

## Introduction

In Italy, a woman who writes for the public is a strange thing. I will therefore make myself courageous in the silence of all, and I will speak of things that interest all Italian women: I mean Rossini and his music. I do not seek praise, nor am I ambitious for some prize; I write for the truth, I want to verify some facts that have been bizarrely expounded, or believed with excessive ease; and if I cannot cite other authors, and refer as all scholars do to the music of the Greeks and Egyptians, I will speak of modern operas, and I too will say things that might deserve some attention.<sup>1</sup>

nevertheless determined to venture into this other dimension: 'I too will say things that might deserve some attention'. In contrast, the voices of other female singers only occasionally found their way into published material until much later in the century, although some, as we shall see, have survived through letters, diaries and other documents.

The term 'female singer' suggests a whole range of personages: a working-class schoolgirl, a society *dilettante*, a middle-class student at a conservatoire, a member of an operatic chorus, a struggling *seconda donna*, or a *prima donna assoluta*. All these manifestations of the singer make their appearance, albeit fleetingly, within the following pages. But the focus of the book is on the singer who aspired to become a *prima donna*.

These words begin another book: Geltrude Maria Giorgi Righetti's brief but passionate defence of Rossini, written in 1823. It is a remarkable document, not so much for what it says about Rossini, but because it represented a rare attempt by a female singer to intervene in the public discourses surrounding opera, to extend the voice that was welcomed and applauded on the lyric stage into another, potentially far more hostile arena. Conscious of the singularity of her stance as both woman and singer, Giorgi Righetti was

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From a certain perspective, the prima donna is hardly a shadowy or indistinct figure in the panorama of opera history. Since her first entrance onto the operatic stage some four centuries ago, she has been eulogised in sonnets and debased in pornography, acclaimed by enthusiasts and castigated by critics, mocked in satires and immortalised as a goddess. And her life story – particularly if her name was Malibran or Callas – has been told and retold, in material ranging from cartoons to scurrilous memoirs to (more occasionally) scholarly monographs. Nevertheless, almost all such material, whether in the form of individual biographies or more general accounts, tends to be concerned with a single and somewhat limited question: the phenomenon of a particular singer's fascination and artistry. The most notable exception to this approach is John Rosselli's authoritative *Singers of Italian Opera: the History of a Profession* (1992), with its focus on social history and the economics of the operatic marketplace.

My emphasis in this book, although indebted both to Rosselli's work and much of the material mentioned above, is rather different. It is concerned firstly not so much with one solitary 'prima donna' as with *prime donne*: a group of working artists, some of whom might have been famous but more often were relatively unknown and are now long forgotten. It also attempts to locate these singers within a broader history: one which includes not only the specificities of operatic stage practice but the life beyond the opera house – the social, cultural and political framing that shaped individual experience, artistic endeavour and audience reception. And within the opera house, its primary focus is that 'mid-point of intersubjectivity' between stage and auditorium that Attilio Favorini advises as the most fruitful investigative site of the theatrical event.<sup>2</sup> Above all, I am interested in the degree to which the experiences of these singers (and especially the way in which those experiences have been recorded or interpreted) depended on issues of gender.

But this book does not claim to be a history of female singers *per se*: it is more precisely a history of the discourses surrounding them, and the ways in which such discourses articulated various

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aspects of their history. Three discrete but contiguous areas are considered: the idea of the singer and the female voice, the actual experience of real singers, and the collision/collusion between the singer and the representation of women in opera. I accordingly employ aspects of literary criticism, social and cultural history, dramaturgical and musical analysis to investigate the meaning of the prima donna and meanings constructed by the prima donna (both on and off the operatic stage).<sup>3</sup> My range is necessarily wide in both historical and geographical terms, based on a period (1815–1930) encompassing three important histories: of the operatic stage, of the female singer, and of women in general.

First, this era is often regarded as opera's 'golden age'. One of the richest in operatic history, it was characterised by both an exceptional stylistic diversity of composition and a growth in the number and type of venues where opera was performed, building a global audience and creating opportunities for singers, composers and impresarios alike. I do not mean to suggest that the development of the operatic marketplace during this time was one of steady, sustained growth – on the contrary, it fluctuated according to the vagaries of local economies and political circumstances. Italy, for example, suffered at least three major periods of instability: during the 1820s, when the gaming licences issued to many opera houses were rescinded; in the 1860s and 1870s following unification, when the financial management of those theatres (particularly in Turin, Milan, Parma and Naples) previously controlled by either court rule or the Austrian government passed to the new Italian state, resulting in smaller budgets and economic restrictions; and again in the late 1890s, when the left-wing government withdrew funding from a number of theatres, with the consequent closure of La Scala for almost two years.<sup>4</sup> Similar episodes of upheaval or stagnation can be found in virtually every other country during the period. Nevertheless, opera as a whole continued to prosper on the world stage, finding a seemingly never-ending supply of new audiences and new practitioners and reaching a peak of activity in the years just preceding the First World War.<sup>5</sup> Only in the 1920s did this productivity

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finally decline, when the depressed world economy brought opera houses under severe financial pressures, the wages of singers were cut substantially, and the already faltering production of new operatic works decreased sharply. By 1930 the 'golden age' had ended.

The years 1815–1930 are also significant as the period in which the prima donna came to dominate the operatic stage, assuming the position held by the castrati in the previous century. Bans imposed by various popes since opera's inception in 1597 had ensured that women's access to the stage had been only partial, limited either to countries or states of Protestant denomination or to those (such as Venice) where theatrical practice took precedence over Catholic condemnation. In 1798, the new Roman republic not only rescinded these bans, but also dispensed with the prima donna's main competitor by outlawing the training schools of the castrati, by then seen less as the epitome of artistry and more as the victims of a barbarous tradition. Women henceforth became the focus of most operatic works, and the most significant element at the box office. Their new prominence did not, however, remain unchallenged for long. The development of the tenor voice from the light, flexible timbre of early singers such as Adolphe Nourrit and Giovanni Battista Rubini into the more dramatic instrument capable of sustaining thrilling high Bs and Cs in the *voce di petto* (supposedly first exemplified by Gilbert-Louis Duprez)<sup>6</sup> found increasing favour with the audience; by the 1890s tenors such as Jean de Reszke, Enrico Caruso and Beniamino Gigli were as popular as their female colleagues, if not more so. Other factors affected the prima donna's status towards the end of this era. By 1931, Ernest Newman was claiming that the diva was no more: 'In these days we may admire our singers but we do not worship them; for a journalist even to speak of a soprano as a *diva* is to raise a smile.' He cited several reasons: the age was an 'unromantic' one, singers were 'too plentiful', and besides, there were now so many other female 'stars' from film and sport that competed with the prima donna in the public gaze. Above all, new methods of marketing and publicity had destroyed the mystique enjoyed by former singers:

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The Press Agent and the gossipy journalist, without intending it, have made the singer a trifle ridiculous; the plain man finds it hard to take people seriously about whom so much vulgar nonsense is talked . . . The modern prima donna, for commercial reasons, has come down into the crowd; and too close contact with the crowd has meant the loss of a good deal of the crowd's respect for her.<sup>7</sup>

Newman's complaints are of course typical of the laments made throughout operatic history that singers of a previous era were more accomplished and glamorous than their modern successors. Nevertheless, he was accurate in his assessment: by the 1930s the prima donna's prominence as a unique (or almost) symbol of female endeavour had begun to decline, at least in the eyes of the wider public.<sup>8</sup>

As Newman implied, the cycle of the prima donna's success also coincides with an important era in women's social, cultural and political history. This history is now well known, thanks to the efforts of writers such as Simone de Beauvoir *et al.*,<sup>9</sup> and need not be repeated at length here. Suffice it to say that the dominant society's preferred image of womanhood was that of the 'feminine ideal' – a concept elucidated most influentially by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in 1762<sup>10</sup> and adopted with enthusiasm by the newly established bourgeoisie of western society during the following century. The precise configuration of the feminine ideal varied in detail according to different cultures (thus, North American women were often regarded as more outspoken than their European counterparts, whilst even relatively early in the period German women were permitted to attend functions and walk outside unaccompanied by a male companion),<sup>11</sup> but the essence of this image remained the same – woman's duty was to please man, not herself, and her proper place was in the home. This concept, as Peter Gay records, was repeated indiscriminately throughout western society, and was inviolable: "To agitate for the emancipation of women from these sacred tasks was to offend against the laws of God and man."<sup>12</sup>

Nonetheless, many women (and some men) prepared to make themselves offensive in the cause of emancipation, for whilst this era

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implemented some of the harshest repressions of women hitherto experienced, it also witnessed the most concerted and determined effort by women to overcome such obstacles and gain freedom and equality. Mary Wollstonecraft had begun the protesting in her *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), and from the 1850s onwards suffrage movements were visible in nearly all the Western countries, most particularly in Britain, the USA and Scandinavia. The feminine ideal or the 'Angel in the House' (as Coventry Patmore dubbed her in 1854)<sup>13</sup> was increasingly challenged by other, more vigorous images, such as the doyenne of apocalyptic feminism, the 'Female Saviour', in the 1850s and 1860s, and the rationally dressed, politically aware 'New Woman' of the 1890s.<sup>14</sup> Even more influential, perhaps, was the vision of numerous real women seeking entry to male bastions such as the universities, medicine and law.

Emboldened by such displays of defiance, more and more women demanded enfranchisement, although their efforts across the international spectrum met with mixed fortunes. By the outbreak of the First World War, the only countries that had awarded universal suffrage to women were New Zealand, Finland and Norway, along with most of Australia and a handful of American states. During the war, Denmark, Russia and Iceland followed suit, to be joined in the 1920s by Germany, Austria, Netherlands, Czechoslovakia, the USA, Hungary, Poland, Sweden – and, finally, Great Britain in 1928. But there were some important exceptions. France, Belgium and Italy only awarded the vote to women after the Second World War, primarily because of the strong Catholic opposition. This religious dimension not only encouraged right-wing politicians in their more traditional view of women, but also led anti-clerical liberal politicians to believe that women's own allegiance to the Catholic church would result in a massively conservative vote if they were granted suffrage.<sup>15</sup> In Italy, a further factor was the growth of fascism: many feminist groups at first supported Mussolini, only to be rewarded with repression (as was the case with the *Unione femminile nazionale*) or even forcible dissolution (like the *Associazione per la donna* in 1925)<sup>16</sup> – a fate that awaited other feminists in

Germany, Austria and Spain. Thus the energy the women's movement had demonstrated during the first two decades of the twentieth century seeped away, either because winning the vote left the feminists uncertain of their future goals and divided amongst themselves, or because other factors (such as fascism or Catholicism) determined a rigorous return to anti-feminist values.<sup>17</sup> By the 1930s, this first great concerted effort of international feminism had reached a close.<sup>18</sup>

Geographically, this book revolves around the most common international circuit travelled by opera singers of that time: Europe, Britain and the Americas. (Of course, some singers, such as Anna Bishop, went much farther afield; others, such as Rosa Ponselle, travelled hardly at all.) Whilst for the purposes of historical investigation the perimeters of this circuit may seem extended, they are largely determined by the international nature of the operatic experience and the nomadic existence of many artists. About half the singers considered here are from Britain, North America and Australia; the other half are European. Snobbery and an innate belief that the best singers were foreign often ensured that the artists employed in Britain or America (North and South) were European, whilst the greater employment opportunities on the continent attracted large numbers of British and American singers. I have attempted to explore something of both groups, although as European singers have received more significant scholarly attention of late, my emphasis has been rather more towards the experiences of British, American and Australasian singers at home and abroad. My research has tended therefore to follow the singer on her travels through various countries, rather than concentrate on one particular area. There are inevitable omissions owing to lack of space; even more owing to lack of evidence.

With regard to both historical and geographical matters, however, the coverage here is by no means equal in all chapters. Some of this partiality is to do with focus: Chapters 3 and 4 centre on the increasing move of women from non-professional backgrounds into operatic careers, and therefore concentrate on the period 1850–1930;

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Chapters 5 to 7, detailing practices within the opera house, are more evenly spread across 1815 to 1930. Other instances of limited coverage are a result of the availability of evidence. Material pertaining directly to the experiences of singers is often fragmentary in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Whilst singers figure frequently as subjects for reviews within the music periodicals throughout the period, they were rarely interviewed directly until the *fin-de-siècle*; equally, few women singers wrote autobiographies before the 1880s. And when they did so, the market for such literature was found primarily within the United States and Britain (Rosselli comments that ‘biographies and memoirs’ were a genre ‘thought little of in Italy’);<sup>19</sup> thus, most of the autobiographical sources consulted here, even when describing the experiences of mainland European singers such as Ernestine Schumann-Heink or Emma Calvé, were published in English. For this and other reasons there is a noticeable absence of the singers’ own voices in the early part of the period, in contrast to the full flourishing of the publicity machine from the end of the century onwards.

The breadth of the historical and geographical areas covered undoubtedly invites criticisms. Similar problems were faced by historians Bonnie S. Anderson and Judith P. Zinsser in their series *A History of Their Own: Women in Europe from Prehistory to the Present* (1988). They argued that, in a world which has viewed women as ‘a separate category of being’, the similarities of gendered experience were more significant than ‘differences of historical era, class and nationality’.<sup>20</sup> With respect to the present study, this is not to imply that substantial differences did not exist between, say, the experiences of Angelica Catalani (soprano, Italian, prima donna *assoluta* of international renown) at the beginning of the period, and those of Kathleen Howard (mezzo-soprano, American, middle-rank singer) towards the end. Nor is it to deny that many experiences of professional life were shared by male singers. On the contrary, this book explores various topics that were of equal importance to *both* genders: or rather, that were common to the enterprise of becoming and sustaining a career as a singer. Nevertheless, a number of themes



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connected directly to issues of gender recur with regularity and subtle variation in the history of opera. This study, without claiming to be either exhaustive or definitive, seeks to address some of these questions, and to establish a broad base from which other, more detailed investigations might emerge.

#### WOMEN AND OPERA

The question of women's involvement in opera has been of late rather vexed. Catherine Clément's *L'Opéra ou la défaite des femmes*, published in 1979 at the height of feminism's forays into all aspects of culture, was an impassioned polemic on the wrongs opera has done to women. Publication in English in 1988 confirmed its status as a provocative feminist exposé, and Clément's findings have been cited and supported by a number of scholars. Others, however, including Ellen Rosand, Katherine Bergeron, Anthony Arblaster, Paul Robinson, Ralph P. Locke, Mary Ann Smart and Carolyn Abbate, have pointed out the narrowness of Clément's ahistorical stance and emphasis on literary narrative, arguing above all on the primacy of music as the real source of gender delineation in opera.<sup>21</sup> It seems superfluous to add anything more to these weighty voices (especially to the elegant, lucid analyses of Rosand and Abbate); but in the present context, it is worth sketching in briefly some of the messier details Clément forgets in her retelling of opera's narrative in western society.

Clément undoubtedly made us think again about the portrayal of women in opera. But the sharpness of her focus on the single aspect of victimisation – the heroine's 'undoing' through either death or domestication – blurs our perspective of the broader panorama of operatic history. The most limiting dimension of her polemic is the implication of *intent* – that opera was merely 'a great masculine scheme surrounding a spectacle thought up to adore, and also to kill, the feminine character'.<sup>22</sup> It is difficult to imagine that a similarly sweeping statement made about 'theatre' or 'literature' or 'art' or 'music' would have exerted such sway in scholarly writing – there, at

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least, is a recognition that such artforms include a vast array of different works across centuries, and in consequence reflect multiple aspects of female representation. The notion that ‘opera’ can somehow be reduced to a clutch of compositions – and those only drawn from the tragic repertoire – is a glum misreading of the actual operatic experience for both the nineteenth-century artist and spectator.

A cluster of factors need consideration if we are to appreciate more fully the complexities of women’s position in opera of this period. Certainly, opera was as tightly woven into the fabric of social customs as other cultural manifestations, and as equally subject to the dominant themes that pervaded artistic reflection. And Clément is right to identify its provenance as essentially masculine. Only a handful of women composers and librettists found their way into operatic composition; of those, even fewer successfully achieved public performance in elite opera houses (Louise Bertin and Ethel Smyth are perhaps the most notable exceptions in this era).<sup>23</sup> But this does not mean that all male composers were necessarily ignorant of the political issues of the Woman Question, or indeed opposed to change. Wagner’s final essay, ‘On the Feminine in the Human’, advocated female emancipation, arguing that woman was a ‘victim of power structures determined according to masculine principles and reproduction’ (he died before completing it);<sup>24</sup> Alexander Borodin openly supported the movement for women’s rights in Russia;<sup>25</sup> partial claims for developing more progressive images of women might be made for a host of other composers, including Rossini, Donizetti, Verdi, Tchaikovsky, Giordano, Strauss, Dukas and Janáček, to name but a few. Nor can we lay all the responsibility for the kinds of roles created for women on the shoulders of the composers. A letter by Donizetti, written in 1842 about his composition of *Le Duc d’Albe* for the mezzo-soprano Rosine Stoltz, reveals an almost modern understanding of the limitations of certain kinds of female representation:

I too am of the opinion that there are some changes to make in the *Duca d’Alba*: the conspiracy less dominant, the love interest warmer. For the