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THE MEZZO-SOPRANO VOICE: THE MELODRAMATIC SOUL OF ENCHANTMENT, EVIL, MOTHERHOOD AND MASCULINITY

How can we reshape the future if we know nothing of the past? I often think about the destiny of UR NINA, considered one of the greatest musicians of her time. She lived in the City of Ur, in Sumer, and was a sacred songstress long before the prophet Abraham led his people towards the Promised Land. How many people know that she was one of the first paid professional singers in music history?

In preparation for this paper I began to compile a list of roles which have been traditionally sung by medium and low female voices in the European operatic and music theatre tradition during the last four centuries. This is the outcome:

- adolescents
- boys
- brothel keeper
- cats (and various other animals including foxes)
- commanders of fleets, legions, troops of soldiers
- comic heroines
- courtesans fallen into disgrace
- death
- domineering elderly female relatives (mothers, aunts, grandmothers, ghosts of the past)
- elderly Earth Goddesses
- elderly nurses
- extremely elderly women

– aged confidantes
– evil women who are then redeemed
– exotic eastern princesses
– gods and goddesses
– gypsies
– ladies in waiting
– mothers
– mature schemers
– mistresses
– nuns and religious womenof all orders
– pages
– poor lost souls
– queens and princesses
– rivals to the heroines of the plot in course
– second cousins
– slaves
– sisters
– soldiers
– soothsayers
– the ‘other’ woman
– tragic peasants and country women
– trouser roles of all kinds
– wandering minstrels
– witches and mediums.

Composers have continued to use the lower female voice in this way for nearly six hundred years – perhaps the time has come for some change.

Thousands of years ago women earned their living as kedeshot, sacred

songstresses and consecrated prostitutes, in the temples dedicated to the Goddesses Ashera and Astarte. They sang with low raucous voices and played flutes. Some followed the Legions back to Rome and set up music circles called Ambubajarem Collegiam. They depended for their livelihood upon their beauty, their voices and their availability for extra-work (usually in bedchambers). Wellbred women despised them (unless they called them for music lessons), men looked upon them as exotic objects of desire. They were singers and the great-grandmothers of the women who later led family companies of musicians and actresses along the roads and highways of Europe.

I don't know if we can consider these wayfaring women the ancestors of those who, in the nineteenth century, took ocean liners to South America where they performed Puccini, Mascagni and Wagner, or of those who travelled from Southern to Northern Europe in the seventeenth century with contracts from a court or an impresario. What is certain is that the profession has always been one fraught with risks and uncertainties: a voice is here today but may not be here tomorrow. For many centuries singers were not buried in consecrated ground, and if many were free with their favours it was because they had to eat – you cannot sing on an empty stomach. They have married within their own circles or tried to marry into money; they have acquired jewels, almost like greedy magpies, after all "diamonds are a girl's best friend", probably because for so many thousands of years their songs have been rewarded with knick-knacks and bracelets. In the thirteenth century the city of Freiburg declared that all gypsies, witches and sorcerers could be killed by anyone without trial and in this way travelling musicians learned that the gift of a voice could also lead to them to the stake.

Why were the voices of the gypsies so feared? Perhaps because they were "low and melodious" and so very different to the high, nasal and stifled voices of the girls from good families or the well-schooled nuns who sang the Sunday masses?

It should not surprise us to learn then that very often the girls and women of theatrical families travelled dressed as young men and that the older women

earned their living as teachers, laundrywomen, nurses to the elderly and confidantes to the young in their groups, or by organising card games. What did all the singers want? Security, a regular marriage, a fixed abode, children who did not have to travel from one town to another, warmth in their old age.

This short historical presentation of the singer is essential if we wish to understand what it is about the low or middle-range female voice that has made it so "different" to the higher voices of the great "primadonnas" in opera history. It is said that nothing once lived is ever forgotten or lost and so perhaps the "travesty" experiences, the wayfaring life, the expediencies, the reputation given and held, all have something to do with the way in which composers (both male and female) have perceived the voice of the mezzo-soprano or erstwhile contralto.

When people refer to the mezzo-soprano voice today they often use the term to describe any lower sounding female voice – very probably because true contraltos are few and far between and because the great majority of mezzo-sopranos are forced to take on a repertory which encompasses both the traditionally contralto and mezzo repertoires. The constant raising of orchestral pitch has also, over the centuries, influenced the destiny of the lower female voices.

In former times pitch was lower – in the sixteenth century for example, a low A would correspond to today's F sharp and in Rossini's lifetime the low A was the equivalent of a modern low G. The pitch used today by the Vienna Philharmonic and many international opera houses means that it is now nearer to a G sharp. These changes are of relatively little importance in the lower ranges of the voice but are dramatic in the centre and top ranges of the instrument. Yesterday's top A or C (the highest good notes for a mezzo) are now top Bs or Ds and the traditional registers or passages in the voice are all thrown out of balance. When Bellini composed *La Sonnambula* or *Norma* for the Italian singer Giuditta Pasta, the diapason was lower than it is today and so although she had an extended mezzo-soprano voice she was able to sing those roles: today the same operas are cast with a soprano lirico leggiero to perform Amina and with a soprano lirico spinto or

even a soprano drammatico to sing Norma. Critics and opera lovers complain that today's voices are nowhere near those of forty years ago. In order to cope with an ever higher diapason singers are forced to lighten their sound and this means that the luxurious colours of the past will gradually become a phenomena only heard in collections of old recordings. Contemporary voice specialists believe that one of the problems is the question of frequent travel and too many performances but in actual fact today's singers travel less and sing less than their foremothers, who managed to perform under almost any conditions and as Adelina Patti once declared, "lived like peddlers or wandering Jews."

The classification of voices has acquired an almost instrumental value in European society and history: both male and female voices are divided into three main categories – high, medium and low. These classifications depend not just upon the effective vocal range and tessitura of the voice, but also upon the timbre or sound which depends upon the size of the vocal cords, the physical appearance of the singer, the kind of technique used to produce sound and also upon a further series of situations which vary from one part of Europe to another. It has always been very difficult to completely identify one voice with one particular kind of repertoire and the German 'Fach'-System is often misunderstood in those countries with a strong national repertoire and vocal aesthetic. We see this very clearly when certain voices are used in Germany for operas which, in Italy, would be performed by quite different singers.

In the 1500's polyphonic music already had used canto di gorgia (florid singing), variazioni (shadings or coloration) and the categories of voice we are familiar with today – superius (soprano), contratenore Altus (contralto), medius cantus (mezzo-soprano) – were used; women were not permitted to sing in church, so the sopranos and the mezzo-sopranos were boys or men who imitated the timbre of women's voices by using falsetto.

Castrate voices, or at least the best of them, became the very symbol of baroque opera because of their bravura and their fantastic, unreal timbre.

Subjected to the surgery called orchiectomy (removal of the testicles) as children before their voices changed, castratos retained all the vivid vibration of boys' voices, reinforced by the fullness, brilliance, sweetness and flexibility of women's voices. In some cities women's voices were preferred, but the lower voices were less popular because they were considered too harsh and realistic, even in the spoken language. Very often the low female was considered grotesque, thus leading to the use of this for elderly females, witches (as in Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*) and all things evil. The naturally lower voices were to be found even in *L'Incoronazione di Poppea* in the comic roles of the nurses of Ottavia and Poppea. Until the end of the 1700's the nurse was to be one of the standard character roles for all low voices – an elderly woman who weeps over the lost pleasures of love and gives bits of sage advice to the lord or master helping to carry out his schemes where necessary.

Venetian opera used women's voices during the period in which Rome did not: the sopranos were all either amorose (women in love) or their rivals or lively adolescents who were courted by men their own age and even by young malicious cunning female characters who behaved provocatively and then sneered at those who fell in love with them. The soprano rarely engaged in vocal acrobatics and her range was that of the modern mezzo-soprano: the most interesting roles and solo parts in the vocal cantatas, so popular in Venice, are surely those written on the one hand for Vivaldi's mistress and live in singer, Anna Giraud, and slightly later on for the composer Hasse's wife, the Venetian mezzo Faustina Bordoni Hasse.

During the Baroque period it should be noted that composers used both male and female voices for female roles and the castrates were also used for roles figuring young lovers, probably because the aesthetics of the day felt that the baritone and the tenor voices were too rough for delicate love songs. All of the travesty roles were created for singers who were well-known to the composers and all of these, quite apart from their vocal qualities, were well known for their personal and

physical appearances.

Initially the lower voices were used for the portrayal of elderly domestics, nurses, scheming and wicked women, while in the second half of the sixteenth century they were used for rivals in love, or even young lovers (trouser roles). The higher voices were young women in love, sometimes also young men in love and the intermediate range, the mezzo-soprano, was almost completely ignored rather like that of the baritone. In a certain sense this "type casting" should not surprise us at all: the family companies of musicians and singing actors and actresses that toured Italy from one town to another and from one contract to another were fundamentally matriarchal. The women were the stars, they sang, played instruments and danced and the men served as guardians, accompanied the singers, and dealt with all the business and legal matters. The tradition of family companies was hard to die and the first group of singers to present the operas of Mozart and Rossini in New York was that run by Manual Garcia and his wife. He sang the principal male roles, his daughter Maria the younger female roles and the trouser roles and his wife sang the roles of the more elderly women in the stories. In a family company from the fifteenth century onwards everyone performed according to their abilities and to their age. So it was considered normal for a mature woman to sing mature roles and for a young singer (they began to perform in their early teens) to take on more youthful parts and trouser roles – after all the girls travelled dressed as men most of the time anyway. Operas such as Cavalli's dealt in a swooning eroticism; they required of women singers qualifications listed by a commentator in 1663 – beauty, rich clothes, attractive singing, appropriate acting, more or less in that order – rather than dazzling technical ability.

It is fascinating to read that even thousands of centuries ago women singers were described in the same way. In the Egyptian Museum in Turin, Italy, there is a sarcophagus for the sacred songstress, Tabakekhonso, renowned during her lifetime for the beauty of her voice and the originality of the works she composed.

Egyptian and later Arabian singers had to have beautiful appearances, extremely varied and rich wardrobes, jewellry suitable for the clothes they wore and needed to perform well on a variety of musical instruments rather like the singers in the early baroque period.

Audiences also enjoyed the spectacle of women dressed up as men and men dressed up as women (sometimes of a woman acting the part of a man disguised as a woman); this seems to have been part of a cult of sexual ambiguity that affected vocal casting as well particularly in opera of about 1630–1650, where a soprano hero often sang opposite a contralto heroine or a tenor nurse confronted an impudent valet sung by a young woman. Transvestism had been condemned by various Church fathers as no better than fornication and one of the most famous travesty singers of this period was the mezzo-soprano Vittoria Tesi who in 1738 refused to sing these roles any more on the grounds that acting a male part is bad for health – perhaps the strain was bad for her public image (incidentally she married a barber, for convenience, and was for many years the official lover of a Cardinal).

Women singers in the early days of opera, whatever their vocal range, were not seen as straightforward professional musicians: the general opinion was that they could not acquire the highest musical skills because under the social proprieties of the day they could not take lessons from men other than their relatives. The fact that they showed their legs in male roles kept them out of “polite society”. Under normal circumstances a singer would not be considered marriageable material.

It should also be remembered that from the first productions of melodramas and even before that when many courts in Northern Italy had their own in-house orchestras and groups of women musicians, it was impossible for a woman to be given a contract unless she was married or accompanied by a father, brother or husband. Very often marriage to a certain colleague was part of the contract that was offered: otherwise the singers were accompanied by their mothers. These, as we learn from Benedetto Marcello’s most amusing book *Teatro alla Moda* acted

as ruffians (finding protectors, contracts and extra work for their daughters), or as a sort of modern press or publicity officer and their work included the finding of compliant men who became husbands to the travelling prima donna.

Most women singers sought male protection – some could be considered courtesans or prostitutes since in the course of their careers they had many protectors. Others had protectors to establish that they were not courtesans. Agents sold their singers not just for their vocal qualities and stage presence but also for their availability after performances and the mezzo Giuseppina Grassini was an excellent example of a singer who doubled her fees through her overtime: she was mistress to both Wellington and Napoleon.

Travelling singers had the sort of life that cannot even be imagined now: they lived in great promiscuity, had to cope with unwanted pregnancies and even hide their children from their impresarios and from the public. Mezzo-soprano Maria Malibran had two illegitimate children during her pre-nuptial affair with the violinist De Beriot. The first child died and the second was educated in the country and kept a well-hidden secret. Abortions were common and fear of losing a contract meant that many pregnancies were terminated during the periods in which a singer was performing almost daily.

During the second half of the seventeenth century the vocality used in the serious Italian operas was already beginning to decline: less virtuosity was requested although the technical level required was very high. Composers (Gluck, Anfossi, Galuppi, and Jommelli) began to write works that were more realistic and that quite obviously owed a lot to the ever-growing popularity of the opere buffe. The almost spoken comic arias of the opere buffe used the central part of the voice and the castratos had no place at all in these works.

Mention must be made here of all the comic roles written for the middle range voice, beginning with those composed by the authors of the Neapolitan School for the small theatres in Naples (followed by those written for the theatres and halls in Venice). Since the heroines of these operas were simple girls from the country, the

language that they used was that of the people, of the streets and of the taverns and in those venues high voices were rarely heard. Originally the comic female roles were written for whoever was around, or already under contract n a theatre – for example Serpina in Pergolesi's *La Serva Padrona* – but later they came to be written for all the young women singers available including those for extremely agile voices. This kind of singer inspired roles such as Rosina in *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* or even Isabella in *L'Italiana in Algeri*.

In 1709 one of the two Neapolitan opera houses, the Fiorentini, was in danger of closing down and the impresarios believed that certain comic operas in local dialect, which had previously been presented in private theatres, could bring in a paying public. The venture was an immediate success and the Fiorenti became the recognised locale for opera buffa. The scenes in the operas reflected not only the everyday life in the streets of the city but owned their artistic birth in a great part to the Atalani, the plays in the vulgate, which had first been presented during the period in which the entire south of Italy was part of the Magna Grecia. In those early comedies the characters were few and easily recognisable: there was always an elderly man ready to be fooled and cuckolded, an elderly scheming woman, a young and clever girl (usually a country or peasant girl) in love with a young simple man (sometimes of humble birth but very often from a higher social class), a young, conniving servant girl, a stupid soldier, a mature widow ready to take on a younger lover or a second husband, a notary/lawyer/judge with limited intellectual capacities and so on. If we analyse most of the operas being written up until the second half of the last century, we can find these same characters over and over again.

That long period in opera history known as belcanto (a technical term used to describe a highly virtuosistic form of vocality), was also a poetic vision of a musical/vocal world of absolute beauty grounded in the fables and myths set to music by generations of composers. Composers, librettists and singers were all aware that they were not impersonating living human beings and that they would

be judged on their inventiveness, and in the case of singers upon their ability to shade, colour, embellish. Gradually the vocal range of singers increased as composers and librettists "catalogued" a series of arias that come to make up the bread and butter of every opera of the period. There are arie di sdegno, guerra, sogno, scongiuro, gelosia, vendetta, amore, seduzione, civetteria, commiato, morte etc. Singers were supposed to be able to exhibit great agility in some arias and long delicate lines in others. Composers began to realise that some voices (usually those higher) could excel in some techniques, the lower voices in others. It should be understood that the relatively small orchestral and instrumental ensembles used to accompany the singers enabled these to undertake enormously acrobatic passages with a minimum of effort. Later on with the increase in size of both the orchestras and the theatres they would have great difficulty in taking on similar virtuosity and, as the history of opera demonstrates, careers would be considerably shorter. Isabella Colbran, for example, a singer with a voice between that of the modern soprano and mezzo-soprano and the artist for whom Rossini composed fourteen operas, had a very short singing career by ancient or modern standards. She started out in her early teens with a sixteenth century repertoire and then moved on to sing the operas of her time: by the time she was forty she had very little voice left at all.

Italian opera travelled throughout the rest of Europe and towards the end of the seventeenth century "opera" had become the most interesting and important form of musical theatre with national forms developing in France, Germany, Spain and even in some parts of Eastern Europe (Poland for example). Mozart conserved a uniquely Italian ideal for his singers and his vocal writing in all of his operas be they in the Italian or German language and also continued the Italian tradition of "primadonnas" and "seconda donnas" as in *Così fan tutte* or in *La Clemenza di Tito*.

At the end of the seventeenth century and at the beginning of the eighteenth there was a fundamental difference between the vocality of the Italian operas and of the

French. However it is quite clear that the success of semi-comic Italian operas in France led to a number of changes in the way in which composers set their works for singers. Throughout the period in which Paer, Mayr and Rossini were active two solutions were adopted: The young lover is usually a tenor and his rival is a woman "en travesty" and is usually a mezzo-soprano or a contralto. This is the solution which Rossini prefers and thanks to him the lower female voice is given a visibility and an authority that it had never had before in the past. Castratos, which had never been popular in France, were banished entirely from the theatres by Napoleon and since repertoire couldn't change overnight all the operas that had hitherto used castratos as young lovers had to give these roles to women. Given the usual range of the castratos the only singers who could cope with this writing were the "seconda donne" or lower voices – mezzos and contraltos.

The term "mezzo-soprano" came into being in the fullest sense possible in the eighteenth century and was used abundantly by Rossini, Verdi and their contemporaries. Manuel Garcia described the voice as being halfway between that of the contralto and the soprano and as having a range between low G and top A or C, while Delle Sedie describes the voice as having a range between low G and top C. (It should be clearly stated that these are maximum normal outside ranges as used by Verdi in *Ballo in Maschera* (Ulrica's low G in "Silenzio") or in Eboli's aria in *Don Carlos* ("O don fatale"). However there are authors who have attempted to go beyond these – for example Gubaidulina in *Oratorio per l'Era dell'Acquario* which takes the singer down to a low F.) Delle Sedie described the voice as being "flexible, full toned and wide ranged" with a number of characteristics similar to those of a dramatic soprano and in fact there are many operas where the sound produced by both the primadonnas, the soprano and the seconda donna, the mezzo-soprano is remarkably similar.

Donizetti, Bellini and Meyerbeer continued to write "travesty" roles for women but as more romantic texts were used (inspired by the literary ferments of the period) the higher voices were used more frequently to embody spotless maidens,

tragic virgins, religious figures and depressed or mad victims. The "Victorian Nightingale" syndrome did not begin with Jenny Lind – she merely happened to come along at the right time for public taste and official approval. The baritone voice suddenly came into its own in a series of roles written for judges, kings, cuckolded husbands, conspirators and the like (rather like those used in the original opere buffe) and the middle range female voice, the "seconda donna", also came out into the open as a quite clearly defined vocal reality: the mezzo-soprano. In this period the mezzo was seen as the rival to all the hapless and virginal sopranos singing the leading roles (Agnes in *Beatrice di Tenda*) and even in France a new voice known as the Falcon (from the name of the first interpreter of Halévy's *La Juive*) was defined, a voice that was somewhere between that of the highest sopranos and a little clearer in colour than the Italian mezzo-sopranos.

The new kind of writing for voices had many victims. Singers used to singing a seventeenth century virtuosistic repertoire could not necessarily cope with fragmented consonants, a realistic kind of recitative and the larger orchestral forces brought into play and this, in the end, led to a kind of "definition" of voices – soprano coloratura, soprano lirico, soprano drammatico, mezzo-soprano acuto, mezzo-soprano drammatico, contralto lirico, contralto drammatico. Verdi's writing, in particular, changed the way in which singers breathed and he wrote for individual singers with extremely personal characteristics: more victims fell by the way but the course of vocal writing was not destined to turn backwards. He used the mezzo-soprano as a rival to the soprano (Principessa Eboli against Elisabetta in *Don Carlos*; Aida in rivalry with Amneris in *Aida*) and for mature and elderly women (rather like Fides in *La Juive*) and for a series of gypsies and soothsayers (Azucena, Ulrica, Preziosilla).

L'opera lirique which developed in this period in France continued to use the lower voices for elderly mature women, or occasionally for wayfarers and peasants as different as Mignon and Carmen. Germany also developed its own form of "role models" for the medium and low voices using them as nurses,

confidantes, emanations of evil and for trouser roles. Wagner chose dramatic sounding voices for most of his heroines and wrote for the effective vocal range of the singers available for the productions. Some can be sung by either dramatic sopranos or mezzos (Kundry for example), lower voices are always used for rivals (Ortrud, Venus), mothers (Fricka, Erda) and for confidantes and nurses (Brangäne, Mary).

Verismo burst on to the scene at the end of the last century and exasperated a series of qualities already being used by composers elsewhere in Europe: sopranos continued to work within categories – the most popular of which was no longer necessarily the "nightingale" but very often the more dramatic soprano lirico spinto (due to the more plebeian content of the operas themselves) and the lower female voices, apart from a few excursions again into male roles. (Amico Fritz, Zanetto) were once more relegated to secondary roles: elderly gypsies or nuns, regal maternal figures (la Zia in *Suor Angelica*) and very occasionally peasants with decidedly anti-conformist behaviour (both Lola and Santuzza in *Cavalleria rusticana*).

This century has been witness to a number of changes in musical repertoire, use and commercialisation. On the one hand theatres are continuing to present music from the distant past in a somewhat museum-like way – if it's Verdi, Puccini, Wagner or Mozart we sell tickets – and composers on the other, given the rare opportunities of writing for and working with singers, have lost all clear conception of what a voice or a vocal range really is: some write for 'dark' or 'light' coloured voices, others write for a universal voice and require extended vocal techniques that can be performed by any voice in any register (or at least in theory). Perhaps we are going towards a new period in which voices will be considered simply high and low: however, until the training of singers includes a full immersion in the music of this century, and until the same singers are actively involved in the promotion of new works for their voices, it is unlikely that traditional role models will change.

In an epoch in which the difference of gender is discussed at all levels and in all fields, we as singers must realise that it is our uniqueness as women human beings that gives us our voices and our individual sounds. Physicians and voice specialists know only too well that lower female voices are found in women with thick, longer vocal cords, long necks, large cranial cavities and large lungs (generally speaking). These characteristics are found in women with a hormone balance that expresses itself in different ways resulting, in certain periods, to a rougher and more raucous sound than that of higher voices. On the other hand the owners can have easier menopause and, when they wish, longer careers than their higher voiced sisters. Some low or middle voices develop in women with even greater hormonal imbalances, thus leading to leaner longer bodies and thicker vocal cords that enable them to act and sing male roles more convincingly (remember the number of slim Orlovskys we have all seen on stage). Quite clearly a singer like contralto Marietta Alboni (known as the elephant with a nest of nightingales in her bosom) produced a very different sound to that of Pauline Viardot Garcia (a look at their portraits clarifies this), although both sang Ernani (yes, the principal role usually sung by baritones), Arsace (the Commander in *Semiramide*) and Malcolm (in *La Donna del Lago*) in their repertoire.

Today all singers must learn to cope with scores written for the Universal Voice (unique qualities as hitherto described are no longer the order of the day) – if you can hum it you can sing it – and with composers who believe that any note on the keyboard can be pitched with exactly the same number of vibrations: a singer should never complain even about metronome times. “If I can sing it, you can” is the composer’s creed, not realising that his/her sound won’t travel further than a metre, while the singer has probably devoted most of her lifetime to projecting whispers above orchestras. It is amazing, too, how few contemporary composers are interested in lower and middle range female voices for major roles in their operas (or music theatre, or multi-media works or even oratorios). A glance through the repertory produced in Europe in the last fifteen years

underlines that the lower voices are still being “type-cast” in exactly the same way as they were in the eighteenth century. Britten wrote well for mezzos because they are almost the national voice in England, Berio did too, because his first wife was one, whereas Bussotti refuses to believe they exist!

Many singers, including myself, have commissioned new works for their own voices and it is important that others do likewise. Of course singing Eboli or Smeton or a Rheintochter is far more lucrative, but if singers like Pasta or Malibran or Viardot or, nearer to us, Berberian, had only thought about money and not about creating something new, the world of music, and the rest of us, would be very much poorer and our general repertoire would still be where it was not just one hundred years ago but probably three hundred years ago.