

Mattia Battistini in Paris

Henry Ferrare

(Les Annales politiques et littéraires, 3 February 1918)

Battistini is very tall, sturdily built, of the finest Tuscan type, his gaze clear and direct. Hand outstretched, he greets his Parisian friends with charming simplicity and affability, whether he is still wearing the pour-point of Henry VIII in his dressing room at the Opéra, or smoking a cigarette in the salon he occupies on the Grands Boulevards. Such is the great aristocratic singer, whose early upbringing has not been effaced by forty years of life in the disreputable world of the theatre. Even today, after an uninterrupted string of triumphs, he brings to rehearsals the same fervour, to performances the same profound respect for the audience before whom he performs, whether in London, Lisbon, Buenos Aires or Paris – which was to know him, by a strange and regrettable quirk of fate, only in the latter part of his career – as on his first day as a singer. And in this attitude as a great servant of his art, he reminds us of the two greatest virtuosos of opera and spoken theatre: respectively, Faure and Coquelin.

How did this young man, the son of a distinguished military doctor and a young woman of noble descent, and destined by his parents for the bar or medicine, jump from the wall of the Collegio Bandinelli onto the stage of the Teatro Argentina? To fill an unexpected vacancy in the opera house. It was in 1878, during a performance of *La favorita*. The baritone soloist's sudden indisposition had interrupted the evening, and Maestro Mancinelli, the great Italian conductor, and Isabella Galletti, still referred to after so many years as the 'singer of the heart', were both despairing over this setback when Mancinelli remembered that he had recently heard

a young amateur in the role of Alfonso XI who had seemed to him to be absolutely remarkable. After frantically searching his memory for the name of the young man in question, Mancinelli sent out emissaries in all directions and was lucky enough to see Mattia Battistini appear after half an hour. Flabbergasted by this amiable frenzy, yet yielding to the Maestro's exhortations to rehearse in Galletti's dressing room, he sang the entire opera as if in a dream and woke up only on the final chord. 'I wish I had always sung Leonora with you', Galletti told him, while the applause erupted wildly. He had conquered his place at the first attempt, and all that remained was to maintain and develop this youthful reputation. Battistini was becoming the emulator, the natural heir, of such men as Sanmarco and Cotogni.

Shortly afterwards, he tackled *L'Africaine*, *Ernani*, *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, *Aida*, *Don Pasquale*, *Guillaume Tell*, *Tannhäuser*, moving effortlessly from the tragic to the comic, from the sublime to the light-hearted, giving his vocal keyboard a prodigious range, working with such partners as Robert Stagno, Bonci and Navarrini in Rome, Patti in Madrid, Tamagno in Florence, and drawing inspiration for his acting from the greatest Italian tragedians – Salvini, Rossi, Novelli, Zacconi – to such effect that at the first performance of *Hamlet* at La Scala in Milan (a splendid evening that brought together Emma Calvé, Félia Litvinne and Maestro Mugnone) Salvini embraced the young baritone on the proscenium and cried out to him: 'You have stolen my art!'

But Battistini still had one more palm to receive. Was it to be tolerated that his name should not be inscribed in gold letters in the annals of our great opera houses? No, that would have been a loss for the Parisians, just as not appearing in Paris would have been a loss for Battistini. M. Rouché, who cannot be praised enough for presiding over the destinies of the Opéra in these trying times, was the first to understand this, and that is how we came to have the admirable performances of last June, the prelude to which was *Maria di Rohan* with Édith de Lys. The following day, in a gesture not lacking in old-style grandeur though very modern in aspect, a Théâtrophone roll of Battistini was deposited and sealed in the cellars of

the Palais Garnier alongside two more rolls bearing the names of Patti and Caruso, in order to make it possible to teach future generations about the Italian vocal school of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

When he left Paris last summer, radiant and grateful for the welcome he had been given by his sister nation, Battistini made two promises: one to Saint-Saëns, to sing *Henry VIII* in French in December, the other to Ambroise Thomas's niece, to perform *Hamlet*, also in French, with the fifth act restored for the occasion – a double effort magnificently accomplished with only a month between the two events.

While some commentators marvel at the fact that an artist who has had such a career, and endured all the climates of the world, has retained the purity and freshness of a unique organ, I would point out the care Battistini has always taken to avoid all vocal strain, his practice and exercising routines, the habit he has maintained for forty years of spending the summer months on his property in the Apennines, leading the life of a lord of the manor on his estate in Contigliano, where the Virginia creeper and climbing roses accommodate artistic treasures, collections and a library of unimaginable wealth, and also, often, poor homeless people. For the illustrious baritone is a philanthropist, a bibliophile and, in his spare time, a composer; all of which does not prevent him from leaping into the saddle of one of his stallions like a twenty-year-old *giovino*, trimming a pergola, or – when he is on his wife's estate in Membrilla, on the slopes of a sierra – shooting a deer or a fox. A happy, charming man who has not been spoiled by art, fortune or fame, and whose heart, talent and mind are as vibrant as they were on the evening he made his debut alongside Galletti.

To Mancinelli he owes the chance of a brilliant debut, and he likes to stress his faithful gratitude by announcing:

One of the next works I shall create in French, on a French libretto and on a French stage, will be an opera that this old friend, my first conductor, is currently completing for me.



Édouard Zier, 'Werther at the Opéra-Comique. Werther (M. Ibos) throwing himself at the feet of Charlotte (Mlle Delna) in Act Three'. *L'illustration*, 21 January 1893. Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

Édouard Zier, « Werther à l'Opéra-Comique. Werther (M. Ibos) se jetant aux pieds de Charlotte (M^{lle} Delna) au 3^e acte ». *L'illustration*, 21 janvier 1893. Bibliothèque nationale de France.