

## 5 Voices and singers

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The singer is the defining feature of opera: the living crucible in which music, drama and spectacle coalesce into a single art form. The history of opera was thus shaped in part according to changing concepts about the singer – about his or her relationship with each of opera’s constituent arts; about ideas of vocal and dramatic virtuosity; about the singer’s place within the hierarchy of the opera house and the gaze of the spectator. In the discourses around opera, the singer is considered both as an embodied musical performer, and also in more abstract terms as pure ‘voice’. Modern opera studies draws on both aspects in its exploration of the singer’s art and performance practice, the social history of the singer, and the investigation of the singer as cultural phenomenon.

Initially, however, the singer was largely ignored during the awakening of critical interest in opera in the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> Despite an opening article by John Rosselli in the first edition of the *Cambridge Opera Journal* in 1989, it was not until the mid-1990s that English-language scholarship began to take the same interest in the singer as was already evident in continental Europe, albeit from rather different methodological perspectives. This chapter explores various aspects of both historical and contemporary approaches to the singer in relation to voice, text, spectacle, technology, the operatic market place and the audience.

### The singer’s voice

Voice is both timbre (the property of the vocal instrument) and action (the manipulation of the instrument). As Stendhal wrote, although the human voice has limited volume, it possesses a more extensive range of colour and effect than any other musical instrument.<sup>2</sup> How then can we describe voice in all its infinite gradations? Here is Giulio Strozzi trying to capture the vocal essence of an early opera singer, Anna Renzi, in 1644:

She has a fluent tongue, smooth pronunciation, not affected, not rapid, a full, sonorous voice, not harsh, not hoarse, nor one that offends you with excessive subtlety; which arises from the temperament of the chest and throat, for which good voice much warmth is needed to expand the

passages, and enough humidity to soften it and make it tender . . . She has felicitous passages [ornaments], a lively trill, both double and *rinforzato*, and it has befallen her to have to bear the full weight of an opera no fewer than twenty-six times, repeating it virtually every evening, without losing even a single carat of her theatrical and most perfect voice.<sup>3</sup>

What does Strozzi tell us about Renzi's voice? The words 'full, sonorous' suggest a rounded, resonant tone; the emphasis on her ability in ornament and decoration imply a flexible, fluid action; the rather puzzling lingering on aspects of 'humidity' (reflecting the epoch's belief that tonal quality was partly determined by the moist surfaces of the throat and mouth) indicate a warm, rich colour. Yet such qualities can belong to many voices, all of which have their own unique imprint. *Timbre* speaks of the singer's inner subjectivity, or vocal personality. Jean-Luc Nancy states that *timbre* is 'the first correlative of listening'; it 'forms the first consistency of sonorous *sense* as such'; as the 'communication of the incommunicable', it cannot be measured or notated like other aspects of sound (pitch, rhythm, duration), but instead can only be described through the metaphors of other 'perceptible registers' – colour, touch, taste, even smell.<sup>4</sup> To some extent we can 'hear' Renzi's voice more effectively through one of the roles she created: Ottavia in Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea*. Even so, the notes can be performed in so many ways that the specificity of her *timbre* and style must remain unrecoverable. As Giambattista Mancini wrote about the castrato Farinelli in 1777, while written music may demonstrate a particular singer's 'intelligence' and 'art', only the 'living voice' can reveal the true individuality of a vocal instrument and method of singing.<sup>5</sup>

Does this mean that all voices are necessarily 'lost'? The French singer and composer Reynaldo Hahn argued that the ephemerality of singing actually endows it with an 'eternal' quality, because singing cannot be destroyed in the manner of material art works but lives on in the memory of the listener.<sup>6</sup> Michelle Duncan makes a similar point in her account of the singers in a recent performance of Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*: 'Though I no longer hear them in the present, I hear them in their presence.'<sup>7</sup> The idea of the 'lost voice' is nonetheless a familiar trope in opera history. Critics of almost every period have tended to recall the voices heard in their youth as the gold standard of a bygone age, and complained of the 'decadence' of modern singing. The 'lost voice' continues to infuse various discourses on singers, from biographies such as Sandro Cappelletto's *La voce perduta: vita di Farinelli, evirato cantore*, to notions within Lacanian-influenced approaches.<sup>8</sup> Michel Poizat, for example, identifies the singer's voice as a 'vocal object' that is both mourned as a 'lost object' and desired as an 'object of *jouissance*'<sup>9</sup> – the latter term belonging to Roland Barthes's

discussion of the 'grain of the voice' that opens the way to 'significance', or 'meaning insofar as it is sensually produced'.<sup>10</sup>

Pleasure or *jouissance* is produced in the listener not only by the innate sound or timbre of voice, but also by what voice can do. In 1695 Giovanni Andrea Bontempi recalled the abilities of the castrato Baldassarre Ferri (1610–1680):

One who has not heard this sublime singer can form no idea of the limpidity of his voice, of his agility, of his marvellous facility in the most difficult passages, of the justness of his intonation, the brilliancy of his trill, of his inexhaustible respiration. One often heard him perform rapid and difficult passages with every shade of crescendo and diminuendo. Then, when it seemed as if he ought to be tired, he would launch on his interminable trill and mount and descend on it all the degrees of the chromatic scale through a range of two octaves with unerring justice. And all this was but play for him.<sup>11</sup>

We should not assume that this description of Ferri was indicative of all or even most castrati, any more than a glowing account of Luciano Pavarotti's nine high Cs in 'Pour mon âme' in Donizetti's *La Fille du régiment* (at the Metropolitan Opera in 1972) can be read as the 'norm' of the twentieth-century tenor. Both singers, in fact, were prodigiously gifted exceptions to the rule. Bontempi's summary nonetheless usefully lists all the desired goals of the baroque singer: complete technical control over volume, range, pitch, velocity and effect. Technical virtuosity was not considered as mere empty display, but rather as a voyage of discovery in the sonic possibilities of the human voice. Such a journey at times took both singer and spectator into the realm of the unknown: Bontempi claimed Ferri had through singing transcended the 'confines of humanity'.<sup>12</sup>

Spectatorial astonishment would continue to be aroused in later periods by the emergence of different kinds of voices (the coloratura soprano, the *tenore di forza*, the *hochdramatische Sopran* and her counterpart, the *Heldentenor*, the dramatic mezzo, the baritone), all with their own special modes of virtuosity. Even when opera became more a 'museum' of repertory works in the twentieth century, the attempts of contemporary singers to revive the music of the past have served to offer new sounds to the listener, from Maria Callas's re-imagining of *bel canto* to the development of operatic countertenors such as Jochen Kowalski and David Daniels. And the modern period still had its own innovations in store, with the 'alternative techniques' developed by Cathy Berberian, Jane Manning and Arno Raving that were required for avant-garde opera from Schoenberg to Birtwistle. Beyond such technical developments, the sheer individuality of vocal sound seemingly offers an endless source of fascination. Peter Conrad's description

of the singing voice as ‘inordinate in its power and somehow miraculous as the production of a single human body’ demonstrates that its capacity to provoke marvel is remade for every generation.<sup>13</sup>

This richly varied history of sung performance is thus pervaded by the dynamics of loss and pleasure, absence and presence. Deciphering its traces in the pre-recorded period solely from notated music and written descriptions is inevitably problematic. The ‘bewildering variety of discourses’ about sung performance during the Renaissance noted by Richard Wistreich<sup>14</sup> is a feature that would become yet more marked in later opera history, as ideas of vocal technique splintered even further in response to new compositional practices, increased sizes of theatres and orchestras, and scientific discoveries such as García’s ‘laryngoscope’ in 1855. The systematic study of ‘vocalismo’ (denoted as comprising both technical facility and artistic expression) was pioneered by the Italian musicologist Rodolfo Celletti in the late twentieth century.<sup>15</sup> The subsequent scholarship inspired by his approach means that our understanding of the singer’s part in shaping Handel’s compositional practices in terms of both vocality and performance affect (through stage personality and histrionic ability),<sup>16</sup> or the reasons for Mozart’s substitution of two arias for Susanna in *Le nozze di Figaro* in a performance three years after the original production,<sup>17</sup> or the development of the *tenore di forza*,<sup>18</sup> or the changing use of *portamento* across the centuries – to name just a few examples – is now more acute.<sup>19</sup>

For all that has been discovered, however, much remains unknown. The issue of vibrato, for example, raises unresolved questions about the core sound of the trained voice in earlier periods. Claims that Renaissance, baroque and indeed much nineteenth-century opera was sung with a ‘straight tone’ are countered by others that ‘vibrato’ was regarded as an intrinsic quality of good singing.<sup>20</sup> Neither term was used in early musical discourses, but emerged during the mid-nineteenth century (although ‘pure tone’ was a more common expression than ‘straight tone’). To many modern singing teachers, an unobtrusive vibrato is the natural oscillation of a free, resonant voice – not something applied consciously by the singer, in the manner of instrumentalists.<sup>21</sup> Richard Miller favours the word ‘vibrancy’ to classify this action of a regular pulsation that does not perceptibly vary the pitch of the note.<sup>22</sup> (In contrast, a ‘wobble’ is an irregular pitch fluctuation in the voice.) It is often unclear whether allusions to vocal trembling or ‘tremolo’ in early musical discourses refer to either a natural oscillation (vibrancy), the ‘wobble’ of a faulty technique, or the deliberate use of pulsation as an ornament (a kind of trill on one note).<sup>23</sup> Mozart’s letter to his father on 12 June 1778 complained that the bass Joseph Meissner had ‘the bad habit of purposely making his voice tremble’, which was ‘despicable

and contrary to all naturalness in song'; but the composer also recognized vibrancy as an inherent vocal quality:

True the human voice trembles of itself, but only in a degree that remains beautiful; it is in the nature of the voice. We imitate it not only on wind instruments but also on the viols and even on the clavier. But as soon as you overstep the limit it is no longer beautiful because it is contrary to nature.<sup>24</sup>

What was regarded as 'beautiful' was nonetheless clearly a matter of personal taste. In 1840 Manuel García denoted 'steadiness of voice' as the 'foundation of a good style of singing'; but he also described it 'as rare as it is valuable' – suggesting that (in his view) most singers did not possess this quality.<sup>25</sup> Recording history demonstrates a shift over the past century. The slender, steady but undeniably vibrant tone and incisive attack of *fin-de-siècle* artists such as Lilli Lehmann, Emma Calvé, Tito Schipa and Victor Maurel – and audible also in much later singers such as Cornell MacNeill and Gundula Janowitz – has given way to the recent penchant for a thicker, heavier quality in the middle of the voice with more intrusive pitch fluctuations. The underlying reasons are complex: more variation in the teaching of singing, with less emphasis on the core values of *bel canto* technique; demands for ever more volume and vocal power; the manner in which a 'throb' in the voice has become a signifier of emotion in both popular and classical singing; the globalization of the opera industry, with greater cultural diversity and national idioms inflected by different language patterns; and the influence of the commercial successes of those rare, exceptionally rich voices (Caruso, Ponselle, Callas, Norman).

The past and present debates around vibrato illustrate that historical practice was far from uniform, that national and indeed private preferences played a clear role in classifying acceptable degrees of vocal oscillation and intensity, and that prescriptions in treatises and manuals should not be assumed to have been rigorously followed by all. As for the implications for our own performance practice, perhaps the words of Pier Francesco Tosi to singers in 1723 have some usefulness where uncertainty otherwise reigns:

Whoever studies, let him look for what is most excellent, and let him look for it wherever it is, without troubling himself whether it be in the Stile of fifteen or twenty Years ago, or in that of these Days; for all Ages have their good and bad Productions. It is enough to find out the best, and profit by them.<sup>26</sup>

## **Singer and text**

From opera's outset, the relationship between singer and text has been complex and often contentious. Should opera aim to use music to 'bring

singing nearer speech' (Peri) or to enable words to find 'expression in the music' (Caccini)?<sup>27</sup> Both approaches became embedded in operatic practice. Word reveals the 'meaning' of the characters' internal and external actions; it inspires the music that expresses their joy and despair. Different engagements with text were thus required from singers. Virtuosity lay both in the singer's dexterity in delivering many words at high velocity (as in patter arias such as 'Largo al factotum' in Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia*) and, conversely, in the singer's fragmentation of the word in melismatic passages (see Broschi's 'Son qual nave che agita', performed by his brother Farinelli in 1734).<sup>28</sup> The declamatory style of recitative also demanded its own technical proficiency, as Tosi fulminated:

There are some who sing *Recitative* on the Stage like That of the Church or Chamber; some in a perpetual Chanting, which is insufferable; some over-do it and make it a Barking; some whisper it, and some sing it confusedly; some force out the last Syllable, and some sink it; some sing it blust'ring, and some as if they were thinking of something else; some in a languishing Manner; others in a Hurry; some sing it through the Teeth, and others with Affectation; some do not pronounce the Words, and others do not express them; some sing as if laughing, and some crying; some speak it, and some hiss it; some hallow, bellow, and sing it out of Tune; and, together with their Offences against Nature, are guilty of the greatest Fault, in thinking themselves above Correction.<sup>29</sup>

Tosi's tirade summarizes two common complaints against singers: either the word is made unintelligible, or it is lifeless. (Sometimes, unfortunately, it can be both.) Composers have often sought to counter such tendencies. For Verdi, who had a keen interest in words that sculpt dramatic action ('parola scenica'), clear pronunciation and tonal colour were essential in a singer's performance;<sup>30</sup> Wagner described the word as 'the bone-and-muscle rhythm' of the human voice.<sup>31</sup>

As numerous commentators pointed out, the clarity of the word is nonetheless crucially compromised in opera.<sup>32</sup> Paul Robinson argues that while libretti in a foreign language, ensemble singing and the use of the orchestra all play their part in obscuring text, it is 'operatic singing' itself that 'represents the most intractable enemy of intelligibility'.<sup>33</sup> Scholars influenced by Lacan – Poizat, Dolar, Abbate – emphasize the psychological fears supposedly engendered by the singing voice's eradication of the word.<sup>34</sup> For Lawrence Kramer, for example, 'overvocalization' is the 'purposeful effacement of text by voice' which 'projects meaning loss as the outcome of a rupture, a wrenching of song beyond the symbolizing terrain of language and even of conception'.<sup>35</sup> The extent of this concern suggests a modern reworking of the ancient distrust of the sirens.

And yet the continuing enthusiasm of audiences for voice's playful exploration of sound–word relations invites other perspectives. First, we might note that the terms employed by Kramer – ‘rupture’, ‘wrenching’ – are an oddly violent description of an act that in physiological terms seems quite different to the singer. The feeling as the voice ascends beyond the level of speech is more one of elation or soaring: Pavarotti, for example, spoke of the restful sensation in his larynx when singing in his upper register.<sup>36</sup> Adjustments to word shape are occasioned simply by the acoustic properties of the operatic voice constrained to fulfil certain expectations of consistency of tonal quality and volume across the range.<sup>37</sup> Nor does the singer lose all contact with the word: its shape may be altered, but it continues to exist as both a mental concept and physical actuality. Martha Feldman sees the fragmenting of referential meaning through repetitions and melismatic passages in eighteenth-century Italian opera as a primarily sensuous process, designed to ‘mesmerize’ the spectator, but also one through which words acquired a ‘new phenomenal, imagistic, and symbolic function’.<sup>38</sup> Meaning is thus enriched rather than abandoned.

New research in cognitive and behavioural science takes us further. Music's ludic transmutations of word are far from a new, alarming intrusion into our lived experience. Parent–infant relationships are built largely through the non-verbal ‘communicative musicality’ of a mutual vocal interplay of ‘pitch, melody, rhythm, tempo and dynamics’ enabling mental and emotional attunement.<sup>39</sup> Colwyn Trevarthen emphasizes the importance of these exchanges as ‘purposeful engagement’ in ‘cultural learning’ that develops intelligence and teaches us how to establish meaningful communication with others.<sup>40</sup> This interaction, by helping mother and baby to bond, increases infant survival rates and thus has clear evolutionary significance.<sup>41</sup> The musicality of speech remains paramount in conveying meaning after the acquisition of language skills: apprehension of the voiced (as opposed to the written) word is dependent on nuanced delivery, with its extratextual information about sociocultural factors as well as the emotions and intentions of the speaker.<sup>42</sup> The sung word might thus be viewed (or heard) not as a degeneration of language, but rather as a sophisticated elaboration of the sounds or ‘dynamic emotional syntax’ that actually generate language.<sup>43</sup>

We might therefore refigure our responses to the opera singer's relationship to text, perceiving the temporary loss of literal meaning as neither an attack on reason nor sybaritic excess, but as revelatory of other experiences. Our pleasure in opera's melismatic fragmentation or occlusion of the word may stem from our earliest memories of shared communication with our carers. Rather than fuelling anxiety, these sounds perhaps recall a nurturing environment and the processes through which we ourselves discovered

language – even of a time when our own voices soared freely to the same heights as that of the soprano.

## Singer and spectacle

An early definition of opera was ‘recitar cantando’: to act through singing. Strozzi’s paean to Renzi reveals the emphasis placed on the singer’s physicality and histrionic qualities in this new art form:

The action that gives soul, spirit, and existence to things must be governed by the movements of the body, by gestures, by the face and by the voice, now raising it, now lowering it, becoming enraged and immediately becoming calm again; at times speaking hurriedly, at others slowly, moving the body now in one, now in another direction, drawing in the arms, and extending them, laughing and crying, now with little, now with much agitation of the hands. Our Signora Anna is endowed with such lifelike expression that her responses and speeches seem not memorized but born at the very moment. In sum, she transforms herself completely into the person she represents, and seems now a Thalia full of comic gaiety, now a Melpomene rich in tragic majesty.<sup>44</sup>

The opera singer’s corporeality continued to be considered by many composers and commentators throughout operatic history as of equal importance as voice, from Monteverdi to Wagner, Lully to Weber, or Verdi to Stravinsky.<sup>45</sup> At its most essential, voice expresses itself through body: voice is body made aural. The body is also a site of dramatic interpretation, offering meanings that add further layers to those apprehended through both sound and word, encompassing a wide aesthetic range of gestural action from realism to abstraction. The precise nature and reception of this interpretative dimension of the singer’s body reflected broader cultural ideas.<sup>46</sup> We can see from Strozzi’s account of Renzi that she was admired for the spontaneity of her performance, her transformation into another character and her ‘lifelike expression’ – all qualities that can exist alongside the improvised, fluid and simple musical structures of *stile recitativo*. In short, there was evident harmony between Renzi’s use of both voice and body: aural and visual aspects worked in tandem to produce coherence and complementarity. This aim of unity between the expressive mediums of music and spectacle remained constant for singers through much of operatic history.

Unity could be demonstrated in different ways, however. With the arrival towards the end of the seventeenth century of the new musical form of the *da capo* aria, with its luxuriating repetitions and vocal pyrotechnics, dramatic



performance (at least in *opera seria*) became what was often described as 'statuary'. Richard Steele praised the alto castrato Nicolini in a performance of Scarlatti's *Il Pirro e Demetrio* in London in 1708:

[Nicolini] sets off the character he bears in an opera by his action as much as he does the words by his voice. Every limb and every finger contributes to the part he acts, insomuch as a deaf man may go along with him in the sense of it. There is scarce a beautiful posture in an old statue which he does not plant himself in, as the different circumstances of the story give occasion for it.<sup>47</sup>

The arrangement of the body in this series of formal gestures supported the melismatic qualities of eighteenth-century opera, a correspondent tracing in the air of the shapes and contours of musical phrases: for the spectator, a means of *seeing* as well as hearing the music. This coded physical language had further relevance in opera's new-found internationality, conveying meaning to audiences unfamiliar with the Italian language.

Influenced by Romanticism's emphasis on heightened passion, opera began to inscribe singers' gestures and actions more directly within the music (Bellini's agitated recitative for Norma as she contemplates murdering her children; or Verdi's use of an ascending scale to accompany Violetta's eager rise to her feet, convinced of her returning health, just before her fatal collapse in *La traviata*). Mary Ann Smart traces the path from the synchronization of the performing body and music in mid-nineteenth-century French and Italian opera to the more abstract relationship evident in Wagnerian opera.<sup>48</sup> With the subsequent impact of theatrical naturalism in later decades, operatic acting conventions once again sought the spontaneity and immediacy admired in Anna Renzi. It was a trend not always welcomed by either critics or singers. For George Bernard Shaw, attempts by Emma Calvé in the 1890s to adopt less stylized patterns of gesture disrupted that much-prized unity between music and action: he grumbled that she 'acted out of time' with the music.<sup>49</sup> And the growing emphasis on dramatic realism and physicality brought new challenges for singers: by 1922 one dramatic soprano was complaining: 'We rush around, we fall, we roll down stairs, we do everything but stand on our heads.'<sup>50</sup> The uncoupling of synchronization and the athletic demands on singers' bodies was merely the precursor to the wider dislocation between stage picture and aural experience that would dominate late twentieth-century opera productions.

Critical interest in the idea of the 'attore-cantante' (actor-singer) is an emerging field in opera studies.<sup>51</sup> Research in this area is necessarily interdisciplinary, drawing on performance studies (from histories of rhetoric and gesture to more recent concepts of the semiotics of *mise en scène* and 'liveness'), philosophical notions such as 'presence' and, as we will see below, the interface between the singer and the performance environment.

## The singer and technology

The singer's interaction with spectacle depended on the technologies of the stage, from the flying machines of baroque opera that created imperious entrances and exits, the effects of lighting in shaping performance (shadowy gas-light in the 1820s demanded gestural expansiveness; electric lighting facilitated the more naturalistic acting style of the 1890s), the different uses of costume design to express either the singer's status (Adelina Patti's hoop skirts in the 1860s, or Rosa Ponselle's *haute-couture* frocks and jewellery in the 1920s) or the fictional reality of the character (Chaliapin's semi-naked, body-painted Méphistophélès in Gounod's *Faust*), and acrobatic stunts such as Amina's somnabulistic roof-top crossing (Bellini's *La sonnambula*) or Tosca's defiant leap from the battlements. Lilli Lehmann, trained by her singer mother never to lose her 'composure when confronted with an emergency',<sup>52</sup> presumably found this steely fortitude helpful when dealing with her Rhinemaiden's swimming machine, perched precariously on top of a wobbling platform twenty feet high, at the première of Wagner's *Der Ring* at the Festspielhaus in 1876. Technologies assist in the mediation of singer and character, heighten illusion and suspense, and thus raise important questions about the creation of meaning on stage, modes of representation and the theatricality of the performance event.<sup>53</sup>

The 'age of mechanical reproduction' (so dubbed by Walter Benjamin) arrived in the 1890s, with recorded sound. The dissemination of singers' voices via this new commercial medium provided fresh routes to stardom for artists such as Enrico Caruso, whose popularity with a mass audience was largely achieved as a result of his extensive recordings, beginning in 1902. Technology changed both criticism (now the reader could hear the singer for himself) and historiographical strategies. With regard to the former, it enabled the development of a specialist fan-base: the voices of singers long dead or simply alive but distant could now be 'collected' via records and compact discs. Such collections from those early years proved to be invaluable resources. The Stuart-Liff collection of 78rpm discs provided much of the initial material for EMI's five-volume *The Record of Singing*, described after the issue of the fourth volume (having already encompassed 730 singers) as a 'monumental project' by William Albright.<sup>54</sup>

In Britain, the investigation of singers on record was largely led by the late John B. Steane and Michael Scott.<sup>55</sup> More recently, the Centre for the History and Analysis of Recorded Music (CHARM) at King's College London has initiated a number of projects. As part of that research, Daniel Leech-Wilkinson reveals the difficulties of analysing the recorded performances of Adelina Patti, made in 1905 and 1906 when the soprano was in her early sixties; the problems are both scientific ('the impossibility of knowing the

speed at which the original discs were recorded') and aesthetic (trying to relate recorded sound to previous writings about singing).<sup>56</sup> There are other extensions to this trawling of deceased voices. Jason Stanyek and Benjamin Piekut discuss capitalism's commodification of dead singers through 'necromarketing' and posthumous duets: for example, Victor's underdubbing of Caruso's 'Vesti la giubba' (originally recorded in 1907) with a new orchestral accompaniment in 1932 represents the first 'intermundane collaboration' of 'a dead performer recording with live musicians'.<sup>57</sup> Technology can be used to try to recreate 'lost voices' or indeed lost bodies: a film about Farinelli splices together the voices of a countertenor and a soprano to fabricate that of the castrato,<sup>58</sup> while Michal Grover-Friedlander explores the 'afterlife' of Callas's voice in Zeffirelli's film *Callas Forever* (2002), asking whether the use of a 'different body' (that of the actress Fanny Ardant) to represent the singer would 're-animate' Callas, or whether this new corporeality would 'refashion the voice'.<sup>59</sup>

Filmed opera performances and opera as film attract ever more attention. One example is a recent edition devoted by *The Opera Quarterly* to the subject of opera and technology. Intriguingly, few of the essays (apart from Emanuele Senici's provocatively entitled essay, 'Porn Style? Space and Time in Live Opera Videos')<sup>60</sup> deal with the specifics of sung performance; rather, the broader theoretical extrapolations of televisual opera recordings form the main focus. If audio recordings created the 'disembodied' voice, visual recordings, with their emphasis on what is seen rather than what is heard, appear to encourage a critical 'de-voicing' of the body.

## **The singer and the operatic market place**

Emerging concepts of social history in the latter part of the twentieth century encouraged efforts in opera studies to chart a much broader framework of relationships between social and economic processes and protagonists. The benchmark for this new approach was set by John Rosselli's *Singers of Italian Opera*, which appeared in 1992.<sup>61</sup> Rosselli's groundbreaking study revealed how the development of a 'profession' shaped various aspects of singers' careers, from training, entry into the profession, patronage, contractual obligations, marketing, theatrical agencies and impresarios.

Simply identifying singers and relevant sources was an initial task for scholars, drawing on the work begun by earlier encyclopaedists (Rousseau, Burney, Fétis, Regli, Schmidl). The growth in this area is demonstrated by the expansion of the most comprehensive and authoritative listing of singers, Karl J. Kutsch and Leo Riemens's *Grosses Sängerlexikon*, from two volumes and 6,995 entries in 1987 to seven volumes with around 14,800

entries in 2003.<sup>62</sup> The effort of tracing singers was aided by increased access to the music periodicals that had emerged at the beginning of the nineteenth century.<sup>63</sup> Where earlier writings had tended to heighten the singer's mystique and 'difference', these new periodicals began to reveal the craft behind the art, with articles on voice production and technique, analyses of *mise en scène*, debates about the 'moral' effect of singing for both spectator and vocalist, and discussions of wages and working conditions. Styles of criticism varied between countries: for example, commentators in Germany and Britain were more prone to providing detailed accounts of *mise en scène* than their counterparts in Italy or France, who focused primarily on vocal performance.

Public interest in the opera singer was further whetted by other discourses, including annual compendiums (Francesco Regli's *Strenna teatrale* in the 1830s), historical surveys (such as the works of Léon Escudier<sup>64</sup> and Ellen Creathorne Clayton<sup>65</sup>), and fictional depictions by illustrious authors (George Sand, George Eliot, George Meredith) and lesser-known writers alike.<sup>66</sup> Singers also began to produce their own accounts of their lives and careers. Michael Kelly's *Reminiscences* (1826) juxtaposed his training in Italy and his time in Vienna as a court tenor (creating roles under Mozart's direction) with his experiences in public theatres in London, Dublin and the provinces.<sup>67</sup> Similar autobiographies, either penned by the singer or ghost-written, soon became a standard closure to a performing career. Some such memoirs (see those by Clara Louise Kellogg, Lilli Lehmann and Titta Ruffo) are valuable historical documents;<sup>68</sup> others are frustratingly vague in their account of professional life (Geraldine Farrar, for example, produced a bizarre autobiography in the third person, purportedly written by her dead mother).<sup>69</sup> Finding a critical perspective on this subjective, often inaccurate material became key for modern musicologists. One solution has been the reissuing of autobiographies in annotated form;<sup>70</sup> another is the noticeable shift in historiographical approaches to biographical writing, with a critical positioning of the singer within the complexities of the operatic market place, as in Roger Freitas's *Portrait of a Castrato: Politics, Patronage and Music in the Life of Atto Melani*, or the volumes of James Drake, who initially collaborated with Rosa Ponselle on her autobiography, *A Singer's Life*, and later issued his own informative biography of the soprano.<sup>71</sup>

Which singers should be investigated? Karen Henson points out that the degree of a singer's influence on a composer has been a pervasive requirement, suggesting that performance in itself is not always considered a sufficient feature for scholarly examination.<sup>72</sup> Star singers, regardless of composerly connections, have proved the exception. Neither Catalani, Patti nor Ponselle, for example, created any roles of note, and yet all have attracted

attention. Singers who fulfil the most extreme tropes of celebrity (glittering fame followed by an early death), such as the two Marias – Malibran and Callas – continue to generate copy. However, an emphasis on celebrity performers brings its own limitations: restricting the study of singers to a few select and in some respects atypical examples, ignoring the validity of spectatorial response to less well-known singers, or exaggerating the image of opera as an elite artform, with scant regard for opera performances in the provinces or smaller houses.

Social history also explores issues such as gender and ethnicity in singers' access to the operatic market place. From its inception, opera's configurations of gender were inherently unstable. Heroic masculinity was initially represented by the castrati, Europe's first international superstars of the stage.<sup>73</sup> These singers, who retained the high voices of prepubescent boys but within the frame of an adult male, were created artificially by a childhood operation, severing the tubes leading to the testicles. Whilst such mutilation seems hideous to modern sensibilities (and indeed to many during that period), Rosselli points out that it should be contextualized within a tradition of Christian asceticism that privileged celibacy as a condition of spiritual grace.<sup>74</sup> The castrati first appeared in fifteenth-century Spanish churches; and the boys' submission to life-changing surgical procedures in the following two centuries was often undertaken not with the operatic stage in mind, but a more stable career as a church singer. Even after their disappearance from the operatic stage in the first decade of the nineteenth century, castrati continued to be employed in the Sistine Chapel and certain other Italian churches up until the early twentieth century. One such singer, Alessandro Moreschi (1858–1921), provided us with the last traces of this vocal tradition in his recordings made in 1902–03 – although these do not adequately reflect either descriptions of Moreschi's own singing in the early period of his career, or the famed abilities of previous castrati.<sup>75</sup>

The castrati were renowned for both their musical knowledge (the four main *conservatori* of Naples provided a long and thorough training in vocal technique, musicianship, composition and literary studies) and their vocal ability. As we have seen from Bontempi's description of Baldassarre Ferri, the best were considered as phenomenal artists with a tone of piercing sweetness, superb breath control and an exceptionally wide range. The cult of the castrato enhanced the sense of difference between auditorium and stage, and increased the notion of the latter as an arena of the fabulous and superhuman, the magical and the mythical – qualities similarly apparent in baroque operatic narrative and spectacle. The physicality of the castrati, often pictured as unusually tall with barrel-chests, towering over their fellow singers, had further significance in this context. But so too did the presence of women.

Anna Renzi performed freely in Venice in the 1640s; she could not have done so in Rome, or even in London prior to the restoration of the monarchy in 1660. The Catholic church forbade women to appear on the public stage, although this was generally enforced only in the papal states. Until the ban was lifted in 1797, the castrati therefore played female roles in theatres subject to the prohibition; but they often did so too even in other cities where women were permitted to perform. The sense of gender confusion was further enhanced by women's assumption of male roles, including those of heroic stature – sometimes opposite castrati playing female characters.

Women's bodies carried their own special messages. Their legs were revealed in breeches for *travesti* roles, their breasts rose and fell with the breaths of song, their musical gasps and sighs were read as coded sexual excitement.<sup>76</sup> Their presence in the public arena, seemingly as objects of display, offering pleasure for money, was viewed as metaphorical and sometimes actual prostitution. A dispute between Margherita Gualandi (known as La Campioli) and her employers in Naples in 1726 illustrates how these notions affected the workings of the opera house. Gualandi unexpectedly fled the city five days before the first performance of Hasse's *Il Sesostrato*; the ensuing scandal provoked a storm of recriminations. An Italian nobleman, Cavaliere Vitelleschi, justified the impresario's treatment of Gualandi, claiming that she had been given every assistance and that her difficulties arose from the theatre's high standards: 'This is a city very attuned to music; they not only want to hear fine singing, but want also good acting and good stage presence.'<sup>77</sup> However, a quite different account was given by the castrato Carlo Scalzi, who argued that Gualandi had been poorly treated and contractual obligations had been broken. Besides, his statement concluded:

Here [in Naples] they want either beauties or professional whores . . . The city is diabolical in these matters, and it is a point of honour among the nobility, once they have visited a singer, to be obliged to say that they have had sex with her. The profession is indecent and dishonest, because they speak evil of everybody, even if they might be angels.<sup>78</sup>

Sex could be used as a weapon in other ways. In London a year later, gossip about the supposed antipathy of two prima donnas (Faustina Bordoni and Francesca Cuzzoni) escalated into a series of scurrilous pamphlets making lewd and lurid suggestions about the singers' sexual behaviour – a forerunner of the pornographic 'biographies' that emerged in subsequent years, often purporting to be written by the singers themselves.<sup>79</sup> Such instances illustrate Richard Dyer's theories of the 'collapsing of distinction between star-as-person and star-as-performer'.<sup>80</sup> It mattered little that Bordoni was of respectable patrician family and soon to be happily married (to the composer who had caused so much trouble to Gualandi, in fact); only that her

public presence in the theatre transgressed the norms of female behaviour, and hence could be read back into other areas of her private life.

Napoleon's abolition of the Italian training-schools for the castrati in 1806 hastened the end for a kind of singer already in decline. Their absence from the operatic stage at first gave increased prominence to women's voices, as both female and male characters. Three decades of extraordinary composition followed, privileging female talent and expanding the artistic and social opportunities for women singers such as Isabella Colbran, Giuditta Pasta, Maria Malibran and Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient.<sup>81</sup> Their rich, dark voices, inscribed in the roles written specifically for them by Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti and Wagner (among others),<sup>82</sup> were often described as mezzo-sopranos – although we might now term them as early exponents of the *spinto* (Pasta) or *lirico-drammatico* (Malibran) or the *hochdramatische Sopran* (Schröder-Devrient). When singing female roles, they were generally partnered by the *tenori di grazia* (Giovanni Battista Rubini is the best-known example), who blended their natural lower notes with the use of falsetto in their upper register. There was thus an octave rising from middle C in which male and female timbres could often sound very similar.

By the 1830s, however, emerging ideas of gender posited femininity and masculinity as binary opposites, thus problematizing earlier codes of gender representation in opera and influencing vocal technique. The coloratura soprano became the epoch's aural portrait of femininity, later to be joined by the lyric soprano. Masculinity similarly explored new sounds. Some tenors such as Michael Kelly in the 1790s or Domenico Donzelli in the 1820s had already begun to sing above the stave in *voce di petto* (natural or chest voice), rather than falsetto. In 1832, Gilbert-Louis Duprez, supposedly searching for a suitably 'virile' timbre in the heroic but very high tessitura of the role of Arnold in Rossini's *Guillaume Tell*, found his *ut de poitrine* (a high C produced from the chest) – and so, legend has it, the *tenore di forza* was born.<sup>83</sup> While attributing Duprez alone with this development is inaccurate, it is nonetheless fair to say that by the 1840s this manner of producing the tenor voice had become commonplace. The extension of the natural voice throughout the tenor range coupled with the epoch's emphasis on passion and power also impacted on other voice types. The modern baritone, capable of an emotional heft in the upper third of his range, emerged most influentially in roles by Verdi and Wagner (Macbeth, Rigoletto, the Dutchman, Wotan); both composers also expanded the dramatic mezzo-soprano repertoire (Eboli, Amneris, Ortrud and Brangäne). The contralto, deprived of her previous access to heroic roles (both male and female), became the lost voice of the century, assigned only to the characters no one else wanted to play: 'tarts, old women and boys' is the usual summary of her lot.<sup>84</sup>



Western notions of exoticism in the second half of the nineteenth century produced various roles for characters of different ethnicities, as in Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine*, Bizet's *Carmen* and Delibes's *Lakmé* in France; or Verdi's *Un ballo in maschera*, *La forza del destino*, *Aida* and *Otello*, Mascagni's *Iris*, and Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* in Italy. Yet these roles were played by white singers in make-up. Singers of colour, although active on the concert platform, were long denied access to the mainstream operatic profession. The careers of Sissieretta Jones (1868–1933, known as the 'Black Patti'), Caterina Jarboro ('Katherine Yarborough', 1903–86), Lillian Evanti ('Lillian Evans', 1890–1967) and Marian Anderson (1897–1993) exemplify the difficulties early African-American singers faced in their attempts to build a career in the US, despite critical and public acclaim for their singing. Both Jarboro and Evanti appeared in European theatres during the 1930s and 1940s, but it was Anderson's appearance as Ulrica at the Metropolitan Opera House in 1955 that marked an important turning point. While overt racial discrimination abated somewhat for female singers in the latter decades of the twentieth century (we need think only of international stars such as Leontyne Price, Shirley Verrett and Jessye Norman), the bass-baritone Simon Estes argued in an interview in 2000 that the position of male African-American singers in the opera house remains tenuous, especially in the US.<sup>85</sup> The more recent successes of the tenor Lawrence Brownlee at the Metropolitan promise some much-needed progress.<sup>86</sup>

### The singer and audience

Celebrity as an outlet for spectators' 'notions of freedom, fantasy, and needs' is an obvious concern of our own period, but one evident throughout opera history.<sup>87</sup> Anna Renzi, as Rosand reveals, was in effect 'created' by the press. Strozzi's homage was an early example of the 'Applausi', effusive sonnets and odes flung onto the stage by spectators at curtain calls, or printed in periodicals and other publications.<sup>88</sup> Some encomiums were genuine responses by admirers; others were commissioned by the singers themselves as a form of advertisement. Both were the literary equivalent of pictorial illustration – a kind of verbal portraiture – indebted to the classical and mythological lexicon that often was similarly apparent in the visual adornments of the opera houses.

Certain critics attempted to debunk the worst excesses of celebratory publicity. In 1829, Luigi Prividali, editor of the Italian periodical *Il censore dei teatri*, challenged the epoch's propensity for 'divinizzazione', arguing that fame should be rooted not in fashion but in the qualities necessary in an 'excellent' singer.<sup>89</sup> Few, if any, singers could have met his stringent



requirements (perfection in timbre, technique, style, interpretation and acting) – but that, of course, was his point. Nonetheless, the tide was not to be stemmed. Increasingly owned by music publishers and theatrical agencies, many periodicals (particularly in France and Italy) traded on the puffery of their proprietors' artists, and helped to supply the audiences for the opera houses.

Impresarios were similarly eager to participate in this pumping up of the celebrity market – but when it came to writing their memoirs, a quite different agenda often prevailed. In 1888, the British operatic impresario Colonel Mapleson wrote about one of his troupe, the Italian tenor Antonio Giuglini (1827–65):

Giuglini was in many things a child. So, indeed, are most members of the artistic tribe, and it is only by treating them and humouring them as children that one can get them to work at all.

The only two things Giuglini really delighted in were kites and fireworks. Give him kites to fly by day and rockets, roman candles, or even squibs and crackers to let off at night, and he was perfectly happy.<sup>90</sup>

It is difficult to square this image of Giuglini with the one that emerges from his private correspondence, written over the course of his career to the conductor Giulio Cesare Ferrarini – and where no mention is ever made of either kites or fireworks.<sup>91</sup> Instead, he emerges as generous, astute and profoundly grateful for his good fortune as a principal tenor in Europe's highest-paying theatres. The contrast between *divinizzazione* at one end of the scale and Mapleson's disparagement at the other is clear. In the former, the singer's personality is perceived as at one with the voice; the voice is read as a sign of admirable inner qualities of temperament and judgement. In the latter, the singer is divorced from his or her voice: the 'divine' instrument is regarded as an aberration, and the singer treated at best as an *idiot savant*. The history of discourses – particularly of popular discourse – around singers has veered wildly between these two extremes.

These polarized views contribute to the sometimes uneasy relationship between singers and their audiences, from the hostility between rival supporters of Cuzzoni and Bordoni during a performance of Bononcini's *Astianatte* in London in 1727 ('Hissing on one Side, and Clapping on the other' among the spectators gave way to 'Catcalls, and other great Indecencies'<sup>92</sup>) to the snappish journalistic exchanges between the two-party faction dominating Erminia Frezzolini's career in the mid-nineteenth century (the *frezzolinisti* lauding her to the skies, the *rigoristi* describing her as the 'shade' of her former self, then the 'shade of a shade', and finally as 'Lazarus in a skirt').<sup>93</sup> The Internet provides a new forum for audience opinion. Comments accompanying clips of singers on YouTube confirm

the delight that sung performance can arouse in its listeners; but they also reveal disturbing levels of invective (see, for example, the attacks on Natalie Dessay and Anna Netrebko).<sup>94</sup> This excoriation of anything presumed less than perfect – in voice, appearance, manner – demonstrates an aggressive escalation in the relentless commodification of the singer.

No voice might be considered more poignantly ‘lost’ than the singer’s own instrument as it falters and fades with the passing of the years. Hahn thought differently:

A singer never stops learning: the progress of a singer who works at his art ends only with his life; the loss of his voice does not bring his work to a halt, for the real work of singing is mental . . .

There is a saying by Garat that is touching indeed for those who understand and cultivate singing. After a glorious career such as few singers have known, Garat, grown old, his voice gone, was asked by a friend if he still occasionally tried to sing. He replied, ‘No, that is impossible; but my mind sings in silence, *and I have never sung better.*’<sup>95</sup>

Not the demise of voice, then – rather, its transcendence in the infinite realm of the imaginary.

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- 79 Suzanne Aspden, "'An Infinity of Factions': Opera in Eighteenth-Century Britain and the Undoing of Society", *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 9/1 (March 1997), pp. 1–19. Examples of pornographic memoirs include James Ridgeway, *Memoirs of Mrs Billington from Her Birth* (London: James Ridgeway, 1792); other works were also written about Lucia Vestris (Anon., *Confessions of Madame Vestris, in a series of familiar letters to Handsome Jack* (London: New Villon Society, 1891)) and Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient (Anon., *Aus den Memoiren einer Sängerin* (1862), translated as *Pauline, the Prima Donna* (London and New York: Erotika Biblion Society, 1898)).
- 80 Richard Dyer, *Only Entertainment* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 79–83.
- 81 On Colbran, see Sergio Ragni, 'Isabella Colbran: appunti per una biografia', *Bollettino del Centro Rossiniano di Studi*, 38 (1998), pp. 17–55. On Giuditta Pasta, see Kenneth A. Stern, *A Documentary Study of Giuditta Pasta on the Opera Stage (Italy)*, PhD dissertation (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Dissertation Services, 2000); Paolo Russo, 'Giuditta Pasta: cantante pantomimica', *Musica e Storia*, 10/2 (2002), pp. 497–534; and Susan Rutherford, 'La cantante delle passioni: Giuditta Pasta and the Idea of Operatic Performance', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 19/2 (July 2007), pp. 107–38. On Malibran, see Howard Bushnell, *Maria Malibran: A Biography of the Singer* (University Park and London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1979); and April Fitzlyon, *Maria Malibran: Diva of the Romantic Age* (London: Souvenir Press, 1987). On Schröder-Devrient, see Susan Rutherford, 'Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient: Wagner's Tragic Muse', in Maggie Gale and Vivien Gardner, *Women, Theatre and Performance: New Histories, New Historiographies* (Manchester University Press, 2000).
- 82 For Colbran, see Rossini's *Otello*, *Armida* and *Semiramide*, amongst others; for Pasta, see Rossini's *Il viaggio a Reims*, Bellini's *La sonnambula*, *Norma* and *Beatrice di Tenda*, and Donizetti's *Anna Bolena*; for Schröder-Devrient, see Wagner's *Rienzi*, *Der fliegende Holländer* and *Tannhäuser*.
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- 84 On the disappearance of the contralto, see Susan Rutherford, *The Prima Donna and*

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94 See, for example, the threads at: [www.youtube.com/all\\_comments?v=5HDKgsXfkaA](http://www.youtube.com/all_comments?v=5HDKgsXfkaA) and [www.youtube.com/all\\_comments?v=S9zeUAYFRVI](http://www.youtube.com/all_comments?v=S9zeUAYFRVI).

95 Hahn, *On Singers and Singing*, p. 49.