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Karen Henson
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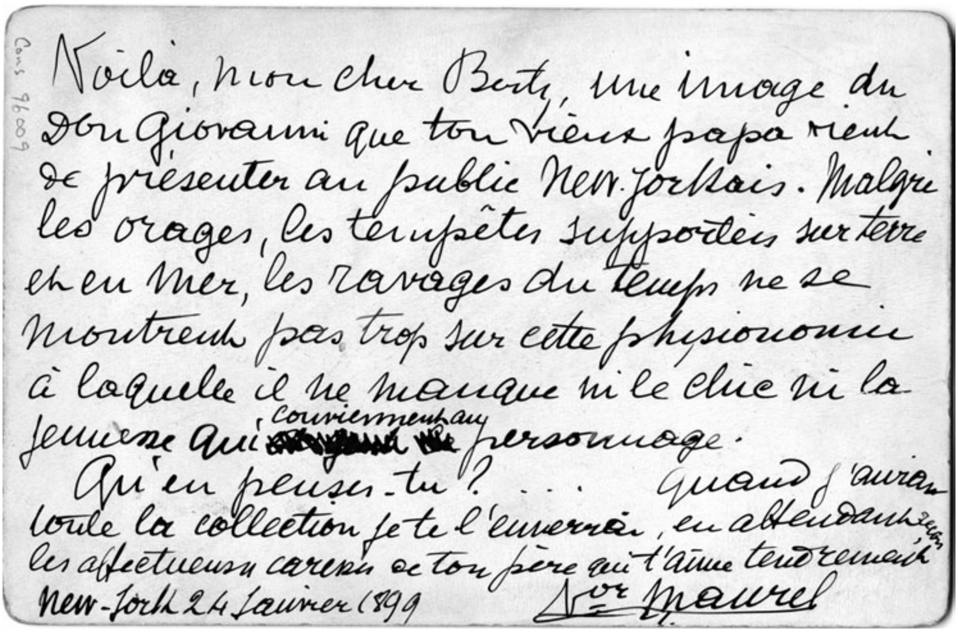
Introduction: On not singing and singing physiognomically

> Here you are, my dear Berty, an image of the Don Giovanni your old papa just presented to the New York public. In spite of squalls and storms endured on land and sea, the ravages of time don't seem to show up too much on my physiognomy, which I think has the chic and youthfulness appropriate to the character.
>
> What do you think? . . . When I have the full set [of photographs] I'll send them to you; in the meantime accept the affectionate kisses of a father who loves you dearly.[1]

When the French baritone Victor Maurel wrote this to his son from New York City in 1899, he had just enjoyed an extraordinary ten years performing around the world as Giuseppe Verdi's first Iago and Falstaff, but was heading into the twilight of his career, into a last half-decade of appearances in the repertory. The note is written on the back of a photographic postcard (or "cabinet card") that captures him on the occasion of one of those appearances, as Don Giovanni at the Metropolitan Opera. The image, which is indeed part of a set by the Met's first regularly employed photographer, Aimé Dupont, is well known to specialists of historical singing, but Maurel's personalization of his copy is striking and unique. Along with the wistful reference to his age and the affectionate greeting, the baritone manages to offer a miniature disquisition on the character of Mozart's anti-hero, whom he hopes to have presented with "chic" and "youthfulness" (Figure 0.1).

Maurel is a singer whose presence will be felt throughout this book, as it was among the generation of singers on which this book focuses, the one that came of age in the last three decades of the nineteenth century. These were singers who had the opportunity to work with the later Verdi as well as with Georges Bizet, Jules Massenet, and those seeking to "guard the flame" of the only recently dead Richard Wagner. They also saw the emergence of more twentieth-century trends, including the increasing dominance of a repertory and of sound recording. Maurel's note raises issues that will be felt throughout my telling of this generation's story: the challenge of writing about singers for whom more written and visual than aural sources exist – sound recording was invented in 1877, but it did not begin to be developed commercially until the 1890s and not for opera until the 1900s[2] – and who in any case seem to have been interested not so much in singing in the conventional sense as in words and textual expression, acting, and physicality. A word Maurel uses, "physiognomy," will return throughout the book. The word has a long history and enjoyed a very lively early nineteenth-century French vogue. By the end of the century it was being used regularly in descriptions of singers' performances.

As even Maurel would have acknowledged, the late nineteenth century is not a period traditionally associated with the figure of the opera singer. If anything, it has been



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Voilà, mon cher Berti, une image du
Don Giovanni que ton vieux papa vient
de présenter au public New-Yorkais. Malgré
les orages, les tempêtes supportées sur terre
et en Mer, les ravages du temps ne se
montrent pas trop sur cette physionomie
à laquelle il ne manque ni le chic ni la
jeunesse qui ~~[illegible]~~ conviennent au personnage.
Qu'en penses-tu? . . . Quand j'aurai
toute la collection je te l'enverrai, en attendant reçois
les affectueuses caresses de ton père qui t'aime tendrement
New-York 24 Janvier 1899 Vor Maurel

Figure 0.1 Victor Maurel's miniature disquisition on the role of Don Giovanni, 1899

seen as a period of final decline for singers, the freedoms and creativity they enjoyed in earlier decades and centuries having been replaced by a more familiar, even "modern" model of operatic production, one centered on the composer and the abstract operatic "work." As is well known, during the first two and a half centuries of opera's history, singers like the so-called "rival divas" Francesca Cuzzoni and Faustina Bordoni, or bel canto stars such as Giuditta Pasta, enjoyed extraordinary prominence, inspiring arias, operas, and vocal styles, not to mention large salaries and fame and notoriety. A Handel, Mozart, Bellini, or Donizetti composed and recomposed their music according to such singers' talents; opera houses spent the greater parts of their budgets on them; and even before the rise of the professional music critic, thousands of words were devoted to their triumphs and foibles.[3] Their significance was such that it is customary to speak of them as having played an influential, even pseudo-authorial role in the creation of opera during this long period. In comparison to which, as one of the most important recent historians of singing, Susan Rutherford, has observed, the years after 1850 can seem to have been only a "downward path" for singers (other historians of singing have spoken of singers' "downfall" after 1850, others of a singing "apocalypse").[4]

From around 1850 changes in compositional style and practice, the spread of Romantic ideas about music, practical and commercial changes (including the growth of music publishing and copyright), and larger socio-cultural trends gradually transformed singers from powerful creators to, in the words of Lydia Goehr, one of the most important commentators on the larger shift, something more subordinate, subservient,

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merely flawed and human.[5] Singers still enjoyed fame and large salaries – though the next important high point in this respect would not be until the early twentieth century, when figures like Enrico Caruso recovered some of the profession's earlier luster through sound recording.[6] However, the creativity of the earlier period was lost. By the late nineteenth century singers were no longer creators but rather intermediaries, executants, faithful (or disloyal) interpreters. To quote more fully from Rutherford:

> Pasta and her [bel canto] generation of artists were in effect the last singers to command . . . considerable influence on composition, or to enjoy [significant] freedoms on stage within the élite opera houses . . .
> [After 1850] the greater part of the efforts of composers, librettists, impresarios, and publishers (urged on by the critics in the flourishing musical press) was to impose a kind of order on the seeming chaos of the . . . opera house . . . Gradually, the composer gained ascendance and operas were no longer adjusted to display individual talents but became *in themselves* the dominant or fundamental component of the performance . . . Later composers [only] occasionally remained open to the idea of writing for a specific singer . . .[7]

One of the aims of *Opera Acts* is to explore this "downward path," this move from freedom to subservience, creativity to interpretation. As I will be showing, singers such as Maurel did indeed have a very different and in many ways more circumscribed role than that of a Cuzzoni or a Pasta, though, as Goehr has pointed out, this new role has tended to be asserted by music historians rather than properly explored.[8] However, as even the basic facts of a career such as Maurel's suggest, if a Cuzzoni-style model is no longer relevant for the late nineteenth century, the one that replaced it was not simply one of decline and limits. Rather, as it is the main aim of this book to show, Maurel and other singers in the late nineteenth century enjoyed their own kinds of freedom and creativity. That these freedoms have been neglected by historians – less so by the many non-traditionally academic writers who have always paid attention to singers[9] – is in part because of the challenges regarding sources mentioned earlier: an absence not only of recordings but also of the added arias, altered scores, and other compositional evidence that we have for the pre-1850 period and that allow us to speak of the activities and role of singers in those years with a degree of certainty. But the challenge is also one of certainty itself, for the freedoms singers enjoyed after 1870 were very different to what had come before, in many ways more elusive, and difficult to explain and elucidate. To do so one has to experiment with alternative and perhaps even with less certainty and proof-oriented ways of thinking about singing, opera, and even music history.

I

Perhaps the first challenge and certainly the principal significance of this "physiognomic" generation of singers relates to the style of singing itself. As Maurel's note

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suggests (and as I have already begun to argue), this was not a generation concerned with singing in the strict or conventional sense. Although Maurel was understandably proud of his new Met photographs, and though he was a singer unusually concerned with his physique and physicality, his note to his son is striking for the absence of anything as simple as the phrase "I sang well." Maurel and his generation are in fact best characterized using the opposite formulation, one that I borrow from the figure with whom Maurel so often worked and who will be a perhaps unexpected source of ideas and thinking for this study. They were a generation who, in Verdi's words, specialized in "not singing."

In Verdi's formulation and my borrowing, the idea of "not singing" begins with the natural qualities of the voice. Although it might seem odd to introduce them this way, the four singers and eight "Supporting cast" members on whom this book focuses were repeatedly described, by both sympathetic and disapproving commentators, as having voices that were naturally unimpressive – neither especially beautiful nor powerful. I will give here just a few examples. On appearing in his break-out role, the title role of Ambroise Thomas' *Hamlet* at the Paris Opéra in 1879, Maurel was described by a columnist, who would go on to give a detailed and highly flattering account of his acting, as having a voice that, in range and power, was "ordinary."[10] On a number of occasions, Bizet's first Carmen, the mezzo-soprano Célestine Galli-Marié, was described as being vocally limited. On being considered for one of her most important roles, the title role of Thomas' *Mignon*, she was even initially dismissed for having "no more than five notes."[11] Massenet's first Esclarmonde and Thaïs, the American coloratura Sibyl Sanderson, is the singer in this book who came closest to being appreciated for her natural vocal qualities: descriptions included "pure" and "crystalline." However, as one journalist joked, it was the "purity . . . formal perfection . . . exquisite harmony . . . [and] grace" of her *body* that attracted the most attention.[12] On the occasion of one of his break-out roles, Roméo in Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette* at the Opéra in 1888, the Polish-French tenor and early Wagner star Jean de Reszke was described by the distinguished critic Johannès Weber as being a very "artful" and "dramatic" singer, but as having a voice that "everyone knows . . . is not one of the most attractive."[13] Reszke himself took this further, commenting to friends and family in later life that during his career he had only been involved in four or five really good performances and that "in the end my voice was pretty horrible."[14]

Reszke was known for his gentlemanly modesty, but even allowing for such factors as well as for late nineteenth-century journalists' love of the attention-grabbing *bon mot*, the frequency of such comments is striking, and contrasts strikingly with descriptions of singers in other periods, with their comparisons to birds, angels, and other sweet-sounding or heavenly creatures. (The bel canto soprano Jenny Lind's nickname "the Swedish Nightingale" is perhaps the best known of such comparisons.) More than the natural qualities of the voice, though, it is the *use* of the voice, a singer's technique and his or her style and approach, to which the idea of not singing seems most to refer. To understand more, we need to go back to Verdi's original formulation, one of the most important expressions of which dates from a key moment in the history of thinking about singers as sources of sweet song.

As Verdi scholars have long emphasized, in composing and preparing for the premiere of his 1847 *Macbeth*, Verdi paid unusual attention, even for a very practical composer, a "man of the theater" as he is so often known, to matters of staging and performance.[15] Although he would not see the original Shakespeare play until after the premiere, he requested that certain scenes, including the appearance of Banquo's ghost and the Scene of the Apparitions, be staged according to the latest theatrical practice in London.[16] He sent detailed instructions to the principals, the baritone Felice Varesi and the soprano Marianna Barbieri-Nini, and the rehearsal period was unusually long and demanding. The premiere in Florence was a success and, as the opera began its journey across Italy, and eventually Europe, no longer under the composer's direct supervision, Verdi wrote to a friend, the librettist Salvatore Cammarano, about a revival of the opera that Cammarano was supervising in Naples. The fact that Cammarano rather than a specialized stage manager or director was supervising the revival was typical of operatic practice in the early nineteenth century, particularly in Italy. By the last decades of the century most opera houses would employ stage managers, though not yet directors in the modern sense of the word.[17] The immediate reason for Verdi's letter was to enquire whether it was indeed true that the soprano Eugenia Tadolini had been cast as the Naples Lady Macbeth. Verdi wrote:

> I know that you are in the middle of rehearsing *Macbeth*, and since it's an opera that interests me more than the others, permit me to say a few words to you about it. Tadolini has been assigned the role of Lady Macbeth and I'm surprised . . . Tadolini's qualities are too good for that role! This may seem absurd to you [but] . . . Tadolini is beautiful and attractive, and I would like Lady Macbeth to be ugly and evil. Tadolini sings to perfection; and I would like Lady *not to sing* [*che . . . non cantasse*]. Tadolini has a wonderful voice, clear, limpid, powerful; and I would like the Lady to have a harsh, stifled, and hollow voice. Tadolini's voice has an angelic quality; I would like Lady's voice to have something of the diabolical about it! . . . Note that there are two important numbers in the opera: the duet between Lady and her husband and the sleepwalking scene. If these numbers fail, the opera is ruined. And these pieces absolutely must not be sung [*non si devono assolutamente cantare*].[18]

Although it is only an excerpt, and though what it contains is in many ways highly specific to *Macbeth*, Verdi's letter can serve as a summary of the changes that were taking place in opera and singing around 1850. The first is of course the singer's supposed decline, seen here in the fact that an enquiry about casting quickly becomes an opportunity for Verdi to make a larger aesthetic pronouncement about the nature of his *Macbeth*. So far as the new Lady Macbeth is concerned, it is no longer a question of

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the opera being altered to suit her – though typically for this period and after, Verdi was willing to make minor and sometimes even major changes for singers, and would do so until his very last opera.[19] Rather, the new soprano has to change in order to conform to a kind of ideal conception of her role, which Verdi describes using all those Romantic and "fantastic" adjectives: ugly, evil, diabolical.

Even more striking than the way Verdi's letter communicates the shift that was taking place in the relationship between singers and composers in this period, however, are the means Verdi effectively recommends to Tadolini and other singers to create the Lady Macbeth role. The soprano must first produce a kind of bodily incarnation of Lady Macbeth: even before uttering a note, she must seem physically and visually ugly and evil. She must also produce a kind of ugliness using her voice, departing from the principles that had guided Italian operatic singing for generations, in particular the importance of a sweet and smooth tone, and prioritizing instead something harsh, stifled, and hollow (*aspra, suffocata, cupa*) that, in Verdi's memorable formulation, is almost "not singing."[20] At the end of the passage, in a special indented section, Verdi pursues the point further. What he describes as the two most important scenes in the opera, the duet for Macbeth and Lady Macbeth in Act I and Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene, or "Gran scena del sonnambulismo," in Act IV, should not only not be sung; they must also approach the spoken theater that they of course originally were. Verdi writes: "[these two scenes] need to be *acted out and declaimed* [*bisogna agirli, e declamarli*] in a very hollow and veiled voice . . . (The orchestra *with mutes*)."[21]

2

Verdi was remarkably consistent in his instructions to singers, using very similar words and phrases right up to his later years and his work with Maurel on *Otello* and *Falstaff*. As we will see, Verdi's attitude by these later years had hardened and his letters to Maurel and other singers tend to be brief and uncompromising. He nonetheless repeated aspects of what he had said about *Macbeth*, referring to the role of Iago in *Otello*, for example, as one in which the baritone should not only "not sing" but not even "raise [his] voice," and reiterating some of the same instructions he had given to Varesi in a letter to Maurel about the role of Falstaff. If Verdi's instructions had not changed, however, opera performance and what singers might understand by a formulation such as "not singing" had. What had changed can perhaps be explained with reference to another nineteenth-century idea, this time not a phrase but a single word: physiognomy.

In criticism and other kinds of writing about singers in the period, including the Maurel note with which I began, this word recurs repeatedly. It recurs especially repeatedly in the late nineteenth-century Parisian press, one of the largest and most powerful in the period, and one of the most loquacious when it comes to singers and opera performance. This is as one would expect from a city that, even in the last decades of the century with the rise of new cultural centers like New York, remained "capital" of all that was theatrically innovative.[22] In the first half of the century Paris had emerged as the capital of grand opera, a new and forward-looking music-theatrical genre that was centered on historical or exotic spectacle and overwhelming vocal, musical, and visual effects, including a range of new vocal techniques and styles by which Verdi and other composers would be impressed.[23] By the 1870s grand opera was in decline, though the works of a composer like Meyerbeer would remain central to the French and international operatic repertories until well into the twentieth century. Paris, however, remained a world-renowned center of opera performance and production.[24]

So far as the use of the word physiognomy in this setting is concerned, I will again give just a few examples. Of Maurel's triumph as Iago in Verdi's *Otello* in the first production of the opera in Paris, at the Opéra in 1894, the music critic and historian Albert Soubies wrote that Maurel's "physiognomy . . . and costume," though surprising at first, contributed to his "consummate act[ing]" and "style" in the role.[25] The word was used several times to describe the mezzo-soprano Galli-Marié as Carmen. Perhaps the most evocative usage was by another critic and historian, Arthur Pougin in the specialist music journal *Le Ménestrel*. He wrote that the singer's performance included "astonishing plays of physiognomy."[26] A more idiomatic translation in this case might be "face" or "facial expression," and in others simply "appearance" or "physical expression," but here and throughout the book, and because of the importance I am attaching to the word methodologically, I will be using the more literal English version. As Massenet's first Esclarmonde, first Thaïs, and his most important Manon of the 1890s, the coloratura Sanderson was only occasionally described using the word. One such occasion was her portrayal of Thaïs at her death, which a journalist at the premiere praised for its "transfigured physiognomy."[27] The tenor Reszke was, on the other hand, and like Maurel and Galli-Marié, repeatedly referred to using it. When he returned to the Opéra after a long absence to give one of his final performances, in the title role of Wagner's *Siegfried*, the critic and early musicologist Camille Bellaigue wrote of him communicating a sense of "divine youthfulness" in the role by means of his "song, action, and physiognomy."[28]

Descriptions such as these recur so repeatedly in the late nineteenth-century press as to seem unremarkable, and yet as descriptions of opera and singing they *are* remarkable and worth pausing over. A very old word, originally from the Greek, physiognomy in French, Italian, German, and English refers to the face, features, and overall physical appearance. In all except French it also refers to the study or pseudo-science of interpreting character or essence from the face, features, physical appearance, and even movement.[29] In French, the different word *physiognomonie* (an added syllable) emerged for the pseudo-science, and perhaps because of this, but also because of the popularity of the science in France, the original word became common in French.[30] Even today it is used fairly regularly. The face, and particularly the mouth, is of course the source of opera's most important sounds, and in that sense the recurrence of the word in descriptions of singers is not surprising. However, the faces, facial features, and physical appearances typically being described are not emitting sound but are rather mute and yet very visually expressive. The late nineteenth century is an important turning point in this respect. As has become a truism in the history of theater, this was a period of major change in the technology of lighting, one that included a move in the 1880s from gas to the more easily regulated, less easily combustible, and brighter electricity.[31] As a result, and even as in other respects singers were struggling to make their presences felt – in the period's ever larger theaters, and over ever-larger orchestras – their *faces* and other aspects of their gesture and physical expression were becoming more clearly visible.[32]

The recurrence of the word physiognomy in late nineteenth-century descriptions of singers seems in part a reflection of these changes. But it is also a trace of the larger, pseudo-scientific history. Like the word itself, this history is old, dating back to a pseudo-Aristotelian text. However, it enjoyed its greatest importance in the early nineteenth century, in the wake of the writings of the late eighteenth-century Swiss theologian Johann Caspar Lavater. A Calvinist with mystical tendencies, Lavater in his *Physiognomische Fragmente* (1775–8) brought together thinkers, writers, and visual artists to produce a rich and compelling account of the science. His "Fragments" became popular across Europe and particularly in France, where in the first half of the nineteenth century physiognomy became a veritable obsession.[33] As Walter Benjamin was one of the first to argue, the appeal of the science was rooted in the way it resonated with changes in the daily life of Paris when, in the first half of the century, it acquired its "capital" status, becoming one of the first densely populated, highly commercially oriented, proto-modern cities. This new identity resulted in, among other things, changes in the way Parisians oriented themselves. The changes put a new emphasis on being able to understand one's environment not from personal, gradually acquired knowledge, but from rapid assessments of external appearance, including the face. A number of arts and practices developed that exploited what Benjamin, borrowing from the early sociologist Georg Simmel, described as a new "preponderance of the activity of the eye."[34] Benjamin was interested in the "physiologie," a popular, semi-journalistic expression of the trend, one that took physiognomical principles and applied them to a phenomenon or group – related genres included the "portrait," the *croquis* (or "sketch"), and the *physionomie* itself. As Benjamin writes:

> The physiologies assured people that everyone was, unencumbered by any factual knowledge, able to make out the profession, the character, the background, and the life-style of passers-by. In these writings this ability appears as a gift which a good fairy bestows upon an inhabitant of a big city at birth. With such certainties Balzac, more than anyone, was in his element . . . [Alfred] Delvau, Baudelaire's [journalist] friend and the

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> most interesting among the minor masters of the *feuilleton*, claimed that he could divide the Parisian public according to its various strata as easily as a geologist distinguishes the layers in rocks. If that sort of thing could be done, then, to be sure, life in the big city was not nearly so disquieting as it probably seemed to people. Then [this] question from Baudelaire [was] just [an] empty phrase: "What are the dangers of the forest and the prairie compared with the daily shocks and conflicts of civilization?"[35]

By the last decades of the nineteenth century the craze for the *physiologie–physionomie* had died down and the science had begun to be discredited, though developments in photography in the second half of the century continued to be informed by it.[36] But if by the 1870s physiognomy was no longer all the rage, and indeed a new kind of visuality was on the ascendance, one that was centered less on knowledge and individuality than on the spectacular and the erotic, the language and ideas associated with the pseudo-science remained as a point of reference. They did so above all when it came to thinking about physicality, physical appearance, and physical expression. This was partly inevitable, for late nineteenth-century journalists and other writers on opera drew on the same traditions and language in which the vogue for physiognomy had first flourished. As has often been noted, when French music criticism emerged around 1800 it was not at first dominated by specialists, but by a mix of often unspecialized, "dilettante" writers.[37] By the 1870s a more musically trained body of writers had emerged, but they remained accompanied by an arguably even more significant non-specialist group that had grown up to provide the increasing numbers of accounts of opera required by an ever-expanding press.[38] These "new" dilettantes paid a good deal of attention to singers and performance, and they did so partly by drawing on the kind of generalized journalistic language of which the word physiognomy was by now a conventional part. But if the word itself had become conventional, its recurrence in late nineteenth-century descriptions of singers reflects something newly urgent and important: a style of "not singing" that can be related to the changes that Verdi and others had urged at mid-century but in which the voice and operatic expression were becoming even more defined by words and physicality.

3

I will be uncovering and exploring what I will be calling "physiognomic" singing throughout this book, but it is worth here giving a basic summary. If Verdi had called for a style of performance that almost certainly did not require "declamation" and "acting" (the words he used in reference to *Macbeth*) in a literal sense, but rather a clear and at times heightened diction, an immediacy and even "nervous charge" in the delivery of the melodic line, and an awareness of the expressive potential of the body, including certain basic actorly maneuvers, by the 1870s we have something closer to what a twenty-first-century listener might understand by a formulation such as "not

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singing."[39] This seems to have included an even more text-oriented approach to melody, in which the energy and immediacies of mid-century have been replaced by an overall vocal restraint and a prioritizing of diction and textual expression over the melodic line. In certain cases that line seems actually to have been altered, with the addition of what journalists describe as "spoken effects" ("des effects . . . [de] déclamation parlée" or simply "le parlé"). Physically and histrionically, the goal seems to have been not simply to be aware of certain basic actorly maneuvers, but to engage in a thoroughgoing way with acting and the expressive potential of the body. The point of reference now, though, was no longer the large, relatively conventional gestures of Romantic acting, but new "realist" and even "naturalist" approaches to acting.

More generally, singers in this period began to look with increasing regularity beyond the stage, to what I will be calling the "extra-vocal." They became interested in other arts: painting, costuming, spoken theater. Some designed their own costumes, others sought inspiration from actors, others became involved in the staging of the works in which they appeared. A small number, including Maurel even in the brief note with which I began, put their ideas on paper. In the history of theater, it has become customary to see the late nineteenth century as the period of the emergence of the director in the modern sense: powerful, creative figures who gave shape and a new, semi-autonomous status to a work's staging.[40] Although the opera director is not usually thought to have emerged until later, among the physiognomic generation there seems to have been a related development: singers who became so interested and involved in staging and production that their activities resemble those of proto-opera directors.[41] Others became involved in an even more forward-looking development, interacting in at times creative ways with the era's media. These include the large and powerful Parisian press and the still emerging medium of photography.

As this summary suggests, what I will be exploring is an aesthetic in which the emphasis has shifted from the grandiose to the detailed, from convention to individuality, and from vocal to more visual values – an aesthetic that has been observed in other nineteenth-century (performing and other) arts and identified using a variety of "isms," the most important among them "realism." I explore some interactions among realism, the later and related aesthetic and movement of naturalism, and singing and performance in Chapters 1 and 2. However, in general I will be using terms such as "not singing" and "physiognomic" in order to emphasize the very specific set of circumstances and subcategory of performance that I am dealing with. This seems important when those circumstances and that subcategory include a phenomenon as underdefined, complex, and yet prone to cliché as opera and acting. The clichés include the idea that opera singers do not – or cannot – act, that they do not *need* to because they act with their voices, or that, when they do, they do so only at the expense of, or in order to attract attention away from, problems with their vocal performance.[42] There is also a historical cliché, that singers only begin to care about