

INTRODUCTION: A LIVING TRADITION

'She is a singer, and therefore capable of anything.'¹ So Bellini complained. Opera, which brings to bear all at once the resources of drama, music, and spectacle, makes its performers seem larger than life. Caricatures show them as large of body: monstrously tall (the castrati of eighteenth-century heroic opera) or alarmingly fat (the tenors and sopranos of the 'palmy' days about 1900). They also strike the imagination as morally outsize: vain, extravagant, demanding. Book titles apply the word 'great' not just to the singers but to the disasters they incurred.

The best opera singers have always been stars; some of their admirers have been as obsessed as Beatle fans. In 1668, only two or three generations after the coming of opera, a Roman noblewoman ran away to become a hermit, like the heroine of the opera she had witnessed in the previous carnival season – a singer who renounced the world and became a saint; the noblewoman was found wearing men's clothes, a common operatic disguise. Over a century later, in 1787, some high-born Milanese ladies founded an order in honour of the castrato Luigi Marchesi, its insignia a ribbon bearing the initials LM; you wore it round the waist.²

By the 1840s, when the rising young composer was Verdi, one of his leading interpreters was the soprano Erminia Frezzolini. Her father, himself a singer, bought a house in her native town of Orvieto; over the door he set a sculpture showing the Genius of Music tracing the word 'Erminia'; atop the living-room walls ran a frieze of seventeen crowns, each bearing the name of an Italian town where Erminia had triumphed, while in the middle of each wall stood the names London, Madrid, Vienna, and Petersburg, and the ceiling bore a sun illuminating a number of capital Es.³ Compared with this, a San Francisco cigar named after Luisa Tetrazzini (like the more familiar chicken) might seem an anticlimax, if cigars did not share with opera two important connotations – luxury and sex.⁴ That was in 1905; the erotic waves made by the recorded voice of Maria Callas are still all about us.

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Yet alongside the stream of adulation ran continual abuse. Pierleone Ghezzi, an early eighteenth-century artist based in Rome, left several volumes of caricatures in which he anatomized the contemporary Roman world, with detailed handwritten captions. Singers figure largely, interspersed with priests, buffoons, a mad Spanish beggar, an incompetent poet (his nose eaten away by syphilis), a thieving prostitute being flogged through the city on donkey back. About singers Ghezzi rarely has anything good to say; it comes as a surprise when he calls the castrato Gioseppino 'a very decent young man, quite the opposite of the general run of singing rabble'.⁵

This term, 'singing [or musical] rabble' (*virtuosa canaglia*), had a career of several centuries. For a Bologna doctor, writing in 1788, it was 'mathematically demonstrated' that 'theatre people suit ill with that part of society which has decent principles'; this did not stop him from exerting himself to prepare an opera season at nearby Faenza.⁶ In the next century Verdi ironically described himself and the opera company he was working with as 'we musical rabble'; in sterner mood he, like Bellini and Donizetti, professed repugnance for the world of opera, which his wife (a famous singer in her youth) called 'that stinking swamp'. The 'tribe' of singers, an impresario complained, 'is a horrible thing which has poisoned my existence; it's enough to drive one mad'.⁷

A curious opening, one might think, to a study of all the people who have sung in Italian opera from the date when it is conventionally said to begin, 1600, to the present. The book that follows deals not just with stars but with the development and behaviour of the profession as a whole.

The high colour most people have seen in the story cannot be denied: it glares at us from opera itself, an outsize, multi-media entertainment. In that story great singers have always been important; some have been larger than the common run, literally and figuratively. Anecdotes about them – the stuff of earlier books – have their place. But that place is in a connected and reasoned account of a group of working people as they move through time and within a society – as they launch out on their careers, pursue them, end them, and give way to others. What often look like bizarre puppets – vain, extravagant, demanding – will, we may hope, be recognized as human beings at grips with the changing demands of everyday life, their behaviour not always to be admired, but explicable in its time and place.

Although the subject of this book is an entire profession, there is in practice no such observable group of people. Who was or was not an opera singer? A member of a church choir who sang in occasional opera seasons nearby, a young woman who made a disastrous debut and one or two more appearances before vanishing into marriage, a performer once successful who

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Excerpt

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came out of retirement to help out a season in a tiny town – are they to be included? Many elude our knowledge altogether. Hence the impossibility of feeding singers into a computer.

Yet there was a profession, increasingly defined in the course of the seventeenth century and then talked about as a matter of routine. We can study singers of Italian opera collectively even though we cannot identify or number them all, just as we can study bandits, witches, merchants, or housewives.

Most have been Italians. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and for part of the nineteenth, Italy – a deindustrialized country – joined deep poverty and overpopulation with a still living heritage of craftsmanship, all the way from artisan competence to artistic virtuosity, and this in nearly all fields.

That Italy was poor by any European standard was attested by many travellers' accounts of grass-grown streets, crumbling palaces, ragged peasants in the country, swarms of beggars in the towns. That it was supreme in arts and crafts was shown in the most practical way: patrons throughout Europe and America readily engaged Italians to sculpt, paint, write, build, decorate, cook, bake, dance, compose, play instruments, and sing, and to teach these accomplishments to their own children and dependents. Italians therefore went everywhere, as mostly seasonal migrants, long before the great intercontinental movement of people with low skills that marked the period from 1848 to 1914. We will follow Italian singers to London, Petersburg, Buenos Aires, and other places, noting how they coped with varying local circumstances while remaining for the most part impermeable to the local languages and artistic influences. Even on the Russian steppe or in Wichita, Kansas, they were Italian, and that, for a couple of centuries, was enough.

Singers of Italian opera, however, from near the start included non-Italians. Most of them went to Italy to study; some stayed on to make a debut or a career; others did so after having studied with an Italian or Italian-trained teacher in their own country; a few, like certain Russians of the early nineteenth century, were trained parrot fashion to become Italian singers without ever leaving their own home ground.⁸ In the past hundred years or so the settled Italian immigrant communities in the Americas have produced singers who identified themselves with Italian opera: Rosa Ponzillo from Meriden, Connecticut, was no less a singer of Italian opera under her stage name of Ponselle than if she had been born in her father's Caserta; there have been many others less famous.

So far I have talked about Italy as a society. Yet there was no such political

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unit as Italy until 1860; Napoleon's kingdom of that name was a mere sliver. Even after the country was unified, one of its early prime ministers famously declared that the task was now to make Italians. Something like a homogeneous Italian people, most of them speaking the same language and watching the same television programmes, has come about only with the far-reaching industrialization of the past thirty-odd years; even now well-known differences remain between north and south, to go no further.

Yet for purposes of opera there was such a place as Italy even in the earliest years. It did not coincide exactly with the Italian boot. The heartland where opera grew up and flourished was a rough triangle between Milan, Trieste, and Rome, and the heart of the heartland was the region on either side of the river Po, between the foothills of the Alps and the Appennines: that was where opera houses were thickest on the ground; probably (there is no means of demonstrating it) more singers came from there than from any comparable region. But the Italian opera world extended further – within Italy to Turin, Naples, and the three chief towns of Sicily (Palermo, Messina, Catania); outside it to Vienna and Madrid (the capitals of empires which for centuries included parts of Italy), and to places like Corfu and Malta that likewise shared in an Italian culture antedating the modern nation state.

The culture of which opera was a part was bound up with the courts and aristocracies of the old Italian states – between nine and twelve of them at most times, the exact number depending on the flux of diplomacy and war. It was an urban culture, based on the Italian language – a literary construct which people of any education could understand even though they used dialect in their everyday speech. It was conservative and slow to change, based as Italian society largely was on agriculture, on the family as the enduring unit of cooperation and enterprise, and on the everyday practice of the Roman Catholic Church.

A living tradition, adapted piecemeal to changing circumstances, is supposed to be characteristic of British society. It was, until recently, still more characteristic of Italian society, where nothing like so much fuss was made of it (and where the rhetoric used by many of the politically active from the mid eighteenth century was one of radical change).

Opera itself evolved gradually out of earlier forms. No one any longer sees it as the brainchild of a small group of Florentine intellectuals who thought they were recreating ancient Greek drama. Theirs was only one among several strands that went to make up the early *opera in musica* – literally 'musical work'. Others were lavish interludes sung and danced between the acts of plays given on great occasions at court, the semi-improvised plays with songs called *commedia dell'arte*, the new vogue for dramatic utterance

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by a lone singing voice in place of polyphony, and the further vogue for pastoral.⁹

The new form can be seen emerging from older ones in the earliest opera still current today, Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* (1607), where the first two acts run to decorative madrigal singing. But by the same composer's *Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria* (1640) the single voice poignantly used to dramatic purpose, already heard when the Messenger announces to Orfeo the death of Euridice, has become the standard mode of utterance.

Il ritorno d'Ulisse was first performed in one of the public opera houses of Venice; the first of these had opened only three years earlier. Elsewhere at that date, for instance in Rome, an opera was still an occasional entertainment given by a great man (say the cardinal nephew to the current pope) in his own palace, to which he would invite local nobles and distinguished foreign visitors: productions were lavish and there was no question of any of the audience paying. The owners of the new Venice theatres too were noble families who used them in part to enhance their political standing, but they were also interested in making (or at any rate in not losing) money: they accordingly let their theatres by the season to impresarios who, at least in theory, took the risks, hired the singers and musicians, and stood the loss if there was one. In practice the impresario was and remained semi-dependent on the theatre owners, who would subsidize him up to a point but also control him; he served them as a buffer. This system, already in place at Venice in the mid seventeenth century, was in its essentials still how most operas were put on in Italy by the time Puccini made his way with *Manon Lescaut* in 1893. Relations among the various parties to so complex a business as opera had altered in the intervening 250 years, but gradually and without any clean break.¹⁰

This was true of a great deal else in the daily round of the singing profession. When a break did come it broke with the past twice over, so marking a deep divide.

First, at a date not easy to pin down but somewhere between 1885 and 1914, the old distinct Italian singing profession merged – except, for a time, in Italy itself – into a highly mobile international profession which is still with us. Until then there had been, all over what westerners were pleased to call the civilized world, a recognizable Italian opera staffed by people who sang little else: outside France, always resistant to its influence, it was *the* opera; in fashionable London seasons everything, down to so Germanic a work as *Der Freischütz*, went on being sung in Italian until 1887. National opera (German or Russian or Czech or even English) coexisted with it, but that was all. After the break, a singer with pretensions to an international career was more and

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more likely to bridge several schools: today, according to the veteran baritone Gino Bechi, it is all but impossible even in Italy to put on at the same time two equally good *Rigolettos* with Italian singers alone.¹¹

Secondly, hard on the heels of this change came the downfall of opera in the theatre as a popular entertainment: it was supplanted, in Italy as elsewhere, by the cinema, later by radio and television. Broadcasting and gramophone records, on the other hand, meant the diffusion of opera (and of singers' reputations) by new means. Taken together, these changes blurred still further the outlines of a distinct Italian profession.

To cope with a story of slow development giving way to rapid change, the book is organized as follows. Four chapters, arranged in broadly chronological order, deal with the growth of the singing profession, first in its initial period of dependence on ruling princes and great nobles, and then in its working of a market, both national and international. This takes the story down to about 1850, a moment of crisis which, for reasons to be explained, marks the beginning of decline both for Italian opera and for the distinct Italian profession. Three chapters then look at aspects of singers' professional lives throughout the period so far covered, and – where change was late in coming – somewhat beyond. Two final chapters, again chronological, pick up the story about 1850 and bring it up to the present, in less detail as the strictly Italian profession loses its clear shape.

Another reason for sketchier coverage of the past thirty or forty years is that in this recent period documentation becomes harder to find. There is plenty of gossip, but little of the written evidence on which the book as a whole rests – memoirs (depended upon only gingerly), letters, official records, above all contracts and other legal documents, where people may be found setting down facts, decisions, or opinions to get something done rather than to impress the public or posterity.

Oral history – based on the spoken recollections of people who took part in the events studied – can be illuminating. But in opera it is of doubtful value. Opera singers move about a great deal; they and the partners they deal with engage in many similar transactions which are easily confused (did such and such an incident take place in Dallas, or was it in Rio? Did X demand £1,500, or only £1,000?) All this quite apart from the pressures of publicity and the demands of self-esteem that may lead memories to distort, perhaps unconsciously. Though I have interviewed a few people, both among singers and in opera management, I have in the main relied on the historian's normal methods. Written evidence has its pitfalls, but, as those will know who have turned up their own thirty-year-old letters, it keeps its healthy capacity to surprise.

I

MUSICIANS ATTENDING

'Opera singer', entered in one's passport under 'occupation', will not surprise frontier officials today. It is a recognized profession. But there was no such profession when opera emerged as a new entertainment about 1600, or when the first public opera house opened in Venice in 1637, or for three or four decades after that: operas were too few to demand most of anyone's time.

In the early seventeenth century not even 'singer' was as yet a clearly defined trade. Many singers played instruments: some accompanied themselves (and some composed their own music), while others switched between singing and playing. The commonest Italian term for them all was *musicci*: they were what was meant by the first stage direction in *Twelfth Night*, 'Enter Duke, Curio, lords, musicians attending.'

Barbara Strozzi, for instance, limited herself to composing and singing her own music to her father's friends at his home in Venice – they and he were members of a sort of literary club, at once learned and freethinking; she never appeared on the stage, though her father wrote the words of one of the most successful of early operas. Giulio Caccini was famous as singer and lutenist; he composed his own music, which was seen as new because of the prominence it gave the single voice, and he wrote one of the first operas; his daughters too sang and composed. Others who figured in early opera were members of the choirs attached to great men's chapels; others again were actors or actresses who could sing, like Virginia Andreini, drafted in an emergency to create the title part in Monteverdi's *Arianna* of 1608.¹

What the early singers of opera had in common was their dependence on patrons of the highest social status. Among these were sovereign princes, chiefly the rulers of the many Italian and German states, but also free-floating royals like Queen Christina of Sweden after her abdication, when she settled in Rome. Others were the aristocrats who controlled the opera houses of republican Venice and Genoa, and the cardinals and other leading members of noble Roman families (most of them related to a present or recent pope) who put on occasional operas in their town houses: early in the next century

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the young Handel was to work for both kinds, first for a Roman prince, then for a theatre owned by a Venetian noble family. These were not unlike rulers in their wealth and pretensions. A few lesser nobles could influence singers' fortunes because of their official position or their social ties.

What made singers dependent on such patrons was the character of opera through most of the seventeenth century, a spectacular mixed genre that demanded great resources, had originated in courts, and served as 'a public demonstration and representation of authority'.² But opera was born into a time of scarce resources: its rise coincided with a deep and long-lasting economic crisis that particularly damaged Southern Europe. Italian industries lost much of their share in international trade; though historians have tended to lighten the unrelieved dark picture they formerly painted of industrial decay within Italy, especially in a privileged capital city such as Venice, there is no doubt that families once active in trade came to depend more on the produce of their landed estates; in nearly all things, territorially based nobles took the lead. This meant that even public theatres with a semi-commercial form of production had to be controlled by families that supplied doges and cardinals.

To understand the social world in which opera developed from 1600 we should look at a few court singers who were active about that time, some of whom never sang in the new genre. The court of Ferrara in the 1580s was celebrated for its musicians. The best of them, for example the three singers who made up the original, celebrated 'concert of ladies', performed 'secret music' of a refinement intended for the ears only of the ruler and a chosen few. They and their successors came for the most part from the families of prominent artists or merchants, though one at least was the daughter of a minor noble. But at court they were not just performers: they were expected to make 'agreeable conversation' as well as music, and to behave like ladies and gentlemen.³

For musicians like these, working for a court posed special problems. A ruler interested in music (from whatever motive) provided an opportunity for those musically gifted to advance themselves as courtiers; but the more prominent and regular their musical performances, the more they needed to establish and maintain their courtly credentials.

This was far from easy. Everyone at court was in theory the ruler's servant: the greatest noble might have the privilege of handing him his nightshirt. On the other hand the ruling ideology, most famously expounded in Baldassarre Castiglione's *Il libro del cortegiano* (*The Courtier*), placed high value on noble birth, as well as on accomplishments that ought to seem effortless, that is, non-professional. In a hierarchical-minded age, the ruler's servants spent

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much time asserting their precedence over others and cultivating a code of honour. Then the late sixteenth-century fashion for a new kind of virtuoso music, designed to bring out individual voices and to be appreciated by an audience, left the soloist exposed: performing in public, especially if you were a woman, might carry unwanted associations of the fairground or the courtesan's dwelling. You also needed to master the language of intimate court exchanges, a blend of high-flown compliment and teasing: it was conventional and must not be taken literally.

All this helps to explain why some well-known singers in these years behaved as they did – why they were keen to achieve noble status, to uphold it if they already had any semblance of it, and to be seen to be patronized by the great, as far as possible on equal terms. To attain any of these ends was worth a good deal of verbal self-abasement.

Giulio Cesare Brancaccio, the star bass singer at the Ferrara court around 1580, was an impoverished noble, conscious of his 'servile' position as a salaried artist and eager to show himself a soldier and courtier. In this he was little different from the first Orfeo in Monteverdi's opera of 1607, the tenor Francesco Rasi, likewise the son of a noble family that had come down in the world: Rasi did his best to have himself treated as a nobleman by the court of Mantua, or at least authorized to eat with the chamberlains rather than with the musicians; the ruler, he pointed out, had once let him take a horse from the ducal stable.

Rasi was not mistaken in seeing court service as a path to noble or other high status. A court was an inward-looking world where to be around, to give satisfaction, and to avoid offence could make the fortune even of the relatively humbly born. The three original ladies of Ferrara all married courtiers; one was murdered by her jealous husband, but that too was a hazard of sixteenth-century court life.⁴

A musician might serve the ruler in non-musical ways. Giulio Caccini was recommended to the court of Modena in 1588 as a possible superintendent of gardens and a dab hand at rearing citrus trees: 'he has excellent handwriting as well, and is apt for every kind of service'. The debutant singer Angela Zanibelli, daughter and niece of Ferrara court singers, was serving as a weaver or embroideress in the household of the city's virtual ruler, Marquis Enzo Bentivoglio, while being trained to read music and to sing; she was lent out to the Duke of Mantua in 1607 for performances of Marco da Gagliano's opera *Dafne* and other works.⁵

This kind of all-purpose service lasted longer in German than in Italian courts, no doubt because in Germany Italian musicians remained for many years a luxury found chiefly in court establishments. Between 1650 and 1692

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several castrati gave the Electors of Saxony non-musical service, one as historian-propagandist, another as inspector of the pheasant runs and the lesser chase, a third as steward of the Electress Dowager's household, yet another as a purchasing agent; the last two were ennobled. This kind of post meant immersing oneself in every aspect of a court life where (in 1665) wolf-baiting in the castle yard was followed that evening by a pastoral dance. It also meant security for one's declining years (within limits) and prestige of a kind not to be got by music alone: Clementino, another famous castrato, let it be known in 1689 that he was serving the Elector of Bavaria 'in a capacity other than that of *musicò*, and that if he sings now and then he does so as a pastime, not professionally'.⁶

Just how important the right standing at court could be to a singer – especially to a woman – may be seen from the careers of Adriana Basile and her daughter Leonora Baroni.

Adriana, already famous in her own city of Naples, agreed in 1610 to serve Duke Vincenzo of Mantua (strictly speaking, his wife and daughter-in-law) at his court. Some three months' complex, at times ill-tempered correspondence ensued before Adriana, her husband, and her brother set out for Mantua. The business turned on a provision in the original agreement (reached through an intermediary) that the Duchess and her daughter-in-law would write to the Vicereine of Naples asking her to order Adriana to go: the point of this was to maintain Adriana's *reputazione* and the respect in which her family was held, and to make her 'more greatly honoured'. The Mantuan court was at first unwilling to deliver, but Adriana held out, even in the face of threats, and in the end got her way.

The issues seem to have been these. The Viceroy and Vicereine were reluctant to see Adriana leave Naples, and needed to be squared by a request from a fellow-sovereign; the Duke at first wished to avoid putting his wife's own *reputazione* on the line; Adriana expressed qualms, probably genuine, about dangers to her health from the Mantuan swamps (she had never travelled before) and to her chastity from persons unnamed, no doubt from the Duke himself: by holding out she was in effect saying 'I am no common woman singer, I am a lady and an artist of standing in *this* court, and I must be acknowledged as such in your court as well'.⁷

The lesson was well learnt by her equally famous daughter: before permitting her old friend Cardinal Mazarin to bring her to the French court Leonora insisted that the Queen Regent should invite her, and should request the cardinal who was her patron to let her go. In her retirement she was annoyed when people brought up her singing days, 'repeating a number of