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Crafting the Eighteenth-Century Singer Introduction

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Surely, some might think, we have had enough of singers? Back in 2007, the last time *Cambridge Opera Journal* ran an issue devoted to the performer, Karen Henson suggested that the diva had become 'almost a symbol' of the wave of (feminist) opera scholarship interested in upsetting musicology's traditional focus on the composer by asserting the agency of singer and audience. Henson and her co-authors complicated this focus on the diva by examining instead the nineteenth-century divo and danseur, but such interest, Henson seemed to hint, was itself becoming, if not exhausted, then somewhat shopworn.

This issue's focus on the singer in the eighteenth century may, then, seem a little behind the times. But, thanks in large part to the energy with which advocacy for the power of the nineteenth-century singer and her voice has been pursued, and the richness and persuasiveness of such readings, we can now shift our attention to other, perhaps less glamorous, but no less significant areas of interest. As a number of recent studies, including articles in this journal, have demonstrated, a different era brings with it different issues: with opera in the eighteenth century, the centrality of the performer and the performance to the genre's very structure means that examination of the influence of the singer, moving beyond clichés about diva-ish behaviour, can transform our understanding.

Traditional (often grudging) acknowledgement of the singer's impact on the compositional process is placed in a new light when we take seriously comments such as Metastasio's and Goldoni's on the importance of the singer for their conception and creation of the libretto.[1] So Melania Bucciarelli shows us that the castrato Senesino sought contractual assurance that he could choose favourable libretti when moving to London. Bucciarelli's article demonstrates that recognition of the singer's role in libretto construction in turn helps make sense of their importance in the transmission of libretti, the shape of operatic seasons or even series of seasons, and the direction of productions.

Margaret Butler's article addresses another shibboleth, opening space to nuance musicologists' habitual annoyance at singers who used substitute arias in new productions (so 'ruining' the cohesiveness of the work of art). As examination of the role of a single song in the career of Gaetano Guadagni shows, arias themselves

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1 See Pietro Metastasio, Letter to Farinelli, Vienna, 4 February 1754, in Charles Burney, ed., *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of the Abate Metastasio*, 3 vols. (London, 1796; reprint 1971), II: 115; Carlo Goldoni, 'Prefazioni dell'edizione Pasquali', *Tutte le opere*, I: 694; trans. John Walter Hill, in Hill, 'Vivaldi's *Griselda*', *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 31 (1978), 78.

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could be freighted with meaning, establishing a network of connections around the lineage of the singer, the aria itself, or both. This diachronic view of the connection between aria and singer is amplified further in the case of Farinelli, who, Anne Desler demonstrates, recognised the importance of the nascent field of music history in his dealings with Charles Burney. Desler's article is a salutary reminder of the sophisticated calculation of which singers (like their chroniclers) were capable.

This set of articles might be seen to make a case for the special agency of castrati in the eighteenth century. Although the prima donna, too, could have significant influence (even running opera houses and concert seasons), my odd-man-out article on concert singer Elizabeth Linley, who never ran anything (directly), and whose career was managed and restricted by father and husband, suggests that even in the stereotypical female role of 'muse' a singer could have a far-reaching impact on the musical life of a region or (in this case) a nation. Taken together, then, one thing these articles might seem to suggest is that eighteenth-century music lovers saw singers not just as purveyors of moments of fleeting, visceral delight, but also as enactors of cultural meaning and vehicles of a kind of living history. Such possible readings add a new resonance to these lost voices, and a new reason for our continuing interest in the stories of singers.

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