

7 Roles, reputations, shadows: singers at the Opéra, 1828–1849

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‘The devil who steals Peter Schlemihl’s shadow’

In an 1841 puff piece on the soprano sensation of the moment, Sofia Loewe, Henri Blaze de Bury related that Giacomo Meyerbeer had recently become so infatuated with Loewe’s voice that he had gone religiously to hear her sing in Berlin, hiding himself behind the curtains of a *loge* and noting down details of her technique, hoping to cast her in his next opera. Blaze de Bury concluded:

Meyerbeer is made so: he travels around the world in search of beautiful voices; as soon as he encounters one he copies it into a notebook, and thus he constructs in his imagination a dream cast for his next opera . . . Do you not find that there is something fantastic in this manner of collecting sopranos, tenors, and basses? Meyerbeer cuts out a beautiful voice for us, no more or less than that devil who steals Peter Schlemihl’s shadow on a moonlit night, folds it up and hides it away in his wallet.¹

The vaguely sinister image of the composer scribbling furiously in the obscure depths of his opera box is given an extra uncanny tinge by the allusion to Peter Schlemihl, a folk character immortalised in an 1814 novella by Adalbert Chamisso, who sells his shadow (in reality, his soul) to the devil in exchange for limitless wealth.²

Of course composers of opera had always ‘collected’ and reanimated great voices, and Blaze de Bury could easily have focused on more positive aspects of this assembly of a ‘dream cast’, emphasising the dialogue, exchange and renewal that also inform transactions between singer and composer. Blaze de Bury’s choice of the more sinister image of Meyerbeer as shadow-stealing demon perhaps betrays a peculiarly French unease with opera’s reliance on singers to bring its scores to life. For the French, steeped in an illustrious tradition of spoken drama, vocal display and the dominance of singers had long been marked as foreign and decadent. The stylistic opposition between French and Italian vocal styles was neatly exemplified in the divide between the two chief Parisian operatic venues. Virtuoso singing was associated with the Opéra’s chief competitor, the Théâtre Italien, and especially with the wildly successful Rossini operas performed there. On the other hand, the works written for the Opéra – even those by Rossini

Example 7.1a Meyerbeer, *Les Huguenots*, Act IV, grand duo. Raoul has just pulled Valentine over to the window and shown her the bloody victims already in the road: ‘Raoul! they will kill you! Ah! have pity!’

Allegro con moto

VALENTINE

ff (cri) p

Ra - oul! ils te tue - ront! Ah! pi - tié!

Orchestra

ff p

Example 7.1b Halévy, *La Juive*, Act V, finale. Rachel: ‘Ah! father, I’m scared! their mournful prayers fill me with icy fear!’ Eléazar: ‘My God, what should I do?’

Maestoso (Récit.)

RACHEL

p

Ah! mon père, j’ai peur! leur lu-gu-bre pri-ère gla-çe mon cœur d’ef-froi! Mon Dieu, que dois-je fai-re!

Orchestra

ppp

pp

pp

Strings

Mesuré

pp

Timps (soli)

+ Vlc., Cb.

ELÉAZAR

himself—asserted their distance from the Italian style by granting singers less leeway, and by emphasising dramatic force and precise declamation over vocal display.

This preference for an operatic style closely resembling speech is reflected in reviews and in the pamphlets chronicling the careers of the Opéra’s singers, which tend to downplay qualities of agility and tonal beauty in favour of the affecting delivery of individual lines of highly charged poetry. Berlioz provides an extreme example in his *Memoirs* when he harks back nostalgically to soprano Cornélie Falcon’s manner of pronouncing a single phrase from Meyerbeer’s *Les Huguenots*; the words he singles out, ‘Raoul! ils te tueront!’, occur in the middle of a recitative, and are recited on a monotone (Ex. 7.1a).³ Similarly, accounts of mezzo-soprano Rosine Stoltz’s early career attribute her ascent from provincial theatres to prima donna at the Opéra to the intensity with which she delivered another string of repeated notes, from Halévy’s *La Juive*: her rendition of Rachel’s dying plea ‘Mon père, j’ai peur!’ (a chain of chest Eb’s) in the opera’s last act (Ex. 7.1b) so captivated Adolphe Nourrit when he partnered Stoltz in a Brussels performance that he lobbied for a contract for her at the Opéra.⁴

This is not to say that the singers employed by the Opéra did not enjoy an ‘Italianate’ status as celebrities. Even in Paris, a word from a singer was

sometimes enough to influence crucial compositional decisions, and there is no doubt that the theatre's economic fortunes were directly dependent on its ability to retain a stable of star performers. If in practical terms the position of French singers differed little from that of their Italian counterparts, the critical discourse that surrounded them was quite different – no less laudatory, perhaps, but more prescriptive and often tempered with defensiveness against the foreign threat. The music conceived for these stars of the Opéra might be seen as marking out a middle ground between French and Italian tendencies, and between catering to singers and the desire to tame them. Amid a wealth of often conflicting evidence, we shall focus on a handful of moments when singers were particularly influential in shaping the Opéra's repertory and reputation, listening in turn to both the music written for them and to the words written about them.

Women of few words

Anxieties about the power of the singer are neatly reflected in the work usually counted as the first grand opera, Daniel-François-Esprit Auber's *La Muette de Portici* (1828). As we see in Chapter 9, the opera centres around a mute girl, a role calling for elaborate powers of pantomime and played by the ballerina Lise Noblet at the first performance. Auber's mute Fenella was an instant hit, but in aiming to capitalise on *La Muette's* huge success the Opéra could hardly imitate the popular theatre of the time by spinning out a series of works around the gimmick of the mute character.⁵ Instead, the role of Fenella effectively metamorphosed into what became one of grand opera's stock characters: a humble young woman, no longer mute, but reticent; who demonstrates her virtue and sincerity by singing primarily in syllabic style and strophic forms. The type was elaborated in the most successful operas of the next decade, but this association between virtue and vocal simplicity did not altogether banish pleasure in the soprano voice from grand opera. As if to placate audiences who demanded both Rossinian vocal *jouissance* and serious declamation worthy of the Comédie-Française, grand opera began to enforce a strict division of labour between the soprano character who *acts* and one who *sings*. Fenella's demure descendants – Alice in *Robert le Diable*, Valentine in *Les Huguenots*, Rachel in *La Juive* – are almost always complemented by high-born women who sing melismatically, exhibiting the *hauteur* and decadence denied their more maidenly counterparts, and often marked as vaguely unsympathetic or threatening. *La Muette's* Elvire, Isabelle in *Robert*, Eudoxie in *La Juive*, and Marguerite de Valois in *Les Huguenots* are all aristocrats – and in plot terms, 'other women' – who express

Example 7.2 Louis-Sébastien Lebrun, *Le Rossignol* (*The Nightingale*), Philis's aria 'Toi qui nous plait'.

Allegro

Flute solo

PHILIS

[en-] sem - - - - - ble Chan-tons en -

Ad libitum

sem -

Ad libitum

etc.

etc.

themselves in elaborate coloratura, their arias placed in unabashedly public contexts.

None of these exhibitionistic princesses is overtly identified as foreign, but contemporary audiences must have noted that three of the four roles were created by a singer with an Italian name – one who, moreover, had made her name singing down the street at the Théâtre Italien, in the popular productions of Rossini that had aroused both fanatical enthusiasm and anxiety for the patrimony of French vocal music. Born in Paris as Cinthie Montalant, the prima donna Laure Cinti-Damoreau (1801–63) – see Fig. 6 (p. 40) – Italianised her name early in her career in a bid for publicity. After signing on at the Opéra in 1826, she sang the first performances of Rossini's *Le Siège de Corinthe* (Pamyra) and *Guillaume Tell* (Mathilde), but before that her art was displayed in Louis-Sébastien Lebrun's opera *Le Rossignol* (1816), whose most famous number was a bravura duet with solo flute (Ex. 7.2).⁶ This 'oiseau' idiom was to remain Cinti-Damoreau's speciality, a style that Meyerbeer imitated and enhanced in *Les Huguenots* in the elaborate *fioriture* and the mimicry of nature sounds within Marguerite de Valois's showpiece aria, 'O beau pays de la Touraine' (Ex. 7.3). Sung while the queen looks at herself in a mirror and set against a decadent background of bathing beauties and voyeurism, the aria perfectly captures the heady combination of seduction and risk attached to Italianate singing in the grand operas of the 1830s.

Cinti-Damoreau left the Opéra in a contract dispute before she could première the role Meyerbeer had conceived for her, but her replacement as Marguerite, Julie Dorus-Gras (1805–96), shared many of these implicitly

Example 7.3 Meyerbeer, *Les Huguenots*, Act II, Marguerite's air: 'O beautiful region of Touraine'.

Andante cantabile

MARGUERITE *doux*

O beau pa - ys de la Tou-rai - - ne, Ri-ants jar-

Orchestra *p*

- dins, ver - te fon - tai - ne, Doux ruis - seu qui mur-

- mu - re, qui mur - mu - re à pei - ne. Que sur tes

bords j'ai - me à rê - ver, oui, que sur tes

cresc. *p* *molto cresc.* *doux*

Italianate qualities: flawless technique, a rather wooden acting style, and a mechanical correctness that Charles de Boigne compared to that of an instrument.⁷ In an 1840 book dedicated to Rossini and transparently designed to champion Italian influences at the Opéra, the Escudier brothers celebrated Dorus-Gras as a 'truly French' artist who, following

Example 7.3

The image displays two systems of musical notation. The first system consists of a vocal line (treble clef) and a piano accompaniment (grand staff). The vocal line includes the lyrics: "bords. j'aime à - rê - ver! O ____ doux ruis-seau qui. mur -". The piano part features a melodic line in the right hand and a harmonic accompaniment in the left hand, with the instruction "légèrement" (lightly) written above the right hand. The second system continues the vocal line with the lyrics: "- mu-re, qui mur-mu - - - re," and the piano accompaniment. The music is in a key with one sharp (F#) and a 3/4 time signature.

Cinti-Damoreau, proved that the French language was not – as had always been thought – fundamentally hostile to ornamental singing. However, their belief that the opposites could be reconciled was a minority position.⁸ As we have seen, the Opéra itself, at least by way of the scores it produced, advocated a different sort of *juste milieu*, building the opposition between French and Italian styles into its plots (and its casting) in such a way that audiences could enjoy the diversion of Italianate ornament while their moral sympathies were firmly fixed on the more purely ‘French’ singer of the pair.

During much of the 1830s, these sympathies were transfixed by the chief exponent of such domestic heroines, the irresistible Cornélie Falcon (1812–97). Falcon created the roles of Valentine and Rachel, and displaced Dorus-Gras as the public’s favourite Alice: when Meyerbeer heard her in the latter part for the first time he declared his opera to be finally ‘complete’.⁹ As the Opéra’s universally loved *ingénue* – perhaps the only singer of the time to maintain a reputation for chastity – Falcon barely needed to open her mouth to bring the role of Valentine to life. What was not communicated by the music Meyerbeer had written for her would be supplied by spectators’ memories of seeing Falcon in the other roles with which she was associated, or by anecdotes about her off-stage life, which journalists mingled freely with those of her characters. Just as film stars today can carry their personas with them from one role to the next, Falcon’s reputation for virtue and modesty inhabited and ennobled any character she portrayed.

Although she was on stage for only a brief five years, Falcon achieved the status of myth well before her untimely retirement in 1837. Her 1832 debut at the age of eighteen as Alice was an early public-relations triumph, attended by 'le tout Paris', including (among many other celebrities) Auber, Berlioz, Halévy, Rossini, Maria Malibran, Giulia Grisi, Alexandre Dumas, Honoré Daumier and Victor Hugo.¹⁰ Falcon quickly became the Opéra's top star, by 1835 earning an unprecedented 50,000 francs per year, more than three times as much as her colleagues Dorus-Gras and Cinti-Damoreau, and well ahead of the 30,000-franc salary of her teacher, the tenor Adolphe Nourrit (cf. Table 2.3, p. 30).¹¹ Falcon's short sojourn on the stage was so memorable that her name has survived into the present as the label for an entire category of singer: the 'falcon', a dramatic soprano with a rich lower register and a somewhat restricted range on top, as contrasted with the lighter, soubrette soprano roles named for another singer of the past, the 'dugazon'.¹² A description recorded by Castil-Blaze soon after Falcon's debut can perhaps help to account for the delirious enthusiasm Falcon inspired, and for the persistence of her memory as a nostalgic ideal of vocal expression:

Her voice is a strongly characterised soprano, with a range of two octaves extending from *b* to *d'''*, and resonating at all points with an equal vigour. A silvery voice, with a brilliant timbre, incisive enough that even the weight of the chorus cannot overwhelm it; yet the sound emitted with such force never loses its charm or its purity. Mlle Falcon attacks the note boldly, sustains it, grasps it, and masters it without effort, giving it the inflection most suitable for the sentiment she wishes to express. Full of soul, with a rare musical intelligence, and a perfect accord between her gestures and the melody she sings – these are the precious qualities we have noticed in this young artist.¹³

Such descriptions can give a general sense of a voice, but the terms of approval tend to be generic, phrases like 'silvery voice' or 'full of soul' occurring in connection with one successful singer after another. A more precise sense of Falcon's style can be deduced from the music Halévy wrote for her in *La Juive*, particularly the unusual Act II *romance*, 'Il va venir' (Ex. 7.4). As we have seen, Berlioz was dazzled by Falcon's way with recitative in *Les Huguenots*, and Halévy mines this same strength by injecting an exceptional amount of fragmented declamation into the set piece itself. Although nominally in ternary form, the *romance*'s outer sections are dominated by short, uneasy bursts of declamation depicting Rachel's fear and trembling ('Il va venir . . . Je me sens frémir'), with melodic continuity entrusted mainly to the French horn. As the soprano gradually begins to shape a melody of her own (at 'd'une sombre et triste pensée'), Halévy exploits both Falcon's gift for

Example 7.4 Halévy, *La Juive*, Act II, Rachel's romance: 'He will come! and I seem to shiver with fear!'

Andantino

RACHEL

Il va ve-nir!

Con dolcezza

Orchestra

Hns

Strings (pizz.)

pp

Hns

sf p più f

et d'ef-froi... je me sens fré-mir! d'u-ne sombre et tris-te pen-

sostenuto

Str. (pizz.)

ppp

Cl. *p*

+ Timp.

- sé - e mon âme hélas, est op-pres-sé - e mon cœur bat... mais non de plai-sir... et ce-pen-

- dant il va ve - nir, ce - pen-dant il va ve - nir! mon cœur

Str. *ppp*

pp

Ob.

bat mais non de plai-sir et ce-pen-dant ce-pen-dant il va ve - nir!

f

p

p

Cl., Bsn *pp*

Timp.

sharply etched attacks and the extraordinary ease with which she must have shifted between chest and head voices. Subsequent phrases build by small leaps to $g^{b''}$, then g'' , and finally through a seventh to a quiet ab'' before subsiding to the cadence. These repeated gestures suggest that Falcon excelled at delicate high notes, but also that she may have had trouble making a smooth transition across her break around a' and bb' .¹⁴ As here, much of the music written for Falcon avoids stepwise motion across this break, just as much of it dwells on the G above the staff, as if she sounded particularly ravishing there.

If Falcon's debut was fairy-tale-like, the circumstances of her vocal decline were no less astonishing. Suddenly during a performance of Louis Niedermeyer's *Stradella* in 1837, she opened her mouth and nothing but noise came out: Berlioz described hearing 'raucous sounds like those of a child with croup, guttural, whistling notes that quickly faded like those of a flute full of water'.¹⁵ She experimented with a variety of remedies, from a sojourn in the warmer climate of Italy to a Hoffmannesque regimen of singing inside a glass bell, presumably intended to enhance her natural resonance. Despite all efforts, though, a comeback attempt in 1840 was disastrous.¹⁶

Theories about the source of Falcon's vocal collapse range from the quasi-scientific to the sensational: among them are the ill-effects of beginning to sing in a large opera house before her body was fully mature, an attempt to force her natural mezzo-soprano into a higher tessitura, the taxing style of Meyerbeer's music, and sheer nervous fatigue perhaps brought on by romantic troubles. What is certain is that Falcon's particular affliction, the fact that her career ended in a kind of noble *muteness*, resonated particularly well with the persona that had been built up for her in the press, and perhaps also with the qualities the Paris public wished to see and hear from their leading performer of the quiet heroines who symbolised 'French' virtues and 'French' vocalising.¹⁷

After her retirement, Falcon lived on for a half-century as a virtual recluse in the Chaussée d'Antin, within a stone's throw of the Opéra. Camille Bellaigue told of visiting her shortly after the première of *Carmen* to play her some of Bizet's music on the piano: he claimed that although she had not heard any music at all since 1840, she was immediately able to grasp the beauties of the new work.¹⁸ Bellaigue aimed to invest the unforgettable Falcon with timeless aesthetic instincts, and perhaps also to hint at the ageless appeal of French music. But it is impossible to contemplate this odd encounter without also reflecting that, even in her prime, Falcon would have been neither able nor willing to play Bizet's entirely new type of heroine – a wilful woman who, careless of virtue and anything but reticent, explodes into exhibitionistic song and dance at the slightest provocation.

Tenors as trumpets

If any male singer approached Falcon's legendary status, it must have been her teacher Adolphe Nourrit (1802–39), first interpreter of the roles of Arnold (*Guillaume Tell*), Masaniello (*La Mulette*), Robert and Raoul (*Les Huguenots*). While celebrations of Falcon tended to focus on her chastity and generosity, or on her affecting acting style, Nourrit is acclaimed first of all for his creative contributions to the works he premièred. Meyerbeer once wrote to Nourrit of what he called 'our *Huguenots* – because you have done more for it than its authors', Donizetti used similar language about his 1838 opera *Poliuto*, and Halévy credited Nourrit with writing the words for the central tenor aria in *La Juive*, 'Rachel, quand du Seigneur'.¹⁹ As with Falcon, Nourrit's mythology derives partly from the way his career ended – all the more so because that end was intimately connected with changes in vocal technique and audience taste. In 1837 Nourrit was virtually chased off the stage of the Opéra by the arrival of Gilbert-Louis Duprez (1806–96), the first tenor to sing up to *c''* in full chest voice. Dismayed by his waning popularity, his voice failing, Nourrit took refuge in Italy where he hoped both to strengthen his voice and to discover a more sympathetic public. When this did not happen, suffering increasingly from symptoms of paranoia, he threw himself to his death from a Naples balcony.²⁰

Duprez's cataclysmic introduction of the '*ut de poitrine*' is something of an anomaly in the history of singing. Unlike the shadowy 'lost' voices preserved only in memoirs and partisan journalistic verbiage, this change is concrete, precisely dateable to 17 April 1837, and even to a specific passage in Arnold's cabaletta in the last act of *Guillaume Tell*.²¹ The moment is widely credited with definitively altering perceptions of the tenor voice. But what exactly changed, vocally and dramatically, when Duprez so violently upstaged Nourrit in 1837?²²

One effect of Duprez's innovation concerned dramatic verisimilitude and archetypes of masculinity. Accustomed as we are today to the blaring tones of a Pavarotti (or even a Caruso), we might guess that Duprez's ringing, fully embodied high notes would inspire librettists and composers to create a new kind of tenor lead, more forceful, active – in short, more convincingly *masculine*. But in fact the movement was nearly in the opposite direction. Where the roles associated with Nourrit (with the possible exception of the naive and passive Raoul in *Les Huguenots*) tended emphatically towards the heroic and the revolutionary, those conceived for Duprez were likely to be defined more by love-interest than by political conviction. Masaniello and Arnold, both originally Nourrit roles, are revolutionaries above all, and both use their highest notes as clarion calls to action: Masaniello sings a rousing duet with baritone studded with exuberant high notes ('Mieux vaut

Example 7.5 Rossini, *Guillaume Tell*, Act I, duo of Arnold and Tell: 'Mathilde, treasure of my soul, must I renounce my love? O fatherland, to you I shall sacrifice my love and my honour!'

Allegro moderato ♩ = 126

ARNOLD (aside)

Ah! Ma - thil - de, i - do - - le de mon â - me,

Orchestra

Strings pizz.
p *sotto voce*
Wind sustain

il faut — donc — vain-cre ma flam - - me?

TELL (observing him)

J'ai su li - re dans son

O — ma pa - tri - e mon cœur - te sa-cri - fi - - e,

cœur, — il rou-git de son er - reur; — en ser-vant la ty - ran-

mourir': see Ex. 10.1, p. 175) while Arnold specialises in leaps of sixths and sevenths, triumphantly laying claim to the Swiss landscape in an imitation of Alpine yodelling (Ex. 7.5). In contrast, the roles conceived for Duprez (see Table 7.1) are surprisingly restrained in their use of the newly forceful high notes, instead exploiting the warmth and breadth of tone for which Duprez was noted.²³ Each of the three arias Donizetti composed for Duprez delivers one or two high *c*'s in its final phrase, but the real heroism in each

Table 7.1 Roles premiered by Gilbert-Louis Duprez

Florence, Teatro della Pergola	
1833	Donizetti, <i>Parisina</i> (Ugo)
1834	Donizetti, <i>Rosmonda d'Inghilterra</i> (Enrico II)
1835	Donizetti, <i>Lucia di Lammermoor</i> (Edgaro)
Paris, Opéra	
1838	Halévy, <i>Guido et Ginevra</i> (Guido)
1838	Berlioz, <i>Benvenuto Cellini</i> (Cellini)
1839	Auber, <i>Le Lac des fées</i> (Albert)
1840	Donizetti, <i>La Favorite</i> (Fernand)
1840	Donizetti, <i>Les Martyrs</i> (Polyeucte)
1841	Halévy, <i>La Reine de Chypre</i> (Gérard)
1843	Halévy, <i>Charles VI</i> (Duke of Bedford)
1843	Donizetti, <i>Dom Sébastien</i> (Sébastien)
1847	Verdi, <i>Jérusalem</i> (Gaston)

Example 7.6 Donizetti, *La Favorite*, Act IV, Fernand's cavatina: 'Purest angel, whom I found as in a dream'.

Larghetto

FERNAND

An - ge si pur que dans un son - ge j'ai cru trou-ver,
vous que j'ai-mais... a - vec l'es-poir, tris - te men-son - ge, en - vo - lez vous,
et pour ja-mais, en - vo - lez vous, et pour ja-mais!

involves tessitura. Both 'Mon seul trésor' (*Les Martyrs*, 1840) and 'Ange si pur' (*La Favorite*, 1840) float around an axis of e'' , stretching up to f'' , g'' and even a'' within their basic melodic compass (Ex. 7.6). No wonder Duprez's voice was already beginning to shred by 1840.

Similarly, the passage in which Duprez unveiled the momentous 'ut de poitrine' must have invested the singer with quite different varieties of heroism. In the cabaletta 'Amis, amis' from Act IV of *Tell*, a rebel leader inflames his followers through sheer vocal energy. Like much of Arnold's other music, the cabaletta is propelled by martial rhythms, stiffened by trumpet and French horn doublings and arpeggiated surges up to that top c'' (Ex. 7.7).²⁴ As performed by Nourrit, one can imagine that it sounded pure, ringing, and somehow idealistic; however, it was probably the sheer vocal muscle Duprez brought to the scene that made it a prototype for countless later tenor cabalettas and for the figure of the defiant rebel-tenor, typified by Verdi's Manrico with his famous cabaletta 'Di quella pira' (*Il trovatore*, 1853).

Example 7.7 Rossini, *Guillaume Tell*, Act IV, Arnold's air: 'Follow me! let us overcome the murderous monster!'

Allegro $\text{♩} = 88$

ARNOLD

Sui-vez moi, sui-vez moi; d'un mons- - tre per-

Orchestra

p Hns

8 - fi - de trom - pons l'es - pé-rance ho - mi - ci - de, trom - pons l'es - pé-rance ho - mi-

8 - ci - de, ar - ra - chons Guil - laume à ses coups, _____ ar - ra - chons Guil-laume à ses coups.

f Tutti *fp*

Just as Nourrit and Duprez escape type-casting along gender lines (at least in terms of gender as we understand it today), the discourse of national difference that surrounded the rivals was equally slippery – although no less vigorous for being confused. Both were French by birth, and Nourrit was embraced as a homegrown talent in a fairly uncomplicated way. The case of Duprez, though, presented both a challenge and an opportunity to journalists determined to decline vocal technique along national lines. Italophilic critics like the Escudiers would gleefully recall Duprez's 'first' Paris debut, an 1825 performance of Rossini's *Barbiere* at the Odéon, when his voice had been so weak that – as one witness put it – listeners had to observe a religious silence in order to hear it.²⁵ These writers insisted

that only ten years of study and apprenticeship in Italy, where Duprez had created several important roles for Donizetti (including Edgardo in *Lucia di Lammermoor*), could have produced the sublime ability Duprez exhibited on the Opéra stage by the late 1830s.

Champions of French training, on the other hand, gave full credit for Duprez's success to his first teacher, Alexandre-Etienne Choron, whose school for religious music had also trained mezzo-soprano Rosine Stoltz and (briefly) the tragic actress Rachel. While the professors of voice at the Conservatoire (source of most of the Opéra's singers) were sometimes criticised for treating the voice as if it were just another orchestral instrument, Choron's pedagogical system was aggressively anti-operatic, rooted in a careful declamation and simplicity of line inherited from the eighteenth-century Neapolitan school and from the German chorales he used as teaching tools.²⁶ As the inventor of a reading method for children based on sensitivity to the sounds – the unique 'voice' – of the French language, Choron's patriotic credentials were unimpeachable, and his voice students accordingly were recognised above all for their declamation of recitative.²⁷ Where Nourrit and his generation had delivered recitative in a style halfway between reciting and singing, Duprez pioneered a more lyrical delivery in full voice that closed the gap between recitative and aria, injecting new life into the French poetry but also perhaps bringing it closer to the song-based Italian aesthetic.²⁸

If Nourrit and Duprez can be 'read' as cultural icons in the same way that the pair Falcon and Cinti-Damoreau can, Duprez must occupy the ground of the *juste milieu*, melding French and Italian virtues, while Nourrit would represent the '*français pure laine*', famed for his depictions of patriots on stage and destroyed off-stage by his banishment from France and the dispossession he suffered in Italy. Such, at least, is the story told by Fromental Halévy, whose affectionate memoir of Nourrit reports that shortly before his suicide the singer described himself as an 'exile', lamenting that

art requires freedom, and I am not free. I am an alien, an exile! [Here in Italy] I speak a language that is not my own, and my audiences hear a language that is not their own.²⁹

Elaborating the patriotic elements of the tale, Halévy traces Nourrit's vocal problems back to the 1830 Revolution. In those heady days, Nourrit apparently strained his voice by singing the Marseillaise from the barricades and by rushing from one theatre to another, determined to play Masaniello at the Opéra and sing revolutionary songs at the popular theatres in a single evening. Like so many stories about singers, this one may contain no more than a grain of truth, but Halévy's picture of Nourrit striving to turn his voice into a trumpet of the July Revolution and exhausting himself in the

process offers an aurally vivid contrast to the established idea of the high tenor as ‘weak’ or effeminate.

‘The banter of an Amazon’

The last two singers I shall focus on are less of a matched pair – neither rivals like Nourrit and Duprez, nor foils like Falcon and Cinti-Damoreau. Rosine Stoltz (1815–1903) and Pauline Viardot (1821–1910) never sang together – their careers at the Opéra did not quite overlap – and although both were technically mezzo-sopranos, they sang very different types of roles. Their public personas, too, were worlds apart, with Stoltz demonised in the press as the quintessential selfish diva while Viardot was idolised as that rare singer who placed the good of the work as a whole above the imperatives of her own ego. These two opposites may share only a single attribute, but it is an important one for my purposes: their idiosyncratic voices and dramatic gifts inspired profound changes in the kinds of roles written for women at the Opéra.

Like Duprez, Rosine Stoltz was trained by Alexandre Choron, and she must have learned his lessons well – at least if we can believe the anecdote about her conquest of Nourrit and of a contract at the Opéra through a single line of recitative in *La Juive*. But where Duprez had supplemented his early training with further lessons and performances in Italy, Stoltz studied only with Choron before making early debuts in Belgium and then at the Opéra (1837), perhaps without perfecting her voice. She was regularly praised in reviews for the intensity of her acting, her declamation and her vivid gestures, but the purely technical aspects of her voice seem to have been less secure, and critics often complained of lack of agility and unevenness of timbre across her range.

On the personal level, too, Stoltz was controversial, accused of using unfair techniques against her rivals and of profiting from a romantic liaison with the Opéra’s director, Léon Pillet. She is remembered today mostly for the role attributed to her in the onset of Donizetti’s madness. According to an oft-retold anecdote, Donizetti’s mental illness first manifested itself after a rehearsal of *Dom Sébastien*. Stoltz protested violently at having to stand idle on stage during the baritone’s *romance* and insisted on cuts; the distraught Donizetti obliged but, the story goes, was never quite the same again. It is now known that Donizetti’s illness was a result of long-dormant syphilis, and the tale is revealed as one of those fictions that collect around divas, perhaps in reaction against the influence they can exert during the compositional process.³⁰

The roles conceived for Stoltz were shaped equally by her talents and her deficiencies, both on and off the stage. She refused to share the stage with

any other principal soprano, thus almost single-handedly making obsolete the convention of paired lyrical and virtuosic female leads. Her two-octave range (roughly from *a* to *a'*), impressive low register and facility with large leaps between the extremes of her range were best suited to roles that emphasised fire and decisiveness over either the demure or ornamental attributes of the previous generation of grand opera heroines. In an 1842 letter Donizetti described Stoltz as a 'Joan of Arc' type, and imagined casting her as Hélène in *Le Duc d'Albe*, in what he called 'a role of action, of a type perhaps quite new in the theatre, where women are almost always passive'.³¹ Although *Le Duc d'Albe* never reached the Opéra stage, the 'Joan-of-Arc' persona can be perceived in the two roles with which Stoltz was most closely associated, the title role in *La Reine de Chypre* (1841) and Léonor in Donizetti's *La Favorite* (1840). A substitute cabaletta Donizetti wrote for Stoltz in *La Favorite* sums up many of her strongest qualities: its jagged contours with sharp shifts between extremes of range, extended passages in the low register and short phrases in a mostly syllabic style create the impression that Donizetti exploited her weaknesses as well as her strengths to maximum dramatic effect.³²

Having begun with the image of Meyerbeer surreptitiously surveying one singer from the depths of his *loge*, it seems only fitting to conclude with his obsession with another. While Meyerbeer was haunting Sofia Loewe's Berlin performances, he was also tracking Viardot, scheming to cast her as Fidès, the spurned mother of the fraudulent Anabaptist prophet Jean, in *Le Prophète* (1849). Viardot's rich voice and musical intelligence were more than enough to justify Meyerbeer's interest, but it is tempting to speculate that he may also have recognised in her a mirror of his own stylistic eclecticism, an ability to shift easily between national styles. As her early piano teacher Franz Liszt put it, Viardot transcended 'her Spanish origin, French upbringing, and German sympathies', to unite 'the charm of the [southern school] with the substance of the [northern] in a happy eclecticism', ultimately proving that 'art prefers to name its fatherland of its own free will'.³³

Viardot's father and sole voice teacher, Manuel Garcia, the most successful vocal pedagogue of his generation, was renowned for instilling both force and facility in his pupils, and his female students in particular (including Viardot's older sister, Maria Malibran, 1808–36) stood out for the 'double' character of their voices, combining a rich contralto register with a soprano extension and often juxtaposing the two extremes to great effect, sounding at once 'brilliant and severe'.³⁴ Viardot made good use of this family trait, which also seems to have allowed her to essay Italian and French styles with equal success. Her London and Paris debuts in 1838 and 1839 concentrated on Rossini – Desdemona (also Malibran's most successful role), Rosina in *Barbiere*, and *La Cenerentola* – and throughout her career she excelled in *bel canto*, while also gradually expanding her repertory to encompass both more

modern and more classical styles. Rather than prompting a completely new kind of heroine as Stoltz had, Viardot in a sense brought together in a single body the characteristics of grand opera's traditional contrasting sopranos – high and low, lyric and dramatic, Italianate and declamatory. In one 1847 performance Viardot even enacted the symbolic demise of that convention, when she sang the roles of both Alice and Isabelle in *Robert le Diable* on the same evening.

Strictly speaking, this was no more than an accident – the soprano scheduled to sing Isabelle was ill – yet the story of that 1847 performance is told and retold as an emblem of Viardot's versatility, her capacity to be all things to all composers.³⁵ For Viardot was also that rare creature, a *female* singer who enjoyed full and friendly collaboration with composers, her input welcomed by Meyerbeer, Gounod, Berlioz, Saint-Saëns, all of whom designed roles with her in mind. She is widely credited (although in the absence of clear documentation) with contributing much to the score of *Le Prophète*, and she had a substantial part in shaping both Gounod's *Sapho* (1851) and Berlioz's 1859 reworking of Gluck's *Orphée*, both roles she premiered.³⁶ Viardot even exerted influence on roles she never sang, such as Dido in Berlioz's *Les Troyens* (1858/1863) and Dalila in Saint-Saëns' *Samson et Dalila* (1877).³⁷

The Garcia family pedigree probably encouraged composers to place their trust in Viardot, but at least as important must have been her unusually broad musical training, which, in addition to serious piano study with Liszt, included composition lessons with Antoine Reicha. Viardot's own compositions, produced steadily throughout her career, are confident and original, showing an impressive ability to meld traditional vocal forms and adventurous harmonic and timbral effects.³⁸ Just as Viardot inspired and influenced young composers, who actively sought her advice and enshrined her in their mezzo-soprano heroines, Viardot also collected a wide circle of literary friends and admirers, many of whom seemed equally eager to depict her unique personality in prose. The copious memoirs of Viardot's social and family life often convey the impression that she inspired affection and awe in equal parts. The awe is echoed in Saint-Saëns' vivid, if not entirely flattering, description:

Her voice was tremendously powerful, prodigious in its range, and it overcame all the difficulties in the art of singing. But this marvellous voice did not please everyone, for it was by no means smooth and velvety. Indeed, it was a little harsh and was likened to the taste of a bitter orange. But it was just the voice for a tragedy or an epic, for it was superhuman rather than human. Light things like Spanish songs and Chopin mazurkas, which she used to transpose so that she could sing them, were completely transformed by her voice and became the banter of an Amazon or a giantess.³⁹

Clearly, we have come a long way from the docile persona of Falcon, or the bird-like Cinti-Damoreau. The diversity of the roles Viardot played, as well as the multiplicity of images in her many factual and fictional portraits, raise the suspicion that she was somehow resistant to the ‘typing’ that constrained most singers, her talents spilling far beyond any single dramatic or vocal category.⁴⁰ In light of Blaze de Bury’s charge against Meyerbeer as a thief of singers’ shadows, it seems significant that the composer cast Viardot in a role that had few antecedents on the nineteenth-century stage – that of a *mother* – and that in doing so he ‘stole’ only *part* of her voice, building up and challenging her talents for dramatic declamation while ignoring almost completely the florid Italian style on which she had built her fame.⁴¹ And because the overwhelming success of *Le Prophète* came quite early in Viardot’s long career, it seems likely that Meyerbeer’s *Fidès* also helped to ‘invent’ Viardot, shaping the singer she became in the following decades.

Of course, certain aspects of the role of *Fidès* were shaped by Viardot’s existing vocal talents as much as by Meyerbeer’s more abstract dramatic concept. The role’s remarkably wide tessitura exploited her impressive two-and-a-half octave range, and its emphasis on firm diction and attack similarly highlights a style in which all Garcia’s students were considered exceptionally gifted. But reciprocally, Meyerbeer also perhaps helped to define Viardot’s style, especially the ability to build emotional intensity through chains of short, gasping, recitative-like phrases which later became a hallmark of her style.

Meyerbeer himself commented on the ‘unprecedented tragic heights [Viardot attained] both as a singer and as an actress’ in the cathedral scene of Act IV, and it is there that his vocal writing for *Fidès* seems most personal and most moving.⁴² The ‘Complainte de la mendicante’, in which *Fidès* enters the cathedral as a destitute seeking alms (Ex. 7.8), relies on detached articulations and phrases gapped with rests to create a sense of pathos and physical weakness. Each of the melody’s first two phrases begins with a falling-fourth sobbing figure perfectly matched to the prosody and affect of the plea ‘donnez’ (‘give’). As the number unfolds, this three-note motif returns in a variety of guises, rising and falling, and in the final phrases of the *couplet* is stretched out to a tritone, on repetitions of the word ‘hélas!’ (bars 25, 27, 29).⁴³ But the *tour de force* of the cathedral scene is *Fidès*’ lament after Jean has refused to recognise her (Ex. 7.9), a blend of righteous outrage and self-questioning (‘Qui je suis? moi!’) that plays beautifully on Viardot’s ‘double voice’ and on her aptitude for vibrant, detached attacks. After a recitative-like opening based on another gasping three-note motif, the number climaxes with a series of pulsating figures in chest voice (‘And you, you denied knowing me!’: bars 23–6) which are finally swept away by a soaring cadential phrase in the upper range (bar 29): ‘Ungrateful one!’

Example 7.8a Meyerbeer, *Le Prophète*, Act IV: Fidès, exhausted, is led to the front of the stage: the 'Lament of the Mendicant' follows. (See also Ex. 12.3.)

Andantino quasi allegretto ♩ = 69

FIDÈS

Orchestra

(plaintively) 1

Don - nez, _ don -

3

-nez_ pour u - ne_ pauvre â - me, ou - vrez - lui le pa - ra - dis, le pa - ra - dis!_

cresc.

The role of Fidès may have been a unique invention when *Le Prophète* was first performed in 1849, but the character had an important legacy, initiating a series of mezzo-soprano and contralto roles that aimed to extend Viardot's unique combination of force and lyricism into a recognisable vocal type. The influence of Meyerbeer's Fidès on Verdi's conception of the gypsy-mother Azucena in *Il trovatore* (1853; Paris 1857) is often noted; and although this memorable pair hardly managed to launch a vogue for operatic mothers, the numerous gypsies and other exoticised women who populate late nineteenth-century French opera can be counted among their offspring.⁴⁴ But no female role of the next few decades came close to spanning the stylistic extremes Viardot had commanded. Indeed, among this late generation of 'othered' heroines, the division between sopranos who sang like birds (Leïla in *Les Pêcheurs de perles*, Mignon, Lakmé) and those who embraced a less florid style (Carmen, Dalila) was, if anything, more solid than it had been even in the midst of the Opéra's agonistic sparring with Rossini in the 1830s.

In other words, while the story told here might seem to outline a progression from singers like Falcon and Cinti-Damoreau, narrowly identified with clear vocal and dramatic archetypes, to the new force of the heroines created by Rosine Stoltz and beyond to Viardot's far more versatile profile, the history of singers at the Opéra is more properly told as an expansion

Example 7.8b The 'Lament of the Mendicant', continuation

don - nez pour dire u-ne mes - se, h - las!_ mon pauvre en -
 fant, h - las!_ mon pauvre en - fant, h - las!_ h - las!_

mon pau - vre en - fant! ah! ah! ah!

of possibilities followed by a rapid return to archetypal casting, with some new archetypes added along the way. Even for men, the spectrum of roles available by the later nineteenth century was one-dimensional compared to the interesting tension between vocal force and passivity played out by both Nourrit and Duprez. The reasons for this were many. The formation after mid-century of a body of repertory works established a fixed set of vocal traits as requirements for *any* soprano, or tenor, or baritone, since all singers had to be able to sing Rachel or Valentine or Arnold while also appearing in newly composed roles. This reliance on a standard repertory shifted the onus of innovation away from composition and on to performance, throwing a new emphasis on the 'technology' of vocal performance, on the spectacular high notes and mechanistic roulades that could inject a

Example 7.9 Meyerbeer, *Le Prophète*, Act IV, finale: Fidès, denied by her son, reacts with shock.

Allegro agitato ♩ = 69 [23] *(s'animent de plus en plus)*

FIDÈS
hé - - - las! et toi - tu ne - me con - nais pas, - et toi - tu

Orchestra

[27] *(avec explosion)* **ff**
ne - me con - nais pas! ah! l'in - grat, _____ l'in -

très marqué **ff** *dim.*

- grat, _____ il ne me re - con - nait - pas, _____

sense of 'event' into even the thousandth performance of *Guillaume Tell*. But as always when singers are concerned, practical factors tell only part of the story: a character as memorable as Fidès is created above all by the collision of forceful temperaments, by a sort of 'chemistry' that arises in the collaborations and negotiations between the 'shadow-stealing' composer and 'his' singers.