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The Great Lablache

Nineteeth Century Operatic Superstar

His Life and His Times

by *Clarissa Lablache Cheer*

Xlibris Corporation (Bloomington 2009) 723 pages

The most telling comment upon the great *basso cantante* Luigi Lablache, no doubt, is that of the genial impresario who commented that he was obliged to play the one role he could not portray to perfection – that of a man *starving to death*. The huge Lablache, six foot tall and with a waistline as expansive as his vocal register epitomised the widest contours of his day, he earned all the superlatives, had a gigantic personality, was capable of jumping all the registers with the most extended male voice in Europe and the biggest heart, enveloping the lyric theatre with a career lasting longer than almost anyone else. Where has been his equal?

Biographical volumes by relatives and descendents have a special cachet. Clarissa Lablache Cheer's volume comes in that category where detail tends to be illuminated by blazing insights unavailable to those beavering after bald facts. When we read that Lablache on his deathbed was absolved by Berardo Calveri Winter now turned Dominican monk (the tenor Winter had sung the role of Settimio to Labache's lordly Murena, his persecutor, in Donizetti's *L'esule di Roma* in 1828) the belcantist mind boggles. No one has ever told us this before [Whatever can we invent to keep up our end? Flagstad in a wheelchair attended by Sister Eufemia de la Misericorde aka Elisabeth Schwarzkopf? Alas no, our age has shed all romance]. One puts aside caveats about spelling, precision and *minutæ* before such a labour of love, it is the warmth and concern that counts here, the dimensions of the biography are as romantically disposed and as extravagantly scaled as its subject. Its contents strain to escape the covers. French/Irish descent, an erratic messy Neapolitan upbringing, all the most unreliable sources (Stendhal/Florimo) quoted with gusto, replete with cranky politics yet capturing deftly the actual musicological impulse upon which such a towering artist thrived. Everything literary that should be a vice becomes a virtue in this book. Compulsive, vivid and enthralling, as much a portrait of its endearing author and her family as that of the great singer himself. And what a family! Their dwellings (possible and impossible), their incredible musical ramifications going on for decades – to modern times indeed with Stewart Granger thrown in. Their memorials, friends, colleagues, *bêtes noir* and tombstones, everything we need and don't need to appreciate all that is enjoyable about a being with a career so legendary.

The text – conceptually chronological - so captures the reader that one is removed from any sensation of time. Maybe we have been led up the garden path by generations of misguided *studiosi* when writing about fabled beings of this calibre – sober assessment and judgement may well be completely inappropriate and be banished before such a exceptional being. Any reliable encompassing biography should be equated with fiction to arrive at the truth.

Those who view Italian Opera and its protagonists as an unknown quantity will find that here, in this long book, that they have a goldmine on their hands. A wonderful collection of anecdotes ready to be quoted – many completely new or unexpected –

all fresh or forgotten and remarkably well collated. I personally relish most the account of the massive singer – a guest of Queen Victoria – plumping down in a chair and only discovering that it was already occupied when he got up and found a tiny dog completely flattened beneath him: after a furtive look- round the room full of courtiers he dropped the corpse in a flower vase. In fact – between elaborate preliminaries and an extensive terminal account of the Lablache family tree throughout the Western World up to our own day there is a remarkable cogent and complete diary of Luigi's career. Very detailed, very expansive and riveting to read. It is the bedside book *par excellence* (except that you won't get any sleep). Yes, there are blemishes galore, but they are quite unimportant (and often a joy– what about 'Casa da vendere' printed as *Casa da venere*?)

An inordinately long time in writing, the book shows its protracted genesis. Information that is out of date rubs shoulders with new or newish facts and figures, but there is a rare, invaluable and utterly comprehensive chronology of his stage career, reinforced by a perfectly fabulous documentation of the concerts and opera tours in which he starred over the years. Apart from the unexpected documentation of the minor members of the Lablache dynasties through the ages, it is these appendices that will be the resort of all those looking for facts about opera in the nineteenth century. The citation policy is sketchy, but the illustrations (five huge wodges of illustrations – not in marvellous quality and rather random) often prove as compulsive as the text – another treasure trove. A book whose intelligence and focus is often hidden by an accumulative diversity, we owe to Clarissa an illumination that exceeds simple commemoration of a famous forbear. In its totality it is a volume as large as its subject.

Alexander Weatherson

Gaetano Donizetti

Gilles de Van

Paris, Bleu nuit éditeur, 2009, 176 p.

Le nouvel ouvrage publié par le musicologue Gilles de Van complète avantageusement la première biographie en langue française du compositeur, due à Philippe Thanh et éditée en 2005. Ce travail apporte donc une nouvelle pierre à l'édifice en dépassant le strict cadre biographique et en proposant une analyse générale des principales partitions du *maestro*. C'est une initiative qu'il faut saluer car ce livre contribue à la renaissance donizettienne en France. Il offre, en effet, un accès facile et direct à la connaissance de Donizetti pour un public mélomane plus large, car il peut désormais l'appréhender sans maîtriser une langue étrangère.

Ce nouveau *Donizetti* est assez court et se compose de six chapitres. Le premier est consacré à « la vie » et à « la personnalité » du compositeur. C'est un passage obligé mais qui n'apporte rien de neuf par rapport aux connaissances courantes. L'auteur le sait bien d'ailleurs et ne propose ici qu'une synthèse de moins de dix pages, qui exploite parfois des erreurs assez répandues. La principale consiste à attribuer à Donizetti une lettre faisant l'éloge de Bellini et dont William Ashbrook a démontré qu'il s'agissait, selon toute vraisemblance, d'un faux attribuable à