

Opera in London during the Nineteenth Century No. 11

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LIND MANIA 2

Jenny Lind made her London dèbut at Her Majesty's Theatre as Alice in Meyerbeer's *Roberto il diavolo,* on the 4th May, but only just. The Lord Chamberlain was to blame for this. Here we had a new production, new scenery built, new costumes being fitted and then shortly after the first rehearsal an order came from his office that prohibited the opera being staged. (For the benefit of our non-English members the Lord Chamberlain was the official censor for all theatre performances in Britain). Had someone in the rival company at Covent Garden had a word in his ear? At the time it was even suggested that money had changed hands. The office was held by Lord Spencer, a career naval officer, who apparently had no interest in the theatre. His reason he said was the character of Bertram "*...why, one might as well bring the devil and his horns on the stage at once*". Lumley appealed pointing out that the opera had already been performed at Her Majesty's in 1832 and also at Drury Lane in 1841. Not only that but London had already seen the devil on stage as early as 1824 as *Zamiel* in Weber's *Der Freischütz* and as *Mephistopheles* in Spohr's *Faust* in 1840. The ban was lifted except for two conditions, the ghostly nuns in act three must not wear a nun's habit and nor should there be any gravestones on stage. Robert and Bertram had to play their chess game sitting on the stage floor. At Jenny's first entrance the audience stood to applaud waving hats and handkerchiefs before she even started to sing. The evening was a triumphant success and Lind Mania gripped the public. Every opera buff wanted to see her, they wanted tickets for her performances, the box office was besieged for returned tickets (the house had been sold on a subscription basis). They even waited in the street to see her walk from her carriage to the stage door. The nearest equivalent today would be to watch the young at a pop concert and then imagine mature adults behaving in the same way. Her next appearance was in *La sonnambula* by Bellini, and the furore both inside and outside the theatre was even greater than the preceding evenings. By now it was said that grown men wept and ladies swooned overcome by the emotion created.

On June 16th the opera was Donizetti's *La figlia del reggimento* and the theatre was sold out. The entrance was packed with people, those with tickets trying to get in, those trying to buy returns or tickets for a future performance, and those who just wanted to see the rich and famous attending the performance. There were strong-arm men employed to assist patrons to get through the crush and to their seats. I see them as todays 'bouncers' but in reverse. There were complaints of impropriety not only from ladies but also from gentlemen. An article published in The Lady's Newspaper told how the audience on that night berated Benjamin Lumley the lessee. When he came on stage to ask the reason for the disturbance some hundreds of voices roared out "*We've no room - shame to take our money after the theatre is over filled*". Quoting ad verbatim from a letter to a newspaper "*the theatre held at least twice the number of persons therein that it could properly accommodate; and the crushing, crowding and squeezing were intolerable. Ladies and must we add gentlemen, were fainting*". The editor in his editorial wrote "*Why overcrowd the house? a full house is surely enough. To take money at the doors when the majority of the audience were in agony from the suffocated crowd and the heat of the house was too bad*". All performances given by Jenny Lind suffered the same problem. In the Observer of 13th June it was reported that "*La sonnambula was repeated to the most crowded house of the season*". So dense

was the throng that when Lumley offered people their money back no less than 200 retired from the Pit alone. This, from an area of the theatre which was only supposed to accomodate 800 people standing in full evening dress. To accommodate so many people, ladies had been asked to discard the hoops from their voluminous gowns and gentlemen to leave their swords at home!

All the excitement was not confined to the theatre alone. The shops could and did sell anything that could be attributed to Jenny Lind. There were Lind handkerchiefs, gloves, parasols and children's dolls. Boxes of chocolates had her portrait on the lid, florists sold Jenny Lind bouquets with flowers purporting to be her favourite blooms. A tulip was named after her, even matchboxes were adorned with her portrait and gentlemen smoked small Lind cigars and took Lind snuff (although I must admit I can find no claim that she indulged in either of these two habits). In Hastings, a seaside resort on the south coast, a public house was named the Jenny Lind and to the best of my knowledge it is still in business.

THE RIGHT HONOURABLE GENTLEMAN v THE MAN FROM WIMBLEDON

Subscription tickets for the opera season were like the tickets for other theatres, they were either a disc or a small oblong made of metal, ivory, bone or card (they all eventually came to be called 'bone') engraved or printed with the area or box where you were sitting and the number of one's seat. These were handed to the door keeper who then gave you a signed slip of paper with the relevant details on it. Now, hopefully, you could enjoy the performance. But this did not happen for the Hon. George de Grey who had purchased Pit Stall No.171 for £2.12s.6d. Enter a Mr E. Frith who demanded that he should vacate the seat as the seat was rightfully his, and he had a piece of paper to prove it. But Mr de Grey also had a piece of paper bearing the same information and refused to move and an argument ensued. The door keeper was called who offered de Grey another seat but he still refused as he thought it was inferior. A scuffle took place with Mr Frith taking hold of his adversary's collar and tried to drag him from the seat. Eventually Mr de Grey moved to another seat and Mr Frith and his lady occupied seats 171/172. But it did not end there as Mr de Grey took out a summons against Mr Frith for assault. The case was heard on the 28th June at Marlborough Street Crown Court as the Rt. Hon. George de Grey, brother of Lord Walsingham v Mr E. Frith of the Stock Exchange residing in Wimbledon. (Being a cynic when I saw the heading I correctly assumed what the outcome of the case would be)

It was on the night of May 27th, the first performance of *La figlia del reggimento* with Jenny Lind as Maria when this altercation took place. In court Mr Frith explained how he and two friends, named as Mr Vile and Mr Bayley had bought seats in the Pit Stalls Nos.171 and 172 for the whole subscription and that they each used them one after another. The Hon. George de Grey insisted that he had purchased his ticket counter-signed by the theatre's secretary for £2.12s. 6p. from John Ebers' bookshop in Old Bond Street the previous Saturday week. Messr's Frith, Bayley and Vile swore on oath that neither of them had placed not even a "bone" at Ebers' bookshop for resale. Other witnesses were called who testified to having seen Mr Frith with his wife in those seats on previous nights. Reading the transcript of the trial it is interesting to note that the person sitting in seat 170 got up and just disappeared when the altercation started. No evidence was given how the double-booking had occured. At that time the theatre did not take back "unwanted bones" for resale. If you did not propose to attend a performance you placed the "bone" for resale at an accredited bookseller (these were

the fore-runners of the London Theatre Ticket Agencies of today). If it was sold, the seller had his money back, less a commission, and the new purchaser was given a card with all details upon it together the signature of the secretary. In the Morning Chronicle of the 29th there was a letter (perhaps tongue in cheek) from a Lord Maidstone seeking assurance that he would not be assaulted when he was next at the opera house, and suggesting that Mr Lumley should obtain one of the posts from the Serpentine water and marking stall 171 at once as dangerous. He further went on to suggest *"It is not unusual for some people to retain stalls for the season, in order to retail them at a great profit upon the appearance of a great star like Jenny Lind".* Next day in the Morning Chronicle, the 30th, there was another letter, this time from Mr Frith pleading for the person who had vacated seat No. 170 to come forward and help to clear his name. No one did.

I am sure you will not be surprised to read that the verdict was found in favour of the Hon. George and poor Mr E. Frith of the Stock Exchange was left with a fine of £5 or a month in prison. He paid cash as he left the court. Selling too many seats was easy when you had benches with people squeezing-up and un-numbered people standing as I know to my discomfort from the Rossini Festival at Pesaro in the 1980's. Personally, having worked in the theatre and ticket agencies for most of my adult life, I find it too much of a coincidence that the bookseller who sold Mr de Grey the "bone" in question was John Ebers, who was also the secretary who counter-signed the paper-ticket for entry to Her Majesty's Theatre. What was he bolstering? The box-office or his own pocket?

On the 11th of June Jenny Lind was seen in the audience at Covent Garden. The opera being given was Bellini's *Norma* with Giulia Grisi, then the undisputed prima donna of the age, in the title role. Four days later Mlle. Lind undertook to sing this killer role in a performance by Royal command, to celebrate Queen Victoria' s birthday. Jenny had first sung the role at Stockholm in 1842. But despite the splendour of the occasion the evening was not a success. The Swedish nightingale herself realised that this was due to her interpretation of the role, whereas at Covent Garden Grisi was a warrior priestess, angry and revengeful, Jenny played the role as a gentlewoman saddened by the betrayal of her lover with her best friend and that the great scenes were more reproachful than furious! The public and the press split into two camps: *for* and *against*. The Times praised her delicacy and pathos; Henry Chorley (the most influential critic of the 19th century) felt that she was too idealistic and this resulted in a certain lack of drama.He particularly complained about how, at the great emotional moments, she used an almost speaking voice, the press had a field day and soon invented, in spite of the peaceable nature of her relations with Grisi, "The War of the Norma's" (and where have we heard something like this before ... oh yes! the feud between Callas and Tebaldi?).

It was at this point in the season that Lumley had intended to present the new opera by Mendelssohn which he had advertised in the season's prospectus. Even at this late date Mendelssohn was still talking about his opera, which he said would be for Jenny Lind with a proposed title of *Miranda* and based on Shakespeare's *The Tempest.* Felice Romani was asked to provide the libretto, but refused. The choice then fell on Eugène Scribe who supplied a text in four acts as opposed to Shakespeare's five. Mendelssohn did not like this, nor did he like that Scribe had made Caliban's insane love for Miranda, the central theme. He refused to accept this libretto and asked for a replacement text that would follow the play exactly. Scribe was offended and refused, as neither the poet nor the composer was prepared to give way the project was abandoned. (The libretto was eventually set by Jacques Fromental Halévy and had its

première as *La tempesta* at Her Majesty's on the 18th July 1850 with Fillipo Coletti as Prospero and Henriette Sontag as Miranda - ironically enough, it was Lablache who carried off all the plaudits from public and press, for his portrayal of Caliban!). Despite its success, to the best of my knowledge, it has never been revived.

But of course Lumley wanted to honour his pledge of a new opera for Jenny Lind, and with that in mind he contacted Giacomo Meyerbeer hoping that he would oversee a London production of *Ein Feldlager in Schlesien* in which she should star. The great composer agreed, with one stipulation, that the Austrian bass Joseph Staudigl should be engaged for the part of the Cossack Peter. This was no problem as he already was a member of the company having sung Bertram in *Roberto il diavolo*. The opera was re-titled *"Camp de Silésie"* but it was not to be. The composer was too ill to visit London and the production was put aside.

The season was due to continue with a new opera by the young Verdi, who had promised a *King Lear* to star Lablache, but due to various causes this was never to materialise. Instead Verdi suggested his newest opus the as yet unperformed *"Masnadieri"* based on Schiller's play *Die Räuber*. After many lengthy and tiring rehearsals conducted by the composer himself *I masnadieri* finally had it's première on Thursday 2nd July. The cast included Lablache as Massimiliano Moor, Coletti as Francesco Moor with Italo Gardoni as Carlo and Jenny Lind as his beloved Amalia. Verdi himself conducted the first night, when he entered the pit he was met with an overwhelming applause which lasted for fifteen minutes. At the final curtain he was called on stage to acknowledge the applause and calls of VIVA VERDI. The critics were mixed: Chorley said *"We take this to be the worst opera that has been given in our time at Her Majesty's Theatre"* (!) while Punch's description of the opera was that it was *"...so noisy that each act was a Riot Act"*. Even the Times was not very enthusiastic; Verdi conducted a second evening before a far less fashionable audience, then he handed the baton to Michael Balfe for the other two performances and left London. A newspaper noted that at " *the first two performances the audience was immense; the other two the audience was far less numerous - the failure of Verdi's opera being incontestable"*. One journal said that Verdi was disappointed with London, the theatre, the singers and orchestra, and with Jenny Lind, but above all, with himself (his correspondence is far from confirming this opinion).

By now the season was nearing it's end and the last production was Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro*. This was a strange choice, nowadays we consider Figaro the most popular of Mozart's operas but in the nineteenth century this was not the case. It's London première was at the King's Theatre in 1812 in Italian, then at the old Covent Garden Theatre in 1819 in English, and then at Drury Lane in 1841 in German. Just checking the Covent Garden archive for the next fifty years there were only 12 years or so in which the opera was given. Perhaps it was felt that another opera with Jenny Lind would fill the void left by the brief stay of *I masnadieri*, *Figaro* opened on 17th August with Jenny in the role of Susanna. Mozart had been part of her repertoire from the beginning of her career, together with Susanna she also sang the role of the Countess, Donna Anna and Pamina. Happily, as she and the rest of the cast knew their roles by heart, tiring rehearsals were kept to a minimum. She was very much at ease as Susanna, and in one passage of highly embroidered recitative (believe it or not) she delighted the audience to such extent that a burst of furious applause insisted that she gave no less than three encores of this particular flourish! Most of the critics were complimentary, although Chorley (who now seemed to find fault with every thing she

sang) said her interpretation was *"stiff and heavy"*. Her last appearance was on 21st August in *La sonnambula*. The season was over.

To the Provinces

Unlike today, every year when the London season was over most of the singers toured to a number of cities in the provinces, and Jenny Lind was no exception. Two days after the last performance at Her Majesty's, together with Lablache and the tenor Gardoni, and with an orchestra under Michael Balfe they gave a concert at Brighton; then on the 26th of August, another at Birmingham; both *La sonnambula* and *La figlia del reggimento* were heard in Manchester and Liverpool. Concerts were given in Cheltenham, Perth, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Dublin. It appears the citizens of Dublin got the best deal as they saw not only those last two operas named but also *Lucia di Lammermoor*.

In July she had received a letter from the Bishop of Norwich, Dr Stanley, inviting her to stay with him and Mrs Stanley at the Bishop's Palace. This unconventional invitation created a lot of consternation and protest from among the more tight-lipped members of the church. In one newspaper the Standard the following appeared. *"It is very right and proper that jackdaws should build in the church, they have vested interests there, but farewell to the primitive purity of the Establishment when it gives a roosting-place to nightingales!"*. She accepted, staying for five days, during which she gave three concerts. Due to the publicity given to this visit, the stations along the railway line to Norwich were crowded with people hoping to get a glimpse of her. At Norwich the four-thirty train (the estimated time of her arrival) came and went, people became anxious but four hours later she stepped on the crowded platform to such a reception that the whole city knew she had arrived. The great bell of the cathedral led the peal and one by one all the churches joined-in an unprecedented jubilation which continued until midnight. Clearly she would have a big personal success, the Bishop's son Arthur Penrhyn (later famously Dean Stanley of Westminster) proposed marriage to her forthwith, which, however, she refused, but they remained friends. She left Norwich to continue her tour singing in Bath and Bristol. The last city was Exeter where the tour ended on the 2nd October. It had all been too much, exhausted, Jenny decided (yet again) to quit the stage immediately afterwards and devote her life to the concert hall. On the 4th of October she spent the evening with the Dowager Queen Adelaide and the following day left for Berlin for her farewell performances on stage there. Would she return to Great Britain? if so, when and what would she sing?

Even Lumley did not know but he was already making his plans for the season of 1848 with Jenny Lind as his star attraction. In Berlin between the 12th and 18th October she sang in four opera performances, one each of *Der Freischutz* and *La sonnambula* and two of *La figlia del reggimento* in which her Berlin admirers saw her for the first time. The two concerts were a Court command, on the 16th, King Frederick William appointed her his *Kammersangerin*. Then she sang in a benefit for the opera chorus on the 18th. A single performance of *Die Regimentstochter* (that is in German) as a farewell to Hamburg on the 20th then home to Sweden - not to rest from the year's activities but to prepare for a season at the Royal Opera, Stockholm.

Surprisingly she never sang on stage in Italy or France. I can find no reason why Italy was foresworn, perhaps the answer lies in her début as *Norma* at the Theater an der Wien, Vienna in April 1846. In a letter to a friend in Berlin she wrote of three unfavourable circumstances: firstly; the theatre management had raised the ticket prices quite considerably, secondly; they engaged a tenor whom everyone laughed at, and

thirdly *"the whole Italian faction was opposed to me, and was determined to hiss if there was the slightest thing that could be found fault with".*

France however presents a mystery. She arrived in Paris early in July 1841 with a letter of introduction from the Queen of Sweden. It was not long before she was invited to an afternoon soirée. When it was time for her to sing she chose a simple Swedish folk song. Big mistake. This was fashionable Parisian society and they were not impressed by vocal simplicity in Swedish, nor was Manuel Garcia the son of the famous tenor and brother of two of the greatest singers of the age, Maria Malibran and Pauline Viardot. He did not detect that she had the qualities to appear before a "highly-cultivated" audience. A little later she went to see Garcia and asked if he would take her on as a pupil, he listened to her breathing and scales, all the usual aspects of a singing lesson, then he asked her to sing an aria from *Lucia.* This should have been her moment, she had sung the role nearly forty times the previous year in Stockholm. But exhaustion and the strain of living alone in Paris took its toll and she broke down in tears. Garcia now gave his answer *"It would be useless to teach you, Mademoiselle. You no longer have a voice".* Cruel words indeed for the young woman, not yet twenty-one and she pleaded with him to take her on. He relented and forbade her not to sing for six weeks and then he would take her as a pupil, she agreed and eventually studied with him for ten months, later she was to say that she owed all her vocal technique to him.

Surely now was the time for Mlle. Jenny Lind to appear at the Opéra. Why did M. Garcia not help her? As I have been reading about this period and putting together odd scraps of information this, I think, is what happened. Firstly, Garcia was much more interested in another of his students Henriette Nissen (a Swedish mezzo-soprano who had a very short career); secondly, at this time Meyerbeer was in Paris to discuss his forthcoming opera, *Le Prophète.* He had heard Jenny Lind in Berlin and was eager for her to replace the soprano who had nearly ruined the première of *Ein Feldlager* in Berlin. He arranged for an audition for Jenny at the Paris Opéra in July 1842, but naughtily told the Director, Léon Pillet: *"She is not for you. It is a voice described as pretty, but too weak for the Opéra".* Meyerbeer and Berlioz were at the audition but Pillet had been called away to a management conference before she sang; nervous, she was far from her best. Consequently she was not offered a contract. Later M. Pillet was obliged to take the blame for not engaging her, but in his defence he said he was at a conference and that Meyerbeer had told him that she was *"not without talent but still had much to accomplish."* It certainly appears to me that Meyerbeer was playing a dubious game.

Three years later she was indeed offered a contract to sing at the Paris Opéra which she rejected. Charming and polite, as always, she thanked the new Director for *"thinking me worthy enough to appear before the most distinguished audience in the world",* but, with a touch of irony adding; *"For, the more I think of it, the more convinced I am that I am not suited to Paris, nor Paris to me".*

Jenny Lind, the Swedish Nightingale, did sing once in France, at a charity concert in Cannes in 1866 when she raised £3,300 francs for the local hospital. But she did tour in America, and in Cuba between September 1850 and May 1852. Her generosity and her charitable work knew no bounds, many of the organisations and good causes she instigated and supported are still existent even today in Britain, even on the Continent and in America.

I may have given the impression that all was sweetness and light at this time, but this was not the case. Both in London and the provinces there were murmurings against Jenny Lind and the season which some people felt had become a circus.

Complaints were made about the delays to the start of operas - carriages had been booked and supper reservations made so a late start caused inconvenience. There were cancelled performances due to the indisposition of the Swedish Nightingale, her health was frail and certainly she was prone to bouts of extreme headaches. After spending a weekend at Osborne House, the Queen's country retreat on the Isle of Wight, the journey back to London must have been tiring and so must have been a day at the races, these were speculative reasons for cancellations. Some of the other artists felt Jenny was so much in the limelight that their careers suffered. Some provincial theatre managers were pleased that their audiences increased in that London patrons, unable to get tickets at home, took the opportunity to go to the opera elsewhere. What would happen when Jenny left these shores? Even shopkeepers were concerned, most still had a large amount of souvenir 'tat' left on their shelves. One London journal voiced its concern with the following – "*The Star System has brought the drama upon its last legs. It wanted one more blow to be smitten down and annihilated. Has not this blow been dealt by the Swedish Nightingale. But when Jenny Lind is gone, how is the opera to be maintained? and what is to restore vitality to the sinking theatres around, that in a brief space will make all London a dramatic charnel-house.*"

These provincial tours also brought forth complaints and adverse criticisms. One Brighton gentleman complained that he had paid two guineas to attend the concert at the town hall but "Mlle Lind" had only sung four items: Mozart's '*Voi che sapete*', Meyerbeer's '*Quand je quittai la Normandie*', a *scena* in three parts '*Ah forse in tal mommento*' especially composed for her by Michael Balfe who accompanied at the piano (which the correspondent enjoyed). The last item was Bellini's '*Ah non giunge*'. He felt that he had been overcharged, not only that he thought Lind had a pleasing voice but that he had heard better, Malibran for instance, while the rest of the artists were no better than expected to be. And so it continued throughout the tour, letters and articles complaining of inflated prices and the paucity of the programmes, denials of reports regarding crowds in the streets and the capacity of the audiences. Despite these adverse comments the London season and tour was generally considered a success, so much so that Jenny Lind did came back to England in 1848, 1849,and 1850, to sing at Her Majesty's Theatre. She chose as her last performance there, the same opera as her very first, in the role of Alice in *Roberto il Diavolo.*

Bunn v Lind a postscript

Bunn had written to her in December 1846 claiming damages for her non-appearance in 1845 to sing at Drury Lane. In a reply to this letter in February 1847 Jenny Lind wrote, *"You are perfectly conversant with my reasons for not coming" and "my arrival would have been fruitless, since you had not at that time had the opera* (Meyerbeer's *Feldlager) translated into English, nor the music I was engaged to sing"*. She then went on to offer £2000 for the return of the contract she had signed way back in January 1845. He refused the offer and so, as at last Jenny had left England, and as Alfred Bunn knew full well that his case did not stand a chance of success due to the esteem in which the Queen held her, to the adulation of the public, to the daily press coverage while she was in London, he now brought a case for Breach of Contract before the High Court On the 23rd of February 1848 a verdict was finally given in favour of the plaintiff and Mr Bunn was awarded £2,500 (he had asked for £10,000). Unfortunately it was the offer of £2000 that Jenny Lind had made that appeared to swing the jury in his favour. Mr Lumley paid the damages on her behalf, but when she offered to repay him he declined to accept. I could find no record what Jenny herself thought of the case, or its outcome, but I think she must have felt that it was a bitter

blow to her character. Mr Bunn on the other hand made a tidy profit as he collected all the letters and papers connected to the case even the newspaper reports and published them in a book entitled *"The Case of Bunn versus Jenny Lind"*. Needless to say that then, as of now, and thanks to a scandal-loving public, the book became a best seller.

(to be continued)



Mlle Jenny Lind as "Alice" and Herr Staudigl as "Bertram" in Meyerbeer's "Roberto il Diavolo"