

Barratt Park
Vocal Repertory and Performance
April 4, 2007

The Trials and Triumphs of Isabella Colbran

Although public criticism, disease, and the stresses of courtesan life plagued Isabella Colbran throughout her life, she had a substantial influence on music composition in the nineteenth century. Heralded as one of the greatest European sopranos during her prime, Colbran's voice declined early in her career, and she became an object of ridicule from her audiences. Colbran's courtesan lifestyle also took a heavy toll; her vocal afflictions and failed marriage to Gioacchino Rossini may have arisen partly as a result of sexually transmitted diseases and poor vocal hygiene. However, through her influences on Rossini's music as well as her own works, she made important contributions to composition.

Colbran was born in 1784 to a musical family in Madrid, Spain. Her father was a trumpeter for the royal court of king Charles IV of Spain, and she had her first voice lessons from the Neapolitan composer Marinelli. She later studied with the castrato Girolamo Crescentini (Servadio, 23). Colbran made her concert debut in Paris in 1801 and her opera debut in Spain in 1806. Audiences praised her dramatic coloratura soprano voice for its remarkable flexibility and range, which spanned almost three octaves from *g* to *e'''* (Celletti). She also became famous for her brilliant delivery and commanding stage presence (Servadio, 23).

In 1811, Colbran became the *prima donna* and mistress of the Neapolitan impresario Domenico Barbaja. Although Barbaja became extremely wealthy as a result of his successful theaters and gambling casinos, he started his career as a kitchen helper in cafes and bars, and he was known for his rough manners and poor education. Nevertheless, Barbaja was remarkably

successful at identifying young talents including Mercadante, Pacini, Donizetti, and Rossini (Pironti). When Rossini signed a six-year contract to produce operas for Barbaja in 1815, Colbran was luxuriously rich and famous, and “must have fascinated the young maestro” (Servadio, 23). It soon became public knowledge that Rossini had fallen in love with the *prima donna*. This caused considerable tension with Barbaja and damaged Colbran’s public reputation. “Barbaja, Colbran and Rossini seemed to have set up a *ménage a trois*” and Colbran was seen quarreling publicly with Barbaja’s daughter (Servadio, 50). Colbran eventually left the wealthy Barbaja for the then penniless but romantically charming Rossini (Servadio, 23-24 50).

In the meanwhile, Rossini produced ten operas specifically for Colbran, including *Elisabetta* (1815), *Otello* (1816), *Armida* (1817), *Mose in Egitto*, *Ricciardo e Zoraide* (1818), *Ermione* (1819), and *Semiramide* (1823). For several years, Colbran and Rossini remained in an open relationship. According to Servadio, sex among theatrical circles was “completely open in those days.... Falling in love, love-making and courting were central to any social and artistic endeavor” (68). Most likely, the onset of Rossini’s gonorrhoea, which he passed on to Colbran, and which plagued her from the 1820’s until her death, occurred during these days. In those days, there was no cure for gonorrhoea and “the treatments available were often worse than the actual disease” (Servadio, 135). Colbran’s poor health and poor vocal hygiene may have contributed to the decline of her voice, which began around the year 1816 and continued until her retirement from singing in 1824. Colbran and Rossini were married in 1822, but were separated in 1827 and divorced in 1836 after Rossini left her for Olympe Pelisier. Rossini’s own suffering, which included periods of persecution mania and phobia, likely contributed to his separation from Colbran (Servadio, 135).

Not only did Colbran suffer hardships from disease and an unsuccessful marriage—during the later period of her career, Colbran endured biting criticism from her audiences, including the biographers of her husband, the most notable of which is Stendahl (Marie-Henri Beyle). Stendhal refuses to discuss Colbran’s vocal health in a serious tone, resorting to sarcasm instead: “She began to ‘suffer from a strained voice’, an affliction which, in singers of lesser distinction, would have been vulgarly termed *singing off key*” (Stendhal, 150). The biographer recounts his numerous experiences of Colbran’s less successful performances. “I have sat a score of times, and listened to Signorina Colbran embark upon an *aria*, which after the first few bars, would tail off into the most excruciating, the most insupportable cacophony” (Stendhal, 150). “We used to wait eagerly, until the critical moment arrived ... then if we found that she was firmly resolved to sing out of key, we likewise took a firm resolve, and chatted away ostentatiously among ourselves until it was all over, or else escaped outside into a coffee-house and ate ices” (Stendhal, 165).

However, not only does Stendhal poke fun at Colbran’s failed vocal performances—he also paints her influence as manipulative and encumbering. He claims that Colbran remained at the *San Carlo* theater only because the impresario Barbaja was “under the thumb of his mistress” (Stendahl, 150). Stendhal also writes of Rossini that Colbran used to “plague him incessantly to decorate his *arias* with the type of embellishment to which her voice was accustomed” (Stendhal, 166). The biographer claims that Colbran held Rossini back in his compositional career. After Rossini was “no longer able to rely” on Colbran’s voice, he resorted to German-style harmonies which “retreated ... from the *true art of dramatic expression*” (Stendhal, 166). Stendhal also believes that Rossini would have been more successful and more in his own element writing *opera buffo*, but he was unable to actualize his career in this way because he

wrote for Colbran, who performed only *opera seria*. To support his claim about Rossini's unrealized talent, Stendhal cites his successes with *opera buffo*, such as the *Barber*, and he discusses Rossini's uninhibited personality, which is exemplified by the phrase with which Rossini began letters to his mother: "*All' ornatissima signora Rossini, madre del celebre maestro, in Bologna*" (Stendhal, 95 186-87).

In addition to the intimidating words written by Stendhal and others, Colbran also faced severe criticism from her audiences. After the debut of *Semiramide*—the last opera written for Colbran by Rossini, in 1823—the Venetian public put up mourning posters reading "*requiescat in pacem.*" Italian families commonly announced the deaths of relatives with fly posters, and in this case, they were "cruelly announcing the artistic death of Isabella Colbran" (Servadio, 109).

However, despite these hardships, Colbran managed to lead a tremendously successful and productive career. She was a major influence on the works of Rossini. Many of Rossini's famous soprano *arias* are written specifically for Colbran's voice, which had unusual flexibility and wide range. According to Stendhal, in order that his lover was not overshadowed by any other singer, Rossini deliberately infused his opera with ornamentation that was easy for Colbran's voice but difficult for her rivals. For example, Colbran had easy mastery of ascending scales, while certain other singers, such as Velluti, did not, so Rossini tended to sprinkle his compositions with ascending figures (Stendhal, 332). Rossini's relationship to Colbran may have also contributed to his decision to depart from the tradition of allowing the singer to improvise extensively. Early in his career, Rossini was faithful to the style of his predecessors, which featured minimal accompaniment during vocal melismas, allowing the singer to improvise as he or she chooses. However, Rossini later started writing his ornamentations explicitly and increased the robustness of the accompaniment, removing some of the freedom of the singer to

improvise. This allowed him to personalize his arias more for specific vocal types (Stendhal, 328-33).

Colbran may have also made very direct contributions to Rossini's works. For example, Colbran is thought to have been critically involved with the composition of the opera *Armida* in 1817. She signed her name under Rossini's on the score "as if to emphasize the extent to which she was involved in the composition of the masterpiece" (Servadio, 73). The brilliant sensuality of Rossini's *prima donna* roles might have resulted from his passion for Colbran, and her active participation in his compositions. Colbran was also a composer in her own right. She published four volumes of song with piano or harp accompaniment: one dedicated to her voice teacher Girolamo Crescentini, one to the Queen of Spain, one to the Empress of Russia, and one to the Prince of Beaumarchais (). She also wrote songs dedicated to her father, which those are now lost (Servadio, 68).

Early in her career, Isabella Colbran became one of the most famous sopranos in Europe. However, she later encountered many challenges that plagued her for the remainder of her life. While her relationship to Gioacchino Rossini allowed her to become a major influence on his compositions, it also may have contributed to the decline of her voice and her general health.

Works Cited

Celletti, R.: 'Isabella Colbran', *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* ed. S. Sadie and J. Tyrrell. London: Macmillan, 2001.

Pironti, A.: 'Domenico Barbaja', *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* ed. S. Sadie and J. Tyrrell. London: Macmillan, 2001.

Marrazzo, Randi, ed. *The First Solos: Songs by Women Composers*, Bryn Mawr, PA: Hildegard Publishing Company, 2000.

Servadio, Gaia. *Rossini*. New York: Carroll and Graf, 2003.

Stendhal. *Life of Rossini*. Trans. Richard N. Coe. Great Britain: Criterion Books, 1957.