SCENE FROM MEYERBEER'S "L'ETOILE DU NORD," AT THE ROYAL ITALIAN OPERA.

Opera in London during the Nineteenth-Century No2

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One Opera - Two prints

The Year is 1855 and the Royal Italian Opera at Covent Garden was to present two new operas in the season 12 April to 11 August. Their first novelty came on 10 May and was Verdi's *Il trovatore*, but that is another story.

The second novelty owes its beginnings to the only German opera the mature composer wrote; which was *Ein Feldlager in Schlesian* (A Camp in Silesia) produced at the Berlin Opera in 1844. When asked to write a comic opera for Paris the composer decided to make use of the little-known work, his collaborator, Eugène Scribe, put the action back nearly a century, exchanging Silesia for Russsia and the character of Frederick the Great for Peter the Great. The result was *l'Etoile du nord*; the composer Giacomo Meyerbeer, and it had its world première on 16 February 1854 at the Théâtre de l'Opéra-Comique in Paris.

At Covent Garden the new opera was scheduled for late June 1855, but on July 7 the press announced that it would have its first staging the next week. Then on July 14 a press-release stated *"The energies of the establishment being concentrated in preparing for the great novelty of the season which, it is understood, will positively be performed next week. There are laborious rehearsals every day, under the direction of Meyerbeer himself, who expresses himself much gratified by the progress that has been made"*. All operas at Covent Garden were at that time given in Italian and so *L'Etoile* opened as *La stella del nord* on July 19. The cast included Angiolina Bosio as Catherine, Karl Formes as Peter and with Luigi Lablache (in what had been in Paris a relatively minor role) as the corporal Gritzenko.

Mlle Bosio had made her début at Covent Garden in 1852 as Adina in *L'elisir d'amore*, her voice was thought to be strange and perpetually out-of-tune, even so, over the next six years she became a favorite with London audiences. In the role of Catherine one critic said that she was *" a singer of the strictly Italian school but it was not difficult for her to excel in a wholly different style"*. and in the *"finale to the last act gave one of those exquisite displays of vocal artistry that has long delighted the audience at Covent Garden"*. Engaged to sing in the Winter Season of 1858-9 at St.Petersburg she died there suddenly at the tragically early age of twenty-eight. The German bass Karl Formes was not thought-of very highly as Peter, though in other roles he had received a good press. One critic felt *"he was by no means good, his intonation incorrect and scarcely a phrase was firm in time"*. Meyerbeer had written recitatitives to replace the spoken dialogue heard in Paris and had enlarged the role of Gritzenko - for the great Lablache who had consented to sing, it was felt

that his role would now be unrecognisable to the Parisians; and another critic commentated that a comic trio in which Gritzenko recounts at great length his adventures with a fictitious sentinel was unnecessary as the audience "*knew it already*".(?) At the end of the evening Meyerbeer was given a tremendous ovation in a curtain call. Later, backstage, to congratulate the artists and orchestra, for forgot the speech he had prepared and could only say "*the heart is so full, that the words are nowhere*". (His English was never up to much).

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The first of the prints depicts a scene in Act 1 where Gritzenko and his band of drunken Cossaks, having interrupted the festivities of the dockyard workers and country folk, are enticed away by the singing and dancing of Catherine.

If you compare the amount of press-space devoted to the two new operas that season, that for "*L'Etoile*" was more than double that for *Trovatore*, surely an indication where the two composers stood in the public taste of the times. In fact, in that season, there were nine performances of *La stella del nord*, four of *Gli ugonotti* and two of *Il profeta* - virtually a mini-Meyerbeer Festival. And the opera was to be given again the following year.

But disaster struck Covent Garden. The management had leased the theatre for ten weeks to a John Henry Anderson who decided to terminate his tenancy with a Grand Bal Masqué on the night of 4 March 1856. The London Journal, in a long article, had this to say of what they called *"a monstrous leprosy": "The women were disgustingly attired; one group was quaffing hot brandy and water; another guzzling fictitious champagne; and another swallowing copious draughts of stout! The males - there were no* men *present - consisted of thieves, gamblers, roués, and many of whom we suspect paid for their night's debauchery out of the tills or cash-boxes of their employers. At about five-o-clock in the morning on 5 March the theatre was on fire. In half an hour the roof had fallen-in and by mid-morning the building was a complete ruin. All the scenery and costumes of the sixty or so operas in the repertory destroyed"*

[It was with some amusement that I realised that this article was being written at the same time that new laws permitting licensed premises to open for twenty-four hours a day were being passed and that feminine *binge-drinking* was clearly no modern phenomenon!]

For the next two years the Royal Italian Opera gave performances at the Lyceum Theatre, Drury Lane and the Royal Surrey Theatre. A weekly series of orchestral and vocal concerts was held at the Crystal Palace, and the company went on tour to Manchester, Liverpool and Dublin. A new opera house was promised for 1858 and the theatre existing today opened on 15 May of that year with *Gli ugonotti.*

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A new production of *"L'Etoile"* was announced for 1864 and the composer was supposed to return to London to oversee the production; but he died in Paris on 30 April, the same night that an *Il profeta* was given at Covent Garden. *"L'Etoile"* opened on July 23 with two French singers heading the cast, the soprano Marie-Caroline Miolan-Carvalho and the baritone Jean-Baptiste Faure as Catherine and Peter respectively. It was said that the soprano *"threw an irresistible charm over the vocal performance"* and *"she sang wiith a brilliancy and finish that could not be exceeded"* while the choice of a baritone was considered a change for the better and that the opening romance in the third act was *"beautifully and effectively sung"*. Other members of the cast were also singled out for praise, even the orchestra had its share as *"the finale of the second act was so brillianlty played that the curtain descended against a veritable furore"*. Given again the following year with a new cast, then in 1866 with Adelina Patti singing Catherine for the first time. It was next heard in 1870, from then until 1882 (except 1880 when there was no performance) Patti invariably sang Catherine. Marcella Sembrich took over the role for the season 1883-4, singing for the first time on June 11 and it was reported that she ended the "Bohemienne" with an E flat *in alt* of such fabulous quality that she was called twice before the curtain.

There were far too many changes in the rest of the cast to name them all: M.Faure continued to sing the role of Peter until 1875 when he left the Royal Italian Opera opting to join the rival company managed by J.H.Mapleson at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. His place was taken by another French baritone, Victor Maurel. Of him, one critic said that he gave a *"thoroughly competent performance as Peter, looking the character well and singing the music like one who has studied it with concise perseverence"*. The last performance of the opera at Covent Garden was in 1890 with Emma Stromfield and M.Maurel.

This article has been about a German composer and a French opera given in Italian. Now in 1890 the wheel was to turn anew, or so it would seem, when a German born in Hamburg - passionate about opera in English - begins offering this same score anew at Drury Lane in the language of his predeliction. The man was Carl Rosa. It was not until February 1975 that the score turned full-circle when Opera Rara offered *L'Etoile du nord* to Londoners in French at last replete with the spoken dialogue the composer originally intended.

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The second print shows the last scene of Act 2. Peter has confronted the conspirators and he is in the act of leading his now-united troops against their enemies, accompanied by a grand martial chorus. But was

SCENE FROM MEYERBEER'S NEW OPERA, "L'ETOILE DU NORD," AT DRURY-LANE THEATRE.—

this print taken from a performance at Drury Lane? It says so in the caption. But in 1890? Meyerbeer's "New Opera"?

The dates I have given come firstly) from Loewenberg's *Annals of Opera;* and secondly) from Journals and newspapers of the period. But what alternative could there be? At this stage I took the print out of its frame and on the back was a reference to the Investiture of Lord Cremorne with the Order of St.Patrick at Dublin Castle. The next step was to ring the Royal College of Heralds who gave me a date of February 1855 for that event. With this I was able to find that *The Star of the North* was given in English at Drury Lane on Tuesday 29 February 1855!

The theatre at that time was essentially a playhouse so reviews were not printed in the music sections of the press but only in those parts reserved for plays, thus the notice was completely overlooked.

I found a long review (I can give a reduced version): *"Mr Smith* (the manager) *has forestalled Covent Garden in the production of the opera L'Etoile du nord. In using the word forestalled we do not impute any blame to him. He has done what he had a good right to do, But he has taken from the work something of its bloom and given the impression of it differing considerably from what could have been produced at the Royal Italian Opera. But on the other hand, he has made it known to many who do not visit that high-priced theatre and who are satisfied with a lower standard of excellence. Mr Smith has had to form an entire company of vocal performers, an orchestra, and a chorus, to present this production and we think he has succeeded admirably".*

Peter was sung by Mr Henri Drayton *"a sound musician and an excellent performer. His wife took the second female role (Prascovia) which was well sung and acted. In the principal tenor role (Danilowitz), Mr Miranda acquitted himself respectably. Mlle Jenny Bauer a singer newly arrived from Germany, as Catherine showed a considerable degree of vocal power and fluency of execution, but she forced her voice too much and at times sang out of tune".* There was no mention at all of the role of any Gritzenko, or who sang it. It was noticed that the theatre *"was crowded from floor to ceiling"* and the performance was *"received with enthusiastic applause".*

I must admit that the research which went into this article, going backwards to go forward, unravelling so many historical errors, has given me no little pleasure.

PS A NON-MUSICAL POSTSCRIPT

In February 1855 the north star indeed descended upon the city. The main item in the newspapers concerned the river Thames - not navigable between Richmond and below London Bridge due to ice flows. A great freeze unknown since the winter of 1814. Global Warming? Will we see skating again there in the near future?