

# The Velvet Voice

Mary Postans: a Life in a Prologue and  
Three Acts



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**Title Page:** miniature portrait on ivory of the 19-year-old singer, Mary Postans. This was made in Naples in March, 1834, and it was dedicated to her future husband, the English painter, Alfred Shaw.  
[Image: CIRMAR. Private Collection, Florence, Italy].

## Prologue

“... everybody who saw her seems to be aware that she is not only to be praised as a great artist but, as a lady-like, unaffected, and most amiable person...” (Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy on Mary Postans singing Mozart’s *Addio*, which she performed at her 1839 debut concert in Leipzig).<sup>1,2</sup>

Although now only remembered by opera cognoscenti, during her distinguished career between 1834 and 1849, the mezzo-soprano/contralto, Mary Postans (1814-1876), became internationally famous, celebrated by royalty and by the leading musicians of her day. Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy [right] was her friend. On November 17, 1839, at the the Teatro alla Scala, Milan, under the Conductor, Eugenio Cavallini, she premiered the mezzo-soprano role of Cuniza in Giuseppe Verdi’s first opera, *Oberto, Conte di San Bonifacio*. At her own salon Concert in January, 1842, attended by Gaspare Luigi Pacifico Spontini, Giacomo Meyerbeer, Franz Liszt, and Mendelssohn, following an encore of a Ricci *canzonetta*, “Liszt spontaneously hastened to the piano to accompany the admired artist.”<sup>3</sup>



A watercolour (detail) of Felix Mendelssohn by James Warren Childe (1780-1862), dated 1829.

In England, Scotland, and Ireland, Mary was adored by both the public and the press, while in Germany she was showered with jewels. The Will of her daughter, Agatha Elizabeth Leigh, lists two such treasures.<sup>4</sup> “I give to the said Mary Katherine Clark...my parure of mixed gems presented to my late Mother Mary Robinson by the Queen of Saxony” and “I give to Mrs Mary Arnold the parure of Turquoise and Pearls presented to my Mother by the late

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<sup>1</sup> K.528, *Bella mia fiamma, addio... Resta, oh cara*, one of the hardest concert arias in the repertory.

<sup>2</sup> See: [http://www.momh.org.uk/exhibitions-detail.php?cat\\_id=5&prod\\_id=306](http://www.momh.org.uk/exhibitions-detail.php?cat_id=5&prod_id=306). Accessed 19/02/2016.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Will of Agatha Elizabeth Leigh, dated and signed 6 March, 1917. [Postans Collection, Ightham Mote Archives]. She died on 24 May, 1924.



Portrait: Augusta of Sachsen-Weimar-Eisenach, Empress of Germany and Queen of Prussia (1811-1890). This is by Franz Xaver Winterhalter. It is dated 1861, and has been missing since 1945. She gave Mary a parure of turquoise and pearls.

Empress Augusta of Germany” [see **left**].<sup>5</sup>

Yet, despite such fame and adulation, Mary’s life was often darkened by tragedy. To her deep sadness, Mendelssohn died young at 38 on 4 November, 1847, to be followed, on the 23rd, by her first husband, the painter, Alfred Shaw. Alfred had been mentally ill for some five years, and he passed away in

Whitmore House Asylum for the Insane, West Hackney. He was likewise still young, only 36, and he was buried with his baby son in Catacomb A at All Souls, Kensal Green.

The strain of her husband’s long illness, combined with overwork, had also begun to affect her beautiful voice, and she started to sing flat. Mary decided to bring her glittering career to a premature end, and she gave her final Benefit Concert at The Queen’s Concert Rooms, Hanover Square, London, on 6 June, 1846, although she did make a couple of rare appearances after this, including a performance of Mendelssohn’s *Elijah* at Exeter Hall, London, in 1849.

On 11 June, 1851, Mary married again, her second cousin, John Frederick Robinson, a country solicitor from Hadleigh in Suffolk. This was a happy marriage, and they had four children. Yet, tragedy struck once more, when her 17-year-old daughter, Mary, died of tuberculosis in 1869, to be followed, 6 months later from the same disease, by her youngest child, Elizabeth, aged 12. Moreover, during the last three years of her own life, she suffered from breast cancer. Mary died on 9 September, 1876, and was buried near her two daughters in the beautiful cemetery at Hadleigh. Thus ended the life of one of England’s greatest singers. It is the aim of this short booklet to place her once again centre stage, a woman with a velvet voice who endured with “bright and cheerful demeanour” the many blows which assailed her later years.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> A ‘parure’ typically consists of a combination of a matching necklace, earrings, brooch, bracelet, and often a diadem or tiara. The ‘Queen of Saxony’ was Princess Maria Anna Leopoldine Elisabeth Wilhelmine of Bavaria (1805-1877), Queen Consort of Saxony from 1836 to 1854. Princess Augusta Marie Luise Katharina of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach (1811-1890) was the Queen of Prussia, and the first German Empress as the consort of Emperor William I.

<sup>6</sup> The Rector, St Mary the Virgin, Hadleigh, Suffolk. From his ‘Sermon’ on the Sunday after Mary’s burial.

## Act 1: Child to Contralto

“... Miss Postans, who we do not remember having heard before, sung *Se m'abbandoni*.<sup>7</sup> Her voice is a rich contr'alto and she used it with remarkable taste and judgement. Most deservedly did she receive enthusiastic marks of approbation.” *The Morning Post* (24 October, 1834), on one of her first professional public appearances after her return to England from Italy.

Mary was born on 8 July, 1814, at Manor Farm, Lee, then in rural Kent, the daughter of Thomas Postans and Agathe (sometimes Agatha) Toulon.<sup>8</sup> Her mother is believed to have been of aristocratic French descent. Unfortunately, Agathe died in November, 1816, aged 35, when Mary was only two. A year later, Thomas married Nancy Holms (or Holmes) at St Martin's Church, Bremhill, Wiltshire, the marriage licence being granted with the consent of Nancy's Guardian, she being under the age of 21.<sup>9</sup> Mary's earliest years were thus largely spent in Wiltshire with her young stepmother. As we shall see, for much of her childhood, Thomas was busy in London.

Her father had been born in Tewksbury, Gloucestershire, in 1780, where he was brought up in the tradition of a yeoman farmer.<sup>10</sup> Sometime around 1793, he moved to Lee, near Blackheath, and caught the eye of Sir Thomas Baring, who had inherited Manor Farm from his father, Sir Francis, the founder of Barings Bank. Following a good Kent tradition, Sir Francis had imported a choice selection of fruit trees from Holland and France. Sir Thomas leased the farm house and the farm buildings to Thomas, who turned the house into a comfortable home. He and his family lived there until 1816/17, when the farm was let to Mr R. E. Brown, Head Gardener to Lord Braybrooke of Audley End, Saffron Waldon, Essex.

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<sup>7</sup> *Se m'abbandoni mio dolce amore*, from the opera by Domenico Cimarosa, *L'italiana in Londra* (1778/9). This was a Grand Morning Concert held on 23 October, 1834, in the Egyptian Hall of the Mansion House, London. The concert was in aid of the Royal Dispensary for Diseases of the Ear.

<sup>8</sup> The spelling of Agathe's maiden name remains uncertain, and it has been variously given as de Toulon, Teulon, Tulon, or Thulon. It is possible that she was part of a French émigré family.

<sup>9</sup> Marriage Certificate, dated April 9, 1817. [Postans Collection: Ightham Mote Archives].

<sup>10</sup> For a thorough summary of his life, see: <http://lewisham-heritage.wdfiles.com/local--files/people:postans-thomas/POSTANS%20Thomas.pdf>. Accessed 20/02/2016.

On leaving Lee, Thomas was appointed Steward to The United Service Club, first situated in Albemarle Street, and then located at the corner of Charles Street and Regent Street, London.<sup>11</sup> After nine years of dedicated work, he rose to the more elevated status of Steward to the Officers' Mess in the Guard Room of St James's Palace, a position he held throughout the reigns of George IV and William IV, only relinquishing the post in 1837 on the accession of Queen Victoria.

Thomas now returned to Lee, where he became Steward to Sir Thomas, and where he had Mr Brown's plantations removed, and the land reinstated for farming. He also played a full role in local affairs, being appointed Churchwarden of the old church, Lee, and attending Sir Thomas at the laying of the foundation stone of the new St Margaret's on 17 July, 1839. By early 1845, declining health caused him to let Manor Farm, although he continued to live at the house, where he died, a "Gentleman", of "anemia", on 5 May, 1845, aged 65.<sup>12</sup>

Thomas' two children by his first wife, Agathe, were both to make their mark in the world. Mary would become the internationally-acclaimed singer, while her elder brother, Thomas, born in 1808, was made Line Adjutant and Political Agent in Upper Sindh, publishing a standard history of Sindh in 1843. He loved to paint, and the Ightham Mote Archives possess a charming watercolour sketch he made of his wife, Marianne (1811-1897), while at her toilet in India [right]. In 1846, he was appointed Commissioner to draw up the boundaries of two Indian states. He became ill on the journey to take up his new post, and died on 11 December. After his death, Marianne married again, William Henry Young, surgeon of H.M. 28th Regiment of Foot.



Pencil and watercolour sketch of his wife, Marianne, at her toilet in India, by Mary's elder brother, Thomas. Dated 1834. [Postans Collection: Ightham Mote Archives].

<sup>11</sup> Founded in 1815, and known as 'The Senior'. It closed in 1978. The club was for senior officers only.

<sup>12</sup> Copy of his Death Certificate [Postans Collection: Ightham Mote Archives].



By contrast, Mary was sent to board at the Moravian School, East Tytherton, Chippenham, Wiltshire.<sup>13</sup> In 1745, the Moravian convert, John Cennick, had built the Clergyman's House, the Chapel, and a school for young ladies, who were taught, among other things, music and sewing. Unfortunately, there appear to be no extant records for the period when Mary was in attendance, but we can assume that the school was small and intimate. In 1859, it was described in Warburton's Census as "20 to 30 children...taught in a nice little thatched room with wooden floor, by a mistress of the Moravian persuasion". Although she was a boarder, she would spend her holidays with the family in London, and, sometimes, at Brighton.

It is perhaps significant that the chief focus of the school was on music, and it is probably here that the potential quality of Mary's voice was first recognised. When she was only 12 or 13, she was heard by the composer, Joseph Mazzinghi (1765-1844),<sup>14</sup> who at once suggested to her father that she should have her voice trained professionally. One wonders if this occurred when, in 1827, she sang at a "Juvenile Party given by Mr. Wright, residential professor, The Colonnade, Brighton." Whenever it was, Thomas heeded the advice, and, in September 1828, just two months after her 14th birthday, Mary was enrolled as a pupil at the Royal Academy of Music to study singing and piano.

The Academy had only been open for five years, and it was located at 4 Tenterden Street, Hanover Square. On 3 April, 1830, when Mary was 15, the students gave a concert in aid of the institution at Hanover Square Rooms. She sang 'He was despised', and the solo quartet, 'Recordare', from Mozart's *Requiem*, with Miss Childe, Messrs Brizzi and E. Seguin.<sup>15</sup> Mary graduated the following summer, winning the Silver Medal for Singing.

Thus, the foundations for her career as a famous contralto had been laid. But it would be another three years before she gave her first professional performances in England, such as the Grand Morning Concert in aid of the Royal Dispensary for Diseases of the Ear, at which she received such "enthusiastic marks of approbation."

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<sup>13</sup> See: <http://history.wiltshire.gov.uk/community/getschool.php?id=1113>. The school closed in 1939. See also: <http://www.moravian.org.uk/index.php/uk-congregations-list-for-the-moravian-church/western-district/tytherton>. Both accessed 21/02/2016.

<sup>14</sup> His operas were much liked by King George III. He had been a pupil of Johann Christian Bach.

<sup>15</sup> 'He was despised and rejected of men', the famous *da capo* contralto aria from G. F. Handel's *Messiah*; the F major quartet (soprano, contralto, tenor, and bass solo) from the *Requiem Mass* in D minor, K.626, by W.A. Mozart.

## Act 2: Operas and Oratorios



Mary Postans as 'Diva'. Portrait in oils by Hermann Winterhalter (1808-1891). In November 1841, she would be designated *Prima Donna Assoluta* at the Grande Teatro, Trieste, where she sang the role of Climene in Giovanni Pacini's 1840 opera, *Saffo*. [National Trust, Ightham Mote].

Following success at the Royal Academy of Music, Mary set off, accompanied by her Governess, Madame Sestini, on a 'Grand Tour' of Europe, with the aim of widening her cultural, linguistic, and musical experience. Considering her youth, this reflected a remarkably liberal attitude on the part of her father, who must have been assured that she would be fully chaperoned throughout. They must also have been accompanied by at least one male servant.

On 18 August, 1831, they left for Paris and Versailles, and traveled through France to the Jura Mountains and Geneva, where they visited Byron's infamous Villa Diodati in the village of Cologny by Lake Geneva. This was where, in 1816, another young woman, Mary Shelley, had first conjured up her Gothic horror story, *Frankenstein*. Like Jane Austen's Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*, one suspects that Mary Postans must have found it terribly exciting.

They then crossed to Italy by the Simplon Pass on 27 September, proceeding through Milan and Bologna to Florence. The journey cannot have been easy, and it was accomplished before the publication of the essential Murray's *Hand-Books for Travellers*, which would be assiduously employed by John Ruskin and his young wife, Effie, during their later travels.<sup>16</sup> Diligences [right: a Swiss diligence] could prove a distinctly uncomfortable ride, while local hostelries were often noted for being dirty and ill-kept.



<sup>16</sup> See for example: J. G. Links, 1968. *The Ruskins in Normandy. A Tour in 1848 with Murray's Hand-book*. London: John Murray.

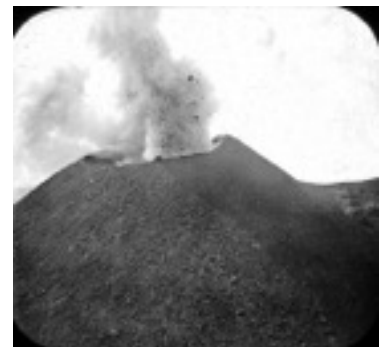


On 12 October, they arrived in Florence, where they were to stay for nearly two years, visiting all the well-known sights and galleries, but, more importantly, enabling Mary to learn the true art of singing in Italian from two of the finest living exponents, Giovanni Velluti, one of the last *castrati* to appear in London, and Angelica Catalani, a dramatic bravura soprano. While in Florence, she may further have studied with Michele Giuliani.

Yet life was not all voice training and sightseeing. Mary also enjoyed high society in the city. In March, 1833, she met the Countess Survillie, the ex-Queen Consort of Naples and Spain, and Caroline Murat (*née* Bonaparte), Napoleon's younger sister, likewise a former Queen Consort of Naples, but by then styling herself the Countess of Lipona.

At her first meeting with the two ex-Queens, she was led to the piano and requested to perform. Mary wrote about the experience later, commenting: "Velluti was present, he accompanied me and said everything polite. The Queens then paid me a number of compliments and I retired." She was obviously a success, being invited back for a second time, on which occasion Caroline Murat presented her with a beautiful *vinaigrette*: "Never did I receive more kindness than from these two celebrated personages, particularly having no claim upon them, I felt it the more."

They finally left Florence on 23 September, 1833, first for Rome, and then for Naples, where Mary was to remain for some seven months. On 30 October, she was at a ball given by the Countess Polocka, attended by the King and Queen of Naples, the Dowager Queen, and all the Royal Family. She also became a serious tourist, studying the Greek temples at Paestum, visiting both Pompeii and Herculaneum, before, on 1 December, 1833, climbing Mount Vesuvius, at night, during an eruption. This must have been quite an experience, ascending the volcano in heavy clothing on donkeys against a lurid sky.



C19th photograph of Vesuvius erupting, by W. H. Goodyear (1846-1923). [Brooklyn Museum].

It was also in Naples that she encountered the man who would become her first husband, the artist, Alfred Shaw. Alfred clearly knew the Postans family already as he had attended her brother Thomas' wedding in London earlier that year. He would later exhibit his watercolour sketches of Italian landscapes at the Royal Academy.

On 24 April, 1834, Mary and Madame Sestini finally set out for their return to London. First, however, between 27 April and 11 May, they stayed again in Rome, touring all the famous places, including Tivoli, where they saw the Pope, Gregory XVI, at a fête. They did not arrive back in England until June.

On her return, Mary immediately became a student with Sir George Smart who was one of the organists of the Chapel Royal, St James's Palace, where her father was now installed as Steward to the Officers' Mess. She was, at last, truly ready to launch her professional public career. This began with a Grand Morning Concert at the Hanover Square Rooms on 4 July, 1834, just four days before her twentieth birthday. From then on, she would be in constant demand as a much-valued performer.

### 1. English Concerts, July 1834 to September 1838

The story of her professional life on platform and on stage falls neatly into four quite distinct periods, the first of which was based in England from July 1834 to September 1838. During this time, Mary gave a large number of concert performances at a wide range of venues, often sustaining an extraordinary workload. **Table 1** presents her demanding schedule for just

**Table 1**  
**Performance Schedule for May, 1838**

1 May:	Rehearsal for Concert of Ancient Music on 2 May
2 May:	Concert of Ancient Music, Hanover Square Rooms
4 May:	New Musical Fund 52nd Anniversary Concert, Her Majesty's Theatre
5 May:	Rehearsal of Philharmonic Concert for 7 May
7 May:	Rehearsal of Ancient Music Concert for 9 May; Philharmonic Society Concert, Hanover Square Rooms
9 May:	Grand Morning Concert, Hanover Square Rooms; Concert of Ancient Music, Hanover Square Rooms
11 May:	Dress Subscription Concert, Concert Hall, Manchester
14 May:	Rehearsal for Concert of Ancient Music on 16 May
15 May:	Mr Chatterton's Morning Concert, Hanover Square Rooms; Mr Cast's <i>Musical Soirée</i> , Hanover Square Rooms
16 May:	Concert of Ancient Music, Hanover Square Rooms
21 May:	Rehearsal for Concert of Ancient Music on 23 May
23 May:	Concert of Ancient Music, Hanover Square Rooms
25 May:	Mr Sterndale Bennett's Concert, Hanover Square Rooms
28 May:	Mr Leate's Classical <i>Soirée</i> Concert, Hanover Square Rooms
30 May:	Concert of Ancient Music, Hanover Square Rooms

one month during this period, May 1838. It is worth noting that she was sometimes involved in two different concerts, or a rehearsal and a concert, on the same day. Such a schedule can put a strain on any voice.

A number of events stand out during this first phase of Mary's career. On 25 June, 1835, the Duchess of Kent presented a Grand Concert at Kensington Palace, in which all the performers were to be English singers. Mary was invited to take part by her teacher, Sir George Smart, who was to be the conductor. She sang in a trio and a quartet. Many of the Royal Family were in the audience, including the Princess Victoria, who was said to have been in the merriest of moods.

In September, Mary travelled to York to take part in her first major provincial music festival. Again the Duchess of Kent and Princess Victoria were present, joining audiences of up to three thousand people at a time who packed the Minster on all four days. Among the more famous performers were the Italian dramatic soprano, Giulia Grisi, and the powerful French/Irish bass, Luigi Lablache, who, in 1827, had been one of the 32 torchbearers attending Beethoven's coffin.

These festival concerts were to be Mary's last at which she would be billed as 'Miss Postans'. On the Monday following the Festival, she was married at St Helen's Church, York, to the artist, Alfred Shaw [right], whom she had first met in Naples; she was 21. Later, in the Royal Academy Exhibition of 1837, Alfred would have three of his Italian watercolours accepted, namely a *View of Venice*; *Florence from the Boboli Gardens*; and a *View of Tivoli*, which were all described as "sketched on the spot".



On 20 October, 1835, Mary appeared with the Hull Choral Society, advertised for the first time as: 'Principal Vocal Performer Mrs Alfred Shaw, (late Miss Postans)'. The reviewer in the *Hull Packet* wrote: "Her voice is a mezzo-soprano of great power and sweetness, and peculiarly rich in its lower tones, to which natural gifts she adds a cultivated taste and peculiar flexibility. Her execution is neat, and her style unaffected..."

Mary's first husband, the artist, Alfred Shaw. In the early 1840s he would suffer from serious mental illness, dying young in November 1847. From an image in 'Postans Family Records. Portraits, etc.' [Postans Collection: Ightham Mote Archives].



Agatha Elizabeth in 1873. She would not marry until 1885, well after the death of her mother. Taken from 'Postans Family Records. Portraits, etc.' [Postans Collection: Ightham Mote Archives].

Mary was now pregnant, although she continued to sing in public. Their daughter, Agatha Elizabeth [left], was born 19 June, 1836, an event recorded by *The Morning Post* on 20 June: "Yesterday morning, at her residence in Berners Street, Mrs Alfred Shaw, of a daughter."<sup>17</sup> Agatha would prove to be one of the mainstays of Mary's life, supporting her mother throughout the many difficult times that would afflict her later years.

Less than four months after the birth of Agatha, on 3 October, 1836, Mary made one of her most memorable appearances during these early years when she sang, at the Liverpool Festival, the contralto part in the first performance in England of Felix Mendelssohn's great Biblical oratorio, *Paulus, or St Paul*.<sup>18</sup> The English translation had been made by Mendelssohn's friend, Karl Klingermann. In his book, *Musical and personal recollections*, Henry Phillips wrote: "One of the beautiful singers in this oratorio was Mrs Alfred Shaw, originally Miss Postans, who had a rich and powerful contralto... Her voice was far superior to that of Miss M.B. Hawes - but she had not, perhaps, the same power of declamation".<sup>19</sup> Mary had, of course, sung in other oratorios before this, and, in June 1836, she had been the contralto in a performance for the Royal Society of Musicians of Handel's *Messiah* at the Hanover Square Rooms.

This English period of her career, however, would be crowned by one further event, which took place on 28 June, 1838, when she became one of the first women ever to sing at a coronation service. This was Queen Victoria's coronation, a truly extraordinary affair which lasted five hours and which involved two changes of dress for the Queen. The music was provided by an orchestra of 80 players, 157 singers, and, for the processions, military bands. The conductor was again Mary's teacher, Sir George Smart, who also played the organ. It remains the only coronation at which Handel's 'Hallelujah Chorus' has been performed.

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<sup>17</sup> 27, Berners Street, London.

<sup>18</sup> The composition of *Paulus* was begun in 1834, and the work was premiered on 22 May, 1836, at the Lower Rhenish Music Festival in Düsseldorf. It is Op.36.

<sup>19</sup> Henry Phillips, 1864. *Musical and personal recollections during half a century*. London: C. J. Skeet.

## 2. 'German' Concerts, October 1838 to October 1839

Mary's career, however, was about to take a most exciting new direction. Felix Mendelssohn was an anglophile who had first visited London in 1829. On 28 March, 1837, he married Cécile Charlotte Sophie Jeanrenaud [right], and, after travelling on their honeymoon through the Rhineland and the Black Forest, they came to London.<sup>20</sup> While there, they dined with Mary and Alfred. Felix was delighted with Mary's singing, although not, it would appear, with her husband's art. In his so-called 'honeymoon diary' for 10 September, 1837, he wryly observed: "Some of Mr Shaw's paintings were shown to me, which I praised as much as I possibly could, which wasn't that much. After dinner, however, his wife sang me the alto aria from my *St Paul*, plus some Handel and other Italian pieces, all so superbly that I was able with a good conscience to furnish all the praise which before dinner I had held back."<sup>21</sup>



Felix Mendelssohn's wife, Cécile (1846). Oil by Eduard Magnus. [Staatsbibliothek Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin].

So impressed had Mendelssohn been with Mary's voice that, in April 1838, he wrote her a long letter inviting her to perform at a series of concerts in Leipzig, also advising her on suitable repertoire.<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, following four final appearances at the Three Choirs Music Festival in Gloucester Cathedral between 11 and 14 September, the little family left England for Leipzig on 4 October. Because Agatha was only 2, they did not want to stay in a hotel, and Mendelssohn found them a comfortable place in which to live.

Her first 'German' concert was given at the famous Gewandhaus, Leipzig, on 18 October, in the original hall constructed in 1781 by the architect, Johann Carl Friedrich Dauthe. This was located within the Gewandhaus proper, a building used by textile merchants (hence its name, 'Cloth' or 'Linen House'). Her debut was a resounding success. She included Rossini's *Pensa all patria* and Mozart's *Addio*.

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<sup>20</sup> See: Peter Ward Jones (ed.) 1997. *The Mendelssohns on Honeymoon: the 1837 Diary of Felix and Cécile Mendelssohn Bartholdy, Together with Letters to their Families: 1837 Diary of Felix ... Together with Letters to Their Families*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

<sup>21</sup> See: Clive Brown, 2003. *A Portrait of Mendelssohn*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, p.14.

<sup>22</sup> Mendelssohn had been appointed conductor of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra in 1835.



Mendelssohn was extremely moved by her performance: "I saw some who shed tears at this beautiful melody which nobody had ventured to sing in public concerts before her, and all the musicians were in raptures, she has made more friends with a simple song, than she would have done, perhaps, with the most celebrated scena and as I know the public here, I am sure that impression will be a lasting one, even if they could not hear her again."

In all, Mary gave 12 Leipzig concerts over three months, including in her repertoire Handel's 'He was despised and rejected of men' from *Messiah*, Luigi Cherubini's *O Salutaris Hostia*, and the *cavatina* from *Giulietta e Romeo*, a 1796 opera by Niccolò Antonio Zingarelli. Mendelssohn remained unstinting in his admiration of her work. In a letter addressed from Leipzig to the Directors of the Philharmonic Society in London, dated 19 January, 1839, he speaks of Clara Novello [right] and Mrs Shaw as "the best concert singers we have had in this country for a long time".<sup>23</sup>



Clara Novello (1818-1908), soprano: lithograph by Josef Kriehuber, 1838. Aged 14, she had performed in Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*. Like Mary, she also sang at Leipzig for Mendelssohn.

Mary gave her farewell Leipzig concert on 28 January, 1839. She then went on to perform in February at the Opera House and the Royal Palace, Berlin, in March at Dresden and Potsdam, in April at Dresden and Vienna, and at Prague in July. By September, she was back in Vienna, singing at the Imperial Theatre.

Mary was now 25, and her life was about to take a second startling turn. She decided to go to Italy, and to step from the concert platform on to the stage. It was time for her to embrace Italian Grand Opera.

### 3. Italian Grand Opera, November 1839 to July 1842

Why Mary decided to move, quite abruptly, from the refined concert platform to the dramatic stage of Italian Grand Opera is not known. Did Mendelssohn recommend this? It would seem unlikely. With a more mature voice, did she feel confident about making such a bold change? Was it really a return to her

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<sup>23</sup> Clara Anastasia Novello (1818-1908) was an acclaimed soprano. In 1843, she married Count Gigliucci, and retired in 1861. Charles Lamb wrote a poem ("To Clara N.") in her praise. In 1837, she too had presented concerts for Mendelssohn at the Gewandhaus, Leipzig.

first love, Italy? We shall probably never find out, but, whatever the reason, she went south from Vienna to Italy, to begin a significantly different period of her life.



A C19th painting of the Teatro alla Scala in the Piazza della Scala, Milan. Mary performed her first great operatic role here on 17 November, 1839, when she premiered Cuniza in Verdi's first opera, *Oberto*.

And what a start it was! On 17 November, 1839, Mary premiered the mezzo-soprano role of Cuniza in Giuseppe Verdi's first opera, *Oberto, Conte di San Bonifacio*. And in what a theatre! The premiere took place at the Teatro alla Scala, Milan [left], the work, after four years of composition, having been accepted by its impresario, Bartolomeo Merelli. It was a success, and Merelli commissioned two further operas from the young composer. To begin your operatic career at La Scala, and in a Verdi opera premiere, takes some beating. In Act II, Scene I, Cuniza has what would have been Mary's first great stage aria, *Oh, chi torna l'ardente pensiero?...Più che i vezzi e lo splendore*.

In March 1840, she took on her next two roles, Arsace in Gioachino Rossini's opera, *Semiramide*, and Malcom (Malcolm) Groeme (Graeme) in his *La Donna del Lago*, which were given at the Navona Theatre, Milan. She was to go on to perform these roles many times, singing both in Italian and English. Indeed, in April, she was already reprising her performance of Arsace at the Teatro La Fenice, Venice.

**Appendix 1** [p.21] provides a complete list of Mary's operatic roles, including those played in England and Ireland, as well as those in Italy, Vienna, and Berlin. During early 1842, she returned to Germany to perform Maffio Orsini in Gaetano Donizetti's *Lucrezia Borgia* at the Italian Opera House, Berlin, but also to give concerts in Leipzig, Dresden, and Prague. Mary finally went to Turin, where, between 12 March and June, she performed variously at the Teatro Carignano and the Teatro Regio, including, at the latter, a concert in celebration of the nuptials of the King of Sardinia's son.

Mary was pregnant again, and, at last, she returned to England in July, where her son, Alfred Thomas, was born in August at 49, New Bond Street. We now enter the final phase of Mary's main career, when she brought her dramatic performances of Italian Grand Opera to the London and the Dublin stage.

#### 4. Theatre Royals, Covent Garden/Drury Lane, November 1842 to May 1844



The second Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, 1828. Thomas H. Shepherd (1792-1864), engraved by John Rolph (1799-1862).

On 1 October, 1842, Mary made her first appearance in England in Grand Opera at the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden [left], playing her old role of Arsace in Rossini's *Semiramide*. Adelaide Kemble, the actor Charles Kemble's daughter, sang the title role.<sup>24</sup> Apparently it was Adelaide who had suggested Mary for the part because they had performed together earlier in Italy. Mary was billed as: 'From the Principal Theatres in Italy, - her First Appearance on the English Stage'.

The opening was a triumph, with an ecstatic audience and a gushing press. The critic of *The Times* wrote: "On her appearance, she was greeted with the most overwhelming applause, but she evinced remarkable self-possession, which as it was unaccompanied by the slightest appearance of pretension, must be attributed solely to a just reliance on her own powers. The first few bars of her recitative she gave with such truth and firmness, with such perfect tranquillity, and so simple and touching was her reading, that the audience even at this early stage of the performance, began to give spontaneous demonstrations of their delight. And here it may be observed that Mrs A. Shaw seems to be the only English singer who thoroughly understands the use to be made of recitative, which is so often little more than mere speaking. She grasped it thoroughly, made it thoroughly musical, avoiding without an effort, coarseness on the one hand, and feebleness on the other, and giving every sentiment its proper force..."

It was clear that her time in Italy with Italian teachers and Italian singers had been well spent. The adored Miss Kemble was showered with bouquets at the end of the performance, but the audience went wild when she then handed a share of these to Mary. It was some homecoming. Mary sang in all 32 performances of *Semiramide*, ending on 28 January, 1843, including no fewer than 14 in the month of October 1842 alone.

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<sup>24</sup> Adelaide Kemble (1815-1879) was an English opera singer, and a member of the Kemble family of actors. She was the younger sister of Fanny Kemble, the famous actress and anti-slavery activist. Her father was the actor, Charles Kemble, who gave Mary the contract to perform at the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden.

Moreover, Mary's appearances in *Semiramide* were interspersed with further debut operas and English-style concerts. On 1 November, she sang the mezzo-soprano role of Fidalma in Chorley's English version, *The Secret Marriage*, of Domenico Cimarosa's 1792 work, *Il matrimonio segreto*, with Adelaide Kemble as Fidalma's niece, Carolina, and Miss Rainforth as Elisetta. 5 further performances ensued. The title of the opera proved to be strangely apt. Miss Kemble retired at Christmas, seemingly to marry Edward Sartoris. In fact, in a case of life imitating art, they had already been married in secret for some months. But there were also concerts presented at the Town Hall, Oxford; in Brighton; at the Hanover Square Rooms, London; and in Woodford. On the 27 December, she further opened at Covent Garden in the 'alto-castrato' title role of *Artaxerxes*, the 1762 opera by Thomas Arne.

On 31 January, 1843, again at Covent Garden, she entered into a long run of 21 performances as Malcolm Graeme, the *en travesti* contralto role in Gioachino Rossini's 1819 opera, *La Donna del Lago*, 'The Lady of the Lake', the first time that the opera had been sung in English. Her performance on 28 February was graced by the presence of Queen Victoria and the Prince Consort.

Nevertheless, her contract with the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, was coming to an end, and she now accepted a new contract at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, to sing the mezzo-soprano role of Climene in an English version, 'Sappho', of Giovanni Pacini's 1840 opera, *Saffo*, a work which she knew well from her time in Italy. The famous actor, William Charles Macready, who had offered her the contract, was notoriously quarrelsome with his singers, and he did not like Clara Novello who was to sing the title role. Luckily, this was not the case with Mary, who appears to have had the knack of enchanting even the most difficult of impresarios: "Mrs Alfred Shaw pleased everyone with her frankness and good humour."

Sadly, darker storm clouds were gathering. The opening night of 'Sappho' should have taken place on 28 March, 1843. It had to be postponed until 1 April, when the Duchess of Kent was seated in the Royal Box. The postponement resulted from the first of a series of tragic blows to strike Mary. The delay was caused by the sudden death from natural causes of her infant son, Alfred Thomas, aged only 7 months. Following an inquest, the little boy had been buried on the 27 March at All Souls Cemetery, Kensal Green. This terrible loss marked the beginning of the end of her singing career.

## Act 3: Love and Loss



Mary Postans by Daniel Maclise (1806-1870). Oil on canvas. [National Trust, Ightham Mote].

The death of their baby son was not only a dreadful blow for Mary. It had catastrophic effects on her young husband, Alfred. He had already been suffering from mental problems for some time, but these now became far worse, and he had to be placed under restraint. Mary arranged for him to be cared for in a private asylum in Hackney. She and her daughter, Agatha Elizabeth, still not 10, were effectively left without a husband and a father.

Mary continued to perform both on the stage and on the concert platform. Nevertheless, the strain was beginning to tell. Slowly, her rich intonation became affected, and she started to

sing flat. Nevertheless, she battled on for another three years, often, as before, enjoying great success. Particularly noteworthy during this final period of her career were opera performances at the Theatre Royal, Dublin, in May 1843; at the Manchester, Birmingham, and Edinburgh Music Festivals; and her mezzo-soprano/contralto role as Angelina (Cinderella; Cenerentola) in Gioachino Rossini's 1817 opera, 'Cinderella, or Goodness Triumphant' (*La Cenerentola, ossia La bontà in trionfo*), at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, where she also reprised Rossini's 'The Lady of the Lake'. Her final opera performances came in 1844, when she played Näama in Sir Julius Benedict's [right] new work, *The Brides of Venice*. The premiere took place on 22 April, 1844, at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane.

By July 1844, she was exhausted through grief, the strain of her husband's demise, and overwork. In May alone, she had given fifteen performances of *The Brides*, along with various general concerts.



The conductor, pianist, and composer, Sir Julius Benedict (1804-1885). Taken from 'Postans Family Records. Portraits, etc.' [Postans Collection: Ightham Mote Archives].



For a short time, she continued to sing at events, but far less frequently. Her voice was clearly suffering. She therefore made the devastating decision to retire, and Mary gave her last Benefit Concert at The Queen's Concert Rooms, Hanover Square, on 6 June, 1846. Fascinatingly, and truly closing the circle of her career, Signor Brizzi joined her on stage; he had been in her very first concert given in the same rooms in 1830 when they were both still students at the Royal Academy. *The Observer* reported her farewell, describing it as "a highly intellectual treat". Mary was thirty one years old.

She now decided to devote her time to teaching. Yet, tragically, loss upon loss continued to assail her. On 11 December, 1846, her brother, Thomas, died in India aged 38. On 4 November, 1847, her friend and inspiration, Felix Mendelssohn, died at the same young age, to be followed, on the 23rd, by her long-suffering husband, who died, aged 35, in Whitmore House Asylum for the Insane, West Hackney.

Her last major public performance was in *Elijah* on 20 June, 1849, at Exeter Hall, London. One can only wonder if this was her own final tribute to Mendelssohn, the composer who had done so much to advance her career, and who had chosen for her the exquisite boudoir pianoforte which today graces the lovely Drawing Room at Ightham Mote, Kent?

Her life now took a very different path. On 11 June, 1851, at Jesus Chapel, Forty Hill, Enfield, Mary married John Frederick Robinson [right], who was her second cousin and a country solicitor at Hadleigh in Suffolk, where they were to live at Hadleigh Hall [left]. This was a loving marriage set in a much quieter world.



Mary's home with her second husband: Hadleigh Hall, Suffolk, dated 1856. From the first page of Agatha's 'Scrap Book'. [Postans Collection, Ightham Mote Archives].



Mary's second husband, country solicitor and second cousin, John Frederick Robinson (1819-1881). Taken from 'Postans Family Records. Portraits, etc.' [Postans Collection: Ightham Mote Archives].

The couple had four children: Mary in 1852; Eleanor in 1853; John Henry in 1855; and Elizabeth in 1858. Her daughter by her first marriage, Agatha, lived with them, and, as ever, she helped and comforted her mother.

Mary continued to teach, and, on special occasions, she would sing at local events, including in November 1852 at a Memorial Service held in Hadleigh Church for the Duke of Wellington, and on May 30, 1862, in aid of the Band of the 16th Suffolk Rifle Volunteer Corps.



But tragedy still stalked her life. On 3 September, 1869, her eldest daughter by her second marriage, Mary, aged 17, died at Hadleigh Hall of tuberculosis, to be followed on 19 February, 1870, by little Elizabeth, aged 12 [**both left**]. One cannot imagine her grief at losing these children at such lively ages. The stress must have been enormous, and she herself developed breast cancer around 1873.

Mary and Elizabeth, the daughters from her second marriage who died of tuberculosis at the ages of 17 and 12. Taken from 'Postans Family Records. Portraits, etc.' [Postans Collection: Ightham Mote Archives].

This wonderful and brave woman with the velvet voice, who so graced concert platforms and opera stages throughout Europe, and yet who suffered such pain and loss, died at Hadleigh Hall on 9 September, 1876. She was buried by the Very

Rev. E. Spooner, Rector of Hadleigh, in the peaceful cemetery of Hadleigh Church. We should forget neither her nor her great gift of song.



Two photographs of Mary Postans in older age, and [**right**] her much-loved daughter from her first marriage, Agatha Elizabeth. Taken from 'Postans Family Records. Portraits, etc.' [Postans Collection: Ightham Mote Archives].

# Appendix 1

## Main Operatic Roles

### a. *Premiere Performances*

Giuseppe Verdi, *Oberto, Conte di San Bonifacio* (1835-1839): Mary gave the premiere performance of the mezzo-soprano role of Cuniza, sister of Ezzelino da Romano, at the the Teatro alla Scala, Milan, 17 November, 1839, under the Conductor, Eugenio Cavallini. She sang in Italian.

Sir Julius Benedict, *The Brides of Venice* (1844). Mary gave the premiere performance of the role of Nääma at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, London, 22 April, 1844. She sang in English.

### b. *Other Key Operatic Roles* (by composer's surname)

Thomas Arne, *Artaxerxes* (1762). Mary performed the 'alto-castrato' role of Artaxerxes. She sang in English.

Mario Aspa, *I Due Savoiard* (1838). Mary performed the role of Alfredo. She sang in Italian.

Domenico Cimarosa, 'The Secret Marriage' (*Il matrimonio segreto*) (1792). Mary performed the mezzo-soprano role of Fidalma. She sang in English.

Gaetano Donizetti, *Lucrezia Borgia* (1833). Mary performed the contralto role of Maffio Orsini. She sang in Italian.

Giuseppe Saverio Raffaele Mercadante, *Il giuramento* (1837). Mary performed the contralto role of Bianca, Manfredo's wife, but secretly in love with Viscardo. She sang in Italian.

Giovanni Pacini, *Saffo* ('Sappho') (1840). Mary performed the mezzo-soprano role of Climene. She sang in Italian. She also sang the role in English.

Federico Ricci, *Corrado d'Altamura* (1841). Mary performed the mezzo-soprano role of (?) either Guiscardo Bonello or Margarita (Margherita). She sang in Italian.

Luigi Ricci, *Un'avventura di Scaramuccia* (1834). Mary performed the contralto role of Il Contino di Pontigny, billed as 'Marietta Shaw'. She sang in Italian.

Gioachino Rossini, 'Cinderella, or Goodness Triumphant' (*La Cenerentola, ossia La bontà in trionfo*) (1817). Mary performed the mezzo-soprano/contralto role of Angelina (Cinderella. Cenerentola). She sang in English.

Gioachino Rossini, *La Donna del Lago* (1819). Mary performed, *en travesti*, the contralto role of Malcom (Malcolm) Groeme (Graeme), Rebel Chieftain and Elena's lover. She sang in Italian. She also sang the role in English. The Queen and Prince Albert attended her performance on 28 February, 1843.

Gioachino Rossini, *Semiramide* (1823). Mary performed the contralto role of Arsace, commander of the Assyrian army. She sang in Italian. She also sang the role in English.

## Appendix 2

# Main Performance Venues

**Bath:** Concert Rooms; Theatre Royal

**Berlin:** Royal Palace; Italian Opera House

**Birmingham:** Town Hall; King's Theatre

**Blackheath:** Green Man Assembly Rooms

**Bolton:** Town Hall, Little Bolton

**Brighton:** The Colonnade

**Camberwell:** St George's Church

**Canterbury:** Concert Rooms

**Cheltenham**

**Dessau**

**Dresden:** Theatre

**Dublin:** Theatre Royal

**Dumfries**

**Edinburgh:** Assembly Rooms; Hopetoun Rooms; Music Hall, George Street

**Exeter:** Royal Subscription Rooms

**Gloucester:** Cathedral

**Greenwich:** Lecture Hall; Railway Station Room

**Hackney:** Memorial Assembly Rooms

**Hadleigh:** Parish Church; Town Hall

**Hammersmith**

**Hull:** Music Hall; Jarratt Street Public Rooms

**Kennington:** Tavern Assembly Rooms

**Leipzig:** Gewandhaus Concert Hall

**Liverpool:** St Luke's Church; Royal Amphitheatre; St Peter's Church

**London:** Bridge House Hotel; Concert Rooms, Cavendish Square; Concert Rooms, Hanover Square; Crosby Hall; Earl of Wilton's House, Grosvenor Square; English Opera House; Exeter

Hall; Freemasons' Tavern; Hall of Commerce, Threadneedle Street; Her Majesty's Theatre; Kensington Palace; King's Theatre; Lansdowne House; Literary Institution, Beaumont Square; London Institution; London Tavern, Bishopsgate; Madame Dulchen's Residence; Mansion House; Mrs Billing's House, Bedford Place; Music Hall, Store Street; Princess Theatre; Royal Academy of Music, Tenterden Street; 7, Park Crescent; St James's Palace; Theatre Royal, Covent Garden; Theatre Royal, Drury Lane; Theatre Royal, Haymarket; Westminster Abbey

**Manchester:** Collegiate Church; Theatre Royal; Concert Hall; Assembly Rooms; Free Trade Hall

**Milan:** Teatro alla Scala; Navona Theatre

**Morpeth:** Court House

**Naples:** Lady Drummond's

**Newcastle-upon-Tyne:** Assembly Rooms

**Norwich:** St Andrew's Hall

**Prague**

**Salisbury**

**Trieste:** Grande Teatro

**Turin:** Teatro Carignano; Teatro Regio

**Udine:** Opera House

**Venice:** La Fenice

**Vienna:** Imperial Theatre; before the Court

**Watford:** Freemasons' Hall

**Weimar**

**Woodford**

**York:** Minister; Concert Room



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'Friends and contemporaries of Mary Postens (Mrs Alfred Shaw)'. Page of photographs in 'Postans Family Records. Portraits, etc.' [Postans Collection: Ightham Mote Archives].

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