

## BOOK REVIEWS

Marco Beghelli and Raffaele Talmelli, *Ermafrodite armoniche* (Varese: Zecchini Editore, 2011). vii+216 pp+CD. €25.00.

It is a truism and a truth of musicology that any scholar concerned with music and its performance before the era of recorded sound can have no absolute certainty about the performance practice of any such time. As the authors of this book state at the beginning of their Introduction: 'To speak of singers who lived before the arrival of sound recording is the equivalent of discussing the aesthetics of an artist by whom no canvas has survived' (p. 12).<sup>1</sup> Remembering the attempt of the Austrian scholar Franz Haböck to describe the art of the great castrato Farinelli by reference to scores of his surviving repertoire,<sup>2</sup> they ask, very reasonably, how much we might have been able to glean from examining scores of works in the repertoire of a protean figure like Maria Callas, were it not for the wealth of her recorded legacy. They are in a more fortunate position than Haböck, since the task they set themselves in this volume is to describe a type of voice and manner of singing much in evidence before the advent of recording, but which does survive in considerable quantity on disc.

These are the *ermafrodite armoniche* of the book's title, those *contralti sopranili*, who, in defiance of singing teachers' precepts<sup>3</sup>, used a technique of what the authors call *la voce doppia*<sup>4</sup> to cover a remarkable range, both in terms of pitch and character. Such was Maria Malibran (1808–1836, range Eb3 to d6), who was spoken of as a singer who 'will do for three: soprano both serious and comic, and contralto' (p. 5)<sup>5</sup>, and such was Giuditta Pasta (1797–1865), whom most today would regard as a soprano, yet who undertook Rossini's *Tancredi* with impunity, alongside Bellini's *Amina* (and *Norma*!). It is also usefully pointed out (p. 8) that such female singers were in some ways seen as replacements for those other epicene creatures of the operatic stage, the castratos, who last trod the boards in the 1830s.<sup>6</sup> Pasta could certainly appear boyish on set, as in

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<sup>1</sup> My translation from the authors' Italian original. One of the many excellent features of this book is that whilst in the body of the text all quotations are in Italian, non-Italian original versions are given in the footnotes.

<sup>2</sup> See Franz Haböck, *Die Gesangskunst der Kastraten* (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1923) and *Die Kastraten und ihre Gesangskunst* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1927).

<sup>3</sup> For example, see Ch. 1, para. 21 of Pier Francesco Tosi, *Observations on the Florid Song* (Bologna: 1723; English translation by John Ernest Galliard, first published in London: 1743).

<sup>4</sup> *Contralto sopranile* and *la voce doppia* are terms rarely encountered outside Italian usage, but the former, 'a soprano-like contralto' used the latter 'double voice' to achieve the wide ranges the authors describe, sounding very *contralto* in her lower range and very *soprano* at the other extreme, with often little attempt being made to hide any register 'breaks'.

<sup>5</sup> Translated from a letter of Édouard Robert to Carlo Severini, Bologna, 5 November 1829, quoted in Remo Giazotto, *Maria Malibran (1808–1836): una vita nei nomi di Rossini e Bellini* (Torino: ERI, 1986):111.

<sup>6</sup> Giambattista Velluti gave his last stage performance in Meyerbeer's *Il Crociato in Egitto* at the Teatro la Pergola in Florence during May 1833.

the engraving reproduced on p. 18 of the volume under discussion, but this was hardly the case with the extraordinary Marietta Alboni (1826–1894), who, matronly of appearance, vocalised from F2 to Eb6 (though ‘in public I only permit myself low G to high C’ – [G3 to C6], p. 26), and was capable, if the occasion demanded, of singing the baritone role of Don Carlo in Verdi’s *Ernani*, and of undertaking Marie’s stratospheric flights in Donizetti’s *La Fille du régiment*, alongside her ‘home territory’ of a contralto role like Arsace in Rossini’s *Semiramide*.

Such extreme exploits were not universally welcomed, not least since exponents of *la voce doppia* exhibited great contrast in timbre in different parts of their range. The authors quote Gino Monaldi, not always the most reliable of commentators,<sup>7</sup> on Pasta: ‘A peculiarity of the voice was the unevenness of the timbre, a defect of which she took advantage with rare skill in order to derive from it greater powers of expression ...’ (p. 17)<sup>8</sup>. Of Alboni the English critic Henry Chorley was particularly damning: ‘The required high notes were forthcoming. But the entire texture of the voice was injured ... the voice remained to be always a spoiled contralto ...’ (p. 35).<sup>9</sup>

Thus ‘the idea of an even vocal quality from top to bottom of a singer’s compass was unknown to Verdi’s contemporaries’ (p. 43)<sup>10</sup>, and a large part of this book is taken up by examining performers of whom this was true even well into the twentieth century, and from whom we have the inestimable advantage of surviving recordings as witness. An obvious change of taste and vocal pedagogy during the twentieth century away from *la voce doppia* and towards a preference for more evenly registered voices is discussed at length, with some most interesting transcriptions of discussions between tenor Stefan Zucker and redoubtable divas of the later twentieth century: very differing opinions about the use of the *voce di petto* are in evidence, with several of these great ladies denying the use of it, or even its very existence.<sup>11</sup> (It might have been interesting to have included comments on this from a teacher or two – there may be more of a confusion of terminology here than of physiology, since I believe many would differentiate, quite rightly, between chest *voice*, ‘raw’ and blatant, with something of a shout about it, and chest *register*, with the voice correctly ‘supported’, to use the common terminology.<sup>12</sup>)

It would have been easy for this book to have fallen into a bitty series of short chapters about individual singers, but the authors skilfully avoid this by interspersing concise biographical studies (by Raffaella Talmelli, who also contributes the excellent ‘In Praise of Ambiguity’) with stimulating chapters on

<sup>7</sup> Monaldi was only three years old when Pasta gave her last public performance, so could hardly have spoken of her singing from direct experience.

<sup>8</sup> Translated from Gino Monaldi, *Cantanti celebri del secolo XIX*, (Rome: Nuova Antologia, 1907): 27.

<sup>9</sup> Taken from H F Chorley, *Thirty Years’ Musical Recollections*, vol II (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1862): 9–10.

<sup>10</sup> Taken from Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, vol II, (London: Cassell, 1978): 68–9).

<sup>11</sup> Taken from his film *Opera Fanatic* (Pars Music DVD 101813)

<sup>12</sup> I realise only too well that such terminology is itself the subject of enormous and contentious discussion; for a concise and, in my opinion, excellently sensible guide to such matters, see Richard Miller, *The Art of Singing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996): 75–8.

topics such as the relationship between contraltos and castratos, 'female tenors', and, most intriguingly, on Maria Callas, whom no less a figure than the great tenor Giacomo Lauri-Volpi described as possessing a *voce multipla* (these sections are largely by Marco Beghelli). Nonetheless, interesting and well-argued though all this material is, equally exciting is the accompanying CD, with excerpts (some very short) of twenty-three singers, ranging from Marianne Brandt (1842–1921), to the male *sopranista*, Angelo Manzotti, born in 1958. As well as famous singers of more recent times, like Kathleen Ferrier (remarkable for her warm and even timbre) and Marian Anderson (whose wonderful recording of Schubert's *Der Tod und das Mädchen* ends with a terrifying D<sup>2</sup>), some of the 'old' singers are still extremely well-known, such as Ernestine Schumann-Heinck, whose 'Ah, mon fils, sois béni!' from Meyerbeer's *Le Prophète* is a true *tour de force* of the 'double voice'. Others will have faded from the notice of all but specialist record collectors: the extraordinary rendition of 'Pensa alla patria!' from Rossini's *L'italiana in Algeri* by Guerrina Fabbri (1886–1946) was a particularly fine choice of opening track, this lady's low range being as 'hermaphrodite' as the book's title could have desired, as well as distinctly reminiscent of the voice of Alessandro Moreschi's, 'the last castrato', who also features here.<sup>13</sup> Others, less known to me at least, include Armida Parsi Pettinella (1868–1949 – she displays fine tenorial low notes) and Gabriella Besanzoni (1888–1962, another reminiscent of Moreschi). Time and again these singers indeed show great contrast between low and high registers (including what can only be termed yodelling as they move between them), extraordinary flexibility that any modern *soprano leggero* might envy, and low notes of remarkable power (not least Clara Butt's E<sub>2</sub> in Hatton's *The Enchantress*, which is said to have scared the panel at the Royal College of Music in London into giving her a scholarship in 1890). Understandably, given the origin of this book, one finds something of a preference for Italian artists, and some of the finest modern contraltos are absent. (This may of course be due to problems of copyright, and it is a simple matter to hear recordings of such as Marilyn Horne and Ewa Podleś, both of whom are mentioned in the text). An underlying theme of the book, namely gender ambiguity, is brought into sharp focus by the moving story of 'Lily Dan' (1920–2005), who, with Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome, led a difficult life of frustrated singing ambitions in modern-day Italy. This is one of several contributions from contemporary musicians, of which I would single out that of Michael Aspinall, male soprano and opera *cognoscente*, as of special interest.

Though 'Harmonic Hermaphrodites' would not perhaps be an ideal English title for this book, it most certainly deserves to be translated at the earliest opportunity, so as to reach a wider public. It explores a topic of great interest to historians of singing, opera and gender-related issues in music, without falling into the tiresome trendiness so often peddled in such areas of study in place of serious thought. I recommend it highly.

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<sup>13</sup> See Nicholas Clapton, *Moreschi and the Voice of the Castrato* (London: Haus, 2008), especially pp. 197–216.