

# Musical Discourse , 1928

(Extract on Adelina Patti and Gottschalk)

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## ADELINA PATTI IN AMERICA

ADELINA PATTI, the New York correspondent of Dwight's Journal of Music reports, in June, 1859, "is preparing for the stage, and will appear next fall, under the supervision of Strakosch, who is her brother-in-law." Her friends confidently expect, it is stated, that she will become a "really great operatic artist." For once, the admiring circle was not disappointed; nor was the newspaper critics false prophets who recorded her appearance in the Academy of Music, New York, on November 24, 1859, when she was sixteen years old. Strange to say, there was also, for once, a precocious musician about whose age and precocity there was little prevarication. It is not always that so much confidence is so fully rewarded, or that newspaper critics are so completely justified in their prophecies as those who heard her first performance as Lucia, in Donizetti's opera. It was an extraordinary success, made without the elaborate preparations of the press agent. The writers of the daily newspapers were full of enthusiasm. W. H. Fry, of The Tribune, considered Adelina already the equal of Sontag. He found that she "possessed unequivocally all the qualities for the role of Lucia," which he considered to be "a full soprano voice with absolute facility in the upper notes, thorough volatility of tone or rapid execution, great power of holding tones, especially attenuating them to the last degree, a gentle, ladylike demeanor and, to some extent, clearness of dramatic action. . . . The brilliant execution which she begins with at the outset of her career ranks with that where the best singers end." As a determined champion of American art and artists he drew the moral that "managers here make a great mistake when they fail to afford every opportunity to American aspiration in whatever artistic form"; and claimed Adelina as "an American without a transatlantic puff, a child brought up in the midst of us. The New York correspondent of Dwight's journal of Music published in Boston, declared that the occasion " made him leap for joy, like a young hart upon the mountain"; and that since the days of Parodi there had been no such sensation as that made by "the little Patti." He then made the prediction that "there is no reason why, in ten years, Adelina Patti will not be the greatest of living singers. I wish I was as sure of \$10,000 as I am of this fact." The only dubious voice in New York that has come down from the days of Patti's debut is that of Richard Grant White, writing twenty-two years later, in 1881.

He thought, then, that at her debut she was not even in vocalization, a "prima donna"; her voice lacked amplitude, richness, power, and her manner, though not awkward or constrained, was that of a very young girl. But her capabilities were at once recognized by her audiences; and her future was foretold by her critics; although, Mr. White adds, "musical criticism in New York at that time was fallen very much below the point at which it stood five years before, and that to which it has risen since."

After numerous other appearances in New York at that time, Adelina then went to Boston with the company of which she was so brilliant an ornament.

The critical state of mind she met with there was one that has persisted ever since and was, no doubt, existent long before her arrival. An artistic magnificence that New York was the first to recognize must be "let down" in Boston, and must be shown to be not all that those excitable and less judicious New Yorkers had thought. Any artistic magnificence desiring unrestrained admiration in Boston should shed its effulgence first in that sober and experienced town. So we find that John S. Dwight, while he was not disappointed in "the newly famous Adelina Patti little Patti," was prepared to be judicious in his Journal of Music. "A young girl, a mere child in appearance, slender, dark, and beautiful, a delicate copy of her sister, Mme. Strakosch, with all the simplicity and natural enthusiasm of a child, she sang and even acted the part of Lucy with an ease, a truthfulness, and an artistic finish that astounded and delighted every one and suggested very high comparisons. That she sings as well as Lind and Bosio and Sontag is, of course, one of the extravaganzas of the New York critics, proving, however, the real enthusiasm she created." But in his analysis of her singing he almost forgets to be an example to the extravagant New Yorkers. After delighting in the purity and beauty of her voice, its even development from the highest tones to "good,

positive low tones of passion," he concludes that "she seems really destined for an artist. . . .

Her execution is certainly most wonderful for one so young so perfect you continually forget to think it strange." In her succeeding appearances the first impression was "more than confirmed." "Never were the melodies of Bellini in 'La Sonnambula' never could they be, wedded to a fresher, purer voice, in the person of a more fitting and more charming interpreter than 'little Patti. Of "the beauty of her rare voice, of her good vocal schooling and her singularly perfect execution" there could be no question. But the best thing about it was that "good sense, the instinct of propriety" pervaded her whole performance. The only pause to these paeans of praise was given by her singing, in a Sunday concert, of "With Verdure Clad" from "The Creation" and "Hear ye, Israel," from "Elijah" and certainly her attempting the latter would not have been fortunate at any part of her career.

Louis Moreau Gottschalk, the American pianist, with whom Patti made a short tour of the West Indies in 1856, before her operatic debut, has left in his book, "Notes of a Pianist," some interesting remarks about Adelina's family, which included an extraordinary number of fine artists : what he calls "a dynasty of distinguished singers." The father, Salvatore, was an "excellent tenore di forza." His wife, Caterina, mother of Adelina, (whose first husband was one Barili), was in 1863, when Gottschalk wrote, "still celebrated in Spain, Portugal, and Naples as a 'fiery actress,'" who sometimes had transports not connected with her art, and denounced violently audiences that did not listen with all the attention and respect she considered due her and her art. She had lived in New York for a number of years. Ireland, in his "Records of the New York Stage," mentions her debut there as Romeo in Bellini's opera of "I Capuleti ed i Montecchi" (in which the hero's part is written for a soprano). He calls her "a vocalist and actress of great skill and accomplishment" but, he adds, "with advancing years and failing voice, her undoubted merits were insufficient to keep her permanently before the public." Her eldest daughter, Clotilde Barili, was successful as a singer: "young, pretty, and interesting," says Ireland, "and, for a short period, regarded as little less than a divinity by the dilettanti of New York." Ettore Barili was a baritone singer and a composer who, at one time, had a name as a fashionable teacher in New York.

Nicolo, basso cantante, was "a tolerable opera singer," according to Gottschalk. Antonio, a basso profondo, was also a fashionable singing teacher; and, according to Richard Grant White, "an excellent master.'

The children of the second marriage, with Salvatore Patti, raised the line to a higher eminence.

Amalia, who married Maurice Strakosch, was a talented singer. She made her debut in New York in 1847, as Agnise in Bellini's "Beatrice di Tenda," in which her half-sister, Clotilde, took the chief part. But her powers unfortunately deserted her before she was ready to end her career. Carlotta Patti was hardly less gifted than her famous sister Adelina. She had, as Adelina herself avowed, a higher voice. Many believed that she had a deeper feeling and a finer artistic endowment. She was originally intended for a pianist; after she became a singer her lameness prevented her from appearing in opera, unless occasionally as the Queen of the Night in Mozart's "Magic Flute," where that character has little to do but stand still and sing excruciatingly high passages of surpassing difficulty.

Carlo Patti, whose resemblance to his sister Adelina, Gottschalk declares, made them "like two peas in a pod," was a fine violinist; he studied with Arditi and became the leader of the New Orleans opera orchestra, and afterwards functioned in New York and St. Louis. Gottschalk calls him a "Bohemian," who had many adventures in California and Mexico and the Southern States; and as a soldier in the Confederate Army was several times reported killed, but survived all the reports.

It is a well-known story that Adelina was born in Madrid the night after her mother had appeared there in the part of Norma. The little girl was a true child of the theatre. She resorted to it as a little girl often with her mother in their life in New York and spent much time in it. The house of her brother-in-law, Maurice Strakosch, was a rendezvous for all the operatic artists who visited New York. Among them Mmes. Sontag and Alboni indulged in glowing predictions for the little girl's future. Everybody who knew her concurred with those views.

The Patti family, according to Max Maretzek, an operatic manager of that day, as he writes in his book of reminiscences, "Sharps and Flats," occupied the "humble dwelling house," No. 96, East Tenth Street; the family at home then consisting of Salvatore Patti, his wife, three daughters, Amalia, Carlotta, and Adelina, and one son, Carlo. The Maretzeks lived in the next house. Salvatore, formerly an impresario, had gone

the way of most operatic managers in those days and had failed in business. In his reduced circumstances he was engaged, from 1849 to 1858, as second tenor, and his oldest daughter, Amalia, as "comprimaria," or second soprano, at the Astor Place Opera, then under Maretzek's management. The two younger Patti girls could often be seen together with the Maretzek girls in the street, "playing, running, frolicking, skipping rope, throwing snowballs at the boys in the winter and firecrackers in the summer." "The entire Patti family were born musicians," says Maretzek, "and the three daughters were gifted with beautiful voices; but Adelina had a wonderful ear in addition to her little silvery voice and could repeat the songs of Jenny Lind and Teresa Parodi after hearing them only a few times, in perfect time and tune. Often, after returning from school or from play, did Adelina call with my younger sister at the office of the Astor Place Opera House and sing, at my request, the air of 'Ernani,' or the melodies of Jenny Lind's Swedish songs, to the astonishment and delight of the singers and other persons present; and when rewarded with half a dollar, the two girls could be seen rushing to the next apple stand or candy store and invest the money received."

Maretzek recalls that once, at the Howard Athenaeum in Boston, when Mme. Barili-Patti, the mother, sang the part of Norma, with Amalia Patti as Adalgisa, Adelina figured as one of the children of Norma. Then a little child, she insisted at the rehearsal upon singing the music with her mother and sister during the duet of "Mira, Norma"; and when, after several admonitions, she would still continue to sing, the irascible mother took her up and gave her a spanking before the eyes of the orchestra and members of the company. And he recalls, again, another performance of "Norma" at the Federal Street Theatre, in which Teresa Parodi and Amalia Patti took part; and in which the two children of Norma, Adelina being one of them, acted "so naturally" that Parodi ran off the stage, Amalia Patti fainted, and the curtain had to be dropped amidst the shouting and roaring of the audience.

Luigi Arditi, who, for many years, was the operatic conductor most closely connected with Mme. Patti's career, describes in his "Reminiscences" how he first saw her in a New York hotel, which she and her mother visited to eat the macaroni prepared there by a renowned Italian chef. She was "a little dark-eyed, roguish maiden with red, pursed-up lips and quick, rippling laughter," and "her determined little airs and manners then already showed plainly that she was destined to become a ruler of men." She was brought to Arditi's room to sing. He was highly amused to see the airs of importance with which the tiny songstress first selected a comfortable seat for her doll, whom she bade "listen to mamma," and then turned to him, asking him to accompany her in "Ah, non giunge," from "La Sonnambula." He and Bottesini, the famous double-bass player, who was with him, both wept "genuine tears of emotion" and were amazed at the "well-nigh perfect manner in which she delivered some of the most difficult and varied arias without the lightest effort or self-consciousness."

Richard Grant White also saw the little Patti some years before her operatic debut under similar intimate and affecting circumstances, although with no tears of emotion. He was visiting Patti's mother "a very motherly seeming woman, who showed all of her forty-five or fifty years." He observed a "slender, swarthy, bright-eyed little girl, in short skirts, who ran into the room and chirped at her mother, and ran out of it, carolling as she went through the passageway, and then ran in and out again in the same fashion," until the middle-aged prima donna with whom he was talking called out rather sharply, "Adelina, tacete! e venite a me, o andate via." The child chose to come. "Soon she left her mother's side for mine, and then with the freedom of Italian childhood half sat upon my knee, swinging one red-stockinged leg as she glanced from her mother's face to mine. I asked Mme. Barili-Patti if her little daughter promised to be a singer like her sisters and her mother, to which she replied, \*Lo spero; lo credo.\* And then, 'Cantate un poco, Adelina, per il signore,' and she suggested something, whereupon the girl, without leaving her perch, sang, like a bird, a little Italian air that I did not know and soon ran away on some childish errand. Grant White thought that to be with her mother in itself must have been a liberal education in music; and the examples before her, night and day, the very atmosphere she breathed, tended to foster her musical talents.

According to Patti's own story, told to Eduard Hanslick, her half-brother, Ettore Barili, was her first teacher. Strakosch, she declared, only coached her as Rosina in "Il Barbiere," and later, when she had begun her career in Europe, in her other parts.

He himself claimed a much greater share in her early training. But much was owed to Strakosch in other ways, if not in this. Patti's mother wished to send her to Italy as a little girl to accept an engagement there. When Strakosch, then a New York operatic manager, heard of this he protested so vigorously against the

idea that it was abandoned. Adelina herself declared that at that time her voice was already on the road to ruin and had begun to show a tremolo. A season in Italy would doubtless have been the end of it.

When did Patti make her "positively first" appearance before the public? She had already sung in many concerts before her operatic debut. Herman Klein, in his book, "The Reign of Patti," thinks it was at a charity concert, of which the date and details are irrevocably lost. But Ireland, in his "Records of the New York Stage," notes that at a benefit concert in Niblo's Garden, on December 3, 1851, one of the performers was "the very remarkable child, Adelina Patti, whose voice and execution were the astonishment of the town," she being then just under nine years of age. This was the fourth annual benefit of the American Dramatic Fund Association. Hamblin and Laura Addison appeared in "Catherine and Petruccio"; an "Italian concert" was given by Signora Borghese and Signora Steffanone, Signor Forti and Signor Vietti, and Adelina; and "the whole Ravel company" appeared in the pantomime of "Mazulme."

If Adelina's own memory served her, she made appearances in concerts in the United States she did not say where in 1850, when she was seven years old. They used to stand her on a table near the pianoforte that the audience, as she thought, might get a full view of her doll. Her account is that she sang "Una Voce Poco Fa" from "Il Barbiere" with the same vocal embroideries that she used later in her famous years. Were they the ones that elicited Rossini's sad sarcasm in Paris when, after one of her brilliant appearances, rendered doubly brilliant by her elaborate decorations of Rosina's melody, he asked her if it was really his music that she had been singing?

Max Maretzek, already an operatic manager in New York and a friend of Adelina's father, declares that her first public appearance was under his management in February, 1852. It was at a concert of Michael "Miska" Hauser, the violinist, at Tripler Hall in Broadway, who was also assisted by Teresa Parodi and Cesare Badiali, two of the noted operatic singers of the day. "Afterwards she appeared in two concerts given by her half-brother in John Brougham's Lyceum Theatre, on May 12 and June 8, 1852, on which occasions she sang the 'Echo Song' by Eckert and 'Ah, non giunge' from 'La Sonnambula.' Her success was complete, but more one of wonder than of admiration" which, considering her age, was not strange. In 1858 Adelina made a tour with Ole Bull in the South and West of the United States. The company included, besides Ole Bull, Adelina, her sister Amalia, and Strakosch, Amalia's husband. They gave many concerts; Mrs. Ole Bull, in her "Memoir" of her husband, says "some two hundred." There were no societies for the prevention of cruelty to children in those days. Mrs. Bull quotes from a Southern newspaper, unnamed, a flattering welcome to the "musical prodigy, only eight years old" she was really ten in which the writer expresses the belief that "Signora Patti will nestle herself in many a memory to-night in company with Jenny Lind and Catherine Hayes, not because she is such a singer as they are, but because her youth will impart to her performance a charm that their matured powers cannot give." In 1856 came the short tour in the West Indies with Gottschalk, above mentioned.

It is not strange, after all this, that the voice gave ominous danger-signals; and that the clear-sighted Strakosch if indeed he had as much control over Adelina's doings as he avers made her refrain from singing entirely for two whole years and then began to teach her, with circumspection, a few roles.

He is even said to have fought hard against her appearing at her operatic debut in the Academy of Music, fearing that the theatre was too big for her voice.

After her effulgent success in the winter of 1859 and the following year in New York, Strakosch formed a partnership with her father, Salvatore Patti, to take her on a concert tour in the Western and Southern States. In January, February, and March, 1861, Adelina appeared as prima donna at the French Opera House in New Orleans, which for so many years boasted that it was the only "permanent" opera in the United States. A New Orleans chronicler mentions "Robert le Diable," "Il Trovatore," "Les Huguenots," "Lucia," "Charles VI," "Le Pardon de Ploermel" (otherwise Meyerbeer's "Dinorah"), as the operas in which she appeared, to which another chronicler adds "Marta." An advertisement in January announced "Le Barbier de Seville" in the "lesson scene" of which Mile. Patti would sing "Mme. Sontag's celebrated 'Echo Song' [i.e., Eckert's] and the Scottish ballad 'Within a Mile of Edinboro Town.'" Prices on that occasion, it may be noted, ranged from 50 cents to \$1.50; the doors were opened at 6.30 o'clock and the performance began at 7. New Orleans local pride may be read in the chronicler's declaration that "it was on the French Opera House stage that Adelina Patti scored her early

successes and where her genius received the stamp of approval that made it recognized throughout the capitals of the world. 55 In the spring of 1861, a year and a half after her New York debut in opera, Patti went to England and began that brilliant European experience that placed her unequivocally where the prescient New York reviewers had placed her, at the head of the world's singers. Her success in London was a surprise. The English people looked on the reports of her American achievements as extravagant; and at her first appearance as Amina in "La Sonnambula," at the Royal Italian Opera, Covent Garden, not twenty people in the house knew beforehand that she possessed more than ordinary ability. The press agent had neglected his opportunity and the advertisements were silent. The surprise was "indescribable"; and confident predictions were made of a successor to Bosio, Malibran, and Pasta.

She had made a great name when she returned to America for the first time in 1881, for concert and operatic performances. In 1884 she came to sing at the Academy of Music in Colonel Mapleson's company, with which he was trying to rival the efforts of Henry E. Abbey at the newly-established Metropolitan Opera House. It was the twenty-fifth anniversary of her first appearance at the Academy. The late H. E. Krehbiel tells entertainingly, in his book, "Chapters of Opera," of the lame attempts to celebrate the anniversary of the dragging of the diva's carriage through the streets from the Academy to the Windsor Hotel in Fifth Avenue by a perfunctory band of Italians hired for the purpose by the Colonel; of the banquet in her honor, which she cheerfully accepted, and which the wives of most of the eminent gentlemen invited positively refused to attend, on account of the then recent scandal over her separation from the Marquis de Caux, her first husband, and her marriage with the tenor Nicolini. In 1893 she came back again for an ill-advised "farewell tour" that could add nothing to her reputation, because her powers were waning, and that caused her admirers to grieve. They grieved still more when she came again in 1903, on another "farewell tour," not a single feature of which was worthy of her and which was a baldly planned scheme to exploit the curiosity of the younger generation and the fond memories of the older. The voice in her youth was a pure high soprano; but it dropped a little in its range as she advanced in years; and in her last years a good deal. In the lamentable last "farewell tour" she had many of her arias transposed a minor third downward. Even a considerable time before this she had had to resort to transpositions.

Much has been said about the wonderful preservation of Mme. Patti's voice. It was indeed wonderfully preserved, and for many years; though at the end she relied too much upon this preservation. A candid colleague and friend, Clara Louise Kellogg, the American soprano, who wrote her memoirs without hesitating to drop a little acid here and there, asks how it could have been otherwise, considering the care she took of herself and it. "Such a life! Everything divided off carefully, according to regime; so much to eat, so far to walk, so long to sleep, just such and such things to do and no others! And above all, she allowed herself no emotions. 9 ' Every singer knows, observes Miss Kellogg, that emotions are what exhaust and injure the voice. " She never acted, and she never, never felt!" Miss Kellogg is kind enough to add, however, that after she had "run away with Nicolini," Mme. Patti did succeed in putting an unusual amount of warmth into the role of Violetta. Otherwise her acting, this contemporary continues, was essentially mechanical. "She never was at all resourceful as an actress and never able to stamp any part with the least creative individuality."

It was a part of Mme. Patti's preservative system that she never rehearsed. Her contracts stipulated that, while she should be allowed to rehearse if she wanted to, she should never be compelled to. And, as a matter of fact, she never did. It has been picturesquely asserted that Mme. Patti's whole course of life was based on the theory that she had in her throat a certain definitely limited number of notes to be expended, and that when these were gone, there would be no more. Consequently, by economizing her expenditure at rehearsals and on other unprofitable occasions, she could make her voice last so much longer.

But the laws of nature are inexorable. Mme. Patti, thanks to the perfection of her art, was able to postpone their operation longer than most singers have done; but even she could not defy them.

There was certainly cause for wonder, at her appearances in New York in 1903, that she could retain and utilize in public even so much of her voice as she did; but some were fain to think, on these occasions, that wonder was not the ostensible purpose of the concerts she gave, nor the reason why the public was invited to attend at very high prices. Her appearances gave proof of what required no proof and what should never have been put to the proof that a human voice may be less lasting than the human being who possesses it. There was not much to admire or to arouse pleasure in the singing she did, as singing. The wonder was that it was the voice of a woman within a few months of sixty-one years.

What beauty it preserved was the result of her lifelong art. But she had to reach desperately for high notes, even though her arias were transposed as much as a minor third; those notes were frequently taken with faulty intonation and that by a singer whose ear in her prime had never let her lose the pitch by a hair's breadth; her runs and arpeggios were dull and uncertain; her trills were subdued and promptly cut off; her phrasing was short and disjointed, showing failure of breath; the production of tone was not seldom perilously near to ugliness.

There are numerous stories of Mme. Patti's relentless pursuit of the dollar in America, as well as of other financial units in other countries. It was only too evident that this last "farewell" was a final attempt to capitalize her enormous reputation and to wrest what there was left to gain from it. There were rather sordid little details for helping to this end.

Thus, it was clearly put down in her contract that she should appear twice upon all the programmes and no more, and that she should deliver one and only one encore after her first piece and two, and no more, after the other. The pieces, as well as the encores, all drawn from a very limited repertory, were all enumerated and printed in the programme - books of the concerts. The most degrading feature of it all was the contract, entered into with a certain popular song writer of the Broadway school for the purpose of advertising his wares, that Mme. Patti should sing, as an encore at each of her concerts, a deplorably tasteless production of his own in which the cheapness of the words vied with the vulgarity of the music. It was a pitiable thing that so great an artist should end her career in the city where she began it, in such a way as this. And, from one point of view, the worst of it was that she did not really need the money.

The result of this last tour in America was disastrous for the singer's manager and his backers, as other tours of hers had been. It was not at all disastrous for her: she took back with her to Craigy-Nos some \$800,000. At her last appearance in New York the audience was productive of only \$3,180 and the manager was slow in depositing in her hands the \$5,000 without which, in plain sight, for each appearance, she invariably refused to stir. She waited placidly in her hotel, the audience waited impatiently in the theatre. The manager distractedly ran about town to secure from his principals the \$,000 that were lacking. These gentlemen were said to be too overcome to speak to reporters about it; but the concert went on and the audience was appeased. It was by no means Mme. Patti's first experience of the kind; she had learned wisdom by experience. Nor was it her last. Many of the final appearances in different parts of the country, especially the Southwest, that were to close her tour, were cancelled because the audiences were not such as were hoped for, in numbers. The projector of this last farewell lost \$25,000. Probably he deserved to the ideals that Mme. Patti represented are notably divergent from those of the present day. The happy-go-lucky representations of opera, such as Colonel Mapleson gave at the Academy of Music in New York for so many years, were for her the sum of operatic art. Opera-goers were not then so insistent as they have since come to be upon dramatic verity, upon finish and completeness of ensemble, upon good orchestral playing, upon the artistic whole of an operatic performance. They wanted the voices of great singers; and they got them. How much is it owing to the dearth of great singers that a different ideal has now come to prevail?

It would lead a long way to discuss the question why really great voices, or really great vocal art, such as Mme. Patti's, are no longer in evidence. Conditions in modern life and art, especially in the operatic business, prevent their development and perfect flowering. The efforts of a younger generation to believe that the methods and results of various modern singers, all more or less raw and in different degrees unfinished and imperfect, really represent the artistic line and traditions of a Patti, are pathetic; and what corroboration the younger gets from an older generation denotes either a failure of memory or a lack of knowledge. Such ideals as Mme. Patti represented, so far as they relate purely to vocal art, are precious; and their loss or neglect necessarily involves the ultimate destruction of good singing. So far as they represent carelessness or indifference toward dramatic values and artistic finish in the lyric drama, they are superseded, and happily so. But the loss is a sore one, which nothing else of a different sort can ever quite make up for.