

# When Patti Wowed Her Fans She Really Undid Them

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By PETER G. DAVIS

THE title "prima donna" has been bestowed all too lightly on opera singers in this century. Even the most imposing of today's divas—in terms of the grandness of their manners and the greatness of their egos—pale in comparison to Adelina Patti (1843-1919), the singer who would seem to have given the term prima donna its definitive meaning. From her first appearance as a toddler of 7 at Tripler's Hall in New York City in 1850 to her final concert (after 35 years of "farewells") at a London Red Cross benefit in 1914, Patti lived her role to the hilt, often traveling in a private railroad car, only consenting to make recordings in her Welsh castle and then only when the spirit moved her, and otherwise delighting and thrilling her admirers with her utterly outrageous behavior. What made it all so joyous, of course, was that she was a great artist possessed with a genuinely great voice and her art seemed to have a universal appeal for fans and connoisseurs alike.

Fortunately for later generations, Patti made recordings—about 30 acoustic sides in 1905 and 1906. Of course she was in her early 60's at the time, and well past her prime, but those slightly fading mementos did capture some of the fascinating magic of her persona and remain to give us a tantalizing glimpse of a vanished style of singing. Almost all of these records have now been gathered in a two-disk EMI import (Odeon 147-01 500/1) and in listening to them a contemporary critic can hardly help echoing, with somewhat modified rapture perhaps, the reactions of the lady herself upon hearing her voice reproduced for the first time: "Ah! My God!" she exclaimed (in French), blowing kisses at the horn: "Now I understand why I am Patti! What a voice! What an artiste!"

No, not a very modest critique, but modesty has never been a virtue cultivated by true prima donnas. In Patti's case, it was a naive but wholly genuine response, the ultimate justification for a lifetime of world-wide adulation.

Born in Madrid of Italian parents, Patti was brought to America at the age of

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Culver Pictures

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# The One Thing Patti Never Doubted: Her Own Genius

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4 and made her operatic debut 12 years later at New York's Academy of Music as Donizetti's Lucia di Lammermoor. Her success was instantaneous and from that moment on she never entertained a doubt about who she was or what was due her. "Patti," George Bernard Shaw once remarked dryly, "will get up and bow to you in the very agony of stage death if you only drop your stick accidentally."

The response to a Sutherland or Caballé performance today is a model of restraint compared to the ovations and demonstrations that greeted Patti throughout her long career. Henry Krehbiel, critic of The New York Tribune at the turn of the century, used three lengthy paragraphs to describe the aftermath of a "Barber" at the Met in 1892—the stage covered with flowers, the constant rising and lowering of the curtain, the cheering crowds, the clamorous insistence for more until a piano had to be wheeled on stage for a final encore.

Shaw recounted a similar scene rather more wickedly—a London concert in 1889 before the diva's trip to South America. Patti had just sung the Bell Song from "Lakmé" and the orchestra attempted to launch into Moszkowski's Serenata. "The audience took its cue at once, and would not have Moszkowski. After a prolonged struggle, Mr. Ganz [the conductor] gave up in despair; and out tripped the diva, bowing her ac-

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knowledgements in the character of a petted and delighted child. When she vanished there was more cheering than ever.

"Mr. Ganz threatened the Serenata again; but in vain. He appealed to the sentinels of the greenroom; and these shook their heads, amidst roars of protest from the audience, and at last, with elaborate gestures, conveyed in dumb show that they dared not, could not, would not, must not venture to approach Patti again. Mr. Ganz, with well-acted desolation, went on with the Serenata, not one note of which was heard. Again he appealed to the sentinels; and this time they waved their hands expansively in the direction of South America, to indicate that the prima donna was already on her way thither. On this the audience showed such sudden and unexpected signs of giving in that the diva tripped out again, bowing, wafting kisses, and successfully courting fresh thunders of applause. Will not some sincere friend of Madame Patti's tell her frankly that she is growing too big a girl for this sort of thing?"

Exactly what Patti demanded as the acknowledged Queen of Song is vividly recounted in the memoirs of Colonel J. H. Mapleson, the British impresario

who took her and his own opera company on several well publicized coast-to-coast tours of America. Patti's \$65,000 private railroad car was elegant, with walls in embossed leather, paintings by Parisian artists and lavish gold embroidery—every comfort was provided. Her fees were tremendous—20 times those of the legendary tenor, Mario, according to Mapleson. "I find from my tables of expenditure for the New York season of 1883 that, after paying Mdm. Patti her thousand pounds, and distributing a few hundreds among the other members of the company, I had only from 22 to 23 dollars per night left on the average for myself." Mapleson also tells us that Patti's pet parrot had been taught to scream "Cash! Cash!" whenever he entered her compartment.

Billing was an equally vital matter. On all advertisements Patti required that her name be printed in letters one-third larger than those used for anyone else's name. In Chicago, Mapleson once spied the prima donna's husband, Ernest Nicolini, on a ladder, measuring the letters of a poster. Patti's were indeed a trifle smaller than stipulated in her contract and revisions had to be made forthwith.

Patti never bothered with rehearsals, contenting herself with sending her maid to instruct the cast on her expected movements. "On one occasion," Mapleson writes, "when 'Il Trovatore' was being performed, I remember the baritone soliciting the honor of an introduction to Mdm. Patti at the very moment when he was singing the trio of the first act. The Manrico of the evening was exceedingly polite, and managed without scandalizing the audience to effect the introduction by singing it as if it was a portion of his role."

Was Patti worth all the fuss and nonsense? Judging from contemporary accounts of her voice, technical accomplishment and general musicianship, she must have been phenomenal—no less than a musical genius, according to the Viennese critic Eduard Hanslick, certainly one of the most exacting standard-bearers of the age (and immortalized by Wagner as the hypercritical Beckmesser in "Die Meistersinger"). "When this slip of a girl steps lightly on the stage, inclines her childish face, radiant with artless pleasure, and regards the audience, intelligently and good-naturedly, with her big, shining doe-like eyes, she has already conquered. . . . What a youthful fresh voice, ranging evenly and effortlessly from C to the F above the staff! A silver-clear genuine soprano, it is wonderfully pure and distinct, particularly in the higher tones."

Hanslick goes on to praise her faultless intonation, her impeccable coloratura, her natural grace and charm, while faulting her somewhat in her projections of warmth and depth of feeling. Patti was hardly a tragic actress—she excelled in light, girlish roles. "She was a songbird *par excellence*," judged her contemporary, the American baritone David Bispham, "and never allowed anything to upset either her equanimity or her comfort."

This lack of profundity in her dramatic performance probably contributed to the extraordinary length of her career and the remarkable preservation of her voice. "Such a life!" recalled Clara Louise Kellogg, who often sang with Patti in London. "Everything divided off carefully according to regime: so much to eat,



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so far to walk, so long to sleep, just such and such things to do and no others! And, above all, she has allowed herself few emotions. Every singer knows that emotions are what exhaust and injure the voice. She never acted; and she never, never felt!"

Even Shaw had to bow to Patti's vocal art, however much he deplored her deportment and choice of repertory: "Patti of the beautiful, eloquent voice, so perfectly produced and controlled that its most delicate pianissimo reaches the remotest distance in Albert Hall: Patti of the unerring ear, with her magical rouds soaring to heavenly altitudes: Pat-

ti of the pure, strong tone that made 'God Save the Queen' sound fresh and noble at Covent Garden: Patti of the hushed, tender notes that reconcile rows of club-loving cynics to 'Home, Sweet Home.'"

It is probable we will never again see a prima donna quite like Adelina Patti, but Odeon's reissue of the 1905/6 recordings does give us more than an inkling of what made her such an extraordinary legend. All the songs and arias were recorded in Patti's Welsh castle, Craig-y-Nos, where she lived in retirement with her third husband, Baron Cederström. Simply getting Patti to make

the disks was a triumph of diplomacy, for she had long disdained to sing in front of this mechanical "toy." Fred Gaisberg, the producer in charge, and his assistants set up their cumbersome machinery and had no choice but to wait for Patti to get used to the notion of recording—and for the right mood to strike her.

The first aria on the album, "Voi che sapete" from Mozart's "The Marriage of Figaro," was precisely the selection that set off the prima donna's rapturous paean of delight at her own art. As an example of interpretation of Mozart it certainly raises eyebrows today: the generous portamento and attacks from below the note, the shortness of breath (understandable at age 62), a yodeling descent to the chest register, the interpolated high note near the end. But this, too, is fascinating as an instance of an approach to Mozart that was once considered just and right. And in any event, the sweet and silvery tone and the disarming charm that so captivated Hanslick come across with undiminished immediacy.

Lotti's "Pur dicesti" is utterly ravishing. The line may not be consistently unflawed but the phrasing is aristocratic and the famous Patti trill, rustling like the finest quality of silk, grows naturally and effortlessly out of the melody itself. What we cannot hear is the matchless coloratura, the *volate* and *staccati* so praised by the critics of the 1860's. By 1905, Patti was past the point of tossing off such technical fireworks, not to mention the fabulous ascent to F above C. In fact, nearly everything here is taken in keys lower than written. "Time," Shaw remarked, "has transposed Patti a minor third down." One gets a hint of what her agility must have been like from the shakes and roudades in the two versions of Marguerite's Jewel Song from "Faust," one of them never before published (seven of the 28 selections are on disk for the first time—the two other items are apparently lost).

Nor can we hear much music of consequence on these disks—Patti's repertory was always of the old chestnut variety, exactly what her adoring audience demanded of her. What does come across in "Home, Sweet Home," "The Last Rose of Summer," "Il Bacio," "La Calasera," "Comin' Through the Rye," and the others is the irresistible personality of a pampered and petted but adorable child and, above all, the tangible proof of what had caused all the cheering: a voice of exquisite tonal refinement.

When these records, with their exclusive and distinctive "Patti-pink" labels, were first released, there was understandable pride and excitement as record shops posted signs reading: "Patti is singing here today." And Patti is still singing, thanks to this valuable, carefully restored set of records. Lilli Lehmann, a formidable prima donna herself, as intellectually tough as Patti was cuddly soft, described the phenomenon accurately for all future generations: "She possessed unconsciously, as a gift of nature, a union of all those qualities that all other singers must attain and possess consciously. . . . The purity and flawlessness of her tone, the beautiful equalization of her whole voice, constituted the magic by which she held her listeners entranced."



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(Cine Adelina Patti-ról)

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