Books

Absence becomes Balfe

Basil Walsh *Michael W. Balfe: A Unique Victorian Composer*
Foreward by Richard Bonynge. Irish Academic Press, Dublin/Portland Or. 296pp

London could easily have described itself as being in a state of shock; its [figurative] stiff-upper-lip trembling; shibboleths dear to Queen Victoria: *"Land without Music"* and *"The Continent is Isolated"* at once refuted by one single name: Michael William Balfe. To the consternation of an operatic establishment permanently resigned to cultural exploitation by peripatetic maestri from warmer climes it found itself harbouring a home-grown composer willing to take-on all comers, a bold Irishman in no way subject to the North-South polemic, smart, sophisticated, and as polished as any from across the channel; never at a loss for a new score or good tune, aimiable amanuensis of *primedonne*, the Dublin-born baritone-conductor-composer had become the unmistakeable emblem of a non-military conquest of its own stage.
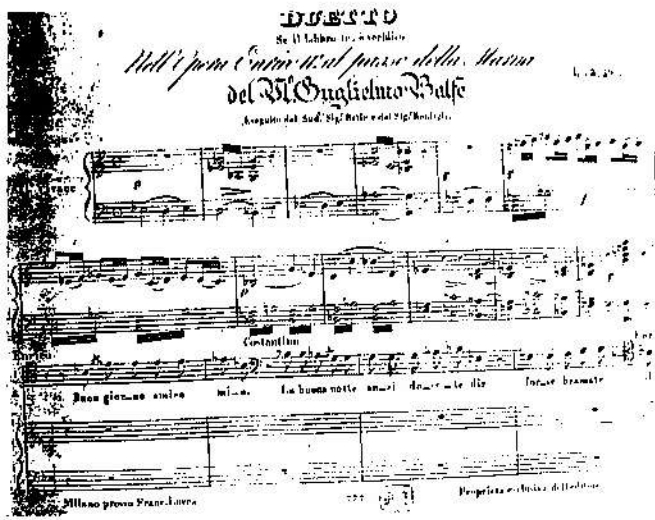
Academics have never warmed to Balfe. Too popular by half and "*insufficiently innovative*" (viewed from their particular Valhalla), and this despite the existence of a mouthwateringly virgin archive of autograph music on the shelves of the British Library. Such a vocal cornerstone as 'I dreamt I dwelt in marble halls' merely evoking the mind-numbing lyrics of Alfred Bunn and visits to a celestial Bank Manager. None of the previous studies devoted to Balfe have opened the way to a detailed investigation of his life and times, even amateurs gagging at those oleaginous Victorian hurdles, sentimental ditties round the piano, nonsense such as the "English Ring" ["*Bo-girl*", Maritana and The Lily of Kilarney!], the once-ubiquitous Balfe reduced to gossip and bathos in the sparse memoirs devoted to his day and age. And then too, even today, vernacular opera finds it difficult to struggle into public consciousness, lumping together Musicals and *opéra-comique*, half-baked and half-sung, binominally suspect, needing special-pleading, diligent research and imaginative advocacy. This Balfe gets, almost for the first time from Basil Walsh.

The most recent extended study of Balfe (William Tyldesley *Michael William Balfe: His Life and his English Operas* (Ashgate 2003)), praiseworthy and instructive, had declared limitations as its title indicates, the first of which being that Balfe was rooted in *continental* tradition and practice. He was educated internationally, his music reflects a Latin muse whatever the language of his texts (and these seldom determine its impact). His instincts were songlike, no wonder he became Patron Saint of the Parlour Balled. He has never lacked adherents or admirers (Sir Thomas Beecham/Richard Bonynge), or detractors (most notoriously

Henry Chorley), but initiatives to restore his fame have been misguided for the most part until recent research and and a digital thirst has obliged the music profession to look at him again.

The fact is, his role needs an explanation, how and why he - almost alone - took the National reins in the *Land without Music* when so many others had failed.

Mr Walsh's book is a near-continuous narrative covering his whole career, its series of chapters identifying the various phases in very considerable detail. Its most welcome emphasis is upon the lacunae, especially those surrounding his musical roots. Though its biographical content is generally discursive there follows - in the form of appendices - scientific sections which open the way to a closer examination of his very unusual career than ever has been possible before. His foreign circuit of the stage is virgin ground. Possibly at the expense of the London-based destiny, touched-upon now and then in other works of reference, here we are supplied with real exotica: 'The Bondsman' (1846) in German for example, as *Der Mulatte,* together with its bibliographical remains. Maybe we would be thrown by *Der Liebesbrunnen* (ie 'Le puits d'amour'(1843)) even if sufficiently linguistically adept, but *Die vier Haimonskinder* ('Les quatre fils Aymon'(1844)), *Die Belagerung von Rochelle* (1835), *Das Traumbild* (ie 'Keolanthe'(1841)) and *Die Zigeunerin* (of course) all have hope of striking a chord. For these there is wonderful material, details of the "Location of the Libretto, Score and Sheet Music" in each case. The French operas of Balfe, a sort of *va et vient* between London and Paris, are key works in his career, especially in their all-purpose melodic structure and use of the great singers of the day. Such rarities as these are covered in special detail, with a special relish I should add as Mr Walsh has a mission in the positioning of his composer both inside and outside the tiny niche to which he has been confined in the past.



At the heart of this important book is an attempt to correct the errors which have always served to marginalise his once-formidable achievement. Irish through-and-through he has had a kind of bogus British self-effacement thrust upon his musical identity. True, his operas adhere readily enough to familar vocal formulae, this accounts for their easy-reception by contemporary audiences, but they often display an unexpected boldness in orchestral variety, a sly piquancy at the edge of foursquare harmony which, combined with a technicolour flair for exotic romantic imagery imbues the whole series of stage works with the same kind of covert fantasy that makes the mid-Victorian era so disconcerting. As if, just like the Great Exhibition of 1851 where an enormous ugliness, in enormous quantities, did not disguise a fantastic imaginative industrial springboard that was due to impose itself on the world, the operas of Balfe resemble a Crystal Palace in their lightness and gaiety, making new shapes and new uses out of old concepts. He was a very experienced composer (something even Verdi could compliment-himself upon). His professionalism was unBritish, and so was perceived obliquely, then as now. Industry has always been suspect in superior artistic circles (we remember that it was the *number* of operas composed by Handel and Donizetti, for example, that was held to militate against any likelihood of their merit!). None of this has helped his music to survive. Too, we cannot, in attempting to recover him from neglect, ignore the millstone round the neck of the terrible texts he set to music so fluently, we should like to exhume Balfe but leave Bunn to rest in peace. (If only we could: an initiative, a year or two ago, in La Rochelle to revive The *Siege of Rochelle* came to grief on the rocks of Alfred Bunn I very much fear).

In a real sense we need this book, We need it for its research and its scope. There are too many gaps in the extraordinary flowering of popular opera in the nineteenth century.

What militates against his fame today? Not the quantity of his works - it is unsurprising for a stage composer of the period; nor his earlier renown - his high profile as a conductor and musical activist were clearly the *moteur* of his fame; it was his modishness (it was that Parisian *sine qua non* which earned him a commission to compose for the *Académie royale de Musique* uniquely for a British composer!). *La mode* kills in retrospect. Being a British icon has always done him a disservice abroad (thanks to the *Land ohne Musik*), this, the book under review reveals as a ground bass. Injustice has distorted his image and continues to do so. Revival needs to pinpoint his strengths, an unBunn opera might do it, *Pittore e duca* with a libretto by Francesco Maria Piave and staged at the Teatro Grande (now Verdi) at Trieste in 1854 for example with Fanny Salvini Donatelli, the first Violetta of *La traviata*, and Raffaele Mirate [if one could find the score] or Il *talismano*, his last opera of 1874. Where Michael William Balfe is concerned, it is his distance from Britain that makes the heart grow fonder...

Alexander Weatherson