

# In Favour with Queen and Nation: Giulia Grisi, the “Fugitive Norma” in London<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Giulia Grisi (1811–1869), the first Adalgisa in Vincenzo Bellini’s *Norma* (Milan, 1831), broke her Italian contract and left for Paris in 1832, where she became *prima donna* under Gioachino Rossini at the Théâtre Italien. In addition, she made her London debut in 1834, replacing Maria Malibran in the young Victoria’s eyes and ears with her singing, acting, and flawless beauty, especially in the operas of the future Queen’s favourite, Vincenzo Bellini. Grisi’s real goal, however, was to conquer Giu-ditta Pasta’s throne by embodying Norma: she first performed the role in London in 1835, and then in almost every season until 1861. Despite her success, she was unjustly attacked for copying Pasta, as established by Thomas G. Kaufman. Bellini himself likewise misjudged her, stating that “the elevated characters she does not understand, does not feel, because she has neither the instinct nor the education to sustain them with the nobility and the lofty style they demand.” “In *Norma* she will be a nonentity; ... the role of Adalgisa is the only one suited to her character.” Nonetheless, even hostile critics like Henry F. Chorley had to acknowledge that “her Norma, doubtless her grandest performance ... was an improvement on the model [i.e. Pasta]; ... there was in it the wild ferocity of the tigress, but a certain frantic charm therewith, which carried away the hearer – nay, which possibly belongs to the true reading of the character.” The purpose of this article is to investigate Grisi’s London reception, primarily in the context of her *Norma* performances.

**Keywords:** Giulia Grisi, soprano sfogato, *Norma*, 19th-century London Opera, Italian migration

1. The present article is the extended version of the author’s paper given at the conference “Italian Musical Migration to the British Isles,” taken place at the University of Birmingham.

Reverend John Edmund Cox remembered the soprano Giulia Grisi's (1811–1869) first appearance in London as Ninetta in Rossini's *La gazza ladra* this way:

The following Tuesday, April 8th, 1834, was, however, to compensate for every disappointment, and to remain for ever in the records of the doings of the King's Theatre as a "night marked with white chalk," for on that ever memorable occasion Giulia Grisi made her *début* before a London audience. ... When Grisi came down the bridge upon the stage, there was on the instant such a burst of applause that made the house ring from end to end. ... the personal beauty of that youthful Italian face, the slimness of her figure, and the modest confidence she manifested, seemed to act like an immediate charm, and rose even the most impassive into a state bordering upon little else than wild excitement. ... The peculiarity of her rich and full tone, the decision of her manner [i.e. acting], and the undoubted signs of her proficiency, disarmed all criticism, and made her at once that favourite she never ceased to be so long as she remained in the full vigour of her powers.<sup>2</sup>

The *Athenæum* reported concordantly:

Her voice, and style, and (perhaps above all) her acting, to confirm it, all three leave little or nothing to be wished. She is gifted with a good figure, and a handsome and expressive face, in the first instance; in the second, she has a rich, clear, powerful, and extremely flexible voice; her execution is at times exuberant, but it goes along with the passion of her part, and carries the hearer away with her.<sup>3</sup>

The next week Grisi played the dramatic role of Anna Bolena, taking a big step of ascension to Maria Malibran throne,<sup>4</sup> as Princess Victoria's enthusiastic diary entries reflect:<sup>5</sup>

2. John Edmund Cox, *Musical Recollections of the Last Half-Century*, vol. 1 (London: Tinsley, 1872), 288.

3. *Athenæum, Journal of Literature, Science, and the Fine Arts* (London: J. Francis, 1834), 275.

4. It was read in *The Times of London* on 16 April 1834, that "To those who witnessed that, there cannot be higher praise, and it is honestly and strictly her due. Her singing and acting of the character are both so truly beautiful that it is difficult to say which of them stands in the higher rank, or displays the greater genius. ... All these transitions were depicted with a truth and force which could not be surpassed. Her singing was exquisite throughout, far too good for the music; but it might be said to give it a new charm, so much did the workmanship excel the material." Cited in Cox, *Musical Recollections*, vol. 1, 290–291.

5. "She is a most beautiful singer and actress and is likewise very young and pretty. She sang beautifully throughout but particularly in the last scene when she is mad, which she acted likewise beautifully." Viscount Esher (ed.), *The Girlhood of Queen Victoria*, vol. 1 (London: John Murray, 1912), 93.

I like Grisi by far better than her.<sup>6</sup>

I prefer Grisi’s singing of these [i.e. arias of Amina in *La sonnambula*] very much to Malibran’s; there is a sweetness, mildness and softness, accompanied with such beautifully clear execution, in the former, which the latter does not possess in the high notes. Malibran’s deep tones are beautiful, touching and feeling, but her high notes are harsh, sharp and voilée.<sup>7</sup>

She soon thought of Grisi as the best *prima donna* in the world.<sup>8</sup>

Giulia Grisi was born in Milan on 22 May 1811. Her maternal aunt and first singing teacher was Giuseppina Grassini (1773–1850),<sup>9</sup> a “reigning singer in Paris [and a favourite in London, too], and was appointed by Napoleon directress of the Paris Opera,” stated the New Yorker *Appleton’s Journal*, which also drew attention to the fact that Giulia inherited her unrivalled beauty from her (*Figures 1–2*).<sup>10</sup> In the future Queen’s memoirs Grisi was

... quite beautiful off the stage ... She is not tall and rather pale; and she has such a lovely and mild expression in her face ... She has such beautiful dark eyes with fine long eyelashes, a fine nose, and a very sweet mouth ... Her beautiful dark hair was as usual quite flat in front with an amethyst bandeau round it.<sup>11</sup>

Grisi put her impeccable beauty, referred to as of ancient Greek type, and a rare and great asset, to good use in the service of the drama to magnify the effect of her acting. Théophile Gautier in Paris described it poetically:

Mlle. Grisi, from the beginning to end, was beautiful, pathetic, with dark flashes of tragic inspiration and the transports of a lioness in love. The passionate cries of the music of our time seem to issue from the marble lips of an antique muse.<sup>12</sup>

6. *Ibid.*, 115.

7. *Ibid.*, 157.

8. *Ibid.*, 169.

9. Italian contralto, pupil of the castrato Girolamo Crescentini. After her retirement in 1823 in Milan she dedicated herself to teaching; she trained inter alia her own nieces, Giuditta and Giulia Grisi, as well as Giuditta Pasta. Arthur Pougin, *Une cantatrice “amie” de Napoléon: Giuseppina Grassini (1773–1850)* (Paris: Fischbacher, 1920) 47 and 66–67.

10. “The Grecian outline of her [Grassini’s] profile, her beautiful forehead, rich black hair and eyebrows, superb dark eyes, and magnificent figure.” *Appletons’ Journal of Literature, Science, and Art*, vol. 3, 1 January to 25 June 1870 (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1870), 22. The most compelling portrait of Grisi was painted by François Bouchot in 1840, see <https://www.ram.ac.uk/museum/item/23444> (last accessed: 14 March 2017).

11. Interestingly, in paintings she is depicted with grey or greenish eyes, rather than dark ones. Esher (ed.), *The Girlhood of Queen Victoria*, vol. 1, 114.

12. Comment on Grisi as Elisabetta in Donizetti’s *Roberto Devereux* (Paris, October 1839). Théophile Gautier, *L’histoire de l’art dramatique en France depuis vingt-cinq ans*, vol 1 (Paris, 1858–9), 206; cited and translated in Elizabeth Forbes, *Mario and Grisi* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1985), 40.

FIGURE 1 Louise Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun, *Josephina Grassini* (1803)



Her shoulders, her neck, her arms are as perfect as the most famous stature of antiquity. No sculpture is more exquisitely formed, nor of a pallor more smooth and white.<sup>13</sup>

*The Musical Times* of 1847 also gave a detailed account, nearly echoing the words above:

Her beauty, indeed, is of high order. The outline of the head is particularly elegant and classical, or, as Hector Berlioz would denominate it, Olympian. Her features are expressive and full of fine intelligence: they are, of a verity, features cast in no common mould. ... Her face is a clear lake where the beam

13. Comment on Grisi in the title role of Donizetti's *Parisina* (Paris, March 1838). Gautier, *ibid.*, 112; cited and transl. in Forbes, *ibid.*, 36.

or the cloud is reflected with truth and perspicuity. Thought seems to exhale from her countenance [sic], and the artist-feeling casts the momentaneous veil of the ruling passion over her features.<sup>14</sup>

The art critic Henry Chorley commented about how she would, exceptionally among her peers, not abuse her attractive looks:

Never has so beautiful a woman as Madame Grisi been so little coquettish on the stage. I remember no solitary instance of smile or sign which could betray to the closest observer that she was attempting any of those artifices, which are

FIGURE 2 *Giulia Grisi*, in Alfred Heinrich Ehrlich (ed.), *Berühmte Sängerinnen der Vergangenheit und Gegenwart. Eine Sammlung von 91 Biographien und 90 Porträts* (Leipzig: Albert H. Payne, 1895), 49.



14. *The Musical World*, vol. 22 (London: Nassau Steam Press, 1847), 723–724.

so displeasing to all those who love art, and who do not regard the theatre as a slave-market. ... As an artist calculated to engage and retain the average public, without trick or affectation ... I have never tired of Madame Grisi – during five-and-twenty years.<sup>15</sup>

Grisi's beauty and youth certainly gave her the attraction of secrecy which she managed to preserve until after her death.<sup>16</sup> In her British necrology, the year of her birth was still a matter of dispute: the years of 1812 and 1816 were proposed, while in reality she was born in 1811.<sup>17</sup> As late as 1901 *The Musical Times* remembered the London premiere of *I puritani* of 20 May 1835 that Grisi's "age at that, or at any time of her career, it is [was] impossible to tell."<sup>18</sup> The uncertainty of her age combined with her beauty which made her seem younger than she actually was, was an important factor in preserving her reign as *prima donna assoluta* for a quarter of a century. She did not conceal her ambition to stay at the top as long as possible, and in order to do that she maintained in her repertoire a great variety of grand roles for which she was intermittently attacked by Chorley and Cox,<sup>19</sup> although Chorley gave serious consideration to identifying Grisi's keys to success (*Table 1*):

The supremacy of Madame Grisi has been secured and prolonged by a combination of qualities rare in any period. ... Madame Grisi has always formed one of the most equally distinguished Opera companies ever collected. She had, during fifteen years, two homes – one in London, one in Paris – where she was certainly to be found at certain seasons; and by such constancy in arranging her career, kept alive (in England especially) the loyalty of her subjects, to a degree which is rare, but which was as largely well-merited. ... Madame Grisi was in 1860 a favourite still; – with only the remnant of her powers more attractive and commanding than her successors who one after another have ventured hither with ambitious projects, and have departed abusing English obstinacy, because they were unable to wrest the sceptre out of her hands.<sup>20</sup>

15. Henry F. Chorley, *Thirty Years' Musical Recollections*, vol. 1 (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1862), 110–112.

16. For more about Grisi's British reception see also: Eleanor Cloutier, "Ways to Possess a Singer in 1830s London," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 29/2 (2018), 189–214.

17. Elizabeth Forbes, "Grisi, Giulia," in *Grove Music Online*, ed. Deane Root (last accessed: 14 March 2017).

18. "Bellini in England," *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular* 42/703 (1 September 1901), 604.

19. "Madame Grisi that [1847] year displayed a grandeur of style, a finish, a 'triumphancy,' in which there was something of conscious power, conscious beauty, and intentional challenge. She was resolute – it is now fifteen years ago – in proving that she *had not* finished her career, – neither that she would be driven from her throne." Although Grisi did not retire until 1861, from 1854 on she had farewell performances at Covent Garden every year. Henry F. Chorley, *Thirty Years' Musical Recollections* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1862), vol. 2, 7.

20. Chorley, *Thirty Years' Musical Recollections*, vol. 1, 108–109.



TABLE 1 Grisi’s long term co-singers in Paris and London

<b>Théâtre-Italien, Paris</b>	<b>King’s Theatre / (from 1838) Her Majesty’s Theatre, Haymarket</b>	<b>Royal Italian Opera (from 1847), Covent Garden</b>
Fanny Tacchinardi-Persiani (S)	Fanny Tacchinardi-Persiani (S)	Fanny Tacchinardi-Persiani (S)
		Pauline Viardot-García (S)
Marietta Alboni (A)	Emma Albertazzi (A)	Marietta Alboni (A)
Giovanni Battista Rubini (T)	Giovanni Battista Rubini (T)	
Giovanni Matteo de Candia called Mario (T)	Mario (T)	Mario (T)
Antonio Tamburini (Bar.)	Antonio Tamburini (Bar.)	Antonio Tamburini (Bar.)
Luigi Lablache (B)	Luigi Lablache (B)	
Joseph Tagliafico (B)		Joseph Tagliafico (B)

Like her aunt, Giulia was also predestined for singing. Her elder sister Giuditta, who was likewise a soprano, appeared in London two seasons prior to Giulia but with no significant success.<sup>21</sup> Their younger sister Carlotta, however, became a dancer and similarly made her career in London. Giulia studied in Milan with the composer Marco Aurelio Marliani and in Bologna with Giacomo Giacomelli before she made her debut in 1828 in Rossini’s *Zelmira* in Bologna, followed shortly in Milan in Pacini’s *Il Corsare*. Unfortunately, due to her youth and lack of experience, in 1829 she signed a disadvantageous contract lasting six years with the impresario Antonio Lanari, which she then broke in 1832 fleeing first to Paris to become Rossini’s *prima donna* at the Théâtre Italien. In 1834 she was introduced in London too, and from then on she alternated between the two capitals (*Figure 3*).

Shortly after her Milan début (1828), “she made the friendship of Pasta [likewise a pupil of Grassini],<sup>22</sup> who predicted her future fame, and declared that she would be in time the recognized successor of herself and Grassini,” the *Appletons’ Journal* reported.<sup>23</sup> According to Elizabeth Forbes, Grisi even studied with Giuditta Pasta briefly.<sup>24</sup> This was essential for her development as a dramatic soprano-to-be from at least two important aspects. Firstly, as Susan Rutherford remarked that what made Pasta unique was the “embodiment” of her voice through acting, accompanying her singing with great gestures forming so called living pictures, and thus giving an additional interpretation to the roles – a practice taken from *opera buffa* and brought by her into *opera seria*. Secondly but not less importantly, she first developed it in roles written for other singers, not for her

21. Cox, *Musical Recollections*, vol. 1, 288.

22. Dan H. Marek, *Alto: The Voice of Bel Canto* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 52.

23. *Appletons’ Journal*, vol. 3 (1870), 22.

24. Forbes, *Mario and Grisi*, 25.

FIGURE 3 Lithograph after a drawing by Alexandre Lacauchie, *Giulia Grisi as Semiramide* (in Rossini's opera; before 1849)



personally, e. g. in *Medea* (Mayr), *Desdemona*, *Semiramide*, *Tancredi* (Rossini), and *Romeo* (Zingarelli).<sup>25</sup>

Grisi followed her tutor successfully in personalizing adopted roles in order to be independent from composers, so assuring a long-lasting career as a supreme vocalist. In this respect, she was one of the first modern artists, also for her direct and natural way of acting. It was dominated by raw passion to which she simply gave free vent, as Chorley commented:

25. Susan Rutherford, "«La cantante delle passioni»: Giuditta Pasta and the Idea of Operatic Performance," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 19/2 (July 2007), 107–138: 110, 112, 113, 127, and 131.



Madame Grisi’s attitudes were always more or less harsh, angular, and undignified; and when she was in her prime, and had no reason to manage or spare her resources, there was a fierceness in certain of her outbursts which impaired her effects. In short, her acting did not show reflection, so much as the rich, uncultivated, imperious nature of a most beautiful and adroit southern woman.<sup>26</sup>

Cox witnessed her expressive powers as well:

It was on this occasion that Giulia Grisi first sustained the difficult part of Donna Anna, and gave a version of it that has never since been surpassed – I might indeed add – and never by the “shadow of a shade” equalled. ... The intensity of passion she threw into the opening scene, wherein the outraged woman struggles with the libertine, was overwhelming, and only surpassed by the following situation, wherein she discovered that the Don was her father’s murderer. The screaming tone – yet perfectly in tune, as round and full as it could possibly be – with which she uttered the expression, “Gran Dio!” rings in my ears whilst I write of it, and never ceased to electrify myself, as it did thousands of hearers.<sup>27</sup>

Grisi’s creative artistry brought her so far in a few years that, by 1836 the latest, Pasta’s Norma and Anna Bolena in London and Paris became identified with her name. Whilst she took on further heavily dramatic roles such as Rossini’s Desdemona (written for Malibran), Donizetti’s Lucrezia Borgia, Verdi’s Lucrezia Contarini, as well as Mozart’s Donna Anna, she excelled in lighter roles, like Rosina, Elvira, Amina, Norina, Susanna, Pamina, and Ninetta at the same time (*Table 2*):<sup>28</sup>

Grisi possesses great versatility of talent. There is grandeur in her tragedy – witness her Donna Anna and Norma; there is infinite beauty in her pathos, as her unrivalled personification of Ninetta may illustrate: and her Susanna and Rosina abundantly testify her claims to comic power in “its highest signification.” Thus, it cannot for a moment be denied that she lays claim to genius in its truest and fullest import.<sup>29</sup>

26. Chorley, *Thirty Years’ Musical Recollections*, vol. 1, 116.

27. Cox, *Musical Recollections*, vol. 1, 295–296.

28. For further illustrations of Grisi on the London stage, including Princess/Queen Victoria’s drawings, see the Royal Collection Trust’s website: <https://www.rct.uk/search/site/giulia%20grisi> (last accessed: 14 March 2017).

29. *The Musical World*, vol. 22 (1847), 724.

TABLE 2 Grisi's main original and adopted dramatic as well as lyric/comic roles

Main original roles	Main adopted dramatic roles	Main adopted lyric/comic roles
Adalgisa (Bellini: <i>Norma</i> , Milan, 1831)	Norma (Bellini)	Amina (Bellini: <i>La sonnambula</i> )
Adelia (Donizetti: <i>Ugo, conte di Parigi</i> , Milan, 1832)	Lucrezia Borgia (Donizetti)	Ninetta (Rossini: <i>La gazza ladra</i> )
Elvira (Bellini: <i>I puritani</i> , Paris, 1835)	Anna Bolena (Donizetti)	Rosina (Rossini: <i>Il barbiere di Siviglia</i> )
Elena (Donizetti: <i>Marino Faliero</i> , Paris, 1835)	Elisabetta (Donizetti: <i>Roberto Devereux</i> )	Valentine (Meyerbeer: <i>Les Huguenots</i> )
Alice Ford (Balfe: <i>Falstaff</i> , London, 1838)	Desdemona (Rossini: <i>Otello</i> )	Pamina (Mozart: <i>The Magic Flute</i> )
Norina (Donizetti: <i>Don Pasquale</i> , Paris, 1842)	Semiramide (Rossini)	Susanna (Mozart: <i>Le nozze di Figaro</i> )
	Lucrezia Contarini (Verdi: <i>I due foscari</i> )	
	Donna Anna (Mozart: <i>Don Giovanni</i> )	

Undoubtedly, Grisi's greatest goal as a dramatic soprano was to triumph in the role of Norma, in which she soon succeeded, although not immediately. Most confusingly, the harshest judgement actually came from Bellini. The *Appletons' Journal* noted that shortly after the premiere of *Norma* (Milan 1831), in which Grisi played the second woman Adalgisa, she "felt an ambition to play Norma herself, and confided her aspirations to Bellini, who put her off coldly, by telling her to 'wait twenty years.'" Long before that time, however, she had assumed the part so peculiarly associated with her name.<sup>30</sup> Bellini, in his letter to his friend, Francesco Florimo of 1 June 1835, on the occasion of Grisi's début as Norma in London, stated mistakenly:

I have heard Grisi sing the *Cavatina* [i.e. *Casta Diva*]: it was bad and worse even, which was sufficient to judge her incompetent for the rest [of the role]. I have also seen her in *Anna Bolena*, and she was insupportable in it, especially in the tragic [parts]. Give her *La gazza*, *I puritani*, and a thousand operas of a simple and innocent character, and I assure you that she will not be mediocre; but elevated characters she does not understand, does not feel, because she has

30. *Appletons' Journal*, vol. 3 (1870), 22.

neither the instinct nor the education to sustain them with the nobility and the lofty style they demand. And so, it is my opinion that in *Norma* she will be a nonentity, and that the role of Adalgisa is the only one suited to her character.<sup>31</sup>

It is important to note that, evidently, *Norma* was an emblematic work of Bellini, musically as well as dramatically inspired by Pasta’s person, or more precisely, by her two previous roles of great significance, i.e. Simon Mayr’s *Medea* and Rossini’s *Semiramide*.<sup>32</sup> In view of the above, Bellini’s prejudice regarding Grisi was strongly influenced by his subjective biases in aesthetic and taste, as he measured the young singer against his muse, the already mature artist Pasta. She was Bellini’s paragon for her dramatic declamation of the recitatives as well as the *canto sillabico* in the arias, which came close to the genre of spoken drama, as Cox’s remark confirms: “Her *recitativo parlante* was the most perfect I have ever heard, every word being as distinctly enunciated as if it had been actually spoken.”<sup>33</sup> Accordingly, in *Norma*, Bellini put Pasta on a pedestal as a tragedienne singing in prose, and shaped the role completely according to her individual attributes of vocal expression.

Furthermore, not only *Norma* but Pasta’s other principal roles also required the comprehensive vocal skill-set of a *soprano sfogato* or *voce assoluta*. The term *soprano sfogato* describes voices of an extended range, strong stamina and great projection capacity to fill large houses on the one hand, and of agility and a fine, silvery ringing vocal quality on the other. The essence of it was to sing high notes with the chest, while not excluding the ability to produce head notes with softness and delicacy.<sup>34</sup> *Fraser’s Magazine* in 1832 referred to both Adelaide Tosi and Giulia Grisi likewise as *soprani sfogati*:

for it is a voice that can only be properly appreciated by those who are used to it. It is a refined, and consequently attenuated, treble, which approaches the voice of the musico [a euphemism for castrato, i.e. representative of the overall

31. “Io avevo inteso cantare la cavatina dalla Grisi male, malissimo, e mi bastò per giudicarla incapace del resto. L’ho vista anche nell’*Anna Bolena*, ed ivi è insopportabile, specialmente nel tragico. Dalle *la Gazza*, i *Puritani*, e mille opere di genere semplice ed innocente, e ti posso giurare che non sarà seconda a nessuna; ma i caratteri elevati non li capisce, né li sente, perché non ha né l’istinto né l’istruzione per sostenerli con quella nobiltà e stile che richiedono.” Bellini’s letter to Francesco Florimo, 1 June 1835; Francesco Florimo, *Bellini: memorie e lettere* (Firenze: Barbèra, 1882), 509; translated in part by Judit Zsovár, also see David Kimbell, *Vincenzo Bellini: Norma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 111.

32. John Rosselli, *The Life of Bellini* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 81.

33. Cox, *Musical Recollections*, vol. 1, 138.

34. Howard Bushnell, *Maria Malibran: a Biography of the Singer* (University Park; London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1979), 9 and 44, cited in Geoffrey S. Riggs, *The Assoluta Voice in Opera, 1797–1847* (Jefferson [N.C.]; London: McFarland & Co., 2003), 34.

technique for ideal voice production],<sup>35</sup> and partakes of its peculiar beauties and defects exactly in the ratio of its approximation.<sup>36</sup>

The *Athenæum* claimed that Grisi's "voice was poured forth with ... fullness and brilliancy."<sup>37</sup> Chorley pondered:

... her glorious notes, produced without difficulty or stint, rang through the house like a clarion,<sup>38</sup> ... And what a soprano voice was hers! – rich, sweet – equal throughout its compass of two octaves (from C [c<sup>1</sup>] to C [c<sup>3</sup>]) without a break, or a note which had to be managed.<sup>39</sup> ... Her shake was clear and rapid; her scales were certain; every interval was taken without hesitation by her. Nor has any woman ever more thoroughly commanded every gradation of force than she – in those early days especially; – not using the contrast of loud and soft too violently, but capable of any required violence, of any advisable delicacy.<sup>40</sup>

The *Musical World* 1847 went into raptures over her:

The flexibility of her voice is proverbial. ... Her sotto voce leaves nothing for the most critical to cavil at. In this respect she is far superior to any singer we ever heard. It is impossible to describe the exquisite delicacy and purity of her tones while warbling piano passages. ... But Grisi's voice has charms independent of this. It adapts itself to all styles of music, from the lofty grandeur of Donna Anna to the simple pathos of Ninetta – from the passion of the Babylonian Queen to the coquetry of Norina – from the voluptuous sensibility of Norma to the comic grace and naivete of Rosina. Where energy is required, or love, anger or despair, her voice, as it were, having power to modulate itself to every newer shade of feeling, becomes the veritable vehicle of the passion of the moment.<sup>41</sup>

These attributes paired with her flawless intonation gave her an edge over Pasta, whose voice was described as broken, incomplete, and husky,<sup>42</sup> and who fre-

35. John Rosselli, "Castrato (opera)," in *Grove Music Online*, ed. Deane Root (last accessed: 14 March 2017).

36. "On the Opera: Italian Opera," *Fraser's Magazine of Town and Country* (July 1832), 727–730: 729. See also Jeffrey Snider, "In Search of the Soprano Sfogato," *Journal of Singing* 68/3 (January–February 2012), 329–334.

37. *Athenæum* (London, 1847), 556.

38. Chorley, *Thirty Years' Musical Recollections*, vol. 1, 112.

39. *Ibid.*, 110.

40. *Ibid.*, 111; see also Ingeborg Zechner, *The English Trade in Nightingales: Italian Opera in Nineteenth-Century London*, translated from German by Rosie Ward (Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2017), 217; <http://open.org/search?identifier=1000566> (last accessed: 14 March 2017).

41. *The Musical World*, vol. 22 (1847), 724.

42. Chorley, *Thirty Years' Musical Recollections*, vol. 2, 64.

quently struggled with singing out of tune<sup>43</sup> mostly because her voice production was at times friable, uneven, and therefore forced. As a matter of fact, Pasta was unable to sing rapid upward scale passages in arias appropriately (this is why they are mostly missing from her repertoire and the downward scales are dominating).<sup>44</sup> Grisi, and even Isabella Colbran (Rossini’s wife) similarly both started their careers as high coloratura sopranos, and developed to *sfogati* through the extension of their range downwards,<sup>45</sup> through the enrichment of their emission and supposedly by naturally gaining a darker voice colour with maturity. Others like Malibran and Pasta, on the other hand, were originally mezzo-sopranos who stretched their vocal territory towards the high register. This might be the reason why Rossini could accept Grisi without reservation, while in Bellini’s ears Grisi’s voice type and the dramatic soprano were not reconcilable. Naomi André observed that Grisi’s enterprise of singing both of the female roles in the same opera (successively) was a pioneering act:

As two roles, Norma and Adalgisa can be blended into one persona thematically (in terms of characterization) and musically. A few modern-day divas have shown, and as was the case of Giulia Grisi, both roles can be contained within the same throat and voice. This hybridity of their characters and voices presents an innovative prototype of the Romantic heroine.<sup>46</sup>

Although, in light of the above, Grisi had the capability to sing Norma adequately (*Table 3*), the time when Bellini heard her sing and followed her career, i. e. from the age of twenty to twenty-four, was a transitional period for her, during which the young soprano matured into an equally lyric and dramatic *soprano assoluta*. Surprisingly, Bellini failed to foresee what would become of her, perhaps because that kind of dramatic declamation in tragedies which fascinated him so much might well have been the last facet of vocal performance acquired by Grisi at the end of that maturation process, around 1835–36, the completion of which he did not live to see (since he died in September 1835).

An article published in *The Musical World* sheds light on how she overcame artistic obstacles and broke her own limitations:

43. *The Harmonicon, Journal of Music*, vol. 1 (London: William Clowes, 1823), 142.

44. *Dwight’s Journal of Music* (Boston: Oliver Ditson and Co., 1867), 28; see also Rutherford, “»La cantante delle passioni«,” 125.

45. “giunse tra noi ... Donna I. C., celebratissima giovane Signora Spagnola ... Possiede essa la celeste arte del canto in così sublime grado ... L’organo della sua voce è veramente un incanto per soavità, robustezza e per prodigiosa estensione di corde, poiché dal *sol* basso al *mi* sopracuto, cioè per quasi tre ottave si fa sentire con una progressione sempre uguale in morbidezza ed energia ... Perfetto è il metodo e lo stile del suo cantare.” *Il redattore del Reno*, 7 April 1807; see Herbert Weinstock, *Rossini: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1957 cop. 1968), 15–16.

46. Naomi André, *Voicing Gender: Castrati, Travesti, and the Second Woman in Early-Nineteenth-Century Italian Opera* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), 168.

It must be granted that when Grisi first came to London, however exquisite her voice might have been and finished her vocalization, and whatever sensibility and felicity of portrayal her acting might have displayed, she fell short of the loftiest efforts of genius. She was not yet fashioned to stand on the highest pinnacle of fame. She was just beginning to climb that hill on whose summit Malibran stood, and was beginning to put forth those wings which, at no distant period, were destined to waft her, yea, to the same towering height as Malibran. ... Stung by the unworthy comparisons of some journal of the day, her genius rose within her, and she was determined to do or die. A genius like Grisi's seizes and embodies with the rapidity of lightning. In a few brief seasons she stood pre-eminent as the grandest delineator of the tragic passions since the days of Pasta.<sup>47</sup>

*The Times of London* reported about her Norma as early as 1836:

... she bore up the composition as if it were by her own efforts, if efforts they could be called which evidently cost her nothing, and in some of the more striking passages communicated an effect on the audience almost electrical. One instance which occurred in the first scene where an ordinary performer would have thrown in a mere roulade, or flourish, but where Grisi merely sustained a long note diminished from her utmost force to its finest point, was one of the greatest refinements in her art ever exhibited. The simplicity and purity of the effect amounted almost to the sublime.<sup>48</sup>

Thomas G. Kaufman established that the accusations according to which Grisi simply imitated Pasta's performances and especially that of Norma, came from Pauline Viardot-García, Malibran's jealous sister, around 1850, and that her biases were adopted by Cox and Chorley to some extent: "Viardot's hostility towards Grisi was probably due to the fact that Grisi's early success in London in 1834 had driven her older sister, Maria Malibran, out of King's Theatre that year."<sup>49</sup> Traces of the above can be found in Chorley's summary, nevertheless he recognized Grisi's creativity in shaping the role:

Her Norma, doubtless her grandest performance, was modelled on that of Madame Pasta – perhaps, in some points, was an improvement on the model, because there was more of animal passion in it; and this (as in the scene of imperious and abrupt rage which closes the first act) could be driven to extremity

47. *The Musical World*, vol. 22 (1847), 536.

48. *The Times of London*, 18 April 1836, cited in Thomas G. Kaufman, "A Fresh Look at Giulia Grisi," *Opera Today* (8 December 2005); [http://www.operatoday.com/content/2005/12/a\\_fresh\\_look\\_at.php](http://www.operatoday.com/content/2005/12/a_fresh_look_at.php) accessed 8 Oct. 2016 (last accessed: 14 March 2017). A revised and amplified version of the author's former article "Giulia Grisi – A Reevaluation," *Donizetti Society Journal* 4 (1980), 180–196.

49. Kaufman, "A Fresh Look at Giulia Grisi."



TABLE 3 Keywords from 19th-century British reports about Grisi’s singing

Performance	Voice production
Classic, Olympian beauty – instant burst of applause	Rich and full tone, flexible voice
So little coquettish: without trick or affectation	Voice poured forth, brilliant
Her age it is impossible to tell	Like a clarion
Excellence in tragic, lyric, as well as comic roles	Range from c <sup>1</sup> to c <sup>3</sup> , equal, unbroken
Sublime	Clear, pure, and unfailing intonation
Electrifies the audience	Clear and rapid trills
Fierce passion	Coloraturas certain
Never boring: carries the hearer away with her	Sophisticated use of dynamical shades
“Conscious” – great awareness	Proficiency
Favourite	
Supremacy, long reign, La Diva, genius	
True reading of Norma’s character, perfection	
Pronounced “the English so very well”	

without its becoming repulsive; owing to the absence of the slightest coarseness in her personal beauty. There was in it the wild ferocity of the tigress, but a certain frantic charm therewith, which carried away the hearer – nay, which possibly belongs to the true reading of the character of the Druid Priestess, unfaithful to her vows.<sup>50</sup>

By 1844, when the book *Beauties of the Opera and Ballet* was published, Grisi’s Norma-personification became legendary (*Figure 4*):

Norma approaches, surrounded by her priestesses. ... The pale classic features, the deep expressive eyes, the intellectual brow, and commanding figure, with the exquisitely turned arms and shoulders, conspire to render Grisi’s first appearance as “Norma” the signal for one loud and simultaneous round of enthusiastic applause. Indeed, this part may be considered her greatest triumph; ... Madame Grisi, as “Norma”, most admirably employs her voice, her energy, her beauty, continued rage, sublime violence, threats and tears, love and anger – all are mingled with such artistic skill as to produce a whole unequalled in any histrionic picture afforded by any female tragedian.<sup>51</sup>

Grisi gives this fearful picture of distracted maternal love with a force and pathos wholly unapproachable by any modern artiste. The struggle between the feelings of the mother and the fury of the betrayed mistress is exquisitely

50. Chorley, *Thirty Years’ Musical Recollections*, vol. 1, 113.

51. Charles Heath (ed.), *Beauties of the Opera and Ballet* (London: David Bogue, 1844), 35–36.

FIGURE 4 *Giulia Grisi, La Norma*.

In *Beauties of the Opera and Ballet* (London: David Bogue, 1844), between pp. 32 and 33.



expressed by the alternation of emotions with which Grisi extends the dagger, as though about to plunge it into the bosoms of the sleeping creatures of her fondest love.<sup>52</sup>

One has to add that the role type Norma represents was attractive for such multi-faceted artists as Grisi and Pasta also for its complexity. Norma is a lover, faithful to a man, unfaithful to her religion and tribe but, beyond that, Norma is

52. Heath (ed.), *Beauties of the Opera and Ballet*, 42–43.

a mother. Interestingly, Pasta’s other essential role besides Norma was Medea, while that of Grisi it was Lucrezia Borgia, in the focal point of which stands motherhood as well.

In 1847, *The Musical World* plainly enounced: “Norma created by Pasta, and developed to perfection by Grisi.”<sup>53</sup> Queen Victoria also estimated the role of Norma as Grisi’s best and she drew her accordingly as a Greek beauty with long black hair and a green wreath around her head:<sup>54</sup> “Again Norma... and oh! more splendid than before. Grisi was perfection, it is really a treat to see and hear her; Mario too is so delightful.”<sup>55</sup> The tenor Giovanni Matteo de Candia called Mario, similarly to Giulia, fled from Italy first to Paris in 1836 then to London in 1839. Afterwards he became Grisi’s partner on and offstage as well.<sup>56</sup> They were a celebrity couple in mid-nineteenth century operatic life, as Walter Maynard remembered (*Figure 5*):

They were an incomparable pair, more liberally endowed by nature with every attribute of personal beauty, vocal power, and dramatic genius, than any of their rivals. Their union an inestimable gain to art, and their attachment to one another as romantic and devoted as that of any hero and heroine they ever impersonated. It was, at once, passionate and faithful; it was hallowed by their mutual pursuit in life; it sanctified their home; it gave incessantly renewed fire and zest to their representations upon the lyric stage.<sup>57</sup>

As far as Grisi’s rivals are concerned, who numbered many during the long years of her career, it can be said that no one was able to stand for long against her and this was also noticed by the press, adding to her virtues. *The Musical World* remarked in 1846 about her Norma, again:

Grisi surpassed herself. She was beautiful, sublime, even terrible. ... No Siddons ever exceeded the dignity and passion of the last act. No Malibran ever went beyond the heart-rending pathos with which she sang the *agitato* in the mirror, when on her knees before Oroveso. No Rachel ever excelled the withering contempt which she threw into her acting in the duet with her profligate betrayer. ... The whole conception and execution of the part was perfection.<sup>58</sup>

53. *The Musical World*, vol. 22 (1847), 398.

54. Clarissa Lablache Cheer, *The Great Lablache – Nineteenth-Century Operatic Superstar: His Life and His Times* (USA: Xlibris, 2009), 215.

55. Forbes, *Mario and Grisi*, 42.

56. Grisi married Count Gérard de Melcy in 1836. The marriage was unhappy, and from 1842 on they were separated, but her husband refused a divorce. After the count died, Giulia married Mario de Candia in 1856. On her grave her name is marked as Juliette de Candia. See Charles Alexander Cameron, *Autobiography of Sir Charles A. Cameron* (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis & Co., ca. 1925), 40.

57. Walter Maynard, *The Light of Other Days Seen Through the Wrong End of an Opera Glass*, vol. 2 (London: R. Bentley and Son, 1890), 24–25.

58. *The Musical World*, 1846. Cited in Kaufman, “A Fresh Look at Giulia Grisi.”

FIGURE 5 John Brandard, Cover sheet of Charles D'Albert's *Quadrille of Lucrezia Borgia*. Duet with Grisi and Mario in Act II/5 (London: Chappell & Co., 1840s)



Forbes noted that although in 1847 the Swedish rising star Jenny Lind arrived as an already celebrated Norma in her country as well as in Germany, she could not repeat the same success in London “where audiences continued to prefer the more forceful, imperious characterization of Grisi. They were not accustomed to a ladylike *Norma*.”<sup>59</sup> Cox stated that “she positively sang down Mademoiselle Lind, by her energetic and determined resolution to bear the entire weight of the Royal

59. Forbes, *Mario and Grisi*, 108.

Italian Opera.”<sup>60</sup> This brings us to the birth of the new opera company in 1847 along with a renewal in Grisi’s career, when after years of struggling with disagreement with the theatre manager Benjamin Lumley, she – together with Mario, Antonio Tamburini, the conductor Michael Costa, and several orchestra members – left Her Majesty’s Theatre for the newly built Royal Italia Opera House at Covent Garden,<sup>61</sup> and probably gave that season her best ever, as reported in *The Musical World* she was

... determined to exert her genius and talents to the utmost, and show the world what LA DIVA could really do when she felt inclined. The manner in which she sang on the first night of the opening of the Royal Italian Opera proved she was still the greatest vocal artist in the world. ... Almost every opera in which she appeared had an immense success. Her singing was pronounced more marvellous than ever; and her acting was universally allowed to be equal to the finest efforts of Pasta and Malibran. ... Was there not in the whirlwind of passion she allowed to sway her in Norma, a murmur, or underbreath, which seemed to say – “With this blast I blow into invisible fragments for ever the frigid efforts of the Swedish nightingale?” At no period of her career in England has she been received with anything like the amount of enthusiasm she has encountered this season at the Royal Italian Opera; and at no period has she sang more divinely, or acted half so magnificently. The season 1847 at the Royal Italian Opera has been the true climax of Grisi’s reputation.<sup>62</sup>

She took the town by storm and still retains her strong-hold in the citadel. Her classic beauty, her natural ease, her pathos, her fervour, her exquisite organ, the perfectibility of her singing, clear, brilliant, and pure in intonation, created a tempest in her favour, of which time, circumstance, and mutation, have scarcely allayed one breath. The grandeur of Pasta, unfortunately too sublime for general appreciation, or too deeply moulded in the school of imperial tragedy, might awe the public into admiration but for a few seasons – Catalani might electrify and astound awhile, yet at last outweary her hearers – the silvery fluidity of Sontag, unattended with higher excellencies [sic], might pall upon the ear – but it was absolutely left for Grisi, through time and tide, through change and novelty, through seasons, cycles and lustres, albatross-like, with wing that never tired, to hold her way still onward in public estimation: nay more, with Malibran in her zenith, she seemed to divide the general acclamation; and some had the hardihood to declare she was as fine a singer, while

60. Cox, *Musical Recollections*, vol. 2, 164.

61. They established a new company, rival of that of Her Majesty’s Theatre, led by Fanny Tacchinardi-Persiani’s husband, Giuseppe Persiani. Massimo Zicari, *Verdi in Victorian London* (Open Book Publishers, 2016), Chapter 4; <https://books.openedition.org/obp/3116> (last accessed: 14 March 2017). See also Zechner, *The English Trade in Nightingales*.

62. *The Musical World*, vol. 22 (1847), 537.

no few insisted Grisi's was the more accomplished voice. ... How many singers does England at this moment possess, with voices of rare quality and power, and yet to hope that one of these may rival Grisi is to indulge in a dream of visionary speculation.<sup>63</sup>

From the British reception's point of view, it is an important detail that Grisi was one of the few Italian singers who pronounced, as Victoria noticed, "the English so very well."<sup>64</sup> However, she could not fully triumph in singing Handel for instance; she was criticised in *The Musical World* for "She cannot understand nor execute the Handel divisions, and the air therefore becomes a mere Italian *bravura* by her style of execution."<sup>65</sup> This remark might refer more to a difference between the Baroque style – which might have been better preserved in the case of the continuous performances of Handel's oratorios, since he, unlike any of his contemporaries, was never forgotten – and that of nineteenth-century *bel canto*, and less to a distinction between the Italian and North-European coloratura singing, also because the first female singers in Handel's English oratorios were Italians, namely Anna Maria Strada, Caterina Galli, and Giulia Frasi. Princess Victoria's note on Grisi's singing in the *Messiah* at the York festival in 1835 seems to support this assumption: "I am not fond of Handel's music ... I am a terribly modern person ... and I must say I prefer the present Italian school such as Rossini, Bellini and Donizetti to anything else."<sup>66</sup> When Handel's music had been performed in the nineteenth-century *bel canto* manner, a style unsuitable for its nature or even contradicting it, the listeners were logically unsatisfied either with the performers, as the connoisseurs of the musical journals were, or with the music, as was the less experienced young princess.

In any case, there is no doubt about that Giulia Grisi was loved and highly appreciated by Queen and Country in her whole life and even thereafter. This admiration was reciprocal, as an autograph letter of hers (dated in Paris, 23 December, year unnamed) clearly demonstrates: "The English public gave me for so many a year great testimonial of his affection for me, the English have been so good and kind to me, that for all my live [sic] I shall love the English and England as my own country."<sup>67</sup>

63. *The Musical World*, vol. 22 (1847), 723–724.

64. Esher (ed.), *The Girlhood of Queen Victoria*, vol. 1, 133.

65. *The Musical World*, vol. 3, 5 January to 26 April 1838 (London: Hooper and Groombridge, 1838), 35–36.

66. Cited in Lablache Cheer, *The Great Lablache*, 210.

67. *The Musical Times*, 1 May 1893, 269.