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Rubini

LAST OF A BREED

*Giovanni Battista Rubini ruled as the paragon of virtuoso tenors,
king of the high Fs*

Rubini was Bellini's favorite tenor. In a letter to his friend and confidant Francesco Florimo, the composer observed, "You have good reason to say that at the entrance of Rubini [in *Pirata*] it seemed to you as if you were seeing an angel, for he said it [the music] with an incomprehensible divineness. ..." At the time of his death, Bellini was about to refashion *Norma* for Rubini for the 1835–36 season of the Théâtre-Italien. Specifically he was going to replace the tenor aria and the Pollione-Adalgisa duet, add a second tenor aria and rework most of the tenor lines. Though Bellini died before he could make these revisions, Rubini went on to become the most famous Pollione of his day. When he was unable to appear in a series of *Norma* performances at the Italien in 1837 because of illness, the Parisian audience became dispirited and could take no pleasure in *Norma* or any other opera.

Rubini was the most celebrated unneutered male international superstar until that time and one of the two or three most celebrated ever as well as the last really brilliant male opera virtuoso. Yet he succeeded in having a career only after utmost perseverance. Dismissed by his first voice teacher for lack of vocal promise, rejected for employment as a leading tenor, a recitalist, even as a comprimario, he reached his lowest ebb when a Milan impresario refused him work as a chorister "because of insufficient voice."

When Rubini finally did succeed in getting roles, he barely was tolerated. Domenico Barbaja, the so-called “Napoleon of impresarios,” who simultaneously ruled the opera houses of Vienna, Milan and Naples, was unwilling to rehire him after a year’s engagement in Naples. In the end Barbaja relented but retained him at a reduced salary. In his thirties Rubini at length came to be regarded as the foremost male singer of the time. But he was short, pockmarked and an indifferent actor, with a number of vocal flaws.

Today we assume that any reigning tenor must have had a voice of some plangency and strength. Rubini’s, however, was characterized as “lightly veiled” in quality—that is, having little brightness or ring. Further, he had the habit of singing with head resonance notes and passages that it was felt ought to be sung with chest resonance. Throughout his career critics complained about the smallness of his voice. Below the top of the staff he often was said to have been inaudible! Other singers routinely covered him.

A number of writers criticized Rubini’s sparing use of moderately loud and moderately soft levels of dynamics. In Chorley’s words, at the time of Rubini’s London debut in 1831 at thirty-six, his voice was “hardly capable, perhaps, of being produced mezzo forte or piano; for which reason he had adopted a style of extreme contrast betwixt soft and loud, which many ears were unable, for a long period, to relish.”

His contemporaries attributed his success primarily to the infectious joy he took in his own singing, to his formidable technique (by the late 1830s his range and agility were relics from the vocal practices of twenty years earlier) and above all to the exquisite finish of his renditions. Anton Rubinstein is said to have remarked to the critic Pierre Lalo, “I formed my ideas of noble and eloquent phrasing almost entirely from the example of the great tenor Rubini.”

This most musical of singers was father to something we now think of as *the* mark of provincialism and coarseness—the sob. Rubini’s sob must have had a telling effect emotionally, for according to Ferdinand Hiller, “When [in the first-act finale of

Sonnambula] Rubini seemed to be singing tears, Chopin too had tears in his eyes.”

Giovanni Battista Rubini was born in Romano, near Bergamo, on April 7, 1795. His father was an obscure music teacher. At the age of eight the boy played violin in an orchestra and sang in a choir. He first studied voice with one Don Santo—the maestro who dismissed him—and later with a certain Rosio. After his opera debut at Pavia, he progressed to the opera houses of Brescia, Venice and Naples. There he studied with Nozzari. Rubini’s career gradually branched out with appearances in Rome and Palermo. His first major conquests took place in Paris in 1825, but of his debut at the Théâtre-Italien in *La cenerentola* the prestigious *Journal des Débats* of October 8 noted:

The organ of the new tenor is weak, veiled, and it does not have more than a fifth that he can make vibrate with clarity; therefore he has neither low notes nor a middle voice. His range is exactly that of the contralto: it departs from the string of the violin and it rises up until the twelfth, to the B-flat, and also until the G outside the lines by means of the falsetto [a term here used to mean what we today would call “head voice”]. This gracious voice, expressive and light, is much liked in solos but is scarcely heard in duets and in fact disappears in concerted pieces. The reserve that all singers put into the development of their means favors small voices, and on that account the part of Ramiro often is reduced to simple pantomime.

Later that season the management of the Théâtre-Italien announced that Rubini was to take over the remarkably low-lying title role in Rossini’s *Otello*. The part previously had been the property there of Donzelli, a singer with a notably stentorian voice. (Donzelli was later to create Pollione in *Norma*, and it was to his vocal measurements that Bellini fashioned the part.)

The *Journal des Débats* of December 17, 1825, was able to report:

One would not have thought earlier that the graceful, tender Rubini could give to the part of the terrible African the force of expression that it demands...[but] the most complete success has justified the faith of the administration. Rubini emerged from this difficult situation with all the honors of his predecessors. He transferred to his range all the low passages, and profiting with ability from the precious advantages of a voice strong and sonorous in its upper fifth, was able to give adept expression to the furors of Otello.

Though I have seen no statement that he performed Pollione in a similar adaptation, we may assume he did, in accordance with his custom with low-lying roles. (Bellini himself had made the adaptation of the low-lying role of Arturo in *La straniera* for him.)

Triumphs at La Scala and Vienna followed. According to Bellini, the Milanese public in the late 1820s had no interest in any tenor other than Rubini, and he despaired of being able to put on an opera successfully there without him. Rubini subjugated London in 1831. From then until his retirement from opera in 1843, he divided his reign between London and Paris.

In 1839 Wagner wrote in *The Virtuoso and the Artist* about a Rubini appearance at the Italien in *Don Giovanni*:

Rubini fired off this night his famous trill from A to B! The whole thing flashed on me. How could I have expected much from poor "Don Ottavio," the so often mocked-at tenor-stopgap of Don Juan? Indeed I long felt truly sorry for the so unrivalledly adored Rubini, the wonder of all tenors, who on his side went quite crossly to his Mozart-sum. There he came, the sober, solid man, passionately dragged on by the arm by the divine "Donna Anna" [Giulia Grisi], and stood with ruffled peace of mind beside the corpse of his expected father-in-law, who now no more could breathe his blessing on a happy

marriage. Some say that Rubini was once a tailor, and looks just like one; I should have credited him with more agility in that case: where he stood he stayed, and moved no further; for he could sing, too, without stirring a muscle; even his hand he brought but seldom to the region of his heart. This time his singing never touched him at all; he might fitly save his fairly aged voice for something better than to cry out words of comfort, already heard a thousand times, to his beloved. That I understood, thought the man sensible, and, as he took the same course throughout the opera whenever “Don Ottavio” was at hand, I fancied at last it was over, and still more anxiously inquired the meaning, the purpose of this extraordinary night of abstinence. Then slowly came a stir: unrest, sitting-up, shrewd glances, fan-play, all the symptoms of a sudden straining of attention in a cultured audience. “Ottavio” was left alone on the stage; I believed he was about to make an announcement, for he came right up to the prompter’s box: but there he stayed, and listened without moving a feature to the orchestral prelude to his *B flat* aria [“Il mio Tesoro”]. This ritornel seemed to last longer than usual; but that was a simple illusion: the singer was merely lisping out the first ten bars of his song so utterly inaudibly that, on my discovery that he really was giving himself the look of singing, I thought the genial man was playing a joke. Yet the audience kept a serious face; it knew what was coming; for at the eleventh bar Rubini let his F swell out with such sudden vehemence that the little reconducting passage fell plump upon us like a thunderbolt, and died away again into a murmur with the twelfth. I could have laughed aloud, but the whole house was still as death: a muted orchestra, an inaudible tenor; the sweat stood on my brow. Something monstrous seemed in preparation: and truly the unheardable was now to be eclipsed by the unheard-of. The seventeenth bar arrived: here the singer has to hold an F for three bars long. What can one do with a simple F? Rubini only becomes divine on the high B flat: *there* must he get, if a night at

the Italian Opera is to have any sense. And just as the trapezist swings his bout preliminary, so “Don Ottavio” mounts his three-barred F, two bars of which he gives in careful but pronounced crescendo, till at the third he snatches from the violins their trill on A, shakes it himself with waxing vehemence, and at the fourth bar sits in triumph on the high B flat, as if it were nothing; then with a brilliant roulade he plunges down again, before all eyes, into the noiseless. The end had come: anything that liked might happen now. Every demon was unchained, and not on the stage, as at close of the opera, but in the audience. The riddle was solved: this was the trick for which one had assembled, had borne two hours of total abstinence from every wonted operatic dainty, had pardoned Grisi and Lablache for taking such music in earnest, and felt richly rewarded by the coming-off of this one wondrous moment when Rubini leapt to B flat!

Rubini, the broad-built Philistine with bushy whiskers; old, with a voice grown greasy, and afraid of over-taxing it: if he is ranked above all others, the charm can't reside in his substance, but purely in a spiritual Form. And this form is forced upon every singer in Paris: they all sing à la Rubini. The rule is: be inaudible for awhile, then suddenly alarm the audience by a husbanded explosion, and immediately afterwards relapse into an effect of the ventriloquist. Mons. Duprez already quite obeys it.... Rubini diverted me hugely....

In 1842–43 Rubini undertook a concert tour through Holland and Germany, with Liszt at the piano. They parted company in Berlin, possibly owing to Liszt's jealousy. Continuing alone, Rubini vanquished the Russians at St. Petersburg. Every honor was heaped on him. Czar Nicholas appointed him not only Director of Singing but also a colonel in the army! He returned to Russia the following year, after a concert tour through Italy to Vienna. Then he retired, a rich man. Rubini passed his last years on his estate in Romano, where he died March 2, 1854.

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