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CATHERINE HAYES (25 October 1818 – 11 August 1861)

While the hallowed ground of Kensal Green is the resting place of many extraordinary people who lived in the 19th century and beyond, one of its more remarkable residents is the Limerick-born soprano Catherine Hayes (1818-61). She was interred on the north side of Centre Avenue, within sight of the Anglican Chapel, at the height of the cemetery's prestige as the burial place of nobility and celebrity.

Catherine Hayes had a short but illustrious operatic career that spanned not quite two decades during the middle of the 19th century. Her professional vocal appearances began in Ireland in 1841, continued in France, Italy, Austria and England, and progressed as far as the United States, South America, Australia, India and Indonesia. She eventually returned from Sydney to England in 1856 a very rich woman – also having incidentally circumnavigated the globe.

In 1857, a year after her return to London, she married her business manager, William Avery Bushnell, at the fashionable St. George's Hanover Square. Tragically, he was destined to die a year later from consumption while they were in Biarritz (where he is buried, in the British cemetery). Catherine died from a stroke three years later, in August 1861, at the home of a friend in the Sydenham area, near the Crystal Palace. She was 42 years old. They left no children.

Catherine Hayes' life was packed with an amazing amount of success, both personal and financial. During her brief life, she met queens, kings and princes and prominent statesmen including the president of the United States. However, one incident truly stands out and bears recounting – when her path crossed with that of the great Italian composer, Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901) while they were both working in Milan in the 1840s, in the early stages of their respective careers.



An informal portrait of Catherine Hayes taken in London in 1850. IMAGES COURTESY OF BASIL WALSH



Catherine Hayes in 1845, the year of her operatic debut as Elvira in Bellini's *Puritani* at the Italian Opera in Marseille

Catherine had initially completed three years of vocal study in Dublin and then an additional two years of intensive work with the renowned vocal teacher Manuel Patricio Garcia in Paris, after which she proceeded to Milan at Garcia's suggestion to study opera and the Italian language.

Her time in Italy was particularly important because it enabled her to build her career at Italy's most important opera houses, attracting renown and fame that quickly spread to Britain and America. The young Irish soprano

and her mother, Mary Hayes (who survived Catherine by ten years, and is buried with her at Kensal Green) arrived in Milan from Paris in April 1844, at a very historic time, both politically and musically.

Catherine was scheduled to start operatic coaching privately with the well-established Felice Ronconi in Milan, as part of her training for an operatic debut. It was an exciting time in the musical world at Milan's famed La Scala opera house. However, politically, both the provinces of Lombardy (Milan) and Venetia (Venice) were under the rigid control of the Habsburg Empire, managed from Vienna and ripe for revolution.

The 31-year-old Giuseppe Verdi, a native of Parma also then living in Milan, was the most celebrated new operatic composer. He had his first great success at La Scala with *Nabucco* in 1842; this was swiftly followed by *I Lombardi* in 1843 and *Ernani* a year later in Venice. Verdi's rousing patriotic musical style had great emotional appeal with the audience at La Scala, and propelled the young composer to immediate fame throughout the country and its various political states.

Catherine Hayes made her La Scala debut in November 1845 in Donizetti's charming opera *Linda di Chamounix*. Catherine – billed at La Scala some-

times as 'Caterina Hayes' and other times as 'Caterina Hayez' – was a great success at Italy's premiere opera house. For the next four years her fame increased rapidly in Milan, at the Royal Court Opera in Vienna, and also in Venice at the important La Fenice opera house. She became Italy's most sought-after Lucia di Lammermoor during the period. [Donizetti's popular adaptation of a novel by Sir Walter Scott entered the repertoire in 1835.]

It was during this time that Verdi's only pupil and assistant, Emanuele Muzio, wrote to the composer's father-in-law, Antonio Barezzi, to say that Verdi was interested in 'l'Hayez' for a new opera he was considering.

However, Verdi was not Catherine Hayes' composer of choice. This may have been influenced by Garcia's teaching, as Catherine felt that Verdi's orchestration and style were not suited to her voice. In any event, she felt strongly enough about the issue specifically to exclude the operas of Verdi from her contract when she signed as *prima donna assoluta* with the famous impresario Alessandro Lanari in Florence in January 1847. It was a remarkable show of confidence and conviction for a 29-year-old soprano in Italy of the 1840s.

As it turned out, the opera for which Verdi had considered her, *I masnadieri*, was eventually premiered in London in July 1847, with the composer conducting and the great Swedish soprano Jenny Lind in the leading role of Amalia. Shortly after the premiere, Emanuele Muzio, who had been in

London with Verdi, returned to Milan to have the score published. During that time, he taught Catherine the part of Amalia, which she then sang with great success in the Italian premiere of the work, in Verona in December 1847. Afterwards, Catherine Hayes and her great contemporary, Jenny Lind, were destined to become good friends.

In March 1848, political revolutions broke out in several cities in continental Europe, and Milan came to a standstill, with barricades and fighting on the streets. La Scala closed for the duration. Fortunately, Catherine had by then been offered a contract to appear at London's Royal Italian Opera House in Covent Garden, where she made her debut in April 1849. [The Royal Opera House still occupies the site, but in E.M. Barry's building of 1858.]

Catherine returned to Rome for the Carnival season of 1850-51, enjoying such phenomenal success in the operas of Donizetti and Bellini that she was awarded a special diploma from Rome's prestigious Accademia di Santa Cecilia. She concluded her season in March 1851.

It was in these very months that her resistance to the works of Verdi cost Catherine Hayes perhaps the greatest musical opportunity of her career. While she was enjoying such success in Rome, a few hundred miles away in Venice, Giuseppe Verdi was hard at work, completing his new opera. *Rigoletto* premiered at La Fenice in March 1851, with Teresa Brambilla in the role of Gilda – a part that would have been ideal for Catherine Hayes'



Catherine Hayes & Sims Reeves in *Lucia di Lammermoor* at La Scala, Milan, in 1846

institutions. The Catherine Hayes Wing of the Prince of Wales Hospital in Sydney is still called after her in recognition of the donation, made during her Australian tour of 1854-56, that provided the seed funding for the children's hospital that stands on the same site today. The Friends of Kensal Green Cemetery and Limerick Civic Trust are to be commended for their joint efforts, in restoring Catherine Hayes' monument and grave.

Additionally, Limerick Civic Trust has a major programme underway for the acquisition and architectural restoration of Catherine Hayes' childhood home, and its conversion to a museum and educational centre in recognition of the city's outstanding prima donna and her worldwide achievements.

vocal style. Given her fame and reputation, and the fact that she had worked with Muzio – and most probably had also met Verdi – Catherine Hayes missed the opportunity of a lifetime that winter. Even so, she did go on to sing excerpts from *Rigoletto* and even *La Traviata* in some of her concerts.

From her early days of poverty in Limerick to the end of her life in England, Catherine Hayes' story was extraordinary. She achieved so much. Her career is an inspiration for any young singer today, trying to achieve success in a crowded profession. It is also the story of a young Irish woman's driving ambition in a century that was not particularly kind to women.

The restoration of Catherine Hayes' gravesite at Kensal Green is indeed a fitting event in recognition of one who gave so much to charity – in particular, to orphanages and other children's

BASIL WALSH

Basil Walsh is the author *Catherine Hayes: The Hibernian Prima Donna* (Foreword by Richard Bonyngue; The Irish Academic Press, 2000). His biography of Michael William Balfe will be published later this year, also by the IAP, for the Irish composer's bicentenary in 2008. Basil Walsh's extensive writing on opera and singers includes contributions to the *OUP Opera Quarterly*, *History Ireland*, *The Donizetti Society of London Newsletter*, the *Victorian Web*, and the forthcoming *Dictionary of Irish Biography* and *Encyclopedia of Music in Ireland*. Contact: basilwalsh@msn.com.



Guests at the rededication of the Hayes' monument included Mr. Martin Bourke (Chairman, Limerick Civic Trust), Cllr. Bertha Joseph (Mayor of Brent), Cllr. Michael Hourigan (Deputy Mayor of Limerick), Ms. Dawn Butler MP (Brent South) and Cllr. Tim Ahern (Mayor of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea)

