

## Malibran's Favourite Aria

Balfe, 'With Rapture Dwelling' (Isoline), *The Maid of Artois*, Act III

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The seventeen-year-old Princess Victoria was 'much amused'. On attending the tenth performance of Michael Balfe's *Maid of Artois* at the Drury Lane Theatre, on 17 June 1836, she thought it 'rather too long, and rather too melancholy'; and that the tenor lead, John Templeton, 'sang and acted as badly, and was as disagreeable, as usual'. Nevertheless, there was 'a good deal of pretty music', most of which was sung by the prima donna around whom the opera had been shaped: Maria Malibran.<sup>1</sup>

Malibran's final Drury season has not tended to occupy much space in the biographies that began to appear within days of her much-lamented death later that summer, at the Manchester Music Festival, and that have continued ever since. French and Italian writers, in particular, have seen little of interest in a repeat engagement to sing operas in English at a venue not renowned for its musical connoisseurs. The comtesse de Merlin, for example, confuses Covent Garden with Drury Lane in her account of 1838, and leaves Balfe's opera unmentioned.<sup>2</sup> Such a

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<sup>1</sup> Entry of 17 June 1836; full entry available at [www.queenvictoriasjournals.org](http://www.queenvictoriasjournals.org).

<sup>2</sup> Comtesse Merlin [María de las Mercedes Santa Cruz y Montalvo], *Les Loisirs d'une femme de monde*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1838), 2: 81-3; reprinted in Brussels later the same year as *Madame Malibran*. The English adaptation, entitled the *Memoirs and Letters of Madame Malibran. By the Countess of Merlin and Other Intimate Friends* (London, 1840) did mention the opera, to say that 'it is of too recent occurrence for any one to forget the univeted charms of melody, sweetness, and harmony, with which she enriched a composition of itself beautiful and pleasing' (2: 41).

level of inattention is matched by later retellings, which to this day often go no further than recycling the claim made by the reviewer in the *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris* that the work consists of a tissue of musical borrowings, capped by a final aria for Malibran, ‘With Rapture Dwelling’ (later changed to ‘The Rapture Swelling’) lifted directly from Johann Strauss the Elder.<sup>3</sup>

The charge of plagiarism was predictable for an unabashedly Italianate work jostling for notice in the crowded post-Rossinian marketplace. But there are reasons to pay more attention to this concluding waltz, aside from its purported Viennese origins. After all, even the reviewer in the *Gazette* acknowledged the number as a highlight, thanks to the ‘unbelievable vigour’ of Malibran’s performance. Others, whether writing at the time or in mournful retrospect, were still more fulsome, declaring it variously ‘one of the most delicious, thrilling pieces that has perhaps ever been heard on the stage’, and ‘beyond comparison the most perfect and effective musical performance I had ever listened to’.<sup>4</sup> In the *Bijou Almanack*, released at the

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<sup>3</sup> D. A. ‘Correspondance particulière de la Gazette musicale’, *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris* 3 (5 June 1836), 191-2. This review seems to have served as the starting point for contemporary Italian reviews, such as those in *Il pirata*, 17 June 1836, and the *Corriere delle dame*, 10 July 1836, and was the only source on the opera used by Arthur Pougin, in *Marie Malibran: histoire d’une cantatrice* (Paris, 1911). The Strauss attribution still surfaces in recent criticism: see, for example Patrick Barbier, *La Malibran: Reine de l’opéra romantique* (Paris, 2005), 223, and Aldo Nicastro, ‘Maria Felicia dalla Francia al mito’, in *Malibran: Storia e leggenda, canto e belcanto nel primo Ottocento italiano*, ed. Piero Mioli (Bologna, 2010), 34.

<sup>4</sup> *The Times*, 28 May 1836; [Hezekiah Hartley Wright], *Desultory Reminiscences of a Tour Through Switzerland, and France* (Boston, 1838), 332.

end of 1836, this was the melody reproduced in tiny script, alongside a portrait of Malibran as the Maid, as a fingernail-sized epitome of her musical gifts.<sup>5</sup> Later, it would gain sufficient continental fame as the ‘air de Balfe’ for the composer supposedly to be introduced to the Russian Empress in Saint Petersburg as ‘Monsieur Balfe of the air’.<sup>6</sup> By the end of the century, it would even see publication as ‘the favourite aria of Malibran’.<sup>7</sup>

In an age of excerpts, it was unusually excerptible, and in both the libretto and vocal score already appeared gloriously unmoored from the rest of the single scene that constitutes the entire third act.<sup>8</sup> The opera’s plot is derived from the Abbé Prévost’s *Manon Lescaut*, and this final act takes place in a parched sandy desert that Jules de Montagnon and his beloved Maid of Artois, Isoline, somehow manage to stumble upon in tropical French Guiana, having fled the Guianese fort where Jules has been exiled during Act II by the Marquis de Château-Vieux, who wants Isoline for himself. Isoline’s delight at their escape quickly gives way to concern for the

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<sup>5</sup> L. A. L., *The Bijou Almanack for 1837* (London, 1836).

<sup>6</sup> The anecdote is recorded in Charles Lamb Kenney, *A Memoir of Michael William Balfe* (London, 1875), 118. The aria appeared in various arrangements at the time and afterwards; its fame in St Petersburg would have come from the version by the imperial court pianist, Adolf von Henselt, which he published in 1846 as the fifth of his Op.13 Concert Etudes, titled ‘Air de Balfe’.

<sup>7</sup> Balfe, ‘Favorit-Arie der Malibran’, arranged for oboe and orchestra (or piano) by Ludwig Klemcke (1895).

<sup>8</sup> Both libretto (published in 1836) and vocal score (published after Malibran’s death) include only the main musical numbers; the full score is held at the British Library, Add. MS. 29327 and 29328.

wounded and unresponsive Jules. Eventually he comes round, only for them both to face the prospect of dying of thirst. The desperate last words of the libretto prior to the finale come from Jules, to the expiring Isoline: ‘I could not share thy life – I will thy death!’; and it is at that point that the waltz begins.

On stage, this dramatic lurch was smoothed over by the insertion of an orchestral march to accompany the arrival of Marquis and his forces, followed by enough refreshment and resolute dialogue to propel Isoline into the yodelling leaps (see Ex.1) of a ninth, a tenth – or, at one point, a fourteenth – that bring the opera to a happy close; and then, in the inevitable encore, do so all over again.

[EX.1 AROUND HERE]

When the opera was revived in 1846, with Anna Bishop in the title role, one author suggested that the problem with the finale was that it ‘converts a vocalist into an instrument – a sort of human piano-forte’. Malibran avoided this through her expressive genius, the writer recalled, with her wail over the body of Jules, and ‘the scream of delight as she exclaimed “he breathes, my love lives”’.<sup>9</sup> Her performance of the actual finale was thereby sidestepped, and in truth – for all the praise it attracted in the opera’s original reception – the spectre of the singer as machine had been present from the start.

An account in the *Examiner*, for instance, described Balfe’s music for Malibran as a collection of ‘every roulade and cadence the lady ever sang in an opera’. For the later historian this offers a tantalising prospect: a written trace of ‘the

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<sup>9</sup> [Patrick Frederick White], ‘Madame Bishop’, in *The Emerald Wreath* (Dublin, 1852), 102.

peculiarities of her voice'. The implication, though, was that the result was diligent but heartless; an attempt at a simulacrum of Malibran's musical mannerisms that becomes most pronounced in the final number, with its play on the two registers around her vocal break, before climaxing on a high trill characterized principally by its predictability: 'we have a shake on C in alt, as usual, from Malibran, and the curtain descends'.<sup>10</sup> In the *Musical Library*, the audience's pleasure at the final number was even turned into an ironic complicity, since Isoline 'so well caricatures the modern vicious style of singing, makes it so palpably ridiculous, that the burlesque is immediately understood, is relished, and never fails to be clamorously called for a second time'.<sup>11</sup>

More seems at stake here than simply whether one fell for Malibran's charms or not. Céline Frigau Manning has written of Malibran's calculated performance of excess, and while this was not the only opera to encourage such polarised opinions, here it was as if Balfe's faux-Italian (or faux-Viennese) music risked unmasking Malibran as herself inauthentic, and her voice no more than a collection of musical tricks plagiarised from her own earlier performances.<sup>12</sup> Tricks, moreover, designed to please a particular audience, as explained in her *Examiner* obituary: 'on the English stage ... Malibran indulged in extravagances which she curtailed elsewhere –

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<sup>10</sup> 'Theatrical Examiner. Drury Lane.' *The Examiner* (5 June 1836). In the original score, the trill in fact comes on a high B rather than a C.

<sup>11</sup> 'The Drama. Drury-Lane Theatre.' *Musical Library. Monthly Supplement* (July 1836), 108.

<sup>12</sup> Céline Frigau Manning, 'Playing with Excess: Maria Malibran as Clari at the Théâtre Italien', in *Art, Theatre, and Opera in Paris, 1750-1850*, ed. Sarah Hibberd and Richard Wrigley (Farnham, 2014), 203-22.

screaming shakes on *C above the line*, are compliments which we may consider as exclusively addressed to our peculiar taste'.<sup>13</sup> For those beyond the Channel, little more would be necessary to furnish a true explanation of her subsequent death, as Jules Janin described in the *Revue et Gazette musicale*: 'It is England that has killed her for us, it is the English fog that has weighed down on this annihilated genius. She killed herself, this woman, in trying to bring to life this statue of iron and coal called England.'<sup>14</sup>

It is striking, in this overheated context, that the narratives that collected around this aria in later years played precisely on its connections to naturalness, as if to extinguish any aura of the mechanical. There is the account of Balfe introducing the aria at a late stage, for instance, having dreamt up the waltz melody one night in a blaze of inspiration, before rushing to Malibran's house and waking her to play it.<sup>15</sup> Or the story of Malibran singing it on a horse ride in the countryside outside London,

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<sup>13</sup> 'Theatrical Examiner. Malibran.' *The Examiner* (2 October 1836).

<sup>14</sup> Janin, 'Mort de Madame Malibran', *Revue et Gazette Musicale de Paris* (2 October 1836). In the wake of her death, various authors linked Malibran's trilled high C to her demise. Henry Phillips, who played the part of the Marquis opposite Malibran at Drury Lane, specifically recalled her trill in the Act III finale as 'one of the most extraordinary vocal efforts I ever heard', but adds that she 'did it so vigorously that I fear it accelerated her death' (Phillips, *Musical and Personal Recollections During Half a Century*), 2 vols. (London, 1864), 1: 219. The same high C crowned the performance of Mercadante's duet 'Vanne se alberghi in petto' that led to her final collapse in Manchester.

<sup>15</sup> Kenney, *Memoir*, 117-20.

to the amazement of a pair of sheep drovers.<sup>16</sup> Or even, most famously, the tale told by Alfred Bunn, manager of Drury Lane, of a trapdoor being cut in the stage to allow Malibran – all too human – to receive a pint of porter while languishing in the Guianese sands, which then sustained her through the concluding number.<sup>17</sup>

The resonances of this last anecdote could echo in a variety of directions. For one thing, it chimed with moralising rumours raised both before and after Malibran's death of her partiality for a tippie.<sup>18</sup> For another, it seemed to offer a key to the singer's outlandish gifts of sufficient promise that the author of an 1885 medical treatise on the effects of alcohol on the voice would still record that 'I cannot but think that the large amount of faith vested in the value of porter as a vocal stimulant rests largely on its reputation as the favourite beverage of the great Malibran'.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Merlin et al., *Memoirs and Letters*, 2: 62; the anecdote seems to have come from Lord William Pitt Lennox, and is repeated in his *Fifty Years' Biographical Reminiscences*, 2 vols. (London, 1863), 2: 206-7.

<sup>17</sup> Alfred Bunn, *The Stage: Both Before and Behind the Curtain*, 3 vols. (London, 1840), 2: 68-70; Bunn claims that at later performances the same amount of porter was moved to a gourd held by a slave in the retinue of the Marquis, and administered to her on his arrival in the desert.

<sup>18</sup> As Mary Novello reported in her reminiscence of Malibran's final days, rumours were circulating in Manchester suggesting that the singer had a drink problem. 'They say I drink', she reports Malibran telling her, 'but should I have kept my voice and appearance with all the fatigue I have gone through, had I done so?' See 'The Last Days of Madame de Bériot', *The Musical World* (14 October 1836), 70.

<sup>19</sup> Lennox Browne, *Voice Use and Stimulants* (London, 1885), 49.

But it could also be read in another way. Porter, after all, was one of the greatest products of industrial London: the first mass-produced beer, constituting a large majority of the nigh-on three million barrels produced in the capital during the year of the premiere of *The Maid of Artois*; a total, as W. Weir calculated in 1843, that amounted to 76 gallons a year for every inhabitant of the city, man, woman and child. ‘Beer is to the London citizen’, Weir adds, ‘what the water in the reservoirs of the plain of Lombardy, or the kahvreez of Persia, is to the village peasantry of those countries’.<sup>20</sup> But its appeal was not just local; across the world people ‘know that London is the place where porter was invented’, including ‘in the tropical climates of the west’ – such as French Guiana, for example – where ‘bottled porter reigns supreme’.<sup>21</sup>

Janin’s statue of iron and coal, in other words, had porter running through its veins, and empire on its mind. And in these terms even the comical image of Malibran’s deep draught – hidden by a sandbank in the tropical desert of Drury – before hurtling body and breath into her final aria, might yet yield new meanings. Meanings that underscore the singer’s lasting skill at confounding the binary certainties of her age; but meanings, too, that might help to reframe the centrality of London for Malibran, and, by extension, for the history of nineteenth-century opera.

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<sup>20</sup> W. Weir, ‘Beer’, in Charles Knight, ed., *London*, 6 vols. (London, 1841-4), 4: 3.

<sup>21</sup> Weir, ‘Beer’, 4: 16.