

## Some Personal Recollections of Rossini

By CAMILLE SAINT-SÄENS

[The following memoir is a translation of an article that appeared in *Musica*, the well-known French musical journal. It is extracted from a volume of personal recollections which the great French composer is writing. Anything that the composer of *Samson et Delila*, the *Danse Macabre*, etc., may have to say of the composer of *William Tell* cannot fail to interest our readers.—EDITOR OF THE ETUDE.]

### THE POSITION OF ROSSINI.

It is difficult in our day and generation to form an estimate of the position occupied for nearly a half century by Rossini in our good city of Paris. Long retired from active work, he nevertheless maintained in his splendid idleness a stronger hold on the popular imagination than all the others in full activity. All Paris courted the honor of admission to the magnificent apartment with the high windows looking out upon the corner of the Boulevard and the corner of the *chaussée d'Antin*. Since the demi-god never went out o' nights, his familiars were always sure of finding him at home; and at one time or another the most diverse circles of society rubbed elbows at his magnificent gatherings, where the most brilliant singers and the most illustrious virtuosos were to be heard.

The lowest kind of sycophantry surrounded the master without besmirching him, for he knew its exact value, and dominated his ordinary environment with all the hauteur of a superior intelligence which does not care to reveal itself to the first comer.

### ROSSINI'S PARISIAN PUBLIC.

Whence did he get so much glory? His works, apart from the *Barber*, *William Tell*, and occasional representations of *Moïse*, appear to have lost their hold. One still goes to see *Othello* at the Théâtre Italien, but that is in order to hear the "high C" of Tamberlick! . . . Rossini entertained so little illusion that he attempted to oppose the effort to install *Schirramis* in the repertoire of the Opéra. Nevertheless, the Parisian public made a veritable cult of him!

The public—I am speaking of the would-be musical public—was at that time divided into two warring factions: the lovers of *melody*, who formed the great majority, and included the critics; and the subscribers to the Conservatory and the quartet concerts of Maurin, Alard, Armingaud, devoted to music considered "learned"—"poseurs"—as the others called them, who pretended to admire works which they could not in the least understand.

The popular cult saw no melody in Beethoven: a few even refused it to Mozart, and the doors of the Opera Comique were closed to me for daring to undertake the defense of *The Marriage of Figaro* before its director. No such objection was raised against the Italian School, of which Rossini was the leader, nor to the school of Hérold and Auber, which it had engendered. To the melodists, Rossini was a palladium, a symbol around which they gathered themselves together in serried ranks, making a rallying-ground of works of his which they should have allowed to fall into oblivion.

### ROSSINI AND BEETHOVEN.

From a few words allowed to fall in moments of intimacy, I have gathered that this was a source of trouble to him. It was a curious turn of Fate that should have made Rossini, in spite of himself without doubt, serve as an engine of war against Beethoven in Vienna, where the success of *Tancredi* ended forever the theatrical aspirations of the composer of *Fidelio*, and then in Paris should have used *William Tell* to avert the encroachment of the Symphony and Chamber music.

I was twenty years old when M. and Mme. Viardot presented me to Rossini. He invited me to his little evening receptions, where he welcomed me with the bland amiability of which he was past-master. About a month later, when he found I did not want him to give me a private hearing either as a composer or as a pianist, he changed his attitude towards me.

"Come and see me in the morning," he said, "and we'll have a little chat."

I hastened to accept this flattering invitation, and found a Rossini totally different from that of the evening before, interesting to the highest degree, open-minded, with ideas which, if not advanced, were at least large and lofty in spirit. He gave evidence of this in his defense of the famous *Mass* of Liszt in face of almost unanimous hostility, when it was performed for the first time at the church of Saint Eustache.

### ROSSINI AND THE SYCOPHANTS.

"You have written," he said one day, "a *Duo* for flute and clarinet for Messieurs Dorus and Leroy. Won't you ask these musicians if they will consent to play it at one of my soirées?"

The two great artists hardly needed to be asked, and an unforgettable incident followed. As Rossini never had printed programs for these occasions, he arranged to have it understood that the work was composed by himself. One can imagine how successful it was under those circumstances. The piece over and done with, Rossini took me into the dining-room and made me sit near him, holding me by the hand in a way that made it impossible for me to escape. Then came the procession of admirers and flatterers. "Ah, *maître!* what a masterpiece! what a marvel! . . ."

And as soon as the victim had unwoven his garland of praise, Rossini would reply, tranquilly: "I entirely agree with your opinion; but the *Duo* is not mine, it is by this gentleman. . . ." Such acts of kindness, mingled with pleasantry, speak more for this great man than a wealth of commentary. For Rossini was a great man. The young gentlemen of our age are badly situated to judge his works, written, as he himself said, for singers and a public which no longer exist. "People have reproached me," he said to me one day, "for the big *crescendo* in my overtures. But if they didn't have the *crescendo* they would never have the operas performed."

### ROSSINI'S ORIGINALITY.

In our day the public is enslaved. Have I not seen on the programs of a certain concert-hall, "all signs of disapproval will be severely repressed?" Formerly, especially in Italy, the public was the master and its approval was law. It came before the candles were lighted, and insisted on the big overture with the big *crescendo*; it demanded cavatinas, duos, ensembles; it came to hear the singers and not to assist at a lyric drama. Rossini, in several of his works, and above all in *Othello*, made great strides in dramatic truthfulness in his operas. In *Moses* and in *The Siege of Corinth* (without mentioning *William Tell*), he opened up new avenues which even yet have not been fully explored, in spite of the meagreness of the means at his disposal. But—as Victor Hugo has gloriously demonstrated—poverty of means is no obstacle to genius any more than a wealth of means is an advantage to mediocrity.

With Stanzieri, a charming young man of whom Rossini was very fond, but who was somewhat lacking in "polish," and Diémer, still young but a great virtuoso, I became "pianist in ordinary" to the household. We frequently had the pleasure of hearing the little piano pieces which the master amused himself by scribbling in his idle moments. I willingly accompanied the singers when Rossini did not wish to do so himself, though he accompanied admirably, for he played the piano to perfection. But, unfortunately, I did not participate in the soirée at which Patti was heard at Rossini's house for the first time. After the performance of the aria from his *Barber*, every one will recall how Rossini, with the most complimentary air imaginable, said to her:

"Who was the composer of the aria you have just sung to us?"

I saw him the next day, and he was not yet calmed down.

"I know well enough," he said, "that my arias ought to be embroidered somewhat; they were designed for that. But in the recitatives, to leave not a note as I wrote it—that is too much! . . ."

And in his irritation he inveighed against sopranos who insist on singing arias written for contraltos, leaving unsung the arias written for sopranos.

The *diva* herself was highly indignant. But she reflected that it would be a serious matter to have Rossini for an enemy. . . . A few days after, she came, repentant, to ask his advice. She did well in so doing, for at that time her brilliant, fascinating talent was not fully developed.