Opera Acts explores a wealth of new historical material about singers in the late nineteenth century and challenges the idea that this was a period of decline for the opera singer. In detailed case studies of four figures – the late Verdi baritone Victor Maurel; Bizet’s first Carmen, Célestine Galli-Marié; Massenet’s muse of the 1880s and ’90s, Sibyl Sanderson; and the early Wagner star Jean de Reszke – Karen Henson argues that singers in the late nineteenth century continued to be important, but in ways that were not conventionally “vocal.” Instead they enjoyed a freedom and creativity based on their ability to express text, act and communicate physically, and exploit the era’s media. By these and other means, singers played a crucial role in the creation of opera up to the end of the nineteenth century.

Karen Henson is Associate Professor at the Frost School of Music, University of Miami. Her research focuses on nineteenth-century opera, singers and opera performance, and opera and technology. She trained at the University of Oxford and in Paris, and her work has been supported by fellowships and awards from The British Academy, the Stanford Humanities Center, and the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University. She has been a regular guest speaker for the Metropolitan Opera, New York City Opera, and the BBC.
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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Opera Acts
Singers and Performance in the Late Nineteenth Century

Karen Henson
for my parents, Pat and Ray Henson, and for Roger
quel plaisir d’être ... joué ... c’est là, notre récompense

Jules Massenet
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In this book I explore the voices and performance styles of four singers and eight “Supporting cast” members active in the last three decades of the nineteenth century. Although these singers would have heard of the new technology of sound recording when it was first invented in 1877, most were too old to take advantage of it when it began to be exploited for opera, in the early 1900s. The important sources for these singers are therefore what music historians sometimes describe as “silent”: written accounts of performances in newspapers and reviews and visual, and in particular photographic, representations. Opera Acts draws above all on the at times slightly opaque and at times simply poor-quality writing of the late nineteenth-century press. I have tried in the main body of the book to translate this writing as idiomatically as possible and to provide ample original-language material. Where necessary, I have also emended modern translations.

Working on singers in any period requires a degree of archival excavation, and I have been fortunate enough to be able to work with materials at a range of libraries and archives, the abbreviations for which (along with abbreviations for the very regularly cited secondary sources) are below. In order not to clutter the text, I have provided only dates of birth and death for the four main singers and the Supporting cast. All websites were consulted on or before January 1, 2013.

Busch, Falstaff  

Busch, Otello  

F-Pan  
Archives nationales, Paris

F-Pbh  
Bibliothèque historique de la Ville de Paris

F-Pn Estampes  
Département des Estampes et de la Photographie, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris

F-Pn Musique  
Département de la Musique, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris

F-Pn Spectacles  
Département des Arts du Spectacle, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris

F-Po  
Bibliothèque-Musée de l’Opéra, Paris
Note and abbreviations

US-AUS Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin
US-NH HSR The Collection of Mr. & Mrs. Laurence C. Witten II, Yale Collection of Historical Sound Recordings, Yale Music Library, Yale University
US-NYmo The Metropolitan Opera Archives
US-Nyp The Music Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts
US-NYpm The Morgan Library & Museum, New York
US-NYpr Rodgers and Hammerstein Archives of Recorded Sound, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts
US-SFpalm San Francisco Performing Arts Library and Museum
Wright, Carmen Georges Bizet, “Carmen”: Dossier de presse parisienne (1875), ed. Lesley Wright (Weinsberg: Lucie Galland, 2001)