11 Opera and gender studies

HEATHER HADLOCK

. . . if woman had no existence save in the fiction written by men, one would imagine her a person of the utmost importance; very various; heroic and mean; splendid and sordid; infinitely beautiful and hideous in the extreme; as great as a man, some think even greater. But this is woman in fiction. In fact, as Professor Trevelyan points out, she was locked up, beaten and flung about the room.

A very queer, composite being thus emerges. Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history. VIRGINIA WOOLF, *A ROOM OF ONE S OWN* (1929)[1]

Virginia Woolf's contrast, between the centrality of women as represented in fiction and their virtual absence from the roster of those who have created fictional representations, may readily yet incompletely be adapted for the history of opera. It is easy enough to insert operatic heroines into Woolf's sardonic parade of martyrs, dominatrices and self-sufficient charmers: 'Certainly, if we consider it, Violetta must have had a way about her; Carmen, one would suppose, had a will of her own; Susanna, one might conclude, was an attractive girl.'[2] And, as in the history of literature, women have been all but absent from the operatic activities that received scholarly attention before the late 1980s: few traces remain of women composing, staging, theorizing about or paying for opera. Yet at the same time it would be absurd to describe women as 'all but absent from [opera's] history', when women – not only as dying heroines but as living divas – have been so central to this art's fascination for audiences, patrons, enthusiasts and critics. Despite that centrality, however, feminist perspectives on opera – by which I mean perspectives that analysed, interrogated and challenged the ideas about femininity, masculinity, sexuality, love, family and authority upon which operas rely, and which operas have helped circulate and perpetuate – did not emerge until the late 1980s. This essay will attempt to trace how scholarship on gender and sexuality in opera has developed since that time, and show how interdisciplinary theories of gender and sexuality have informed opera scholarship. The field of opera and gender studies reflects a general shift in feminist humanistic scholarship away from a more or less exclusive focus on women/femininity, toward a broader set of questions about the constructions and deployment of gender and sexuality categories. In the discussion that follows, I use the rubric 'feminist opera studies' to refer to the study of gender and sexuality in operas by men and women, in the careers of male as well as female artists, and in representation/performance of masculinity

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as well as femininity. I risk this term because I regard it as fundamentally a feminist project to de-naturalize and de-essentialize gender, to critique sex and gender identity categories, and to analyse and challenge the heteronormative frameworks in which notions of "natural" gender and sex roles are maintained as universal, unequal, mutually defining and mutually reinforcing. "Feminist opera studies" thus encompasses, in my admittedly utopian view, the sometimes competing and mutually neglectful domains of women's history, gay history, feminist theory and queer theory.

The first stage of feminist musicological research in the 1970s and early 1980s, which focused on female composers of Western art music, discovered only two opera composers, Francesca Caccini (1587– after 1637) and Ethel Smyth (1858–1944).[3] History records even fewer female librettists, impresarios, stage directors and opera conductors. More recently scholars have uncovered a cluster of female librettists and composers in Paris between 1770 and 1820, and at least three late nineteenth-century women, Louise Bertin and Augusta Holmés in Paris, and Ingeborg von Bronsart in Germany.[4] The activities of female opera composers and directors since the mid-twentieth century remain to be explored. The search for lost female opera composers continues to raise valuable questions about canon, values and historiography, to enrich our repertoire, and to add detail to the history of opera's development. Nevertheless, opera scholarship informed by feminist and gender studies did not fully take flight until the late 1980s, when it widened its focus from the search for female composers to the representation of women and femininity in canonic works. This turn towards interpretation, informed by literary theory and film studies, shaped the questions and challenges that would eventually push the field towards two issues that preoccupy it today: firstly, a critique of the assumptions that feminist scholarship on gender means studying 'women' and 'femininity' and, secondly, a new engagement with women's history, this time focusing on singers rather than composers.

Feminist criticism of canonic works was one of the most significant directions in the 'New Musicology' of the 1980s, and opera studies proved a central arena for it. Opera's literary and theatrical dimensions, commercial milieu and collaborative systems of production – the very qualities that made it a poor fit with the values of absolute music and high modernism – made it a perfect object for new questions about music's place in the 'web of culture'. 'Reading opera' would mean examining libretti and music as bearers of cultural values, including values about gender, love, virtue, family and nation.[5] Into this intellectual ferment came the 1988 English translation of Catherine Clément's polemical, charming and infuriating *Opera, or, The Undoing of Women* (1979). Clément retold opera's stories from the feminist perspective of a 'resisting reader', emphasizing both their mundane

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dimensions of sexual politics and class struggle, and their mythic/archetypal aspects.[6] Clément interpreted opera's doomed heroines in religious terms, as scapegoats who bear the spectators' individual and collective guilt. Drawing on Lévi-Strauss's structural analysis of myth to discern patterns in operatic plots (including the woman-as-outsider, the father–son rivalry, the family romance), she argued that tragic heroines embody the 'abject', by whose expulsion society reaffirms its coherence and purity. Her readings also drew on psychoanalytic theories to interpret the diva as a maternal figure, suggesting that opera's ritual re-presentations of feminine death permit the spectator to affirm his separation from and mastery over the mother.

Clément's most controversial move was deliberately to privilege the literary aspects of opera, proposing that music and spectacle serve primarily to short-circuit the audience's critical response. Musical pleasure might coat a bitter pill of bourgeois misogyny, but silent reading would restore detachment and enable feminist critique.[7] Of the Violetta–Germont duet in Act II of *La traviata*, for example, Clément wrote:

> You think it is a touching duet between a wounded father and a suffering woman? Then *listen to the words, see the truth* [emphasis added]. The father of the family is marrying off Alfredo's sister. The noble feelings he concedes to the prostitute are of no interest to him. Except in one way: it is how he will be able to trap her. That is where the ignominy begins. Listen to him describe, with tender, peaceful music, the little pure, and virginal girl . . . [8]

Clément claimed that opera marshals the power of narrative, theatre and music to make the audience desire the heroine's death as both inevitable and beautiful. Susan McClary extended this argument to include musical strategies for depicting female madness, violence, sexuality and exoticism: with chromaticism, coloratura and manipulation of formal convention, composers could offer first the 'pleasure and danger' of disorder and then the relief of harmonic resolution and formal closure.[9]

Clément's book produced a paradoxical double response: an 'aha!' that she had articulated something obvious and central (*women die!*), and at the same time a nagging feeling that she had missed the point (*but opera is not about that!*). While it would be an overstatement to describe the next decade of feminist opera studies exclusively as a response to Clément, her assertions and assumptions did provoke extensive debate, critique, rebuttal and refinement through the 1990s. Mary Ann Smart's editorial introduction to *Siren Songs: Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Opera* offered an insightful overview and meditation on the state of opera and gender studies in the second half of that decade.[10] Scholars of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century repertoire focused their critiques on two of Clément's assumptions: firstly, psychoanalytically based theories of the dynamics between singer,

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voice and listener in operatic performance; and, secondly, an implicitly heterosexual politics of operatic spectatorship. Meanwhile feminist research on pre-Romantic repertoires, which Clément had not considered in her feminist analysis, challenged both her equation of the high/dominant voice with femininity and her tragic model of catharsis through the heroine's undoing.

Singer, voice and listener

Readings of operatic heroines as 'undone' for the enjoyment of the bourgeois spectator resonated with certain tenets of feminist film theory, particularly the presumption that the masculine (free, empowered) gaze of an author/apparatus/spectator exercises 'mastery' over the feminine (immobile, constructed, gazed-upon) object.[11] Both Susan McClary in her *Carmen* book and Lawrence Kramer in his essay on *Salome* compared musical structures to a camera's controlling gaze: devices for framing feminine excess so that the male viewer/listener might enjoy it with impunity.[12] But does opera produce such comfort and security? Listening may equally well be figured as an experience of vulnerability, a temporary loss of self in submission to a voice and, by extension, to the singer who produces it. The difference between seeing and hearing a singer drives the plot of Balzac's novella 'Sarrasine' (1830), whose protagonist, a sculptor, falls in love with the singer 'La Zambinella' at the opera. Initially her delicate appearance inspires fantasies of that conquering male gaze: 'Sarrasine wanted to leap onto the stage and take possession of this woman . . . the distance between himself and La Zambinella had ceased to exist, he possessed her, his eyes were riveted upon her, he took her for his own.'[13] Yet her voice undoes this illusion of mastery:

> this agile voice, fresh and silvery in timbre, supple as a thread shaped by the slightest breath of air, rolling and unrolling, cascading and scattering, this voice attacked his soul so vividly that several times he gave vent to involuntary cries torn from him by convulsive feelings of pleasure which are all too rarely vouchsafed by human passions. He was presently obliged to leave the theater. His trembling legs almost refused to support him. He was limp, weak as a sensitive man who has given way to overwhelming anger. He had experienced such pleasure, or perhaps he had suffered so keenly, that his life had drained away like water from a broken vase. He felt empty inside, a prostration similar to the debilitation that overcomes those convalescing from serious illness.[14]

Balzac replaces the objectified image with a more disturbing yet more erotically specific fantasy of the listener's 'undoing' by a feminine voice.

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(Later in the story, Balzac corrects this apparent gender reversal by revealing that 'La Zambinella' is no woman but a castrato: 'her' penetrating voice substitutes – perversely, and with tragic consequences – for the phallic authority of which 'he' has been deprived.)

Connections between the voice, the body and the feminine may be traced back to Freud's theories of infantile development and the formation of an individual subjectivity based on self-awareness and the awareness of sexual difference. While the infant initially experiences itself as one with the Mother in a pre-linguistic realm dominated by vocal sonority, the body, impulse and pleasure, it becomes aware of its own bodily separateness and eventually acquires language, passing thus into the Father's realm of words, meanings, rules, systems and prohibitions. The basic premise that 'language' is paternal while 'voice' is maternal generates a chain of gendered binarisms that would oppose the male composer to the female singer, the writing hand to the singing voice, meaningful discourse to meaningless music, arguments to enchantments. Opera studies drew on literary theories of voice as both medium and message, grain and utterance, atavistic 'cry' and civilized meaning.[15] The price of access to the paternal/social realm is the acceptance of taboos against the mother and, by extension, against the feminine, which comes to be figured as 'lack' in contrast with the active agency of 'the phallus'.[16] These taboos in turn produce fantasies of lost authenticity, nostalgia both for the maternal voice and for a 'voice-self' silenced by language, culture and paternal inhibition.[17]

As this summary suggests, most literary and scholarly writing on opera figures 'the operatic voice' (whether emerging from women or castrati) as female. Ironically, the feminist move of attending to female voices has tended to leave male voices – their presumably transcendent authority, stability and god-like detachment – almost uninterrogated. Low male voices remain all but inaudible in analyses of 'the operatic voice' and its meanings and functions within culture. An important first step away from this was Carolyn Abbate's 1993 essay 'Opera, or, the Envoicing of Women', which challenged the habitual equating of female characters and performers with actual women.[18] Her argument unfolded through readings of the film *Mascara* (in which male transvestites lip-sync to operatic music) and of Strauss's *Salome*, extending these works' central motifs of veils, masquerade, gender transgression and delusion to encompass the constructed and performed nature of all operatic femininity, both on and off stage. This essay raised the possibility of regarding every diva, regardless of sex, as a female impersonator. Abbate further proposed that the recordings to which *Mascara*'s transvestites lip-sync are operatic 'texts', and that (female) singers, perhaps more than composers, should be regarded as opera's authors. The gender-oriented analysis in 'Opera, or, the Envoicing of Women' reflected broader

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tensions in musicology between conceptions of music as a textual system and music as event, and anticipated Abbate's eventual framing of the question in terms of 'gnostic' and 'drastic' modes.[19] The implications of these two strategies – de-essentializing the diva's femininity, and elevating her to the status of author/creator of operatic experience – continue to be worked out in current scholarship.

Sexual politics of spectatorship

The tacit presumption (or official fiction) of a straight male spectator for opera has been challenged from feminist, gay and lesbian perspectives. Traces of what opera might mean for female listeners may be discerned in literature and popular fiction, which typically caricature women as valuing opera for its prestige rather than truly 'hearing' it (a privilege reserved for sensitive men). This reflects opera's importance as an arena for conspicuous consumption and social competition, increasingly feminized activities since the nineteenth century.[20] Yet there were exceptions: Flaubert's Emma Bovary, for one, wonders at the opera 'Why had she not resisted and supplicated, like Lucia?'[21] Feminist writers including George Eliot, Willa Cather and Margaret Atwood created divas to embody the values of freedom, self-determination and artistic discipline. The heroine of Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* (1976) recalls how as an obese teenager she loved the Metropolitan Opera radio broadcasts:

> For a while I wanted to be an opera singer. Even though they were fat they could wear extravagant costumes, nobody laughed at them, they were loved and praised. Unfortunately I couldn't sing. But it always appealed to me: to be able to stand up there in front of everyone and shriek as loud as you could, about hatred and love and rage and despair, scream at the top of your lungs and have it come out music. That would be something.[22]

Lesbian-feminist poet Adrienne Rich, on the other hand, suggested in 1978 that opera would no longer do as vehicle for resistant female voices:

> the music on the radio becomes clear –
> neither *Rosenkavalier* nor *Götterdämmerung*
> but a woman's voice singing old songs
> with new words, with a quiet bass, a flute
> plucked and fingered by women outside the law.[23]

What a cluster of patriarchal clichés Rich could evoke and reject with just two operatic titles: lesbian desire as false and titillating spectacle, female aging as doom, the beauty of feminine renunciation, the death-drive, the

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necessity of apocalypse. ‘Women’s music’ subcultures of the 1970s and 1980s rejected classically trained voices – with their connotations of elitism, whiteness and a narrow range of stylized feminine personae such as coy girl, siren or victim – in favour of natural (rough, weak or untrained) voices and ‘natural’ (unglamorous and/or sexually non-conformist) personae.[24]

The significance of opera in urban gay male subcultures has been an open secret since the late nineteenth century, and probably much earlier: the opera house was always a forum for the dandies, aesthetes and men of fashion among whose ranks wealthy men could both conceal and indulge same-sex desires. Yet the flip side of this ‘open secret’ was a strict taboo on public acknowledgement of homosexuality among the ranks of opera (and art music) composers.[25] The illegality and stigma of homosexuality required musicians, critics and admirers of opera to deny and suppress traces of non-heteronormative sexuality in the lives and works of composers. The most extreme operatic case is Benjamin Britten, whose biography and reception are marked with the suppressions, elisions and substitutions typical of what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick unforgettably called the ‘epistemology of the closet’.[26] Philip Brett’s article ‘Britten and Grimes’ (1977) was the first to name the possibility of reading Britten’s damaged and persecuted hero as a sympathetic and critical evocation of the homosexual in a homophobic society: ‘There is every reason to suppose that . . . it is to the homosexual condition that *Peter Grimes* is addressed.’[27] Over the next twenty-five years, Brett developed increasingly bold analyses of sexuality in Britten’s operas, including internalized homophobia in *Billy Budd*, stigma and scapegoating in *Peter Grimes*, and mutually defining themes of pederasty and exoticism in *The Turn of the Screw* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.[28] Britten’s life, art and critical reception emerge in Brett’s essays as case studies of how the closet functioned on the individual level as a psychological category, and on the social level as a disciplinary force.[29]

The most systematic and influential exploration of opera’s ‘closets’, and most overt challenge to presumptions of spectatorial heteronormativity, came from Wayne Koestenbaum, whose *The Queen’s Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (1993) wove together a high-spirited ethnography of gay male opera fans with queer readings of plots, arias and characters.[30] Following Koestenbaum’s initial ‘outing’ of opera, the 1990s were a prolific coming-out phase for queer opera studies.[31] The ‘opera queen’ subfield produced a set of tropes about the affinity of queer subjects for opera: that the excess of opera compensates for the repressions of the closet, and that cross-gender identification (between queens and divas, or queens and heroines) subverts the genre’s apparently heterosexual content.[32] Similarly, lesbian critics in the 1990s celebrated opera – particularly works with trouser roles – as a transgressive space where lesbian

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spectators might adore women on stage, and relish love scenes between women.[33] In this celebratory school of criticism, operatic music creates a utopian sound-space in which 'perversity' is cleansed of its negative charge.

These tropes, however, became rather stale with repetition, and by the end of the 1990s seemed temporarily exhausted. Gay and lesbian perspectives were all but absent from two international feminist opera studies conferences in 2006 and 2007.[34] The present challenge facing queer opera studies is: now that opera has come out, what next? How shall queer theory and opera studies inform each other in an 'out' way?[35] The increasing fragmentation of conceptions of identity make it harder to propose theoretical models of reading 'as a woman' or 'as an opera queen'. At any rate, it is impossible to return to the 'masterful male gaze/mastered feminine object' paradigm, or to assumptions that opera's primary cultural work is to soothe masculine/dominant-cultural anxieties.

At times it has seemed that feminist criticism had set in motion a sort of critical carousel, its ponies oscillating endlessly between undoing and envoicing, victimization and empowerment, objects and subjects, oppressive master-plots and resistant voices. Any assertion of one side may be more or less automatically countered by the other. But it may be more productive to regard these oppositions as two poles between which opera's energy cycles, renewing itself. Questions originally formulated about 'women in opera' – undone, or envoiced? objects or subjects? – have drawn us closer toward opera's central, sentimental paradox: that its performers exercise power most effectively through performances of abject powerlessness. The dynamic is as old as the genre itself, traceable back to Orfeo's 'true prayer' and Arianna's 'true lament'.[36]

Opera and gender before Romanticism

While nineteenth-century scholars were critiquing Clement's apparently transhistorical claims about voices, spectatorship, authority and desire within the Romantic repertoire, feminist scholars of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century opera were building their own questions and hypotheses about how gender and sexuality had worked in earlier periods. Early feminist studies of baroque opera offered 'Clémentian' reading of heroines' excess and containment, and indeed female voices of defiance and seduction ring through opera's history. Although the very first operas had concerned themselves with the musician-divinities Apollo and Orpheus, a woman's expression of emotional extremity through song quickly became central to the genre. The aria 'Lasciatemi morire', from Monteverdi's *L'Arianna* (1608), represents the *fons et origo* for the lamenting heroine as a

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musical and theatrical topos.[37] Female laments, usually motivated by sexual betrayal, encompass erotic nostalgia, despair, noble wrath and ignoble vindictiveness. Two early opera stars, Virginia Ramponi Andreini ('Florinda') and Anna Renzi, were especially celebrated for their compelling laments.[38] Wendy Heller's research on Venetian opera has amply demonstrated how women's voices in baroque opera functioned as instruments of political ambition and sexual power.[39] Suzanne Cusick reads Francesca Caccini's *La liberazione di Ruggiero dall' isola d'Alcina* (1624–25) as allegory about the misuse of feminine song and sexuality: the 'wicked' sorceress Alcina's spell over Ruggiero must be broken by a 'good' (patriarchally identified) sorceress, Melissa.[40] Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea* turns an episode of Roman history into another 'sorceress myth', with Poppea as a modern Venus of ambition and blithe destructiveness, and Love himself as her champion. In the later seventeenth century, operatic portraits of feminine sensuality, power and vulnerability become increasingly complex in such iconic figures as Lully's Armide and Purcell's Dido.

Yet if the heroine's archetypal character, psychology and experiences persist across opera's history, the heroes, supporting characters and social worlds around her have changed drastically over time. Though the meanings attached to vocal timbres since the early nineteenth century have been so consistent as to seem natural and inevitable, research on gender and sexuality in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century opera has revealed the connotations attached to vocal timbres to be historically and geographically specific. Opera carries and constructs gendered meanings not only in its libretti and musical conventions but in its very material: singing voices and gendered bodies. Scholars of baroque opera have crafted new paradigms for understanding gender and sexuality in their repertoire, based fundamentally on the arguments of Thomas Laqueur that the early modern period did not conceive of the masculine and feminine as fixed opposites. Rather biological sex and gender were imagined as a continuum, a ladder with adult masculinity at the top and adult femininity and childhood on the lower rungs.[41] Each body and gendered subject was understood to begin at the bottom of the ladder and grow up to its proper stage. The fully achieved masculine subject would be emotionally and sexually continent, acting on principle rather than feeling, while the feminine subject was seen as sensual, narcissistic and impulsive, driven by passions such as desire, pity and vindictiveness. The fascinating danger was that subjects might not maintain their proper places: ambitious, passionate women might surpass the normal limits of 'femininity', while undisciplined men might slide back down into the 'effeminate' realm of feeling and self-indulgence. This conception of sex and gender complicates the sexual politics of baroque opera for modern audiences, as does the use of castrati in both male and female roles.

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In contrast to its active, ambitious heroines, seventeenth-century opera's heroes perpetually sink into lasciviousness and passivity. A central theme in seventeenth-century opera is the emasculating effect of love, a conceit reinforced by the preference for castrato singers and the fascination of high voices, both alone and in pairs. Eric Chafe and, more recently, Rachel Lewis have argued that the castrato casting of Nero in *L'incoronazione di Poppea* conveys his effeminized state, while Ellen Rosand adds that Ottone's laments, and the hypocrisy and crime into which he descends, further supports *Poppea*'s theme of the corrupting effects of love on men. Roger Freitas has shown that castrati were erotic objects in life as on the stage.[42] In the mid-seventeenth century, the florid duet for two high voices became an essential component of Italian operatic scores, so that even 'heterosexual' love scenes are complicated by 'homovocal' sonorities.[43] The result is a labyrinth of ambiguously sexed and gendered situations, co-created in performance by poets, composers, performers and audiences.

In Metastasian *opere serie* of the eighteenth century, themes of unmanning, effeminacy and erotic deception gave way to more hygienic plots celebrating the hierarchy of a legitimate leader and grateful subjects. Serious opera became a political theatre of endorsement for absolutism, in which the castrato as king, general or conqueror represented masculine and patriarchal authority. Yet the eighteenth-century castrati are perhaps the most extreme examples of the gap between what Abbate called 'plot-character' and 'voice-character', or what Gumbrecht calls the dimensions of 'meaning' and 'presence' in live performance.[44] The castrato's character may have 'meant' order, patriarchy, legitimacy, but the singer 'presented' androgynous and sexually ambiguous enjoyments: an artificially engineered body, a non-reproductive sexuality, and a voice combining feminine timbre with masculine technical and social mastery. Contemporary reactions ranged from adoration to abjection as fans showered them with money and gifts while critics, reformers and satirists made them the epitomes of Italian *opera seria*'s 'unnatural', anti-dramatic, performer-centred aesthetic.[45] On the side of meaning, the *opera seria* hero embodied unproblematic masculinity – on the side of presence, everything but that. The castrati as a surgically, socially and culturally constructed 'third sex' continue to be subjects of both popular fascination and feminist investigation.

In contrast with the blurring of masculine and feminine attributes in serious opera, comic opera is organized around a clear, even exaggerated contrast between the two. The essential comic pair in *opera buffa* (and its cousins the French *opéra comique*, German *Singspiel*, Spanish *zarzuela*, etc.) consists of a bumbling bass and a clever girl, stock characters as old as Roman comedy and descended, in their operatic forms, from semi-improvised *intermezzi* and street theatre and Renaissance *commedia dell'arte*. Comic

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opera's timeless 'battle of the sexes' plots provided opportunities for exploring modern class themes, emplotting bourgeois critiques of aristocratic power in stories about male–female relationships. Voice-type and musical idiom defined character through stereotypes: each new soubrette and *basso buffo* was 'shadowed' by earlier incarnations of the types. At the same time, eighteenth-century comic opera includes some of the genre's most psychologically complex and individual characters. The women in Mozart's operas represent the pinnacle of this *buffa* achievement.[46]

Many comic operas rely on the old joke of unmasking feminine docility as women's strategy for running the world, as in Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia* when Rosina explains, 'I'm docile, I'm obedient, I'm affectionate . . . But if you cross me, I'll play one hundred tricks to get my way!'[47] The 'sassy girl' in opera buffa is distinguished by rapid syllabic declamation, lack of deference, cynicism and fearlessness. She frankly acknowledges women's sexual power, scolding gentler women for their naïvety and submissiveness, and promising to teach them better ways to manage men. In Rossini's comedies this type begins to gain social status and vocal authority, becoming a bourgeoise rather than a maidservant or peasant. Rossini also preferred for comedy the coloratura mezzo, whose chest tones and commanding technique leave behind the adorably feminine bossiness of the soubrette.

If *opera buffa* exaggerates femininity in order to affirm its power, the opposite is true of the genre's treatment of masculinity. Mary Hunter has argued that *opera buffa*'s master narrative is the carnivalesque one of 'uncrowning the king': exposing the ruler's selfish motives and the arbitrary basis of his power, correcting his excesses, and re-integrating him into society.[48] The primary male type, therefore, is an officially powerful master whose exaggerated faith in his own authority, intelligence and charisma contributes to his downfall by the combined efforts of the subordinate characters. The secondary *buffo* male, often cast as the servant or sidekick of the first, is the clown or stooge who grumbles over his circumstances without being able to improve them. His subordinate status and haplessness render him more endearing than villainous, and he typically wins the audience's sympathy by being the character who addresses us directly, breaking the 'fourth wall' to comment on other characters.

The beginning of the nineteenth century was a time of many drastic shifts in operatic style and convention, among which the obsolescence of the castrati and the emergence of the modern diva and tenor have been a primary focus for scholarship on opera and gender. The population of castrati was aging and dwindling in the 1810s and 1820s, but during these decades women could still win praise in new heroic roles.[49] Praise for male and female *musico* singers was a classically based rhetoric of androgyny that compared them to Apollo and Orpheus, divinities whose charisma operated

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above and beyond sexual difference. Yet this period saw an increasing dissatisfaction with *musico* heroes, whether played by castrati or women, and after 1820 individual singers and performances were increasingly vulnerable to criticism as 'foppish' or 'unmanly'. By the early 1830s, it seemed that a woman in a male role must inevitably turn her character into an effeminate parody.[50] Under the influence of comic and semi-serious opera at home, and French opera abroad, Italian serious opera was moving away from its traditional aria-centred dramaturgy to incorporate duets and ensembles. When high-voiced heroes and heroines began to sing together at length it became impossible to ignore their similarities of timbre and expression, and while the collapsing of vocal and sexual difference in these duets provoked pleasure (a sense of luxury, of voluptuousness, of suspended time), it also provoked a longing for contrast and differentiation.[51] This un-pleasure could be manifest as boredom, aural fatigue, vague distaste for the music, or (more subtly) in audiences' partisanship for one or the other singer in a pair such as Sontag–Malibran or Sontag–Pisaroni. Fans' obsessions with differences between singers – adoration of one and vilification of the other – is a perversely logical solution to the problem of voices being too similar. The newly polarized codes of masculinity and femininity in Italian Romantic operas of the late 1830s emerged against this background of sentimental-serious opera's 'mimetic crisis', in which the pleasures of similarity between heroine and *musico* hero began to be overshadowed by the anxiety of non-differentiation.

The period 1830–35 stands as the moment when modern expectations about the proper relation between voice and gender came to appear natural and inevitable. The castrati were replaced by modern 'divas', super-feminine celebrities who as tragic heroines quickly claimed the greatest fame, prestige, and narrative and musical interest. This period was also distinguished by the appearance of the first star tenors, beginning with David and Nozzari in Naples in the 1820s and followed by Duprez and Nourrit in Paris in the 1830s.[52] But if the installation of tenor heroes soothed anxieties produced by 'effeminate' similarity between heroes and heroines, it did not thereby restore an ideal of 'masculine' strength and mastery. On the contrary, the new-style tenors were unprecedented voices of masculine vulnerability: emotional to the point of hysteria, helpless before ever more brutal persecution by fate and by hostile masculine powers.[53] The mid-nineteenth century saw the establishment of the modern (that is, tragic-Romantic) operatic canon, with its themes and spectacles of Oedipal struggle, doomed heterosexual romance and ritualized feminine death.

Within that canon, Italian and French repertoires continue to receive the most attention from scholars of gender and sexuality, with German opera a distant third. The neglect of Wagner has been a persistent and curious

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feature of English-language feminist opera studies.[54] Wagner expressed his theories about music, poetry and drama in such gendered (yet cryptic) phrases as 'Music is a woman . . . What kind of woman must true music be?'[55] If Wagner's proclamations about the 'true woman', and plots celebrating 'faithfulness unto death' and ecstatic self-sacrifice tend to strike today's feminists as embarrassingly regressive, we have lost sight of aspects of Wagnerism that the 'New Women' and suffragists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did see. Feminist ardour for Wagner at the turn of the twentieth century had three bases: the power of his music to excite strong feeling and transfigure everyday life; Wagnerian heroines as strong-willed, idealistic women; and Wagnerian divas as models of female seriousness and dedication to an artistic vocation.[56]

Apart from *Salome* and some of Britten's operas, twentieth-century opera remains relatively under-examined by feminist and gender-oriented scholars. Literary studies (and, to a degree, other subfields of musicology) have explored the *fin-de-siècle* crisis in conceptions of gender and sexuality, including the first modern feminist movements and anxieties around the 'New Woman'; new heights of artistic interest in the femme fatale, often in conjunction with oriental subjects and imagery; the emergence of homosexual identities and corresponding fears of homosexuality and masculine degeneration; and psychoanalysis and psychoanalytically informed ways of understanding gender, sexuality and personality. Puccini scholars are increasingly investigating his work in light of Italian anxieties about modernity, including the perceived degeneration of modern masculinity.[57] In opera, as in the other arts, femininity, masculinity and perversity were primary metaphors through which early twentieth-century artists reacted to social changes that seemed to point towards the collapse of rational or natural order.

Present and future directions

Feminist opera scholarship remains in a relatively early stage of interrogating its own tacit premises that gender is something women (and homosexual men) have and/or do. With a few exceptions, the study of gender and sexuality in opera continues to mean the study of female roles, images and performers. International conferences on 'The Arts of the Prima Donna' in 2006 and on 'Technologies of the Diva' in 2007 focused even more exclusively on women than had the 1995 Stonybrook conference on 'Representing Gender and Sexuality in Opera'.[58] However, these conference topics do mark a significant shift within work on women in opera since the early 2000s: namely, a move away from studying representations of 'the feminine'

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and toward studying women as performers both in history and in the contemporary opera world. In the emerging subfield that we might call 'diva studies', feminist theory and women's history intersect. Feminist research on singers presents methodological challenges in that the historical record preserves a largely male-authored discourse, so that the object (whether singer, voice or body) is almost always filtered through a dominant-cultural sensibility. Prima donnas played the role of 'woman' off stage as well as on stage and have tended to present themselves as unworldly, idealistic, chaste and capricious, so that singers in interviews, memoirs and autobiography often appear as fictional as the characters they play(ed). The study of opera singers is as much the study of fantasies and ideologies attached to performances of femininity as it is the study of historical women.[59] In exploring the paradoxical status of performers as both objects (of the spectator's gaze) and self-fashioning subjects, research on opera singers intersects with feminist work on popular music stars and celebrity culture.

The relatively new turn towards studying singers, male and female, brings opera scholarship into contact with ethnomusicology and popular music studies, which have developed theories of the singing voice as a bridge between a singer's private self and the outer world, giving – or imagined to give – audible presence to an otherwise inaccessible interiority.[60] The most powerful voices inspire not merely enjoyment but identification, collapsing the distance between singer and listener: 'the singer is expressing what I (the listener) feel', singing not 'to me' but 'for me'.[61] Sex- and gender-oriented criticism continues to return to Barthes's essay 'The Grain of the Voice' for inspiration in theorizing the qualities that endow voices with gendered personae, and make the singer more than a neutral conveyor of melody, lyrics or meaning.[62] Barthes's essay remains a point of reference and inspiration for considerations of how timbre, tone colour and vocal 'weight' complicate our perception of a voice's sexed, gendered and racialized body of origin.

Finally, critiques of the woman-focused approach to research on gender have opened up new, potentially productive paths to studying masculinity and androgyny as gender roles that are as constructed, as policed and as rich in cultural meanings as femininity. Such a turn will involve examining male roles, vocality and performers through the critical lens of 'manliness as a masquerade' rather than an essential quality.[63] One might, for example, set out to test assumptions about how specifically feminine is the 'diva' persona: is there a difference between divas and divos, given that male opera stars can be as highly paid, as temperamental, as commodified as objects of erotic fantasy, and as admired for superhuman musical artistry as female stars? Is the physical and emotional vulnerability that defines 'the diva' the same vulnerability that creates the 'drastic' quality of all

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live musical performance, or does something unique remain about the mystique of the female opera star? Feminist theories of female performers as objects and manipulators of the audience's gaze now provide a foundation for interrogating performances of non-feminine gender, and of genders beyond a binary conception of masculine/feminine. Ultimately, they lead to and demand an analysis of the complex and erotically charged dynamic between spectators and all performers.

Notes

1 Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1929), p. 45.
2 Woolf's examples were Cleopatra, Lady Macbeth and Rosalind. Woolf, *Room*, p. 44.
3 On Caccini, see Suzanne Cusick, *Francesca Caccini at the Medici Court: Music and the Circulation of Power* (University of Chicago Press, 2008). On Ethel Smyth's career and operas, see J. Bernstein, '"Shout, shout, up with your song!": Dame Ethel Smyth and the Changing Role of the British Woman Composer', in Jane Bowers and Judith Tick (eds.), *Women Making Music: The Western Art Tradition, 1150–1950* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), pp. 304–24; Elizabeth Wood, 'Gender and genre in Ethel Smyth's operas', in Judith Lang Zaimont et al. (eds.), *The Musical Woman: An International Perspective*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1987), pp. 493–507; Kathleen A. Abromeit, 'Ethel Smyth, *The Wreckers*, and Sir Thomas Beecham', *Musical Quarterly*, 58 (1989), pp. 196–211; Elizabeth Wood, 'The Lesbian in the Opera: Desire Unmasked in Smyth's *Fantasio* and *Féte galante*', in Corinne E. Blackmer and Patricia J. Smith (eds.), *En travesti: Women, Gender Subversion, Opera* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), pp. 285–305.
4 Jacqueline Letzter and Robert Adelson, *Women Writing Opera: Creativity and Controversy in the Age of the French Revolution* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2001). See Anselm Gerhard's chapter on Bertin's *La Esmerelda* in *The Urbanization of Opera: Music Theater in Paris in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Mary Whittall (University of Chicago Press, 2000); Karen Henson, 'In the House of Disillusion: Augusta Holmès and *La montagne noire*', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 9/3 (1997), pp. 233–62; Melinda Boyd, 'Opera, or the Doing of Women: The Dramatic Works of Ingeborg von Bronsart (1840–1913)', PhD dissertation, 2002.
5 For an early example of feminist reading of a libretto, see Nelly Furman, 'The Languages of Love in *Carmen*', in Roger Parker and Arthur Groos (eds.), *Reading Opera* (Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 168–83.
6 Catherine Clément, *Opera, or, The Undoing of Women*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988). Judith Fetterley, 'The Resisting Reader' (1978) in Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (eds.), *Norton Companion to Feminist Criticism* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2007), pp. 443–7.
7 This argument was not new with Clément, though she was the first to use it to critique gender ideologies in opera. See Theodor W. Adorno, 'Bourgeois Opera', trans. D. Levin, in D. Levin (ed.), *Opera Through Other Eyes* (Stanford University Press, 1994), pp. 25–44.
8 Clément, *Undoing*, p. 63.
9 On Lucia, Salome and Carmen, see Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991); see also Susan McClary, *Georges Bizet: 'Carmen'* (Cambridge University Press 1992), pp. 29–43. For a critique of McClary's analysis of Lucia, see Mary Ann Smart, 'The Silencing of Lucia', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 4/2 (July 1992), pp. 119–41.
10 See Mary Ann Smart (ed.), *Siren Songs: Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Opera* (Princeton University Press, 2001).
11 Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, 16/3 (Autumn 1975), pp. 6–18. Re-published in Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).
12 Susan McClary, 'Excess and Frame: The Musical Representation of Madwomen', in *Feminine Endings*, pp. 80–111; McClary, *Bizet:*

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'Carmen'. See also Lawrence Kramer, 'Culture and Musical Hermeneutics: The Salome Complex', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 3/2 (1990), pp. 269–94.
13 Honoré de Balzac, 'Sarrasine', reprinted in Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), pp. 238–9.
14 Balzac, 'Sarrasine', p. 239.
15 Lesley C. Dunn and Nancy A. Jones (eds.), *Embodied Voices: Representing Female Vocality in Western Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 1994). See also Matthew Head's discussion of the maternal voice evoked in piano music and early *Lieder* in '"If the pretty little hand won't stretch": Music for the Fair Sex in Eighteenth-Century Germany', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 52/2 (Summer 1999), pp. 235–44; and Linda P. Austern and Inna Naroditskaya (eds.), *Music of the Sirens* (Indiana University Press, 2006).
16 Joke Dame, following Barthes's analysis of 'Sarrasine' in *S/Z*, attributes the castrato's power to his uncanny combination of a phallic voice emerging from a castrated body, Freud's very epitome of 'Lack'. See Joke Dame, 'Unveiled Voices: Sexual Difference and the Castrato', in Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood and Gary C. Thomas, *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology* (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 144–5.
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