

PERFORMING THE BRITISH NATION: FOREIGN OPERA AND THE PRIMA DONNA

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A Question of Culture

In nineteenth-century Britain, the opera and its stars – both often of foreign extraction – incited debates regarding a national culture and appropriate support for the performative arts. During the previous century, opera had functioned to some extent as one of the numerous curiosities the wealthy nation imported for amusement and this reading continued to have some currency. The centre of an expansive colonial and financial empire, Britain had the power and means to bring in artefacts and treasures from diverse parts of the globe and to exhibit them in galleries alongside local productions. Since, however, opera imports involved not only scores but also composers and well-paid performers from countries independent of British rule, the dynamics of purchase and spectatorship excited uneasy responses even after more than a century of opera consumption. For critics of the period, one issue comprised scrutiny of Britain as culturally colonised by, or at least dependent on, a foreign art versus Britain as an international patron of the arts. At least as important was the question of the prima donna who received veneration as well as an immense salary in exchange for her public performances of multiple roles and emotions. How was one to constitute this anomalous foreign woman in terms of cultural and gender performance?

Readings of the prima donna and of the opera tended to address performance as a subject of serious domestic consequence. As Charles Burney posited in the eighteenth century and music critics and public intellectuals reasserted in the nineteenth century, Italian and then German opera established themselves as part of British culture and entertainment; correspondingly, many of opera's primary proponents became naturalised Englishmen. Composers such as Johann Hasse, George F. Handel, and Sir Julius Benedict eventually were accepted as definitive examples of British excellence, while first-rate singers such as Faustina Bordoni Hasse, Giulia Grisi, Jenny Lind Goldschmidt, Adelina Patti, and Therese Tietjens chose England as their home, settlements that largely met with warm and dignified receptions. To both apologists for and critics of opera, it was evident that public performances had crucial private consequences for the nation and the individual, especially those of vocally talented women. As H. Sutherland Edwards surmises, while the prima donna does not benefit from any type of inheritance (such as rank or

wealth), only Empresses and Queens claim greater stature or receive larger salaries than she does (2: 267-70). Furthermore, as Edwards and Ellen C. Clayton assert in their respective prima donna histories, the “absolute prima donna” or “queen of song” acquires cosmopolitan tastes and attitudes as well as leaving her distinctive mark on the many Westernised countries which support the opera (Edwards 2: 268; Clayton vii-x). This impact derives from the cantatrice’s histrionics *and* from her private self or history: the female singer “stands more prominently in the world’s eye, has a greater influence on manners, and reflects more strongly the prevailing hues of society” than the male performer; also, the narrative of her career throws light not only on her life and character, but on the life and character of the society to which she belongs (Clayton vii-x).

This attentiveness to the conjunction of private and public continues in recent feminist commentaries on nineteenth-century performing women which, since the 1980s, have been moving away from a focus on patriarchal oppression of all women and branding of public women to explorations of the intricacies and processes characteristic of individual negotiations with social structures. In cultural and musical studies, landmark texts by authors such as Nancy Armstrong, Mary Poovey, Catherine Clément, Susan McClary, and Tracy Davis have amply demonstrated the opprobrium to which the feminine was subjected in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as well as the multiple challenges to separate spheres that necessitated repeated social strictures against women, precisely because they refused the narrow lots assigned them. Of equal import were the social contradictions built into the gender structure which not only enabled women to exploit these inconsistencies but also betrayed society’s own divided desires (Poovey 160-62). Pertaining to the prima donna in particular, the nineteenth-century cultural hesitations regarding the very meaning of performance presented sizable complications and latitude for debate. Though we now tend to discuss the lyric actress of the nineteenth century either in terms of documentable hardships (including public equations of her with prostitution and alienable labour) or feminist symbolism (a woman who “had a voice” and visibility), period representations suggested that in multiple senses she enacted nationalist concerns about morality, especially emotional “truth,” and aesthetics.¹ As Elaine Hadley has argued in *Melodramatic Tactics*, at the turn of the nineteenth century increasingly sharp distinctions arose “between public role and private integrity, between acting and sincerity”; yet sincerity “became a crucial concept even as it was [deemed] necessarily more difficult to ascertain”(21). Compounding this already difficult scene of interpretation, opera critics repeatedly unsettled the binary between public role and private integrity by calling for, and commending, prima donnas who performed emotion with sincerity. This underwriting of histrionics with the personal and biographical coincided with

¹ Clément, Smart, and, to some extent, Davis (who focuses on the actress) explore the difficulties of the prima donna’s life. Leonardi, in her single-authored article and in her co-written book with Pope, explores the prima donna largely as a symbol of freedom. Rutherford combines the two approaches.

widespread cultural endeavours in Britain to purify the theatre of its associations with specious artifice; but it additionally participated in the charged and paradoxical attempt to domesticate a foreign art and prove Britain a musical nation.

A History of Reading

Concerns about the national impact of theatre generally and foreign opera specifically date back to the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, when first Italian singers and then fully staged opera sought to establish themselves in England, efforts which increasingly forced domestic drama and music into intense competition with an imported art. Before turning explicitly to the nineteenth century, I will provide a brief historical overview of the ideology and context of these struggles. While the Italian opera was neither an instant nor an invariable success, but instead one of a number of art forms striving to create a large and loyal audience, from its inception in 1705 it received intense and often hostile critical attention. During the eighteenth century, dissenting critics figured Italian operatic music as nonsensical and English enjoyment of it as tantamount to an indulgence in unruly passions that endangered both individual and nation. Some of the specific (and often competing) fears were as follows: that mere ornamental sounds could seduce and, at least temporarily, defeat sense, while Shakespeare and other representatives of noble, national art fell into neglect (Steele *Tatler* 1: 39; Addison *Spectator* 1: 55-57); secondly, that consummate performances of multiple roles involved emotions, but that these performers and actions were unreliable; or, finally, that performers, like their art, might lack substantial emotion altogether, but, as sponsored by upper-class tastes and fashion, might pass within and compromise the gentry and aristocracy – and by implication the political and social powers of England (Wilkes 67; Bicknell 90 ff). Obviously, such hyperbolic fears constituted a single perspective, but historical sources repeatedly confirmed that national concerns coincided with cultural ones, sources which range from Addison and Steele's *Spectator*, to Gay's *Beggar's Opera*, Fielding's *The Opera of Operas*, travel narratives (Wilkes), satires (Bicknell, *Quavers*), and music histories (Burney, Hawkins). According to the vitriolic satire *The Remarkable Trial of the Queen of Quavers*, the British empire's "foolish inhabitants did cast away the substance and honour of the noblest island, for the sake of a puny Quaver" (17), which nonetheless proved substantial enough to establish an illegitimate "Kingdom of Quavers" and to transform England into a "Lunatick Empire" (19, 38). As evidence against the Queen of Quavers and her associates, the trial produces as witnesses orientalist audience members like Miss Giddy and Lord Fiddle Faddle, who are unable to attend to familial or political duties as they obsessively sing arias.² Loss of sense

² Asked about matters of empire, Lord Fiddle Faddle replies, "Twing, twong, twang, daddle, doddle, diddle, a cat and a fiddle" (28).

and regulated emotion also compromise the social hierarchy, as the elite and the professional trillers assume unsanctioned roles in their mingling with one another: the aristocrats behave as senseless musicians, and the musicians as nobility. As the incredulous, anonymous author of *Queen of Quavers* expostulates, though the singers' kingdom "be founded upon nothing but quavers and semiquavers," they arrogate to themselves "real" powers (49). Representation, or impersonation, raises threats not only of Britain's cultural colonisation, but also of acting replacing ethically informed reason and emotions.

Among the British intelligentsia, imported art did not necessarily signal divestment or endangerment of the home country. Dr. Charles Burney, one of Britain's foremost eighteenth-century musicologists, consistently defended opera, writing that by 1709, "The Italian Opera had [...] obtained a settlement, and established a colony on our island, which having from time to time been renovated and supplied from the mother country, has subsisted ever since" (*General History of Music* 2: 671). At first glance, Burney's approving metaphor of foreign rule as a benevolent, maternal nurturing of the arts relies on and turns the rhetoric of British imperialism against itself: Britain's own "empty" spaces, inadequately tended by indigenous peoples, require foreign intervention or at least support. Yet Burney, in his numerous musical texts, evinces passionate nationalism as well. Even as he harshly, and somewhat unfairly, castigates English opera and composers, accusing them of lacking "sensibility," he praises England and its typical opera audience for recognising and embracing the "great art" of the Italians (*History* 2: 658, 673). In fact, his 1773 publication *The Present State of Music in France and Italy* repeatedly calls attention to the inferiority of Italy to England in terms of productions and audiences (68, 98). If Italy gives birth to the best composers, instrumentalists, and singers (including street singers), nonetheless the best professionals receive primary support from England as well as a more attentive reception of their affecting performances.

By the nineteenth century, the attacks on Italian opera significantly decreased in both fervour and number, but opera's cultural significance in Britain remained complex. Stagings of opera at the patent theatres of Covent Garden and Drury Lane ensured that the Italian art form – and, from about 1800, German and occasionally French opera as well – appeared on the same boards as legitimate and nationally prized drama such as Shakespeare's plays. Additionally, the imported opera suffered less direct competition from the English opera. As Donald Grout records, the English masque gave rise to a "distinct national type" of opera, but it rapidly "succumbed to Italian taste soon after 1700" (135). (Nineteenth-century exceptions to this dearth of national operas included those of Michael Balfe, John Barnett, Henry Rowley Bishop, George Macfarren, Charles Stanford, William Wallace, and,

of course, the Gilbert and Sullivan operettas of the 1870s to 1890s.)³ This taste for the foreign affected British-born singers as well.⁴ Typically, they struggled to gain national, let alone international, attention and commanded smaller salaries than those granted to foreigners (*Harmonicon* 11: 115, 139). As in Burney's time, the prominence of foreign musicians raised the anxious question, "Are the English a Musical People?" (*Fraser's* 43: 675-81), and led to rather incommensurate projects: demands for a higher standard of musical training within Britain struggled against tendentious readings of foreign culture as a British possession. But these conflicting methodologies did serve a common ideological goal of making visible Britain's pre-eminence in art, even as it dominated in geo-political acquisitions. Consolidating eighteenth-century strategies, Britain increasingly equivocated over the precise demarcations between domestic and foreign culture both by claiming the presence of first-class performers from various parts of Europe as a testimony to national standards of musicality and by calling attention to "the prodigious pains and expense employed to supply, encourage, and maintain musicians" (Cox 1: 6-7; cf. *Harmonicon* 10: 43-44; *Fraser's* 31: 743; Edwards 2: 54-55). Crucially, though, Britain's cultural appropriation of foreign performers entailed unpredictable and far-reaching effects. The impulse was to use their art to serve imperial purposes; this is when, as post-colonial critic Deborah Root explains, "art is [...] used to explain and naturalize the display of authority" (19). In terms of cultural appropriation, the significance of the act lies in the very ability to treat the foreign as if it were one's

³ A *Harmonicon* correspondent praises the recent efforts of the Royal Academy's music school to obviate the "humiliation of being obliged always to have recourse to foreign scores for our theatres," but points to the futility of training composers without staging their operas (9: 108). The writer elaborates that if the currently successful Auber had been "born in London," he "would no doubt have shared the fate of many promising composers, who after long and ineffectual struggles to overcome prejudice, and to obtain a fair trial of their strength, have at length been compelled to sink down into mere balladmongers" (109). Some musicians born in Great Britain proved exceptions to the general rule of national indifference to local talent. Balfe fared well as a singer and as a composer, especially of *Siege of Rochelle* (1835), *The Maid of Artois* (1836), and *The Bohemian Girl* (1843); this last mentioned opera, his most popular, was translated into German, Italian, and French. Other British successes include John Barnett's *The Mountain Sylph* (1834), Henry Rowley Bishop's many (short-lived) pieces for Covent Garden and Drury Lane, George Macfarren's *Robin Hood* (1860), Charles Stanford's *Shamus O'Brien* (1896), and William Wallace's *Maritana* (1845) and *Lurline* (1860). Substantial entries for these composers may be found in the 1910 edition of *The Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*.

⁴ Of the British-born prima donnas, Elizabeth Billington achieved the greatest national and international recognition. Chorley notes that her skills enabled her to "hold her own against a Southern no less fascinating than Madame Grassini" (154). Lord Mount-Edgumbe, however, complains that the beautiful Grassini eventually triumphs over Billington, the "superior musician and singer," because all have eyes to see, but few have "musical ears" to hear (94). Other noteworthy British singers include Anastasia Robinson, (Anna) Nancy Storace, Anna Maria Crouch, Cecilia Davis, Lavinia Fenton, Catherine Stephens, Mary Anne Paton, Clara Novello, and Adelaide Kemble.

own to manage and to endow with whatever meanings one desires (Root 70).⁵ Yet when nineteenth-century Britain assigned multiple meanings to the foreign prima donna, her role as a performer of the nation's cultural aspirations compromised her commodity status and began to erode the exact distinctions between the public actress and the private, domestic woman that imported art was supposed to guarantee.

If the highly developed musical culture of Italy coupled with the lure of the exotic initially enabled foreign opera to dominate in England, in the case of nineteenth-century female Britons aspiring to become professional singers, the national reluctance to endorse them derived in part from unofficial, yet powerful, conceptions of gender and propriety. Promoting the operatic stage as a legitimate national pastime involved dignifying the actors, yet the British young women of respectable class and family status tended to be inculcated with the indecorum of public performance. Commenting on this tautology, Tracy Davis writes that while "the middle-class ethos prohibited an easy surrender of middle-class daughters to the stage, the growing middle-class audience demanded their presence" (76). Domestic feminine worth derived almost exclusively from the social status and activities of the male members of a woman's family, and she remained valuable to the middle classes insofar as she practised sexual restraint and demonstrated solicitous care for the household and its members. Furthermore, the patriarchal family and even feminists of the period tended to stress her symbolic role: her circumscribed activities implied the cohesion of the middle-class family and its practical and ideological commitment to interactions based on affect rather than profit.⁶

Demonstrably, though, in musical circles from the 1830s to the 1860s audiences and critics had begun to address, if not resolve, such difficulties in two distinct adaptations of the foreign woman for domestic use. In one instance, Britons argued for the personal virtue of a foreign prima donna – Jenny Lind – and her resulting accommodation of national, middle-class values on the operatic and social stage. The second and more ambitious treatment began from the opposite assumption: that, in both a national and individual sense, the merit and virtue of outstanding performers such as Giuditta Pasta, Maria Malibran, Wilhelmina Schroeder-Devrient, and Pauline Viardot might be deduced from their consummate histrionics and emotionally truthful song. Whether beginning from the private or the public, British opera aficionados allowed for the affecting performances of select, already famous prima donnas to signify as one measure of value. In turn, British discrimination of and responsiveness to good performances supported a preferred

⁵ Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* and Anne McClintock's *Imperial Leather* are excellent sources for the study of the politics of culture during and after the nineteenth century.

⁶ See in particular the conclusion to Caine's book, in which she summarizes the difference between mid- and late Victorian feminists. Caine remarks that the earlier feminists "had spent decades refuting the idea that those women who sought political and social reform also sought to end the family and to assert women's freedom to reject existing moral standards" (255).

image of the nation as cultural patron of high art, regardless of its origin. The effects of accommodating the foreign as a means of protecting (middle-class women) and promoting Britain, however, also included a reverse influence whereby the foreign prompted more liberal and admirable reconsiderations of merit within the British nation. Exceeding their cultural usefulness, opera and the prima donna left their mark on England's notions of aesthetic and feminine truthfulness.

Prima Donna Performances and British Nationalism

During the nineteenth century, opera consolidated its position in the rank of the arts at once popular and distinguished. As *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country* posited in 1845, the "Opera is now the first, best, and most cherished amusement amongst every civilised congregation of human beings from Mexico to Alexandria, from Odessa to Smyrna and Constantinople, and from St. Petersburg to Algiers" (31: 744). Consequently, while public intellectuals like Thomas Carlyle continued eighteenth-century insinuations of opera's corrupting artifice that infiltrated fashionable society and encouraged theatrical (i.e. insincere) enactments of relationships and emotions (401), operatic defenders adopted Burney's tactics of arguing for Britain's refined, international tastes and standards: opera appreciation, J. E. Cox asserted, indicated a movement past xenophobia, superstition, and error (1: 12). Other amateur music critics such as Mount-Edgcumbe (36, 74), Clayton (Introduction), and Edwards (1:14) approached opera similarly, as did Chorley, music critic for the *Athenaeum* from the 1830s-1860s, J. W. Davison, music critic for the *Examiner* in the 1840s and *Times* in the 1850s, and Hogarth, founder of the *Daily News* in 1846. This conception of opera as one crucial signifier of the "civilised" shifted the meaning of performance from something inherently untruthful (artificial) and foreign (thus possibly corrupting) to that which symbolized power and merit or even functioned as a metaphor for their workings inside of society: in nineteenth-century operatic theatres, fashion displayed and class defended its privileges (Conrad 237; Attali 60), while the nation as a whole demonstrated its susceptibility to and sponsorship of the best of culture. But opera's prestige value also entailed its affecting representations, its appeal to matters of the heart. As the language of emotion, opera's music and (often melodramatic) plots appeared to evoke the essential and universal (Tambling 33). In this way, performance referred simultaneously and contradictorily to a hierarchical and economic system of value and to an immaterial value that reputedly preceded and informed theatrical enactments (Attali 58). As I will argue in the rest of the paper, it largely rested with the prima donna to perform a resolution of contradictions through her "sincere" and affecting performances.

Jenny Lind, in particular, stood for the prima donna who (paradoxically) embraced conventional femininity.⁷ She acquired renown and wealth with dazzling rapidity because she appeared to reconcile the represented with the universal, and material with moral success. As excerpts from contemporary journals and memoirs demonstrate, Lind served as international symbol of a great artist, who was nonetheless “still greater in her pure human existence” (Bremer qtd in Clayton 467). In the innumerable evaluations (I am tempted to say “idolisations”) of Lind, formerly infamous prima donna vacillations, breeches of singing contracts, and broken romantic engagements translated as Lind’s signs of crises of conscience, the agonies of a moral woman protecting herself from theatrical taint. In deploying aspects of idealised, domestic femininity as a vehicle for social success, and in signalling transcendent virtue through staged representations, Lind made the oppositional “mutually enabling and legitimizing” (Gallagher 201).⁸ Purity of person merged with purity of voice (Clayton 463). Her performance of but a small selection of roles “revealed” Lind’s abhorrence of pretence and the integrity that informed all of her actions, including her frequent and publicized donations to charity. Lind, the foreigner born to a divorced and unwed woman, played the role she aspired to – that of unblemished femininity; she performed one bourgeois fantasy until she became the fantasy’s embodiment. “Jenny Lind, the practical and living heroine of domestic drama, the prolific dispenser of world-wide charities” (Lumley 226), thrilled critics and audiences, who paid excessive amounts to see her as much for her cultural performance of ideals as for her interpretation of a particular role. Her private and operatic conduct became (to borrow the twentieth-century words of Jacques Attali) “a model of society, both in the sense of a copy trying to represent the original, and a utopian representation of perfection” (57). Demure, maidenly, gentle, sincere – and prized most in character roles of the innocent or the victim – Lind became the copy of a lost original, the symbol of feminine excellence in art and life that was publicly available through operatic sponsorship.

In fact, Benjamin Lumley, the manager of Her Majesty’s Theatre, risked capital on his purchases of Lind’s labours in order to sell what cannot be sold: private virtue, which, by definition, does not bare itself, its “modesty and secrets to the paragraph-maker” (Chorley 192). Lumley’s memoirs explore with relish such

⁷ Generally, prima donnas were labelled as obstreperous and uncooperative when they gain a modicum of public influence, and Grisi swelled the numbers of those infamous for their displays of self-importance; in fact, fears of and imprecations against her power generated persistent rumours of her jealous refusal to allow her tenor husband, Mario, to co-star with rival prima donnas. Two recent articles – Tom Kaufman’s precisely on Grisi and Mary Ann Smart’s on Rosina Stolz – intelligently interrogate the ways in which prima donnas are stereotyped and demonised.

⁸ Lowell Gallagher’s outstanding article on Jenny Lind’s American reception identifies a series of contradictions the nightingale diffused for the industrialised and internally divisive New World.

incongruous imbrications. Lumley, having saved Her Majesty's Theatre from bankruptcy using Lind as attraction, notes at the end of her first season that the

grand professional success was aided no doubt by the prestige thrown around the fair Swede by interesting details given to the public of her private life. The report of her unblemished character, of her unbounded charities, and of her modesty – a modesty that seemed to guard her against the indulgence of personal vanity – added greatly to the favour with which she was received by the English public, and gave increased lustre to her professional reputation. (187)

As Lumley's candid account of theatre and prima donna management suggests, Lind actually benefited from her foreign birth and training insofar as her character and early struggles could be shaped as a compelling, romantic narrative with all the potentially sordid elements explained away or bowdlerized. Coming to London as a star of the stage and as the "heroine" of her own life story, she could be represented with consistency as a woman of virtue who defined the productions in which she appeared, rather than being marked or tainted by theatrics. Public feeling about her had its genesis in partisan and solicited press releases; and the paradoxical promotion of morality within economic exchange led to calculated transactions masquerading as philanthropy as Lind distributed large sums of money to various charities.⁹ For either shrewd entrepreneurs or for Lind's large fan base, her so-called nightingale voice – a concept and a physical product – served to connect perfection fantasies with social wealth and status.¹⁰ Lind's genius perhaps lay in this capacity

⁹ Lind was but one of many artists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries known for her donations to charity (Chorley 192-93). The *Athenaeum* even complained of public imposition on the generosity of artists, reversing the usual charges that a stage star's salary depleted the resources of theatres (897: 19). The truth probably lies somewhere between these two stances. The generosity of prima donnas such as Angelica Catalani, Maria Malibran, Jenny Lind, and Adelina Patti often coexisted with their demands for exorbitant salaries. This complexity of character grows progressively difficult to assess when we factor in the all too usual effect of a star's salary upon an opera company: theatre managers were reduced on occasion to staging operas that featured an unchallenged prima donna and an inferior ensemble. Catalani's husband M. de Vallebrequé, who was zealous as her manager but reputedly knew nothing about opera, is credited with this saying: "Ma femme, et quatre ou cinq poupées, voila tout ce qu'il faut" (qtd. in Mount-Edgumbe 107). The question of salaries, then, blends with the more volatile issue of the queen's desire for supremacy and her sometimes questionable means of attaining it. Lind, like Catalani, appeared to prefer unrivalled supremacy.

¹⁰ Lind's ethical distinction from other singers signified in society, where Lind was received by Queen Victoria and Bishop Stanley of Norwich. One of Lind's biographers, Joan Bulman, rates the churchman's act as more "unorthodox" and "eloquent" even than the Queen's words and deeds, in

to suggest a simultaneous representation and transcendence of categories, a simultaneity that resolved for many of her contemporaries the problem of the exceptional woman.

Domesticating the foreign prima donna as though she possessed the kind of private virtue recommended by conservative conduct manuals of the period, however, constituted but one method of promoting Britain as a cultural nation while also safeguarding its own respectable women within the family home. The “anodyne femininity” (in Christiansen’s apt phrase; 95) incarnated by Lind ultimately proved neither a fully effective model for dignifying the stage overall – given her tendency to distinguish herself and her reputation from that of her colleagues – nor of demonstrating England’s musical stature. For this latter endeavour, virtue itself received reinterpretation, beginning from the onstage performance of the female singer who was also a consummate actress. If an entrepreneur like Lumley remained less concerned with the precise traits of a prima donna – be it purity of voice and person or wide-ranging histrionics – than with her marketability, select music critics and intellectuals of the time certainly marked distinctions between the two. For example, the exacting critic Henry Chorley acknowledged Lind as a “remarkable” (78) and “assiduous” artist (196), but attached several caveats: he thought her overly composed on stage and her repertory and acting skills limited (196, 199). He preferred artists such as Guiditta Pasta, Wilhelmina Schroeder-Devrient, Maria Malibran, and Pauline Viardot whose dramatic and vocal skills enabled them to succeed in multiple roles – character roles both female and male, gentle and violent, irreproachable and dubious. *Fraser’s Magazine* similarly endorsed art over sanitised nature in an extended comparison of Lind with Grisi, the latter a prima donna who held Londoners’ interest for twenty-five years. “Morgan Rattler” notes that Lind stands for the “simple” and “natural,” Grisi for the “artificial;” but for *Fraser’s* exasperated critic, such division constitutes “sentimental twaddle” that fails to recognize the necessity of acquired artistry in operatic acting, and the writer awards Grisi top honours for her histrionic abilities: “Grisi [...] instead of bringing the prima donna into the common world [as Lind does], transports the audience into an operatic world, created for the nonce; a world in which song, accompanied by an orchestra, is the natural and only mode of conversation” (43: 681). Revisiting the clichéd grievance that song constitutes a distorted mode of communication and that operatic exchanges on mundane topics evoke the ludicrous, *Fraser’s* foregrounds artifice as *the* seminal trait of opera, wittily adverting to art’s manufactured, conventional “nature” that receives ideal embodiment not in untutored simplicity, but in skilled gesture and vocalisation. The unsubtle and damning implication is that, if Lind is simple and natural, she is not an artist, whatever her value as woman. This view remained marginal, for Lind tended to be proclaimed both a natural and a

that the bishop’s voluntary and non-sexual alliance with a female entertainer affirmed her utterly unique social and moral position (177).

feminine artist, but she did not garner common acclaim for her renditions of majestic or impassioned characters (Lumley 190; Chorley 78, 197).

Offering a radically alternative model of meritorious conduct, prima donnas who excelled vocally and histrionically in diverse roles not only fulfilled, but performed, Britain's musical aspirations. To begin to unpack the components of such performances, we need to return to Clayton's and Edwards' descriptions (cited in the first section of this paper) of the prima donna as cosmopolitan. The female singer typically acquired value by progressively appearing in the major European capitals and opera houses. Edwards elaborates that the prima donna, in addition to vocal and histrionic excellence, ideally possessed multiple languages as well as a comfortable familiarity with the customs of many nations (2: 266-68). Even as she moved from country to country with ease, she took on a myriad of roles and emotions as though they were her own. Britain, in turn, acknowledged that the capacity of the performer to embody compellingly the full range of emotions – from the pathetic to the violent – was indeed exceptional, signalling a performer worthy of financial support and commendation. Additionally, the nation performed a kind of artistic courting of emotions and conduct that it disavowed as common in its own citizens in order to make its adopted high art simultaneously capacious and hierarchical. The prima donna as one repository of the manners, emotions, and intellectual accomplishments of many countries symbolised merit more difficult to define than that of birth or breeding. Her versatility and intellectual-emotional proficiency increased her international value, and Britain, desirous of possessing a renowned culture to match its expanding empire, used the prima donna to enact its international value. In this sense, the prima donna functioned as an analogue for the nation, domesticating difference which nonetheless remained unlike the self. The nation hosted and supported her precisely because she exceeded conventional definitions of the feminine; yet this hospitality allowed for subtle distinctions between the full British citizen and the performer who enhanced the culture but whose alliance with or status within the country might be renegotiated at any point.¹¹ The nation strove to constitute itself through its delicate balancing of the cosmopolitan with the indigenous, difference with likeness.

But the prima donna as an analogue for the workings of the nation involved mutually beneficial performances too, not just an ideologically exploitative artistic sponsorship. Clayton astutely observed that the prima donna reflected and influenced society, and that her private and public performances determined her operatic ascendancy. We may now identify her duality of influence and reflection (given our temporal distance from the Victorians) as participating in the slow and incremental changes to definitions of sincere or substantial performances. Her art pre-empted the division of sound from sense in its rendering of emotions verifiably

¹¹ In a forthcoming article, "Opera in the Family," I argue that these tactics of excluding the prima donna from the nation – not to mention its respectable families – were primarily rhetorical and practically unenforceable.

experienced by divergent types of people. Moreover, the prima donna who entered fully into the roles that were informed by, but not identical with, the private self guaranteed the paradox of truthful art. For performing women, these readings meant a partial liberation of their value from stereotypical femininity, allowing for a (relatively) complicated exchange of private and public merit. For the British nation, the paradox of the sincere performer became one form of national striving to look beyond lineage and to expand gender conceptions, in spite of Britain's undeniable habits of assimilating in order to control difference.

The systemic contradictions in the British treatment of the foreign prima donna as a consummate and truthful performer recurred in the critical responses to women of various European countries or ethnicities: of the most critically lauded performers, the Italian Giuditta Pasta, the German Wilhelmina Schroeder-Devrient, and the Spanish-Jewish (Garcia) sisters Maria Malibran and Pauline Viardot form a heuristic group for study because of commonalities in their professional reputations and private lives.¹² All experienced problems with intonation and voice failure, struggles which critics absorbed into narratives of the singers' truthful and impassioned performances; and all significantly advanced the social and cultural position of the prima donna due to their histrionic abilities, which critics frequently equated with original artistry. Combined, the emphases on sincere acting and original creation effected a partial redefinition of both paid performance and feminine worth, whereby one could acquire cultural value in other ways than Lind's slavish adherence to middle-class sexual mores. As Edwards put it, the prima donna "must possess great physical strength and that particular kind of force, half physical, half moral, which is known by the name of 'nerve'" (2: 56-57).

With the exception of Pasta, the lyric actresses (identified above) transgressed sexual codes of conduct for women, though, surprisingly, their suspicious or blatantly scandalous lives did not jeopardize their operatic success. Associated with lovers and affairs, with divorces, and even with rumours of *ménages à trois*, these performers nonetheless won the support of some of the most discerning critics of acting and morals. The details of the life of Schroeder-Devrient were particularly salacious, for she took numerous lovers and married three times (Pleasants 156; cf. Christiansen 142). Her first marriage resulted in a lawsuit against her for adultery, which she resented, asserting that "she could produce the extraordinary on the stage only because she experienced it in real life" (Pleasants 156). Similarly, Malibran, the older sister of Viardot, was famed for her wildness, impetuosity, and extravagant

¹² I have excluded Giulia Grisi from this (brief) study, in spite of her unparalleled twenty-five year reign on the London opera stages, predominantly because she does not quite fit the category of the lyric actress. Pasta, Schroeder-Devrient, Malibran, and Viardot garnered acclaim for their strikingly original creations or re-creations of characters. Grisi, though a first-rate actress and singer, appeared to base her interpretations on those of other prima donnas, notably Pasta. See Chorley (77) and Cox (1: 292, 295) for discussions of Grisi's acting debts to Pasta. *Fraser's* also concurred that, however accomplished, Grisi remained "an actress of routine and convention" (42: 334).

displays of passion on stage and off, and yet critics could not bring themselves to dismiss her, even when they lamented her excesses. In the words of *Fraser's* music critic, "Your judgment condemns her strange passion, but your heart admires and absolves her" (3: 589). *Fraser's* critic refers specifically to Malibran's performance of Desdemona, but the statement models the sort of allowances regularly accorded to the engaging singer. At eighteen, she married Malibran, who was more than thirty years her senior and with whom she lived but briefly in the United States. After separating from him, she returned to Europe to work as a singer. Unable to obtain a divorce from Malibran until 1836, she bore an illegitimate child and lived with violinist Charles de Bériot for six years prior to marrying him. Conversely, her younger sister Pauline Viardot maintained a lifelong union with her husband and appeared outwardly discreet and self-possessed, though many suspected her of a romantic involvement with Ivan Turgenev, the famed Russian novelist and playwright whose passion for her was an open secret and who lived with the Viardots for long periods (Fitzlyon 379).¹³ Significantly, neither rumours of Viardot's adultery nor evidence of Malibran's and Schroeder-Devrient's sexual transgressions cancelled their critical reputations as consummate performers of substantial emotion. While, generally speaking, the nineteenth-century prima donna had limited control of the signals she gave off in performance and considerably less over audience interpretations (Davis 105-108), the lyric actress gained ground in an artistic hierarchy predicated on her ability to create a moving and credible "other world." While newspapers continued to record titillating references to the so-called irregularities of singers' private lives, music columnists relocated the affective virtues of the woman from an exclusively private to an imbricated private-public site. This did not necessarily signal an alteration in their own marriage practices or domestic standards, but it did imply recognition that sincere emotion could be experienced and communicated by women who acquired remuneration for their very public performances.

In part this difficult merger of private and public, of sincerity and acting, relied on melodramatic narratives which replaced the typical one of woman's struggle to remain pure and selfless with one involving the prima donna and her voice. Giuditta Pasta, who consistently received credit for introducing "genuine" acting and singing into the opera (Edwards 1: 199) – for coming on to the stage as though she had become the "character itself," "excited by hopes and fears, breathing the life and spirit, of the being she represents" (Ebers qtd. in Edwards 1: 193) – was also known for disciplining her troublesome voice into submission, a fact which became absorbed into an incongruously moral discourse. In the estimation of Chorley, the volubility, brilliancy and expressiveness in her voice were "totally beyond the reach of lighter and more spontaneous singers" who did not need to

¹³ Critics did not necessarily countenance these rumours. Clayton explicitly credits Viardot with "high principles" as well as with a "pure and cultivated mind" (412).

subject themselves to a “course of severe and incessant vocal study” (88). Chorley, in fact, idealised her “indefatigable labour applied to reduce into order and to harmonize imperfect and heterogeneous elements of a rebellious voice, and to render it capable of any shade or form of musical or dramatic expression” (*Athenaeum* 1185: 745). Here are the bourgeois work ethic and conduct book rhetoric of women’s selfless service (Dr. Gregory, Sarah Stickney Ellis) applied to theatre so that good performances on stage repeat the discipline involved in feminine performances of goodness in private. The particular obsession with the “rebellious” voice in need of disciplined self-management, a commonplace of nineteenth-century music criticism, satisfied a desire to witness sincere acting, an oxymoronic bringing together of actress and character and of autobiography and performance that redressed the problem of seduction by morally evacuated singers without heart and soul.

Readings of a prima donna’s private (and sometimes not so private) struggle with the voice as an indication of artistic commitment and public service occasionally extended to other areas of a singer’s life: Maria Malibran, who died at twenty-eight, comprised the prime nineteenth-century example of this phenomenon. The many and varied reports of her disagree as to the details of the intervening incidents between her last performance and her death, but they concur that her proclivity to sing, act, and live beyond her strength brought about her death (cf. Clayton 351-58; Cox 2: 32-33; *Fraser’s* 2: 51-52). Moreover, the accounts of her life are harrowing, encompassing the several horrors of commodification imposed upon the wife, the daughter, and the prima donna. From her childhood, Maria and her unpromising voice were under the constant surveillance and tutelage of her violent father. Sutherland Edwards remarks that neighbours accounted for screams coming from the Garcia household as the outcome of Manuel Garcia Sr. teaching his daughters to sing (1: 243). Maria’s voice, like Pasta’s, remained a problem, but the young Spanish singer had to cope as well with the family tensions which followed her to the stage and even determined her married life. As Clayton tells the often-repeated account of the young Maria’s stage debut as Desdemona opposite her tenor father as Otello, the Garcias experienced a “stormy” morning. Consequently, when the death scene arrived and Garcia brought his own dagger on to the stage, the prop having been misplaced, Maria abandoned the character of Desdemona, fleeing from her father in terror, crying “Papa, papa! for the love of God do not kill me” (Clayton 336). Implicitly, Clayton connects such trepidation to Maria’s ill-advised marriage to the elderly Malibran, noting that the girl accepted this man in order to escape her father. Other sources, including Edwards (1: 243) and Cox (1: 144n), deny Maria any agency in the marriage whatsoever. At the extreme end of interpretation, *Fraser’s Magazine* connects the marriage with Garcia’s various economic speculations: Garcia trained Maria for the opera, dabbled in pictures, and then took “his lovely daughter and a cargo of shoes to New York, where he disposed of both – the shoes to great advantage, but of the lady most unfortunately” (*Fraser’s* 2: 52).

This manifest sympathy for Maria Malibran, including her separation from her husband, acquires particular potency when we recall that, at the same period in Britain, the family patriarch in fact did possess his women and children as if they were so much property, and that a woman like the upper-class Caroline Norton who publicly exposed her husband's infidelities and brutality was as apt to elicit censure as emotional or practical support.¹⁴ But Malibran – a woman whose passionate life was exhibited on the public stage, figuratively and literally – frequently attracted apologists for her life and even more consistently for her art.

While public desire for the well-trained and disciplined voice resulted in unconventional evaluations of a scant number of early to mid-nineteenth-century singers, suffering and vocal difficulties never in and of themselves comprised the crucial factors in the achievements of the lyric actresses, but rather their originality as vocal and histrionic performers. The very critics who equated struggling with inspiration significantly complicated the gender hierarchy by insisting on the intelligence, inspiration, versatility, and creativity of the lyric actresses, all of which served as qualifications for their ability to incarnate an ideal character or to fully impersonate familiar emotions and conduct (both the readily avowed and the disavowed). At the intersection of the ideal and the real, the performances of the prima donna at their best borrowed from and confirmed the status of dramatic music as a privileged form of nineteenth-century taste, culture, and knowledge. What *The Examiner* remarked of Beethoven's *Fidelio* also applied to the art of the prima donna: that it encompassed "musical expression of the strongest passions, and the gentlest emotions, in all their shades and contrasts," portraying them "with a force and reality that make music an intelligible language, possessing an illimitable power of pouring forth thought in sound" (27 May 1832: 340). Elsewhere in the article, the writer praises Schroeder-Devrient who "possesses every requisite of the highest order for the lyrical stage," but my comparison of the performer with the composer has validity in any case, given the similar critical expectations for each: to represent the world of affect "in all [its] shades and contrasts" and to render sound the vehicle of thought. Whereas critics wrote derisively of the "ignorance" of a singer such as Angelica Catalani who was "capable of exertions almost supernatural" (Mount-Edgcumbe 97) but had little sense of drama or the world events shaping the contemporary stage, they praised Pasta's "art of dramatic singing" as an effort "of the *mind*," not merely "of the *muscles*," as well as Malibran's and Viardot's versatility (*Harmonicon* 9: 305). The sisters were polyglots, excellent conversationalists, and composers, Malibran excelling as well in equestrian feats

¹⁴ Barbara Bodichon's summary of the laws affecting women and Norton's own accounts of her conflict with her husband, George, and the British legal system are available in e-text form at the Victorian Women Library Project site <<http://www.indiana.edu/~letrs/vwwp/>>. Mary Poovey and Elaine Hadley each provide excellent readings of Norton, and Poovey's *Uneven Developments* remains a landmark text detailing the social, cultural, and medical approach to women in the mid-nineteenth century.

and drawing, Viardot in piano playing and teaching. In critical discourse, such accomplishments enabled qualitative distinctions between performers of “expression,” who subordinated technical prowess to affective techniques arrived at through disciplined mental and vocal study, and singers of “execution,” who thrilled with their vocal agility but did not so much as attempt to edify their auditors emotionally or intellectually (*Harmonicon* 8: 400).¹⁵

While instrumental music monopolised nineteenth-century theorising about music’s potential for the communication of universal truths, opera also professed this capacity, especially in reference to its pre-eminent dramatic singers. Pasta, for example, excelled equally in roles from the crossed-dressed role Romeo, the vengeful cousin who retaliates for the death of Mercutio as well as the tender lover of Juliet (cf. *Times* 22 July 1833, 33; Cox 1: 269-70), to the village girl Amina, whose innocence is maligned by a jealous rival.¹⁶ From a twenty-first century perspective, the warm reception accorded her impersonation of male characters as well as of problematic heroines such as the sexualised, Druid high priestess Norma and the enraged, murderous-minded Medea appears especially liberal, since these impersonations enhanced her reputation as a tragedienne of “the highest order” (Hogarth 305; cf. Mount-Edgcumbe 170, 190). In these evaluations, critics (again) appealed to standards we more commonly associate with predominantly male composers, whose facility in a variety of musical genres and whose power to evoke emotions from fear to pity increased their cultural stature and individual merit. For women whose musical endeavours necessarily involved the performing body and public scrutiny of their lives and histrionics, the bid for cultural status through interpretation entangled them in considerable risks; still the burgeoning critical support for a distinct standard of measurement for artists began to benefit the prima

¹⁵ Leading the category of singers of execution was Angelica Catalani, who, like Franz Liszt on piano and Nicolo Paganini on violin, became one of the century’s most famous virtuosi:

Endowed with the most extraordinary natural gifts, the image of resistless power and overwhelming magnificence, the first notes of Madame Catalani’s voice can never be forgotten by those who have heard it burst upon the astonished ear. With this voice, – extending in its most perfect state from G (below the soprano staff) to F in *altissimo*, full, rich, and grand in its quality beyond previous conception, capable of being attenuated or expanded into a volume of sound that pierced the loudest chorus, – she bore down by force the barriers of criticism, and commanded the admiration of Europe. Nevertheless, it is, we think, incontestable that Madame Catalani is a singer of execution rather than expression. (*Harmonicon* 8: 400)

¹⁶ Celletti illustrates the gradual acceptance of the tenor in the role of hero during the nineteenth century; however, in the early years, many women specialized in roles written for castrati: Pasta, for example, played Telemaco, Armando, and Enrico. Additionally, between 1800 and 1835, composers created approximately a hundred trouser roles – a role in which a female performer playing a woman is forced by plot exigencies to cross-dress as a man (157).

donna. Both in her social appearances at dinners and in her stage roles, she began to acquire merit for communicating insights regarding personalities and world events, both those desired and those distrusted by society. Discussing Pasta's astonishing capacity to shift from the tragic heroines to the antithetical character of Amina, the *Harmonicon* enthuses:

But as exquisite as were, undoubtedly, Mad. Pasta's vocal exertions, her histrionic powers if possible, surpassed them. That she stands alone in "sole dominion" in this branch of her art, is universally acknowledged, but her acting in *La Somnambula* places her beyond even the possibility of imitation. It would be difficult for those who have seen her represent, in Donizetti's excellent opera, the unfortunate *Bolena*, with a grandeur and a dignity above all praise, to conceive that she could so change (if the expression may be allowed) her nature as to enact the part of a simple country girl. But she has proved her powers to be universal; she personifies a simple rustic as easily as she identifies herself with *Medea*, *Semiramide*, *Tancredi*, and *Bolena*, and is a living commentary upon the maxim of the great critics, *ars est celare artem* [true art is to conceal art]. (9:110)

Pasta established her claim to the universal through her adaptable "nature," that is the nature of the artist who embraced and mediated contradictions. Aspects of the self, such as private emotion, dissolved into public performances of wholly fictional characters that made intelligible abstract concepts – beauty, honour, vengeance, love. This art was truthful insofar as it exceeded the purely personal and refused to be bound to a single perception; it was the infinitely expansive that, in performance, concealed its own artifice in order to offer credible, moving representations of the world.

In direct contrast to the British notion of the respectable woman as self-consistent and knowable in her domestic role, the woman as artist instead possessed knowledge of the world in order to create and represent a world of diverse ideas and teeming emotions. Of the series of lyric actresses, Viardot ranked as the most intellectual, and critics as well as other artists publicly offered tributes to this woman "capable of every style of art," an art, moreover "adapted to all the feelings of nature" (Clayton 404).¹⁷ Writers including George Sand and George Eliot based

¹⁷ Like her operatic predecessors, Viardot consolidated her status as artist through her compelling portrayals of multiple roles in Italian, French, and German opera, winning virtually unanimous positive reviews whether performing grand opera or reviving Gluck's 1762 figure of Orpheus (under the aegis of Berlioz). Viardot's large repertoire included the following roles: Rachel, Orpheus, Alice, Desdemona, Cenerentola, Rosina, Norma, Arsace, Camilla (*Orazi*), Amina, Romeo, Lucia, Maria di

heroines on Viardot, and numerous artists and intellectuals sought her acquaintance (Rutherford 99; Fitzlyon 51, 64-65, 93-96, 348). Others who felt no private affection for Viardot manifested their responsiveness to her stage creations in pronounced fashion as well: after Dickens witnessed a performance of her Orpheus in Paris, he arrived at her dressing room “disfigured with crying” (Fitzlyon 355). Viardot’s impact bore witness to the potency of an expressive aesthetic, whereby every gesture, every note aided in an emotionally nuanced portrayal of a character. Translating reflection into spontaneity, the lyric actress created the interiority of a character by imitating the natural expression of emotions and naturalising the formal artifice of the stage. If, as feminists have argued, her performances bound her to already determined scripts and notes, and if the feminine in music itself bore unflattering connotations of the excessive or weak in need of containment (Clément 22; McClary 15), nonetheless the lyric actress’s relationship to nature and culture functioned in theoretically dissonant and productive ways. Speculations regarding the woman as artist, for example, led to reconsiderations of the nature of femininity and emotional veracity which allowed for paradoxes to signify affirmatively. Evoking a simultaneity of culture and nature in the vocal performances of Schroeder-Devrient, *The Examiner* comments, “her execution is at once highly finished, and of the most beautiful simplicity” (27 May 1832: 340). As in the case of other lyric actresses, critics evaluating the vocal production and sound of Schroeder-Devrient employed terms which suggest admiration for the woman whose nature proved amenable to the highest cultural attainments. This conjunction emerged with particular frequency in the descriptions of the singer as an effective actress, one who made feeling and thought a matter of conscious representation. Mount-Edgcumbe highlights Schroeder-Devrient’s “power of great expression and change of countenance” (211), while *Fraser’s* similarly lauds Malibran’s “features capable of expressing [...] the minutest shade of feeling” (3: 589). Nature shades imperceptibly into culture in the discussions of the artist, whose talents form the basis of culture and who looks to available cultural models of instruction to refine her innate abilities. Concomitantly, the boundaries between public and private too lose their precision when the prima donna brings her dedication to and passion for art into the space of the theatre. As Cox asserts of Malibran, she “entered heart and soul into every character she undertook” (Cox 1: 320). Obviously, such performance of emotion could raise fears of the woman herself as prone to untrustworthy changeability, but as opera and music increasingly acquired a cultural reputation for emotional profundity and inclusiveness, the performing woman’s adaptability also became appropriated for a contending discourse of the lyric actress as a bearer of natural and cultural significance, not as a familial figure, but as a creator of meaning.

Rohan, Ninette, Leonora (*Favorita*), Azucena, Donna Anna, Zerlina, Iphigénie, Isabelle, Valentine, and Fidès.

Culture originates and gives form to the complex workings of the mind animated by reason and emotion, thus resembling nature in recurrent acts of creation. As Chorley famously pronounced of Malibran, she was “one by nature fairly endowed not merely with physical powers but also with that inventive, energetic, rapid genius before which obstacles can be reconciled” (6); she was “in her art at least – thoroughly, fearlessly original” (7). This mutually engendering interchange between nature and invention, as I have endeavoured to show, indicates that in order for culture to represent one source of goodness and enlightenment in society, the performer herself could not operate purely at the instinctual level. Reading retrospectively, we in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have tended to overemphasise the ideological coercions endemic to the nineteenth-century arts, including opera, as if they merely served to confirm prejudices of the time. The prevalence of undeniable biases against the foreign and women, however, should not blind us to the co-existent desire for an “ideal of self-contemplation though art” (Taylor 409). In specific reference to the prima donna, she was to translate seamlessly her own contemplations of self and society into variable characters, metonymically standing for the expansiveness of culture that demonstrated its integrity precisely by interrogating and exceeding a parochial vision.

The function and significance of the foreign prima donna in nineteenth-century Britain ultimately mirrored the complexity and contradictions of culture itself: on the one hand, she symbolised a mode of inspired creativity contingent on identification (her complete assumption of a character) and discrimination (the cosmopolitan intelligence that informs the emotionally convincing performance); on the other hand, the foreign prima donna and opera participated in a system of hierarchy, subordination and commodification. In the latter capacity, she embodied the workings of empire and imagination, politics and art, insofar as the British purchased her genius, which defined their good taste without granting her full citizen’s status. Her talent and often her country of origin were foreign to English social hierarchies, and this foreignness meant that, in both positive and negative senses, her value could remain unfixed. Such ambiguity allowed the prima donna to occupy an *unofficial* rank that borrowed aspects from both the middle and the upper classes: she possessed the ambition, dedication, and upward mobility of the one, and the elite status of the other but belonged to neither, especially in terms of gender. Yet while class and gender conventions readily lent themselves to exclusionary measures, whereby the exceptional nature and conduct of the prima donna could signify reductively as the allure of difference, opera as culture possessed national and international importance. The *Harmonicon* of 1833, for instance, contends that a primary opera house such as the King’s Theatre (soon to become Her Majesty’s) should operate as a profitable business venture and as “a place of elegant amusement, highly creditable and useful to the metropolis of a great empire” (11: 205). These uses of opera and prima donna thus included the nation’s aesthetic

performance of itself as an ever-expanding empire; at the same time, in rendering the foreign prima donna useful to public displays of what it appreciated and could afford, Britain, however cautiously and inadvertently, opened up the possibility that credible, national performances might necessitate not just an accommodation but even an appreciation of difference.

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