Stealing the Opera in the Georgian Era:
Tracing Michael Kelly and the Forty Thieves

by Matthew Kelly

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Author Biography

Matt Kelly is graduating summa cum laude from Christopher Newport University with a Bachelor of Music with Distinction in Vocal Performance and a minor in Leadership Studies. Mr. Kelly was part of the President’s Leadership Program and the Honors Program and holds a Service Distinction. This summer he will perform in 44 performances with the Ohio Light Opera Company then head straight to Indiana where he will begin studies for a Master of Sacred Music degree at the University of Notre Dame. A musician equally comfortable onstage and in the stacks, Matthew Kelly first encountered Michael Kelly when preparing to sing the role of Don Basilio/Curzio and decided to further his studies of the composer while browsing the Josephine L. Hughes collection. This paper was presented at the 2015 Paideia conference where Matthew Kelly sang “Ah! What is the Bosom’s commotion” accompanied by Dr. Danielle Ward-Griffin on piano.

Abstract

The Josephine L. Hughes Collection (JLH) is home to rare American music, providing a glimpse into the musical life of the American parlor in the South. One might be surprised to discover the Georgian era opera aria, “Ah! What is the Bosom’s Commotion” from The Forty Thieves by Michael Kelly in the collection. This song provides a point of departure into the life of a musician and a period of music that has almost entirely escaped academic attention. A prolific composer, performer, producer, and publisher at the famous Theatre Royal Drury Lane, Michael Kelly’s contribution to opera in the Georgian era deserves attention.

Drawing upon Kelly’s memoirs and clues found in the score, this paper pieces together the history of the aria from its inspiration and performance through its printing and arrival into an American collection. The work’s premiere coincides with a period of great mourning in Kelly’s life, which I argue is expressed in the drama of the aria. Furthermore, based on first person accounts of Kelly’s singing, I demonstrate how he used various compositional techniques to highlight his own vocal strengths. Finally, I situate the score in the context of music publishing in the Georgian era and suggest that the copy of “Ah! What is the Bosom’s commotion” contained in the JLH Collection is likely a bootleg version printed down the street from Kelly’s own shop. Developing upon Girdham’s work on Kelly’s predecessor, Stephen Storace, this paper provides academic entry into one of Georgian opera’s most active men.
The Josephine L. Hughes Collection (JLH) is home to many rare pieces and editions that provide a glimpse into the musical life of the American parlor in the South. While the American compositions and publications comprise the backbone of the collection, a sense of the performing tradition in the United States can be gained by examining the international works. One might be surprised to find the music of a Georgian Era opera composer in the collection. English opera in the Georgina Era (1714-1837 or the period between Handel and Gilbert and Sullivan) is all but entirely exempt from the Western performing canon and is rarely studied. The JLH collection is fortunate to possess music by Michael Kelly including, “Ah! What is the Bosom’s Commotion” from *The Forty Thieves*, a setting of Hamlet’s letter to Ophelia, “I Fondly Turn to Thee Mary,” “Rest! Warrior Rest,” “Flora McDonald,” “Here’s a Health to Thee,” and the most famous of his compositions, *The Woodpecker*, with text by Thomas Moore. In particular, “Ah! What is the Bosom’s commotion” provides a point of departure into the life of the prolific composer and performer as well as the operatic climate in which he lived. Michael Kelly left behind an extremely detailed two volume memoir that helps place the song in its historical context and offers many insights into the musical tradition from which it is derived. A detailed look into Kelly’s memoirs and the score in the JLH collection uncovers hidden secrets of the aria’s journey from the mind of the composer to the printing press.

Michael Kelly (1762-1826) was an Irish born tenor who spent most of his operatic career in London. After getting his start performing abroad in continental Europe, even premiering the comic roles of the conniving Don Basilio and the very incompetent, stuttering lawyer Don Curzio in *Le nozze di Figaro* by Mozart, Kelly spent the majority of his musical career in London at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane, the most highly regarded opera house London after Covent Garden. Michael Kelly had his hands on almost every aspect of the opera: he was the leading tenor at Drury Lane for multiple decades, allegedly composed more than 60 operas, produced many shows, managed the Italian opera, procured French operas for the English stage, and even ran a music publishing company at 9 Pall Mall. Though he was a prolific composer, he is remembered today almost exclusively for premiering Don Curzio.

Recalling Kelly through his compositions, however, allows deeper insights into the man’s life, with “Ah! What is the Bosom’s commotion” revealing a unique perspective on Kelly’s many talents. *The Forty Thieves* premiered at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane in April 1806. Receiving a very brief mention in his memoirs, it appears *The Forty Thieves* was an average work for Kelly. As Kelly was a popular and prolific composer in his day, one might therefore take *The Forty Thieves* to be representative of the Georgian Opera era.

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as well. According to the composer it was a “splendid spectacle” with a “very great run.” Kelly notes that the spectacle included acting, singing, and dancing by the main character Morgiana, played by a Miss Decamp. The subtitle on the score reads “sung by Mr. Kelly in the Grand Dramatic Romance of The Forty Thieves.” As this aria is sung to Morgiana, it is likely that Kelly was playing the male lead opposite Miss Decamp. According to musicologist Jane Girdham, it is very difficult to distinguish between plays and operas of this era in British theater. Neither critics, composers, nor publishers were consistent in the terms they assigned to stage works. Operas contained spoken dialogue (much like the German singspiel) and plays traditionally contained music. Based on Kelly’s description of The Forty Thieves as a “splendid” spectacle and the description given in the title, the work can be best described using the terms of the Georgian era as a “musical spectacle” or “musical romance.” According to Girdham, the classifications assigned in the Georgian era typically contained the word “opera” or “musical” and then some sort of modifier such as comic, farce, romance, drama, or entertainment. The modifier is there simply to suggest themes in the work, thus the exotic themes in The Forty Thieves might have led to its classification as a spectacle.

The Forty Thieves is based on the folktale, “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves” from the Arabian Nights folktale collection. Ali Baba, the hero who eventually acquires a great treasure, works together with his slave Marjeneh, who uses her wits to save Ali Baba from the forty thieves on multiple occasions. This aria is sung by Ali Baba to Marjeneh, rendered in this English version as Morgiana. The aria seems to contain two verses, but it makes more sense dramatically for the second verse to be a reprise from the end of the show. Ali Baba gives Marjeneh to his son in marriage at the end of the story, described in the text of the second verse: “Love made by a Parent my duty.” The first verse may refer to Ali Baba’s feeling deceived by Marjeneh when she kills an enemy thought to be a friend by Ali Baba, or it may be a romantic plot modification between Morgiana and Ali Baba, which occurred in the Orientalist 1944 Hollywood movie adaptation. The dramatic side of the musical romance is certainly demonstrated in the text of “Ah! What is the Bosom’s commotion,” which reads as follows:

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1
Ah what is the bosom’s commotion
In a sea of suspense while ‘tis lost
While the heart, in our passion’s wild ocean
Feels even hope’s anchor is lost:
While the heart in our passion’s wild ocean
Feels even Hope’s anchor lost.
Morgiana thou art my dearest:
For thee I have languish’d and griev’d,
For thee I have languish’d and griev’d.
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5 Michael Kelly, 2:212-213.
8 Ibid., 322.
9 Girdham, 322.
10 Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, directed by Arthur Lubin (Universal Pictures 1944), Youtube video. This movie and other adaptations tend to hypersexualize Marjeneh and her the love interest of all male characters.
And when Hope to my bosom was nearest
How oft’ has that hope been deceiv’d
And when Hope to my bosom was nearest
How oft’ has that hope been deceiv’d
Morgiana my hope was deceiv’d
Morgiana my hope was deceiv’d

2
The Storm of despair is blown over,
No more by its Vapour depress’d
I laugh at the clouds of a Lover,
With the sunshine of Joy in my breast.
Love made by a Parent my duty,
To the wish of my heart now arriv’d,
I bend to the power of Beauty,
And ev’ry fond hope is reviv’d.
Morgiana my hope is reviv’d.

The lyrics to the first verse contain many references to lost hope and deception which may have real life implications for the drama in Kelly’s personal life at the time The Forty Thieves was produced. Furthermore, the majority of lines are repeated, indicating a very pensive character. Michael Kelly’s The Forty Thieves was produced shortly after the death of Arna Maria Crouch, Kelly’s very close friend who sang the lead soprano roles opposite his leading tenor at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane for many years.\(^{11}\) In this dramatic aria sung to the leading soprano one gets a sense of the personal mourning Kelly was experiencing in the text. Kelly recalls wanting to quit acting altogether at this stage of his life; given his state at the time of the production, the mourning and repeated lines of hopelessness in the aria suggest that he may not have needed to act.\(^{12}\)

The music itself appears less affected than the text might suggest. Given that the aria was sung by Kelly, it is interesting to note that the aria has a range and tessitura much lower than the role of Don Basilio/Curzio. Whereas Curzio especially sings the majority of the time above the staff, “Ah! What is the Bosom’s commotion” does not go above an F#. Kelly was in his 40s during the premiere of The Forty Thieves and may not have had the same range as his younger days. His memoirs recall an invitation to sing Ferrando in Cosi fan tutte at the end of his career.\(^ {13}\) The key, range, and melodic contour of “Ah! What is the Bosom’s commotion” follow Ferrando’s aria, “Un’aura amorosa” very closely and it is possible that Kelly was thinking of Ferrando as he composed this aria. Figures 1 and 2 resemble the similarities found in the opening measures of the two arias.

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\(^{11}\) Kelly, 2:211.
\(^{12}\) Ibid., 212.
\(^{13}\) Ibid., 271.
He certainly wrote the vocal line to highlight his strengths. Based on an account of the aria given in an American journal regarding the performance of *The Forty Thieves*, it appears that “Ah! What is the Bosom’s commotion” was a vocal thriller. *The Halcyon Luminary* describes the American performance as follows:

> This highly and very justly admired song has met a deserved reception on our stage. It is performed by Mr. Darley, with the exquisite effect which ever accompanies that gentleman’s execution of the vocal tasks assigned to his profession.\(^\text{14}\)

This aria was written to put the tenor’s voice on display. Kelly was distinguished among other tenors of his day for his ability to sing high notes in full voice, not resorting to falsetto.\(^\text{15}\) One critic recalled how Kelly’s ability to sing ascending intervals in full voice “often electrified an audience.”\(^\text{16}\) Kelly knew this strength of his as the dramatic moments occur on ascending fifths and sixths and the climax of the aria is on an octave leap. For example, there is a major sixth leap to bring out the word “languish’d” in measure 23, and

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\(^{15}\) A. Hyatt King, introduction to *Reminiscences of Michael Kelly of the King’s Theatre and Theatre Royal Drury Lane*, by Michael Kelly (New York: Da Capo Press, 1968), ix.

\(^{16}\) Ibid.
Kelly also employs word painting in measure 15. As the singer laments, "even Hope's anchor is lost" there is an ascending leap on the second syllable of "anchor." These devices can be seen in Figures 3 and 4 below.

![Figure 3. mm. 23.](image1)

![Figure 4. mm. 15.](image2)

Kelly even indulges himself with a fermata over a high F# leading into the final cadence in measure 36. Kelly uses the lyrics and expressive melody to highlight his tenor voice and dramatic ability.

Harmonic variation is rather limited in this aria which is likely due to the compositional process behind The Forty Thieves and Kelly's other works. Unlike his friends and fellow composers Mozart, Salieri, Gluck, and Haydn, Kelly did not write his own accompaniments or harmonizations. Thomas Moore sheds light on Kelly's compositional process in a letter dating 1801, which poetically states: "Poor Mick is rather an imposer than a composer. He cannot mark the time in writing three bars of music; his understrappers, however, do all that for him." Kelly composed the melody which was then harmonized and orchestrated by his assistants. "Ah! What is the Bosom's commotion" is set in A major with an eight bar introduction. It is curious that such a lamenting song would be set in a major key. After an exposition of the melody, it passes through a V/V chord and ends solidly in a I, IV, I, V, I progression ending with a perfect authentic cadence. This is quite literally a textbook chord progression which reinforces the claim that Kelly's understrappers do his harmonizing for him. The accompaniment uses a broken chord Alberti bass pattern throughout. The aria is strophic and follows an ABA' form modulating to b minor in the B section. The introduction is quoted to close the aria with one key difference: The arch of the introduction peaks with a fortissimo pounding of a I\textsuperscript{M7} followed by a rapid scalar descent in the right hand. This same moment occurs at the close of the aria with but the chord spelled as a simple A major triad. Figure 5 demonstrates the I\textsuperscript{M7} chord in measure 5 while Figure 6 shows the I chord in measure 39.

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17 King, x.
One can be certain the I\textsuperscript{m7} at the beginning was a typo given the harmonic palette of the time. Moreover, if we compare this score to the American editions available online, we see that all other versions show a I chord. This choice also seems representative of the conservative harmonizations encountered in Kelly’s other works, specifically his most successful opera, Blue Beard.\textsuperscript{18} Another typo occurs in measure 11, shown in Figure 7, where an accidental is missing in the right hand of the accompaniment. While these typos may seem like careless mistakes made by the printers, they may contain great significance with regards to the printing and distribution of the sheet music.

At this point it is certainly relevant to ask how an aria from an almost forgotten Irish composer made its way into an American song collection. According to A. Hyatt King in the introduction to Kelly’s memoirs, his music “enjoyed considerable success in America.”\textsuperscript{19} Over two hundred separate issues of his music were published in major American cities during his lifetime, with his arias making up the bulk of the publications. Furthermore, it was not uncommon for his operas to be produced in America shortly after their premiers in London. There are seven different American publications of “Ah! What is the Bosom’s commotion,” all published within five years of the opera’s premiere.\textsuperscript{20} While Kelly’s music was published in multiple American cities, the Josephine L. Hughes collection is unique in that its three copies of “Ah! What is the Bosom’s commotion” were printed and sold in London. On the title


\textsuperscript{19} King, xiii.

\textsuperscript{20} These alternate editions were discovered through a search of the aria’s title on WorldCat.
page of the aria appears, “Printed and Sold by Chas. Christmas 36 Pall Mall.”

21 There is no copyright date provided on the score, however, the date of publication can be deduced from the printer’s name and location. One might presume that the printing is a first edition due to the typos in the music, but also due to the fact that it was printed by Chas. Christmas and not Falkener & Christmas. Michael Kelly’s publishing company occupied 9 Pall Mall (right next to the Theatre Royal Drury Lane) and 4 Pall Mall, while Charles Christmas sold from 36 Pall Mall; after going bankrupt in 1811, Kelly’s shop was acquired by a music publishing merger between H. Falkener & Chas. Christmas. 22 Since this copy was printed at 36 Pall Mall prior to the merger, it is likely that Michael Kelly was still publishing and selling at 9 Pall Mall when this copy was printed and sold. One online song database has dated the Charles Christmas edition to 1807, which is well within Kelly’s publishing career. 23 Michael Kelly states in his memoirs that he began his music publishing business for the purpose of selling his own compositions, therefore it is highly unlikely that Kelly sold the rights to his own music when he could have printed it himself. 24 Thus, it is probable that the edition of “Ah! What is the Bosom’s commotion” contained in the Josephine L. Hughes collection is a “bootleg” copy of Kelly’s aria. In the introduction to Kelly’s memoirs, King mentions that there were instances of publishers pirating Kelly’s music though mostly abroad in America or Ireland. 25 During this time period, however, it was also common for publishing companies to pirate the works of local composers within England. 26 The pirated editions would often include intentional errors in the score. 27 Considering the typos present in this edition, one can infer the Josephine L. Hughes copy was likely pirated just down the street from Michael Kelly.

Studying “Ah! What is the Bosom’s commotion” allows a glimpse into Georgian era opera from the stage to the printing press and across the ocean into the American Parlor. Using first hand accounts of Kelly’s singing combined with knowledge of his composing influences, such as Mozart, one can infer the stylistic tendencies of this aria in order to provide a well informed performance of a work that once thrilled audiences in England and America. Furthermore, despite the fact that Kelly’s works receive little attention today, the study helps provide insights that go beyond the music, particularly the illegal printing of the JIH collection’s edition. This information can help raise questions regarding the authenticity of other scores in the JIH collection. It is hoped that further research in the Josephine L. Hughes collection can discover more hidden treasures and fresh insights into the individual sheet music practices of the young United States.

21 Kelly, J.
24 Kelly, 163.
25 King, xiii.
26 Girdham, 167.
27 Girdham, 170.
Bibliography


