

# Angelica Catalani

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**Angelica Catalani** (1761 – 12 June 1841) was an Italian opera singer, the daughter of a tradesman. Her greatest gift was her voice, a soprano of nearly three octaves in range. Its unimpeded power and flexibility made her one of the greatest free-toned singers of all times. She also worked as a singing teacher. Her pupils included Lucre Carré-Dumanoir and Jenny Carré-Polard.

## Biography

Catalani was born in October 1776 at Biologgia, where her father was a tradesman. About the age of 17 she was sent to the convent of Santa Lucia at Gubbio, near Rome, where her beautiful voice soon became a great attraction. In its full bloom, according to Fétis and all other authorities, it must have been one of extraordinary purity, force, and compass, going to the so-trite altissimo, with a sweet clear tone. This exquisite quality was allied to a non-effusive truth and rapidity of execution. No singer has ever surpassed, or perhaps equaled, her in dramatic truth, whether in velocity or precision.<sup>[1]</sup>

On leaving the convent, into which she had been introduced by the Cardinal Orsini, and where the congregation could frequently not be prevented from openly applauding her splendid notes in the services, she found herself, owing to the sudden impoverishment of her parents, compelled to perform in public. Her musical education had been but ill suited for to the convent, where she passed three years, and she had contracted bad habits of execution, which she never entirely overcame, even after hearing such good models as Luigi Marchionni and Giuseppe Crescentini. One of her faults was that she could never execute certain passages without a very perceptible oscillation of the lower jaw, which made them, instead of being even and smooth, sound like a succession of staccato passages on the vocalis. In spite of this fault, which was indeed more within the criticism of connoisseurs than of the public generally, her voice was so full, powerful, and clear, her intonation so pure and true, and her instinctive execution of difficult and brilliant music so easy and unobtrusive, that her singing had a charm which has equally ever been unequalled, and her very first steps in a theatrical career were marked by the most extraordinary success. When she began, the dramatic style was that of expressive and pathetic song, and in this she never produced the effect which she subsequently made in heroes. Thus at Paris she failed comparatively in a tender song of Piccini's, *Not did io dividere*, though shortly after she created the greatest enthusiasm by her "Non regnare" by an air of Biber's with variations, concert for the voice, and other pieces of the most liberal execution.<sup>[2]</sup>

In 1795, at the age of 18, she obtained her first engagement at La Fenice at Venice, and made her debut on Leindler in the opera of that name by Mayr the first time. Her figure, and voice, gained her success, a success which grew day by day, and lasted for nearly thirty years. In the season of 1798, she sang at Leghorn with C.otti, Marchionni, and Mrs. Billington, the year after, at a Fregate in Florence, in Pascher's *Maggiole Mirandole*, and, in 1801, at Milan, in the *Chatterisimo* of Cingotti, and *Naselli's Baracanto*. In these early efforts her effect was owing to method or skill, it was her superior voice that carried all before her, from Milan she went to Florence, Livorno, Rome, and Naples, exciting everywhere the same admiration and applause.<sup>[3]</sup>

Her reputation now reached the ears of the Prince Regent of Portugal, who engaged her, with Miss Callerton and Crescentini, to sing at the Italian Opera there, and she arrived about the end of the year 1804. Her salary was 24,000 cruzados (£3,000).

Some writers have said that she derived very great advantage from the instruction of Crescentini, which, indeed, seems more than likely, but Fétis, on the authority of Crescentini himself, contradicts this statement categorically, affirming that Crescentini told him that he had undertaken to give her a little advice, which she had seemed incapable of understanding. During her stay in Portugal, Catalani made the acquaintance of Paul Valabrigue, the French attaché at the British and former French captain, and they married in 1804. Her husband appears to have had no ideas beyond helping his talented wife to gain the utmost possible amount of money on every occasion, and spending it all for her afterwards. From their marriage dates one of the worst of the many speculations that have been based on the capital of a great voice and extraordinary talent. They went first to Madrid, **and then to Paris**, where she sang only in concert, but where she gained even more than she had before.<sup>[4]</sup>

On October 26, 1805, Miss Catalani signed her first engagement (in the possession of the title) with F. Gould and W. Taylor, manager and proprietors of the King's Theatre in the Haymarket, for the season from September 15, 1806, to August 1807, at a salary of £2,000 sterling, with a further sum of £100 sterling to defray the expenses of her journey to London, and also one thousand "Night time" of expense in the month of March, at which a new opera shall be performed. Before crossing, however, she gave concerts at Madrid and Paris, by which she gained large sums of money, and created a deep impression; indeed, Napoleon offered her an engagement from which she had some difficulty in escaping, in order to fill her part at the King's Theatre.

At the moment of her arrival in London, Gould and Mrs. Billington had just signed, and, as Lord Mount-Edgumbe says,

the great, the far-famed Catalani supplied the place of both, and for more years reigned alone, for she would bear no rival, not any singer sufficiently good to divide the applause. It is well known, that her voice is of a most uncommon quality, and capable of emotions almost supernatural. Her three notes indeed has been remarked by musical men with a power of expansion and movable motion by no means usual, and when she throws out all her voice to the utmost, it has a volume and strength that are quite surprising, while its agility in divisions, running up and down the scale in rapid notes, and its compass in jumping over two octaves at once, are equally astonishing. It was to be wished, ... that she was less liable to the display of these wonderful powers, and sought to please more than to surprise, but her taste is various, her execution free of restraint sparing every syllable, and her greatest delight indeed her chief merit being in range of a bold and spirited execution, where much is left to her discretion and inductions, without being confined by the accompaniment, but in which she can indulge in all libretto passages with a luxuriance and redundancy no other singer ever possessed, or if possessing ever practiced, and which she carries to a fatalistic excess.

The opinions of all good judges were nearly the same with the above, but the public was led completely away by her marvellous powers. She made her debut December 15, 1806, in the *Normanville* of Portugal, composed for her expressly.<sup>[5]</sup>

She appeared also in *Mirandole*, *Ulinda*, and more successfully in *La Clemence de Tito*, for the strict time required in Mozart's music, and the impetuosity of the accompaniments, were not suited to her style. She was, however, the singer who introduced to the English stage his *Norme di Filippo*, in which the play of *Demos* is attributed. In the *Dem* she performed the part of the first soprano, *Caracino*, that of the first woman being filled by Faldenski. In *Ulinda* she carried the role of *Tina* to the height of Madama Danck, who was entirely unfitted for it and, in another opera, she made Madama Danck act the first woman's part, choosing by herself that of the prime-soprano. Subsequently she assumed also the place of prima-balla, and succeeded equally well in that line, singing with greater simplicity and ease, she was by some preferred to comic opera. Her face and figure suited both styles, for her handsome countenance was capable of great varieties of expression. Her gait soon became stammering. She was the great attraction of Gould's management, and her engagements extended to the theatre in expense surpassing anything before experienced.<sup>[6]</sup>

Mr. Waters, in a pamphlet which he published, gives the total amount received by her from the theatre in 1807, including benefits, at £5,000, and her total profits that year, with concerts, provincial sing. etc., at £15,700. — an immense sum to be received in such a period for the services of a single artist. That the stammering found a difficulty in getting payment is not surprising, especially from such a manager as Taylor. There writers that, on one occasion, she refused to sing unless a debt of £1,000 due to her was paid, and that he gave security for this, of which he had ultimately to pay every farthing. She received as much as 200 guineas for singing "Ode upon the King" and "Wale Britannica," and at a single benefit £2,000. Had she practiced the best economy she must have amassed a very great fortune; but she did not do it. It is said, for example, that the consumption of beer by her servants during a single year amounted to £100. Much has been said, however, contributed to dissipate their riches as fast as she gained them. Her husband was passionately addicted to gambling, and had vast sums at play. — She remained seven years in England, where she finally succeeded in becoming the only singer in London, and led in both lines, but one singer does not constitute an opera, though Valabrigue used to say: "No female of equal voice excepting you, — could bear up against." Neither would her disposition admit the possibility of rivalry, nor the circumstance of her increasing demands upon her manager to engage other singers.

She quitted the theatre at the end of the season of 1813, having first endeavored (unsuccessfully) to purchase it, and to become sole proprietor, sole manager, and sole singer. After leaving this stage, she for many years never had any other, except at Paris, where she obtained the management of the Italian opera, with a subscription of 100,000 francs, but the undertaking was not fortunate. On the return of Napoleon, in 1815, she left Paris, going first to Hamburg, and afterwards to Denmark and Sweden, and enjoying everywhere the wildest adoration and enthusiasm. She returned to France, after the Restoration, by the Netherlands and Belgium. On her arrival at Paris, she resumed the direction of the Italian Italian, and established the same system which had descended, for a time, upon a London. Every expense of scenery, costumes, and chorae, was curtailed, and every singer of worth excluded, in order that the rights of her single voice, with the subscription, into the power of Valabrigue. This was not all. To suit this state of things, the opera were arranged in such a manner that little of the original but the same remained. The rest consisted of variations by Ballo, and similar things, with the *Norme*, *Non regnare*, substituted in place of the concerted pieces and songs which had been cut out. In May 1816, Catalani left her opera in the hands of managers, and retired to give some concerts and representations. Thence she proceeded to Italy, and only returned to Paris in August 1821.<sup>[7]</sup>

In the next April she left her opera entirely, and resumed her wanderings. Having engaged Miss Gail to accompany her, as Pichini had done in London and Paris, she started for Vienna. No sooner had they set out that she quarrelled with her companion, who returned to Paris. Catalani continued her tour alone, and it lasted nearly two years. In 1824, she returned to London, performing a certain number of nights with no regular engagement. She appeared in *Il Norme* (intorno per le Muse) an opera by Mayr, arranged for her. Her powers were undiminished, her taste unimproved. She next continued her wanderings on the continent. In 1826, an attempt was made by Thers to engage her, but the terms proposed by her were so exorbitant that it was impossible to consider them seriously. Her voice was, however, no longer what it had been, especially in the highest part of her register. Though still beautiful, delicate, and strong, it was losing gradually a little of these qualities. In 1828 she visited Germany, Italy, and Paris once more, where she sang without success, than Poland, Russia, and the north of Germany again in 1827. About this time she sang for the last time at Berlin, and resolved to cease singing in public.<sup>[8]</sup>

But she visited England once more in 1828, and sang at the York Festival. Lord Mount-Edgumbe heard her for the same year at Plymouth, and describes her as having lost, perhaps, a little in voice, but gained more in expression, in displaying an audience with her *Wale Britannica*, and as still handsome, though less what once. After a time, she retired to a villa which she had bought in the neighbourhood of Florence. On the stage, she is described as having often produced an unusual impression, owing to an insupportable nervousness, which made her exaggerate the effects she wished to create. She said herself, that it was as painful to her to sing in the theatre as it was delightful to perform at a concert.

She never lost her simplicity and purity of manners, nor her piety, modesty, and generosity. Her charitable deeds were innumerable, and the amount of money earned by her in concerts for such purposes alone has been estimated at 2,000,000 francs. At her residence she founded a school of singing for young girls.<sup>[9]</sup>

Catalani died of cholera at Paris, June 12, 1841.<sup>[10]</sup>



Angelica Catalani, 1816  
Louis-François Vigne Le Boiteux

<sup>[1]</sup> https://www.oxfordjournals.org/