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Opera Singers in Seventeenth-Century Italy

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The birth of opera around 1600 is intimately tied to singers. Jacopo Peri and Giulio Caccini are known not only as composers of the first complete published operas but also as superb vocalists. In October 1600, as part of the Florentine celebrations for the wedding of Maria de' Medici to Henry IV of France, Peri starred as Orfeo in his own setting of Ottavio Rinuccini's *Euridice*.¹ On stage with him were Caccini's daughters, Francesca (1587–after 1641) and Settimia (1591–c. 1660), who, instead of performing Peri's music, sang the settings their father had insisted upon inserting. In future years, Francesca would go on to be celebrated for both her vocal prowess and her compositional acumen: she was the first woman to compose an opera, *La liberazione di Ruggiero dall'Isola di Alcina* (1625).² The spread of opera thus cannot be separated from the talented performers who brought the works to light on the stages of courts and public theatres over the course of the century.

That said, Sergio Durante has noted that the career of opera singer was 'a professional role that really came into being only gradually'.³ Such a change could happen only after opera had vaulted to the public stage in Venice in the late 1630s and after cities all over Italy began to mount such works on a regular basis throughout the year (and not just in carnival season). The careers of Peri and Caccini played out before this sea change. They were both initially employed at the Medici court in Florence for their skill as singers and instrumentalists, but their duties also comprised the composition of many different kinds of works, including instrumental pieces, songs, and court entertainments. After 1600, Peri worked mostly as a composer, collaborating with Marco da Gagliano (1582–1643) on both operas and *sacre rappresentazioni*. Caccini was a sought-after voice teacher – he had a hand in training both of his daughters – and later in life he dedicated himself to gardening. Singing in opera was but one small facet of their storied careers.

It was only in the last decades of the seventeenth century that it was possible for a singer to devote a career to opera; some well-known vocal stars, however, chose not to do so. The castrato Matteo Sassani (or Sassano, c. 1667–1737), for example, began and ended his professional life singing in

serenatas and religious services; he mounted the operatic stage for about ten years of his long career, more rarely than other great singers of the time.⁴ Pier Francesco Tosi (1654–1732), who sang perhaps once on the operatic stage in the 1680s and who went on to write a highly regarded treatise on the voice, noted that all singers should be able to sing recitative in three styles: one for church, one for chamber, and one for opera.⁵ Even in the late seventeenth century, then, singing opera was sometimes just one part of a larger professional life that arose out of a confluence of talent, training, and patronage.

Training

The institutions that offered musical instruction were already well established in Italy by the time opera rose to importance and included churches, conservatories, and seminaries (especially the national colleges in Rome).⁶ Boys entered or were recruited to those organisations at very young ages and learned their foundational skills there. Pedagogical programs doubtless taught them the techniques that are the basis of any vocal training, even today: how to produce a healthy tone, how to sing in tune, how to develop vocal flexibility, how to enunciate clearly, and how to avoid grimacing. Since the ability to decorate a vocal line was so important in the seventeenth century, students needed to practice how to apply and sing various ornaments, such as trills.⁷ Boys also received instruction on the keyboard and learned basic theory and counterpoint as well.

The need for male sopranos in church choirs was so great that the administrators at some cathedrals began to recommend talented young boys with beautiful voices as candidates for castration and either to pay directly for the procedure or to reimburse parents who had already had it done. The attraction of the operatic stage was so powerful that churches issued contracts specifying a standard length of service before the boy could leave the choir and seek his fortune as an opera singer. In Siena, for example, boys had to serve the cathedral choir for six years before they could leave the employ of the institution; otherwise, they had to repay half of the cost of the operation and half of the salary they had earned.⁸ As long as the boys remained on the payroll most of the year, however, the administrators at Siena Cathedral did allow them to take short leaves of absence to sing on the stage; in this, they were much less severe than their peers at San Francesco in Assisi, whose rules forbade castrati to perform in opera until the tenth year of their service.⁹

Talented girls in Italy could not avail themselves of this kind of comprehensive, institutional education unless they were placed in convents with active and lively traditions for musical performance. Nuns were some of the most highly regarded singers on the Italian peninsula during the seventeenth century, and some sang theatrical works in the convent.¹⁰ In 1670, for example, the Grand Duchess of Florence consigned to a Siense nunnery a young girl 'highly predisposed' to music, perhaps in the hope that she would blossom into an excellent performer.¹¹ The Duke of Savoy adopted a similar strategy in 1688 when he sent the singer Diana Aureli (fl. 1691–1696) to a Milanese convent to perfect her vocal technique.¹² Since the majority of convents in Italian urban centres during this period were, however, intended for 'surplus' women of aristocratic birth whose status would not permit them to sing on stage, not many professional opera singers came out of this environment.

Most girls had to receive their training privately, and, in this, some were more fortunate than others. The Caccini sisters, for example, were raised in a musical household (both Giulio and his wife Lucia di Filippo Gagnolanti were singers) and probably began their musical apprenticeship at a very young age. Other parents made different decisions. Silvia Galiarti (c. 1629–c. 1677), whose mother was a talented opera singer unattached to a court, entrusted her daughter's musical education to a private tutor, whose seduction of the young woman sparked a legal case.¹³ The gifted Caterina Martinelli (1589 or 1590–1608), on the other hand, found a good home away from home. She came to Mantua from Rome as a thirteen-year-old and boarded with Claudio Monteverdi (1567–1643), who took on the responsibility of teaching her and subsequently wrote the title role in *Arianna* for her.¹⁴ Her unfortunate death from smallpox at the age of eighteen forced the composer to look elsewhere, and he turned to a woman best described as an actress with an excellent voice, Virginia Ramponi Andreini (1583–1629 or 1630). The trend of using actress-singers in opera did not, however, persist into the mid- to late-seventeenth century, as the musical skills required became more specialised.

The case of Lucrezia d'Andrè (fl. 1694–1704) is illustrative in this regard. In 1694, the Roman noblewoman Lucrezia Colonna Conti wrote to Cardinal Francesco Maria de' Medici in Florence, seeking to induce him to hire d'Andrè for an opera. Her letter briefly describes the background and character of the young woman (she was the daughter of one of Colonna Conti's servants and was modest and hard working) but is most effusive as to her musical training. The young woman had learned her

vocal technique from Giuseppe Fede (1639 or 1640–1700), an accomplished castrato singer in the papal choir, a veteran of operatic performances, and an admired teacher. She had studied harpsichord with Bernardo Pasquini (1637–1710), a keyboard virtuoso and a renowned composer of oratorio and opera. Colonna Conti also notes that another famous opera composer, Giovanni Bononcini (1670–1747), and a singer under the protection of the Medici, Giuseppe Canavese (fl. 1684–1707), had heard her perform, undoubtedly at the Colonna household. By the late seventeenth century, it appears that (with some exceptions) a high level of musical training, as well as a good stage presence, was necessary to be able to sustain a career on the operatic stage.¹⁵

Beyond her training, a woman who wanted to perform in opera could unleash another weapon in her arsenal, if she possessed it: the ‘lovely letter of recommendation’ in her face.¹⁶ John Rosselli quotes a 1663 document concerning the requirements for female singers at the Venetian theatre of SS. Giovanni e Paolo: ‘beauty’ and ‘rich clothes’ were the first items on the list and only then was ‘attractive singing’ mentioned.¹⁷ In her plea to Francesco Maria, Colonna Conti made sure that the cardinal knew of d’Andrè’s physical charms in addition to her good character and first-rate musical education. When the Bolognese singer Angela Cocchi (‘la Linarola’, d. 1703) arrived in Parma in late 1697 to perform a role in *L’Atalanta*, the castrato Giovanni Battista Tamburini (1669–after 1719) observed that if her voice were equal to her beauty, she would be marvellous.¹⁸ That said, beauty went only so far. A Sieneese correspondent once described Vincenza Giulia Masotti (c. 1651–1701) as an extremely ugly woman (‘una gran brutta figliola’), but audiences went into raptures during her performances, and she was one of the most highly regarded singers of her time.¹⁹

Many singers made their débuts on the operatic stage at a relatively young age: Masotti first appeared in Venice when she was probably eleven or twelve years old, and Vittoria Tarquini (‘la Bombace’, 1670–1746) made her première at age fourteen.²⁰ The alto castrato Francesco Bernardi (1686–1758), the singer for whom Handel would write some of his most celebrated works, was thirteen when he first mounted the stage in his native Siena. Girolamo Gigli, the impresario for the production, was probably responsible for adding the part tailored just for him in the libretto, and the local chapel master, Giuseppe Fabbrini, doubtless set those new additions with music suited to his young voice. Bernardi then continued his instruction at Siena Cathedral under Fabbrini for another eight years before going off to seek his fame and fortune.²¹ Anna Renzi

(c. 1620–after 1661), on the other hand, was probably near twenty when she first sang in opera; nonetheless, her voice teacher, Filiberto Laurenzi, accompanied her to Venice for her *début*.²² Voice lessons thus could continue after singers were launched in opera, especially if they were young; at times, however, such training could extend into adulthood.

Tamburini provides an interesting example of a singer whose schooling we can follow for many years. He was one of the numerous boys for whom the religious authorities at Siena Cathedral paid the expenses of castration and provided a foundational education in music. His tenure at the institution lasted from 1683 to 1695, that is, from the age of fourteen to the age of twenty-six. He came under Cardinal Francesco Maria de' Medici's protection sometime in his early twenties and mounted the stage in minor roles for productions in Florence and Siena from 1690 to 1695. Then the cardinal packed him off, first to Rome and then to Parma, to study under the composer Bernardo Sabadini (d. 1718). Tamburini sang in several operas during this further period of study. When Sabadini left for Madrid in 1700, Francesco Maria sent his protégé to the composer Carlo Antonio Benati in Bologna, despite the fact that Tamburini was nearly thirty-one years old and had already performed in sixteen operas. It is true that the lessons in Parma probably consisted primarily of Sabadini coaching the singer on the music he had written especially for him and perhaps also refining his acting skills. Tamburini did, however, tell his patron that 'sometimes my teacher will have me sing scales to make sure my technique is secure'. Although we have some insight into singers' basic training during the seventeenth century, we still know little about how they continued to perfect their craft once they were established on the operatic circuit.²³

One additional category of singer deserves mention here: the talented dilettante. In small cities with strong academic traditions, noblemen sometimes took the stage for local performances. In Siena, for instance, we know of at least two productions featuring a mix of professional and amateur performers: *L'Adalinda* (Apolloni, Agostini, 1677) and *L'innocenza riconosciuta* (1698). In the latter opera, three members of the Sieneese patrician class mounted the stage alongside Pietro Mozzi (fl. 1686–1729) and his son, the young castrato Giuseppe Mozzi. One of them, Tolomei, perhaps less skilled than the others, lost his voice during the last act of the second performance and accused the elder Mozzi of instructing the instrumentalists to play so loudly as to drown him out.²⁴ Such were the perils of the lack of professional training.

Patronage

Opera singers depended on powerful patrons for protection. Italian rulers in numerous urban centres hired and maintained salaried singers to use in operas performed under their aegis. The ecclesiastical courts in Rome also patronised singers. But if Peri's *Euridice* was mounted in Florence using singers on the Medici payroll, the performance of Monteverdi's *Orfeo* only seven years later depended on the talents of at least one performer who was not part of the musical establishment at Mantua. The Florentine court loaned one of Caccini's pupils, the castrato Giovanni Gualberto Magli (d. 1625), to the Mantuan court for the opera; he sang at least two and probably three roles in *Orfeo*.²⁵ When public operas began to be staged in Venice starting in the late 1630s, it was paramount that singers be able to move from one city to another to take advantage of the opportunities to sing. This was especially true for female singers in Rome, who were forbidden from taking the stage in that city.

Several solutions to the problem presented themselves. In the first half of the seventeenth century, self-financing touring companies, sometimes called *Febiarmonici*, travelled from city to city to put on operatic performances. Ellen Rosand has noted that such troupes (often with Roman singers) were responsible for the first operatic performances in Venice; after carnival season, they then took their shows on the road.²⁶ By the 1680s or so, when opera was well established as a feature of cultural life all over the Italian peninsula, performers were the star attractions. Impresarios wanted to hire the best, and a number of rulers with singers under their protection often responded to requests to send them to perform elsewhere. Thus was the ducal or gentlemen's circuit born – with the enthusiastic participation of courts in Florence, Mantua, Ferrara, Parma, and Rome (to name but a few), whose rulers loaned out musicians to one another as well as to impresarios in the public theatres of Venice. The system benefitted everyone. Rulers who loaned out one of 'their' coveted singers symbolised their social rank through a display of 'good taste and knowledge', thus earning honour for themselves as well as the more prosaic right to borrow a singer from another member on the circuit for their own productions. The singer had the protection of the ruler as a guarantee against ill treatment, an opportunity to perform in a new setting with new colleagues, and the chance to earn more than he or she ever could as a court employee.²⁷

Some patrons kept a tight rein on their protégés. Rosand describes how Pietro Dolfin, a librettist and composer in Venice, exercised his power over

the singer Lucretia, a young woman who came to live in his house in the late 1660s. Dolfin controlled all the young woman's contracts, refusing to allow her to sing when he thought the part too small or the cast mediocre.²⁸ Francesco Maria de' Medici did the same with Tamburini, arranging for his début in Florence in 1690, informing him (through a proxy) that he was to turn down a role in a 'dreadful, feeble work' in Rome in 1697, and instructing Sabadini on the operatic environment in which his protégé was likely to shine: as the singer of a secondary role (*parte di mezzo*) in an opera with a cast of excellent singers.²⁹

Tamburini's situation was not unlike that of many singers in the later seventeenth century. Francesco Maria paid Sabadini for his role as Tamburini's teacher and for the expenses of housing and feeding the singer in Parma; he also gave his protégé a modest yearly annuity until about 1705. Tamburini was, however, never resident in Florence as a court employee; instead, he spent his life on the road.³⁰ The same was true for other singers of the time, such as the contralto Francesca Vanini (or Venini; d. 1744), Maria Maddalena Musi ('la Mignatta', 1669–1751), and Barbara Riccioni (fl. 1684–1707), who received small stipends as court musicians in Mantua but spent most of their time travelling the Italian peninsula to perform in opera.³¹ Although some dukes and princes served as agents, many functioned simply as clearinghouses for their singers. It is thus ironic that during the last years of the century, libretti start to emblazon the names of not only the singers in operatic productions but also those of their patrons: 'Elena Garofalini, Bolognese, *virtuosa* of the Most Serene Duke of Mantua', 'Diana Caterina Luppi of Ferrara, *virtuosa* of Count Ercole Estense Mosti', and 'Signora Diamante Scarabelli, *virtuosa* del Sereniss. Di Mantova' (see Figure 6.1), and so on.

The Rise of the Prima Donna

At opera's birth, Rosand notes, singers were 'merely the mouthpiece[s] of the librettist and composer'.³² That began to change by mid-century, with the woman who has been called the first prima donna of opera, Anna Renzi. Renzi came from Rome to Venice to create the role of Deidamia in the Giulio Strozzi/Francesco Saccati opera *La finta pazza* (1641). Later, she would première the role of Ottavia in Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea* (1643). A book was issued in her honour in 1644, praising her voice, her acting, and her ability to embody a character through gesture and spontaneity of expression. Her fame and popularity meant that during the



Figure 6.1 *Giuditta di Baviera* (Siena, Stamperia del Publico, 1702). The dedication of the libretto (librettist and composer unknown), to Count Francesco Sane Sebastiani, is dated 3 July 1702.

Detail of the cast and beginning of the libretto, 8–9. Image from Biblioteca Comunale degli Intronati, Siena

1643–1644 season, she was able to command a far higher salary than any other woman who had sung on the Venetian stage up until that point.³³

The control singers had over the very fabric of opera began to be audible by the 1660s and into the following decades with the proliferation of arias.³⁴ By this time, singers could request that the composer make changes and additions to their parts, and were able to reject arias they did not like and substitute them with works of their choosing – even if not by the composer of the opera – that they felt showed off their voices to greater advantage. The practice of performers repeating arias on stage when an enthusiastic audience demanded it also became a commonplace.

As singers' fame and influence grew, so did their power to negotiate all manner of things relating to the production. Masotti offers a good case study of a singer who knew her worth and knew how to work the patronage

system to her best advantage.³⁵ She was obviously a talented young woman; in Rome, Margherita Branciforte, Princess of Butera, had taken her under her wing and Masotti had received her musical training in the princess's home from Giacomo Carissimi (1605–1674), one of Rome's most celebrated composers and *maestro di cappella* at S. Apollinare. A Tuscan resident in Rome, Torquato Montauto, became her protector and probably helped arrange her début in Venice at the Teatro San Luca for the 1662–1663 season. Despite the fact that Giulia was no older than twelve, she made a huge splash in the title role of *La Dori*, an opera with a libretto by Giovanni Filippo Apolloni (c. 1635–1688) and music by Antonio Cesti (1623–1669). She reluctantly returned in 1663–1664 to perform in two operas, one of them Francesco Cavalli's *Scipione affricano*. Around this time, she gained new patrons: the Contestabile Lorenzo Onofrio Colonna and his wife, Maria Mancini.

Masotti refused to go back to Venice in the 1664–1665 and 1665–1666 seasons, but the impresario Marco Faustini (1606–1676) insistently requested her presence for 1666–1667. Using the Contestabile Colonna and the Venetian nobleman Girolamo Loredan as intermediaries, Masotti dug in her heels and once again refused to go until promised a salary that was twice as much as she had been offered (and had turned down) in 1665. She also received travelling expenses and was given lodging with the Grimani family. She was similarly shrewd in her negotiations for the 1668–1669 opera season in Venice, using both the Colonna and her new patrons, members of the Chigi family, to guarantee herself a large salary and other concessions. She must have been gratified that the opera chosen that season was a revival of *L'Argia*, a work by her preferred librettist, Apolloni, with music by her favourite composer, Cesti. In 1671, in fact, she tried to persuade Cardinal Sigismondo Chigi to ask Apolloni for a new libretto with a 'part that does me honor above everyone else'. This was one of her few requests that came to nothing. Throughout her career, she managed to convince impresarios to mount operas that she liked and to cast her in the roles she wanted to sing. In other words, although she depended upon patrons to protect and help her, she was in charge of her own professional life.

Other singers sometimes took hold of the reins in an even more authoritative manner. Elena Passarelli ('la Tiepola', fl. 1658–1673) was not only a well-respected singer, but also cast herself at least once in the role of impresario, perhaps in tandem with her husband, Galeazzo. In 1670, she signed the libretto issued for a Florentine revival of Cesti's *La Dori*, dedicating the work to Margherita Luisa d'Orléans, the Grand Princess of

Tuscany, whose marriage to Cosimo III was then in a final period of reconciliation. Passarelli and her company mounted the opera in Florence and then were scheduled to go on to Siena, where the singer had performed the previous year in a revival of *L'Argia*. She astutely supposed that an opera by the same librettist–composer team that had triumphed in Siena a year previously with her in the lead role would be sure to please the Sieneſe, who were indeed waiting with impatience for the performances. Unfortunately, the show was cancelled due to the death of Grand Duke Ferdinando II in 1670. A correspondent in Siena observed that Passarelli was responsible for the company and since the show could not be staged there, she would pay the salaries and take the cast on to the next performance.³⁶ In 1704, in Siena, the singers Maria Anna Garberini Benti ('la Romanina', c. 1684–1734) and Vittoria Costa (fl. 1701–1719), aided by the Florentine chapel master Giuseppe Maria Orlandini (1676–1760), decided to serve as impresarios for a little pastoral opera, taking the lead roles, establishing the ticket prices, and hoping to make a profit from the enterprise.³⁷ Their plans may not have come to fruition, but they show that more than one female singer was unafraid to venture into new realms to direct her own career.³⁸

Payment and the Gift Culture

The first singers of opera performed those works as part of their normal court duties. That changed once an operatic circuit was established and it was necessary for singers (or their agents) to negotiate salaries. As is clear from the discussion of Masotti above, singers who had to journey to foreign cities also often asked for travelling expenses and requested free lodging with the impresario or with a nobleman; otherwise, they might not have taken much money home after a long season. No one formula determined how much a singer could make, and salaries varied according to the locale and the size or importance of the role, as well as the reputation of the singer. Women were the most coveted performers during this period and generally earned higher salaries than men, an imbalance that would change in the eighteenth century when the castrato rose to great prominence. One thing appears to be true for opera productions throughout the Italian peninsula in the late seventeenth century: the costliest items on the budget were the salaries paid to the singers.³⁹

Although private agreements between an impresario and a singer were by far the most common throughout Italy, a few publicly registered

contracts for singers in Venice survive and help clarify some of the details of payment and the expectations placed on singers and impresarios. A contract for Renzi from the 1643–1644 season, for example, establishes a payment schedule, which seems to have been the normal one for that city: the singer was to receive the honorarium divided into three portions and distributed at the beginning, middle, and end of the opera's run. If she were to fall ill, she would collect only a portion of her salary. She also received the use of a box in the theatre at the expense of the impresario and all the costumes she would need (although these remained with the impresario at the end of the run). In return, she agreed to attend all rehearsals and performances.⁴⁰ What may be the first printed contract for singers, issued in Siena in 1703, lays out basically the same expectations, although it specifically excludes payments for travel and food.⁴¹ Even with a contract in place, if a show did not succeed as planned, singers might receive only a portion of the contracted fee and have to lodge complaints or initiate legal cases to collect what was owed them.⁴²

Payment in cash was, however, only one form of remuneration that performers acquired during the run of an opera. Both men and women (but especially women) expected to receive gifts, including rings; bracelets; necklaces; watches; earrings made of gold and silver and often encrusted with precious jewels; and items of clothing comprising hats, gloves, ribbons, and stockings. The cash portion of the payment to a singer, especially a beautiful female singer, sometimes paled in comparison to the presents she received from admirers. When Passarelli performed the title role in the Sienese revival of *L'Argia* (1669), the women of the town ordered culinary delicacies from Florence for her on a continual basis, and over thirty gentlemen contributed money to buy her a gift worth 700 *lire*. She left town at the end of the opera's run with 2,800 *lire* in cash and gifts, probably more than she had earned in Venice in the early 1660s. From accounts of the revival of Bononcini's setting of Silvio Stampiglia's *Camilla, regina de' Volsci* in Siena in 1700, we know that the star performer, Maria Domenica Pini ('la Tilla', 1670 or 1671–1746), carried away about 1,400 *lire* in cash and almost 600 *lire* in gifts. Her colleague, Maria Maddalena Vittori ('la Marsoppina', fl. 1699–1704), went home with about 400 *lire* in cash and perhaps as much as 600 *lire* in gifts.⁴³

Critical Assessment

It is difficult to find true critical assessments of an opera singer's voice in the seventeenth century; most comments tend to the generic, comparing

singers to swans or sirens, or waxing lyrical about how divinely or magnificently or wonderfully they perform.⁴⁴ The quotation given in the title of this essay – ‘una bella voce, un bel trillo, ed un bel passaggio’ – comes from a letter penned by Leonardo Marsili about the singer ‘Aloisia’, and it begins in typical fashion: she had a ‘beautiful voice, a beautiful trill, and beautiful ornamentation’. He does go on to note that the singer was able to modulate her voice depending on the size of the room; that is, she knew to sing more softly in a chamber setting than on the operatic stage. Sometimes observers commented on the strength of the voice; Caterina Galerati (fl. 1701–1721), for instance, apparently had a small instrument but compensated for its size through the use of trills and other musical ornaments.⁴⁵

Stage deportment and acting skills were also addressed and evaluated, as in a commentary from a performance of *Pirro e Demetrio* (Adriano Morselli; Alessandro Scarlatti) in Siena in 1695: Maria Rosa Bracci (‘l’Acciaiola’, fl. 1695–1726) was the technically superior singer, but Maria Domenica Marini (‘la Cappona’, fl. 1695–1702) made the best impression because she moved naturally and nobly. In the same cast, a tenor from Pistoia was judged to be a good actor with a terrible voice.⁴⁶ It is clear, however, that assessments of a singer’s acting skills were situational. The Siena 1704 carnival season featured two works with the same cast of singers: revivals of Scarlatti’s *La caduta dei decemviri* and of Tomaso Albinoni’s *La Griselda*. In the Scarlatti opera, Anna Maria Coltellini (‘la Serafina’, fl. 1691–1704) was praised as the singer who held the show together and was superior to all, but Maria Maddalena Fratini (fl. 1690–1705) was disparaged for poor acting skills, despite a pleasant voice. In the Albinoni opera, however, Coltellini cut a poor figure because she did not know how to act her part, whereas Fratini was lauded for her acting skill; the commentator asserted that no one would recognise her as a woman when she was onstage in a pants role.⁴⁷

Public Images

In the culture of Renaissance and Baroque Italy, silence was understood as a sign of a woman’s chastity. The eloquent woman was in danger of being considered unchaste; indeed, the famous courtesans of the period were renowned for their skills in both rhetoric and music. Female singers on the operatic stage thus faced a dilemma; they had to be eloquent to be successful in their careers, but their very powers of musical persuasion marked their virtue as suspect. A female singer thus was in jeopardy of

being considered little better than a prostitute – her profession required her to ‘speak’ in song and to do so in front of a paying public.⁴⁸ To be sure, some were courtesans, although, for the most part, their careers seem not to have lasted long.⁴⁹ Female singers thus had to be vigilant about their image. They often travelled with family members (mothers, husbands, and brothers) as protection and took care to manage their offstage behaviour in a way that was above reproach.

Notwithstanding their precautions offstage, female opera singers on stage often aroused sexual desire, a desire that could be intensified by the adoption of pants roles, in which women cross-dressed as young men. Wendy Heller has illuminated the ways in which operatic heroines embodied seventeenth-century ideas about female sexuality and anxieties about the fluid gender boundaries between men and women. Heroines on the Venetian stage ran the gamut from the chaste but undesirable Ottavia; to the nymph Calisto rejoicing in her amorous same-sex encounter; to the virile, cross-dressing warrior queen Semiramide; to the sexually rapacious Messalina. Singers who brought these heroines to life were both ‘desired and condemned’ for their erotic power and control, and they often risked creating a public image that might have greatly diverged from their private identity.⁵⁰ Renzi’s portrayal of the scheming and vengeful Ottavia in Monteverdi’s *L’incoronazione di Poppea*, for instance, was so incongruous with her own character that several critics provided interpretations of the role that ‘transcend[ed] the virtues and vices of her own musico-dramatic representation’.⁵¹

Castrati also had to deal with a public image that might have been at odds with their own private personae. In their glorious artificiality, castrati were understood as ‘purely sensual’ creatures ‘frozen’ in the state of everlasting boyhood. In the one-sex system of the day, that meant that they stood somewhere between a submissive woman and an adult man who had gone through puberty; their eternally soft, attractive features rendered them the objects of desire for both men and women.⁵² Their status was often reflected in the affectionate and slightly condescending use of diminutives for their stage names: Luigi Albarelli (fl. 1692–1707) was ‘il Luigino’, Francesco Bernardi was ‘il Senesino’, and Matteo Sassani was ‘Matteuccio’.

The cult of the castrato took hold in the last half of the seventeenth century, just as the penchant for lyrical display in aria accelerated in operatic scores. Castrati were cast as ‘effeminate’ men; that is, as men too much preoccupied with loving women and with erotic adventures rather than with proper masculine activities such as war. The ‘lush vocalism’

inherent in aria style rather than the 'lyric restraint' characteristic of recitative, helped make the voice type the pre-eminent choice for operatic heroes at the end of the seventeenth century and into the following century as well.⁵³

Private Lives

The life of an opera singer was not an easy one, despite the fame and adulation that could come with it. It often involved tiring travel, protracted and vexing negotiations with impresarios, quarrels with composers and librettists, and the possibility of not receiving promised payments. All who chose the profession faced these frustrations, but women were in a much more precarious position at a time when, as John Rosselli so succinctly puts it, most men operated under the assumption 'that almost any woman was available for fumbling at the first opportunity'.⁵⁴ Beth L. Glixon has documented the dangers that lay in wait for young women at the earliest stages of their careers. Giovanni Carlo del Cavaliere not only seduced his thirteen-year-old pupil, Galiarti, but also hoped to kidnap the girl and poison her mother. In 1685, the father of the then fourteen-year-old Tarquini complained to the Council of Ten in Venice that she had been raped.⁵⁵

Now, it is true that some singers were in thrall to powerful men, often their patrons. Ferdinando de' Medici seems to have carried on sexual relationships with both the castrato Francesco De Castris (c. 1650–1724) and with Tarquini.⁵⁶ Most female singers, however, chose to marry at some point in their careers, although their reasons varied. Some wed while still professionally active and chose husbands in their field. Elena Lorenzoni married Galeazzo Passarelli, who served as impresario for productions featuring his wife and who seems to have toured with her when she was performing outside Venice. Some took husbands out of convention and lived apart from them; Dionora Luppi (also known as Leonida Presciani) is a case in point, as is Tarquini. Galiarti married Pietro Manni at age sixteen when her mother's death left her alone and unprotected in Venice; her husband might have been an impresario or possibly a singer.⁵⁷ Some women waited to marry until they decided to leave the Italian circuit. Masotti retired from the Venetian stage in 1673 at the young age of twenty-two or twenty-three and took up a court position in Vienna. Two years after her arrival, she met and married her younger husband, the violinist Ignaz Leopold Kugler. Their union produced four children, including a daughter whom Masotti trained as a singer.⁵⁸

Castrato singers were in an especially circumscribed position, especially if they wanted to form a family, because the Catholic Church denied them the sacrament of marriage. One castrato who managed to wed did so outside the Italian realm. Bartolomeo Sorlisi (1631 or 1632–1672) spent his adult career in Munich and Dresden and was so well regarded at court that Elector Johann Georg II suggested he retire in Saxony. While looking for appropriate property to buy in the early 1660s, he fell in love with Dorothea Lichtwer, and she with him. After a long battle with Lutheran ecclesiastical authorities, the two wed in 1667.⁵⁹ The same option was not open to castrati working in Italy. At the age of thirty, for example, Tamburini fell in love with Vanini, who apparently had returned his affection at some point. It is possible that the patrons of both singers did their best to quash the blossoming love affair; a description of Tamburini's fruitless attempts to meet and speak with Vanini after an operatic performance in autumn of 1699 is heartbreaking.⁶⁰ Castrati were created to be singers; once their operatic careers were over, some returned to live near extended family, some sought out adoptive sons, and some created an extended network of close relationships through teaching. As Rosselli has eloquently noted, 'the chief hazard' for a castrato singer after retirement 'was probably loneliness'.⁶¹

Epilogue

It remains to remind the reader that seventeenth-century composers did indeed cast roles for natural male voices. The tenor Peri created the role of Orfeo in his own setting of *Euridice*; Gagliano praised the manner in which he could make his listeners 'weep or rejoice' through the grace and style of his singing and his interpretation of the emotions latent in the text.⁶² Monteverdi likewise cast the role of Orfeo in his eponymous opera for a tenor, Francesco Rasi (1574–1621). By the end of the century, however, casting tenors in primary roles happened more rarely. It is notable, however, that among the many women and castrati Tosi cites in chapter seven of his treatise on the voice, he names only one man with a natural voice, the tenor Giovanni Buzzoleni (fl. 1682–1722), whom he praises for his ability to ornament while keeping a steady tempo.⁶³ Buzzoleni was in the service of the Mantuan court and sang in opera during the last two decades of the seventeenth century, often in main roles.⁶⁴

Basses generally played older men in important positions, such as generals and counsellors.⁶⁵ Sometimes these were title roles (even if they

were not the largest in the opera). The talented and irascible bass Pietro Mozzi, for example, took on the part of the Roman king Tullio Ostilio in *Alba soggiogata da' Romani* (music by Ziani; Pisa, 1701), but could more often be found in secondary roles. Mozzi had a remarkably long career, first mounting the stage in the mid-1680s. Later in life he transitioned to playing comic characters, and his last known appearances in opera took place in 1729.⁶⁶

Natural male voices would come into their own during the eighteenth century, but during the seventeenth century, high voices – both male and female – ruled the stage.

Notes

- 1 Tim Carter has shown that Peri's *Euridice* actually saw its first performance in May 1600 in a room in the Pitti Palace; see 'The Staging of Peri's *Euridice* (1600)', a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Musicological Society, Louisville, Kentucky, 14 November 2015.
- 2 Articles on Peri and members of the Caccini family, as well as many of the singers mentioned in this essay, are available at *Grove Music Online* and *Oxford Music Online*.
- 3 Sergio Durante, 'The Opera Singer', in Lorenzo Bianconi and Giorgio Pestelli (eds.), *Opera Production and Its Resources*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane, *The History of Italian Opera*, vol. 4 (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 345–417: 346.
- 4 John Rosselli, *Singers of Italian Opera: The History of a Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 43.
- 5 *Opinioni de' cantori antichi e moderni* (Bologna: Lelio dalla Volpe, 1723; rpt. New York: Broude Brothers, 1968), 41–2. See also the English translation of Tosi's treatise by J. E. Galliard, *Observations on the Florid Song: Or Sentiments on the Ancient and Modern Singers*, 2nd edn. (London: J. Wilcox, 1743), 66–7.
- 6 Rosselli, *Singers of Italian Opera*, 41–3; 97.
- 7 Rosselli summarises Tosi's recommendations in *ibid.*, 104–5.
- 8 Colleen Reardon, 'Siena Cathedral and its Castrati', in Kristine K. Forney and Jeremy L. Smith (eds.), *Sleuthing the Muse: Essays in Honor of William F. Prizer* (Hillsdale: Pendragon, 2012), 201–7: 202–3.
- 9 Cristina Pampaloni, 'Giovanni castrati nell'Assisi del Settecento', *Musica/Realtà* 8 (1987), 133–54: 138. Pampaloni's documents come from the first half of the eighteenth century, when the cult of the castrato was at its height.
- 10 On this topic, see Reardon, *Holy Concord within Sacred Walls: Nuns and Music in Siena, 1575–1700* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 131–53; Reardon, *A Sociable Moment: Opera and Festive Culture in Baroque Siena* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 149; and Jonathan Glixon,

- Mirrors of Heaven or Worldly Theaters? Venetian Nunneries and Their Music* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 250–61.
- 11 Reardon, 'Getting Past No or Getting to Yes: Nuns, Divas, and Negotiation Tactics in Early Modern Italy', in Karen Nelson (ed.), *Attending to Early Modern Women: Conflict and Concord* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2013), 23–43: 26.
 - 12 Rosselli, *Singers of Italian Opera*, 97–8.
 - 13 Beth L. Glixon, 'Scenes from the Life of Silvia Galiarti Manni, a Seventeenth-Century *virtuosa*', *EMH* 15 (1996), 97–146: 101–11.
 - 14 Edmond Strainchamps, 'The Life and Death of Caterina Martinelli: New Light on Monteverdi's "Arianna,"' *EMH* 5 (1985): 155–86.
 - 15 Reardon, 'Getting Past No or Getting to Yes', 33–8. Rosselli, *Singers of Italian Opera*, 93, cites the case of one seventeenth-century bass with a fine voice who was musically illiterate.
 - 16 See Reardon, *A Sociable Moment*, 240.
 - 17 Rosselli, *Singers of Italian Opera*, 58.
 - 18 Reardon, 'Launching the Career of a *secondo uomo* in Late Seventeenth-Century Italy', *JSCM* 16/1 (2010), www.sscm-jscm.org/v16/n01/reardon.html, par. 5.5.
 - 19 Reardon, *Holy Concord*, 126.
 - 20 Beth L. Glixon, 'Giulia Masotti, Venice, and the Rise of the Prima Donna', *JSCM* 17, no. 1 (2011), pars. 3.1–3.11, <http://sscm-jscm.org/jscm-issues/volume-17-no-1/giulia-masotti-venice-and-the-rise-of-the-prima-donna/>; Glixon, 'Supereminet omnes: New Light on the Life and Career of Vittoria Tarquini', *Händel-Jahrbuch* 62 (2016), 385–98: 403.
 - 21 Reardon, 'Camilla in Siena and Senesino's Début', *SM* n.s. 2/2 (2011), 281–325: 305–6, 311–18.
 - 22 Claudio Sartori, 'La prima diva della lirica italiana: Anna Renzi', *Rivista musicale italiana* 2/3 (1968), 430–52: 435–8.
 - 23 Reardon, 'Launching the Career of a *secondo uomo*', pars. 3.1–3.7.
 - 24 Reardon, *A Sociable Moment*, 205.
 - 25 Joachim Steinheuer, 'Orfeo (1607)', in John Whenham and Richard Wistreich (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Monteverdi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 119–40: 122.
 - 26 Ellen Rosand, *Opera in Seventeenth-Century Venice: The Creation of a Genre* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1991), 2–3; Lorenzo Bianconi and Thomas Walker, 'Dalla Finta pazza alla Veremonda: Storie di Febiarmonici', *RIM* 10 (1975), 379–454.
 - 27 For the ducal or gentlemen's circuit, see Robert Lamar Weaver and Norma Wright Weaver, *A Chronology of Music in the Florentine Theater, 1590–1750: Operas, Prologues, Finales, Intermezzos, and Plays with Incidental Music* (Detroit: Information Coordinators, 1978), 65–71, and Beth L. Glixon and Jonathan E. Glixon, *Inventing the Business of Opera: The Impresario and His*

- World in Seventeenth-Century Venice* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 180–9. The observation on patronage is taken from Claudio Annibaldi, 'Towards a Theory of Musical Patronage in the Renaissance and Baroque: The Perspective from Anthropology and Semiotics', *Recercare* 10 (1998), 173–82: 174.
- 28 Rosand, *Opera in Seventeenth-Century Venice*, 236.
- 29 Reardon, 'Launching the Career of a *secondo uomo*', pars. 8.2–8.6.
- 30 See the Tamburini Career Chronology published as an appendix to *ibid.*
- 31 Paola Besutti, *La corte musicale di Ferdinando Carlo Gonzaga, ultimo Duca di Mantova: Musici, cantanti e teatro d'opera tra il 1665 e il 1707* (Mantua: Gianluigi Arcari Editore, 1989), 12–18.
- 32 Rosand, *Opera in Seventeenth-Century Venice*, 244.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 227–37; and Glixon and Glixon, *Inventing the Business of Opera*, 202.
- 34 Rosand, *Opera in Seventeenth-Century Venice*, 243–4.
- 35 The discussion here is based on a series of articles in the *JSCM* 17/1 (2011) that exhaustively examined Masotti, her life, and her career: see Reardon, 'Letters from the Road: Giulia Masotti and Cardinal Sigismondo Chigi', <http://sscm-jscm.org/jscm-issues/volume-17-no-1/letters-from-the-road-giulia-masotti-and-cardinal-sigismondo-chigi/>; Beth L. Glixon, 'Giulia Masotti, Venice'; Valeria De Lucca, 'The Power of the Prima Donna: Giulia Masotti's Repertory of Choice', <http://sscm-jscm.org/jscm-issues/volume-17-no-1/the-power-of-the-prima-donna-giulia-masottis-repertory-of-choice/>; Janet Page, 'Sirens on the Danube: Giulia Masotti and Women Singers at the Imperial Court', <http://sscm-jscm.org/jscm-issues/volume-17-no-1/sirens-on-the-danube-giulia-masotti-and-women-singers-at-the-imperial-court/>.
- 36 Reardon, *A Sociable Moment*, 82–3.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 250–4.
- 38 See Glixon and Glixon, *Inventing the Business of Opera*, 7, for the names of other female impresarios.
- 39 Rosand, *Opera in Seventeenth-Century Venice*, 223, notes that singers were generally paid more than composers. See also Lorenzo Bianconi and Thomas Walker, 'Production, Consumption, and Political Function of Seventeenth-Century Opera', *EMH* 4 (1984), 209–96: 224, 230–1, 284–5.
- 40 Glixon and Glixon, *Inventing the Business of Opera*, 199–200.
- 41 Reardon, *A Sociable Moment*, 244–6.
- 42 Beth L. Glixon, 'Private Lives of Public Women: Prima Donnas in Mid-Seventeenth-Century Venice', *ML* 76/4 (1995), 509–31: 522, and 'Scenes from the Life of Silvia Galiarti Manni', 113–15, 131, 133.
- 43 Reardon, *A Sociable Moment*, 78, 216. For more on singers and gifts, see Rosselli, *Singers of Italian Opera*, 81–2.
- 44 Rosand, *Opera in Seventeenth-Century Venice*, 228, 230; Durante, 'The Opera Singer', 357–8.
- 45 Reardon, *A Sociable Moment*, 37, 240.
- 46 *Ibid.*, 173.

- 47 Ibid., 249.
- 48 For an introduction to the subject, see Wendy Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence: Opera and Women's Voices in Seventeenth-Century Venice* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2003), 9–17.
- 49 Rosselli, *Singers of Italian Opera*, 62–3; Beth L. Glixon, 'Private Lives of Public Women', 522–4.
- 50 Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence*, 85.
- 51 Ibid., 174–6.
- 52 Roger Freitas, 'The Eroticism of Emasculation: Confronting the Baroque Body of the Castrato', *JM* 20/2 (2003): 196–249.
- 53 The description of the singing styles is from Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence*, 135.
- 54 Rosselli, *Singers of Italian Opera*, 52.
- 55 Beth L. Glixon, 'Scenes from the Life of Silvia Galiarti Manni', 100–12, and 'New Light on the Life and Career of Vittoria Tarquini', 403–4.
- 56 Beth L. Glixon, 'New Light on the Life and Career of Vittoria Tarquini', 409.
- 57 See Glixon and Glixon, *Inventing the Business of Opera*, 192; Beth L. Glixon, 'Scenes from the Life of Silvia Galiarti Manni', 116–19, 127–30.
- 58 Page, 'Sirens on the Danube', pars. 5.1–5.4.
- 59 Mary E. Frandsen, 'Eunuchi conjugium: The Marriage of a Castrato in Early Modern Germany', *EMH* 24 (2005), 53–124.
- 60 Reardon, 'Launching the Career of a *secondo uomo*', pars. 6.4–6.5.
- 61 Rosselli, *Singers of Italian Opera*, 47–50, 53.
- 62 Richard Wistreich, "'La voce è grata assai, ma. . .': Monteverdi on Singing', *EM* 22/1 (1994), 7–20: 16.
- 63 Tosi, *Opinioni de' cantori*, 65. It is interesting that Galliard, the translator of Tosi's work into English, knew by reputation most of the female singers and castrati the author mentioned but could report nothing on Buzzoleni. See *Observations on the Florid Song*, 100–4.
- 64 See Bianconi and Walker, 'Production, Consumption, and Political Function of Seventeenth-Century Opera', 277–8.
- 65 Glixon and Glixon, *Inventing the Business of Opera*, 176.
- 66 See Rosselli, *Singers of Italian Opera*, 29, for a caricature of Mozzi in his old age.