Lablache and the Italian Singers in Russia

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It was not until the autumn of 1852, that Luigi Lablache and his entourage left Paris for Russia.1 He was not the first or the last of the Italian singers to embark on that long journey to the "Polar regions," as described by Lablache.2 The Italian Opera was then under the soul patronage of His Imperial Highness, Nicholas Ist the Tzar, who ruled supreme as Emperor and autocrat.The Tzar took a strong personal interest in the outcome of the Imperial Theatre in St Petersburg, even while he was committed to the outcome of the battles fought in the Crimea. Under his rule censorship had been lifted, and opera flourished. He engaged envoys to infiltrate the opera circles of Europe, with the purpose of enticing the best talent from the Italian stage to Russia. Naturally many singers found success, and musicians, dancers and actors followed suit.In the eighteen fifties, the vast wastes of Russia became more reachable due to the oncoming railways.

Finally persuaded by the Tzar to go to Russia, Lablache succeeded Antonio Tamburini as director of the Imperial Theatre at St.Petersburg, and remained in charge there for five years.3 Loyal to Her Majesty's Theatre in London, Lablache had excused himself several times to the Tzar before undertaking such a position. Russia was certainly a mecca, and few complained that their payments came in the form of solid gold coin.

Italian Opera had enjoyed a long tradition in Russia, carving a very special place within the lives of the people. The first wave of Italian singers to take a firm hold during the mid-19th century happened between the entrance of Giovanni Baptista Rubini's successful Russian season during the early forties. Followed by Antonio Tamburini, Pauline Viardot, Guilia Grisi and Mario and many others. Afterwards the wave continued through the middle of the century and later. It was noted in the annals of the Imperial Opera House in St. Petersburg during the tenure of Lablache there was an enormous serge of operatic activity resulting in an increased attendance.4

The Italian company during the fifties was especially strong in good tenors. Three newcomers beside Enrico Tamberlik were- Calzolari, Stigelli and Naudin. Baritone Georgio Ronconi made only a fair impression, while other non-Italians sopranos like Anna de La Grange, Marai, Giuseppina Medori, and Emilie de Méric entered the Russian scene.[1853-54] The deficit of the Italian theatre disappeared after the beginning of the Crimean War:

"The affairs of the foreign theatres, therefore carried on as normal. If audiences fluctuated, then no more than usual. They rose and fell as a result of the repertoire and the casts, not because of the political events. St. Petersburg residents were as zealous as ever for the theatre, regardless of the fact that many families had loved ones in the ranks of the army." 5

Audiences were curious about how the fifty seven year old Lablache's voice had survived into the fifties. When he first appeared at the Bolshoi Theatre Moscow in *Don Pasquale* on the 8th of October 1852, all eyes were riveted on him. Winning them over immediately, they were surprised and gratified to hear his voice had not aged. Greeting his debut with cheers and encores, it was noted in the newspapers that his voice sounded as rich and fresh as ever.6 Lablache did not disappoint later at the Imperial Theatre at St.Petersburg in *Don Pasquale*, with soprano Medori on October 20th 1852.Feelings were certainly ignited when Lablache sang Georgio with soprano Marai and tenor Mario in the popular Bellini's *I Puritani*. He also sang: *La Cenerentola, Il Barbiere di Siviglia, La Prova d'un Opera seria, L'Elisir d'Amore.* Audiences were enraptured with his racy humor,and native comic genius.They enjoyed his Dr. Dulcamara, Leporello, Don Pasquale and of course his unforgettable Bartolo. The critic F.B wrote: "He made Dr.Bartolo the most important person in the opera.7 After all Lablache's genius was concentrated and burned in the focus of comedy." Equally fine in serious roles, his Henry the VIII in Donizetti's

Anna Bolena was known as one of his most powerful interpretations. His acting was so memorable that he brought fear into the eyes of the audiences. "He's a kind of Talma" wrote the newspapers.

Apparently during the winter of 1853 money was not in short supply. The majority firmly believed in a Russian victory and only a few looked into the future with dread. Lablache certainly looked towards a pleasant fulfillment of his dreams now that he was a huge success at the Imperial Theatre of St. Petersburg. The four story house that he planned to build outside Paris at MaisonsLaffitte was in the planning stage. Lablache was accompanied in Russia by his daughter Marie a budding young soprano, his son Nicolas and his future wife, the well known contralto Emilie de Méric. One of his younger sons Dominique Lablache, was in the French Army fighting against the Russians in the Crimea.

On March 7th 1853, Mario sang with Lablache at the Hermitage Palace in St Petersburg in Donizetti's *La Figlia del Reggimento*. before all the Royal family and the Russian court.The opera was selected by His Majesty the Tzar. It was the social event of the season and was especially planned on a large scale for the debut of Luigi's lovely daughter Marie.8

At that time how did Italians rank in the eyes of the Russians? Unquestionably, Italian opera ruled supreme over Russian opera. The handsome 'beau ideal' Mario was "the undisputed king of all the tenors alive. Russian audiences were charmed by him, yet he declined to stay. This departure brought an abundance of other Italian tenors who could claim considerable fame: Emilio Naudin, Enrico Calzolari and Enrico Tamberlik were among the famed few. Emilio Naudin was first tenor to enjoy a great empathy with the public. A remarkable artiste, with great artistic feeling. He had a voice that was described as *"a high, wide -ranging tenor di forza"*. His Russian debut happened in 1853, with Calzolari, and he was especially remembered as Eleazar in *La Juive*.

Another tenor Enrico Calzolari, joined Lablache fresh from successes in England and the British provinces. Soon he became one of Russia's favourites, and remained so for 18 years. Praised as a splendid singer, it was noted: *"Calzolari was reputed to have reached perfection only on our stage. His voice was remembered as remarkable for its delightful timbre, soft and velvety and pouring out from the soul."* 9 Calzolari was the son of a rich merchant of Parma, and was a favourite equal to the handsome Enrico Tamberlik: *"though in his ecstatic moments did not have the same fire, he still won over his audiences with his refined manner, and it was noted he never sung for effect."* A *tenore di grazia* Russian critic Serov rated him highly and considered him to be *"the last of the Mohicans among Italian fioriture tenors, and an exact opposite to Tamberlik."* Lablache first sung with Calzolari in Paris and during his tenure at Her Majesty's 1849 season before they both departed for Russia. Unfortunately, following on the heels of the favourite tenor Mario, was not an easy task for Calzolari. He was received rather cooly at his debut in the autumn of 1853.10

Evidently among the primadonna of the day, only Anne Caroline de La Grange, a French singer was recognized as a lead soprano of the greatest genius. According to the Russian critics, she was an artiste completely in the spirit of Persiani, but far superior. La Grange was known as a virtuoso singer. Roulades were her real forte. Her voice had a huge range and was immaculately trained. Wolf, another critic remarked that de La Grange was an "electrifying singer" no other singer could produce such high notes."As fine as hair." Yet for all these qualities, apparently others wrote that she was lacking in "charm," and her singing did not reach the soul.11 After only two years in Russia she left to sing in New York.Most of the other sopranos were not memorable.Madame Medori was a boisterous seasoned artiste who was not liked there or in England.F. Marrai,and Mad.Tedesco were equally unpopular.

Pauline Viardot, Malibran's sister returned to the Russian stage in 1853. No other artiste touched the Russian hearts like Pauline. Remembered as a great tragedian she triumphed again when she sang with Mario in Meyerbeer's La *Prophete*. After Viardot returned to Paris, the young prima donna, Angiolina Bosio fresh from successes at Covent Garden, swept into St. Petersburg creating a sensation. Opera enjoyed a brief splendour in the forties and fifties, but by the mid-seventies, the quality to some began to decline, and the Russians themselves lamented past glories.*The Musical World* wrote:
"The successors of the above artists did not rank so high in art, but were much higher- in their demands." 12

Not to be ignored, in 1854, all the newspapers from Moscow to Paris reported Lablache collected the largest booty over all-and 3,8825 rubles of that was just for his benefit! Leaving Russia after two years he returned to Paris loaded down with gold coin.
Instead of retiring Lablache returned to London. There he finally made his debut at the Royal Italian Opera at Covent Garden. That year he sang the "usual fare" before rushing back to Russia.

Now in his sixtieth year Lablache was greatly appreciated on his return to Covent Garden on May 5th, 1855. Recognized, as a celebrated old favorite, Lablache was so highly respected that he was the only *artiste* allowed to sing on stage from a chair. Lablache's "bill of fare" consisted of seven favorites, beside a new Meyerbeer opera in Italian: *L'Etoile du Nord*. Later he recreated the same role for the Russian public. After the London season writing from St. Petersburg in a letter to Michael Costa he grumbled that it was not worth the long journey from St.Petersburg for the low pay that Gye was offering him, compared to the Russians.

The twelfth season from September 1854 to the 8th of February 1855 was a brilliant one, sporting a excellent cast of tenors. Besides the legendary Tamberlik, and the favourite Calzolari, Alessandro Bettini tried his luck in Russia. Bettini [first tenor for 2nd and 3rd roles then] was well liked and stayed through 1861-62 season. Like Naudin he returned in the 1870s. The voice was described as not loud, but with a matt tone, reminiscent of Bulakhov, a famous Russian tenor of the time.13
Verdi was considered a new talent then, and it took the Russian critics a long time to recognize his genius, many critics such as Serov, complained even after the *entree* of his new works: *Il Trovatore* and *La Traviata, Rigoletto, Ernani* and *Macbeth*. Basses and baritones like Dido, Ferzing, Tagliafico, Polonini, Chekkoni were abundant for the enormous number of operas shown per season. Of all those who stood up besides Lablache, none could reach his stature, few are even remembered. Disliked by the critics,*Der Freischutz* was sung in Italian thirty three times that season. Serov remarked..."all parts were written without embellishment, and only Tamberlik added a cadenza to Max's aria in the first act. Of Lablache: "What a voice!" exclaims Serov: *"Remember the role of the hermit is very small, but Lablache's voice as always is completely captivating! Like a dense but clear bell covering all other noises on the streets of a populous town: such is the effect of this old master in the finale of Der Freischutz. This last scene surprisingly crowns the play, harmonizing all the discord of the previous sounds. And the voice of Lablache is as if created for this conciliatory, pacifying harmony....Lablache turns everything he touches to gold."* 14

Herbert Weinstock wrote of Lablache: " He was unparalleled in the entire history of opera.15 *"The Musical World* wrote: *"Lablache proved himself a consummate vocalist in every school of music, from Mozart down to Bellini. Whether in Leporello in Don Giovanni, Doctor Bartolo in Il Barbiere, the old wife-seeker in Don Pasquale, Geronimo in Il Matrimonio Segreto, Giorgio in I Puritani, or the Corporal in L'Etoile du Nord, Dr. Dulcamara in L'Elisir d'amore, or Henry VIII in Anna Bolena. He embraced all the principal modern operatic schools of his time. Lablache's repertoire belonged legitimately to the pre-Verdite composers, and stopped with Donizetti and Bellini...Perhaps in no branch of the vocal art did Lablache so triumphantly declare his genius as*

in recitative, whether accompanied or parlante. In the former he was always forcible and impressive - in the latter, he had the peculiar skill of half intonating the notes, which was neither speaking nor singing, but seemed wonderfully to coalesce with the spare chords of the violoncello, always, as it seemed to us, out of keeping with the perfect annunciation of the tones of the voice. But, withal, gave you no idea of tune, and his time was as correct as that of a metronome. In fact, if Lablache only made a motion with a limb, or a grimace with one of his features, he never broke his time. He sang in time - he acted in time - he thought in time. What a splendid example such a singer might have afforded the modern race of vocalizers, if they could only have followed him. All the renowned Italian singers have been remarkable for their power of sustaining notes, which can only be attributed to capaciousness and expansibility of the lungs, in which a large supply of air can be obtained at a breath. Lablache was perhaps more extraordinary than other Italians in this respect. While singing the loudest, or articulating the most rapid passages, unless you paid the most earnest attention, you could not ascertain when he took breath.

As an actor Lablache has hardly enjoyed less reputation than as a singer. The name of "great comedian" and "great tragedian" have been almost universally coupled with "vocalist". Lablache, beyond all dispute, was one of the most original, powerful, and varied comic actors that ever trod the boards of the opera. High comedy, middle comedy, low comedy, were equally native to his genius. The universality and force of his humor were compelled to be seen and felt in one performance.Lablache you were immediately and forever satisfied. Lablache was the most original as well as the greatest comic actors. When on the stage, "He never thought about himself at all," but was governed by his instinct. His natural gifts were prodigious. His walk was wonderfully easy and life like. How he filled up the stage - not with his size but with his intellect! Every action had its propriety every movement its meaning - every look its significance. No artist ever took greater liberties with his audience; but in all his freedom and "gaggings" there was no extravagance or caricature."

One day the Tzar was taking a solitary stroll through the streets of St. Petersburg, followed at a discreet distance by two *moujiks* ready to arrest anyone who spoke a single word to the monarch. Seeing Lablache, the Tzar motioned for him to approach, and conversed amiably for several minutes. As soon as the Tsar moved away, the *moujiks* came over and put Lablache under arrest. That same evening at the opera house, His Majesty became annoyed and impatient because the curtain was delayed. He called over the Intendant, General Gedonoff, and asked the reason for the delay. "Sir, Lablache is not here." "Is he perhaps ill?" "No, he was told, he is well." The Tzar was at a loss, saying "He certainly has not left, as I spoke with him just a few hours ago. "Precisely, Your Majesty, for that reason..." The Czar immediately understood, and ordered Lablache to be freed at once. Ten minutes later, Lablache was in the theatre, singing in the *Barber of Seville*. When the curtain fell, the Tzar had Lablache come to his box and asked how he could make amends for the ill treatment he had been subjected to. Lablache, jokingly said, "Very simple, your Majesty, next time you see me on the street just do not recognize me." However, the Tzar thought this inadequate and gave him a handsome present.16

1. *The Musical World*. September 1852.
2. Lablache letter to Rubini..
3. *The Musical World*. 1852.
4. Ivanov, M. *The first decade of the Italian Theatre in St. Petersburg in the 19th century*. St.Petersburg, 1895
5. M.A. Zagulyev
6. Severnaya Pchela. St. Petersburg, 1852
7. Ibid,1852
8. Damcke in the *St. Petersburg Journal*.
9. From the memoirs of Ms.S. Lavrenteva.
10. Critic N.Raevsky.
11. Rostislav [F.M.Tolstoy] wrote in her honour not only satires, but some hymns of praise.
12. *The Musical World, 1857*.
13. M.Ivanov
14. Ibid. M. Ivanov
15. *Opera. 1966*.
16. *Rivista dell'opera*. 1953.