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978-0-521-88998-8 - Fashions and Legacies of Nineteenth-Century Italian Opera

Edited by Roberta Montemorra Marvin and Hilary Poriss

Excerpt

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1 | Introduction: Italian opera's fashions and legacies

HILARY PORISS

"Ban on Solo Encores at the Met? Ban, What Ban?" So read the headline of an article published in the *New York Times* on 23 April 2008 describing an unusual event.¹ On the first evening of a new production of Gaetano Donizetti's *La fille du régiment* at the Metropolitan Opera, Juan Diego Flórez – the fiery young tenor whose popular following closely resembles that of Luciano Pavarotti in his own day – sang an encore of the *cabaletta* from Tonio's "A mes amis."² Known as a "Mount Everest" for tenors because of the nine high Cs the singer must scale, this aria represents one of those spectacular operatic moments for which audiences always wait with heightened anticipation. When Flórez performed it flawlessly, "the crowd, as they say, went wild."³ Following nearly eight full minutes of applause, the cheering throngs were lavishly "rewarded" in a manner to which patrons of the Metropolitan Opera have grown decidedly unaccustomed in the twenty-first century: the tenor began the piece again, singing it just as spectacularly the second time around.

Although repetition of solo arias was once standard fare at the world's major opera houses (including the Metropolitan Opera), encores were largely banned in the 1920s and 1930s, and since then they have been few and far between. The positive reception generated by Flórez's flouting of this ban was expressed through a variety of conventional means, audience members jumping to their feet when the performance concluded, and newspapers publishing glowing reviews. But there was, as well, a decidedly *modern* flavor surrounding the reception of this event. The last time the Metropolitan Opera witnessed a solo encore by one of its stars was in 1994 when Pavarotti repeated "E lucevan le stelle" in Act III of *Tosca* – that is, just prior to the onset of the internet revolution. Flórez's encore was thus the first event of its kind to occur at the Metropolitan Opera that could be hashed over on blogs, websites devoted to operatic gossip, and listserves; a video posted to YouTube was available for those who wanted to see and hear a previously recorded version of him singing "A mes amis" (to date, that video has received well over 35,000 hits);⁴ and the *New York Times* uploaded to its website an audio recording of the encored performance, complete with rapturous applause and both renderings of the *cabaletta*. Anyone in

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possession of a decent internet connection could now have immediate access to this event in a way that had never before been imaginable.

The modern quality of this production was not born of personal computers alone, however, for just a few days later the Metropolitan Opera's performance of *La fille du régiment* was broadcast live in high definition to movie theaters throughout the United States and sixteen other countries. As the day approached, a sense of anticipation gripped an unprecedented number of operagoers and was reflected in advance sales, which exceeded 100,000 tickets (yes, tickets, not dollars). The question "will he do an encore again?" was on the minds of connoisseurs as well as those who had rarely given a thought to *bel canto* opera, let alone imagined that they would attend a performance. Flórez's actions, combined with Met General Manager Peter Gelb's innovative ideas for employing technology to "usher in a new more hip era," sparked a vibrant public conversation that is unusual, though by no means unheard of, in today's cultures of operagoing. It would be an exaggeration to say that the excitement generated was as widespread as that surrounding a major sporting event, or the wedding of a beloved celebrity,⁵ but for a moment people were talking about Donizetti's work and the Metropolitan's production in a way that seemed to recapture the spirit with which this composer's operas had been received throughout the nineteenth century. On the day of the broadcast, audiences in theaters throughout the United States applauded at the screen, *loudly*, after Flórez sang "A mes amis," as if they could make themselves heard by the tenor who was 100, 500, 2,000 miles away; when it became clear that he was not going to repeat the *cabaletta*, a collective groan floated across these theaters. In the technologically wired twenty-first century, this 168-year-old opera and this performer created a community for operatic performance and reception that was entirely fresh.

This event is fascinating for many reasons, not the least of which is the manner in which it unites an opera that originated during the nineteenth century with performance practices popular at the beginning of the twentieth and with technological advances available only in the twenty-first century. The production succeeded, in part, because it displayed a vibrant synergy between the nineteenth-century work and modern interpretations and transformations of that work – fashions from both past and present, in other words, coalesced to create new legacies for Donizetti's opera. These interpretations and transformations, it bears mentioning, extended beyond encores and technological advances, affecting many other aspects of *La fille du régiment* as well. This production played somewhat fast and loose with the original spoken dialogue, for example, characters slipping occasionally

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from French into English and modernizing the text by creating connections between the nineteenth-century plot and current events (in Act II, to mention one example, spectators learn that Marie's fiancé cannot attend his own wedding because – as his mother explains – he is in training for the upcoming Olympic bobsled competition and he simply cannot get away). The excitement that this production generated stemmed foremost from superb performances of Donizetti's music and drama. But the transformations, both large and small, internal and external, to which this opera was subject also played a vital role in its positive reception, helping to bring it to life for a public that is geographically and chronologically distant from the audiences who first enjoyed *La fille du régiment*.

It is these types of connections between new and old that link together the chapters of the present volume. As is the case with *La fille du régiment*, operas that linger in the repertory for centuries, decades, or even just a few years undergo myriad transformations, shifting shape in response to the fashions and legacies of their new geographical, temporal, technological, and performative contexts. To put it another way, these enduring works inevitably have many stories to tell. The chapters that follow reconstruct a handful of these stories, each exploring ways in which operatic works from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have been reshaped and revived throughout subsequent eras. Embedded in all of these investigations is an attempt to respond to a fundamental question: how has this music retained (or sacrificed) its powerful messages in the face of deconstruction and recontextualization over time and place?

As the title of the volume suggests, the focus of this collection falls on the Italian operatic repertory heard in the nineteenth century. Works by Rossini, Donizetti, Bellini, Verdi, Puccini, and their contemporaries play a central role, but so too does music by earlier composers as performed during the nineteenth century. Of primary interest is what happens to these operas once they have escaped the control of their authors. As such, it is the contributions of singers, stage directors, conductors, publishers, and a variety of other theatrical personalities that stand front and center in the majority of these chapters. This book does not aim toward comprehensiveness, but rather it seeks to contribute an additional layer to the growing body of scholarship dedicated to expanding the notion of the operatic work-concept and to exploring the manner in which the taste for, and reception of, Italian opera has been influenced, transformed, and adapted by individuals and institutions.

The volume opens with “Viardot sings Handel (with thanks to George Sand, Chopin, Meyerbeer, Gounod, and Julius Rietz)” (Chapter 2), Ellen T.

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Harris's exploration of a world-renowned singer and teacher, Pauline Viardot. This *prima donna*'s legendary appearances in operas by Rossini (*Il barbiere di Siviglia*, *Otello*), Bellini (*Norma*), and Verdi (*Macbeth*) led her to become one of the most influential interpreters of this repertory during the 1840s and 1850s. In addition, Viardot was a passionate collector and performer of music from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Among her extant manuscripts is a set of three extracts from works by George Frideric Handel that have received no attention in the literature until now. Harris explores these sources to understand how Viardot interpreted this music in conformity with nineteenth-century sensibilities and, more important, how she recreated a fashion for this music among contemporary audiences, breathing new life into a repertory that had long lain nearly forgotten. This chapter illustrates how Viardot helped create a vibrant legacy for Handel and his music in a world beyond where it would typically have been heard.

The authors of the next two chapters seek to understand how Italian operas were made to conform to the shifting fashions of varying geographies by focusing on words, exploring the cultural meanings embedded in the act of manipulating verses, or in creating texts that are entirely new. In Chapter 3, "Partners in rhyme: Alphonse Royer, Gustave Vaëz, and foreign opera in Paris during the July Monarchy," Mark Everist assesses the activities of Royer and Vaëz, collaborators who worked tirelessly during the 1840s to translate into French the librettos of Italian operas by Rossini, Donizetti, and others for the Académie Royale de Musique. His discussion illustrates that the work of Royer and Vaëz often involved more than simple translations, modifying both drama and music in Italian works to suit the tastes of the French theatrical tradition. In Chapter 4, "Verdian opera in the Victorian parlor," Roberta Montemorra Marvin studies a new aspect of the reception of Verdi's operas outside the theaters of Victorian London by focusing on sheet music excerpts intended for the parlor. She pays particular attention to the substitute English-language texts created anew for Verdi's melodic lines, noting that their striking dissimilarities from the Italian originals reveal a conscious effort to convey and promote Victorian values through domestic performance. These often striking textual transformations, in other words, had the effect of ensuring a place for Verdi's works beyond the theater, and of exposing his music – and hence his legacy – to a wider operatic public.

The chapters by Fabrizio Della Seta and Hilary Poriss also deal with large-scale manipulation, though their projects focus on musical rather than textual alterations, each author exploring ways in which the scores of

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ottocento operas were subject to whole-scale rearrangement throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In Chapter 5, “*I falsi Puritani*: a case of espionage,” Della Seta investigates the dark side of these practices, sketching the fascinating history of a “false” version of Bellini’s *I Puritani* that was performed in a handful of Italy’s opera houses during the 1830s. This score, which contains numerous reorchestrations and inventions, reveals a wealth of new information concerning the procedures under which musical piracy occurred during the *Primo Ottocento* and provides a number of clues pertaining to the ambiguous early reception of Bellini’s opera in Italy. Poriss’s “‘To the ear of the amateur’: performing *ottocento* operas piecemeal” (Chapter 6) examines a second type of operatic rearrangement, the strange custom of carving out an evening’s entertainment from a selection of acts from different operas rather than performing a whole work from start to finish. These performances proliferated throughout Europe and the United States during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and have maintained a significant position in the repertoires of some opera companies to the present day. In this chapter, Poriss challenges the conventional assumption that piecemeal performances were emblems of a “segmented” mindset among nineteenth-century spectators, arguing instead that these productions signaled a growing familiarity with operatic works, a process that occurred in conjunction with the gradual formation of an operatic canon.

The next two chapters examine how the language that surrounds works by Rossini, Verdi, and others in theoretical texts and music journalism can lend insight into the legacies of Italian opera. In Chapter 7, “Peeping at pachyderms: convergences of sex and music in France around 1800,” Jeffrey Kallberg attempts to understand what motivated connections between sex and music in France around the turn of the century. Avoiding formalistic analysis of musical works, the author instead seeks answers in contemporary discursive practices, gleaned information regarding the mingling of these two concepts from written sources including contemporary erotic literature and an obscene letter by Stendhal that describes the salacious effects of listening to a duet by Rossini (“Amor, possente nome!” from *Armida*). Close analysis of these documents reveals that music’s power lies not within the “notes,” but in its ability to reveal the appropriate responses to moods and objects of desire that are already present in culture. In Chapter 8, “*Aida* and nine readings of empire,” Ralph P. Locke stakes out a comprehensive reception history of Verdi’s most “exotic” opera, *Aida*, offering a continuum of nine “readings” along which most journalistic and critical writings on this politically charged subject have fallen. Through these readings, Locke seeks to understand how exotically

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tinted themes originating during the long nineteenth century have been interpreted and reinterpreted well into the twenty-first century.

Staging is the subject of three chapters, each of which contributes to the growing scholarly conversation concerning ways in which visual traces from the past might inform productions today. In Chapter 9, “Comic sights: stage directions in Luigi Ricci’s autograph scores,” Francesco Izzo identifies layers of comic subtlety embedded in the stage directions that accompany Ricci’s *buffo* operas. His investigation of gesture and movement in works such as *Chi dura vince* and *Il nuovo Figaro* illustrates that Ricci was often as engaged with the way his operas looked as he was with how they sounded. Chapter 10, “Staging and form in Giuseppe Verdi’s *Otello*,” by Andreas Giger is an exploration of the visual conception of *Otello* recorded in the *disposizione scenica* for the opera. In particular, Giger investigates how this manual records a clear relationship between the blocking of individual characters and the musical forms of arias, duets, and ensembles. Finally, David B. Rosen’s essay, “Stanislavsky’s *La bohème* (1927)” (Chapter 11), presents a case study of Konstantin Stanislavsky and his unique interpretation of Puccini’s work. A renowned director and theorist of prose theater, Stanislavsky turned to opera during the final two decades of his career, bringing to the genre a host of important innovations concerning characterization, gesture, lighting, and timing. In this chapter, Rosen analyzes Stanislavsky’s staging of Puccini’s *La bohème*, a challenge amplified by the fact that this interpretation survives with virtually no visual trace. Close reading of the director’s written descriptions helps bring this interpretation to life and offers a compelling example of how a non-authorially sanctioned staging might nevertheless play an important role in a work’s history.

This collection concludes with two chapters that engage broadly with the issue of “tradition,” how it influences, inspires, and often hampers modern performances of Italian operas. In “What is tradition?” (Chapter 12), Will Crutchfield outlines a careful distinction between what he terms a “caricature tradition” (in which performance practices that are modern inventions are passed off as “authentic”) and a “self-transforming tradition” (in which performance practices evolve naturally from generation to generation). Through an examination of examples culled from archival sources, recordings, and his first-hand experience as a conductor, Crutchfield stakes out a middle ground where the notion of tradition is employed not to tie singers and spectators to the past, but rather to open up paths along which performances of Italian operas might proceed into the future. Chapter 13, “Epilogue: the art of ‘translation,’” by John Mauceri is written from the point of view of a practitioner whose professional activities fall primarily outside the

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scholarly realm, but who is dedicated to incorporating the ideas and discoveries of scholars into his performances. In this chapter Mauceri recounts his practical experiences, discussing the reception – both positive and negative – that such an approach has had throughout his career. We are calling this chapter an “epilogue” not because it attempts to summarize the various arguments introduced throughout this volume (which it does only implicitly); rather we distinguish it from the other chapters because it serves as an example of how performers have engaged with, and how they might continue to profit from, the types of scholarship presented here and elsewhere.

In 2001, music critic Alex Ross stated provocatively that “[t]he appeal of Italian opera is difficult to put into words, but it has something to do with the activation of primal feelings.”⁶ As the chapters in this volume seek to demonstrate, the precise meaning of these “primal feelings” is by no means fixed: rather it constantly changes; it is something malleable that varies with each decade, culture, and context. As such, *ottocento* opera has undergone an enormous number of alterations that have affected music, text, and staging all in abundant measure. At the same time, however, these works have maintained their devoted followings not only because they are adaptable to a variety of new situations, but also because they have continually satisfied what Ross describes in the same article as a “yearning to connect with the grand original.” Although this notion of “grand original” is itself malleable, open to a variety of interpretations, what Ross refers to here is straightforward: productions of operas by Verdi, or Rossini, or Puccini, or any of their contemporaries move and affect spectators most powerfully when they replicate the emotional realism that was present at their premieres. It is this delicate and constantly shifting balance between the old and the new – the fashions and the legacies of this genre – that the following chapters embrace and elucidate.

No scholar has contributed as much toward the creation of new fashions and the uncovering of old legacies of nineteenth-century Italian opera as has Philip Gossett. His ongoing achievements in the research and performance of this repertory are so far-reaching that they defy neat summary, but one thing is clear: his work continues to breathe new life into opera. His influence extends worldwide into opera houses through the critical edition projects, as well as through his unparalleled gift for translating this scholarship from the page to the stage by working directly with singers, conductors, and directors. His writings are required reading for any student of Italian opera and his most recent book, *Divas and Scholars: Performing Italian*

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Opera, has become an instant classic, an absolute “must read” for anyone interesting in studying, performing, or listening to this repertory.⁷ But most important, Philip’s passion for and knowledge of this repertory are unmatched, serving as an ongoing source of delight, inspiration, and awe to anyone who has the fortune of studying or working with him. All of the authors in this volume – students, protégés, and colleagues – have benefited from his genius and his generosity, and we hope this volume in some small way demonstrates our indebtedness to him.

Notes

1. The article was written by Daniel J. Wakin.
2. This was a co-production with the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London, and the Wiener Staatsoper, Vienna, and it was directed by Laurent Pelly.
3. Bernard Holland, “Counting a Tenor’s High C’s in ‘Fille du Régiment’ at the Metropolitan,” *New York Times*, 23 April 2008.
4. The video can be found at youtube.com/watch?v=3aS6M8j3pvQ.
5. In fact, Flórez has reached such a level of celebrity, especially in his native Peru, that his wedding generated a media frenzy that also played itself out on YouTube.
6. “Verdi’s Grip,” *New Yorker*, 24 September 2001.
7. Philip Gossett, *Divas and Scholars: Performing Italian Opera* (University of Chicago Press, 2006).

2 | Viardot sings Handel (with thanks to
 George Sand, Chopin, Meyerbeer, Gounod,
 and Julius Rietz)

ELLEN T. HARRIS

No one has surpassed Handel – no one ever will surpass him. ...Handel is superior, even in the opera, to all composers past or present.

George Sand, *Consuelo* (1842)

Opera in the *Ottocento* was not always nineteenth-century in origin nor were its fashions wholly romantic in nature. The revival of Gluck’s operas by Berlioz paralleled Mendelssohn’s recovery of Bach’s vocal music, and one finds, in addition to many operas based on romantic epics and dramas, a small but significant return in newly written operas to topics based on classical history and mythology. Arias and *scenas* by Lully, Marcello, Handel, and Pergolesi were performed and studied, and these had an important impact on both instrumental music and opera. Among the composers of nineteenth-century opera most affected by these classicizing trends, Berlioz, Meyerbeer, and Gounod stand out in particular. But probably no one was more significant to the legacy of eighteenth-century opera in the *Ottocento* than the singer Pauline Garcia Viardot (1821–1910).

Viardot’s veneration of the music of the eighteenth century is well documented. Her depiction of Orpheus in Gluck’s opera *Orphée*, which role Berlioz adapted especially for Viardot, became, perhaps, her signature operatic role; this was followed by the title role of Gluck’s *Alceste*, also adapted by Berlioz. A devotee of Bach, she shared this deep interest at first with Chopin and Mendelssohn and, later, with her Berlin friend Julius Rietz, a conductor, composer, and editor of Mendelssohn’s complete works for Breitkopf & Härtel. She and Chopin enjoyed playing through the Psalms of Benedetto Marcello, and these pieces became a regular part of her recital repertory; the Psalms also left an indelible impression on George Sand, who in her thinly veiled biographical novel based on the life of Viardot, *Consuelo*, described the rapturous effect of hearing them sung.¹ Viardot was also a well-known collector of music manuscripts. She purchased the autograph of Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* in 1855 after the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek in Vienna, the Königliche Bibliothek in Berlin, and the British Museum in

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London declined the opportunity, and she created a shrine for the manuscript in her house where friends, including such disparate composers as Rossini, Fauré, and Tchaikovsky, came to pay obeisance.² In 1858 Rietz presented Viardot with the autograph of the Bach cantata “Du Hirte Israel, höre” (BWV 104), as a gift.³ As early as 1840, when the Viardots were in Rome on their honeymoon, the Abbé Fortunato Santini gave her a manuscript containing twenty-nine Italian, mostly late seventeenth-century arias for voice and continuo.⁴ Santini’s extraordinary library of music manuscripts and printed music was a treasure trove for someone like Viardot. She is known, for example, to have copied Pergolesi’s *Sicilienne* at this time from Santini’s collection,⁵ and his gift of a manuscript was an acknowledgment of her musical knowledge and curiosity.⁶ The presence of three Handel extracts in the Viardot materials now housed in the Houghton Library of Harvard University provides yet more evidence of her musical interests: the collection includes a recitative and two arias from Handel’s chamber cantatas copied out by Viardot herself; an aria from the opera *Alcina*, reorchestrated by Gounod; and a *scena* from the secular oratorio *Hercules* copied by Rietz.⁷

The operas of George Frideric Handel had no place in the operatic repertory of the nineteenth century. From the moment Handel himself stopped producing his operas in 1741 to the twentieth century, the exceptions are so few as can be counted on one hand. In 1743 and 1748, Handel’s *Alessandro* was adapted and produced under the title *Rossane*, and in 1754, his *Admeto* was revived, the last performance of an opera by Handel during his lifetime.⁸ In 1787, Samuel Arnold, editor of the first collected works of Handel, prepared a version of *Giulio Cesare*, but this was less a revival than “a pasticcio from various Handel operas put together.”⁹ Thereafter, performances became even rarer, unless one includes productions of Handel’s English secular works, such as *Acis and Galatea*.¹⁰ The only production of an *opera seria* by Handel in the nineteenth century was a condensation of his first opera, *Almira* (composed in Hamburg), into one act as part of a triple bill in 1878 “to celebrate the bicentenary of the Hamburg Opera.”¹¹

If Handel’s operas were little known, the cantatas were largely unknown, and the oratorio *Hercules* was not among the cherished, English-language works of Handel regularly performed: it was revived at Oxford in 1766 and 1768, and not apparently heard again until a revival at Düsseldorf in 1875.¹² The Handel Commemoration of 1784 and “The Works of Handel, in Score; Correct, Uniform, and Complete” published between 1787 and 1797 under the editorial direction of Samuel Arnold (hereafter the Arnold edition) provide a good indication of the corpus of music by Handel that did survive into the early years of the nineteenth century.