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Scandalous by Profession:  
Opera in Eighteenth-Century Europe

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When the eighteenth-century operatic soprano Francesca Cuzzoni (1696-1778) refused to sing an aria George Frederick Handel (1685-1759) had written for her, he grabbed her and said, “I know you are a she-devil, but I am Beelzebub, the king of all the devils, and I swear that if you don’t sing that air this very minute, I’ll throw you out of the window.”<sup>1</sup> Although this anecdote might encourage feelings of sympathy for the singer, a closer examination reveals that Handel was very likely at his wit’s end with Cuzzoni. Many opera singers of the eighteenth century, both male and female, were extremely difficult people with a penchant for highhandedness and erratic behavior, largely because opera was one of the most popular and influential art forms in Europe during the 1700s. In the major centers of European culture, especially Naples, Paris, and London, the art form reflected cultural attitudes and deeply affected the masses. Opera stars commanded the attention of the public by being at the center of cultural life. However, a strange incongruity existed with regard to them as well. Opera singers were popular and influential, but they were also scandalous individuals. Though they entertained all

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1. Francis Rogers, “Handel and Five Prima Donnas,” *The Musical Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (April 1943): 217, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/739522>.

levels of society, including the aristocracy, they did not have an acceptable place in that same society. Both prima donnas and castrati, male singers castrated as children to prevent their voices from changing, particularly experienced the worshipful love of the masses but also their unabating rejection. The foundation for this response is found in the personal and professional behavior of the singers. Although opera was an essential part of eighteenth-century European culture, the paradoxical disreputability of opera singers was based in the openly licentious lifestyles they frequently led, their behavior on stage, and, in the case of castrati, changing views on their physical mutilation.

Understanding the importance of opera singers and the subsequent peculiarity of their rejection by society requires an understanding of the importance of opera itself in European nations. In Naples, opera was a means for the monarchy to increase the status of the country, but the art also became an artistic commentary and reflection on political trends. In 1734, the kingdom was coming into its own as an independent nation and was, therefore, eager to establish itself politically and culturally. Anthony Deldonna pointed out in his study of opera in Neapolitan society that the new king, Charles of Bourbon (1716-1788), reorganized the kingdom “in the reality of an absolute monarchy.”<sup>2</sup> The uncontested control the monarchy sought to maintain over the nation included opera. Theater was so central to Neapolitan society that the Bourbon court enforced an old restriction regarding royal control. Under their new jurisdiction, any non-court affiliated entity who wanted to stage productions had to ask for special approval. In addition to this, the government censored the newly built Teatro di San Carlo, the theater at the center of cultural life in Naples. These policies were created and enforced to prevent ideas

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2. Anthony Deldonna, *Opera, Theatrical Culture and Society in Late Eighteenth-Century Naples* (Burlington, VT: Routledge, 2012), 13.

that were not conducive to the nationalistic thought the monarchy wanted.<sup>3</sup> Because of the absolutist nature of the court, the funding and controlling of theater in the city is unsurprising. The monarchy evidently saw theater as an extension of nationalistic ideals and desired to maintain their influence.

However, the operas written and performed in the Kingdom of Naples in the eighteenth century greatly reflected the ideals of the rulers and the populace. For example, the desire of the court to establish continuity with the past and to strengthen Neapolitan independence caused a fascination with antiquarianism.<sup>4</sup> A result was the writing of the comedic opera *Socrate immaginario*, which ultimately asked why the court was investing so much time in discovering the history of Naples but not sharing all of their discoveries with the common people. Thus, opera sometimes acted as a criticism of court practices, providing the public with a means of communicating with the monarchy.<sup>5</sup> Another important example of the value of opera in Neapolitan culture occurred in the writing of *Elfrida*. In the opera, the title character is based off of the queen of Naples, Maria Carolina Habsburg (1752-1814). Elfrida's militaristic tendencies reflected those of Queen Maria Carolina, who desired to respond quickly to the threat of the French Revolution against her sister, Marie Antoinette (1755-1793). Therefore, the opera once again provided a means for a commentary upon a political issue.<sup>6</sup> Opera was encouraged by the monarchy to establish desirable ideals among the people. However, the integration of political controversies by composers helped make opera in Naples into an important, multifaceted art form that was useful in expressing cultural and political commentary.

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3. Ibid., 3-4.

4. Ibid., 15.

5. Ibid., 39.

6. Ibid., 106-107.

Paris was a thriving center of politics and culture in the eighteenth century. In the city, opera had an important role not only because it was first promulgated by the aristocrats, but also because of the way the opera house itself defined the social classes and drew them together in a unique way. The powerful began the city's fascination with opera. The monarchy had a strong hold on the production of opera as early as 1669 with Louis XIV (1638-1715) issuing a special charter that created the *Académie de Musique*, which became the Paris Opéra.<sup>7</sup> During the early years of Louis' reign, his desire to create an absolutist state influenced him to take charge of the arts in such a way that "the wealth, prestige, and renown that success in Paris could bring" were his, and therefore effectively make himself "the primary arbiter of performing arts culture in France, if not in all of Europe".<sup>8</sup> Just like Naples, opera in France was a way for the absolutist monarchy begun by Louis XIV and continued by his successors to assert control and add to the government's significance. Seating in the opera house supported this claim, as the arrangement showed one's consequence and wealth. For example, people involved in politics had boxes closest to the stage where they were very obvious to the rest of the audience.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, people from all classes came to enjoy the opera and to let their opinions of it be known, sometimes very vociferously. Thus, opera houses allowed for a distinct mixing of the classes that forced Parisians to be aware of each other.<sup>10</sup> With the royalty supporting the arts in Paris, opera was a means of displaying the social hierarchy and also a way for people to come together for a common purpose, thus making opera an opportunity for reaching and influencing the masses.

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7. Sheldon Cheney, *The Theater, Three Thousand Years of Drama, Acting, and Stage Craft* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1952), 337.

8. Lauren Clay, *Stagestruck: The Business of Theater in Eighteenth-Century France and Its Colonies* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 72.

9. Ibid., 57-58.

10. Ibid., 3.

In London, the significance of opera was manifested both in the way the English government maintained control over the arts as well as in the ways that audiences behaved. Opera became popular in London in the first decades of the eighteenth century primarily through the efforts of George Frederick Handel.<sup>11</sup> The government controlled the licensing of opera in the city through the Lord Chamberlain's Office, and many prominent politicians both attended opera and saw its importance. Like any art form, opera reflected the cultural values and attitudes toward authority of the English people, sentiments that government officials needed to be aware of to preserve a strong and effective government.<sup>12</sup> Foreign, particularly Italian, opera was the favored form in England, and audiences possessed much influence over it. Opera scholar Ian Woodfield noted that when the playwright Frances Brooke (1724-1789) and her compatriots acquired the opera house known as the King's Theater in the latter half of the eighteenth century, they desired to show straight plays as well as opera. However, the loyal, wealthy audience of the King's Theater reacted negatively to the proposed change, and the scheme had to be abandoned.<sup>13</sup> The overarching interest European governments took in the staging of opera, in addition to British citizens' impact on opera in eighteenth-century London, the Kingdom of Naples' integration of political themes into the operatic works themselves, and the French means of making the opera house into a cultural center, emphasized the considerable role opera had in European culture during this period.

Regardless of the reality that opera as an art form had a tremendous role in eighteenth-century European society with far reaching influence, operatic performers had strong aura of

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11. Robert Thicknesse, "The History of Opera," *Scottish Opera*, <https://www.scottishopera.org.uk/discover-opera/history-of-opera/> (accessed November 12, 2017).

12. Paul Kléber Monod, "The Politics of Handel's Early London Operas, 1711-1718," *Journal Of Interdisciplinary History* 36, no. 3 (2006): 448-449.

13. Ian Woodfield, *Opera and Drama in Eighteenth-Century London: The King's Theatre, Garrick and the Business of the Performance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 30.

scandal and disreputability about them. An initial reason is found in the history of acting and the stage itself. The negative connotation has its foundation in ancient Rome. In her work *On Stage: A History of Theater*, Vera Mowry Roberts summarized the societal position of actors in ancient Rome. Not only did they belong to a class known as *infami*, they did not have rights as citizens, and their descendants could not marry senators. Anyone who became an actor gave up all of his rights and was no better than a slave.<sup>14</sup> Women could be on the stage in ancient Rome, but they either wore very promiscuous attire, or nothing at all.<sup>15</sup> The performances themselves became more scandalous in content over time. Because of the immoral nature of stage in ancient Rome, the Christian Church forbade its members from attending theaters and would not bury actors in Christian cemeteries.<sup>16</sup> The notorious nature of actors and societal opinion of them in ancient Rome left an impression that continued into the eighteenth century.

In addition to inherited ideas, the association of stage performers with immorality had another foundation in the lifestyles of opera singers, especially the women. As writer Mary Jane Matz explained, “Men of the aristocracy vied with each other to become the lovers of famous prima donnas.”<sup>17</sup> Contemporary evidence is largely supportive of this claim. A commentary on the singers working at the Paris Opéra in 1738 reveals that many of the lead singers had lovers from the same wealthy class that displayed its own consequence in the seating arrangements of the theater. Four out of nine of the girls named were coupled with noblemen with whom they were having affairs, some examples being M. le Duc de Mazarin, M. Bonnier de La Mosson, and M. le Duc de Rochechoüart.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the accounts of the chorus members of the Paris

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14. Vera Mowry Roberts, *On Stage: A History of Theater* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 75-76.

15. Ibid., 73.

16. Ibid., 76-77.

17. Mary Jane Matz, *Opera: The Grand and the Not So Grand* (New York: William Morrow and Company Inc., 1966), 87.

18. “Détail de la régie actual [sic] de l’Academie Royale de Musique avec un denombrement de tout ce qui

Opéra also mentioned in the document included little personal information beyond what they looked like and of whom they were the mistresses.<sup>19</sup> Female opera singers' licentious lifestyles made them appear scandalous in the eyes of the public. Author Vlado Kotnik described epistles written about opera singers in England in the early part of the eighteenth century in which they were characterized as "lustful, debauched, and engaged in illicit sexual activities."<sup>20</sup> The stigma of the deviance of opera singers' personal lives was well known and heavily impacted how society viewed them. However, these singers did not simply act improperly in their private lives. Their scandalous behavior sometimes affected their work as well.

Opera singers in the professional setting were often erratic and unpredictable, particularly when they were extremely famous. The popular singer Caterina Gabrielli (1730-1796) often cancelled her performances on a whim, and when she did sing, she insisted on having her current lover near the front of the stage where she could direct all of her singing to him throughout the entire opera.<sup>21</sup> Singers, however, did not only make spectacles out of themselves through their manner of performing. One infamous story involved Cuzzoni, the soprano Handel threatened with defenestration, and the singer Faustina Bordoni (1697-1781). The women developed a rivalry in London, which culminated in a physical fight between the two on stage during a performance.<sup>22</sup> Public impropriety was not limited to female opera singers. The castrato Caffarelli (1710-1783), while performing those same operas that reflected important societal trends in Naples, frequently hit his fellow performers during performances when they were off-

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fait la recette et la depense de ce spectacle en 1738," *Académie Royale de Musique vulgairement l'Opéra*, quoted in Graham Sadler, "Rameau's Singers and Players at the Paris Opéra: A Little-Known Inventory of 1738," *Early Music* 11, no. 4 (October 1983): 458, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3137872>.

19. Ibid., 461.

20. Vlado Kotnik, "The Idea of Prima Donna: The History of a Very Special Opera's Institution," *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 47, no. 2 (December 2016): 242, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44234972>.

21. Alan Wagner, *Prima Donnas and Other Wild Beasts* (Larchmont, NY: Argonaut Books, 1961), 65-66.

22. Ibid., 72.



key, talked to friends in the audience during the opera, and even yelled out his negative opinions about other singers. A Neapolitan audience even saw him undergo incarceration for shouting insults during a performance in 1741.<sup>23</sup> Caffarelli also rejected a gift from King Louis XV (1710-1774) on account of it not including a picture of the king because only royal ambassadors received such a gift. Caffarelli merely said, “Then let His Majesty make the ambassadors sing.”<sup>24</sup> Between promiscuity off the stage and outrageous professional behavior on it, coupled with the long-standing distaste for stage performers, opera singers were generally not considered respectable in the eyes of society.

Given the fact that stage had disreputable associations since the time of ancient Rome, the question arises as to why singers in the eighteenth century made their already precarious positions worse by becoming known for erratic behavior. The answer is twofold. As already shown, opera was one of the most popular art forms in Europe, influencing politics and culture in a variety of ways and causing emotional responses from the public. As the people who physically delivered the popular commodity to European audiences, opera singers were naturally celebrated individuals. Singers in the eighteenth century had the unique opportunity of being the defining reason people went to the opera at all. Rather than serve as glorification for a composer, opera music strove to showcase the voices of the singers.<sup>25</sup> Because singers were the center of the entertainment, they changed the music as much as they wanted, sometimes during the performance itself. No limit existed as to what singers could or could not do to the composer’s work, including putting in arias from a totally different composer. Unsurprisingly, the emphasis on opera singers’ importance inflated their pride and encouraged them to behave shamelessly in

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23. Matz, 86.

24. Wagner, 176.

25. Victoria and Albert Museum, “18<sup>th</sup>-Century Opera,” *Victoria and Albert Museum*, <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/0-9/18th-century-opera/> (accessed November 12, 2017).

their professional careers.<sup>26</sup> Another reason for the impropriety so frequently betrayed by singers is actually found in the audience members themselves. Although opera singers suffered reproach for their conduct, they were simultaneously encouraged to behave that way because that was what the audience wanted to see. While discussing Cafarelli's temperament, Matz pointed out that the audience in Naples enjoyed seeing him hit people during the show.<sup>27</sup> Woodfield, when referring to Gabrielli, explained that no one "had any real interest in seeing a modest, well-conceived musical and acting performance. What they wanted (and got) was a star with the personal magnetism to cause a sensation."<sup>28</sup> A prime example that manifested this desire happened during the aforementioned Cuzzoni-Bordoni rivalry. London audiences formed into two groups, each favoring a particular singer, and attended the opera to cheer one on and boo the other.<sup>29</sup> Evidently, a circular reasoning existed in eighteenth-century Europe regarding stage. Singers acted in ways that earned them disapprobation as far as their reputations went, but audiences watched and loved them for the same reason. The stars' impropriety clearly destroyed their respectability, but the audience had no interest in respectability. They wanted a good show.

However, the disreputability of castrati was not simply rooted in public disdain for their controversial behavior. The practice of castration was extremely demeaning and cruel, and it was merely done because people wanted to preserve the high, angelic sounding voices of young boys. Despite the horrid nature of their mutilation, castratos were extremely popular both because of their talent and their physical attractiveness. Their popularity enabled them to make large amounts of money and live well.<sup>30</sup> For example, the castrato Farinelli (1705-1782) "could hold a

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26. Matz, 85.

27. Ibid., 86.

28. Woodfield, 130.

29. Rogers, 220.

30. Victoria and Albert Museum.

note for a whole minute and sing over three octaves.”<sup>31</sup> His skills allowed him to live like a king and collect priceless treasures.<sup>32</sup> However, parallel with this era where opera had an important societal function, was that of the Enlightenment. With increasing influence of Enlightenment ideals about nature and man’s rights as an individual in the late eighteenth century, castrati came under greater censure, especially in England and France. More than ever before people saw them as a twisted form of real manhood and an insult to the natural order.<sup>33</sup> People’s growing realization that castrati in their essence were unjustly mutilated human beings contributed in a totally new way to the cultural perception of opera singers as disgraceful members of society.

Opera had far reaching influence in the cultural and political climates of Naples, Paris, and London, but that did not change the deeply entrenched conviction of the disreputability of many of these stage performers. The men and women who chose this art as a career also chose a life of social rejection, albeit a luxurious social rejection. Within this paradox lies another. Audiences held singers as unrespectable because of their inappropriate actions on and off the stage, but also encouraged these actions. Regarding the outlook of opera singers, Mary Jane Matz observed, “Temperament alone could not guarantee permanent fame, but it became at least a certain and sure ticket to notoriety.”<sup>34</sup> The shallow and unfortunately cyclical nature of the relationships between singers and their audiences illustrates how eighteenth-century society was quite contradictory where theatrical culture was concerned. However, the Enlightenment trends that discouraged castration merely to sustain the existence of a pleasant voice posited a movement toward better understanding of human dignity. Indeed, a deeper assessment of the

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31. Ibid.

32. Matz, 86.

33. Martha Feldman, “Denaturing the Castrato,” *Opera Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (Summer/Autumn 2008): 178-179, doi: 10.1093/oq/kbp021.

34. Matz, 85.

positive influence of the Enlightenment regarding the arts in general would perhaps offer a more comprehensive understanding of how stage performers finally did earn respectability on the simple grounds of being extremely talented people. Beyond this, singers began to move from their exalted status when the power of opera managers and composers grew over the desires and demands of performers. Singers were no longer the sole reason people attended the opera.<sup>35</sup>

Also, people no longer go to opera houses for political or social reasons in this day and age, but rather for artistic enjoyment. However, this is better for the singer in many ways. Because they do not need to act outrageously for fame, singers have finally escaped the stigma of immorality that haunted them for so many centuries.

#### About the author

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35. Ibid., 93-94.

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