This book is concerned not so much with the ‘prima donna’ as with prime donne: a group of working artists (sometimes famous but more often relatively unknown and now long forgotten) and the circumstances of their professional lives. It attempts to locate these singers within a broader history, including 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. Rutherford addresses questions such as the multiple discourses on the image of the singer and their impact on the changing profile of the professional artist from figlia dell’arte at the beginning of the era to middle-class woman at the end; the aspect of the ‘stage mother’ and patronage; issues of vocal training and tuition; professional life in the operatic market-place; and performance (both vocal and dramatic) conventions and practices.

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Volumes for Cambridge Studies in Opera explore the cultural, political and social influences of the genre. As a cultural art form, opera is not produced in a vacuum. Rather, it is influenced, whether directly or in more subtle ways, by its social and political environment. In turn, opera leaves its mark on society and contributes to shaping the cultural climate. Studies to be included in the series will look at these various relationships including the politics and economics of opera, the operatic representation of women or the singers who portrayed them, the history of opera as theatre, and the evolution of the opera house.

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The Prima Donna and Opera, 1815–1930

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