

The Rise of the Female Opera Star

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The cessation of the castrati created a catalyst or platform for the female virtuoso singer to become a celebrity in a once male dominated world.

This essay aims to explore how women overcome and broke societal barriers in order to perform on the operatic stage. I will employ aspects of literary criticism, social and cultural history and also musical and dramaturgical analysis to ascertain the true meaning of terms such as 'prima donna', 'siren' and 'diva' as understood both on and off the stage. I will also examine the careers of prominent female opera singers of the *Bel Canto* movement and then finally move to the present day to investigate the role of women on the operatic stage today.

The Castrato

The castrated singer has a long history dating back to ancient Sumer where males were castrated as a means of subjugation or punishment. In a Western context, singing eunuchs are known to have existed from the early Byzantine Empire. The procedure saw boys having their testicles removed before puberty to prevent a boy's larynx from developing and thus the voice deepening. What resulted was the vocal range of a prepubescent boy due to the lack of testosterone present in the surgically altered body. Naomi Adele André in her '*Voicing Gender*' explains that: 'The orchiectomy left physical consequences beyond the potential for a phenomenal singing voice' which resulted in what was called 'primary hypogonadism. (Andre 2006, p.28)

Remarkably, the Castrati had disproportionately long arm and leg size. They also didn't develop an Adam's apple or grow beards and mustaches so their faces and throats were femininely smooth and subtle. Due to this lack of testosterone they grew fatty tissue around their chests, thighs and hips resulting in a very surprising feminine appearance. Andre informs us that 'with both masculine and feminine features encoded in their physical bodies, the castrati were the ideal singing vessels' (Andre 2006, p.29). Indeed, they could sing both male and female roles and could pass as both male and female off stage as well. This was troubling to the Victorian mindset where gender boundaries were rigid and any act of conspiring one's God-given gender was deemed repulsive and irreligious.

An account by Casanova from 1745 describes an experience of seeing a castrati in a Roman coffee house: "In comes a pretty faced abate. His hips and thighs make me think him a girl in disguise. (Andre 2006, p.29) Thus the castrati were controversial public figures as they were blurring the clear gender divide of the time. Men found themselves strangely attracted to their ambiguity and mystery. Moreover, in the height of the fashion for castrati it has been estimated that some 4,000 boys were castrated a year. However, their fame gave rise for all sorts of abuse and hate. Some saw them as effeminate prima donnas who lured men into homosexuality and went against biblical ideals of gender. They endured bullying, name calling and public embarrassment.

In the first performance of Monteverdi's *Orfeo* in 1607 castrati played roles such as Speranza and Euridice. They were so integral to Italian opera that singers such as Ferri, Senesino and Farinelli became the first operatic superstars of their days and earned large acclaim and even

larger fees. John Potter highlights that “by the middle of the 18th century the castrat[i] were taking virtuoso singing into realms that we can now barely imagine” (Potter 2007, p. 97). For example, the most famous anecdote about Farinelli is that he sang in competition with a baroque trumpet but outshone the trumpeter with rapid ornamentation that left the audience in aghast.

However, by the late 18th century castrati became redundant due to changes in not only operatic taste but also social attitudes. This redundancy thus provided women with opportunity to take on the mantle of the castrati and train their voices to achieve the Bel Canto acrobatics of the castrati. This shows that the castrato singer took the initial ideals of Bel Canto (flexible diminution) and developed it to the point of superhuman ability which many scholars have alluded to being due to a direct result of the castration operation. Eighteenth-century French writer Charles de Brosses (1709 – 1777) described the castrato voice as:

“clear and piercing as that of a choirboy and much more powerful; they appear to sing an octave higher above the natural voice of a woman. Their voices have always something dry and harsh, quite different from the youthful softness of women; but they are brilliant, light, full of sparkle, very loud and with a very wide range”. (Heriot 1975 p. 14)

Boys and eunuchs thus performed female operatic and Shakespearean roles at this time. In 1798, training schools of the castrati were closed down as they were seen as ‘victims of a barbarous tradition’. The brutal action of surgically removing a boy’s testicles was now seen as demonstrative, violent and torturous so thus outlawed. With the redundancy of the controversial castrato, women took to the stage and had to metaphorically fill the shoes of these super-human singers who had both the strength of a man and vocal height and physical agility of a woman. The diva was born.

The Female Singer

Susan Rutherford in her *‘The Prima Donna and Opera, 1815-1930’* states that the term ‘female singer’, ‘suggests a whole range of personages: a working-class schoolgirl, a society dilettante, a middle-class student at a conservatoire, a member of an operatic chorus, a struggling *seconda donna* or a *prima donna*’. (Rutherford 2006, p.1)

The term is thus heavily laden with stigma, history, expectation, prejudice and ambiguity. As we have seen, females were traditionally depicted on stage by the castrati so ‘the years 1815-1930 are...significant as the period in which the prima donna came to dominate the operatic stage, assuming the position held by the castrati in the previous century’. (Rutherford 2006, p4) Rutherford explains that ‘bans’ imposed by ‘various popes’ since the 1597 had made sure that women didn’t have any access to the stage. It was illegal in England for women to perform on the stage until 1660 following the downfall of Cromwell’s puritanical government. The first recorded female performer in England was Margaret Hughes, who played Desdemona in Thomas Killigrew’s production of *Othello*.

The image of womanhood during the reign of Queen Victoria was that of the ‘feminine ideal’ which was influenced greatly by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in 1762 and put into practice by the bourgeoisie of western society. At this time a woman’s place was in the home as domesticity and motherhood were considered by society to be a sufficient emotional and religious fulfillment for all womankind. Indeed, women were not permitted to work outside of the home

and they had no formal rights such as to vote or to employ any university study. Some societies went so far as to not permit women to walk outside unaccompanied by a male companion. Her duty was to 'please man, not herself, and her proper place was in the home' (Rutherford 2006, p.5) explains Rutherford. Queen Victoria came to represent a kind of femininity, which was centred solely on the family, motherhood and, most importantly, reputation. Accompanied by her patriarchal husband Albert, and surrounded by her many children in the idyllic surroundings of Balmoral Castle, Victoria soon became an icon of late-19th-century middle-class femininity and domesticity. Female singers thus had the door firmly closed on them and they were restricted to fervently upholding this ideal and repressing any desire to have a life outside the home and to explore her intellectual or musical talents.

However, activists such as Mary Wollstonecraft in her 'Vindication of the Rights of Women' (1792) paved the way for women's suffrage and equal rights. The 1890s saw a 'New Woman' (Rutherford 2006, p.6) emerging who could exist outside of the home. Women had access to university study and were able to enter professions such as medicine and law. Indeed, most excitingly, women took to the operatic stage with gusto and became the focus of most operatic works. Opera allowed women into the public domain where they could demonstrate musical prowess and have financial independence and sexual freedom. Opera also gave women a voice as opera's narrative is to 'adore, and also to kill, the feminine character' (Rutherford 2006, p.9) Strong female characters were emerging in opera and theatre which challenged the stereotype of the weak-willed, subservient woman. However, singer's responses to progressive images of womanhood remained mixed. Some didn't approve or involve themselves such as Ernestine Schumann-Heink' who famously commented that:

'Women in their proper place-the home, this is the final solution. Woman has nothing to do with politics, in my opinion, except through her husband and children. Let the husband have a happy home, find his open fire burning as it used to be, good food on his table, relaxation after his work, let the wife attend to all these things' (Rutherford 2006, p.83)

However, ironically, she didn't practice what she preached and had a fantastic operatic career stretching 50 years; she performed in some of the most prestigious opera houses around the world. Perhaps, as Rutherford suggests, she was just seeing 'the domestic life' with 'rose-tinted spectacles' (Rutherford 2006, p.84). Or, was she simply putting pen to paper the views she felt she *should* possess to be accepted as a moral woman of the time? Perhaps her actual views on the matter were kept private.

In the 19th century 'opera was as tightly woven into the fabric of social customs as other cultural manifestations' and despite only a mere 'handful' of female composers and librettists' (Rutherford 2006, p.10) composers such as Wagner were advocating female equality and famously stated in his 'On the Feminine in the Human' that woman was 'a victim of power structures' and 'masculine principles' (Rutherford 2006, p.10). Donizetti also tried to challenge the normal heroine role with his 'Le Duc d'able' where he said he had written an 'innovative female role' (Rutherford 2006, p.10) for the strong female. However the role was refused by the singer as they were reluctant to 'undertake more daring roles' themselves. (Rutherford 2006, p.11) This was most probably due to the heavy burden of their reputation, which was on the line if they undertook such a role.

Female singers and actors were already on the edge of society judged and disowned by puritan peers and associates. Very much like the castrati who were subjugated and marginalized, women who were on the stage were seen as unfeminine and going against their God-given role

of being in the home looking after their families. Rebecca Meitlis argues that: 'What always rankles in me is that male composers and writers create woman who are such gleaming ideals- who love, and are talented and beautiful- and who are then destroyed. It seems inevitable that Violetta and Tosca have to die' (Rutherford 2006, p.11) Therefore, despite the advancements in women's rights and suffrage, perhaps her operatic roles sought to portray woman as weak and subservient to men and thus holding onto the Victorian ideal? Can women so quickly escape the shackles that have so bound her for hundreds of years?

However, one must realize that death in the 19th century didn't have the same dark connotations that it has today. Death was, like Senta's in *The Flying Dutchman* is a 'realization of self'; an ascent to the metaphysical. Indeed, it is Angels themselves who lift Marguerite into heaven in *Faust*. Moreover, Carmen holds onto her ideals of independence till death saying: 'Je ne suis pas femme a trembler devant lui' (I am not afraid of a soul in the world) and that 'libre elle est nee et libre elle mourra' (Free I was born and free I will die). Death was thus a defining moment for a male or female character and not something demeaning, enfeebling or brutal.

Furthermore, there are many female characters in 19th century opera that are in fact very strong willed and independent. Rupert Christiansen said that: 'Opera provides the strongest image of woman in any Romantic form'. The weak heroine is depicted in literature and art of the 18th/19th century but opera gave women action and 'revolutionary possibilities' (Rutherford 2006, p15) The prima donnas of the time sparked social change. Women were given celebrity status and able to hold their own in a male dominated world. In fact, from the 1850s more and more middle and upper class women wanted to become opera singers as opera gave women space to air extraordinary talent and skill. 'The diva can dominate the stage in her redemptive sacrificing vein, her voice riding the orchestra far more tellingly than the female speaking voice dominates debate' (Rutherford 2006, p17)

Furthermore, female opera singers such as Adelina Patti and Nellie Melba were the 'highest paid theatrical performers of their day' (Rutherford 2006, p15) Carolyn Abbate argues that it is opera which 'subverts the borders we fix between the sexes' and 'speaks for the envoicing of women' (Rutherford 2006, p17) Thus opera is an empowering force which propels women to new artistic heights and makes the world sit up and listen. There was a move towards tragedy as opposed to 'lieto fine' (happy ending) in the 1820s. Opera was now serious and meant to 'petrify' its audiences 'into silent, serious, breathless attention' (Rutherford 2006, p12) Women were thus given the power to stun and to silence audiences into having metaphysical experiences and to be taken out of themselves for the duration of an opera. Furthermore, it was 'a metier for female labour, a focus for female spectatorship, a sphere for female aspiration: it was not merely an art form....it was....a lived experience-chaotic, shifting, irreducible.' (Rutherford 2006, p.18)

At this time opera or the theatre was indeed not just for the wealthy and respected individuals, Chorley's review of London opera-goers between 1834 and 1838 included the 'most notorious and beautiful' (Rutherford 2006, p.19) and provocative spectators. *The Musical World* complained in 1839 that *Her Majesty's Theatre* was full of 'women of more that doubtful character' (Rutherford 2006, p.19). Thus, opera was open and accessible to all which is contrary to some beliefs today where opera is for the elite and inaccessible to those less wealthy. In 1845, *America the Spirit* stated that 'nothing is so popular as opera with all classes' (Rutherford 2006, p20) This idea of theatre being for all dates back to amphitheatres where all would come to view the action of an animal fight or some sort of contest. Indeed,

Shakespearean theatre was not just for the rich but also the groundlings who filled the theatre with noise, dirt and hustle and bustle. Female singers of the era:

‘inhabited an operative marketplace that was not only a remarkably diverse and extensive arena, encompassing a wide range of venues, audiences, aesthetic and performative experiences, but one in which the boundaries for challenge to received opinion were fluid and mutable’ (Rutherford 2006, p.22)

The Prima Donna

The Victorian era was a contradiction in terms with regards to not only its religious and social ideals but also its views on the operatic stage and the female singer. At one time she was something to be despised and outcast (illustrated by the Greek hero Jason who ‘conquered the sirens by means of Orpheus and his lyre’ (Rutherford 2006, p.45) and at another time revered and respected. In 1838, *The Musical Worth* wrote that ‘music acts upon the mortal feeling’ and that it works ‘powerfully on the mind’ and ‘awakens high and heavenly thoughts’ (Rutherford 2006, p.46). Middle and upper class families were highly encouraged to provide their children with music lessons. In 1800 the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* stated that:

“every well-bred girl, whether she has talent or not, must learn to play the piano or to sing; first of all, its fashionable; secondly...it’s the most convenient way to put herself forward in society and thereby, if she is lucky, to make an advantageous and matrimonial alliance, particularly a moneyed one”. (Rutherford 2006, p.48)

Thus females were encouraged to train their voices and to develop advanced musicianship and to spend lots of money on tuition, not for their own gain (or to have a career in music) but in order to be seen in an ‘advantageous’ light to men in order to be successful in finding a wealthy husband. Women were essentially being encouraged to excel at music but behind closed doors; they were not allowed to step out of the home and showcase their talents on the stage. *Strenna teatrale europea* writes in 1838 that:

‘woe to her if she does not already know by memory the best items from *Giuramento* woe if she does not know how to perform instantly the *cracovienne* of *Satin Roman*....or that of *Guglielmo Tell*’ (Rutherford 2006, p.49)

‘Woe’ also to the girl who attempted to learn any other instrument besides singing and piano. Camilla Urso, a French violinist recalls that playing the violin at the time was taboo as it ‘lacked grace in the appearance and movements of the performer’ (Rutherford 2006, p.49). Gillett writes that the piano was a ‘perfect fit for the Victorian girl and woman’ due to the fact that ‘the seated position accorded well with female modesty, no awkward motions or altered facial distortions were required’ (Gillett 2000, p.4) so they could embody the perfect feminine ideal whilst playing an instrument. The French Horn or Cello was deemed very unfeminine as to play it required a physical stance that was unwomanly; such instruments were only for males to play. Furthermore, women who excelled in singing and the pianoforte were taught that their talent was not for themselves but for the service of others; namely men. Ruskin famously wrote that ‘the one thing you have to is to make a clear voiced little instrument of yourselves, which other people can entirely depend on you for the note wanted’ Thus there is ‘no suggestion...that woman herself might gain pleasure from her singing’. (Rutherford 2006, p.52)

Paula Gillett in her *'Musical Women in England, 1870-1914- Encroaching on All Man's Privileges'* writes that 'women's participation in music took place in a context pervade...by nonmusical criteria: will performance on this instrument detract from female beauty? What degree of expressiveness is appropriate for a girl destined for a life that requires restraint and self-effacement' (Gillett 2000, p.3). The key word here is 'restraint'; women were constantly held back from success and life outside of the home and they had to overcome social stigma to be able to air their talents. Indeed the Victorian era saw women as for sole the benefit of men as their Biblical 'helper' and aid. Rev. H. Reginald Haweis warned that to 'set women to do the things which...are only fit...for them to do, is...like setting the steam-hammer to knock pins into a board'. He goes onto explain that at some point she might become so angered and frustrated that she gives 'one good smashing blow' and feels 'better for it'(Rutherford 2006, p.53). He believed that piano playing and singing were women's best outlet for their passions and helped them 'accept their domestic imprisonment with renewed obedience and compliance' (Rutherford 2006, 53).

Furthermore, Gillett explains that piano playing began to carry 'such strong feminine connotations that boys were often discouraged from studying the instrument' (Gillett 2000, p.5) However, women were discouraged from publically displaying her vocal or piano skills on the public stage; such displays were only deemed appropriate within the family home. Women could earn money from her musical talents but only as a governess or hired in home-settings. Thus the image of the caged siren singing her woeful laments alone in the home troubles the 21st century mind. More troubling was the belief that a woman's voice could in fact be a window to her possibly dark, adulterous or immoral soul. The physiognomist Johann Lavater stated that: 'The voice is very frequently an involuntary expression of the individual....The voice, like the face, becomes better or worse as the character improves or deteriorates'. (Rutherford 2006, p.54) Perhaps this idea was just another method of control of men over women as just through their voice they were told they could bare their innermost secrets.

Therefore, women who took to the operatic stage had to overcome a plethora of sigma, fears and social/political injustices. The idea of a woman using her voice to gain something for herself, i.e. a career, money, sexual independence, status etc was abhorrent to the Victorian. Fears about the siren's challenge to the feminine ideal were illustrated clearly in an extract from *The Music Student* in 1911. It reads: "We have only to think of the lives of certain famous singers....to see what conceited, demoralized, despicable creatures the false study of music made them" (Rutherford 2006, p.56) He then goes on to give specific examples of such singers who have been corrupted by using her voice on the public stage. Thus, to fulfill society's requirements of the female singer she needed to have the vocal genius of a siren but have to docile, obedient, weak-willed qualities of a songbird. This ideal was indeed unattainable and so with the wake of the suffragettes, a 'new woman' emerged' who took control of her own 'ingenuity in constructing her public image'. The female opera singer went quickly from a caged bird to a free woman able to express herself and to be able to achieve independence.

The prima donna was now a 'kind of superwoman'(Rutherford 2006, p.58) who earned her own money and took charge of her own talents and future. A Prima Donna or a first lady is best described by Christiansen in his *The Prima Donna*:

'A woman who wants her own way is a prima donna. A woman who makes complaints is a prima donna. A woman who changes her mind is a prima donna....A woman who refuses

compromises is a prima donna. A woman dedicated to her talent is a prima donna'. (Rutherford 2006, p27)

Furthermore, Bermiani in his '*The life, death and transpiration of the Prima Donna assoluta*' started that a prima donna is flirtatious, beautiful and agile; that she needs a 'sufficient dose of charlatanism...much impertinence, a scrupulous and (when necessary) convulsive attachment to one's *convenienze*, costumes that hide little and display much...limitless demands...malicious group against one's rivals' and so on and so forth (Rutherford 2006, p27)

With development of marketing and the press, the prima donna was brought 'down into the crowd' which resulted in a loss of respect from the public. (Rutherford 2006, p.5) Thus the female singer was seen as an immoral temptress who uses her stunning voice to enchant, seduce and deceive. This stereotype, based on some cases of fact has stuck until this very day. When one mentions a female opera singer, the term 'diva' or 'prima donna' is often used. This word is also used when a woman is being accused of being high-maintenance or demanding in some way. The phrase 'Oh, stop being such a diva' is often used without thinking about the origin of the name.

Moreover, a prima donna opera singer in the Victorian era was seen as sexually free, promiscuous and high maintenance to work with. Also called 'The Siren' who could 'bewitch any mortal man' and sing in 'high clear tones' (Rutherford 2006, p.36) the female singer became an icon of sexual freedom and seduction. The emergence of the 'New Woman' at the fin-de-siecle depicted these sirens as erotic embodiments of 'passion and strength-that rejoice on the rocks at the sight of Ulysses' ship in John William Whiteley's picture 'A Sail!' (1898) (Rutherford 2006, p.37) However with new freedom came great responsibility and controversy. When great social or cultural change occurs there is always opposition from purists.

Stage performance was seen by the Victorians as a form of 'prostitution' which only the debauched took part in or attended. *The Examiner* in 1818 stated overtly that opera was in fact 'a species of intellectual prostitution' that is 'artificial' and 'cut off' from 'nature' due to the 'melting medium of Siren sounds'(Rutherford 2006, p.38). In Italy the words 'virtuosa' and 'prostituta' were used interchangeably which would horrify a 21st Century female opera singer.



This controversial and iconic image from Punch magazine is a clear illustration of how female opera singers were considered at the time. You can see the poster advertising *La Traviata* in the background, and the woman is clearly a singer, welcoming in another girl. The term *gay* meant *prostitute* at this time, showing just how debauched a life on the stage was seen through Victorian eyes. Adam Smith in his '*An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776)' stated that: "There are some very agreeable and beautiful talents of which the possession commands a certain sort of admiration, but of which the exercise for the sake of gain is considered as a sort of public prostitution' (Gillett 2000, p.6) This clearly illustrates that at the time a woman using her talents for financial gain or for public success was deemed as abhorrent as selling her body. Furthermore, the caption '*The Great Social Evil*' is outrageous at most and hyperbolic at least. The brazen hand on her hip and stern facial expression furthers how female opera singers were seen as sexually immoral, unfeminine and irreligious beings both on and off the stage.

Famous opera singers at the time such as Erminia Frezzolini (1818-1884) was claimed to act 'the part of the siren in private life, and drowned her adorers in a whirlpool of excitement'. (Rutherford 2006, p.42) Also Luisa Tetrazzini was seen as the 'siren who lured' (Rutherford 2006, p.42) men from their wholesome Christian homes. The power and dependence that was associated with this siren 'were perceived as having damaging consequences on male prestige and self -image'(Rutherford 2006, p.42). In *Painted Veils*, the Wagnerian soprano Istar is described as 'heartless' and an 'ungrateful creature' (Rutherford 2006, p.45). Thus the label 'siren' was placed on female opera singers at the time and that label carried with it the heavy burden of immorality and corruption. Therefore the prima donna didn't fit this so called ideal of *woman* and what she symbolized. Peter Gay states that 'to agitate for the emancipation of women from these sacred tasks was to offend against the laws of God and man' (Rutherford 2006, p.5) Women thus had to risk their reputation in society in order to pursue a life on the stage and to use her musical talent.

Moreover, in Victorian literature opera is seen as enchanting and a place where lovers meet and taboo passions are developed. For example in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Natasha and Anatole begin their meeting in an opera house. She says in fact that she has fallen completely 'under the spell of the world' of the opera. Thus her 'moral judgment is weakened' which furthers the narrative in the novel. Similarly in H.G. Wells's *Ann Veronica* he writes of a 'great hazy warm brown cavity' of the opera house where they watch Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*. Opera was also seen as something effeminate and emasculating. William Hazlitt famously said that opera 'softens the senses' and removes 'every manly and generous feeling in an atmosphere of voluptuous effeminacy' (Rutherford 2006. P.39). In Oscar Wilde's *A Picture of Dorian Gray* Dorian and Lord Henry frequent the opera house. The act of going to the opera is embroiled in the character's downfall and represents the false, hedonistic, enchanting and morally corrupt nature of Dorian who is obsessed with outward appearance and youth. In the novel he meets the infamous Sibyl Vane, who performs Shakespeare plays in a dingy, working-class theatre and falls under her intoxicating spell. However, later in the novel, Dorian rejects Sibyl, telling her that acting was her beauty; without that, she no longer interests him. Thus female stage performers at this time were seen as immoral enchantresses who entice men with their abilities to become different personas.

However, there are texts from the 1800s, which portray a different stance on the female performer. One such text is a poem about the famous opera singer Erminia Frezzolini which states that her voice 'descends into the soul like the prayer of an angel' and that she is 'noble'

and victorious in her art. He describes her as having 'sweet sounds' and a 'calm' and a 'merit' worthy of admiration. Perhaps this perception of the Prima Donna of the 19th century is an 'irreverent and exaggerated sneer at the honest artistry of the female singer'? (Rutherford 2006, p31) Rutherford informs us that in fact some of 'these poetic ecstasies were of course commissioned by the singers themselves, as a form of advertisement' (Rutherford 2006, p.31) Thus it is difficult to ascertain the truth of any propaganda surrounding the female singer. No other woman at this time encompassed such a wide range of interpretations and differing opinions. She was 'both so idolized and so despised' (Rutherford 2006, p31).

Pauline Viardot (1821-1899), was the first prima donna who had real 'social standing and respect' from the public. She was called a 'priestess' who sings with 'truth and beauty' (Rutherford 2006, p.60) Ironically the prima donna, who was once put in the same category as prostitutes and immoral women, were now seen as partaking in a 'sacred' act of bringing poetry and music together harmoniously. In Sand's romantic novel *Consuelo* (1824) she writes that 'music and poetry were the highest expressions of faith, and a woman endowed with genius and beauty was at once a sibyl and a priestess' (Rutherford 2006, p.60). This is a far cry from the *Punch* magazine image where the female singer is deemed as partaking in a 'social evil'. Sand 'thus lifts the prima donna from the mire of male degradation, and accords her a moral status of unimpeachable virtue' (Rutherford 2006, p.61).

It seems both views are extreme and unrealistic. Surely female opera singers were/are just ordinary people with extraordinary talents; they are neither 'evil' nor 'saintly'. The female artist has always sparked controversy and a plethora of hearsay, opinion and confusion.

Callas, Sutherland, Fleming and the female opera singer today

As Rutherford shrewdly highlights, critics and writers have always been fascinated with the 'phenomenon of a particular singer's fascination and artistry', (Rutherford 2006, p.2) Indeed Maria Callas, Joan Sutherland and Rene Flemings' life stories have been told and retold in a variety of material, showing that the public has always seen the female performer as some engrossing object to be dissected, analyzed and idolized. It could be argued that the private life of the diva has been so scrutinised and exposed that it is deemed more fascinating than the life of a male singer. As we have seen, from time immemorial women have represented the domestic life and so women who challenge this stereotype and achieve international acclaim continue to captivate critics, writers and indeed the general public.

The legendary Maria Callas is known for her glittering career with staggering triumphs in La Scala, Covent Garden and the Met. However she came across her own stumbling blocks, prejudice and body issues to make her journey to stardom not the easiest. As a child her father, could see no 'justification' of spending money on Callas' music and ballet lessons, believing that his wife was simply trying to satisfy 'his wife's empty dreaming of musical and theatrical fame' and that it was her 'frustrated ambitions' (Huffington 1981, p.24) that were the driving force of his daughter's musical study. Maria was regarded as a 'shadow of her older sister, less beautiful, less promising, less accomplished' (Huffington 1981, p.24). Living under this shadow was indeed exhausting for the adolescent Callas and so she eventually cast aside the 'feminine side of life-looks figure, clothes, the art of being agreeable, of keeping guests entertained, of maintaining charming small talk' (Huffington 1981, p. 26) and set on an operatic career that would become one of the greatest this world has witnessed. Thus, as this quotation from Huffington highlights, Maria was deemed a rebel who was not fit for normal womanhood of the 1930s. At this time, despite the plight of the suffragettes and the victory of

the New Woman, Victorian ideals were still lingering. Gillett writes that 'socially conservative parents continued long thereafter to maintain traditional prejudices, especially towards the aspirations of musically or dramatically inclined daughters' (Gillett 2000, p.6) This illustrates how even the most famous prima donnas underwent prejudice and judgment when entering the world of performing arts.

After the resignation of Callas as the 'queen of bel canto' it was Joan Sutherland who took to the stage. Jerome Hines asks in his insightful book *'Great Singers on Great Singing'* whether it was her husband Richard Bonyngue who was the 'mastermind' (Hines 1990, p.324) behind her success. This harks back to the belief that the siren needed a male mentor to steer her in the right direction and make sure she behaved in the right fashion. Rutherford explains that it was believed that the siren heeded the 'guidance' of a 'husband and domesticity' (Rutherford 2006, p.) in order to escape the immorality of a life on the stage. She writes that marriage provided a 'peaceful solution' and so perhaps one could view Sutherland's success and simply due to having a male guider in her career. Hines argues that it is 'certainly' a 'major factor as 'husband-and-wife teams have scored impressively in today's opera area' (Hines 1990, p.324) I believe this to be slightly disconcerting as a female's success in the opera world needn't be attached to a male counterpart; surely her success is solely due to her extraordinary talent, diligence and musicianship? In various biographies of her life it is mentioned that Richard had to keep her focused and have to even pull her away from domestic tasks in order to practice. Hines, however, goes on to say that her success was mostly due to her 'gift from God' (Hines 1990, p.330) Rene Fleming in her *'The Inner Voice'* argues that 'while it's a fact that a voice begins with natural talent, any talent must be nurtured, cajoled, wrestled with, pampered, challenged, and, at every turn, examined (Fleming 2004, p.xvii)

Like Callas, for Fleming, it was her mother's influence that gave her the foundations for her operatic success. She writes that 'there can be no underestimating my mother's role as a teacher in my life'(Fleming 2004, p.7). Lucky for Fleming, her mother and father were great singers and music teachers. Her mother in particular was 'an incredibly gifted and disciplined performer' (Fleming 2004, p.7) who taught Fleming to sing from a very young age. However, when discussing how diligent and creative she was as a young girl, she remembers the voice of her father in the car who told her to 'look up!' from her novel and to 'stop reading for five minutes and look at something! I don't know why you'd want to spend so much time reading novels, anyway. They don't teach you anything' (Fleming 2004, p.6). However, her father did teach her about hard work and how you need to graft to succeed in something. She recalls him telling her that 'with dreams come responsibilities' (Fleming 2004, p.9). These responsibilities have certainly evolved over the years as had Fleming been born in the Victorian era she would not have had the right or opportunity to study at the Juilliard or had been able to secure the apprenticeships and contracts she was endowed with during her career. During her acceptance to the Juilliard on the *'American Opera Centre'*, (a prestigious postgraduate training programme) she recalls her father telling her that if she moves to New York she would 'end up jumping off a bridge' (Fleming 2004, p.35). This was unnecessary control from her father as she writes that on the contrary, she 'loved it' and ended up thriving there.

Callas had to endure the hardships of growing up during the Second World War. 'One day in the early summer of 1941, when Maria returned from the mountains, she discovered that the Germans had issued another of their endless series of proclamations' (Huffington 1981, p.46). This one permitted no noise both in 'public places' and in 'private homes'. The confident and courageous Callas rebelled against these ridiculous laws from the male powers that be and 'loved to disobey, with fervor and bravado' (Huffington 1981, p.47). She proceeded to sing at

the top of her voice whenever and wherever she felt like it and didn't let anyone stop her from doing what she loved doing. This carried on throughout her career as she came across opposition, her self-belief and confidence as a powerful woman pervaded. Huffington writes that when asked: "what about your voice, Madame Callas? They say your voice is uneven." She replied that "well, let them say what they want. I sing the way I sing" Then she was asked: "And life, what about life?" she boldly replied: "My life! What a life-moving in and out of hotels, living out of trunks...Some envy me for my trips around the world..." (Huffington 1981, p.85) It was clear that she wouldn't let anything stop her from having success in the opera world and was not interested in set backs or people's opinion of her.

Similarly, Fleming writes of having many set backs in her career that made her feel as though she 'couldn't stand the rejection anymore' as it was 'wearing (her) down'. (Fleming 2004, p.76) Like Callas, her determination to succeed was so resolute that she was prepared to go through rejection and frustrations in order to achieve her operatic goals. Her parents, 'forever practical, insisted' that she graduate from college 'with a skill that would ensure me a job' as her 'big dreams might never materialize' she was taught. This shows that although we have advanced in the equality of women, there is still a hesitation when it comes to females entering a career that is unstable, unpredictable and doesn't fit with family life. At one point Fleming asked herself whether it was 'worth enduring this level of stress?' and considered finding herself 'a nice teaching job somewhere in the Midwest, raise my girls, and call it a day' (Fleming 2004, p.105)

Fleming writes that she found motherhood difficult out on the road, in her *Inner Voice* she very candidly tells her reader how she nearly lost her first baby due to stress. She 'started to bleed' in her 'fifth month of pregnancy'. He writes that she was 'completely alone in an apartment...in the middle of nowhere'. The doctor 'ordered her' to 'lie down and not move' for 'five days' or she would 'lose the baby' (Fleming 2004, p.91) . This shows how women have to juggle not only their careers but also the pressures of motherhood and also maintaining marriages. The benefit of the castrati was they could work and not have bodily or hormonal changes due to menstruation or pregnancy. However, Rene interestingly mentions how 'with pregnancy comes the lovely, buoyant pillow of a womb for the diaphragm to press against, which makes singing wonderfully easy'! (Fleming 2004, p.92) If the Victorians knew this, perhaps they would be more understanding of women who wanted to couple an operatic career with having a family.

Joan Sutherland's attitude towards her work and her success was quite simple. "People talk a lot of nonsense," she once said, "about becoming a star. One is just given a talent, and it's one's duty to make the most of it. My talent was my voice, and Richard was born with a talent to delve and discover things. He discovered my voice. I have been extraordinarily fortunate that our two talents came together and gave me so much happiness." ¹However, when it came to her physical presence on stage she came across some stigma and judgement. She was tall and broad in stature and was frequently criticised as being wooden on stage and not being feminine enough. Callas also succumbed to the pressures of social stigma regarding her body and famously shed stones in a short amount of time to become the model-like ideal for the cameras.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2010/oct/11/dame-joan-sutherland-obituary>

Martin Kettle writes in his article ‘Joan Sutherland: the greatest soprano ever?’ that she ‘wasn’t a great actor or a great beauty’² and this highlights just how judgmental and biased critics can be. Singers are constantly having to please their critics, directors, conductors, fans and general public and singers such as Callas, Fleming and Sutherland have shown just how much pressure there is for sopranos to not only sound the best but also to fit costumes and to appear on glossy magazines and on TV. Is all this pressure necessary? How far have we actually come from this attitude to female opera singers? There is still a great amount of pressure on female singers to not only sound the part and juggle their personal lives but also to look the part. Glossy, photo-shopped, sexualized images of opera singers such as Anna Netrebko and Danielle de Niese, Kate Aldrich, Maria Maksakova-Ingenberg and Aida Garifullina fill pages of opera magazines, on advertisements and on social media sites. These idealized images of the female opera singer are not far removed from the siren of the Victorian era. Perhaps we haven’t moved on and this stereotype is very much alive.

Body shaming is very much an issue of today such as when, on May 17th 2014, the young Irish mezzo-soprano Tara Erraught performed the title role of Octavian in a *Glyndebourne Opera* production of “Der Rosenkavalier,” and vicious controversy erupted in the British press. A group of (all male) critics unleashed some remarkably disgusting reviews, focusing more on her appearance than on her stunning singing. She was described as a “chubby bundle of puppy-fat,” as being “stocky” and “dumpy of stature,” as possessing an “intractable physique.”³ This just highlights how far we have not come; the ideal of the sexy siren is not in her watery grave just yet. In terms of women entering the profession after working tirelessly at music colleges and in young artist programmes, how much control does she have on whether she gets work in the opera world? And how much does her appearance dictate her success?

In her *Inner Voice*, Fleming describes a time in her career where she was asked ‘Okay, how do you feel about using sex to sell your recording?’ to which she replied: ‘Really? Do you think that? Thank you!’ She says she was ‘stunned’ and ‘thrilled’ because she never thought she would be seen as ‘anything approaching sexy’. (Fleming 2004, p.163) This demonstrates two things: firstly that Fleming and indeed many female opera singers do not even think of how they are appearing to the opposite gender when performing; they are simply in it for the art and secondly that image is crucial for female opera singers. Rene says she took it upon herself to have gowns ‘made for her’ and to have photos taken in the most ‘flattering angles and lighting’ (Fleming 2004, p.163) to give her audience and fan base what they want from a female opera singer-mystery, beauty and outstanding vocal ability.

Carolina Biagioli writes of how the life of a female opera singer is ‘the lowest, hardest, most disgusting life for anyone who wishes to get there on her talent alone’. This is alluding to what became known as ‘the casting couch’ where women would come across ‘pressures for sexual favors’ (Rutherford 2006, p.190) to obtain roles. However, this is not to say that men throughout the ages have not had difficulties with regards to their image. Rutherford tells us that ‘Tacchinardi was often criticized for his ugliness’ and faced real set backs due to his appearance on stage.

Conclusion

² <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2010/oct/11/joan-sutherland-great-soprano>

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/may/20/opera-figures-angry-at-description-of-soprano-stars-weight>

From the castrati to the modern day, female opera singers have come across stigma, confusion, outrage, barriers and judgment on varying scales. From not being permitted to set foot outside the home (let alone to have a career on the stage) to dominating the opera stage, women have come a long way in performance history. However, the expectations and stigma never do completely fade as female opera singers still have to try to fit the mould and to come up against powerful forces such as body shaming, fierce competition and physical expectations. However, as Tom Sutcliffe argues, opera can be seen as 'actively working for sexual equality' as 'the diva can dominate the stage in her redemptive sacrificing vein, her voice riding the orchestra far more tellingly than the female speaking voice dominates debate' (Rutherford 2006, p.17). Similarly, Carolyn Abbate argues that opera subverts the borders we fix between the sexes' and 'speaks for the envoicing of women'. One could argue that opera has literally given women a voice and empowered them to be able to, like Sutherland and Fleming, to have it all: a marriage, a career, a family and societal respect, something that might not have occurred without opera.

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