Henriette Sontag, Lithographie von Emma Mathieu, o. D.

**Henriette Sontag**

Merried name: Henriette Gertrude Rossi

Variants: Henriette Rossi, Henriette Sontag-Rossi, Henriette Gertrude Walpurga Sontag, Henriette Gertrude Walpurga Rossi, Henriette Gertrude Walpurga Sontag-Rossi

* 3 January 1806 in Koblenz, Deutschland
† 17 June 1854 in Mexiko Stadt, Nordamerika

Opera singer, soprano

"Although I cannot underline any single special characteristic of hers, her entire being is a gratifying and pleasant occurrence on the stage. She always knows how to favourably place her sweet person as the third, fourth, fifth, etc. amongst so many unfamiliar ones in a major theatre, and because she vocalises and articulates perfectly, her voice shines down like a clear star, even amongst the many stronger ones. Her face moves simultaneously with the melody as do her arms and hands; all this is not repeated, but remains the same whilst being new."


**Profile**

Henriette Sontag appeared in the major opera houses of Europe until she was 24 years of age. She made her stage debut at the Prague National Theatre, followed by further engagements in Vienna, Berlin, Paris and London. The singer was particularly famous in the role of Susanna in Mozart’s "Le Nozze di Figaro" and primarily sang roles of the light, brilliant range such as the title role in Rossini’s "Semiramide" and Amina in Bellini’s "La Sonnambula"; she is considered the most important coloratura soprano of her times. After her marriage to the diplomat Count Carlo Rossi, she bade farewell to the stage and dedicated herself exclusively to her husband and children. It was only in the revolutionary years of 1848/49, when the family’s financial situation had worsened, that Henriette Sontag returned to the stage. Although she was already 43 years old, she was able to resume her career without difficulty and celebrated great successes, also in America.

**Cities an countries**

Henriette Sontag appeared on all the major operatic stages of Central Europe until 1830. Her career began in Prague and continued in Vienna, Berlin, Paris and London. After her marriage to the diplomat Count Carlo Rossi, she only gave concerts sporadically and in private halls. The Rossi family first lived in Den Haag and Frankfurt/Main. For professional reasons, they moved to St. Petersburg and finally to Berlin. In 1849 Henriette Sontag resumed her career, singing in England and Scotland (Manchester, Birmingham, Southampton, Wright, Brighton, Liverpool, Edinburgh, Glasgow, York, Bristol, Exeter), appearing in London and Paris and touring through the most important German cities. She travelled to America in August 1852. She performed there in New York and made guest appearances in Philadelphia, Boston, Baltimore, Louisville, New Orleans, Cincinnati and Buffalo. The last place she lived was Mexico City.

**Biography**

Henriette Sontag was the daughter of the actor couple Franziska and Franz Sontag. She was already participating at theatrical performances by the age of five, still before she began her vocal training at the Prague Conservatory from 1817 until 1821. She made her debut as an opera singer in 1819 at the Pra-
gue Estate's Theatre as the Princess of Navarra in François Adrien Boieldieu's "Jean de Paris". Beginning in 1822 there followed guest appearances in Vienna, first at the Theater an der Wien and then at the Kärntnertor Court Theatre, where she attracted the attention of Carl Maria von Weber, who offered her the title role for the world premiere of his new opera "Euryanthe". In 1825, having become an established singer, she left Vienna and travelled via Leipzig to Berlin, where she first created a sensation at the Königstädtler Theatre and then at the Court Opera, being idolised by the Berliners ("Sontag Fever"). In 1826 Gioacchino Rossini brought her to Paris, where he had been director of the Théâtre Italien since 1824. In 1828 she introduced herself to the London public. After her marriage to the Sardinian diplomat Count Carlo Rossi in 1827, she gave up her career at the age of 24, whilst at the zenith of her success, in favour of her marriage; this career was regarded by her husband, Count Rossi, as not befitting her social status. Henriette Sontag continued to sing, but primarily in private circles.

After her husband's financial ruin during the March Revolution of 1848, she resumed her operatic career at the age of 43. She was able to continue the successes of her earlier career and even expand them, now also including dramatic roles such as Bellini's "Norma" in her repertoire. In order to ensure the family's financial security, she undertook a tour through America in 1852 which finally took her to Mexico. It was there that Henriette Sontag died of cholera in 1854.

More on Biography

Henriette Sontag was born in Koblenz on 3 January 1806. Her parents were the actor couple Franziska Sontag, nee Marckloff, and the actor and singer Franz Anton Sontag.

Henriette's name was first mentioned on a Darmstadt playbill, where she already participated as a five-year-old child in August von Kotzebue's one-act play "The Confession". The girl was soon entrusted with larger roles. After separating from her husband, Franziika Sontag accepted an engagement in Prague and moved to the Bohemian capital with her two children, Henriette and her younger sister Anna, called Nina. It was here that Henriette Sontag's musical education began: on 1 July 1817 she entered the Music Conservatory in Prague as a pupil of the alto Anna Czegka-Aurhammer. Henriette Sontag achieved an initial major success when, in 1819, she substituted for a singer fallen ill at the National Theatre in Prague as the Princess of Navarra in François Adrien Boieldieu's opera "Jean de Paris". Larger roles were soon entrusted to her at the Prague National Theatre, including Clorinde in Nicolas Isouard's "Cendrillon", Myrrha in Peter von Winter's "Das unterbrochene Opferfest" ("The Interrupted Sacrificial Offering"), Marguerite in André-Ernest-Modeste Grétry's "Richard Coeur de Lion", Sophie in Ferdinando Paer's "Sargino", Amaïda in Rossini's "Tancredì", Rossina in Rossini's "Il barbiere di Siviglia", Giulietta in Nicola Antonio Zingarelli's "Romeo e Giulietta", Zerlina in Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's "Don Giovanni", and Agathe in Weber's "Der Freischütz". She now began to attract attention in Vienna as well, and on 22 July 1822 she made her debut at the Theater an der Wien as the Princess of Navarra. The sixteen-year-old also thrilled the Viennese public as Agathe and as Rosina at the Kärntnertor Court Theatre. A generous fee and the involvement of her mother kept the new favourite of the Viennese in their city, and so she began her engagement there on 4 April 1823 in the role of Donna Anna in Mozart's "Don Giovanni". Because the so-called "operatic war" (between the adherents to German music and those to Italian music) held sway in Vienna at that time, it was not only important to convince the German adherents with her portrayal of Donna Anna, but also to prove her ability in Italian roles. Her triumph followed in August 1823 in the role of Elena in Rossini's "La donna del Lago", with which she won over the Italian faction to her side and also thrilled Carl Maria von Weber. That composer immediately sought her out in order to personally introduce her to his new opera "Euryanthe" and to offer her its title role. Thanks to Henriette Sontag's participation, "Euryanthe" was performed 20 more times after its premiere before it disappeared from the repertoire. The greatest successes of the young soprano were also known to Ludwig van Beethoven, who engaged her for the soprano part at the premiere of his "Missa Solemnis" and the Symphony No. 9 on 7 May 1824.

When the financial situation of the Viennese Opera continued to worsen, Franziska Sontag began searching for better engagements for her daughter Henriette, always under the condition that her younger daughter, thirteen-year-old Nina, and she herself were to be engaged as well. In Leipzig, where the Sontags made a guest appearance at the local premiere of Weber's "Euryanthe", they were showered with offers from Berlin theatres. Following long negotiations with Henriette Sontag's mother, a contract for the three Sontags with the Berlin Königstädtler Theatre was signed. In order to create a con-
In 1830 her marriage to Count Carlo Rossi, a Sardinian diplomat, became known; it had begun secretly two years previously. They kept it secret in order not to endanger Rossi’s position at the Sardinian court, where a marriage to a woman of the theatre would have met with disapproval. Already in December 1828, Henriette had given birth to her daughter Jettchen, who died shortly thereafter, however. In order for Henriette Sontag to do justice to the position of a diplomat’s wife, the Turin court demanded of her that she leave the stage forever. It was permitted, however – as agreed upon between the courts of Berlin and Turin – to appear on stage 14 more times. The singer celebrated her departure from the stage on 22 May 1830 with Rossini’s opera “Semiramide”. In order to appease the Sardinian nobility, the Prussian king ennobled the wedded Countess Rossi on 22 August under the name von Lauenstein. The singer was permitted to appear in concerts until the couple was allowed to make their union public. They used this time for a concert tour that took them to Russia.

Countess Henriette Rossi

Beginning in October 1831, Henriette Sontag lived as the wife of the diplomat Count Rossi in Den Haag and primarily concerned herself with her children Alexander, Camillo and Maria. Alexandrine and Luigi were born later, in St. Petersburg, and a seventh child in Berlin (see Stümcke, Sontag, p. 164, 170 and 172). After four years, her husband was appointed authorised minister to the Bundestag (Federal Parliament) in Frankfurt/Main. After three years he was transferred to St. Petersburg as the Sardinian ambassador. Tsar Nicolas I immediately reported to Turin that he wished to hear the famous singer. She then appeared at the St. Petersburg court opera in “La Sonnambula” of Vincenzo Bellini and in “Lucia di Lammermoor” of Gaetano Donizetti, amongst other works. Due to the high costs of living, the savings of the Rossis shrank during their time in St. Petersburg. In 1841 the family moved back to Berlin. Henriette Sontag opened a salon there that rapidly became the centre of the music-loving and art-loving society there (see Kühner, Große Sängerinnen, p. 123).

Henriette Sontag had never completely given up music during all these years, and repeatedly sang in concerts or for charitable purposes. Of the seven children to whom the Countess had given birth over the course of the years, only four survived. But her husband’s income was insufficient for the family, and their money worries continually worsened, especially since the couple had suffered high
losses in their securities in 1848 during the March Revolution in Berlin. In addition, King Albert, the friend and mentor of Count Rossi, had been overthrown, and thus the position of Count Rossi had begun to totter. When he was repeatedly advised to separate from his wife, he immediately quit his service and was pensioned off.

In order to ensure a living for her family, Henriette Sontag decided to return to the stage. Benjamin Lumley, the erstwhile impresario of the singer Jenny Lind, was now the director of Her Majesty's Theatre (the former King's Theatre) in London and enabled Henriette Sontag to return to the stage (Pirchan, Sontag, p. 146). On 28 June 1849 the singer left Berlin and began her engagement at Her Majesty's Theatre in London in the title role of Donizetti's "Linda di Chamounix" on 7 July. After the conclusion of the London season, she undertook a tour through Great Britain and Scotland, followed by a guest appearance at Her Majesty's Theatre in Paris in 1851. Despite a 20-year break from the stage, she was as convincing as ever and even seemed to have improved her singing. The "Revue des deux mondes" wrote: "La voix de Mdm. Sontag est assez bien conservée. Si les cordes inférieures ont perdu de leur plénitude et se sont alourdies un peu sous la main du temps, comme cela arrive toujours aux voix soprano, les notes supérieures sont encore pleines de rondeur et de charme. Son talent est presque aussi exquis qu'il était il y a vingt ans, sa vocalisation n'a rien perdu de la merveilleuse flexibilité qui la caractérisait autrefois, et sans beaucoup d'efforts d'imagination, on retrouve aujourd'hui dans Mdme. Sontag le fini, le charme, l'expression temperée et sourdine, qui la distinguaient parmi les cantatrices éminentes qui ont émerveillé l'Europe depuis un demi-siècle." ("The voice of Mme. Sontag has been very well preserved. If the low notes have lost something of their fullness and become heavier over the years, as always happens with sopranos, the high notes are still full of an enchanted roundness. Her talent is as outstanding as it was twenty years ago; her vocalisation has lost none of the wonderful suppleness that once characterised her, and without having to make efforts of the imagination, one today finds in Mme. Sontag the perfection, the magic, the moderate reserved expression which includes her amongst the prominent singers who have been astonishing Europe for the past half century." See Stümcke, Sontag, p. 211) Henriette Sontag then travelled back to London, where she appeared in Giulio Eugenio Abramo Alary's "Le tre nozze" during the course of the 1851 World's Fair, but then separated from her agent Lumley, with whom there had been financial disagreements, and returned to Germany. There she celebrated great successes on tours throughout many German cities.

America
In order to ensure the financial security of her children, she decided to follow the example of the singer Jenny Lind, who had earned a fortune in America. Accompanied by her husband and a small entourage, she embarked at Liverpool on 25 August 1852. The children remained in Europe. After the 12-day journey, a busy life began for Henriette Sontag in America. In New York she first gave 23 concerts and then performed at the opera. She had added three new roles to her repertoire for New York, in Donizetti's "L'elisir d'amore", "Maria di Rohan" and "Lucrezia Borgia". The enthusiastic New York public dubbed her the "Queen of Song" (Pirchan, Sontag, p. 182). But she did not only perform in New York, but also in Buffalo, Cleveland, St. Louis, Louisville, Cincinnati, Washington and New Orleans.

She was finally able to conclude a contract with the director of the St. Anna Theatre in Mexico, the Frenchman René Masson, the fee from which exceeded all previous offers. On 1 April 1854 she sailed from New Orleans to Vera Cruz – the crossing took four days – and continued travelling by mail wagon from there. Henriette Sontag made her debut at the St. Anna Theatre on 21 April 1854 in Bellini's "La Sonnambula". The Mexican climate did her good, and both her voice and her health profited from the uniform temperatures. Despite major triumphs, Henriette Sontag soon planned her return.

Her sudden illness from cholera on 11 June, however, thwarted these plans. Henriette Sontag died on 17 June 1854 in Mexico. Two days later there was a solemn funeral procession and a provisional burial at the San Fernando Monastery Church. The transport to her homeland only took place after the rainy season, on 28 November 1854. On 3 May of the following year, she was buried at the convent of St. Marienthal-Lausitz which Henriette Sontag's sister Nina had finally joined.

Appreciation
Henriette Sontag enjoyed extraordinary success as a singer during her lifetime. The core of her artistic activity was primarily opera. She was considered the most important singer of her epoch in this genre. Her voice - clear as a bell, well-balanced in all ranges, utterly flexible - corresponded perfectly to the taste of her times, and with her girlish figure she was also able to con-
Henriette Sontag's successes were of the same calibre as those of Maria Malibran or Giuditta Pasta. After her lengthy creative pause as a singer, she expanded her repertoire of lighter roles to include dramatic ones, including Vincenzo Bellini's "Norma".

Reception

Henriette Sontag was enthusiastically venerated by her admirers. The climax of her career was her engagement in Berlin at the Court Opera in 1825/26. Through the engagement of the famous singer, the theatrical directors counted on increased attendance. The great interest shown to her by the Berliners not only applied to her artistic production, but also her private life. The special veneration enjoyed by her was referred to, already at the time of her Berlin residence, as "Sontag fever" (Stümcke, Sontag, p. 48-51) and was reflected in numerous songs, poems and articles – also in satirical or parodistic form by irritated Sontag opponents. The theologian and theatre opponent Gottgetreu Tholuck, for example, wrote the following verse (according to Stümcke, Sontag, p. 87):

"Wie preißt man sie nicht als der Oper Zierde,
Und sie vergöttert mancher gute Christ.
O, daß d e r  Sonntag so gefeiert würde,
Wie es  d i e  Sontag ist."

("How is she not praised as the opera's ornament,
And some good Christians deify her.
Only if only Sunday [Sonntag] were as celebrated
The way Sontag is.")

Today, Henriette Sontag is hardly regarded as being of the same calibre as Maria Malibran or Angelica Catalani. It is possible that Angelica Catalani named one of the reasons for this in her statement about Henriette Sontag: "Elle est la première dans son genre, mais son genre n’est pas le premier." ("She is the number-one singer of her genre, but her genre is not number one". See Stümcke, Sontag, p. 89) In research papers on Henriette Sontag, it is also striking that American libraries contain more available secondary literature on the artist than do German libraries. It would be important to investigate whether Henriette Sontag enjoys a higher degree of fame in the USA than in Germany.

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