

Patrick Bade | Jenny Lind: The Swedish Nightingale – Felix Mendelssohn: A Romantic Relationship

– Thank you very much, Judy. I'm in my flat in Paris, but as you can see, I've changed the angle of my location. So you can see behind me on the wall a painting of Jenny Lind, it's by a French artist called Leonard Poirier. He was a pupil of Girodet who was a pupil of David, so it's very much in that kind of tradition, and a bit similar to Ingres, who was a contemporary. And that painting was shown at the Royal Academy in London in 1847 and it was brought by my great-great-grandfather. And when I was a child, my grandmother had that painting in the attic, and I used to go up and look at it, and I liked it very much. And when I was about 10 years old, she gave it to me, and it's been one of my greatest treasures ever since. And my intention one day is to give it to the Mendelssohn House in Leipzig. I've spoken to them about it already, and they say they're quite keen to have it. because Mendelssohn and Jenny Lind had a very intense relationship. I don't think it ever became physical, but it was an extremely deep, emotional relationship, and I think each was the great love of each other's life. And I want to start off talking about Jenny Lind's role in the modern cult of celebrity. Around 1850, years just before, just after, she was, without a doubt, the most famous woman in the world, and the most famous woman who had ever existed. I should say, she was an opera singer. Her sobriquet was the Swedish nightingale. And she took city after city in Europe by storm, and her fame went around the world. This is a caricature from Punch. You can see the kind of public delirium that she caused, her appearances in London caused. Now, this kind of fame was a completely new phenomenon, and it went hand in hand with new technological developments, particularly in transport and communications. Such fame would never have been possible in an earlier age. One factor, of course, is railways, railways that transformed and shrank the world in the way that the internet has done in recent years. This is a painting of the very first railway, the opening of the Stockton Darlington Railway in 1825. And within a generation, by the time Jenny Lind was at the height of her fame, most of the European cities were, most of the Western cities were connected by rail. This is Stockholm, her birthplace, and you can see a railway in Stockholm itself. So she, at the height of her career, she was travelling around Europe in steam trains, going from one city to another, and she crossed the Atlantic, as we shall see, in a steam ship. This is a painting of the 1850s by Augustus Egg, showing how the world had shrunk, and it was perfectly possible for nice young Victorian ladies to travel to the Bay of Naples by rail in considerable comfort if they wanted to. So other factors in creating celebrity. On the left is a rotary press. So in the middle of the 19th century, you have, for the first time, mass circulation newspapers. And newspapers go back to the 18th, even the 17th century, but would've had a very small circulation. But now newspapers like the Times in London, Le Figaro in France, they could reach millions of

people. But newspapers have to get their news from somewhere. And another factor in spreading the fame of individuals was the telegraph. So by means of the telegraph, readers in Europe could follow the adventures of Jenny Lind when she got to America, and of course, readers in America could learn of the great fame of Jenny Lind before she ever even arrived there. This is New York, it's a little bit later, from the women's dresses. So I think this must be about 1870, so 20 years later. You see all the maze of telegraph wires going across Europe, taking news with them. Probably the publication that played the greatest role in spreading the fame of Jenny Lind was the illustrated magazine, Punch. And here again, for the first time, illustrated magazines, at this point with line engravings for the illustrations. And the magazine Punch between 1847 and the early 1850s was absolutely obsessed with Jenny Lind. And there's article after article of tributes and poems.

One of the things that the English loved about her, and the Americans too, was that she earned vast sums of money, and she gave most of it away. She was very involved in a great many charities. and this was integral, really, to her great fame. You can see Punch presenting Jenny Lind with the sovereignty of the stage. And here, this is Jenny Lind, when she finally arrives in America. The coronation of Jenny Lind, the first queen of the Americans, and a whole kind of semi-humorous article about how the Americans want Jenny Lind to become their queen. And this continued, really. When she went to America, you can see within a minute of going to press, we had received the following important intelligence from Liverpool that her ship had arrived in America. When she finally went to America in 1850, or I'll get to that in a minute. Oh, here, other factors, really, in promoting her fame and her image. I mean, to people who knew about her, millions and millions of people around the world who never had a chance to actually hear her, who didn't really know what she had sounded like. So these are colour lithographic prints, of course lithography, a new method of printing, which had no limits. Unlike an etching or a woodcut, where you can only have a very limited edition. With a lithograph, you can do millions if you want to. So here you can see her in one of her most famous roles, "La fille du regiment", the same costume that she's wearing in the painting that's hanging behind me on the wall. And another new phenomenon was the marketing of a celebrated name. She certainly did not herself endorse chocolate. She certainly wasn't going to endorse cigars, and absolutely not alcoholic drinks. She was a rather puritanical lady. It was only a later generation of celebrities, Sarah Bernhardt and Nellie Melba, for instance. She actually copyrighted her name, to make sure that nobody was going to exploit her name to promote products. And these mass-produced Staffordshire figures that were in even working class people's homes. As I said, very simple people who never went to the opera, but they heard of the great fame of Jenny Lind. And here she is again in The Daughter of the Regiment, and here in Meyerbeer's "Robert le diable". And there were even a number of ships that had that Jenny Lind as

their figureheads.

Now, the man who really took the Jenny Lind cult to its ultimate, and who is a key figure, really, in modern celebrity. This is Barnum, the American entrepreneur. And hearing about these incredible scenes of fevered hysteria wherever Jenny Lind appeared in Europe, he thought, yes, well, I've got to take her to America, I've got to exploit her in America. Of course he wasn't really interested in music at all. He was famous for exploiting and presenting freaks to the American public, like the miniature Tom Thumb on the left hand side and bearded ladies and Siamese twins and giants and dwarfs. This was the stuff of Barnum and his famous circus. And he really treated Jenny Lind, she was, in effect, when he toured America with her, she was a kind of a freak show in 1850. So this, as I said, this kind of hysteria was a new thing, where we've seen a lot of it recently in London today, I gather, in London with huge crowds following the coffin of the queen and so on. This is a crowd of tens of thousands of people in Liverpool just wanting to see the departure of the ship that was carrying Jenny Lind to America. So this was a steam ship. We're 1850. So the very first steamship crossing of the Atlantic was really quite recent. It was in 1838. And it of course transformed international travel. Instead of taking 40 days to cross the Atlantic by sail, you could now cross the Atlantic in less than two weeks. So Jenny Lind arrives in New York, the thriving city of New York. And quite a significant population, percentage of the entire population of New York went down to the docks. It's estimated a good 40,000 people went to receive Jenny Lind when she arrived. Here's another factor, of course, in fame is photography, that we could really know what people looked like. Here is New York as it looked around the time that Jenny Lind arrived. And from the moment she arrived, Barnum, he was up to all his tricks of inventing all sorts of newsworthy stories about her, some true, some completely untrue, and all sorts of stunts. And this is her first appearance in New York to an enormous, enormous crowd. And one of his stunts was to auction the tickets. There wasn't a fixed price, you actually had to buy the tickets by auction. And he earned fabulous, fabulous sums of money, of course, for himself, but also for her, again, most of which she gave away. So this is Stockholm, where she was born, in 1850. And she was actually illegitimate. Her parents didn't marry 'til sometime after her birth. Had a very, very difficult upbringing, very, very difficult, very cruel and irascible mother. And at the age of nine, she was already showing great talent and she was enrolled in Stockholm Conservatoire. And in her teens, she was already singing small roles in operas. But she made her official debut aged 18 in the role of Agathe in the Der Freischutz. Was immediate, sensational, sensational success in Stockholm. And before she'd reached 20, she was singing really major and heavy roles. But by the age of 20, she was already regularly singing Lucia di Lammermore, Donna Anna in Don Giovanni, which is a really heavy role and unbelievably, and one would think insanely, Norma. The idea today that a 19 year old could sing Norma, it seems beyond belief. This is the

Royal Opera House in Stockholm, as it was in her day. It was later rebuilt. And one factor, of course is that opera houses were smaller. Orchestras were smaller and not as loud as they became later. So you didn't need to have such a huge voice to get over the orchestra, singing in the 1850s as you would have later. But unsurprisingly, singing all these roles and being heavily exploited. By the time she got to her early twenties, she was in deep vocal trouble. And her voice was showing signs of wear. So with great determination, she took herself off to Paris and she wanted the advice of this man, Manuel Garcia II. He is the son of Manuel Garcia, who was a very, very famous singer in the time of Rossini. And he was the brother of two of the greatest female singers of the 19th century, Maria Malibran and Pauline Viardot. And he was reckoned to be the greatest singing teacher of the entire century, lived to be over a hundred. This is a portrait of him at the end of his life on the right hand side by John Singer Sargent. And he was a very severe character. And when she arrived in Paris and she sang for him, and he said, I'm sorry, there's nothing I can do for you, your voice is a complete ruin. And she was a toughie actually, and she said, no, no, I'm determined. I'm determined to get my voice back again. And he, for a period of months, she was not allowed to even speak, let alone sing. And then he slowly and systematically rebuilt her voice. I think of this very often, I hear young singers, so many young singers today singing roles that are too heavy for them, pushing their voices. And you think, oh my God, this voice is, it's heading for ruin. You hear these voices that become unsteady and unfocused, and you think, this is what you need. You need the discipline of someone like Jenny Lind, and you need to go to somebody like Manuel Garcia, and you need to start again, and you need to rebuild your technique. While he was successful, she went back to Stockholm and she was considered better than before, and audiences were tremendously enthusiastic. And from here in the early 1840s until the end of the decade, she conquered Europe city by city. And the first European city to fall under her spell apart from Stockholm was Copenhagen. She went there and again, everywhere she went, she caused a kind of hysterical admiration. On the right hand side, you can see Hans Christian Andersen. Although she was never considered to be beautiful, she was considered to be a rather plain young woman. But men fell in love with her. And Hans Christian Andersen fell deeply, deeply, deeply in love with her, and many times proposed to her. And she loved him as a brother, but she didn't find him attractive, she didn't want to marry him, rather cruelly, on one occasion when he was begging her to marry him, she just handed him a mirror. And she said, that's my answer. Which is a, I think, a rather cruel thing to do. But she inspired several of his stories, including, of course, the ugly duckling who becomes a swan, because she became beautiful when she sang. "The Snow Queen", that's the cruel side of her, the cold side of her who wouldn't open her heart. And there are other stories that Hans Christian Andersen wrote about her. So next stop was Berlin. This is the Staatsoper, the old court opera in Berlin, which still exists in its 18th century form, although it's had to be rebuilt several times

after fires and bombed twice actually in Second World War. And here she appeared in her role, in the role of Norma, as you see her on the right hand side, Berlin was very important to her. And she met two men who were crucial to her career. Giacomo Meyerbeer on the right hand side, and Felix Mendelssohn on the left. Meyerbeer was really a kind of father figure to her, and a mentor, and he was hugely influential. He was the most successful, the most influential opera composer in Europe in the 19th century. So people really paid attention to what he said. And he was passionate admirer of Jenny Lind. Here is Felix Mendelssohn on the left hand side. I think you can get a sense from his portrait of how everybody said he was very beautiful. He was married, that was a problem, of course. But they met in the autumn of 1844. And he, on that first meeting, he showered her with compliments and she wrote a letter at the time saying that describing Mendelssohn was indescribably friendly and polite. That's how she puts it. But it's very obvious from the first that there was a very powerful, intense mutual attraction between them. Many letters survived that show, I think, the intimacy and the love that they had, although apparently many more letters were destroyed after her death. There were apparently letters where he even threatened suicide if she wouldn't love him. But of course, she was very religious, very very puritanical. And he was a married man, so there was no way I think that she would ever have had a love affair with him. But he clearly was the great love of her life. And she said, "He's the only person who brought fulfilment to my spirit. And almost as soon as I found him, I lost him again." He wanted to write an opera for her on the subject of the Lorelei. But he died before he could do that. When he met her, he was already working on his great oratorio "Elijah". And as soon as he heard her, he began working on arias for her and for her voice. And it was her voice that he had in mind when he wrote it. Sadly, I don't think he ever heard, I don't think he ever heard her sing it. I don't think she sang it until very soon after his death. And it's curious that Jenny Lind said, she was extremely Christian, very, very Protestant, very, very disapproving of Catholics. But she clearly had a deep affinity with Jews and with Jewish men. And again and again, they played a very important part in her life. On the left is her accompanist, Julius Benedict. He accompanied her around America. He wrote songs for her, including one of her greatest successes, the song La Capinera. And on the right is Jenny Lind with the man she married. A man called Otto Goldschmidt, who was Jewish but converted to Christianity when he married her. And I think she saw him really, he was a protege of Mendelssohn. And I think she went, clearly Mendelssohn was impossible. And actually she only married also, she only accepted Otto Goldschmidt's proposal of marriage after Mendelssohn died. But it was apparently a very happy marriage. And they had three children.

So back to Berlin and Meyerbeer. And he wrote an opera that was tailored to her talents, "Feldlager in Schlesien". I've just been listening to it actually. There is a recording in its French version,

"L'étoile du nord". Insanely virtuosic role. I'll talk more about that later. It tells you a lot about what kind of singer she was that she could even sing what he wrote for her. So here, this is again, Jenny Lind, by, that's her portrait, the one that's in the National Portrait Gallery in London. They worked together. She went to Leipzig where he was based. This is Leipzig. And he conducted and she sang in concerts at the Gallant House. This is his house. This is where I want my picture eventually to be. And if you've not been to Leipzig, I do recommend it. It's a very fascinating town. And although it was heavily bombed, there are all sorts of really interesting things to see there. There's a Wagner museum, there's a Bach museum. Both in houses or, in fact the Wagner Museum is in the school that he attended as a boy in Leipzig. And the Bach house dates back, is a house that he knew, that dates back to his time. There is of course the Bach church where he performed and composed for most of his career. And there are the fascinating, amazing that they survive completely intact, are the Schumann House and the the Mendelssohn house. And the Mendelssohn house is so moving. I've been to it several times. I was already completely gripped when I walked in the door and I walked up that staircase and I thought Mendelssohn must have walked up and down that staircase so many times. Here is his wife Cecilia. She obviously is, not surprisingly, she was rather cool towards Jenny Lind. So I don't know she'll be all that thrilled about my portrait be hanging in her house. But they've done a fantastic job on really restoring its interior. This is the room on the right hand side where Mendelssohn composed many of his masterpieces. And we know what it looked like in his time because of this watercolour on the left hand side. And using that watercolour, they've really been able to put back the room to exactly, almost exactly as it was in Mendelssohn's time. This is a large, the largest room in the apartments. A big apartment where many concerts would've been given, private concerts, I'm sure Jenny Lind must have sung many, many times in that room to the accompaniment of Mendelssohn.

Now back to her career, it's 1847 that she hits London. And it's this total mayhem. Part of it is that there was a very well publicised law case between two impresarios who were fighting over presenting her to the London public. So her name had been in the newspapers and there was a lot of curiosity. And apparently there were traffic jams snarling up the whole of the West end for days when she first appeared in London. People desperate to get tickets to hear her. And she made her debut in the role in the opera "Robert le diable", another very virtuoso role. And in 1847 in that season, Verdi was in London. And the Royal Opera commissioned, actually no, it wasn't Royal Opera House, it was Her Majesty's theatre. Commissioned Verdi to write the only opera he ever wrote for London, which was "I Masnadieri" which is based on Schiller's play "Die Rauber". And the role, as we shall hear in a minute, tailored very specifically to Jenny Lind's talents, other roles that where she had a tremendous success, of course, "La sonnambula". And probably the role in which she was most loved by the

British public was Donizetti's "La figlia del reggimento", or "La fille du regiment", which showed off her delightful comic talents. Now what did she sound like? Of course, if she'd been born just a generation later, just 20 years later, or 25 years later, we could have had recordings of her. Her successor as the queen of song was Adelina Patti. And Adelina Patti lived long enough and sang long enough so that we have a handful of records of her made at the end of her career. They certainly don't show her as she was when she astonished Rossini and when Verdi declared that his three favourites sopranos were, "First, Adelina Patti, second, Adelina Patti, and third, Adelina Patti." But even so, from Patti's records, we can get a fascinating sense of how she sang, and what was so special about her, and the peculiar timbre of her voice. Sadly, Jenny Lind just two decades too early for that. But we can get a sense of how she sang from two sources. Firstly, from the reviews that were written, opera reviews, particularly by the man on the left hand side, he's called Henry Chorley. And he wrote reviews for the then very influential journal, "The Athenaeum". And now 19th century opera reviews are totally different from modern ones. A modern opera review will first of all, start telling you about the production. That's the big deal for any modern opera review. And they might, and they might also, from a musical point of view, they're more likely to talk about the conductor and the orchestral playing and the general interpretation. There's very, very little said about singers and their techniques, and very little understood, actually. I think most modern opera critics haven't got a clue about singing. And if you read any opera reviews, say up to the First World War, there are immensely knowledgeable, detailed discussion of the singer's technique, what the voice sounded like. And so Henry Chorley's reviews of Jenny Lind are extremely enlightening. The other source, of course, of understanding of how Jenny Lind sang is to listen to the music that was written specifically for her. And composers from the earliest times, obviously Mozart and Verdi. And even up to a certain point up to the period of Puccini and Strauss. Composers were working with certain singers and they created the roles with certain singers in mind to show off the quality of those singers. So, as I said, "L'etoile du nord", in its original version, was tailored to Jenny Lind's voice and its technique. It's extremely, extremely virtuosic. So I'm going to play you three excerpts from music that was written for Jenny Lind. And I thought a lot about it, and I've carefully chosen singers who I believe show you some aspect of what Jenny Lind was like. So we're going to start off with Meyerbeer, "L'etoile du nord", with Amelita Galli-Curci. Now Amelita, one of the things that people said about Jenny Lind that affected people so much was the actual timbre of the voice, the quality of the voice. That it had a such a sympathetic quality that it can melt your heart. And if any singer has that quality for me, it is Galli-Curci. I can listen to two minutes of Galli-Curci and I can be in tears. If you listen to her singing the duet with Germont pere in Traviata, it's not that she interprets in a particularly emotional way. It's the actual sound of the voice that

just, it's so moving. And so here I'm going to play you an excerpt, "L'etoile du nord", sung by Galli-Curci. So obviously it must have been a very flexible voice. She was famous for her trills. I'd say Galli-Curci trills are a bit so-so, they're not the very best trills on record. And neither is her coloratura particularly brilliant. But as you can see, that is music that is written for a brilliant technique. And as I said, the real similarity I think is that maybe Galli-Curci, actually when Galli-Curci made her sensational debut in Chicago, in America, and she took America by storm, lots of older opera lovers said that she reminded them of Adelina Patti. Now Joan Sutherland had very much the same repertoire as Jenny Lind. A lot of their favourite roles, Lucia di Lammermore, Norma, and so on, even Donna Anna, But above all, la figlia del reggimento. And most critics I think of Joan Sutherland would say that the glory of her voice is the top of the voice. And the middle and lower parts less beautiful. And there was similar comments about Jenny Lind that the top of the voice was the most beautiful part, and that the voice could sound as they put it veiled in its lower range. So that is a possible similarity. Jenny Lind's voice must have been quite powerful, more powerful, I think than than Galli-Curci. I mean, she could sing roles that were a much heavier role than anything Galli-Curci ever sang. And of course, Joan Sutherland, the remarkable thing about her was that it was a very big voice and at the same time very flexible. A difference is of course, that Joan Sutherland is notorious for her very poor diction. Sometimes you can hardly tell what language she's singing in. She's not good at putting across the text. And that was something of course, that Jenny Lind was very good at. But I'm going to play you an excerpt from "I masnadieri". Verdi was in London. He was listening to Jenny Lind. He knew what she could do, and he certainly also makes big demands on her technique and was clearly pleased that she could do such wonderful trills, 'cause he puts in an awful lot of them. So here is Joan Sutherland singing "I masnadieri" Now Mendelssohn composed the aria "Hear Ye Israel" from Elijah, very specifically with Jenny Lind's voice in mind. And Mendelssohn believed that the most beautiful notes in her voice were the F and the F sharp. So you'll find this aria, a lot of this aria hovers around those notes. And for this, I've chosen the English soprano, Isobel Baillie. I think, of course, Jenny Lind after the end of her opera career, she retired very early from opera. She went on singing oratorio, she sang a lot of Handel's "Messiah", a lot of Elijahs. And I think she had a great influence on the singing tradition of oratorio in this country. And Isobel Baillie certainly is a very typical representative of that tradition with this very pure instrumental sound. So here is Isobel Baillie in "Hear Ye, Israel". So when she announced her American tour in 1850, she also said she was never going to sing in opera again. She would only continue her career on the concert stage. And that was true of her American tour. When she came back to to Britain, she sang for, still sang for a number of years. As I said, she was intensely religious. And she felt that somehow the opera house was in an immoral place, which it very often was actually in the 19th century. The last time that she saw



Mendelssohn was very shortly before his death. He was in London already. And he heard the news that she was arriving, and he went to the place where he knew she would be staying, which was Belgrave Square. Which is now of course nearly all embassies, very handsome Regency Square. And apparently for hours he was so anxiously waiting for her he was pacing up and down on the pavement out in Belgrave Square waiting for her to arrive. But that was the last time that they ever met. And I want to end my talk with the piece with which she became most associated with the British public, was the "Messiah", which we think of as, even though it's by a German, of course we think of it as totally British and we think of it as very much part of our national heritage. And she was very famous for singing "I Know That My Redeemer Liveth". this is the monument to Jenny Lind in Poet's Corner in Westminster Abbey. There's a lot of focus on Westminster Abbey at the moment, for obvious reasons. And I suppose there will, I imagine at some point there will be a monument in Westminster Abbey to our dear Queen. But certainly this monument to Jenny Lind was the only monument to a woman in Westminster Abbey who was not royalty for many, many years. So I'm going to finish with a little bit from, "I Know That My Redeemer Liveth", once again sung by the beatific voice of Isabelle Bailey.

♪ I know that my Redeemer liveth ♪ ♪ And that He shall stand ♪ ♪ At the latter day upon the earth ♪ ♪ I know that my Redeemer liveth ♪ ♪ And that He shall stand ♪ ♪ At the latter day upon the earth ♪ ♪ Upon the earth ♪ Right, well let's see what you've got to say.

#### Q & A and Comments

Jennifer. Thank you, thank you for your comment. Felix died very young. He was not yet 40. And he died of a stroke. And it was obviously a heredity thing because his sister Fanny had very recently died of this. And some people say of course, that he died partly of grief because he was so attached to his sister Fanny. And it was a terrible, terrible blow when she died. But they both died the same thing. And as did other members of the family.

Q: Was a recording –

A: No, there was never record of Jenny Lind I'm afraid. She just died a couple of decades too soon.

I'm not sure what a Yeshiva Bosha looks like. To me, I love Mendelssohn's face. It's such a sensitive, beautiful face. Yes, indeed.

In Norwich. The local children's hospital is the Jenny Lind Hospital. And interestingly, there were two versions of my portrait by Leonard Poirier. and the other one belonged to that hospital. But I think it's

disappeared, I'd love to know where it is. Maybe they still have it locked up in an attic somewhere.

Yes, Jenny was her real, well, it was a nickname of course, but it was her real name. I mean it was a shortened version of her name.

Stan, thank you so much. I really appreciate your comments. And I just feel it's a privilege to talk to people like you. The slide would be banned today. I don't know, I guess I suppose it would, but that's sad, isn't it? I don't agree that she had such fantastic trills, actually. But I'm all the same. I'm reluctant to criticise her because I love her record so much.

It wouldn't strictly be to the Mendelssohn family. When I give it. It's certainly to Mendelssohn himself. But also I just think that the house is such a fantastic place. It is one of the most moving small museums that I've been to.

Yes, Masnaderi, thank you Herbert, it's before, it's not really one of Verdi's greatest operas, I would say. And it's before his really, he really hit the heights with "Il trovatore" and "La traviata".

Thank you, Lorna. Yes, I did know that she funded the children's hospital in Norwich and she funded many, many other things too. Yes, well, of course, your grandfather couldn't have heard Jenny Lind. And he probably couldn't have heard Galli-Curci live, as she retired in the early 1930s. But of course her records were best sellers, so he would've known her records.

Yes, Queen Victoria absolutely adored her. So there were many, many, Queen Victoria would turn up to a performance, any performance of Jenny Lind and Jenny Lind also went to sing at Windsor Castle, privately for Queen Victoria. Oh, yes, yes. It's interesting that, of course, she lived at Melbourne, as did Elgar.

Thank you all very, very much indeed. And I think it's, I've got a little bit of a gap before I talk to you again. And the next one will be on the Finnish artist Akseli Gallen-Kallela. So back to painting next time. Thank you all very much. Bye bye.