Opera in London during the Nineteenth-Century No.10

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LIND MANIA

This is the first of three articles for 2010 covering the musical pandemic favouring the celebrated Swedish Nightingale whose possession of the British Musical stage exceeded anything for such former stars as Malibran or Pasta and certainly for that of Callas to come. Jenny Lind who eschewed Paris and Milan, took London by the scruff if its neck thanks to Queen Victoria (and a few others…)

I have been asked by a few of our members to answer the following questions. (1) Did Queen Victoria pay for her tickets when she went to the opera?. The answer to the first question is yes and no and I will explain this more fully later in the article. (2) Could the average working man in the street afford to go to the opera? And it is this second question that I want to answer first. To appreciate this you must know what the cost of living was at that period, how much people were paid and also the social conditions of that era. I have taken one year, Jenny Lind's year of 1847, to illustrate as best I can the answers to these questions.

The cost of living

When the Royal Italian Opera at Covent Garden opened in opposition to Her Majesty's Theatre in 1847, the theatre was sold on a subscription basis and those seats not taken up were sold to the general public. The prospectus gave the prices as follows and I quote in pre-decimal currency, ie: £.s.d. Boxes seven guineas to two guineas, stalls one guinea, the amphitheatre 15s., 12s.6d. and 8s., the pit 7s. and the gallery 3s. (Pre-decimalisation a guinea was £1.10p) That same year the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane advertised its prices as, Private Boxes two guineas and one guinea, boxes 5s., stalls 10.6d., dress circle 7s., first and second galleries 2s. and 1s. To find the cost of seats at Her Majesty's Theatre in 1847 has been nearly impossible due to the fire that destroyed the building in 1867 but in 1858 the prices were advertised as Boxes three guineas and £1.11s.6d., the pit two guineas, pit stalls 7s.6d., balcony 5s., 1st circle 4s., 2nd circle 3s., and gallery 1s. However a subscription priced double box for the whole season could cost £8000, but the owner could sell seats in the box whenever he wished for whatever price he wanted, as could other subscribers. I suppose an early form of a black market for the arts. This could cause trouble as I will tell later in this article.

So, could the average working and middle class man afford a night at the opera. To see if he could I checked with the Office of National Statistics and the Retail Price Index for 1840-1870 which was published in 2004 and found the wages and salaries for a large number of different occupations and I can only list a few of them as an illustration:

A milkmaid selling door to door from 5.30am until 7pm was paid 9s. a week plus a mid-day meal.

A general labourer 18s. a week.

A skilled labourer, bricklayer, carpenter, plumber etc. 30s. a week.

Drivers of the horse drawn buses 34s. a week.

A maid of all work, living in, £6. a year

A general servant, living in, £16. a year.

£42 was the annual wage for a gentleman's manservant.

A Parsons stipend was between £80-£140 per annum.

A junior clerk, 2nd class in the Post Office £90 per year. (The author Anthony Trollope, employed in such a position, tells in his auto-biography how he found it impossible not to get into debt.)

£400 was the annual salary of the Governor of the Bank of England.

The Duke of Westminster's annual income from his London estate was £250,000.

Perhaps to make it a little clearer, in 1851 the year of the Great Exhibition one Pound Sterling would have paid for goods to the value of £58.83p in 2004.

But records of the cost of food and everyday spending did not officially start until about 1914 and so we have to rely on the written word of people of the period who kept their own diaries, journals and housekeeping accounts, and these differ quite considerably from district to district, so I shall just give details of some of the main essentials. The cost of bread differed as to the time it was baked and sold, and according to its weight. Butter was 9d a lb. Meat was 5d to 9d a lb, and the butcher called daily to take your order. Tea was 6s a lb whilst coffee was 2s.6d for the same weight, milk 5d a quart and sugar to sweeten your beverage was 6d a lb. Fish was plentiful. Now a delicacy, whitebait was regularly fished from just below Tower Bridge and salmon from upstream. Herrings were four a penny or depending on freshness and condition twenty a penny. Cod's head at half a penny made a good stew and oysters were two a penny. Fruit and vegetables were sold by costermongers (street traders) and price depended on freshness and time of day. Nothing could be sold after 2pm on a Sunday. But to put it into perspective, a poor man could buy half a loaf of stale bread for a penny, and the Duke a wooden cask holding 13lbs of caviar for £3. Most of the London theatres that we know today were not built until *after* 1847; of those already in existence at that date some details survive about what was presented and admission prices. I give you a selection below:

The Lyceum 1834, Melodrama and farce. Boxes £4. 00, and £1.11s.6d, other places 6s. 4s. 3s. 2s. and 1s.

The Olympic 1805, Plays, comedy, pantomime and equestrian performances. 2s, 1s. and 6d.

The Royal Coburg 1818 (now the Old Vic), Burletta, harlequinade, ballet, lantern shows and musical entertainment, (Paganini gave his farewell performance here in 1834.) Boxes 2s. Pit 1s. Gallery 6d.

St. James's 1835 Every year during the season was host to the Comédie-française and others. Boxes £2.12.6d and £1.11.6d. Pit Stalls 6s. Upper boxes 3s. Pit 2s. and Gallery 6d.

Princess's 1840 Promenade concerts, then opera in 1842, *Sonnambula*, *Puritani* and *Lucia*. In 1845 the American tragedian Edwin Forrest played *Macbeth*. Boxes £2.12.6d £1.11.6. Stalls 6s. Circle 5s. Pit 2s. Gallery 1s.

Sadler's Wells 1683 Aquatics, circus, plays, acrobatic displays, performing animals, ballet or anything respectable or as noted "villainously disreputable". But in 1844 the theatre was licensed to perform legitimate drama and advertise that it was now open all year.For the next few years thirty-four of Shakespeare's plays were produced here. Boxes 3s. and 2s. Pit 1s. and Gallery 6d.

The Music Hall

Music Hall was made by and for The Working Class. It started in the old taverns and the public house such as 'The Eagle' in the City Road built about 1825 by Thomas Rouse, replacing an earlier tavern. The gardens which surrounded the pub had an entrance made of the decorations used for the coronation of William IV. The gardens became fashionable and people came to walk in the evenings under the trees lit by lanterns, to eat and drink and to watch and listen to the entertainment. They are remembered today only from the nursery rhyme *Half a pound of tuppenny rice. Half a pound of treacle. That's the way the money goes. Pop goes the Weasel. Up and down the City Road. In and out the Eagle. That's the way the money goes. Pop goes the Weasel.* The origins of the rhyme are unknown but are thought to date back to the 1700s. At the furthest end of the City Road stood a pawnbrokers shop and Pop is Cockney slang for pawn and Weasel and Stoat is slang for a coat. The song crossed the Atlantic in the 1850s and was first printed in Boston in 1858. When Victoria became Queen the gardens were renamed the Coronation Gardens and it is from this beginning that Music Hall was born.

One old tavern was The Canterbury Arms on the Westminster Bridge Road in the area known as Lambeth Marsh. It was well known in mediaeval times, when Queen Mary Tudor visited Cardinal Pole at Lambeth Palace, her retinue stayed there. A Charles Morton acquired the old place in 1848 and by 1852 he had transformed the building, adding a large Club Room for Men only where they could eat, drink and be entertained by professional artists. Eventually the wives wanted a look-in and so a special Ladies Night was given on Thursdays. The Canterbury Hall as it came to be known could accommodate seven hundred people when full.

But Morton wanted a new hall, something he called a Music Hall. He called in architects and builders and gradually a new building started to take place around the old hall. On Saturday December 18 1854 the alehouse and club room closed and on the following Monday the new Canterbury Music Hall was open for business. Cost of admission was 6d. in the body of the hall and 9d in the gallery. The main hall contained tables and chairs for four or two people, here you could eat and drink. At one end of the hall was the stage, at the other two staircases that led up to the gallery across the back and down the two sides of the hall. Here you could not eat and drink. The 'Canterbury' was capable of holding 1,500 people and was full every night. The entertainment was mainly vocal, although there was a comedian and even someone who told the latest installment of the new novel of Charles Dickens. But it was glees and part songs, solos, duets, quartets and choral singing which were the mainstay of the evening.

Morton then decided to give opera, not the full score as he did not have a licence to do so, but large selections. The demand for the opera was so great that within two months he had lowered the entry price to 3d and 6d. One evening the impresario Colonel Mapleson, escorted the famous prima donna Therese Tietjens to the Canterbury Music Hall to hear the selections from *Faust* by Gounod. And so it was that London first heard *Salut! demeure* and *Ah! je ris* in a Music Hall, before the British premiere at Her Majesty's Theatre on June 11th 1863.

If the Man in the Street could afford 6d to hear a selection from an opera at the music hall then he could and did afford the one shilling for a seat in the gallery and hear the complete work at the opera house.

The Two Contracts

When Benjamin Lumley presented his programme for the 1847 season at Her Majesty's Theatre he stated that he had Mlle. Jenny Lind under contract and that she would appear in a new opera especially composed for her by Felix Mendelssohn. He lied, briefly, what had happened, was the following...

In January 1845 Lind was singing the role of Vielka in *Das Feldlager in Schlesien* by Meyerbeer, (re-written, we know it as *L'Étoile du Nord)* at the Royal Opera House, Berlin. During her second performance she was asked to go to the box of the English Ambassador, Lord Westmorland. With him were two other men Meyerbeer and the crafty, overbearing businessman Alfred Bunn, lessee of the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. Bunn presented her with a contract - in English, of course, which she did not understand - to be signed immediately as he wanted to take it with him to England that night. If she did not sign the deal was off. The contract was was for twenty performances of *Das Feldlager* and *La sonnambula* to be sung in English, the dates to be confirmed later at a fee of £40 per performance. Westmorland and Meyerbeer urged her to sign and pressed for time before returning to the stage she did so. Later she began to have doubts about its validity. She also felt that Mr Bunn had taken advantage of her.

Bunn began sending letter after letter insisting that she honour her contract and even fixed a date for her first appearance in London. At last she answered his letters saying that she had been unable to learn the roles in English and that consequently felt that a failure in London would be fatal to her career. In one letter she promised that she would pay whatever compensation the laws of the country required. Bunn was furious and felt that her letter was hypocritical and in his reply wrote *"Can you suppose that I will accept a promise, when you violate a contract which you have signed?, I tell you I*

will not. You are in Berlin at the very time that, by law and honour, you ought to be here." He also intimated that if she did not come to London then he would start legal action in both Berlin and London. Some time later Jenny found out much to her relief that as the period fixed for her engagement had expired it was now only a question of damages.

In 1846 Jenny was singing in Frankfurt and Lumley went there to persuade her to sign a contract with him for his 1847 opera season. But still unsure of Bunn's vengeance she refused. As she wrote to a friend on her 26th birthday *"Lumley! What he has not offered! And what a charming man he is, but I have sent him to Italy to look for a singer there."* But Lumley was not to be put off. He travelled to Leipzig to see Mendelssohn hoping if he could persuade Jenny to accept his terms. The impresario returned with a long effusive letter for Jenny, and it was this letter that tipped the scale. In his memoirs Lumley wrote *"The terms offered were far superior to any hitherto offered to the celebrated singer".* And the terms were:- *£4800 for the period April 14 to August 20, a house or villa suitable for receiving guests, free of charge, a carriage and pair to be at her disposal; a sum of £800 should she wish to go to Italy for a month, for repose or study, prior to her debut at Her Majesty's. Cover for twenty persons* (I presume that is for her staff) *and the liberty to cancel her engagement if, after her first appearance and her success falling short of her expectations, she felt disinclined to continue.* He also undertook to bear any loss that she might incur in the event of a law-suit with Mr Bunn. The contract was signed on October 17th. Mendelssohn studied the contract at great length, there were a few points that troubled him. He felt that she should not have agreed to sing ten times in one month, eight performances would have been better. He also thought her fee should have been higher. But what worried him most was the ban on singing at private parties, he thought this would stop her singing at Court. This was corrected by Lumley in a clause which would leave the decision to Jenny herself.

But Bunn was vindictive and threatened Jenny that the moment she set foot in England she would be in prison for breach of contract. Terrified she wrote to him from Vienna offering him £2000 if he would destroy the contract, he refused and published her letter in the press. Word soon reached Lumley that she would not be coming to England. Easter was early that year and on the day before the theatres closed for the holiday he took the boat train to Calais and on to Vienna.

On the 10th April Her Majesty's re-opened but with no sign of the young prima donna nor even of Mr Lumley. He eventually arrived back in London on the 16th and told how he had escorted Mlle. Lind and her companion as far as Strasbourg and that they would arrive the next afternoon, which they did. That first evening in London, Jenny attended the opera, sitting with friends in their box. A ripple of interest ran through the audience when Lumley acknowledged her. Who was this rather plain and insignificant young girl? But in the interval when Luigi Lablache still in costume bent to kiss her hand they knew. Like wildfire three words swept through the theatre:

"SHE HAS COME"

And on the morning of April 18 those three words from the previous evening were on everybody's lips. That strange phenomenon that would be known as the LIND MANIA had begun

To be continued.

"a plain and insignificant young girl" **(as *Norma*) (opposite)**

(Back cover) **The second Canterbury Music Hall c1855**

