

Isabella Colbran: Prima Donna... Wife... Muse

“The ‘Colbran Roles,’ with their outlandish ranges, fierce temperaments and perilous vocal passages, have always intrigued me. While there are numerous academic reasons to explore this prima donna, it is the pure romance that captivates me – conjuring visions of Isabella leaning over Rossini’s shoulder as he plotted yet another grand finale to showcase her voice (she, perhaps, mildly suggesting the insertion of a harrowing two-octave chromatic scale, much to his delight); ... Having spent so much of my musical life with Rossini, what a joy it is now to explore the intimate world of this beloved composer creating such music for Isabella – his muse.”

— Joyce DiDonato, today’s Elena, from her introduction to the recording “Colbran, the Muse,” (EMI Virgin Classics, 2009).

They met in 1815, possibly earlier. Gioacchino Rossini was already a rising star when he was engaged by the impresario Domenico Barbaja to reside in Naples and compose for its renowned opera house, the Teatro San Carlo. He was to create operas that showcased the remarkable vocal abilities of Isabella Colbran, the reigning prima donna who was to shape Rossini’s art for so many years. The beautiful Spanish-born diva was considered the finest coloratura soprano of her age, possessing a voice of great beauty, an extraordinary range of three octaves, and a technique of great virtuosity and astounding agility, able to conjure a touching lyricism and spin out a long legato line. By the time Rossini met her the voice had darkened, which explains why mezzo-sopranos like Joyce DiDonato sometimes take on the role of Elena in *La Donna del Lago*.

Today Rossini, Signor Crescendo, is still best known for his comedies, especially the ebullient *Barber of Seville* and tender *Cenerentola*. It comes as somewhat of a shock to realize that most of his operas, aside from juvenile works, were *Opera Seria*. In his choice of subjects he was no doubt influenced by Colbran, whose talent was best suited to noble and dramatic roles. He composed seven operas for her. The fourth, debuted in 1819, was *La Donna del Lago*.

During these years of collaboration their growing intimacy altered the course of Rossini’s life as well as his music. In 1815 Colbran became Rossini’s lover. From then on they lived together, finally marrying in 1822. There can be no doubt that Colbran collaborated with Rossini in the composition of her fioritura and other vocal pyrotechnics. A talented musician, she eventually published four volumes of songs.

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Rossini was a shrewd man of the theater, and there was calculation in selecting a work by Sir Walter Scott as his subject. For this was the heyday of Scott's popularity, the public entranced by tales of the mythical Scotland of his imagination, gripped with a mania for Scott and the still-wild Scottish Highlands. *La Donna del Lago* is somewhat an anomaly in Rossini's oeuvre. William R. Braun, in his article "Lake District" in the February 2015 issue of *Opera News*, wrote a sensitive analysis arguing that this work is neither comic nor tragic, but bucolic in setting and tone. The Rossini expert Philip Gossett calls it "by far the most Romantic of Rossini's Italian operas."

The entrance of the heroine is quite unusual. It is a barcarole in the most literal sense of the word, for it is sung as the heroine Elena rows herself across Loch Katrine, musing on her love for Malcom [sic] Graeme. And she concludes the opera with its most famous numbers, "Tante affetti in tal momento," immediately succeeded by "Fra il padre, e fra l'amante." This bravura and deeply moving rondo and florid cabaletta are a dazzling, breathtaking finale to *La Donna del Lago*. They are Rossini at his best, the very essence of bel canto.

There is something of a paradox in the works Rossini composed for his muse, Isabella Colbran. The vocal demands are enormous. And yet, from contemporary accounts, newspaper reviews and memoirs, at this time Colbran's voice was deteriorating. She was known to sing sharp or flat, and at times failed to execute the fiendishly difficult music. One telling anecdote refers to the King's well-known partiality to Colbran's artistry. A member of the audience, asked what he thought of the performance, evaded the question by answering "I am a Royalist."

The end is sad. Colbran lost her voice utterly, and in 1823, after a disastrous tour of England, she retired from the stage. The couple's married life was not a happy one, due in part to Colbran's addiction to gambling and Rossini's infidelities. Around 1830 they separated, Colbran moving in with Rossini's parents. Her health declined. She suffered greatly from an inflammatory pelvic condition, almost certainly caused by a venereal infection she contracted from her husband. Isabella Colbran died October 7, 1845 and was buried in the Rossini family plot.

Towards the end of his long life Rossini was asked which singer he most esteemed. Without hesitation he replied "Isabella Colbran."

— Rachel Stuhlman for the Opera Guild of Rochester