Victorian Vocalists

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ALBERTINI, Augusta [AITCHI(N)SON, Augusta Rosina] (b Bristol, bap 5 June 1823; d Florence, Italy, 23 January 1898)

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ALBERTINI, AUGUSTA [AITCHI(N)]
SON, AUGUSTA ROSINA

(b Bristol, bap 5 June 1823; d Florence, Italy, 23 January 1898)

Augusta Albertini was undoubtedly one of the outstanding English sopranos to be heard on European operatic stages in the 1840s and 1850s. She was well enough considered in Italy that she was one of just four British vocalists whom the important music and theatre writer Francesco Regli thought worthy of inclusion in his celebrated (and much plundered) operatic who’s who of the 1860s. However, since she lived almost the whole of her life in Europe, and her only substantial professional visit to Britain lasted but one short season, her reputation in her ‘home country’ was limited. Not so on the Continent.

‘La Albertini’ was reportedly (and actually) born with the surname of Aitcheson or Aitchison or Aitchinson. The reason that I couldn’t, for years, be more precise than that is that she was always said to have been born not in Britain, but in Europe of British parents. I even found a couple of second-hand references – including one in an Enciclopedia dello spettacolo – which averred that she was born in Florence. Alas, I had not the Florentine birth registers at my command, so I could confirm neither that, nor the spelling of her birth name, nor indeed the date of her birth, but persistence pays, and, as you will see above and below, when I had long finished compiling this article, I ultimately cracked her.

I could have cracked her earlier, had I dug up Lusitanian Sketches of the Pen and Pencil (1845) by W H G Kingston (author of ‘The Circassian Chief’, ‘The Prime Minister’, etc), which describes the Lisbon musical scene of the 1840s and reveals her identity. Kingston also describes her: ‘Her figure is very elegant, though small, her features engaging, her eyes dark, with much expression, and her forehead high and expansive … her voice is sweet, powerful and flexible … She is capable, with the greatest apparent ease, of mounting to the highest notes, and her low ones are particularly fine. I have never seen an actress with such complete abandonment of self.’ Regli says simply that Albertini was ‘of a distinguished English family’ and that her mother was a well-known amateur pianist and harpist. He also records that she pursued her early studies in Florence, with Geremia Sbolci and Ferdinando Ceccherini, at the Accademia delle Belle Arte of that city, then subsequently with Giuliani and definitively with Carolina Ungher. Which sounds logical.

I find a first mention in print of ‘la giovine signora Albertini’ (as opposed to the older Chiara Marchesini Albertini or the prima donna buffa Virginia Albertini) making what was, however, apparently not her first appearance at the Bologna Casino in February 1842. And she apparently took her first theatrical engagement, ‘at the age of seventeen’ (she was 20), at the Teatro San Carlo in Lisbon, beginning on 7 March 1844. Her debut was in the title-role in Parisina (‘Frl Albertini ist in der Parisina mit sehr günstigen Erfolge aufgetreten’). Soon after her arrival at the San Carlo, a new tenor, Enrico Tamberlik, joined the company, and the two highly successful young singers were featured opposite each other in a series of the theatre’s productions.
Augusta Albertini

Augusta remained at Lisbon through to mid-1845, singing Elizabeth to the Mary of Giovanna Rossi-Caccia in *Maria Stuarda*, in *Adelia* and, alongside Tamberlik, the title-role of the two versions of *Gemma di Vergy*, otherwise *Gabriella di Vergy*. She sang in *Nina pazza per l’amore*, in *Nabucco*, as Leonora in *La favorita* and as Giselda in *I Lombardi*, and she and Tamberlik made a particular hit together in *Ernani* (1 January 1845). The pair continued on to Oporto (where Mr Kingston saw her and, he tells us, mother came too), to Cadiz (so he says) and to Madrid, where the Albertini-Tamberlik duo fulfilled another substantial engagement at the Teatro del Circo, opening on 10 August with Donizetti’s *Adelia* (‘not fully recovered from illness’), and going on to play *La sonnambula, La favorita* (20 November) and *Gemma di Vergy* with Ferlotti (10 December).

Albertini apparently remained in Spain in 1846, but the next time I spot her is in 1847 in, of all places, London. The Italian Opera at Her Majesty’s Theatre was playing ‘extra nights’ at the end of the season, and Mlle Albertini ‘of the Royal Italian Theatres of Madrid and Lisbon’ was cast to sing one performance as Adalgisa in *Norma* (15 July). The role of Norma was sung by Jenny Lind.

In early 1848, Augusta made her first appearance in Rome: ‘an English girl, a pupil of Carolina Ungher’, reported the British music press of her debut in *Norma*, alongside the celebrated Ivanhoff, ‘who has grown very fat’. ‘A young singer of great merit, named Albertini, has made a great hit at Rome in *I masnadieri*’, reported another. During that season she seems also to have sung in *Nabucco*. From Rome, she continued on to the Teatro Comunale of Bologna, where she played in Sanelli’s *Gennaro Annese*, singing Catherine Hayes’s role of Adele alongside Emilio Naudin (Toraldo) and Cesare Badiali (Annese), in *Lucia di Lammermoor* and in *I masnadieri*, and in February 1849 I spot her singing more *I masnadieri* at Modena. She made the international papers when her performances were made the target of a bit of tawdry political demonstrativeness.

In May 1849, La Albertini was engaged at the San Carlo in Naples, where she again sang in *I masnadieri*, this time alongside Felice Varesi and the tenor Carlo Baucarde. The paths of the prima donna and the tenor soon parted – Baucarde went to London and made a British debut opposite Sonntag in *Luisa Miller*, while Augusta went back to Rome, to the Teatro Apollo, where she had ‘culled glowing laurels two years earlier’ and where her co-prima donna was Clara Novello – but they would soon be back together again.

At the Teatro Apollo she sang in *Matilde di Shabran* (and doubtless others) over the Carnevale season before moving on to sing *Macbeth* and *Luisa Miller* with Marcucci and Colini at the June fiera festival at Forli. ‘The audience surged up from their seats with excitement’, reported the music press. Albertini made an unscheduled trip to Faenza to replace an ailing Salvini-Donatelli in *I masnadieri* (and apparently inserted arias by Pacini and Sanelli) before, still under the management of the Marzi brothers, continuing to the new Teatro Ventidio Basso, Ascoli, where she and Naudin gave *Luisa Miller* for the opening of the theatre (26 October 1850).

When Augusta again returned to the Tordinona in Rome, for Carnevale 1850–1 to sing *Luisa Miller*, the tenor was booted off the stage after Act I, and the management had hastily to call in Naudin. *I due Foscari* and *Stiffelio*, played as *Guiglielmo Wellingrode*, with Naudin and Ferlotti (‘admirable’) were also played, and the London *Morning Post* picked up that ‘the prima donna is a young Englishwoman, who appears by the name of Signora Albertini.’

Augusta was now capturing general attention and, when she went for Quaresima to Florence, even the French music press reported: ‘Mme Albertini fait la grande sensation en ce moment au théâtre de Pergola à Florence. Le journal *L’Arte*, qui se publie dans cette ville, assure que cette cantatrice n’a plus de rivale en Italie, surtout dans la musique de Verdi. Elle vient de jouer *Luisa Miller* avec un succès qui rappelle les plus beaux triomphes des Malibran, des Pasta, des Frezzolini.’

During 1851 ‘la Albertini’ was seen around Italy. After Rome and Florence, she went with tenor Malvezzi and baritone Varesi to Ferrara and Forli (*Luisa Miller, I Lombardi, Maria di Rohan*, etc), then on to Sinagaglia, where she was reunited with Baucarde (*Luisa Miller, Attila, Parisina*, etc). ‘She goes to Trieste for the autumn, Genoa for the carnival and in the spring to Vienna, and she is already engaged for next year’s carnival at Turin.’ In August, she was giving her *Luisa Miller* at the Teatro Comunale in Fermo.
Augusta Albertini

Around this time, the journal *France Musicale* reported that Carlo Baucarde had wed a soprano in Madrid. The lady was named as the French diva Noémie de Roissi. Whether this was correct, an error of reportage or malicious gossip, I do not know. But Augusta Albertini – whose name had previously been romantically linked with the baritone Giovanni Battista Bencich and the tenor Fraschini – was to be very obviously ‘Madame Baucarde’ till the end of the tenor’s life. Maybe it was she whom he married and *France Musicale* got its sopranos wrong. Or maybe not. Augusta wasn’t billed as Madame Albertini-Baucarde for another five years yet. And she sang alongside Bencich frequently.

In November, at the Gran Teatro Civile, Trieste, Augusta sang Rigoletto (‘furore’), Luisa Miller, I Lombardi and Armando il gondoliero with Gaetano Ferri and Settimo Malvezzi, and the gossip seeped into the world’s music papers: ‘The papers talk of an English girl performing at Trieste destined they say to become the rival of Lind and Grisi …’ – as *La Fama* printed a laudatory acrostic on her name.

At the Carlo Felice, Genoa, she sang the title-role in Chiaramonte’s unsuccessful Giovanna di Castiglia (12 February 1852: ‘O Filippo, tu soltante’) and appeared as Lady Macbeth, after which she progressed to the Merelli Italian opera at the Kärntnertor Theater in Vienna, where Baucarde was principal tenor (Linda di Chamounix, I puritani). She returned to scenes of her triumphs in Trieste in the autumn, with Rigoletto, Stiffelio, Luisa Miller, I puritani and Nicola de Giosa’s Folo d’Arles and took the title-role in the premiere of Maria di Brabante by Achille Graffi na, alongside Bencich and Fraschini. Both of them.

At the end of 1852, Augusta moved on to the Teatro Regio in Turin (Robert le diable, Luisa Miller – ‘success trionfale’ – and Rossini’s Stabat Mater), and in the autumn of 1853 she and Baucarde created Pollione Ronzi’s Gastone d’Anversa alongside I due Foscarì and Il trovatore at the Pergola in Florence.

Baucarde, meanwhile, had fulfilled a much more important new performance when he had created the title-role of Manrico in Verdi’s Il trovatore, and on 26 December 1853 Augusta, teamed with Mirate, Bencich and Secchi-Corsi, introduced that opera to Venice, at the Teatro Fenice, with an ‘esito clamoroso’ ‘ha piaciuto immensamente’ ‘cresce sempre in successo’. ‘Madame Albertini’ was also seen in a remake of I Lombardi, in Rossini’s Otello, in Rigoletto with the same co-stars, and in Pacini’s new La punizione (8 March 1854, Lidia) during the Carnevale.

In 1854, I sight Augusta in May at Ravenna (Rigoletto, played as Viscardello, Maria di Rohan), then at Lucca (Il trovatore, Viscardello with Giuglioni), for the autumn season at Treviso (Luisa Miller with both Baucarde and Bencich) and, finally, at La Scala di Milano, where she opened the season on Boxing Day singing Petrella’s Marco Visconti with Raffaele Mirate and Gaetano Ferri. One critic reported: ‘[she has] a powerful voice but not of the most agreeable quality particularly in the upper register.’ It was a niggle which would be repeated on occasion, particularly by those critics with a devotion to bel canto. Albertini was, however, an undoubted success, ‘molti applausi e appellazioni’, and she went on – while Eliza Hensler gave Linda di Chamounix, Giuseppina Sanchioli Il barbiere and La vestale, and Catherine Goldberg-Strossi Nabucco – to star with Mirate, Ferri and de Gianni-Vives in Il trovatore (17 January 1855) to a rapturous reception, Chiaramonte’s unfortunate Ives de Mendoza (14 February 1855, ‘canta maestrevolmente’), Rigoletto and I Lombardi. A summary of the carnival season’s performances reported that Il trovatore had been played 24 of the 64 nights, and that the outstanding stars among the season’s artists had been Albertini, Mirate and Ferri.

As the music press buzzed with reports of mirabolific offers from overseas turned down, Baucarde and Albertini – now definitely a pair – moved on to the Teatro Paganini of Genoa (9 April), where they performed together in Rigoletto (‘L’Albertini a fait admirer sa magnifique voix et son exquisite méthode’), I due Foscarì (‘nuove palme’) and Il trovatore, and thence to Treviso (Il trovatore with … Baucarde and Bencich) and the Teatro Comunale of Bologna, where they also appeared as Alfredo and Violetta in La traviata (played as Violella) (22 November: ‘recalled three times after the first act, we have rarely here been the witness of a triumph more complete’; ‘au-dessus même de sa grande reputation’), the San Benedetto of Venice (I Lombardi) and the Teatro Filarmonico of Verona (Il trovatore, Giovanna di Guzman).
The *Musical World* reported ‘Mme Albertini Baucarde née Aitcheson, one of the most finished artists in Italy, has a lucrative engagement at Verona … a young Englishwoman whose great powers as a singer and actress have recently created a strong sensation throughout Italy.’ It seems to have been on this occasion that she was heard by Meyerbeer, who noted: ‘Madame Albertini, an Englishwoman, must once have had a really fine voice, in the mode of Cruvelli; the middle and lower registers are still lovely, but the higher, while still strongly resonant, is already.’ Showing a little wear and tear, is that what he means?

Yet when the pair appeared at the Teatro delle Antiche Stinche, Florence, in May 1856, in *Giovanna di Guzman*, they were cheered to the echo, their next performances were sold out in advance, and on their last night Augusta was dragged back to repeat the bolero, and the trio from *I Lombardi* one more time, at the end of the show … while the French press declared: ‘L’Albertini a chanté à perfection’.

The couple continued on from their Florentine triumph to Benjamin Lumley’s Italian opera season at London’s Her Majesty’s Theatre. It was a season in which it would be hard to make an effect, given that it included the sensational debut of Maria Piccolomini in *La traviata* and the adored performances of Marietta Alboni, but if Baucarde was judged to be on the decline (the Miserere had to be transposed down for him) in comparison with his appearances of half a dozen years earlier, his wife won sufficient plaudits in her performance (2 June 1856) of *Il trovatore*:

… she is tall and slight, stately and dignified in deportment and her countenance beams with intelligence. Madame Albertini made an even deeper impression by her singing than by her looks and demeanour. Her voice is a pure and splendid soprano of great power and compass, the low notes rich and full, the middle ones strong and clear, and the upper tones – except one or two which are rather worn and fatigued by ‘hallooing’ and singing of Verdi – brilliant and resonant as a bell. Madame Albertini’s sotto voce singing is exquisite and she has a perfect shake on several divisions of the scale – a very rare gift. Moreover her intonation is faultless.

Another paper chipped in:

[she is] worthy of her Italian reputation … a powerful tragic actress and an accomplished singer … a pure soprano of great power and compass. In quality too it is fine … in pathetic passages when she subdues her voice its high tones are often exceedingly sweet and her ‘dying falls’ — sustained sounds gradually diminished to an extreme pianissimo are often as exquisite as anything we have ever heard. Her execution is clear articulate and brilliant … We do not know her age, but her powers seem to be fully matured and she is a finished and cultivated artist.

The anti-Verdians, of course, had their word, but guardedly, for it was clear that the new prima donna was a successful artist:

Mlle Albertini is an English lady who has become in Italy a mistress of her art and, as a favourite prima donna of the Italians, has shrieked for them the songs of their beloved Verdi until her voice has been we fear a little (certainly only a little and in its least valuable part) damaged by the exercise. Her perfect success in her own country will give her occasion, we trust, to sing in London, season after season.

News seeped across the Atlantic too, and America was able to read:

She has been before the public a good many years and has established her reputation as an accomplished singer and a powerful tragedian. Her figure is tall and commanding and her features,
though perhaps not regularly handsome, are striking and impressive. Her voice is a real soprano, of great power and compass, though it seems to have suffered a little in the highest part of the scale, probably in consequence of her being accustomed to sing the music of Verdi, which tries severely the strongest voice. Madame Albertini in order to give her high notes sufficient power is apt to force her voice too much and make it somewhat shrill and piercing. Notwithstanding this defect, however, her voice is a superb organ and she uses it like a most accomplished artist. Her execution is clear and brilliant and her method of vocalization is that of the best Italian school. She is peculiarly excellent in the delivery of recitative … Everything she does both as an actress and a singer, is full of intelligence and feeling.

After *Il trovatore*, Augusta was brought out in *Lucrezia Borgia*, and the music press found her ‘hardly seen to as much advantage in her second part as her first … but occasionally in her acting and her singing [she] created an immense sensation. “Com’è bello” was charmingly given and she showed real dramatic power in Act I finale.’ Elsewhere, it was agreed that, in spite of the hovering shadow of Grisi in the role, she had been ‘highly and deservedly successful’.

At the end of the opera season, the couple sang in concert, but when they were engaged for the Liverpool Philharmonic Concerts they found on their arrival that there were no parts for the orchestra. The management had expected them to bring their own, like some variety act. The pair departed, leaving such as the pontifical H F Chorley to sneer at ‘these Italians who come to England and expect to take it by storm’. Albertini, he pouted, had a good voice, but ‘without a spark of musical or dramatic intelligence’. More intelligently, Lumley, in his memoirs, reported that her good work had simply been overlooked in the fanatical fashion that had developed around Piccolomini.

Back in Italy, Mme Albertini returned to the Fenice for the autumn (*Giovanna di Guzman*, *Gemma di Vergy*, etc) and to Rome for Carnevale (*Pacini’s La punizione* and Petrella’s new but unsuccessful *L’assedio di Leida*). She appeared for the faithful Marzi brothers at Mantova during Primavera, at Florence (*Giovanna di Guzman*, *Simone Boccanegra*, and as Potiphar’s wife in Pietro Raimondi’s oratorio *Joseph*), and at the end of 1857 she reappeared at La Scala, also now under the Marzi management, to repeat *Giovanna di Guzman* and to introduce Petrella’s new *Ione, ovvero L’ultimo giorni di Pompeii* (26 January 1858). *Ione* was played 26 times, unlike Vincenzo Lutti’s *Berengario d’Ivrea*, in which Augusta sang the role of Adelaide, and which folded after one night. She also appeared in *Nabucco*. However, ‘la egregia Albertini’ took a while to get into her stride, and it was reported that in certain circles she was being referred to as ‘l’ombra’.

Later that year, I spot the couple at the Teatro Sociale, Rovigo, in *Il trovatore* and *La favorita*, in the summer Fiera at Udine (*I vespri siciliani*, *Lucrezia Borgia*, *I due Foscari*), and Augusta sang at Milan’s Teatro Radegonda on the occasion of the debut of the young English baritone Alberto Laurence in *Beatrice di Tenda*. Evidently her Italian upbringing hadn’t helped her mastery of the tongue. One paper wrote that the baritone ‘sang in Turkish and she in Chinese’!

In 1859, after it had been announced that she was ‘held in London by private engagements’ and would not accompany her husband to America, Augusta arrived in New York on the *Ocean Queen* on 25 October; interestingly, she gave her principal residence to the officials of America not as Italy but as France. The couple began their performances, under the management of Bernard Ullman, at the New York Academy of Music. Augusta made her debut in *Lucrezia Borgia*, alongside Baucarde, Ardavani and Mme d’Ormy, and the *New York Herald*, more accustomed to hurl forth exaggerated flights of language, simply agreed: ‘All the artists acquitted themselves well, and Madam Albertini was particularly good. She gave to the music a degree of passionate intensity which electrified the audience. The great scene in the second act has rarely been so well expressed here’; ‘[she has] a fine mezzo soprano voice of good quality and compass, her method is good and her acting appropriate and vivacious.’
Augusta Albertini

She followed up in *Il trovatore* and *Poliuto*, handicapped by an under-the-weather tenor, before moving to Niblo’s (12 December 1859). When, on 14 January, she sang the *Pirata* duet and a Pacini *Niobe* aria in concert, the press commented: ‘The *Pirata* duet was given with all that precision and elegance which distinguish the vocalism of these artists who are, perhaps, the most purely Italian in their method of any now in this country.’

The couple appears to have travelled from America, to the south, but they were back in Italy by Carnevale 1860–1, which they spent at Reggio Emilia.

Following her return to Italy, Madame Albertini was rather less prominent than before. I spot her in the early 1860s at Milan, at Malaga and, of course, at Florence, where she seems, as often as not, to have taken part in society musical occasions with such as the ‘Marchese Maria Piccolomini’ or the English tenor Tom Hohler. It was not until 1872, however, that she formally announced her retirement. In English. In the British press: ‘Florence: Mme Albertini Baucarde (late prima donna of the Theatres Royal La Scala, San Carlo, etc) having relinquished public engagements has decided to give lessons in singing at her residence No 12 Piazza dell Indipendenza, Florence.’

Baucarde, whose career, it was said, had been prematurely ended by a penchant for the bottle and ‘exhaustion due to the excitement of gambling’, died on 22 January 1883. His wife, or ‘wife’, continued to teach music (and to sing in the odd local concert) in Florence up to her death in 1898. The most successful among her pupils was the soprano Clementine de Vere Sapio.

Described during her career as ‘una di più encomiate prime donne’, and ‘une des meilleures chanteuses d’Italie’, ‘Madame Albertini’ had made and kept her fame very largely in Europe, but throughout — and it may have been her Italian pronunciation! — she was referred to inevitably as ‘an English prima donna’ — she who not only sang but little in Britain but apparently rarely even visited the country. She is also referred to as ‘eccentric’ and ‘difficult’ and her career as ‘brilliant’, but ‘agitato’. She is further cited as being responsible for keeping Baucarde on the stage after his voice was gone. But the last word lies with Verdi, who wrote that he could not have Albertini for his new opera because he wouldn’t put up with her argumentative (etc) husband. Just a typical 19th-century Italian opera couple, it seems …

So. The identity. And how I found it.

Augusta left a will in her native country. £398 11s 2d to be administered by one Mrs Ellen Ada Daniel. I clearly had to investigate. Well, to see if Ellen Ada was an Aitchinson. You never know. But Ellen (d 1902) was born in Bristol as Ellen Ada Phipps Hood, the daughter of one Stephen Hood, a commercial traveller, and his wife Letitia, née Morgan (d 1843). Not a relation, it seems. A friend …?

But there was an Augusta Aitchinson born in Britain round this era. Augusta Rosina Aitchinson, daughter of James and Eliza Ellen Aitchinson, was baptised on 5 June 1823 at — guess where — St Stephens, Bristol, even though James and Eliza Ann (sic) were spelled ‘Aitchison’ on their wedding registration (Westbury-on-Trym, 20 August 1822). And the new Mrs Aitchison was … née Morgan, ‘the youngest daughter of Mr John Morgan of Queen’s Square of this city [Bristol]’. Connection made! Morgan. Identity proven.

So, Augusta was not born in Florence at all. She was born in Bristol. And Augusta and Ellen were cousins. I don’t know if the Morgans were ‘distinguished’ and whether the Morgan girls played the harp, but one of them married a commercial traveller.

James and Eliza Aitchison do not appear in any other British documents after their marriage and the birth of their daughter, so I imagine they did emigrate. To Florence? Why? I guess that’s another tale for someone to investigate.

But Augusta’s origins? Found.