BARBARA AND CARLOTTA MARCHISIO FROM MY MUSICAL SCRAPBOOK

BY CARLO V. MARCHISIO

IN 1862 at Her Majesty's an immense success was made by the sisters Marchisio (Barbara and Carlotta) whose duet singing has never been approached - I dont know about before, but certainly not since. Their pièce de résistance was SEMIRAMIDE. The *Giorno d'orrore* was worth walking ten miles to hear; such quality of time, such perfection of tone, two voices of one perfect and exquisite concord".

The two singers mentioned above in" My Musical and Theatrical Recollections" by Emily Soldene were my great-aunts.

Grove quotes them as having performed in most European capitals. They sang in St. Petersburg and Moscow for the Tsar (after a six-week journey mainly by coach!) ; at Windsor Castle for Queen Victoria, and in Paris for Napoleon III.

In the Marchisio room in the La Scala Museum, Milan there are laurels in gold and two magnificent Sevres porcelain vases presented to them on these memorable occasions.

Barbara was born in 1833, Carlotta in 1836. At that time Casa Marchisio was the musical centre most in vogue in Turin and every week during the winter months concerts of chamber music were given there by the best local and visiting musicians. Antonio Marchisio their brother, himself a distinguished pianist and composer of several operas, had a piano factory and these concerts were given above in the salons often in the presence of the Duchess of Genova with the Princess Margherita, to become the first queen of united Italy.

Barbara was more gifted than Carlotta. Her true contralto voice was warm and powerful, with a splendid timbre and range. Consequently her debut in Spain, after the two sisters had sung in a concert at the request of Queen Isabell II, was an unqualified success. She appeared in the *Barbiere* in ten conseecutive performances at the Teatro Real, Madrid with Varesi the famous baritone to whom Donizetti dedicated *Maria di Rohan* and Verdi *Rigoletto*. The success continued with *Trovatore, Cenerentola, Linda di Chamounix and Lucrezia Borgia*. By then her name was made. In 1858 the sisters appeared together for the first time in Turin at the Vitt. Emanuele theatre, shortly afterwards they gave their first performance of *Semiramide*, which was to bring so much glory to their career.

The following year while performing Bellini's *Norma* at La Scala the Marchisio sisters caused a patriotic demonstration which Barbara described years later in a letter to one Achille Torelli : -

" a most marvellous demonstration started when we sang the War Hymn. The entire audience rose to its feet, crying out, waving handkerchiefs and singing: War! war! vendetta! vendetta! they seemed mad with fury. The Austrian officials and Hussars in their elegant uniforms either in fear, or determined to dominate, banged the floor with their sabre scabbards. Caught up in the excitement, forgetting my part, I came from behind the scenes, carried along by the entire theatre personnel, all joining in the chorus of the spontaneous revolt, repeating again and again the page of Bellini's epic. The terrible Austrian governor Giulay, in his stage box, glared with flaming eyes, his moustache bristling like a fighting tom-cat but swallowing his fury his hand on his sabre did not dare to refuse the persistant call for an encore"

This scene caused the Governor to ban all performances of Norma, no longer did it appear on the Scala programmes, we were not even allowed to sing the duet on the Gala Night and even the pianists were forbidden to play the famous *Thalberg Variations*. Fortunately the milanese public were soon given the chance to see that priestess again, in *Semiramide* and its- its revival in Italy was attributed to the artistry of the sorelle Marchisio. The acclaim which greeted them in their travels was similar to that accorded, twenty years earlier to Pasta and Malibran. Nevertheless comparisons did not favour the sisters, for although their voices were of exceptional beauty and power, their acting was not as good as that of other equally famous singers suchas Sontag and Sontag. The latter sang Semiramide in Paris with Malibran before the Marchisios and the famous musicologist, Fetis prided himself with having done the impossible by having brought about the collaboration of these two rival divas. Fetis in his Univ. Bibliography does not admit that the Marchisio sisters outshone the glory of Sontag and Malibran in Paris, the fact remains that rumours of the great success of the sisters in Semiramide which they had sung all over Italy, made the directors of the *Opëra*, Paris decide to engage them and have a special translation written for them - French being the only language allowed at the *Opëra*.

This is how Barbara Marchisio described their arrival in Paris for this event (in 1860):

"Rossini received us in his splendid house in the rue Chaussee d'Antin when we timidly presented ourselves to him, "My dear children" he said "you have brought a dead man back to life". At the rehearsals the Maestro was tireless. He seemed rejuvenated. suggesting change after change in the translation and granting all our requests, at the dress rehearsal Rossini was very nervous, but very pleased.

"What a success the first night was! He called us the follow-day and embraced us if we were his own children. He also embraced us both saying " I must thank you for having brought them into the world". After the 5th performance the new splendid edition appeared, the score for voice and piano with the french words. As a memento of the success Rossini sent us a gilt-edged copy bound in green velvet with the following hand-written inscription " To my delightful friends and matchless performers Carlotta and Barbara Marchisio, whose singing penetrates my soul".

Their triumphs in Paris and the sponsorship of Rossini brought the brilliant career of the sisters to its peak. Their long and intense vocal studies, constantly singing together, had attuned each voice perfectly with the other, thus enabling them to overcome the most difficult passages with rare mastery. The sympathetic harmony of their voices saved many operas from being relegated into oblivion, for example *Il Giuramento* by Mercadante. After two years spent in Italy and Spain they returned to Paris. The Countess Pillet-Will, wife of one of Rossini's dearest friends, persuaded to compose a Mass to be performed at the opening of her palace in rue Moncey. This was the Mass that Rossini called *petite* to which impressarios added *solennelle*. The singers at the first performance were the Marchisio sisters, the tenor Gardoni, the bass Agnesi with a chorus of students from the conservatoire conducted by Jules Cohen. Albert Lavignac was at the organ and the pianists were Mathias and Peruzzi, conducted by Rossini. Barbara Marchisio writes: *"The first performance was a great success, Rossini received a tremendous ovation and after the duetto, having embraced us, he presented each of us with a gold and turquoise bracelet inscribed ' 14 March 1864'. The following year, although we were to appear in Florence for the centenary of Dante, Rossini persuaded our impressario to release us so that we might appear in the second performance of the Petite Messe. During those days he composed the accompaniment, he said to us:"I prefer it just as it is but as I am sure that after my death someone will orchestrate it, I will do so myself".*

The Marchisios followed that second success in Paris with a triumphant tour of Italy, Spain, Germany and Russia. In 1866 having returned from Madrid, they re-appeared in Rome in all their famous roles but in 1871 their happiness clouded over. Carlotta had married an Austrian singer, Eugen Cosselli-Kuhn, a talented young man who was also a painter. In one of the Marchisio albums he drew a caricature of the two sisters performing the *Petit Messe* which made Rossini roar with laughter. Carlotta gave birth to a son, but shortly afterwards the baby was taken ill and the mother remained with him during a long illness, which meant that Barbara sang at La Scala in *Il Giuramento* with another singer, Pontentini, instead of her sister. A few months later the little boy died and Carlotta herself died shortly afterwards. The charm of the two voices which seemed to come from one throat was broken; death divided forever the two lives that destiny had seemed to link together in one.

The break was a terrible blow for Barbara who decided not to in public again and retired to the seclusion of her villa on The Venice lagoon. For a long time she refused all requests to resume her career, saying that her powerful contralto voice frightened her, but one of her friends, Maestro Antonio Gallo, was determined to cure her of the obsession, and begged her to sing at his Malibran Theatre. Barbara eventually agreed and in 1877 gave 4 special performances of the *Barbiere* for the visit of Queen Margherita, afterwhich she continued to sing for charities in Venice, never refusing to give concerts for the city she so adored.

Of Carlotta a critic said:- "She possesses a delightful, powerful high soprano voice; astonishingly equal throughout its wide range, with an exquisite timbre; sweet, passionate, penetratingly moving; her talented modulations showing most subtle refinement of phrasing, mood; so living whatever she sings that we are moved to tears; a wealth of passion that touches the innermost fibres of her listeners, resulting in frantic enthusiasm. With her sister she had great successes in *Semiramide in* London, they also sang together at The Crystal Palace and at the Monday Popular Concerts. Carlotta also appeared in London as Isabella in Meyerbeer's *Robert le diable* and as Donna Anna.

Barbara was invited to sing Rossini's *Stabat Mater* at Florence on the occasion of the composer's remains being transferred to Santa Croce. At the same time she met Giuseppe Martucci who offered her the directorship of The Singing School at The Naples Royal Conservatory. She flatly refused as she had already turned down Anton Rubinstein's offer to go to the Petrograd Music school. Finally the governor of S.Pietro a Maiella,Prince Fr. Pignatelli sent a deputation begging her to give way and accept this exceptional appointment. She agreed and for 20 years the Naples Conservatory had the benefit of her "art of pure singing" She died in April 1919, the announcemnt astonished many people because having gained an international reputation she had left the stage at the height of her career.