

The Cambridge Companion to
SINGING

EDITED BY

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1 Introduction: singing at the turn of the century

JOHN POTTER

Singing moves and excites people, often in very large numbers. Thousands turn out for the Three Tenors or rock concerts, millions mourned Frank Sinatra and the Berber singer Lounès Matoub; every week in Europe millions more sing their hearts out at football matches. We are born into a babble of voices and the clamour continues, if we're lucky, for the rest of our lives: our voices *are* us, directly expressive of our personalities and emotions. A voice is not like an oboe or violin, something you can take out of its case and put away, an instrument with hundreds of years of technical development behind it. You don't have to be a virtuoso to express your own emotions. Everyone can speak, and everyone can sing, so we all have our own idea of what singing actually is. This is one reason that the *Cambridge Companion to Singing* is different from its instrumental predecessors: in the end a choice has to be made about which aspects of singing can be usefully explored in the space available. Like the other Companions, this one deals almost exclusively with the music we experience in the industrialised West. At the beginning of a new century, with artistic ideas and activities expanding in all directions, it seems appropriate to begin with 'world music'. The term is a Western concept, involving the incorporation of singing outside the Western tradition into the stream of possibilities that are available to us today. If I had to predict where significant developments in singing will come in the future, I would hazard a guess that what we now call world music is the well-spring from which new forms of vocal expression will flow. Many, but by no means all, varieties of singing are to be found between these covers, and how the authors dealt with their subjects has been left broadly up to them. Significant omissions include folk music (a very large and nebulous subject) as well as anything more than a passing glance at more abstract issues of sociology, semiotics and meaning. A balance has been struck between 'classical' and 'popular' singing, and the final list of topics was arrived at with a great deal of agonising over the weighting given to each one.

At almost any other time in recent history a singing Companion would probably have meant an anthology of writing about fairly narrowly defined 'classical' singing.¹ Looking backwards to the latter part of the twentieth century and forwards to the twenty-first, it is possible to see a

[1]

major and continuing change in our perception of what singing is, to the extent that it is no longer possible to come up with any single meaningful definition. The classical variety, as used in opera, still has a significant place in our culture after hundreds of years, but it is no longer automatically thought of as being *the* authoritative way to sing. There are not only many varieties of singing that might be called 'classical' – the re-envisioning of 'lost' styles by early music singers, for example, or new vocal techniques for contemporary repertoires – but for very large numbers of people in the USA and Europe there is real cultural significance in the myriad varieties of popular music that pour from our radios, televisions and CD players every day. This encompasses not only Afro-American varieties but singers from all of the earth's continents. It is a major perceptive shift, and one that the *Cambridge Companion to Singing* embraces wholeheartedly. Frank Sinatra was regarded by many as one of the greatest voices of the twentieth century, and in many ways is a symbol of the cultural value that we now assign to singers of popular music.

Singing has a peculiarly awkward, shifting relationship with economics, art and status. Most singers are very happy to ignore this and simply get on with whatever they like to sing. But there is undeniably a sociological dimension to the way singing is perceived by listeners (non-singers, perhaps): societies (particularly governments and institutions) make value judgements about artistic worth. So at the turn of the century we find in England, for example, that opera and jazz have similar numbers of fans who go to concerts, yet jazz, a vibrant art form with perhaps increasing relevance to the twenty-first century, receives roughly one hundredth of the funding available to opera, which seems to lurch from crisis to crisis and always to have at least one foot in the nineteenth century. Western classical singing still has a unique world status: Japanese music colleges turn out fine singers of the classical Western canon, but very few Western conservatories teach Japanese singing. The classical song recital is in decline (perhaps terminally so, Stephen Varcoe hints) but opera is still seen as the vocal summit. John Rosselli's two chapters in this volume recognise a clear division between a dynamic past and a more traditional present, and he offers an interesting French correction to the conventional Italian bias of many early opera histories. Most major American and European cities have music colleges, and each year these institutions prepare for the profession a much larger number of singers than can actually earn a living in it. A lot of classical singers certainly make successful careers (some gloriously so) but many more end up as teachers (where they rejoin the production cycle at a different level) or leave the profession altogether. Jazz and pop music are increasingly seen as having pedagogical value, but singers suffer from the same lack of opportunity once they get

3 Introduction

out into the market place. The market that classical singers enter is often not subject to the usual laws of supply and demand. At the very top, opera singers can earn fantastic sums of money, often far more than can be covered by box office receipts alone. The shortfall is made up from government subsidies or institutional or commercial sponsorship, which enables opera houses to run up huge paper losses even when admission prices are extremely high and every seat sold. These structural absurdities often seem to have a debilitating effect on both audiences and opera companies (the demands of corporate entertainment are not easy to reconcile with imaginative programme planning) and it will be interesting to see how far into the twenty-first century this situation can continue. Singers of popular music have a much more precarious existence. A small number make huge sums and some performers are able to make a very good living playing major festivals (which are often heavily sponsored), but many are subject to the market cruelty which ensures that they sing for very little reward at all.

One of the consequences of the stylistic fragmentation of classical music has been the proliferation of singing styles associated with early music. Early music is unlike any other variety in that it purports to work within a stylistic framework that does not belong to the present, and cannot (yet?) be part of a living tradition in the sense that, say, opera or rock music are. Some aspects of early music singing have seemed anachronistic, such as the muddled attempts to re-create Baroque gesture or the strange coupling of highly researched instrumental playing with academically under-nourished singers. Nevertheless, some early music singers have often found themselves closer to the cutting edge than their more heavyweight colleagues. The record industry has supported a great variety of singers: the wave of small British and American ensembles that became successful in the 1970s has been joined by new groups from Italy, France, Germany and Scandinavia. Few of these until recently have had much time for serious investigation into the *sound* of pre-twentieth-century singing, but several performers on both sides of the Atlantic are taking more risks in this direction. The sources are there for singers to construct their own techniques, whether they be medieval or Renaissance, Romantic or modern, and Joseph Dyer, Richard Wistreich and David Mason in this volume provide a good starting point for singers to do just that. There are also signs that singers are having the courage to break away from slavish adherence to musicological dogma and are beginning to think more like their medieval and Renaissance predecessors (who, the evidence suggests, generally preferred the delights of emotional self indulgence to the musicology of their own day). Of course historical texts should be respected, but as a means to an end in the

present. There is more willingness to admit that if early music is to be relevant to the present, certain aspects of it are perhaps better left un-revived or engaged with critically (anti-Semitism in medieval and Renaissance motets, for example, or the casual sexism of much secular music). The further back you go, the less evidence there is: the improvising traditions of the medieval period are almost entirely lost to us, for example. Increasingly this is seen as a chance to be creative and not to worry too much about what is not known, offering the possibility for a new dynamism in early music.

Early music singers have living examples which could point the way to at least a partial recovery of lost techniques: Middle Eastern and north African singers may hold clues to a medieval sound; jazz and improvised music certainly offer clues to understanding something of what was not written down. As John Schaefer's chapter shows, we are increasingly open to the huge variety of singing from outside the Euro-American axis. Many strands of twentieth-century popular music have been driven by Afro-American innovations, and towards the end of the century we have seen African, Indian and Arabic singers making a serious impact in the West. Many of these singers come from improvising or non-literate traditions and have interacted with both mainstream popular music and jazz. This northwards and westward movement of southern and oriental singing styles has a curious and timely historical parallel: a similar process may have been happening at the end of the first millennium.² It will not be lost on students of ethnomusicology that most of the 'alternative' sounds discussed in Linda Hirst's and David Wright's chapter are perfectly normal in a global context. Popular music has benefited from periodic injections of Afro-American influences which have enabled it to reinvent itself, as Richard Middleton implies (and as I point out in my contribution on jazz singing). David Toop's chapter on hip-hop shows that the capacity of Afro-American culture to take popular music by the scruff of the neck knows no bounds. Not that all American music is African influenced: Stephen Banfield draws our attention to the remarkable Jewish contribution to the American musical.

Choral singing flourishes throughout Europe and North America, though in England there is still a big divide between the elite Oxbridge singers and the amateurs who form the backbone of the choral movement. Timothy Day explains the origins of the 'English' choral sound, pointing out that this is far from the monolithic phenomenon that it sometimes appears to be. Heikki Liimola describes how to make the best of singing in an amateur choir, a very different tradition but one which in his native Scandinavia has produced some of the very best singing of recent times. A North American perspective is provided by Neely Bruce,

whose chapter outlines the long and fascinating history of choral singing in black, white and native American communities. The two final, but by no means least important, chapters in this anthology are about children's singing and vocal acoustics. In some ways these are actually the most important topics dealt with here: we would all benefit from the all-singing childhoods envisioned by Felicity Laurence, and a knowledge of how the voice actually works can solve technical mysteries without compromising its imaginative and artistic use.

The shape of this Companion is designed to link the various topics, beginning with John Schaefer's world music chapter and ending with Johan Sundberg's exposition of vocal acoustics. There are many possible routes through the material, and I hope that interested readers will be tempted by more than just the chapter associated with their own interests, perhaps moving outwards via adjacent chapters. The final selection of topics and authors was mine and obviously reflects my own interests and biases, but I have tried to cover as many aspects as possible within the series format. Another editor could easily have come up with a very different collection, and he or she would inevitably have had to deal with the question of what to leave out. Looking back over the second half of the twentieth century, it seems to me that singing is a sign of the enormous social diversity encompassed by musical activity, whether it is the blatantly commercial or the shamelessly subsidised, the church choir or the urban rapper. If there is one identifiable characteristic associated with singing and singers as we move into the new millennium, it is a move away from the closed introspection of an earlier generation, towards an open-endedness, a generosity of spirit that can bring together musicians and listeners from creeds and cultures all over the planet.