

From the Bel Canto Stage to Reality TV: A Musicological View of Opera's Child Prodigy Problem

Peter Mondelli



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EVERY FEW MONTHS, A YOUNG SINGER, usually a young woman, takes the stage in front of network TV cameras and sings. Sometimes she sings Puccini, sometimes Rossini, rarely Verdi or Wagner. She receives praise from some well meaning but uninformed adult judge, and then the social media frenzy begins. Aunts and uncles start sharing videos, leaving comments about how talented this young woman is. A torrent of blog posts and articles follow shortly thereafter. The most optimistic say that we in the opera world should use this publicity as a means to an end, to show the world at large what real opera is—without ever explaining how. The sentiment that seems to prevail, though, is that this performance does not count. This is not real opera. Opera was never meant to be sung by such a voice, at such an age, and under such conditions.

Two years ago, Laura Bretan's performance of Puccini's "Nessun dorma" on *America's Got Talent* evoked the usual responses.¹ Claudia Friedlander responded admirably, explaining that there are basic physiological facts that keep operatic child prodigies at a distance from vocally mature singers.² More common, however, are poorly researched posts like the one on the "Prosporo" blog run by *The Economist*.³ Dubious claims abound—Jenny Lind, for example, hardly retired from singing as the post claims at age twenty-nine, the year before P. T. Barnum invited her to tour North America. Worse still are the memes, the curtly captioned images that now pervade the Internet. One stands out in my mind, a variant of the Batman-slaps-Robin meme. Robin says, "Have you heard the latest 13-year-old . . ." Batman, hitting him, cuts him off, "That's not opera!"⁴

But what counts as real opera? What counts as real singing? Who gets to decide? As a musicologist who writes about operas and singers, I have an interest in these questions. What troubles me, however, is the extent to which the experts among us are willing to fall back on tired tropes without ever thinking about the consequences. We tend to speak of opera as some hallowed, immutable tradition that has always demanded certain standards. From a historian's standpoint, however, this sells opera short, not only by misrepresenting how the genre existed in the past, but also by limiting too severely what it could be moving forward. By placing our hope in some abstract notion of "the way it has always been," we disenfranchise ourselves,

putting our own visions for the genre aside while denigrating the least powerful among us, namely the passionate but often misguided adolescents.

In this article, I would like to offer a different perspective on opera's child prodigy problem, one that addresses unflinchingly the historical elephant in the room. For most of its 400-year existence, opera has embraced voices that we would consider immature. Our modern pedagogic practices present a well justified break from that tradition. Focusing on the historical circumstances of the standard bel canto repertory, I will provide evidence that the average female singer's career peaked between about age twenty to age thirty-five, implying that most successful singers must have been doing exactly what Laura Bretan did: learning and singing mature repertory in their teens.

I highlight these facts not because I seek some return to the old abuses of the Italian bel canto tradition. Far from it: I believe we have a moral imperative to use hard science as our guide and not damage voices. If anything, acknowledging the history of bel canto practice can serve as a warning. I highlight these facts, rather, to show that we evoke traditions and frame our art as purely traditional at our peril. To understand why, however, we first need to understand and contextualize more honestly some of opera's old traditions.

CAREERS AND CONTEXTS, THEN AND NOW

For the modern opera singer, a career can seem structured like an ordered list: earn a Bachelor of Music degree, learn some roles and sing them, teach middle and high school students, maybe go to graduate school, audition everywhere in order to make the transition from paying to sing into being paid to sing, and, ideally, find a way to balance teaching, performing, family, sanity, etc. Every step runs through an institution, whether a conservatory, an opera company, or a high school music lesson program. The process moves slowly, but there is no need to rush, because the best physiological evidence shows that a voice will not be a mature instrument until at around age thirty-five or forty.

Our value judgments about career trajectories are grounded in two sources: medical science and institutional judgment. We have wisely accepted biology as

both the limit to what is possible and the guide to what is healthy. As for what we consider not just healthy singing, but good singing, we have developed an entire system of schools, summer programs, and companies, all designed to cultivate an operatic status quo. Those with a certain threshold of raw talent are invited to put in the work and time needed to develop into conventionally good, institutionally sanctioned singers over the course of a decade or two. As we all know, most careers depend not just on latent talent, but also on artistry cultivated through training; and many of us are primarily employed by institutions that serve that purpose. Ours is an art and an economy of refinement.

Yet if we look back about two centuries, we can see a completely different system with different values. To make it as a singer in the early nineteenth century meant to work without recordings and cameras, without degrees and young artist programs. Success meant jumping into a network of fiercely competitive, locally operated houses, often at an early age.

As is well documented, these houses, especially in Italy, worked in a competitive market system at a frantic pace.⁵ Impresarios would hire composers and librettists to write for local companies. Sometimes star singers were hired; sometimes they arrived in town with little advance notice.⁶ Most often, a core of local repertory singers would take on new roles. The process of writing and staging a new opera—from composition through rehearsals to a premiere—would take about two months. New works would hold the stage only as long as they continued to make money. Some left the repertory quickly, others made the rounds to theaters in the regions. A select few became international successes.

This system presented singers with professional realities vastly different from our own.

- 1) There was little time for refinement. Rehearsals were limited to a few weeks. To best show off their abilities, some singers substituted arias from operas they already knew.⁷ Stars would take their favorites on the road, a phenomenon that explains, among other things, the repetition of names like "Lindoro" in bel canto libretti.
- 2) Impact mattered most. Success in these circumstances depended on the ability to amaze and move an audience.⁸ Maria Malibran stands out in this regard; critics were at times moved to remark less on her voice itself,

and more on her ability to convey emotion through her singing and acting.⁹ Composers, impresarios, and fellow singers doubtless appreciated technique and refinement, but fees were paid and careers were built on emotional impact.

- 3) Success almost always guaranteed burnout. The push to make as much money as quickly as possible meant a singing schedule more akin to Broadway than to the Metropolitan Opera. Singers were often expected to sing four or more performances per week, and were castigated when they refused. John Rosselli cites numerous examples of such demanding schedules. Nozzari, a tenor, was called "capricious" in 1809 when he refused to take the stage more than three or four times per week. Giuseppina Strepponi sang Norma five times in six days.¹⁰ Under such circumstances, it is clear that less demanding contracts were a luxury, as when Giuditta Pasta's 1826 contract for the Royal Opera in London specified that she would not be obligated to sing more than six performances per month.¹¹
- 4) Pedagogy was scientifically and technologically limited. Early nineteenth century doctors like Francesco Bennatti describe how the human voice produced high and low tones, observing and normalizing as scientific fact the raising and lowering the larynx according to the register of the piece.¹² This is doubtless because few people understood how the organ itself worked. Before the laryngoscope came into use in the mid-nineteenth century, teaching techniques focused more on the mouth than on the invisible, mysterious throat.¹³
- 5) For women singers especially, burnout mattered less. The idea that a woman would wait to start a career until after age thirty was preposterous to patriarchal, nineteenth century standards. Women would debut young, sing for fifteen to twenty years, and either get married or live out their lives in poverty once their instrument started to fail. The fact that scant documentation on women singers exists after their retirement testifies to these social realities.¹⁴

Whereas our operatic system validates the biological realities of the voice by encouraging singers to wait until they are vocally mature, the early nineteenth century Italian system was structured with neither knowledge of nor respect for the physiology of the instrument. The

artistic, economic, and sociological realities two centuries ago show us a radically different vision of a normal career. From the standpoint of opera's history, then, our system is anything but traditional.

YOUNG ADULTS ON STAGE

In the bel canto era, "vocal maturity" came early. Whereas we now know that the voice does not fully develop until age thirty-five or forty, singers two centuries ago would take the stage at a much younger age. The appendices at the end of this article list every female singer who premiered a role in a Rossini, Bellini, or Donizetti opera about whom reliable documentary evidence is readily accessible.¹⁵ As this list shows, most of these women made their professional debuts between age fifteen and twenty, and retired within two decades.

The bel canto stage was thus populated with singers in their teens, twenties, and early thirties. The ages at which many of these singers created now iconic roles are surprising for those of us used to seeing careers flourish after forty. Some of the most surprising include:

- Geltrude Righetti-Giorgi, who created Rosina and Cenerentola between the ages of 22 and 24.
- Giulia Grisi, who created Adalgisa at 20.
- Fanny Tacchinardi-Persiani, who created Lucia at 22.
- Sabine Heinefetter, who created Adina at 22.
- Luigia Abbadia, who created Maria in the Italian version of *La figlia del reggimento* at 18.

That these singers created such difficult roles in their late teens and early twenties implies that their entire careers were shifted earlier. To have earned the trust of composers and impresarios, these singers would have needed to establish reputations beforehand. The young age at which many of them debuted attests to this. Even singers like Isabella Colbran and Giuditta Pasta, whose careers flourished well into their thirties, debuted young. Yet to make such an early debut, they would have needed exposure to the style even earlier.

The only way this is possible is if these young women began singing operatic repertory in their early teens. There is ample evidence to support this claim. Adelina Patti, for example, performed in concert in New York at age seven, having already studied voice and piano with members of her family for several years.¹⁶ Yet Patti was far from the only child singing before the public. In Italy,

children's opera companies were fairly common in large cities, and remained so into the early twentieth century. Although most focused on lighter, comic operas, John Rosselli has documented a company in which children undertook serious operas like *Lucia* and *Rigoletto* in treble in 1903.¹⁷ While children and adolescents may not have started with such difficult music—nineteenth century publishers' catalogs are replete with less demanding salon pieces like vocal romances and nocturnes—it seems that a twelve- or thirteen-year-old singing operatic repertory would have been an entirely common occurrence in the nineteenth century.

It is also possible, though not often discussed, that the subject matter in so much of the bel canto repertory may have resonated not just with older audience members, but also with young adults and adolescents. So many of its themes—young love, transgression versus obedience, desire versus duty, and so forth—may have had a more direct impact on younger audience members, all the more so when sung by someone in his or her teens or twenties. Our preoccupation with seeing opera as a mature art sung by mature voices may have blinded us to the many ways in which the genre could have been intended for younger singers and audiences. While this may seem like a boon to those looking for ways to reach out, this notion of young adult opera may ultimately be a vision of the genre that we ought to let go, not because it comes from some irrecoverably distant historical past, but because it represents a past that we might not want to recover.

HISTORY AS CAUTIONARY TALE

History is often taken as an instruction manual in the operatic world. Good singers and teachers are trained to know the historical and biographic background of the repertory. They know which editions to recommend and why. And history can provide meaningful answers to interpretive questions. Knowing about a poet or composer's life, world, and style can illuminate his or her artwork, adding depth to performances.

Yet history can also serve as a warning. The appendices included with this article are not meant to advocate teaching mature repertory to vocally immature teenage singers. Quite the opposite, they are meant to show what happens when you start too young. Nearly every

singer listed began working professionally before the age of twenty. Almost none of them continued to sing past forty. Most started before twenty and retired before thirty-five. Although the sounds of their voices and the conditions of their instruments are lost to history, we can infer from these statistics that in nearly every case, their instruments gave out from premature overuse. For entire generations, the best singers had careers that rarely lasted more than two decades.

The world in which they found their success exacted a heavy toll. The system that created the bel canto repertory demanded that they act against the best interests of their own bodies. While the public viewed them as artists, the system viewed them as laborers, or even as parts in a machine, capable of being replaced when no longer able to serve a designated purpose. A select few lived and died in the public eye; Maria Malibran comes to mind.¹⁸ For most, however, a brief turn in the spotlight was overshadowed by decades of anonymity, poverty, or both. The luckiest married into the aristocracy or *haute-bourgeoisie* before they got too old to keep singing. The others struggled.

We need not look as far back in operatic history as the bel canto era to see examples of singers who started too soon running into problems. The most famous is Maria Callas. Born in 1923, Callas began training seriously at thirteen, and was singing repertory as heavy as Santuzza in a student production of *Cavalleria rusticana* just two years later.¹⁹ By the late 1940s, she was singing Wagnerian dramatic soprano repertory while simultaneously learning bel canto roles, often on short notice. Her career, in many respects, mirrors that of a singer from the 1810s and '20s: pushed too hard and too soon. In her case, recordings attest to a gradual decline in control over the course of the 1950s before her retirement in the 1960s. We can imagine that many singers working a century earlier experienced a similar unravelling of their instruments.

Not all, however, were lucky enough to live comfortably after retirement. More typical are cases like that of Maria Galvany.²⁰ Born in Grenada around 1878, Galvany made her debut in 1896 (age seventeen or eighteen) and toured internationally for the next fifteen years. By the 1910s, however, her career was beginning to falter. Although biographic evidence is scarce, listening to recordings can help fill in the blanks. Galvany had an

otherworldly coloratura sound with a distinct, whistle-tone upper register. The sound is both unforgettable and completely unsustainable. As her instrument went into decline, she came to the Americas seeking work, gradually moving from opera houses to vaudeville. She died in poverty in Rio de Janeiro in 1949.

In opera's four-century history, stories like these played out many times. This article's brief overview of bel canto era singers shows that they rarely ended well. Perhaps we ought not keep silent about the genre's historical realities. Perhaps, when confronted with the next well meaning adolescent singer, we ought to try a different approach, for we cannot honestly tell them that opera was never meant for young voices. It was often written for young voices—the historical documentation is undeniable on that point. But opera embraced young singers for all the wrong reasons. We cannot hold to our values, both aesthetic and ethical, while trying to emulate that past. Yet the more fully we understand that past, the more we can use it not to disparage, but to empower young singers. We can tell them that opera used to be different, but it changed because our values changed. We can tell them that their careers are no longer meant to end when they marry or have children. Singing Puccini at thirteen may win accolades now, but they are living in a world that, thankfully, treats their careers as long-term endeavors. We should not, in other words, let the weight of tradition break and ruin our young singers the way that it broke and ruined so many other singers centuries ago.

THE CASE FOR ANTITRADITIONAL OPERA

By shifting singing careers later to align with what we know about the physiology of voice, the modern operatic world has accomplished something truly remarkable: it has broken with a centuries-old way of thinking about, teaching, and producing opera. We ought to be proud of that, for it shows that we are capable of leaving some traditions behind when they no longer align with what we think is best for our art form, our students, or ourselves. Although opera's roots run deep, they need not bind us if we do not want to be bound.

And this, in turn, brings me back to my opening questions: What counts as real opera? What counts as real singing? And who decides? The answers offered by historical traditions might not satisfy us. Our values are

different, our tastes are different, and both are constantly changing. Even looking at sources from within the bel canto era, we see a wide variety of opinions about what opera ought to be. Stendahl, for example, wrote in his *Life of Rossini* that the Parisians would do well to adopt more of the behaviors and attitudes of their Italian contemporaries.²¹ Thus, from a historian's perspective, what counts as real opera has varied considerably from time to time, from place to place.

I propose, therefore, that we stop citing tradition as a way of discrediting the work of young singers who we think are doing something wrong. We could, rather, reimagine opera as an antitraditional art form, one that can turn to tradition from time to time, but not one that is ultimately bound to it. For when it comes to defining opera and answering questions about which pieces and performances count, no one is better positioned to decide than we are. It is not our duty to pass down an old legacy without reexamining it critically; it is our duty to keep opera relevant to our values. Every season, every semester, even every day, we have the ability to begin to change the things about our genre that no longer work. We can speak out, ask questions, and start conversations that could reshape the future. We are, in short, empowered.

In the end, this is what the history of opera repeatedly affirms: that anything can be changed. Much what has worked best for the genre in the past four centuries has come from the power of reevaluation. Whether experiments of the Camerata, or the reforms of Gluck and Wagner, or the revisions of Mozart and Verdi, the story of opera is predicated on thinking critically, asking questions, and finding new solutions. It is up to us to continue this ongoing renovation.

APPENDIX A

Female Role Creators in Rossini's Operas

Belloc-Giorgi, Teresa (b. 2 July 1784, d. 13 May 1855)

Debut 1801—age 16 or 17

Isabella, *L'inganno felice* (8 January 1812—age 27)

Ninetta, *La gazza ladra* (31 May 1817—age 32)

Cinti-Damoureau, Laura (b. 6 February 1801, d. 25 February 1863)

Debut 8 January 1816—age 14

La contessa di Folleville, *Il viaggio a Reims* (19 June 1825—age 24)

Pamyra, *Le Siège de Corinthe* (9 October 1826—age 25)
 Anaï, *Moïse et Pharaon* (26 March 1827—age 26)
 Comtesse, *Le Comte Ory* (20 August 1828—age 27)
 Mathilde, *Guillaume Tell* (3 August 1829—age 28)
Colbran, Isabella (b. 2 February 1785, d. 7 October 1845)
 Debut 1801—age 15 or 16
 Elisabetta, *Elisabetta, regina d’Inghilterra* (4 October 1815—age 30)
 Desdemona, *Otello* (4 December 1816—age 31)
 Armida, *Armida* (9 November 1817—age 32)
 Elcia, *Mosè in Egitto* (5 March 1818—age 33)
 Zoraide, *Ricciardo e Zoraide* (3 December 1818—age 33)
 Ermione, *Ermione* (27 March 1819—age 34)
 Elena, *La donna del lago* (24 October 1819—age 34)
 Anna, *Maometto secondo* (3 December 1820—age 35)
 Zelmira, *Zelmira* (16 February 1822—age 37)
 Semiramide, *Semiramide* (3 February 1823—age 38)
Dabadie, Louise-Zulme (b. 20 March 1804, d. 21 November 1877)
 Active after 1821—age 16 or 17
 Sinaïde, *Moïse et Pharaon* (26 March 1827—age 23)
 Jemmy, *Guillaume Tell* (3 August 1829—age 25)
Malanotte, Adelaide (b. 1785, d. 31 December 1832)
 Debut 1806—age 20 or 21
 Tancredi, *Tancredi* (6 February 1813—age 27 or 28)
Manfredini Guarmani, Elisabetta (b. 1790, d. after 1817)
 Debut 1809—age 18 or 19
 Baldassare, *Ciro in Babilonia* (14 March 1812—age 21 or 22)
 Amenaïde, *Tancredi* (6 February 1813—age 22 or 23)
 Aldimira, *Sigismondo* (26 December 1814—age 23 or 24)
 Adelaide, *Adelaide di Borgogna* (27 December 1817—age 26 or 27)
Marcolini, Marietta (b. ~1780, d. after 1814)
 Active after 1800—age 19 or 20
 Ernestina, *L’equivoco stravagante* (26 October 1811—age 30 or 31)
 Ciro, *Ciro in Babilonia* (14 March 1812—age 31 or 32)
 Clarice, *La pietra del paragone* (26 September 1812—age 31 or 32)
 Isabella, *L’italiana in Algeri* (22 May 1813—age 32 or 33)
 Sigismondo, *Sigismondo* (26 December 1814—age 33 or 34)
Mariani, Rosa (b. 1799, d. after 1832)
 Debut 1818—age 18 or 19
 Arsace, *Semiramide* (3 February 1823—age 23 or 24)
Mombelli, Anna (b. 1795)
 Demetrio-Siveno, *Demetrio e Polibio* (18 May 1812—age 16 or 17)
Mombelli, Maria Ester (b. 1794)
 Lisinga, *Demetrio e Polibio* (18 May 1812—age 17 or 18)

Madama Cortese, *Il viaggio a Reims* (19 June 1825—age 31 or 32)
Pasta, Giuditta (b. 26 October 1797, d. 1 April 1865)
 Debut 1816—age 18 or 19
 Corinna, *Il viaggio a Reims* (19 June 1825—age 27)
Pisaroni, Benedetta Rosmunda (b. 16 May 1793, d. 6 August 1872)
 Debut 1811—age 17 or 18
 Zomira, *Ricciardo e Zoraide* (3 December 1818—age 25)
 Andromaca, *Ermione* (27 March 1819—age 25)
 Malcolm, *La donna del lago* (24 October 1819—age 26)
Righetti-Giorgi, Geltrude (b. 1793, d. 1862)
 Debut 1814—age 20 or 21
 Rosina, *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (20 February 1816—age 22 or 23)
 Cenerentola, *La Cenerentola* (25 January 1817—age 23 or 24)

APPENDIX B

Female Role Creators in Bellini’s Operas

Caradori-Allan, Maria (b. 1800, d. 15 October 1865)
 Debut 1822—age 21 or 22
 Giulietta, *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* (11 March 1830—age 29 or 30)
Grisi, Giuditta (b. 28 July 1805, d. 1 May 1840)
 Debut 1826—age 20 or 21
 Romeo, *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* (11 March 1830—age 24 or 25)
Grisi, Giulia (b. 22 May 1811, d. 29 November 1869)
 Debut 1828–29—age 16–18
 Adalgisa, *Norma* (26 December 1831—age 20)
 Elvira, *I puritani* (24 January 1835—age 25)
Méric-Lalande, Henriette (b. 4 April 1799, d. 7 September 1867)
 Active after 1814—age 14 or 15
 Bianca, *Bianca e Gernando* (30 May 1826—age 27)
 Imogene, *Il pirata* (27 October 1827—age 28)
 Alaïde, *La straniera* (14 February 1829—age 29)
 Zaira, *Zaira* (16 May 1829—age 30)
Pasta, Giuditta (b. 26 October 1797, d. 1 April 1865)
 Debut 1816—age 18 or 19
 Amina, *La sonnambula* (6 March 1831—age 33)
 Norma, *Norma* (26 December 1831—age 34)
 Beatrice, *Beatrice di Tenda* (16 March 1833—age 35)
Tosi, Adelaide (b. ~1800, d. 27 March 1859)
 Debut 1820—age 19–20
 Bianca, *Bianca e Fernando* (7 April 1828—age 27 or 28)
Unger, Caroline (b. 28 October 1803, d. 23 March 1877)
 Debut 24 February 1824—age 20
 Isoletta, *La straniera* (14 February 1829—age 25)

APPENDIX C

Female Role Creators in Donizetti's Operas

Abbadia, Luigia (b. 1821, d. 1896)

Debut 1836—age 14 or 15

Maria, *La figlia del reggimento* (3 October 1840—age 18 or 19)

Ines, *Maria Padilla* (26 December 1841—age 19 or 20)

Boccabadati, Luigia (b. 1800, d. 12 October 1850)

Debut 1817—age 16 or 17

Zoraida, *Zoraida in Granata* (1824 revision—age 23 or 24)

Amelia, *Il castello di Kenilworth* (6 July 1829—age 28 or 29)

Norina, *I pazzi per progetto* (6 February 1830—age 29 or 30)

Sel, *Il diluvio universale* (6 March 1830—age 29 or 30)

Francesca di Foix, *Francesca di Foix* (30 May 1831—age 30 or 31)

Brambilla, Marietta (b. 6 June 1807, d. 6 November 1875)

Debut 1827—age 19 or 20

Orsini, *Lucrezia Borgia* (26 December 1833—age 26)

Pierotto, *Linda di Chamounix* (19 May 1842—age 35)

Comelli-Rubini, Adelaide (b. ~1796, d. 30 January 1874)

Alina, *Alina, regina di Golconda* (12 May 1828—age 31 or 32)

Metilde, *Gianni da Calais* (2 August 1828—age 31 or 32)

Nina, *Il giovedì grasso* (26 February 1829—age 32 or 33)

Dorus-Gras, Julie (b. 7 September 1805, d. 6 February 1896)

Debut 1825—age 19 or 20

Pauline, *Les Martyrs* (10 April 1840—age 34)

Frezolini, Erminia (b. 27 March 1818, d. 5 November 1884)

Debut 1837—age 18 or 19

Lucrezia Borgia, *Lucrezia Borgia* (1840 revision—age 21 or 22)

Gioia Tamburini, Marietta

Lisetta, *Chiara e Serafina*

Muley Hassem, *Alahor in Granata*

Edmondo, *Francesca di Foix*

Grisi, Giulia (b. 22 May 1811, d. 29 November 1869)

Debut 1828–29—age 16–18

Adelia, *Ugo, Conte di Parigi* (13 March 1832—age 20)

Elena, *Marino Faliero* (12 March 1835—age 23)

Lucrezia Borgia, *Lucrezia Borgia* (1840 revision—age 28 or 29)

Norina, *Don Pasquale* (3 January 1843—age 31)

Heinefetter, Sabine (b. 19 August 1809, d. 18 November 1872)

Debut 1824—age 14 or 15

Adina, *L'elisir d'amore* (12 May 1832—age 22)

Lefèvre, Constance-Caroline (b. 12 December 1828, d. 1905)

Rita, *Rita* (7 May 1860—age 31)

Loewe, Sophie (b. 24 May 1812, d. 29 November 1866)

Active after 1831, age 18 or 19

Maria Padilla, *Maria Padilla* (26 December 1841—age 29)

Malibran, Maria (b. 24 March 1808, d. 23 September 1836)

Debut June 1825—age 17

Maria Stuarda, *Maria Stuarda* (30 December 1835—age 27)

Melas, Teresa (b. 1803)

Aurelia, *Il fortunato inganno* (3 September 1823—age 19 or 20)

Emilia, *Emilia di Liverpool* (28 July 1824—age 20 or 21)

Méric-Lalande, Henriette (b. 4 April 1799, d. 7 September 1867)

Active after 1814—age 14 or 15

Elvida, *Elvida* (6 July 1826—age 27)

Lucrezia Borgia, *Lucrezia Borgia* (26 December 1833—age 34)

Mombelli, Maria Ester (b. 1794)

Zoraida, *Zoraida in Granata* (28 January 1822—age 27 or 28)

Gilda, *L'ajo nell'imbarazzo* (4 February 1824—age 29 or 30)

Morandi, Rosa (b. 15 July 1782, d. 6 April or 4 May 1824)

Debut 1804—age 21 or 22

Serafina, *Chiara e Serafina* (26 October 1822—age 40)

Orlandi, Elisa (b. 1811, d. 1834)

Debut 1829—age 17 or 18

Seymour, *Anna Bolena* (26 December 1830—age 18 or 19)

Eleonora, *Il furioso all'isola San Domingo* (2 January 1833—age 21 or 22)

Pasta, Giuditta (b. 26 October 1797, d. 1 April 1865)

Debut 1816—age 18 or 19

Anna Bolena, *Anna Bolena* (26 December 1830—age 33)

Bianca, *Ugo, Conte di Parigi* (13 March 1832—age 34)

Pisaroni, Benedetta Rosmunda (b. 16 May 1793, d. 6 August 1872)

Debut 1811—age 17 or 18

Abenamet, *Zoraida in Granata* (1824 revision—age 30 or 31)

Puzzi Tosi, Giacinta

Elisabetta, *Maria Stuarda*

Ranieri Marini, Antonietta

Principessa, *Gianni di Parigi*

Ronzi de Begnis, Giuseppina (b. 11 Jan 1800, d. 7 June 1853)

Debut 1816—age 15 or 16

Fausta, *Fausta* (12 January 1832—age 32)

Sancia, *Sancia di Castiglia* (4 November 1832—age 32)

Bianca, *Buondelmonte* (18 October 1834—age 34)

Gemma, *Gemma di Vergy* (26 December 1834—age 34)

Elisabetta, *Roberto Devereux* (28 October 1837—age 37)

Schütz-Oldosi, Amalia (b. ~1800, d. after 1839)

Serafina, *Il campanello* (1 June 1836—age 35 or 36)

Stoltz, Rosina (b. 13 January 1815, d. 29 July 1903)

Active after 1831—age 16

Léonor, *La Favorite* (2 December 1840—age 25)

Zayda, *Dom Sébastien* (13 November 1843—age 28)
Strepponi, Giuseppina (b. 8 September 1815, d. 14 November 1897)

Debut December 1834—age 19

Adelia, *Adelia* (11 February 1841—age 25)

Tacchinardi-Persiani, Fanny (b. 4 October 1812, d. 3 May 1867)

Debut 1832—age 19 or 20

Rosmonda, *Rosmonda d'Inghilterra* (27 February 1834—age 21)

Lucia, *Lucia di Lammermoor* (26 September 1835—age 22)

Pia, *Pia de' Tolomei* (18 February 1837—age 24)

Linda, *Linda di Chamounix* (Paris, 17 November 1842—age 30)

Tadolini, Eugenia (b. 1809, d. after 1851)

Debut 1828—age 18 or 19

Paolina, *Poliuto* (30 November 1839—age 29 or 30)

Linda, *Linda di Chamounix* (19 May 1842—age 32 or 33)

Maria, *Maria di Rohan* (5 June 1843—age 33 or 34)

Tosi, Adelaide (b. ~1800, d. 27 March 1859)

Debut 1820—age 19–20

Argelia, *L'esule di Roma* (1 January 1828—age 27 or 28)

Neala, *Il paria* (12 January 1829—age 28 or 29)

Elisabetta, *Il castello di Kenilworth* (6 July 1829—age 28 or 29)

Unger, Caroline (b. 28 October 1803, d. 23 March 1877)

Debut 24 February 1824—age 20

Marietta, *Il borgomastro di Saardam* (19 August 1827—age 23)

Parisina, *Parisina* (17 March 1833—age 29)

Antonina, *Belisario* (4 February 1836—age 32)

Maria, *Maria de Rudenz* (30 January 1838—age 34)

NOTES

1. My thanks to Megan Stapleton for helping me contextualize this example.
2. Claudia Friedlander, "That's Not Opera: It's an Opportunity," *The Liberated Voice*; <http://www.claudiafriedlander.com/the-liberated-voice/thats-not-opera-its-an-opportunity.html> (accessed September 15, 2016).
3. "Dispelling the Myth of the Operatic Prodigy," *The Economist*; <http://www.economist.com/blogs/prospiero/2016/08/premature-primadonnas> (accessed September 15, 2015).
4. Shared via Friedlander, "That's Not Opera."
5. This system is described in detail in two books by John Rosselli: *Singers of Italian Opera: The History of a Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), and *The Opera Industry in Italy from Cimarosa to Verdi: The Role of the Impresario* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984).
6. Evidence of this can be found in Pauline Viardot's letters, discussed in Hilary Poriss, "Pauline Viardot, Travelling Virtuosa," *Music and Letters* 96, no. 2 (May 2015): 185–208.
7. The history of substituting bel canto arias is considered at length in Hilary Poriss, *Changing the Score: Arias, Prima Donnas, and the Authority of Performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
8. Both Poriss, *Changing the Score*, and Philip Gossett, *Divas and Scholars: Performing Italian Opera* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), cite many examples of nineteenth century audiences' reactions to performances.
9. Such is the case with the reviewer of her performance of Bellini's *I Capuletti e i Montecchi* in *Teatri arti e letteratura* on November 3, 1832; cited and discussed in Poriss, *Changing the Score*, 110.
10. See Rosselli, *The Opera Industry in Italy*, 127.
11. The contract is reproduced in John Ebers, *Seven Years of the King's Theatre* (London, 1828), 387–90, and discussed in Susan Rutherford, *The Prima Donna and Opera, 1815–1930* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 167.
12. Discussed in Gregory Bloch, "The Pathological Voice of Gilbert-Louis Duprez," in *Cambridge Opera Journal* 19, no. 1 (March 2007): 16.
13. The extent to which confusion over the glottis abounded in the history of nineteenth century voice pedagogy is considered in James Davies, *Romantic Anatomies of Performance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 123–151.
14. Susan Rutherford has nevertheless constructed a history of the prima donna from such relatively thin biographic evidence in *The Prima Donna and Opera, 1815–1930*.
15. These appendices are based largely on data found on *OperaGlass*; <http://opera.stanford.edu> (accessed August 31, 2016). I have corrected and standardized spellings, and added dates from *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) and the online index of the Bibliothèque nationale de France; <http://data.bnf.fr> (accessed August 31, 2016).
16. The circumstances surrounding her early start are documented and discussed in Herman Klein, *The Reign of Patti* (London: Unwin, 1920), 20–39. My thanks to Jennifer Lane for reminding me of Patti's remarkable story.
17. See Rosselli, *Singers of Italian Opera*, 151–152.
18. Malibran's story is presented in Poriss, *Changing the Score*, 100–134.
19. The start of Callas's career is considered in Nicholas Petsalis-Diomidis, *The Unknown Callas: The Greek Years* (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 2001).

20. For more on Galvany, see Nicholas Limansky, "Maria Galvany (Review)" *Opera Quarterly* 20, no. 3 (January 2004): 505–512.
21. Stendhal, *Vie de Rossini*, ed. Pierre Brunel (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 368–371.

Dr. Peter Mondelli is Associate Professor of Music History at the University of North Texas's College of Music. Prior to joining UNT's faculty

in 2012, he taught at West Chester University, the University of Delaware, and the University of Pennsylvania. His main research projects consider the impact of print culture and bourgeois capitalism on nineteenth century Parisian opera. Other areas of interest include oral song culture in the late eighteenth century, early music and musicology in *fin-de-siècle* France, and the relationship between music studies and the posthumanities. His articles have appeared in *19th Century Music*, *Acta Musicologica*, and *The Opera Quarterly*. His first book, titled *Opera, Print and Capital in Nineteenth-Century Paris*, is forthcoming.



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