

ELISABETTA REGINA D'INGHILTERRA

THE SOURCE of the plot of Rossini's *Elisabetta regina d'Inghilterra* has always been something of a mystery, and attempts on the part of writers to gloss their way over the matter have only resulted in confusion and at least one widely held misconception. This misconception, as far as one can tell, originated with Stendhal, Rossini's biographer. Stendhal was well aware that the opera was produced *some five years before* the publication of Sir Walter Scott's *Kenilworth*, but his statement of the matter was so fudged and misleading – so wilfully anachronistic, in fact – that there is a persistent myth in the world of music, right to this day, that *Kenilworth* was the source of the opera:

Walter Scott's novel *Kenilworth* was not published until 1820¹; nevertheless, its existence makes it superfluous for me to give a full analysis of the plot of Rossini's opera, although in fact *Elisabetta* was produced five years earlier. [...] The *libretto* is a translation from a French melodrama, perpetrated by a Tuscan-born gentleman by the name of Smith, whose home was in Naples.²

¹ in fact 1821

² From Stendhal's *Vie de Rossini* as translated by Richard N. Coe (London, John Calder, 1956), pp. 152-3. This misconception that the source of the plot is to be found in *Kenilworth* is repeated by, for example, no lesser an authority than Herbert Weinstock in his *Rossini: A Biography* (London, OUP, 1968), pp. 50, 495.

Let us attempt to set matters straight. Giovanni Schmidt, the librettist of *Elisabetta regina d'Inghilterra*, may have been Tuscan, but he pursued his career as a librettist in Naples where he was, together with Andrea Leone Tottola, one of the two principal poets employed at this time by the Royal Theatres. A prolific writer, his libretti were also, with the passing of the years, to include Rossini's *Armida* (1817) and *Adelaide di Borgogna* (1817), Mercadante's *Lapoteosi d'Ercole* (1819) and *Anacreonte in Samo* (1820), Pacini's *Amazilia* (1825) and Donizetti's *Elvida* (1826).

And the source of *Elisabetta*? This is a question he answers, even if not as explicitly as we could wish, in a note he prefixed to the printed libretto:

The unpublished subject of this drama, written in prose by the lawyer Signor Carlo Federici and drawn from an English romance, appeared last year at the Teatro del Fondo. The fortunate success it obtained has resulted in my having to turn it, at the request of the Management of the Royal Theatres, into a libretto for music. I was without the original manuscript (the property of the company of actors, who left Naples several months ago) and thus the possibility of following its action in precise detail. But having heard it performed on several occasions, I have followed its events as closely as my memory allowed, reducing five very long acts in prose to two very brief acts in verse. In consequence I make no claim to authorship, apart from the [bare] words and some slight changes, to which the laws of our present-day musical theatre compelled me.

MANUEL GARCIA

For Rossini, the Spanish tenor created Leicester and then the following year he sang the first Almaviva in *Il barbiere di Siviglia*.



At first sight this account seems clear enough, and upon consultation of library catalogues we will find that Carlo Federici did indeed write a play by the name of *Elisabetta regina d'Inghilterra*. But when we have the text actually before our eyes, our mystification is even greater than before, for it has nothing to do with Rossini's opera, and nothing to do with England's Virgin Queen. It presents a totally fictitious plot in which an unidentifiable English queen, Elisabetta (conceivably Elizabeth of York?), the wife of an unidentifiable king Enrico (Henry VII?), is condemned to death for infidelity, but manages to prove her innocence and recover her husband's love. The essential information which Giovanni Schmidt should have given us – but failed to provide – is that we should not be misled by titles, for the true source is *another* play by Carlo Federici, *Il paggio di Leicester* ³.

And the English romance whence Federici drew his inspiration⁴? This – and again he would have saved us a great deal of trouble had he said so – was *The Recess, or A Tale of Other Times* (1785), an enormous three-volume historical romance written by a school mistress from Bath, Sophia Lee. Since this will

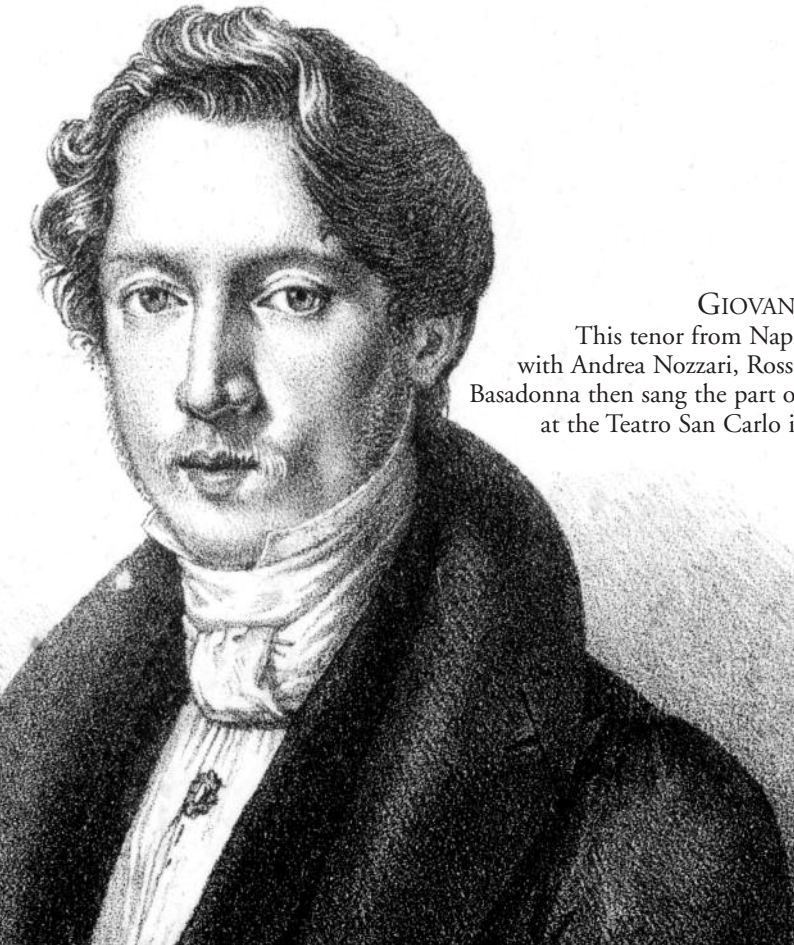
³ For further detailed information on the knotty problems of the evolution of the opera's plot, we refer to two Italian investigations: Marco Spada, "*Elisabetta regina d'Inghilterra*" di Gioachino Rossini, a thesis presented to the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy of the University of Rome "La Sapienza" in 1983-84; and Bruno Cagli, *Rossini a Napoli*, Naples University, Faculty of Letters and Philosophy, 1986-87.

⁴ Either directly or indirectly – it is quite possible that there was a further intermediate source in the form of a French melodrama.

be of particular interest to English readers, let us start here. It was not, let us insist from the start, simply ‘a historical romance’: it also qualifies as a novel of sensibility and as a Gothic novel. A seminal work, *The Recess* helped create a new genre: it is still remembered, if not widely read, as one of the first important historical novels in English.

It is based upon a totally supposititious premise: that Mary Queen of Scots, at a time when she erroneously believed Bothwell dead, and when she was already in England as the prisoner of Queen Elizabeth, entered into a secret marriage with the Duke of Norfolk, and bore him twin daughters, Matilda and Ellinor (the latter replaced in the opera by a son, Enrico). Concealed from their birth in an underground ‘recess’, constructed beneath the ruins of an abbey, Matilda and Ellinor are not informed of their parentage until they reach years of youthful maturity.

The two sisters meet by accident the Earl of Leicester, and the novel follows the fortunes first of Matilda, who becomes Leicester’s wife, and then of Ellinor, who falls in love with the Earl of Essex. We travel from England to France, on to Jamaica and back to England. The episodes that are relevant to the opera occupy only a relatively small portion of the first volume. But whatever else may be said of the story – and it has invited some trenchant and ungenerous comment over the years – Sophia Lee at least had the courage to eschew a happy ending. Leicester is (quite unhistorically) treacherously murdered, while Essex (as in real life) goes to the block. Matilda is subjected to many trials, the greatest of which is the poisoning of her only daughter, and eventually dies; while Ellinor, following Essex’s execution, goes insane.



GIOVANNI BASADONNA

This tenor from Naples studied singing with Andrea Nozzari, Rossini's first Leicester. Basadonna then sang the part of Leicester himself at the Teatro San Carlo in 1831 and 1833.

Carlo Federici, faced with the task of reducing this sprawling canvas to proportions suitable for the stage, retained only one or two central and essential premises: the supposition that Mary Queen of Scots was the mother, not only of James I but also of two other children, concealed from the world from the time of their birth; and that, as the eventual secret wife of Leicester, Matilda excited first the suspicion, and then the jealousy and wrath of Queen Elizabeth. Indeed the incisive and dramatic depiction of Elizabeth as a tyrannically imperious monarch, oscillating between her possessive love for Leicester and her more responsible concern for her country, is the strongest and most memorable feature of the story in all its versions. The description that Sophia Lee has Matilda give of the Queen, recalling the first occasion on which she saw her at Kenilworth Castle, deserves quotation, for it could well be taken as a blueprint by any prima donna who aspires to interpret the title-role in Rossini's opera:

Concealed from the public gaze, I had now an opportunity of examining Elizabeth. She was talking to Leicester, who waited behind her chair. Though the features of Elizabeth retained nothing of her mother's sweetness, they were regular; her eyes were remarkably small, but so clear and quick they seemed to comprehend every thing with a single glance; the defect in her shape taking off all real Majesty, she supplied that deficiency by an extreme haughtiness; a severe, satirical smile marked her countenance, and an absurd gaiety her dress. I could not but suppose foreigners would imagine that [the] Queen owed much of her reputation to her counsellors, who could disgrace her

venerable years by [encouraging her to appear with] a bare neck, and a false head of hair made in the most youthful fashion.⁵

The character in the opera who is furthest, and most confusingly, removed from his counterpart in the novel – and his historical counterpart before that – is Norfolk (or ‘Norfolc’, as Schmidt and Rossini call him). The historical Thomas Howard, fourth Duke of Norfolk (1536–1572), was a Catholic, and was therefore favourably inclined towards the imprisoned Mary Queen of Scots. He carried his hopes and intentions to the point of wishing to marry her, but, unwisely entering into communication with Philip II of Spain regarding the proposed Spanish invasion of England, he was, when this correspondence and his treachery were revealed, arrested and beheaded.

⁵ Sophia Lee, *The Recess, or A Tale of Other Times* (1783-5), I, 200. The description which Sophia Lee gives of Leicester is also noteworthy:

He appeared something past the bloom of life, but his beauty was rather fixed than faded; of a noble height and perfect symmetry, he would have had an air too majestic, but that the sweetness of his eyes and voice tempered the dignity of his mien. His complexion was of a clear polished brown; his eyes large, dark and brilliant; his hair gracefully marked the turn of all his features, and his dress was of a dove-coloured velvet, mingled with white satten [sic] and silver; a crimson sash inwoven with gold, hung from his shoulder with a picture; and the order of the garter, as well as a foreign one, with which he was invested, shewed his rank as distinguished as his person.

There is, unfortunately, no direct or concise description of Matilda, since she is the narrator of the novel. We continually see the action through her eyes, rather than look directly at her.



LAURE CINTI-DAMEREAU
One of Rossini's favourite singers,
this French soprano
sang Matilde in Paris in 1822.

In Sophia Lee's novel Norfolk scarcely appears, for his execution has taken place more than fourteen years before the action begins. He is, however, presented in a retrospective account narrated by one of the other characters. There, he is presented as a genuine friend of Leicester, and his portrait is drawn with total and unqualified sympathy. After his death, we are told:

Never was nobleman more lamented: he had endeared himself to the body of the people by his courage, generosity, and affability; and to his equals, by an unconsciousness of superiority, which prevented envy, and an uniformity of conduct, which gained admiration.

Nothing of the surprising fiction that Norfolk was the husband of Mary Queen of Scots and the father of two of her children survives by the time we reach the operatic version of Schmidt and Rossini. Here Matilda and Enrico are, indeed, Mary's children, but we are never told who their father was. Certainly they no longer have any relationship to Norfolk, who, after he has passed through the imaginative – or perhaps unimaginative – crucible of Carlo Federici's reconstruction, is a totally different person from the character who bore his name in Sophia Lee's novel.

This new Norfolk, as he now appears in Schmidt and Rossini, is a high-ranking nobleman at Elizabeth's court who aspires to the crown. Ostensibly he is the friend of Leicester, but really he is a hypocrite who resents Leicester's presence as an obstacle to his own advancement. Reduced in this way from a

sympathetic and semi-historical character to a sufficiently conventional operatic villain, he is now an Iago-like deceiver: a man who feigns friendship while really being consumed by malevolent jealousy and ambition.

Elisabetta regina d'Inghilterra – the new operatic version of the story – is a romantic, historical costume melodrama. And its greatest merit lies in the fact that it is simple and concise, easily comprehensible in its two-act action, and yet rich in dramatic possibilities. Four sharply drawn and clearly distinguished characters are locked in antagonistic confrontation: an imperious queen; her guilt-ridden lover who has secretly married elsewhere; his wife, who through no fault of her own happens to be the daughter of the queen's most dreaded political enemy; and an ambitious courtier who is only too eager to dislodge and destroy his more favoured rival. Loyalties and betrayals; conflicts of self-interest and honour; all the pith and marrow of romantic melodrama is concentrated in this single fleet-footed drama.

The subject was also most carefully chosen – certainly by the impresario Domenico Barbaja, very possibly in collaboration with his mistress, the prima donna Isabella Colbran, rather than by Rossini himself – because, showing the eventual clemency of a monarch, it was precisely the right subject for this particular moment of Neapolitan history. For at the time when Rossini would have received his contract to compose an opera for Naples, the ruler of the kingdom was Gioacchino (Joachim) Murat; when, on the other hand, the time came to perform it, Murat had been thrust from the throne and soon afterwards shot, and the ruler was the restored Bourbon King Ferdinand I.

Both Barbaja and Isabella Colbran had begun their engagements in Naples under the Napoleonic regime: both were now under the necessity of winning the favour of the restored monarch, and this was the first major spectacle to be mounted since his return. The choice of *Elisabetta regina d'Inghilterra* may thus be seen as a symbolic gesture: as a plea that the King might be willing to close the chapter of the past, and to grant them his protection as they served him in the future.

Elisabetta regina d'Inghilterra was also the first opera that Rossini composed for Naples. It ushered in a brilliant period of eight years during which he was to compose nine operas for the Royal Theatres: *Elisabetta regina d'Inghilterra* (1815), *Otello* (1816), *Armida* (1817), *Mosè in Egitto* (1818), *Ricciardo e Zoraide* (1818), *Ermione* (1819), *La donna del lago* (1819), *Maometto II* (1820) and *Zelmira* (1822). But all this lay still in the future. At the time he received his commission to compose *Elisabetta* he was, undeniably, a name to contend with in the north of Italy. Barbaja is known to have tried to engage him earlier, following the brilliant success of *La pietra del paragone* at La Scala in Milan in 1812. In 1813 he had eclipsed even this success by producing, in Venice in the course of the year, both *Tancredi* and *L'Italiana in Algeri*. Yet, it must be added, he was still unknown in Naples. He came from the Papal States, in effect a different country, and he was a product, not of the Neapolitan school which had dominated Italian music during the 18th century, but of the school of Padre Mattei in Bologna. Surprisingly, none of his operas had yet been heard south of Rome. He was faced, therefore, with the challenge of winning over a new public which, if not exactly xenophobic,



ADELAIDE COMELLI-RUBINI

The wife of the great tenor Rubini,
this soprano sang both Matilde and Elisabetta,
from 1819 to 1825.

was certainly conservative, proud of its own traditions, and suspicious of *enfants terribles* who arrived with reputations made elsewhere.

This challenge was probably even greater than is generally recognised. According to traditional accounts, Rossini's acceptance in Naples was facilitated by Barbaja's appointing him musical director of the Royal Theatres with an obligation to compose two new operas a year. But no such contract – no contract, for that matter, for *Elisabetta regina d'Inghilterra* in any shape or form – has ever come to light. As Bruno Cagli has pointed out⁶, it is highly unlikely that a young composer, no matter how successful he may have been in the north, would have been offered such a contract in Naples. Almost certainly he would have been expected to prove himself first. And almost certainly he would have been offered a contract covering a first, single opera alone.

In this light, it is now generally accepted, we should read an announcement of the forthcoming theatrical season that appeared in the *Giornale delle Due Sicilie* on 25 September 1815. For there is an element of condescension, perhaps even of deliberate affront, in the way 'a certain Signor Rossini' is mentioned. He is clearly regarded as comparatively small fry and as an outsider amid so many proven and better-known names:

⁶ Bruno Cagli, 'Al gran sole di Rossini', in *Il Teatro di San Carlo 1737-1987*, II (L'opera, il ballo, a cura di Bruno Cagli e Agostino Ziino), 133-169.

In this moment all is movement in our theatrical world; from everywhere there are arriving composers, singers, dancers, artists of every kind. Within the last few days there have reached us Signor [Salvatore] Viganò, the famed composer of ballets; Signora [Antonia] Pallerini and Signor Le Gros the leading dancers; [the choreographer] Signor [Luigi Antonio] Duport and his young wife, both so applauded upon our stages; Signor Rubini, the tenor destined to sing at the Teatro de' Fiorentini; and lastly a certain Signor Rossini, a composer who they say has come to present an *Elisabetta regina d'Inghilterra* at our Teatro S. Carlo itself, which still resounds with the melodious accents of the *Medea* and the *Cora* of the renowned Signor Mayer [sic]. In the midst of this general movement, the young son of our illustrious composer Signor Tritta makes us hope for a truly Italian music at the Real Teatro del Fondo; Maestro Prota another in the Teatro de' Fiorentini; and Signor Viganò a new and magnificent ballet entitled *Clotilde* at the Teatro S. Carlo. These arrangements make us anticipate a most generous recompense for the inactivity in which for some time our stages seem to have languished – our stages where vocal music was born, grew and attained the greatest manifestation of its glory.

The cast that Rossini found awaiting him could not have been more glittering. It was headed by the Spanish prima donna Isabella Colbran (Elisabetta), at this time the mistress of Barbaja and eventually – in 1822 – to become the wife of Rossini. The two tenors were the highly gifted and fiery



JOSÉPHINE FODOR-MAINVILLE

This French soprano sang the role of
Elisabetta from 1818 to 1825 in
London, Vienna and Naples.

Spaniard, Manuel Garcia (Norfolk), and the equally talented Andrea Nozzari (Leicester). Even the second soprano, Girolama Dardanelli (Matilde), was a formidably accomplished singer and a name to contend with⁷.

And ‘contend with’, given the troubles that Rossini encountered with his cast, is a phrase that does not seem inaptly chosen. It was intended that the opera should receive its first performance on 4 October, the name-day of the heir to the throne, Ferdinand’s son Francesco, and therefore a gala occasion. Yet it appeared anything but certain that the production could be ready in time.

In the first place there was a regrettable clash of personalities and interests between Barbaja and Garcia. On the grounds that his contract denied him the right to exercise his talents outside the Royal Theatres, Barbaja refused to allow Garcia, who seems to have been a truculent and somewhat difficult character at the best of times, the privilege of holding a private reading of one

⁷ When in 1816 she assumed the role of Elisabetta herself in a production at the Teatro Carolino in Palermo, the *Gran Foglio di Sicilia* reported (11 September 1816):

This young artist, besides an extraordinary voice which does not, perhaps, admit rivals, besides *gorgheggi* which show agility, clarity and unparalleled taste which leave bystanders aghast and inebriated with pleasure, has displayed surprising tragic and heroic talents, totally unexpected in an artist who, nearly always accustomed to performing in opera buffa, has necessarily had to habituate herself to a style of acting in no way in keeping with that of tragedy. It is something truly extraordinary to see her lose her naturally sweet expression, and to substitute one that is commanding and majestic. Sarcasm, anger, irony are perfectly expressed by her; her gait is noble.

of his own works, the opera *Zemira e Azore*, in his lodgings. Garcia retaliated by addressing a supplication to the King seeking redress against Barbaja's abuse of power. He refused to attend rehearsals, especially since he was about to sing in another opera (Domenico Tritto's *La parola di onore*, premiered at the Teatro del Fondo on 27 September), with the result that on two occasions, 15 and 26 September, rehearsals of *Elisabetta* had to be cancelled. On 17 September Girolama Dardanelli also declined to rehearse, giving as her reason the fact that she was already singing elsewhere that evening. In response to all these difficulties, Barbaja on 20 September had recourse to the Superintendent of Spectacles and Theatres, complaining about both Garcia and Dardanelli, but 'in particular of the *absolute inobedience of the Tenor Garcia*, constantly dominated by his whim'. The upshot was that Garcia was summoned to the Prefecture of Police and soundly reprimanded. Only as the result of such extreme measures were matters finally brought under control.

At this point, four days before the scheduled first performance, Garcia, even if he had attended some rehearsals, had almost certainly not so much as opened his mouth. Indeed the Countess Merlin, reporting in her *Memoirs of Madame Malibran* (London, 1844) an account of the opera which she had received verbally from Isabella Colbran, wrote:

After a dozen preparatory rehearsals, during which [Garcia] had merely looked [the music] over, the day of the final rehearsal arrived. Garcia attended, but, alas! not one note, not one word of his part, had he learned. Mademoiselle Colbran was in despair... 'Don't alarm yourself... think of nobody but me; give me out the words distinctly,

and as to the music, that's my affair'... In short, he went through the whole opera with unbounded applause, but without giving *one note of the composer's music*. The fact was, during the rehearsals he had attentively studied the harmonies of the accompaniments. Having made himself thoroughly acquainted with them, he was enabled to substitute for the part which the composer had assigned to him, one of his own adaptation, improvising, as he proceeded, in the most extraordinary manner possible. Madame Rossini always mentioned this as the most astonishing example of musical talent and facility that ever came under her notice.

Exaggerated and embroidered though this account doubtless is, it nevertheless vividly illustrates Garcia's prowess as a singer, and eloquently hints at the anxieties that must have racked Barbaja and Rossini during the final stages of preparation.

The premiere duly took place, as planned, on 4 October, but once again we are faced with an extraordinary situation. The *Giornale delle Due Sicilie*, the official Neapolitan newspaper of the day, published a review which made no mention of the music whatsoever. Tradition has always maintained that the opera scored a sensational success, but the official journal of the kingdom – the very journal which one would have expected to extol it most warmly – totally ignored it. For confirmation that it did indeed meet with eager and universal applause, we must go to the Sicilian *Gazzetta di Messina*, which printed a report it had received from Naples to the effect that:



FRANCESCO PEDRAZZI

In 1834 this tenor sang the role of Leicester at the Teatro San Carlo.

In the same season he created the title role in Donizetti's *Buondelmonte*.

Signor Rossini exceeded the good idea that was entertained of his talents, because he pleased [even] after *Medea* and *Cora*: notwithstanding the great and deserved reputation of Mayr and the malevolent prophecies of the journalist of Naples [i.e. of the *Giornale delle Due Sicilie*], his music gave us extreme pleasure and the public called for him and covered him with applause. Only a great actress and singer of the merit of Signora Colbran could have succeeded in shining in such a short time in a part so difficult and arduous, having had to go on stage in a very few days.

And there, until only a few months ago, our primary documentary evidence of the success of *Elisabetta regina d'Inghilterra* came to an abrupt end. Early this year, however, the auction house of Sotheby's offered for sale a highly important and completely unpublished series of about 250 autograph letters which Rossini (and in some instances his by-then-wife Isabella Colbran) wrote to his parents Anna and Giuseppe Rossini. They are letters that span almost his entire operatic career. And they preserve for us the composer's own comments on the success of this opera, for in one letter (no. 55 of the collection) he says:

At last my *Elisabetta* has been staged, and it was received with fanaticism... a revolution of applause and at the end a call upon the stage where I must have remained for 8 minutes receiving the evvivas...

while in the next (no. 56, dated 14 October 1815) he elaborates (with a nicely ironic inversion of the truth at the end):

FURORE

OH! what music, oh! what music, Naples is saying. It is impossible that I should explain to you the enthusiasm that my music is producing here... Know, though, that I have always [i.e. at every performance] been called on to the stage to receive the oranges thrown in my face.

The applause that engulfed Rossini was almost certainly owing to his ability to work with singers so that he came to appreciate both the strengths and the weaknesses of their techniques, and as a result to cast and shape his music in ways that showed their strongest features to the greatest advantage. While a major question-mark must hang over his working relations with Manuel García, Isabella Colbran and Andrea Nozzari he would seem to have established links that were to last long and fruitfully. For both remained essential pillars of Barbaja's company throughout Rossini's Neapolitan years, and both participated in the premieres of all nine of the operas he wrote for the Royal Theatres.

Isabella Colbran, in particular, is deserving of even further comment, since, already the reigning diva on the stages of Naples, her triumph in this opera brought the entire city to her feet. Contemporary descriptions suggest that her voice was that of a contralto, but with a phenomenal upper extension that gave her a range of nearly three octaves. She excelled in passages of agility and in the execution of fioriture. And though soon to be plagued by problems of intonation, she was at this point still very much at the height of her powers.

Visually, too, she was a remarkable and charismatic performer, prompting Stendhal to write that:

... never before or since did she possess greater beauty than at that time. It was a beauty in the most queenly tradition: noble features, which, on the stage, radiated majesty; an eye like that of a Circassian maiden, darting fire; and to crown it all, a true and deep instinct for tragedy... The moment she stepped on to the boards, her brow encircled with a royal diadem, she inspired involuntary respect, even among those who, a minute or two earlier, had been chatting intimately with her in the foyer of the theatre.

Rossini also found himself working in Naples with one of the finest theatre orchestras in Italy. Directed by its first violinist, the exacting Giuseppe Festa, it numbered about 80 players, and was renowned for the discipline and the meticulous precision of its playing. The prominence given to wind instruments in *Elisabetta regina d'Inghilterra* – and the difficulty of some of the solo passages written for them – is ample testimony of Rossini's recognising and taking advantage of the opportunities offered him.

This opera remains, therefore, of lasting and undeniable importance. It ushered in eight of the most glorious years both in Rossini's own life and in the history of opera in 19th century Naples. It may not contain the high-spots that distinguish some of its successors – the Willow Song in *Otello*, or the prayer 'Dal tuo stellato soglio' in *Mosè in Egitto*, for example – but it paved

the way for those greater achievements and set the musical patterns that were to be developed in the years that followed.

Composing for singers of the calibre of Isabella Colbran, Manuel Garcia, Andrea Nozzari and Girolama Dardanelli – confronting the Neapolitan public for the first time – and treating a drama that was built around one of the most majestic and imperious monarchs the world has ever known – it is hardly surprising that Rossini opted in this score for majesty rather than intimacy, for brilliance rather than tenderness or pathos. *Elisabetta regina d’Inghilterra* is essentially a brilliant opera, depending on the dazzling vocalism of superbly talented virtuoso singers. This emphasis on display is particularly apparent in the music allotted to Elisabetta, and nowhere more so than in the slow central section, ‘Bell’alme generose’, of her aria finale, where an initially simple *andante* melody becomes increasingly embellished as it goes on. As Stendhal reported,

... The enthusiasm of the audience knew no bounds. Fully fifteen performances had to be witnessed before we were finally restored to a state of sanity, and able to submit our delight in this superb passage to the tempering judgment of rational criticism.

Having said this, however, it must also be admitted that *Elisabetta regina d’Inghilterra* contains some perplexing features. It is generally acknowledged that it gets better as it goes on. While Act I is never less than engaging and attractive, Act II is musically more concentrated, more dramatic and vital.

This is partly a consequence of growing dramatic tension: an exposition is never as gripping as the conflicts it leads to. But we may also note the surprising absence of an *aria di sortita* for Leicester, even though he is a commander returning victorious from his campaigns, and even though there is a chorus, ‘Vieni, o prode’, which would seem specifically designed to usher one in.

There is, too, we believe, a further reason for the qualified judgment which has frequently been meted out to Act I: Rossini’s habit of self-borrowing, and the extreme lengths to which he took it. Unless we are prepared in advance, how surprised we are to find, when the orchestra strikes up, that we are listening to the overture which we know better as that to *Il barbiere di Siviglia*. Fractionally revised, and with orchestration slightly reinforced, it is in all essentials exactly the same. Similarly it comes as a shock to find that Elisabetta sings the cabaletta of her *aria di sortita*, ‘Questo cor ben lo comprende’, to the same music to which Rosina sings her mischievous ‘Io sono docile’. How, we wonder, could Rossini have been so cavalier as to use the same music one moment in an *opera seria*, and the next in an *opera buffa*? With both these items, indeed, the ‘case for the prosecution’ is even worse than we have suggested, since they were used *thrice*: first in *Aureliano in Palmira*, then in *Elisabetta regina d’Inghilterra*, and only thirdly where we feel they really belong, in *Il barbiere*. While a close examination of the cabalettas of Elisabetta and Rosina may suggest that there was only a very slender demarcation line separating *opera seria* from *opera buffa* in Rossini’s day, and that it needed only a change of nuance, decoration, tempo, or singer’s tone to adapt the same

music to a new context and opposed genre, the problem nevertheless remains a very real one. And for this reason we would contend that, were we not so accustomed to hearing these items in another, very different context, we would probably find them considerably more effective and acceptable here, in *Elisabetta regina d'Inghilterra*.

The items we have mentioned are not, in fact, the only self-borrowings in this opera. The *Allegro* section of the Act I finale, 'Quegl'indegni sien serbati', which employs music from the last section of the overture, derives from *Aureliano in Palmira*, while the very beautiful prelude to Leicester's dungeon scene in Act II is borrowed from *Ciro in Babilonia*.

The recycling of two of the passages we have mentioned into yet a third work, *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, becomes even more disconcerting when we realise that *Elisabetta* was separated from *Il barbiere* by only four months. *Elisabetta* was written late in 1815, while *Il barbiere* was premiered in February 1816. If we look at the work of other composers of the period, we will find that the normal practice, when any opera failed, was to use it as a mine from which to extract material until any particular item, melody or musical idea became definitively placed in a work which *did* score a valid success. Once so 'enshrined', it remained 'sacrosanct' and unsuitable for further use. Here, however, Rossini flouts this more usual practice. *Elisabetta* scored such a resounding success that we may think he should have realised that it would retain its place in the Neapolitan repertoire and soon be seen, as indeed it was, on many other stages further afield. Yet within four months of the premiere

he proceeded to rob it of two of its prominent numbers and use them in a totally opposed context: in a comic opera.

It is also disconcerting to find that *Elisabetta* has, over the years, become the subject of at least two erroneous or ill-focused critical commonplaces. How often have we read that in this opera Rossini evidenced his concern with innovation and progress by abandoning *recitativo secco* and writing for the first time *recitativo strumentato*? It is true enough that for the first time he here scores all the recitatives which we might have expected to be cast as *recitativo secco* for a quartet of strings. But does this amount to personal ‘innovation’ for which he may claim the credit? Such an assertion ignores the fact that the French-influenced court of Murat had, by introducing French models, established a taste for orchestrally accompanied recitative. Mayr, for example, arriving in Naples in 1813 with a completed score of *Medea in Corinto*, had been instructed to recast the recitatives ‘in the French manner, which all of us have taken as our model’. And Mayr, we may add, carried out these instructions more efficiently and a great deal more thoroughly than Rossini did in *Elisabetta*. In *Medea* we feel that the composer is really thinking in orchestral terms as he writes his recitatives, whereas Rossini, even though he writes for strings, so often gives them bare chords that we realise that he is still thinking in terms of *recitativo secco*. Elsewhere, of course – before important items and in heightened moments – he writes true accompanied recitative. But the fact remains that we are never, in all the course of the opera, in a moment’s doubt as to whether he is thinking in terms of *recitativo secco* or *recitativo strumentato*. His instrumentation may have changed in this opera,

but his concepts have not. Emphatically he was not in this particular matter the innovative theorist that some have wished to suggest: he was, rather, a composer who adapted his practice to the mode of whatever city he happened to find himself in. And, by way of footnote, it should come as no surprise to find that in some of his later scores – *Bianca e Falliero*, for example – he reverts to *recitativo secco*. Again he was complying with the practice of a particular city, for *Bianca e Falliero* was composed for La Scala in Milan, where *recitativo secco* was still regularly employed in serious operas until the end of the 1820s.

Before we leave this question of the recitatives, and the manner in which they are written, we may note in passing that the first truly accompanied recitative in the opera comes before the Act I Elisabetta-Norfolk duet, ‘Perché mai, destin crudele’, and, significantly, lifts the whole opera at that point to a new level of drama and dramatic expression. Nor does the ensuing three-part duet for a moment allow the tension to diminish. Rather it continues to build in excitement – and in the brilliance of its bravura writing – right through to the end.

This duet serves, moreover, to usher in the First Finale, an extended finale which has always met with unanimous and eager praise. It begins with an accompanied recitative as an offended and seething Elisabetta laments her discovery that Leicester loves another – a recitative which is introduced and punctuated by one of the most graceful and memorable melodies in the score. Stendhal wrote of Isabella Colbran’s acting at this point:

... Signorina Colbran was magnificent; she allowed herself no gestures; she simply paced up and down, unable to control herself, to force herself into stillness while she awaited the setting of the stage and the arrival of her false lover; her eyes alone betrayed that her mind was burning with the single word which inexorably would send her lover to his death.⁸

With the entry of Leicester, Matilde and Enrico, Elisabetta proceeds to play with her faithless lover as a cat plays with a mouse, launching the fully-composed section of the finale with a superb passage of autocratic, florid declamation, ‘Se mi serbasti il soglio’, and entangling Leicester in an offer of marriage and advancement to the throne which she knows very well he cannot accept. His embarrassment and bewilderment are expressed in a mainly homophonic concertato-quartet, ‘Qual colpo inaspettato’, pregnant with apprehension and anxiety on the part of Leicester, Matilde and Enrico. It is a quartet which is also interesting since it begins and ends with ritornelli for four horns – the only place in the opera where a quartet of horns is used. The

⁸ Some pages later Stendhal writes in similar vein:

Signorina Colbran, as Elizabeth, used no gestures, did nothing melodramatic, never descended to what are vulgarly called *tragedy-queen poses*. The immensity of her royal authority, the vastness of events which a single word from her lips could call into being, all this lived in the Spanish beauty of her eyes, which at times could be so terrible. Her glance was that of a queen whose fury is restrained only by a last rag of pride; her whole presence was that of a woman who still has beauty, and who for years has grown accustomed to beholding her first hint of a whim followed by the swiftest obedience.

crisis point, when Elisabetta pounces upon Matilde and thrusts her, terrified, before an abashed Leicester, is managed with exemplary efficiency in the following *tempo di mezzo*, and precipitates a thrilling *stretta*, ‘Quegl’indegnien serbati’, based, at least in part, upon the crescendo passage from the end of the overture. If Act I began rather unremarkably, therefore, the dramatic temperature gauge has risen steeply and set the audience’s pulses racing by the end.

But let us return to the mistaken critical commonplaces that have bedeviled assessments of this opera. How often, to take a further example, have we read that this was one of the scores in which Rossini wrote out all the vocal decorations, forestalling any wish that the singers may have had to decorate the music for themselves? In the words of Herbert Weinstock, this opera ‘marked his first effort to force virtuoso singers to perform the notes that he composed for them – the vocal ornaments were autographed as integral parts of the score.’⁹ This again, we believe, is an exaggeration and a distortion of the truth. Rossini – and his contemporary, Pacini – demanded more bravura floridity from their singers than any other Italian composers of the 19th century: their music simply bristles with demands for spectacular agility. But the old story that Rossini failed to recognise his own music when he heard Velluti sing *Aureliano in Palmira* and thereafter determined to discipline his singers by writing in all his own decorations, must, we believe, be taken with a grain of salt. He never, we believe, wished to force his singers

⁹ Herbert Weinstock, *Rossini: A Biography* (London, OUP, 1968), p.50.

to sing his notes and only his notes. He wrote to the topmost of their abilities, but still expected them to add their own decorations, particularly in cadenzas and in the second verses or repeats of cabalettas.

Elisabetta regina d'Inghilterra is also fascinating for the diversity of critical opinion that certain of its items have evoked. Some sections – Matilde's suavely beautiful aria, 'Sento un'interna voce', for example – or the already-mentioned finale to Act I – or Elisabetta's extraordinarily spectacular and florid aria finale – have met with universal praise. On the other hand, it is by no means uncommon to find one writer praising items which another dismisses with unenthusiastic qualification. When Stendhal wrote of the consecutive arias for Norfolk and Leicester in Act II, 'Deh! troncate i ceppi suoi' and 'Sposa amata', he conceded that 'both are reasonably well written', but went on to say that, 'considered purely as pieces of composition, both *arias* had a faint flavour of the commonplace, and seemed to fall rather below the high standard of the rest of the opera.' Present-day listeners, we predict, will find themselves in fierce disagreement, for both arias are particularly fine. Norfolk's can scarcely be separated from the scene which introduces it, beginning with the chorus of citizens and soldiers, 'Qui soffermiamo il piè', one of those broad elegiac choruses which were later so much to influence Donizetti. It then continues with an accompanied recitative introduced by a noteworthy orchestral passage in which an insistent violin figure is pitted against more sustained phrases for cello. The whole scene is remarkable for the fully integrated and realised dramatic part played by the chorus, as Norfolk progressively works them up from initial despondency to a determination to

liberate their imprisoned hero, overcoming as he does so their initial hushed and horrified reaction to his suggestion that they use force against the authority of the throne. As for Leicester's aria – omitted from some early vocal scores – it is certainly the most expressive and deeply felt music in the whole score. In the words of Andrew Porter, writing in *The Financial Times* on 20 May 1964, 'Best of all is the scene for the imprisoned Leicester, as he half-voices his dreams in broken phrases through a web of cor anglais and flute obbligatos.' Porter's reference is simply to the aria itself, remarkable for its unusual employment of two cors anglais and two piccolos, but the recitative that precedes it, introduced and then punctuated by the orchestral prelude borrowed from *Ciro in Babilonia*, is also highly expressive and suitably doom-laden. The aria is also interesting in that it begins with an extremely simple and affecting orchestral melody in 6/8, played in thirds by woodwind – a good illustration of how extreme simplicity can have maximum effect – which is highly appropriate to Leicester's feelings as, sunk in slumber, he thinks longingly of his cherished wife. Since he is sleeping, and therefore incapable of being fully articulate, it is also appropriate that Rossini does not allow him to sing the melody himself. It represents what is passing in his mind, while he can only 'half voice' intermittent phrases until, reawakening, he realises that he has been dreaming and launches into far more bitter railings against fate. That such an aria should have been dismissed as falling 'rather below the high standard of the rest of the opera' is eloquent testimony that too many of Rossini's early listeners appreciated the bravura execution of the performers but remained deaf to many of the intrinsic ideas and expressive qualities that inform the music itself.

One further unexpected feature of *Elisabetta regina d'Inghilterra*, which at first seems a flaw but which may have been consciously and deliberately planned on Rossini's part, is the inclusion of two two-part duets, each lacking the central slow section which most of us will feel generally enshrines the major musical riches of any item composed in Italy at this time. One of them, Leicester and Matilde's 'Incauta! che festi!', occurs fairly early in Act I; the other, Leicester and Norfolk's 'Deh! scusa i trasporti', comes towards the end of Act II. Both have met with critical praise, the first especially, Stendhal describing it, with its opening in minor key particularly in mind, as 'not only magnificent, but extremely original... It may justly be claimed that this first duet... determined not only the success of this particular opera, but also the wider triumph of its composer.'

Can Rossini's decision to include two such duets without central section be explained? The present writer owes to Opera Rara's artistic director Patric Schmid the intriguing suggestion that, seeking to give the whole opera variety of form and interest, Rossini constructed it like some kind of musical palindrome. Act I begins with items that are fairly simple and predictable in their structure, such as the opening choruses and Elisabetta's *aria di sortita*, but as the act proceeds the forms become more complex (the duet for Leicester and Matilde may be in two parts, but that for Elisabetta and Norfolk is in three), the process culminating in all the architectural complexity of the First Finale. When we reach Act II, we find the process reversed. It begins with a duet which turns into a trio – and contains *two* slow movements, one in the duet, the other in the trio – but moves to simpler forms such as the two-part

duet for Leicester and Norfolk already mentioned, and ends with an *aria finale* for Elisabetta (to balance her *aria di sortita* in Act I). Another way of putting this is that there are times, in the middle of the opera, when Rossini wishes to expand and elaborate the action; times, at the beginning and end, when he wishes to hasten it forward. His instinct to round off the action concisely and forcefully is further illustrated by his giving Elisabetta a single-verse cabaletta at the end of her *aria finale* – a cabaletta a full half of which, moreover, is climactic coda.

But calculated simplicity – or complexity – of form ought never, in this opera, to suggest simplicity of texture. Rossini manifestly set out to take Naples by storm. Taking advantage of the fact that his performers were *virtuosi*, he aimed everywhere at a brilliance as breathtaking as it was unprecedented. And he succeeded not merely in arousing public approbation: he went further, much further, and left his audiences spellbound, agog, and searching for superlatives.

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