The Idea of Prima Donna: the History of a Very Special Opera’s Institution

Introduction

Opera is a very complex system of different kinds of craft and artistry. However, throughout its entire history one craft in particular dominated the field, the craft of singers. Even now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, singing seems to be the lifeblood of opera while other elements, such as the orchestra, acting, staging, setting, décor, costumes, etc., seem to be important but supplementary. The singing operatic voice, with all its idiosyncrasies, charm, magnetic power, temper, theatricality, seductiveness, drama, technique, virtuosity, pedantry, extravagance, mysteriousness, and artistry, drew and continues to draw people to the opera and captures their imagination again and again. For many, the operatic voice is the most vital and magical element in the experience of the art of opera. However, because voice production has tended to be perceived as a slightly mysterious process that could even have a kind of supernatural dimension (the term diva itself, ascribed to a female opera

Abstract – Résumé

This article examines the historical constitution and construction of prima donna, probably the most intrinsic institution of opera expanding from the end of the sixteenth century until today. From the 16th to the 21st century the opera’s prima donna has experienced numerous cultural transformations and commodifications. Her idea was determined by paradigms and concepts of absence and replaceability in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, of human nature and body, sexuality and gender, character and costume in the eighteenth century, of aura and fetish in the nineteenth century, and of identity in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. However, even though she has lost a lot of past mystique, grandomania and phantasmagoria, her institution continues to rule the opera’s world.

Keywords: prima donna • diva • singing • history of opera • women studies
singer, and coming from the Latin word for goddess, refers to the »divine« status of the prima donna, the first lady) or, in an anthropological sense, a superstitious dimension (for instance, Vincenzo Bellini’s famous complaint about seductive prima donnas: »She is a singer, and therefore capable of anything«) it has often been the subject of countless discussions with abundant metaphors, nonsense, stereotypes, prejudice, novelistic figurations, caricatures and ridicule. Women who for nearly 400 years have been at the centre of the magnificence and scandal of opera, ridiculed, reviled, and worshipped, are prima donnas.

The Oxford English Dictionary gives «the first or principal female singer in an opera» as its major definition of the prima donna, and records examples of the usage in English from the end of the eighteenth century. Although it is commonly assumed that the term arose in Italian around 1650, in fact, virtuosa was the ordinary way of referring to a principal female singer until about 1800. Also, the word cantatrice (meaning simply ‘female singer’) was internationally used. Such words were neutrally descriptive, and, in the earlier phases of opera, a prima donna was the cantatrice who sang the greatest number of arias in the course of any particular work. However, in the nineteenth century, the term acquired a pejorative meaning in which prima donnas were associated with courtesans, idling their way through wealth and fame. And by the twentieth century, the term had stuck as a label of abuse on a level with virago, shrew, or bitch. To be a prima donna was not so much to be a great interpreter of operatic music as to be an outrageous grande dame, »exacting, obstinate, torrential, grouing, and exasperating«, and often lazy, greedy, stupid, conceited, emotionally unstable, mentally unbalanced, in short, »impossible« in every respect (Christiansen 1984: 9). These powerful stereotypes have covered a more complex truth about the prima donnas which is that many of them came from unprivileged backgrounds and, therefore, needed to fight aggressively to survive and to get a hearing in a male-dominated world of ruthless intrigues, temperamental clashes, egocentric itineraries, stressful situations and highly-strung professions.

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1 About the literary representations of prima donna, see Buckler 1998.
2 See, for instance, David BARBER’s hilarious history of opera When the Fat Lady Sings: Opera History as It Ought to be Taught (Toronto, 1990).
3 See MARCELLO’s Il teatro alla moda (1956 [1724]).
‘Acting the prima donna’ may have been the only way to avoid exploitation, and a prima donna’s greed was often the hard-headed refusal to work for less than her market value … It would be possible to make a feminist defence of the prima donna. She proved that women of no inherited rank or moral virtue could stand up in public – something Jane Austen or Emily Dickinson never had to do – and make their lives for themselves. However, feminist writers have shown no interest in prima donnas, despite massive and justified attention paid to their sister painters, writers, and scientists. Why should this be? Not, I think, because all lasting successful operas to date have been written by men and largely present women in passive or dependent situations; but perhaps because prima donnas are, almost by definition, successful. They have not been the victims of oppression and intimidation, they have grabbed at the glittering rewards of their success … And if prima donnas have been mocked, they have also been worshipped. Like the sirens of the Odyssey, their voices were sexually alluring and morally dangerous. In the nineteenth century a prima donna also became a diva, a goddess … With the idealizing of the diva came all the journalistic emphasis on charisma, genius, and mystique, and a consequent under-emphasis on the technique, intelligence, musicianship, and plain hard work which make a first-rate singer. (Christiansen 1984: 10–11)

An ability to sing well has repeatedly been viewed as a mark of culture and humanity not only in Western civilization but in other civilizations too. It is not surprising at all that opera singers like to describe their ability to sing, on the one hand, in terms of a specific gift sent from heaven, or a kind of special mission, but also, on the other, as an intimate and very human act. Singing represents, as Slovenian philosopher Mladen Dolar points out, perhaps the most spectacular modality of the human voice. Operatic singing, by its massive concentration on a decorated and affective voice, introduced codes, meanings and standards of its own. The operatic voice is not pure; it is decorated by affective power, worship and reverence. By focusing on the voice, singing actually turns into a fetish object. The singing voice received its most structured performance at the opera. In the first two centuries of opera history, opera as secular celebration was populated by different mythical creatures and celestial beings. But no one among them could be a match for the singing power of the diva, a true goddess of profane opera. The opera diva is a woman who, according to Dolar, owes her divine status exclusively to her voice. However, the fetishisation of the voice at the opera is ambivalent: music evokes the voice and, at the same time, obfuscates it (Dolar 2006: 30–1). It is therefore not at all unusual that from the eighteenth century on, the divine status is ascribed to prima donnas as female singing champions. With the rise of prima donnas5 in the eighteenth century, opera achieved one of the most »erotic«

5 The following texts are suggested here: Rupert CHRISTIANSEN’s Prima Donna: A History (London, 1984); Ethan MORDDEN’s Demented: The World of the Opera Diva (New York, 1984); and Francis ROGERS’ article »Some Prima Donnas of the Later Eighteenth Century,« The Musical Quarterly, 30/2: 147–62.
moments for singing. When the operatic stage became a paradise for prima donnas or «tragediennes de l’opéra», first in France and then elsewhere, opera was transformed, so Philippe Joseph Salazar writes, into »a place of love as a trivial ideological cover of the new signification of opera« (Salazar 1984: 122).

From Pleasing Courtesans to Emancipated Professional Artists

Women singers had established themselves as a notable group of artists, often also as courtesans, in late sixteenth-century courts. It is to be expected that the entrance of women into the opera scene was accompanied by many sexist prejudices against women singers, who, in the early days of opera, were presumed to be courtesans, and sometimes were. But it was also a repulsive stereotype as, for women, opera provided one of the very few professional and economic opportunities available. Due to this, men throughout the seventeenth century and much of the eighteenth went on talking about them as if they were what might be now called sex objects. Around the mid-seventeenth century a female singer might manage to legitimately and professionally step onto the stage as a place of the perfect union of erotic and vocal magic but, once she is there she is, in the collective fantasy, promptly attributed the role of a courtesan (which is, of course, the stigma and practice to which the profession of female singers is related in early opera). Women who did publicly display themselves were all suspected of being courtesans, as any public exposure to men was seen as immoral. Usually, they are portrayed as possessing an insatiable lust and deviant carnal desire.

As opera spread throughout Italy during the mid-seventeenth century, women were able, for the first time, to pursue well-paid musical careers outside the homes and palaces of the wealthy nobility. The popularity of opera, particularly in Venice which was culturally developed, commercially oriented and a multicultural city, helped to encourage women to take public roles: »during the middle of the century much of the attention, and the highest salaries, were showered on the leading women. These decades saw the emergence of the prima donna« (Glixon 1995: 509). Anna Renzi was the most celebrated prima donna in mid-seventeenth-century Venice. She gained support from a number of the prominent members of Venetian noble society while also maintaining a degree of financial independence. The publicity generated by wealthy and influential Venetians helped to increase Renzi’s reputation (ibid., 512). As Glixon summarizes: »The burgeoning opera industry of the mid-seventeenth century provided increasing numbers of young women with the opportunity to lead, at least for a time, productive professional lives with a degree of financial security in an age when such possibilities were almost non-existent in other respectable areas of society« (ibid., 526–7).

The rise of the prima donna in eighteenth-century France was entirely based on matters of the heart as well. The image of the prima donna – who, while exhibit-
ing her full bosom onstage, produces pleasures perceived as a cornucopia of vocal wealth – is not very different from the image of ladies practicing another ancient craft, namely prostitution. The increased interest in women in France (with a decree issued in 1713, the Parisian Opéra was attributed 12 female singers, an event with no precedent) can be compared with the situation in Italy where, even years later, women were not allowed to enter the operatic or the political and social scene: for instance, in Rome and most of the Papal States women were forbidden to appear on stage until 1798, in some places even until 1823, while Venice and Naples, from the middle of the seventeenth century on, came to have a reputation as the very places for »adventurous« prima donnas. The first one in a role of many singers at the beginning of the eighteenth century is Giulia (Ciulla) Di Caro, named »Madonna of a bawdy house,« who was also the mistress of the king of Naples. How the term ‘prostitute’ could readily, perhaps automatically be linked with the stage, explicates a Naples diarist of 1671 who described her as »actress singer musician whore.« Yet Ciulla undoubtedly was a courtesan and her story shows the possibilities open to a Neapolitan female singer in the late seventeenth century. The Italian philosopher and historian Benedetto Croce writes in his book I teatri di Napoli (1876) that the terms virtuosa and prostituta have the same meaning in the world of theatre: when the state of Florence awarded the prima donna Faustina with the medal of honour, the rumours spread that such recognition should be reserved for »great artists« only. When the count Favoz married the singer Marchesini, the government of Modena expressed their opposition to the union (Salazar 1984: 123). In other words, in the early eighteenth century, a prima donna had the same status as a twentieth-century movie star. Female singers often drew into their nets wealthy counts and powerful impresarios. They found themselves at the very center of ambiguous love affairs, and sometimes also of political battles. In Naples, for instance, the soubrettes of the dominant genre – the Despinas and Zerlinas – were the performers repeatedly arrested or expelled by the authorities, usually for love affairs or attempted marriages with young noblemen. Beauty and verve were still their chief qualifications (Rosselli 1992: 59). Women singers needed male protection because they were also courtesans. The others needed protectors to establish – which for many of them was probably true – that they were not courtesans. Even then the celebrated Anna Renzi, the original Ottavia in Monteverdi’s L’incoronazione di Poppea, though hymned as ‘chaste’ in a lavish publication in her honour, was automatically written down as ‘courtesan’ by an opera-goer scribbling in his programme. However, Rosselli concludes, courtesan-singers’ careers were short, lasting a few years at most: »Some were virtually non-existent: we are here dealing with ‘singers’ under a convention like the one that lets high-class call-girls appear in today’s newspapers as starlets or models« (ibid., 62).

Even if a prima donna of the Baroque or early Gallant era was not a courtesan, she usually had to deal with the strong Baroque anti-feminist rhetoric represented
by certain clerics and moralists of the time. In 1676, the famous French moralist Charles Denis de Saint-Évremond took the opening shots at opera-crazed women in a comedy entitled *Les Opéra* in which a teenaged woman has gone mad from hearing Lully’s operas and reading Quinault’s libretti. The renowned critic and rabid misogynist Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux, in his essay *Contre les femmes* from 1694, warns husbands that the degeneration of women can be traced to the Paris *Opéra*, where she is seduced by luxurious voices singing of love. It is therefore up to their husbands, Boileau-Despréaux suggests, to keep women away from those bad places, such as the *Opéra*, which draw out sexual infidelity, immoral deviance, or even madness, lying always just beneath the surface of their silks and velvets (Cowart 1994: 206–07). Contemporary critics also blamed women’s love of opera on their lubricious nature, but a more probable reason why opera appealed to women is that under the Old Regime few social venues other than the theatre existed for women outside the home. Young women of the *grand monde* were »presented« to society at the *Opéra*, and were not considered part of the *gallant* world until they had triumphed there. Noble women received the fashionable operatic world in the best places at the *Opéra*, usually in the glamorous boxes of the first and occasionally the second tier. Also, the education women received prepared them only for an appreciation of the lighter entertainment based on adventure, diversion and spectacle which opera provided. Higher education was out of the question for women. Rather than receiving training in the humanistic disciplines of history and mythology, women were taught the arts of leisure – music, singing and dancing. Their tastes and influence helped shape a more civilised society (*ibid.*, 210–11).

Such misogynistic reception of female singers is continued in the eighteenth century, as is evident in the famous verse epistles on prima donnas and Italian castrati touring the London operatic scene of the 1720s and 1730s. At the centre of these obscene, misogynistic and satiric epistles written to or about certain prima donnas and castrati, among whom are the English soprano Anastasia Robinson, the famous Venetian prima donna Faustina Bordoni and castratos Senesino, Carestini and Farinelli, is the accusation that these female and male singers engaged in a variety of deviant, sexually subversive practices. By representing female singers and castrati as lascivious, lustful, debauched and engaged in illicit sexual activities, the epistles amplify the sexual danger of Italian opera in England. Specifically, the epistles indicated that the sensuous character of prima donnas and the effeminate nature of castrati threatened English masculinity and normative sexuality. These scandalous pornographic epistles, even if they are taken solely as literary works, according to Thomas McGeary, »reveal how Italian opera had penetrated London’s social imagination so deeply that Grub-Street writers would react against the supposed destabilizing effects of Italian opera by stigmatizing female singers as a way of asserting normative male sexual hegemony« (McGeary 2000: 51).
In the course of the eighteenth century, women singers are shown slowly emancipating themselves from dependence on great patrons and entering the dangerous freedom of the market. Even so, few women opera singers had control over all aspects of their art:

Victorian diva Pauline Viardot wrote music and planned to write an opera with George Sand, but most of the music Viardot sang came from the established repertoire, composed, of course, by men. Many divas have had music written for them, and they have been instrumental in creating operatic roles. But most of the roles opera singers perform and almost all the music they sing are created and written by others, again always men. (Pope – Leonardi 1997: 316)

The Handelian prima donnas of the first half of the eighteenth century, soprano Francesca Cuzzoni and mezzo-soprano Faustina Bordoni, were the first in a great line of rival prima donnas which includes Grisi and Viardot, Lehmann and Jeritza, Tebaldi and Callas (ibid., 22). The lives of singers who made their debuts in the first two decades of the eighteenth century, like Faustina’s, show that the social climate was changing, at least for women at the top of the profession. Now, women singers became more independent and autonomous in making decisions about their career. Among the post-Handelian songstresses of the later eighteenth century, we find Regina Mingotti, Caterina Gabrielli, Lucrezia Agujari and Angelica Catalani, the last of the famous prima donnas that can be said to belong to the eighteenth century but also held sway in the opera world of the first two decades of the nineteenth century. At the age of only fifteen she made her début in Venice, which immediately established her as a rising star of transcendent brilliance. Catalani’s example supports the fact that singers who went through an apprenticeship, formal or informal, did not necessarily have long to wait before they appeared in public. Rosselli writes that she was convent-trained in both singing and piety and both were exemplary in her later career as a celebrated prima donna (1992: 98). If she was indeed »La prima Cantatrice del Mondo« as she was billed, it was at least in part because, as Mordden notes, her financial demands were paramount. Accordingly, she typified the Italian imperialist, carrying the intentions of Italian vocal supremacy everywhere and rewriting her roles to suit the free-wheeling »singer-take-all« mentality of opera seria. Mordden wittily describes Catalani’s talent for music: »She embellished vocal lines beyond understanding, interpolated her specialties into any piece without a thought for dramatic coherence, and ruthlessly checked the slightest display of talent from her colleagues« (Mordden 1985: 106). Of her own qualities Catalani said: »When

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6 At that time, women composers and librettists gained access to concert halls and opera houses as well. See Jacqueline LETZTER – Robert ADELSON, Women Writing Opera: Creativity and Controversy in the Age of the French Revolution (Berkeley, 2001); also id., French Women Opera Composers and the Aesthetics of Rousseau, Feminist Studies 26 (2000)/1: 69–100.
God has given to a mortal so extraordinary a talent as mine, everybody should honor and applaud it as a miracle. It is profane to depreciate the gifts of Heaven« (Rogers 1944: 162). Her voice was described as powerful, rich and clear throughout nearly three octaves and remained all her life »the glorious, beautiful, thoughtless [Venetian] song-bird« (ibid., 161).

The feats of vocal acrobatics of eighteenth-century castrati and prima donnas were, as a rule, designed to appeal the demands of the audience which, particularly in Venice, regarded the proceedings on the stage as just another carnival entertainment (Pauly 1948: 225). Venetian operatic artistry embodied in the vocal exhibitionism of castrati and prima donnas, offered a very convenient opportunity for piquant satire. In his Teatro alla moda Marcello tells us about the practice of shortening recitatives and even arias if they did not afford the virtuoso’s or virtuosa’s opportunities for vocal display; the practice of »stretching« a scene by inserting material by other composers in order to give the stage crew sufficient time to prepare an especially elaborate machine or decoration for the next scene; the sacrificing of the opera as an artistic whole in order to please the whim and vanity of the vocal executants (see Marcello 1956: 27–45; id. 1949: 85–105; Pauly 1948: 227).

From Laughing Madwomen to Crying Divas

With the gallant prima donnas, like Faustina and Catalani, we leave the outworn prima donnas’ singing standards of the eighteenth century and enter an era of song and bel canto, the era to be dominated by Rossinian, Meyerbeerian, Bellinian and Donizettian vocalists. Although women characters in opera are too diverse to permit easy generalisations and classifications we will try to sketch some of the most interesting types of prima donnas. The era of Romanticism produced several representations of womanhood and femininity in opera. The first appeared in the golden age of opera when the bel canto method ruled much of Romantic opera. Within this operatic tradition, a new type of prima donna triumphed: a mad prima donna. The existence of her character owes much to examples from the eighteenth century but is now related to the new circumstances of musical life. Newly arising bourgeois societies demanded a new function of opera. Opera as bourgeois entertainment is, from the sociological point of view, opposed to most eighteenth- and seventeenth-century operatic works, which were usually commissioned by the nobility or the church. Italian composers of the bel canto tradition were, in particular, akin to entertainment for the ascendant bourgeoisie. Their success often correlated with their capacity to adapt to the taste of growing audiences and the expectations of the public. Through high social demand, opera in Italy became a form of popular entertainment, strongly linked to commercial success. One such strategy with which composers and librettists pleased the local crowds was the incorporation of mad scenes into the plot. Bellini
and Donizetti, in particular, became famous for their mad scenes, such as those in *Il Pirata* (1827), *La Sonnambula* (1831), *I Puritani* (1835), *Anna Bolena* (1830), *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835) and *Linda di Chamonix* (1842). A mad scene is an enactment of insanity in an opera for which immense vocal skills and the highest level of vocal virtuosity is required.\footnote{Mad scenes threw the vocal capabilities of some prima donnas into question to such an extent that sometimes a mad scene was omitted and replaced by another piece of music. If they were in poor vocal condition, and found a mad scene too difficult to perform, the contracted prima donnas consequently decided to introduce a piece with which they were better acquainted. About this interesting strategic tradition of altering the mad scene in the case of Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor*, see Hilary PORISS, 6–9.} In Italy and France, it became a popular convention of how an opera should appear, as mad scenes were created as a way to offer star singers a chance to show off their vocal abilities. Psychiatrists Andreas Erfurth and P. Hoff concluded that the success of mad scenes in bel canto opera »can be understood as expression of an increasing interest in emotional aspects in music and society as well as in clinical psychiatry« (2000: 310–311). The sexy madwoman is now not only a champion of a new type of opera but also a representation of a new female personality reflecting broader themes of women, sex, music and madness. The bel canto mad prima donna represents the venerable transformative power of woman, whose function was to speak the truth under the guise of madness, praising pleasure, laughing at reason, and subverting social norms. The prima donna’s laugh on stage is meaningful enough to be a matter of experts’ attention:

> Listening to the participants [of a Met Opera quiz on women in opera] labeling the various Carmens — even when Carolyn Abbate injected a bit of resistance by insisting on dividing the singers according to those who »did the laugh« and those who did not — one had to wonder whether part of the appeal to the quiz was the possibility for control it promised … If the quiz stands for positivistic command, Abbate’s flippant remark about »doing the laugh« points the way toward a more rhapsodic approach, an ear for vocal jouissance. […] So when Brünnhilde »does the laugh« in the last act of *Götterdämmerung*, she can be heard as commandeering the opera’s »voice« and overturning the usual hierarchy of words and music, modeling a way … to hear music as more than merely an elaboration of patriarchal plot. (Smart 2000: 3–4 and 7; see also Abbate 1991: 206–49)

As with every gesture made by the prima donna on stage, her laugh too has to be obviously theoretically justified to be accepted as normal, and not excessive or even immoral. The operatic *la folie* is »a demi-goddess who replaces rationality with irrationality, moderation with excess, power with pleasure, tragedy with mirth, and common sense with joyous wildness« (Cowart 1994: 216). Traditionally, prima donnas’ mad scenes were taken as a sign of woman’s mental decline or emotional breakdown. Recently, however, some feminist critics have suggested
that mad scenes could rather be interpreted as positive, even liberatory. This view has been expressed most flamboyantly by Catherine Clément, the prominent French feminist writer and theorist, for whom «madness is one of the few ways an operatic heroine can escape the near-inevitable plot process of seduction and death» (Smart 1992: 119). Or, as said by Clément: «Madwomen’s voices sing the most perfect happiness» (Clément 1999[1988]: 89). Prima donna’s insanity, if paraphrasing Michel Foucault, cannot be understood as a complex of psychical symptoms, but rather should be open to interpretation as politically defined or even politically «correct» behavior that resides on the margins of the nineteenth-century society. It is, in feminist readings, a potential mode of resistance to the dominant male-codified order (Smart: ibid.).

But if we put music and sound in the famous Lévi-Straussian opposition, then operatic music appears as articulated structure (the level of culture), while the sound is an unarticulated formation, represented on the level of nature. However, in this case, Dolar points out, the unarticulated sound is not something that would be outside music but, rather, in the very center of music itself, and, therefore, of Lévi-Straussian culture (Dolar 2003: 55–6 and 60–1). Additionally, there are many prescribed or even codified elements of unarticulated sound in opera, such as the laughing and crying of prima donnas in mad scenes in Italian bel canto opera. At this point, Dolar inserts an important new element into the opposition of sound/music, which is the «cry», which appears to him as a distinguished instance of the border between sound and music. Here he refers to Michel Poizat’s influential book L’opéra ou le cri de l’ange [The Angel’s Cry] (1986) in which the entire history of opera is seen as a journey through the optics of two limits, speaking on the one hand and crying on the other. At the beginning, opera was closest to the form of speaking, such as in the case of Monteverdi’s operas, where his humanistic program is expressed in the style of parlar cantando (Poizat 1986: 80). At the «end», opera glides merely into cry, such as in the case of the horrific cry of Straussian avantgardistic women (Salome, Elektra, Die Frau ohne Schatten). Further instances are the cry of the hysterical woman in Schoenberg’s Erwartung, or Maria’s cry in Berg’s Wozzeck, or Lulu’s cry. However, the presence of the cry is punctuated, as Dolar notes, in several strategic places in the timeline of opera: from Mozart’s Don Giovanni’s mortal cry to Kundry’s cry in Wagner’s last opera Parsifal. The period between these two cries is marked by a «metonymy of cry»: the romantic fascination with the highest female voice reaches its highlight in the coloratura soprano voice. It is very likely that this fascination derives from its proximity with the cry. This is why Dolar defines the coloratura voice as a tamed, codified, aesthetically-elaborated, or culturally-elongated cry (Dolar 2003: 61–2). Coloratura has an artificial cry which avoids nature by using strict cultural principles. A normal cry seems a spontaneous act of life (the level of nature); the coloratura cry appears as a disciplined cry, elevated to the level of culture. In Lévi-Straussian terms, the coloratura appears to be a fabricated nature within culture. But this is not the end of the possible interpretation of the relationship
between different oppositions. If we take into consideration the opposition of
music/crying, then we can see, Dolar writes, that the cry is not the only limit of
articulated music – where music would disappear into a kind of non-articulation
– but music as an articulated whole can be seen as a metaphor of the cry. Richard
Wagner was well aware of the fact that art as such was probably born from this
primordial natural element of human being, the cry (Poizat 1986: 114; also Dolar
2003: 62). Opera, with its divas as crying goddesses, can be therefore taken as a
highly elaborated and sophisticated structure of the primordial cry. Through
Dolar’s reading of the basic Lévi-Straussian oppositions, opera appears as the
eminent metaphor of the cry. For Poizat, the impulse toward the soprano’s death
in nineteenth- and twentieth-century operas is an impulse toward the inarticulate
scream or cry often uttered by these suffering heroines at the moment of death
(Smart 2000: 7).

From Helpless Victims to Powerful Heroines

The third type of Romanticist prima donna is, according to Clément, a perse-
cuted victim: »In the operas of the nineteenth century, almost all heroines are
victims, persecuted by men, baritone or bass … Humiliated, hunted, driven mad,
burnt alive, stabbed, committing suicide – Violetta, Sieglinde, Lucia, Brünnhilde,
Aida, Norma, Mélisande, Liù, Butterfly, Isolde, Lulu, and so many others … All
sopranos, and all dead« (Clément 2000: 22). Accordingly, women characters in
opera are mostly victims. Such a discouraging view of opera, as Ralph P. Locke
argues, rests on strong evidence. Most female characters in opera are based on
one of a small number of stereotypes of womanly behaviour. There is the passive
innocent who, through her devoted love either gets her man (Agathe) or dies
(Liù); then we find women who dare to love against the rules and end up losing
their lover, sanity, or their own lives (Lucia, Gilda, Cio-Cio San, Aida, Senta,
Isolde, Rusalka, Mélisande, Marie in Wozzeck). Further, there are the possessive
mothers (Fidès, Azucena, Kostelnička in Janáček’s Jenufa); then coquettes and sou-
brettes (Violetta, Musetta, Manon, Adina, Olympia); then women en travesti
(Cherubino, Isolier, Siébel, Oscar, Nicklausse, Orlovsky, Hänsel, Octavian, the
Composer in Richard Strauss’s Ariadne auf Naxos, Omar in John Adams’s The
Death of Klinghoffer and Max in Oliver Knussen’s Where the Wild Things Are); also,
there are femmes fatales (Dalila, Salome, Lulu, Carmen, Elektra, Florida Tosca)
(Locke 1995, 61). Let us refer here to an interesting remark made by the French
writer, ethnographer and anthropologist Michel Leiris, who expressed in L’âge
d’honneu that he had a very personal and intimate relationship with female
characters of the opera. Three heroines from Les contes d’Hoffmann – doll Olympia,
courtesan Giulietta and singer Antonia – were, for him, a triple incarnation of a
woman according to which his personal and intimate notion of femme fatale was
created (1992[1939]: 50). Leiris’s »sensual love« for some characters, for instance with passionate and charismatic operatic femmes fatales such as Carmen, Salome, Elektra, Dalila, Floria Tosca or Louise, made him obsessed with aggressive women who could castrate him. Perhaps this sentimental feeling led him also to a more self-destructive passion as, more than once, he talked of suicidal feelings in connection with his opera attendances.

Some complex and interesting characters in opera blend traits of several different stereotypes: Carmen, for instance, can be seen as rebellious heroine, audacious coquette and a real victim; Violetta as well contains different aspects of womanhood, from simultaneous coquette, devoted innocent, and someone who has risked loving across the boundaries of social class; Gioconda is a manipulative femme fatale on the one hand and a victim of male-dominated society on the other. However, as Locke stresses, when we look closer at the standard repertoire operas, it can be noticed that even some of the late-classicist women characters are not spineless as we have been led to believe: for example, Donna Anna in Mozart’s Don Giovanni or the Queen of the Night in Die Zauberflöte. Donizetti’s Lucia di Lammermoor is an even clearer case of a character whose courage and forthright-ness are underappreciated. At something like the other end of the woman character spectrum is Carmen. She is a victim, but a charismatic one and whose survival instinct, perceptiveness, humor, and ability to think fast under pressure remain vivid in audience’s memories after the opera and its violent death scene are finished (Locke 1995: 66, 68–70). The main power of operatic prima donnas probably lies in the fact, that there is »something irresistibly admirable and troubling about the female voice in opera, something that commands our attention and our deeper involvement, almost in spite of ourselves. Even – perhaps especially – in their coloratura flights, these women characters, as Paul Robinson puts it, »are rarely experienced as victims. Rather they seem subversive presences in a patriarchal culture, since they so manifestly contain the promise – or rather the threat – of women’s full equality« (ibid., 65). It is true that woman characters are set in a predominantly male world in plenty of operas but the roles that draw audiences and devoted fans into the opera houses are more often than not those of women who transform female singers into prima donnas, divas, goddesses. When we go to the opera, an image, a fantasy, an expectation of our own internally embodied prima donnas is with us waiting to be revived on stage: when watching Die Zauberflöte we want to see the astonishing Queen of the Night, in La Traviata the heartbreaking Violetta, in Il barbiere di Siviglia the much adored Rosina, in Le nozze di Figaro the magnanimous Countess, in La Bohème the gentle Mimi. Prima donna is the audience’s ultimate desire to see and experience. This is the subtle power by which the prima donna rules every performance at the opera.8

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8 Marta Feldman quotes E. M. Forster’s novel from 1905 Where Angels Fear to Tread when describing what happened when the diva »began to sing, and there was a moment’s silence. She was stout and ugly; but her voice was still beautiful, and as she sang the theatre murmured like a hive of happy
Prima donnas – such as Spanish mezzo-soprano Maria Malibran, French mezzo-soprano Pauline Viardot, Spanish soprano Isabella Colbran, Italian sopranos Giuditta Pasta\(^9\) and Giulia Grisi, »the Swedish Nightingale« Jenny Lind and German sopranos Henriette Sonntag and Therese Tietjens – flourished on the operatic stage and fully enjoyed the status of international celebrities. Some of them had a very professional approach to their apprenticeship: Maria Malibran, for instance, claimed to have exercised her own »awkward« voice with the final aria from Rossini’s \textit{La Cenerentola} for six years and still not to have got to the end of it (Rosselli 1992: 101). Women singers were now fully accepted as professional musicians. In a more general sense, the best women singers could now play a masterful role. If they were good enough, they had not only earning power and money but wide social acceptance. With the disappearance of the castrati, and before the cult of the powerful tenor had set in, women came to dominate Italian and other national operatic scenes. But with this generation of divas, something else changed in the profession of singing: they dominated opera by vocal and acting skills and only in the most marginal way by physical attraction. Good looks in a prima donna were not despised, but no longer were they first required (ibid., 69).

Through this, opera comes nearer to the audience as theatre and not only as vocal exuberance and pure exhibitionism. It must be remembered that the opera singers of 1800 were already creatures of the market. Before the nineteenth century, prima donnas were merely displayed on the stage; in the age of Romanticism, their craft had to be enacted. Before, sopranos were creatures of the demimonde due to their exhibition of themselves so publicly, but a new generation celebrated, as Jenny Lind did, the singer’s respectability. Before, prima donnas were musical dolls,\(^{10}\) producing lovely \textit{da capo} arias and coloraturas, not known for their education, but Pauline Viardot was sage, the adviser of writers and composers. Before, a prima donna was only a decorated body for producing high tones; now female singers needed to build a character on the stage and not just display themselves. So the genre of opera took its course in the nineteenth

\(^9\) Stendhal wrote that sometimes he liked to imagine a creature that combined the prodigiously beautiful voice of Angelica Catalani with the impassioned soul and dramatic instinct of La Pasta (Stendhal 1970: 367).

\(^{10}\) The famous operatic doll Olympia from Offenbach’s \textit{Les contes d’Hoffmann} destabilises, as suggested by Heather Hadlock, the representations of prima donna’s liveliness. The prima donna crumbles into pieces exactly in the moment of vocalising and piercing high notes of Olympia’s aria. In that very moment, when the obedient singing and dancing machine goes out of control, Olympia’s mechanical voice appears as the constructed anti-diva. Her song namely leaves no room for a vocal inventiveness the nineteenth-century diva might have regarded as her right (Hadlock 1994: 237–8). Hadlock therefore concludes: »Ultimately, the opera implies, the construction of Olympia is only another futile attempt at repressing the prima donna’s spirit« (Hadlock 1994: 240).
century in relation to certain new codifications and relationships between singer and composer, singer and impresario, singer and audience. Composers seldom wrote for an ideal cast in those days; they wrote for available talents: Rossini wrote roles in ten of his serious operas for soprano Isabella Colbran, while Bellini composed the title soprano role of several operas, *La sonnambula* (1831), *Norma* (1831), *Beatrice di Tenda* (1833), for Giuditta Pasta; Jenny Lind became a star in European opera houses and some roles were written especially for her by Giacomo Meyerbeer and Verdi; and even Wagner was crucially inspired, as he himself admitted in his autobiography, by a famous soprano Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient, for whom the French composer Berlioz once said that she was rewarded with »maternal bosoms« and the fantastic theatrical ability to expose vocal crescendo. She made such a great impression on Wagner that he wrote her a letter admitting in it that he finally »found a true purpose in my life« (Godefroid 1995: 26).

In summary, composers often tailored the role to the prima donna, which means that talent had to grow before opera could. This specific phenomenon of aria insertion, the practice that allowed prima donnas to introduce music of their own choice into productions of Italian operas, has been carefully explored by Hilary Poriss. Prima donnas had a lot of power in the nineteenth century. They were the ones audiences came to see. The best prima donnas were paid more than best composers, and theatre managers knew that the audience came to hear their favourite prima donna, and not the new opera. So, in their heyday, prima donnas were so influential that their celebrity status gave them the power to make or break the careers of some the most famous composers of the time – legends like Rossini, and Donizetti – and these operatic stars flaunted their status by making changes to operas as they saw fit. In the famed »lesson scene« in Rossini’s *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, for example, the composer’s score was rarely performed. Instead, a prima donna would introduce another aria, often by another composer, that she felt fit the overall opera. When Adelina Patti stepped onstage during the 1860s to play the part of Rosina, the audience could expect a treat during the lesson scene. Like nearly every other prima donna of the era, Patti would showcase her unique skills during this scene by singing an aria of her choice, explains Poriss. Even more, Patti created her own »mini-concerts« in the lesson scene of Rossini’s masterpiece (Poriss 2009: 158–9). Another famous prima donna, Carolina Ungher had difficulties in finding the perfect entrance aria to introduce herself in Donizetti’s *Marino Faliero*. Making an effective entrance was crucial in the early-nineteenth-century Italian opera. Works that lacked entrance arias were routinely altered by prima donnas to correct the »composer’s mistake«. Tracing Ungher’s decision to introduce three different arias as entrances in the space of a single year, Poriss finds evidence of her admirable desire to get it »just right« and to demonstrate her absolute domination of the stage (ibid., 38–40). In the 1830s, a figure like mezzo-soprano Maria Malibran could become famous for instituting changes that might be hard for modern opera-goers to fathom. Malibran was
known for replacing the Tomb Scene in Bellini's *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* (1830) with the equivalent scene from Vaccai's earlier *Giulietta e Romeo* (1825). Such a choice allowed the prima donna, who performed the role of Romeo in trousers, to present herself as a compelling and tragic figure doomed to an early death. The craze for Malibran as Romeo morphed into a craze for performing Bellini's opera »alla Malibran« (*ibid.*, 104–5). Another example is the famous Italian attrice cantante Giuditta Pasta, acknowledged as *diva del mondo* between 1822 and 1836. The contracts she made with opera impresarios and theatre managers afforded her an unusual degree of authority over every aspect of the production process. This position is, as documented by Susan Rutherford, most tellingly illustrated by the contract she signed with the King's Theatre in London in 1826 in which is written: »In all the operas in which Madame Pasta will perform, she alone will have the choice of the actors and the distribution of the roles, the absolute direction for all that regards the rehearsals and all that concerning the mise en scène of the said operas. No one will have the right to intervene in rehearsals, nor to meddle in anything concerning the performance of those operas« (Rutherford 2007: 111). Composers had no other choice than to surrender their works to the »personal convention« of prima donnas. This is something that would never happen today. But at the time, from about 1825 to 1850, we witness a growth in the number and influence of prima donnas, and composers were utterly reliant on them. In the early nineteenth century, between the 1810s and 1820s, they were probably at their most influential, holding sway over both compositional practice and the hiring and firing of other performers. Yet over the course of the century, the Romanticist prima donna gradually becomes only a constitutive element contributing her part to the entire system of production and not opera's central icon. However, the operatic divas of the time did not lose much of their old phantasmagorical image.

The fourth type of Romanticist prima donna is a suffering but powerful figure and, in the final instance, also a dying heroine. Her death on the stage therefore is a powerful act *par excellence*. According to Clément, the traditional operatic plots often feature the death of female characters in operas, in her words »the infinitely repetitive spectacle of a woman who dies, murdered« (1999: 47). To her, the nineteenth-century racism- and imperialism-based sacrosanct cultural frames of the opera world and musical life protected, in many ways, the gender politics that require the death or the destruction of the operatic heroine that people had so unapologetically celebrated. The prima donna’s *lasciatemi morir* is a history lesson that men imposed over women. The demand of nineteenth-century opera for the sacrifice of the prima donna caused audiences to »desire her death« on stage. Besides the literal deaths of characters such as Violetta, Mimi, Gilda,

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Norma, Floria Tosca, Carmen, Cio-Cio San, Gioconda, Isolde, Brünnhilde, Senta, Antonia, Marfa and Mélisande. Clément also speaks about metaphorical deaths, for example, of Turandot’s power and the Marschallin’s sexuality. The prima donna dies under men’s pressure. This is why Clément surveyed the death toll for female characters in opera, asserting that opera »undoes« its women by sentencing them to death, suicide, seduction, and madness. Some scholars, including musicologist Carolyn Abbate (see 1995), however, criticized Clément’s failure to discuss the music of opera in her focus on the libretto only. Her literary approach has provoked objections from critics who view the plot as merely scaffolding on which to hang the real substance of opera, namely the music, and the voices especially. These critics argue that although female characters die, they also hold the »authorial voice« and thus, through singing, reverse the tradition of the passive, silent woman as object. In other words, it was suggested that the power of the female voice evokes a sense of triumph that transcends plot. French writer Hélène Seydoux, too, exemplifies the powerful and heroic side of operatic women. Even though they can be victimized, male-dominated and punished, beneath all this they remain radiant and triumphant. Even in the moment of their darkest and lowest fates, they usually occupy the entire space of the stage. Humiliated, degraded and disgraced but voluptuous, stunning and magnificent, their voices maybe reveal their torments and failed desire strategies but their singing is victorious in any case. According to Seydoux, opera offers an ideal space where women are constantly magnified. Norma, Elektra, Carmen, Salomé, and many others are ascribed noble sentiments and worthy suffering. Whether they are male-dominated victims or male-destroying sirens they are heroines at the end. Carmen is, so Seydoux writes, a symbol of free woman, Elektra is a symbol of political women, and even Monteverdi’s Arianne is a symbol of realistic woman (Seydoux 2004: 145–190). Seydoux establishes in which ways opera actually privileges women in comparison to other artistic genres, for instance, literature, theatre or cinema, by giving them the largest share of lyrical space.

Due to feminist musicology, it is not the character types and dramaturgy of opera’s women that is remembered, but their voices, soaring strongly above all considerations of plot, sounding anything but victimised. Naomi Adele André supports this view by her study *Voicing Gender* when arguing: »My original question was: ‘Why do women in opera always die at the end?’ As an avid opera-goer, the death of the heroine seemed to say less about her strength of character and more about the fulfilment of an old convention … I have been unwilling to believe that the heroine’s untimely death is the primary criterion, or requirement, for hers to be the central role« (André 2006: xi). To support the idea of her initial question André centred on the three Verdi operas in which women get to live, by focusing on three drama-driven female roles in which the characters do not die at the end: Azucena from *Il trovatore* (1853), the Princess Eboli from *Don Carlos* (1867), and Amneris from
Aida (1871). All three of these female characters have something in common: first, each survives at the end of the opera; second, all three are performed by singers with lower voices, usually by mezzo-sopranos or contraltos; and third, each opera has two leading principal female characters. To summarize, women in opera who die are usually the high sopranos, while those who get to survive are mostly mezzos and contraltos: «In fact, it turned out that women who died at the end of operas where rather rare before 1830» (André 2006: xii).

In feminist opera scholarship, there are two intellectual factions which have contributed insights in order to understand the role of women in opera: one follows the pessimistic view of Catherine Clément (in opera studies best known by her study L’opéra ou la défaite des femmes from 1979), the other is inspired by the American feminist musicologist Susan McClary (her best-known book is Feminine Endings from 1991) who looks at operatic women more positively. Mary Ann Smart compares these two approaches to understanding women in opera as follows:

If Clément’s view of Carmen could be telegraphically summed up as «Carmen dies,« McClary’s extensive discussion of the opera focuses on the seductive rhetoric of Carmen’s songs and the way her death is necessitated by the workings of operatic conventions. And while the musical specificity of McClary’s interpretations has been both liberating and instructive, more and more (feminist) listeners now seem to prefer telling stories with the moral: «Carmen sings.« Paul Robinson famously complained that Clément’s negative verdict of opera was skewed by her inability to hear the voices of the sopranos who so often sing the most compelling and pyrotechnically impressive music in any opera, even as they are being oppressed and murdered by plot. (Smart 2000: 6)

However, there is a third direction which traces a different tradition, a feminist one in which women are neither man-destroying sirens nor devoiced and passive vessels for the voices for men, but women who work, act, sing, and think for themselves. This line of interpretation contests the »masculinist« tradition of representing the prima donna as either a manipulative, castrating femme fatale who must be punished or a passive, fragile woman whose role is equally, and predictably, fatal. In this manner, the woman dressed as a male character reveals how her voice as »his voice« is heard and enjoyed. Not all women are helpless victims in opera. Some of them, particularly the second women, as André calls them, possess a strong instinct to survive, as Clément herself puts it when mentioning mezzo-sopranos. The mezzo usually possesses active thought and is very articulate. She is capable of resistance, witchcraft, treason, and violent contestation: Carmen poses resistance to each and every order; Azucena is a sorceress fighting her powerful enemy; Marfa resists the renovated Russian orthodox religion; the passionate Eboli betrays her mistress; the jealous princess of Bouillon kills Adriana Lecouvreur; Dalila, resistant to Jewish tyranny in a period in which the Jews were the masters, betrays Samson; Marina in Boris Godunov leads a conspiracy against Russia; and Dame Quickly in Falstaff is a
superb go-between, betraying Falstaff and plotting for women; even Charlotte in Massenet’s Werther, who appears pure, innocent and unhappy, like a soprano, becomes treacherous, as she faithfully betrays both her husband and her true love, Werther (Clément 2000: 23–24). The mezzo prima donna and the second woman are still from this world. They demonstrate all too human down-to-earth weaknesses and power strategies because they are heroines who display desire, calculation, and strategic acting.

From Alpine Virgins to National Sirens

The fifth type of prima donna is a virgin prima donna. She is well documented by Emanuele Senici, who explores her path to mountain settings and picturesque nature. As Senici concedes, opera needs virgins and virgins need white mountains. The nineteenth-century lyric stage was densely populated by virgins who live happily in flat or modestly undulated lands, from Rosina in Rossini’s Il barbiere di Siviglia (Seville) to Amelia in Verdi’s Simon Boccanegra (Genoa), from Fenella in Auber’s La Muette de Portici (Naples and Portici) to Charlotte in Massenet’s Werther (Wetzlar in Germany) (Senici 2005: 1–2). However, from the 1820s onward, virgin female characters of Italian opera are increasingly placed in a mountainous idyllic, specifically Alpine, setting. The connection between landscape, gender and opera created the emblematic figure of the Alpine virgin. Operas portraying an emphatically virginal maiden, a woman defined by her virginity, were often set in the mountainous Alps. Senici discusses a number of works particularly relevant to the origins and meanings of this conventional association, including Bellini’s La sonnambula (1831), Donizetti’s Linda di Chamounix (1842), Verdi’s Luisa Miller (1849), Catalani’s La Wally (1892) and Giordano’s Fedora (1898). The clarity of the sky, the whiteness of the snow and the purity of the air were associated with the innocence of the female protagonist. In these operas, the Alpine landscape represents a range of metaphors. Its geographical features, such as white snow, clear light and unpolluted air lead the nineteenth-century audience to make certain moral interpretations. The idyllic mountains were obviously images for purity, the mountain summits represented virginal inaccessibility. The pure, idyllic and beautiful landscape is crucial for the Romantic virginal prima donna. In La sonnambula, the ‘idyllic idealization’ of the Alpine landscape corresponds to the portrayal of the virgin Amina as a perfect example of purity. Alpine virgins have their own sociality too. Divas singing in their mountain settings were increasingly represented as detached from their communities, as outsiders. Linda’s madness in Donizetti’s Linda di Chamounix is wholly bound up with her virginity. It is provoked by her father’s curse, the very idea that her father believes her to be unchaste is enough to unbalance her. Her madness is a symptom of her innocence. The combination of her literary, psychological and
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sociopolitical texts offers a convincing cultural context in which Linda had no other choice than to go mad. Senici rationalizes the father’s curse: a daughter’s chastity was seen as a commodity, part of a family’s wealth, guarded with a degree of paranoia by fathers and brothers in a society in which powerful males were predators, hunters and corrupters. It is clearly no coincidence that Freud’s ground-breaking studies of female hysteria were begun during a high point in the popularity of Alpine-virgin operas. One of his case studies prompts Senici to compare Linda with Freud’s patient, though Freud was concerned with investigating causes, Donizetti with displaying symptoms. With *Luisa Miller*, Verdi also evoked the tradition of Alpine virgin operas. The transfer of location in this opera from the *Residenzstadt* in Schiller’s play *Kabale und Liebe* to librettist Salvadore Cammarano’s Tyrolean village is interpreted by Senici as way of placing *Luisa* in the context of Alpine operas such as *La sonnambula* and *Linda di Chamounix*. But why did Cammarano and Verdi place Luisa in the Alps? Senici finds the reason in the goal of the *Risorgimento* and draws for supporting evidence on writings which lash out against the Austrian oppression of Italian land. Cammarano and Verdi, who for reasons of censorship could never have been explicit in such a critique, portrayed in their more general Tyrol the more personal oppression of a despot who has come to power through murder and now terrorizes Miller and his daughter. Thus, Verdi’s Alpine-located opera emerges as an artistic reflection of a more realistic political situation: «Moving the action to the Alps … made *Luisa* as contemporary as was allowed in serious opera at the time, thus making more transparent the moral pessimism of the plot and its resonance with the post-1848 political restoration. *Luisa Miller* is … politically and from an Italian perspective, a post-1848 »realistic, « »patriotic« [opera]« (Senici 2005: 177).

In short, virginity is, according to Senici, the most important ‘quality’ of these operatic heroines and, at the same time, the result »of a century-long preoccupation with the preservation of female purity« (2005: 4) and female sexuality. Operatic virgins of the rocks were probably the highest cultural product and most artistic outcome of the more and more popularized meeting between Alpine landscape, female purity and the exploitive tourist industry in the nineteenth century. The Italian nineteenth-century operatic tradition was a tradition in which popular approval and instant emotional appeal were essential criteria for a work’s success. As Emanuele Senici has noted: «empathy, identification with the characters, is precisely what the nineteenth-century tradition of Italian opera … considered its highest goal, its very raison d’être, what the audience expected and longed for» (Senici 2001: 298). The nineteenth-century opera needed singing virgins as much as opera’s audiences of the time needed the right identification and the right ideological tuning with the archetypally constructed prima donnas.

The sixth type of Romanticist prima donna is a singing siren of the nation. With her voice, she usually represents the advocacy, the interest, or simply, the sound of her people. Bizet’s *Carmen* was designed to play on the aura of romance
that adhered to economically underdeveloped Spain with the strong presence of the gypsy community. Accordingly, Carmen is the singing embodiment of the historical outsider through the presence of the gypsy as a standard symbol of the European Other *par excellence* (Lindenberger 1984: 277–8). Bellini’s *Norma* and Verdi’s *Aida*, two of the perennial standards of the Italian opera repertory, share the trope of romantic triangulation in which one man is desired by two women. And in both cases this configuration is complicated by the backdrop of nations at war, resulting in each of the women, either literally or metaphorically, sleeping with the nation’s enemy. In both operas, the leading female character is caught in the conflict between love and public duty. In Bellini’s opera, Norma and Adalgisa, Druid priestesses, both love Pollione, the Roman proconsul, despite the fulminating rebellion of the Druids and the Gallic people against the Roman invaders. Rather than allowing this rivalry to divide them, however, the two countrywomen renounce the colonizing male, pledging their mutual fidelity to the mission. Norma ultimately offers herself as a sacrifice through which the integrity of the Druid nation is preserved. Catherine Clément says that Norma symbolizes the colonized nation. Norma can save herself inasmuch as she can save her nation. The same role is ascribed to Aida who is the voice of the oppressed Ethiopians, dependent on the oppressive Egyptians (Smith 1997: 93–109).

A specific folkloristic version of the national siren comes from the less known Slovenian Romantic operatic repertory. Anton Foerster’s comic opera *Gorenjski slavček* (The Nightingale of Upper-Carniola) from 1872, which is still today considered as the first Slovenian national opera, is inspired by a love triangle of one woman and two men. Minka, the modest but talented provincial Carniolan songstress becomes the object of desire of the French music teacher Chansonette from Paris, who visits the land of Carniola to make his own collection of vernacular Slovenian folk songs and popular melodies. When he listens to Minka’s wonderful singing, he immediately invites her to Paris where she could improve her singing. However, the problem is that Minka has already been promised to Franjo, a jealous local guy, and therefore decides to stay at home with her beloved darling. But it is interesting how these three characters are differently portrayed: while Franjo mostly possesses the positive domestic virtues, his French opponent is presented as foreigner and intruder. The entire plot, written by librettists Luiza Pesjakova and Emmanuel Züngel, is inspired by the differences between the natives and foreigners, showing, in particular, Francophilia and Francophobia, as well as the subject of sacrifice for love, honour and loyalty to the nation and devotion to the fireside, home, and family. Minka therefore stands at the centre of this difference as a true and faithful representative of the Slovenian nation. She embodies, through her voice, all stereotypically positive collective virtues of the Slovenian people. She is the bearer of the nation’s melodies, virtues, and correct decisions which the entire Carniolan community of the mid-nineteenth century somewhere near the Alpine town of Bled, where the plot of the opera is situated, obviously expected. Any other decision but her decision to stay at home would be
understood by all as national disloyalty. So, women too can be a representative voice of their communities.

When the divisions between different ethnic groups and nationals became a crucial matter of social organization in the mid-nineteenth century, opera houses became a place of ethnic separation almost throughout the European continent. Each and every ethnic group or national community tried to build its own opera house in which their vernacular operatic works would be performed and, by doing so, would foster a growing national consciousness among its members. Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, was for centuries under the Habsburg Empire, and almost all Ljubljana’s cultural institutions were under German regency or led by Italian troupes. An anonymous nineteenth-century historiographer wrote: »As for opera in Ljubljana, it was self-evidently accepted that it belonged to the German authorities« (Kotnik 2010: 92). Particularly from the 1860s on, the distinction, and even the institutional separation, between superior German and inferior Slovenian city life was also clearly present in Ljubljana’s musical activities. From the 1860s on, the Slovenian community gave rise to the Slovenian opera, which from 1892 was housed in the new Deželno gledališče/Landestheater (the present-day Ljubljana Opera), initially sharing the theatre with the superior German ensemble. With this, the dreams of Slovenians to get their first theatrical stage where the performances can be given in Slovenian and not only in superior German language came true. Immediately after the opening of the theatre, the building was treated as the national opera house and the cultural temple of Slovenians. All domestic works performed, particularly Gorenjski slavček, were accepted enthusiastically by the local crowds. The Carniolan couple Minka and Franjo became the very symbol of the small, suppressed, still partly-colonized and not yet entirely politically-emancipated nation. Every one of Minka’s verses, melodies and intentions could be, in the final instance, considered as a contribution to the nation’s agrandissement. Slovenian newspapers from the end of the nineteenth century report that opera was the most popular of the arts among the local Slovenian crowds. Going to the opera was a clear symbol of national feeling and belonging, and, as such, a ritual of determined political emancipation. In the last instance, Minka’s romantic »no« to the Frenchman could be understood as the Slovenians’ political »no« to the long lasting Austrian supremacy. The Slovenians lived under the rule of the Habsburg dynasty from the fourteenth century until 1918, when the Austrian Empire disintegrated. Carniola, the constituent region of today’s Slovenia, otherwise situated between the gulf of Trieste, the eastern Alps and the Pannonia lowland was just one of several Austrian duchies. In other words, it was easier to refuse the Frenchman from a distant country, and to do this artistically on the operatic stage, than the much more unfavourable Austrians from the closest neighbourhood in the political arena. No one could give the nation’s esprit a better musical and literary meaning than the opera composer and his librettists could through the singing mouth of a decent woman.
From Recording Angels to the Prima Donna Assoluta

The famous late-nineteenth-century prima donna Adelina Patti, who was, according to both Mordden and Rosselli, by far the highest paid singer of the day (she earned nearly $5000 a night and had her own railway carriage) showed disdain for rehearsals: »Rehearsals,« she declared, »tire the voice.« She was not, supposedly, a great interpreter of the characters she portrayed, such as Lucia, Amina, Marguerite, Juliette and Violetta, but her voice was described as golden, with perfect bravura needed for the repertory of the time. Her individual musicianship was trained according to only one technique, Manuel García’s. However, George Bernard Shaw thought her too much the diva and too little the artist:

Madame Patti’s offences against artistic propriety are mighty ones and millions. She seldom even pretends to play any other part than that of Adelina, the spoiled child with the adorable voice; and I believe she would be rather hurt than otherwise if you for a moment lost sight of Patti in your preoccupation with Zerlina, or Aida, or Caterina. [Christine] Nilsson, a far greater dramatic artist, so far stood on her dignity that she never came out before the curtain to bow until there had been applause enough to bring out [Patti] at least six times. (Patti will get up and bow to you in the very agony of stage death if you only drop your stick accidentally). (Mordden 1985: 119)

Mordden writes that Patti focused only on song without portrayal of the character. To her, the song was the poetry of character. Mordden hilariously adds: »If Patti did not herself act, she let the roles act for her« (ibid.). And, it is said, when Patti was indisposed, she did not disappoint her fans: the diva was simply propelled back and forth across the stage in a flower-strewn gondola. All this suggests an extravagantly vain woman, and most Patti anecdotes confirm this profile. Adelina Patti, emerged from old age and tasted a dangerous immortality by making some of the first gramophone records (Mordden 1985: 118–20).

The end of the nineteenth century in music is strongly marked by a new art form: phonography, the art of making music on record. If the prima donnas of the previous centuries inaugurate opera’s most vivid legends and anecdotes, the prima donnas active around the turn of the twentieth century created the first generation of opera’s vocal archives in the recordings they left behind. Prima donnas of the age of the gramophone made themselves famous and pushed their predecessors into a kind of honorable mention, a mute history. With newly-emerged media, opera’s cultural status began to shift from the elitist to the populist. The star became a constant of everyday life. Through the phonograph, gramophone, stereo, radio, compact disc, TV and DVD, the operatic divas have become perceived in a quite personal way (Mordden 1985: 128–9).

With the advent of recording, even opera singing has changed, and particularly its social reception. The first half of the twentieth century was a time of many glorious opera divas – Luisa Tetrazzini, Nellie Melba, Maria Jeritza, Kirsten Flag-
sted, Lotte Lehmann, Birgit Nilsson and others – and it was a time when opera divas were accorded the sort of mass adulation given today to pop-rock singers, movie stars and superstar athletes. And also, it was a time when prima donnas had to adapt the training of the voice to suit this new cultural and technological situation, as the social perception and self-perception of the voice changed significantly.

The effect of technologisation was to transform the notion of opera as art into a cultural good. On the other hand, the technological production of the meanings of opera as cultural goods led to the production of a new aesthetics of taste and reception of opera as music. The opera world is now determined by the record. Opera gradually becomes a part of a discographic industry which transforms operatic art into an object – a product or a commodity. Opera becomes a part of reproduced culture in the free social market of offer and demand, and of capital and choice. The question of the opera audience is entirely reorganized. According to some ideas, taste and reception are the direct constructions of opera discography. The materialized form of a sound record of this or that singer becomes a public mass form which is available on the open social market of tastes, choices and decisions. Here one needs only to consider the well-known example of the famous Adelina Patti. When she first heard and recognized her own recorded voice, she was so surprised that she exclaimed with enthusiasm: »Now I can understand why I’m so famous!« The sound record is an objectivisation of the voice for the singer herself. Another notorious example is Maria Callas, who became morbidly obsessed with her own recorded – and already alienated voice (see Pettitt 2000; Andry et al. 2008: 47–60). We could undoubtedly say that »gramophonisation« or »discographisation« of opera singing has prolonged the ideology of the absolute diva through virtual reception of a »perfect voice.« Maria Callas exemplifies this well.

Whether or not Maria Callas was the greatest singer of the day is not especially important. More interesting is that opera needs these personalities as controversial figures to create a sense of epochs come and gone. In essence, the Callas mission was to turn opera from singing as a lovely noise to singing as the expression of text, character, and mood. This is probably why Peter Conrad says about her: »Maria Callas symbolized what opera might ideally be« (Conrad 1996: 318). At the beginning, around 1600, opera was an intensely musical declamation of poetry, and there were no star singers. By 1700, characterized by Angelica Catalani, all one needed was a star singer. At that time, opera was only about singers. Callas provoked a compromise: the stars would remain, but instead of just producing their lovely noise they would express and personify through the libretto and score. Conrad supports this view:

Callas is admired for her willingness to let vocal beauty suffer in the interest of verbal meaning. But she was more than a great actress with an unreliable voice. She herself insisted on the authority of bel canto ... she was capable of creating a dramatic charac-
ter, psychologically true and detailed, using strictly musical resources and never marring an absolute beauty of tone. (Conrad 1996: 319)

By that, Mordden points out, Callas redirected opera back to the golden age of Maria Malibran. She was determined to edge into authentic bel canto, into the great roles of Malibran’s time and into some others that led up to or followed them – Lucia, Amina, Violetta, and, sanctum sanctorum, Norma. She made her colleagues acknowledge that, in this most complex of arts, only the best is acceptable. She was exceptional, yet she acted as if she were the norm. And, in her view, she was. Her vocal quality – not only the natural sound, but the way in which she used it – was so unusual that she practically had to barge into opera. When she managed to step on the stage, many great coloratura and lyric singers lost their glitter; and Callas showed so much of it. She was a tireless rehearser, never holding her voice back, always begging the maestro for another run-through. La Callas was an extremely ambitious and egocentric interpreter and became notorious for her manners, which included drowning other singers’ voices in ensemble, something that Tosi, in the eighteenth century, refused to do. He suggested that singers should cultivate good manners, both in public and in professional relationships; manners should include not covering other singer’s voices in ensemble, and not doing what Maria Callas was much later to complain of in Fiorenza Cossotto – holding a note sung by both in a duet for longer than had been agreed (Rosselli 1992: 105). On stage, in particular, she was determined to be assoluta. That determination to be the best not only led her on to the near impossible, but also landed her in a series of feuds and scandals that less-driven singers would have tried to avoid. As many stories illustrate, Callas was never calm when treated with disdain by impresarios or not appreciated by audiences. After important appearances in La Fenice in Venice, La Scala in Milan and Covent Garden in London, Callas became opera’s most talked-about figure, as those who had heard her – and those who had not – tried to understand why the obviously flawed voice could do such spectacular things. However, fame tends to show mistakes in bold relief, and Callas seemed to collect a veritable series of scandals just when she had achieved greatest prominence. »Another Callas walkout« and »Another Callas scandal« were the press clichés of the era: Callas insulted all of Italy in early 1958 by leaving a Rome Norma after Act One with no less than the Italian president, Giovanni Gronchi, in the house, having foolishly tried to sing almost literally without a voice. Callas often drove her talent to the point of what might be called prima donna masochism, as in the case when she was hissed during Medea at La Scala in 1961 and she aimed her lashing »Crudel!« at the hostile audience; in Anna Bolena Callas, »la regina della Scala,« stirred up the volatile Scala audience during the performance in April 1958 and upbraided it as her persecutor, scorning its right to judge her by hurling Anne Boleyn’s most defiant lines »Giudici? Ad Anna? Giudici?« into the auditorium, but they loved, cheered her
and absolved her. When Callas, the Onassis-collectible, left her husband Meneghini for the Greek shipping tycoon, she accomplished the ultimate walk-out from the stage; Callas, the wild walk-out queen, fought with half the opera world, cruelly goading the nice Renata Tebaldi; Callas, the fallen angel, insisted on singing the most difficult roles after she had lost her grip upon them; Callas, the stubborn Greek, forcing herself to show the entire world that she has not lost her voice yet, showed nothing but a demoralized wraith pleading for love, and in the horrendous worldwide concert tour with Giuseppe di Stefano, artistic meltdown. But such affairs were merely complementary to a soprano raising opera’s standards in the mid-twentieth century (Mordden 1985: 197–9; Conrad 1996: 321).

By the time of her last concerts in 1973, public accusations had softened in the face of the victim’s gentle compliance. Once more appropriating the music she sang as autobiography, she reminded the public that she had destroyed herself to please it. Her self-exposure was physical as well as emotional. With the delight in suffering Callas saw her art as servitude. Callas bestowed her own unsparing integrity on the characters she played. All her characters were versions of herself, sacrificial victims or apostates. Throughout her life, she had been searching for a scapegoat. At the end, she finds one – herself. Dispensed with a grandly semaphoric style of acting she revolutionised or, better to say, restored opera after the war to its source in ritual. Callas was a muse, but a misused one, overtaken by the fantasies of directors who, through her, were at once renewing opera and criticising it. The masochist in her – unsure of her own power and longing for protective guidance – consented to the exploitation. Thus, for Visconti and later for Zeffirelli she became a black goddess: the spirit of music and of the sensuality which rages from the orchestra. Visconti called her »a monstrous phenomenon. Almost a sickness.« He heard her singing as a symptom of her sensual obsession so he cast her as a musical demon, a fatal and decadent creature. Later Zeffirelli made productions with her and designed them for his own imagined Callas. The woman whom Visconti considered a monster was for Zeffirelli a greedy, ambitious, passionate, sometimes enjoyably ill-behaved star. Visconti staged macabre and corruptly beautiful apotheoses for her. Zeffirelli staged extravagant and bustling spectacles for her. And Pasolini’s filmed tribute to Callas showed her not as the modern celebrity, but an ancient woman, torn by violent conflicts in herself. For Pasolini, singing in opera was only the voice of that primeval rage in her. Pasolini acknowledges that for Callas opera was a cult, and entailed a shedding of blood. Self-sacrifice became Callas’s creed, so she could turn her vocal tragedy to expressive account. This was the distressing moral of her last concerts with Giuseppe di Stefano when her voice sounded »odd«, »funny«, »painful« and »broken« (Conrad 1996: 321–324, 327–329). Those final concerts were the prima donna’s intimate acquaintance with her pain; even more, in that pain, exactly there were hidden all the pains of the characters she sang and played at the opera.
From Modern Goddesses to Global Media Stars

The post-World War II epoch produced many brilliant female exponents of operatic vocalism as singing became an extremely professionalized activity: Ljuba Welitsch, Sena Jurinac, Zinka Kunc Milanov, Imgard Seefried, Régine Crespin, Teresa Berganza, Renata Tebaldi, Maria Callas, Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, Christa Ludwig, Lucia Popp, Wilma Lipp, Leonie Rysanek, Joan Sutherland, Martina Arroyo, Leontyne Price, Mirella Freni, Radmila Bakočević, Ana Pusar Jerič, Gundula Janowitz, Anna Moffo, Jessye Norman, Montserrat Caballé, Victoria de los Angeles, Ileana Cotrubas, Kiri Te Kanawa, Marilyn Horne, Marjana Lipovšek, Biserka Čvejić, Ruža Pospivić Baldani, Dunja Vejzović, Eva Marton, Agnes Baltsa, Ghena Dimitrova, June Anderson, Luciana Serra, Karita Mattila, Edit Gruberova, Felicity Lott, Inva Mula, Deborah Voigt, Mariella Devia, Raina Kabaiwanska, Vlatka Oršanić, Waltraud Meier, Angela Gheorghiu, Renée Fleming, Cecilia Bartoli, Vesselina Kasarova, Natalie Dessay, Diana Damrau, Krassimira Stoyanova, Violeta Urmana, Petja Ivanova, Sabina Cvilak, Martina Zadro, Elina Garanča, Anna Netrebko, and many others. It would be wrong to think of the idea of the tailoring of roles for particular singers as something that belongs to a distant past. Even in the jet age, we can find such artistic collaboration between the composer and the singer: Menotti has written roles for Marie Powers and for Beverly Sills; Samuel Barber created Anthony and Cleopatra for Leontyne Price, just as Bellini had composed Norma and La Sonnambula for Giuditta Pasta in the nineteenth century. It is the voice that is the central question; the voice as the orienting point of collaboration and mutual reference.

However, the relationship between the history of an opera and the cultural practice of each performance, that is, the relationship between the research of scholars of the operatic genre and the divas who executed them on stage, is of crucial importance. Philip Gossett touches this relationship by suggesting that a successful production is born from teamwork, and divas alone do not make or break a production. He writes that «Without instruction in the art of vocal ornamentation from Rossini and his own singers (Giuditta Pasta, Manuel García, and Laure Cinti-Damoreau), you are forced to trust the practices of late nineteenth-century divas like Estelle Liebling who tended to confuse the music of Rossini with the Bell Song from Délibe’s Lakmé» (Gossett 2006: xiv).

The seventeenth- and eighteenth-century prima donnas usually just stood in the middle of the stage and displayed their vocal agility. In our time, the operatic goddess is no longer just a performer but an interpreter as well. The recreation and interpretation of the music and libretto is her main role. In the book The Third Line American cultural anthropologist and professional opera singer William Orman Beeman and renowned opera stage director Daniel Helfgot propose the view that opera singers must not only study their roles but also work on their self-presentation as public figures. As Beeman and Helfgot argue, modern opera performers must focus on opera interpretation, not simply on opera singing. So,
they propose that performers study a »third line«, which is, besides the text and the music, the interpretation including movement on the stage, focus, facial expression, and vocal inflection. Following Helfgot’s and Beeman’s book, modern prima donnas cannot be regarded by their vocalism alone but by a complex fusion of their musical, theatrical and other skills necessary for making an opera. In the postwar era, modern operatic goddess experienced a huge transformation which represents a broader shift from the understanding of opera as a purely musical art celebrating vocalism to the understanding of opera as a complete performing art where theatrical and musical values exist in equal strength. By this shift, pure vocalism in opera has emerged as nonsense, as it is expected from modern prima donnas »not only to have all the vocal strength and mastery of their predecessors, but also [to be] able to engage their audiences with their acting and interpretation« (Beeman and Helfgot 1993: 1–2). Now it is necessary for prima donnas from the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries to learn how to establish themselves in an opera as »opera interpreters« and not »opera vocalists«. Beeman and Helfgot note that some people complain about the current vocal situation, saying that the great voices are disappearing from the modern opera stage. Their answer is that it is a mistake to compare the late-twentieth-century situation to the spirit of opera’s Golden Age in which the social role of »great voices« was very different; also, what was a great voice in the nineteenth century might not be judged a great voice today, as the objectivisation of the voice in the age of recording has significantly changed. Today’s singers should not be only vocalists, they claim, but thoroughly prepared, complete performers. They despair for the future of opera if the voice were to remain the dominant factor in performing opera (ibid., 15).

From their ethnographically-informed epiphany for opera singers, we are led to make two brief conclusions regarding the social position of the modern and the emerging prima donna. The first is that, for the opera prima donna, »her art« does not begin when the curtain goes up and ends when it goes down but reaches far beyond. Their study well illustrates that being an opera prima donna does not mean being a definite product of adoration. On the contrary, the opera prima donna is a historically- and socially-constructed figure as she embodies inherited techniques, skills, traditions, trends, and so on.12 And the second conclusion is that prima donnas’ singing is not an activity which remains in the magical bubble of an enchanting or sacred world. The Callas case is probably one of the best examples suggesting that it is far from that. It is a serious career, full of rigorous training, painstaking work, tedious rehearsal, and of professional strategies of how to build and perform her professional self in the private and public sphere.

12 Similarly, Susan Rutherford (2006) discusses the prima donnas as a specific group of working artists by locating them within a broader history, including their life beyond the opera house and professional activities.
Since the 1990s, in the age of the Internet, the DVD and YouTube, opera is facing a new phenomenon: prima donnas have been successfully transformed into the role of global stars. Their omnipresence is more obvious than ever: Montserrat Caballé, with her memorable cross-over duet with pop-star Freddie Mercury and earlier benchmark executions of Norma’s »Casta diva« in the 1970s; Marilyn Horne, who sang male title roles in Handel’s Rinaldo and Rossini’s Tancredi with equal success to female title roles in which she portrayed Rosina in Il barbiere di Siviglia, the title role in Bizet’s Carmen or Dalila in Saint-Saëns’s Samson and Dalila; Waltraud Meier, the distinguished Wagnerian diva and the supreme Isolde; Angela Gheorghiu, much celebrated Puccinian diva; Renée Fleming, the American diva who can sing Handel, Mozart, bel canto, Verdi, Richard Strauss, French opera, German lieder, chansons and jazz equally superbly; Cecilia Bartoli, whether it be a concert of her travesti roles or an opera performance with her in the title female role, has sold out opera houses everywhere since the mid-1990s; Vesselina Kasarova, not just the iconic Orfeo en travesti but probably a better »man« than any other male singer who sang this role before and after her; Natalie Dessay, the diva of stunning coloraturas and one of the best actresses with immense sense for comic characters, such as her unbeatable Marie in Donizetti’s La fille de régiment; Diana Damrau, the German high-notes diva of ordinary private personality and extraordinary stage presence; and Anna Netrebko, the most media-acclaimed operatic diva of the early twenty-first century whose professional career has ranged from appearing at the best opera houses to selling the most luxurious products in media advertisements.

Prima donnas of the Internet-DVD-YouTube generation have projected their craft and artistry not only on the stage of the opera house but through the media and new technology as well. Prima donnas, today, possess abilities and opportunities, duties and tasks undreamed of by performers of the past. When renowned soprano Renée Fleming, as special guest interviewer, posed the question to the famous Anna Netrebko in her dressing room – in the intermission after Elvira’s second-act mad scene she had sung at her debut at the Metropolitan Opera in 2007 – about the value of the legacy of other singers who sang this role before, Netrebko’s answer was not surprising. She said: »Of course, before I started to sing it, I’d been listening to all of the great sopranos who’ve done this before. And I admire them very much. And I think I took … I steal from all of them a little … but definitely, it [the legacy] helps me.« This is just one concrete example illustrating Beeman’s and Helfgot’s suggestion that the accomplishment of an opera is the performance of inherited and reproduced practices and meanings. In other words, prima donnas need to repeat something of the old in order to produce something new.

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13 See the DVD of Bellini’s I Puritani filmed at the Metropolitan Opera, © 2007 Deutsche Grammophon.
From Vernacular Songstresses to Foreign Favourites

Prima donnas, both hated and adored, often provoke extreme feelings and divide people. However, in any case, they are always at the centre of public attention, or it is at least expected of them to be publicly visible due to either their caprices and whims, their love affairs, their attractiveness and beauty, or even due to their artistry and singing virtuosity; the last criterion should be, of course, the most relevant factor of their reputation and fame. In short, throughout history, one can find many reasons why they deserve the central position in the opera world. For some people, they are only screaming caricatures, for others goddesses. The voice of a prima donna can surpass the limits of her throat, body, personality, aria or opera house, and it can touch the whole nation. The twentieth century documents many examples of prima donnas who overgrew the national frames of their communities. A study of the relation between a soprano prima donna and a nation could be very exciting. Many examples of »larger-than-nation« mezzo or soprano prima donnas signal a strong national identification with the prima donna’s voice. Her voice becomes the voice of the nation: Joan Sutherland, Australian prima donna assoluta, as the iconic voice of the Australian nation, became one of the most admired Australians of the century; Kiri Te Kanawa as the voice of the New Zealand nation became also a highly successful cultural symbol of her Maori ancestors; Edita Gruberova as the undisputable voice of the Slovak nation; Violeta Urmana as the highest cultural symbol of the Lithuanian nation; or Elina Garanča as the internationally renowned voice of the Latvian nation. Nations compete with their prima donnas and fight for them, as in the case of Maria Callas. At the occasion of the 30th anniversary of her death, the Greek authorities decided to dedicate the year 2007 to Maria Callas. The aim of this action was, according to the then Greek minister for culture Georges Voulgarakis (as reported by the Slovenian National Radio and Television in 2007), to show to the world that she had been »one hundred-per-cent Greek.« With the year of Maria Callas, the Greek Ministry of Culture wanted to introduce a policy of honours paid to Greek personalities, in order to »draw a clearer image of contemporary Greece,« Voulgarakis added. »Callas was chosen because she was a great figure and we didn’t pay her enough honour; this is why we’ll make up for it.« At the same time, he also regretted that »some people in Italy,« where the diva was most successful, »try to usurp her.« Thus, the Greeks were perfectly clear about the fact that Maria Callas was theirs. Prima donnas can even charm foreign nations to the point that they are willing to adopt them, as in the case of Anna Netrebko who was enthusiastically »adopted« by the Austrian public and was even issued an Austrian passport. The cultural transformation of the Russian soprano into the Austrian superstar was hugely supported by Austrian tabloids and even by serious national dailies.

In Slovenia, which is not the best and most hospitable place for a top-level prima donna to work, one »target« of recent increasing media attention has been
the lyric soprano Sabina Cvilak. On the invitation of the famous director Plácido Domingo, she made a successful American debut at Washington National Opera as Mimi in La Bohème in September 2007 and was re-invited as Micaëla in Carmen and Liu in Turandot for the 2008/09 season. This immediately took her to the list of top Slovenian celebrities whose glamorous private or professional appearances attract even more media attention. Slovenian tabloids, magazines and newspapers quite uniformly created a positive platform for the singer’s self-production through which Cvilak has constituted her professional identity. Her biographical account has been constantly reproduced along with some anecdotic aspects of the performer’s life while the element of artistry was more or less put aside. Her success abroad was presented by the Slovenian press in a manner similar to that of successful national athletes or skiers. In other words, her growing international presence was presented as something that strengthens and unifies the national imagination of Slovenians as a people of culture, since media have transformed her appearances to points of collective identification and national pride.

On the other hand, another outstanding female singer active on the Slovenian opera stage, the coloratura soprano of Bulgarian origin Petya Ivanova, has had recent successes on German, French, Italian and Austrian stages and achieved great success in appearances at the Maribor Opera in Slovenia, but nevertheless remains almost entirely ignored by the national press. The ethnicity of artists is the hidden parameter through which the success and the achievement of both »divas« have been reported by the Slovenian national mainstream media. The distinction made by the media is quite obvious: Ivanova is still a foreigner to the

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14 The number of full-page or even multi-page newspaper interviews, sporadically appearing in major Slovenian dailies, is meaningful when compared to the media exploitation of other female singers working in Slovenia: Sabina Cvilak (interviewee) – Melita FORSTNERIČ HAJNŠEK (interviewer), Konjem pojem, seveda [I Sing to Horses, Of Course], Večer, year 69, no. 295 (21 December 2013), pp. 12–15; Sabina Cvilak (interviewee) – Ingrid MAGER (interviewer), Najslabše kritike so bile vedno doma [The Worst Reviews Appeared Always at Home], Dnevnik – Dnevnikom Objektiv, year 62, no. 144 (23 June 2012), p. 18; Sabina Cvilak (interviewee) – Petra ZEMLJIČ (interviewer), Imeti moraš adute, vztrajnost in srečo [You Have to Play with Best Assets and Have a Bit of Stamina and Luck], Večer, year 65, no. 51 (3 March 2009), p. 14; Sabina Cvilak (interviewee) – Boštjan TADEL (interviewer), Volumen je za pevce potreben, vendar le v odprtosti razmišljanja: Sopranistka Sabina Cvilak je odlično debitirala v operni hiši, katere direktor je Placido Domingo [The Volume is Necessary for Singers but Only Regarding the Open Thinking: Soprano Sabina Cvilak Debuted Excellently at the Opera House Whose Director Is Placido Domingo], Polet – Magazine of Delo and Slovenske novice, year 6, no. 41 (18 October 2007), 12–15; Melita FORSTNERIČ HAJNŠEK, Sabina Cvilak, opera pesva: Kandidati za idole. O solanju in nastopih mlade operne pevke iz Maribora [Sabina Cvilak, An Opera Singer: Candidates for Idols. On Education and Performances of a Young Opera Singer from Maribor], Večer, year 88, no. 45 (25 February 2002), 9.

15 Incompatible with the number of her appearances and numerous successes on the Maribor opera stage appears this, one of her rare full-interview appearances in the Slovenian newspaper: Petya IVANOVA (interviewee) – Tjaša KRAJNC (interviewer), Na samotni poti do opernih višav: S sopranistko Petyo Ivanova [On the Lonely Road To Operatic Heights: With Soprano Petya Ivanova], Večer, year 69, no. 85 (12 April 2013), p. 14.
national media, or only a »naturalized Slovenian« who lives in Slovenia (even though she has lived here for many years and speaks Slovenian fluently), while Cvilak is perceived by the national media as »true Slovenian« and therefore deserves greater attention. This example indicates that there are systems of cultural signification and connotation that are shared among the press and media in general and which go in the direction of national homogenization that is most often based on the notion of »us« and »them.« Stories produced by that press that frame the singer and suggest sensational national contexts for their audiences are obviously themselves elements in the codes of cultural significance in a society where the symbols of national identification still matter.

In Slovenia, there were some great local female singers, some of them even with international success: in the 1930s, the Croatian born Zlata Gjungjenac, married Gavella, was the reigning prima donna of Ljubljana Opera stage, her Madama Butterfly is remembered among local crowds as unsurpassable; the dramatic soprano Valerija Heybal was celebrated in the 1940s, with some local critics writing that she received the loudest applause ever heard at the Ljubljana Opera for the role of Magda Sorel in Menotti’s Consul. Opera chronicler Marko Košir writes that on radio, the Slovenian conductor Samo Hubad called her »the Slovenian Maria Callas« (Košir 2013: 317). The lyric-dramatic soprano Ksenija Vidal (Žebre), had been praised in the early 1940s in Ljubljana until she moved

16 Zlata Gjungjenac, born to a Croatian father and Slovenian mother, was fully incorporated into the canon of Slovenian musical scholarship, as it is documented by Ciril CVETKO’s monograph Dirigent Niko Štritof in sopranistka Zlata Gjungjenac v ljubljanski Operi [Conductor Niko Štritof and Soprano Zlata Gjungjenac at the Ljubljana Opera] (Ljubljana, 1999) and Primož KURET’s book of portraits Sto slovenskih opernih zvezd [One Hundred Slovenian Opera Stars], 70–71 (Ljubljana, 2006).

17 A difficult life story of this almost forgotten, or better to say, by Ljubljana’s local crowds adored but by the politically-inspired influential local cultural circle suppressed and by the communist regime eliminated (and removed from Ljubljana Opera to Belgrade Opera in the season 1947/48) prima donna, otherwise of Czech origin through her father Josip Heybal, has been only recently re-told by certain local opera connoisseurs and journalists in an uncensored manner: Katja HUMAR, Je Valerija Heybal pozabljena?: Prva dama slovenske opere [Is Valerija Heybal Forgotten?: The First Lady of the Slovenian Opera], Delo, 15 January 2016, 20; Ingrid MAGER, Bliščin beda operne dive: Portret sopranistke Valerije Heybal [The Splendour and Misery of an Operatic Diva: A Portrait of Soprano Valerija Heybal], Dnevnik, 20 January 2016, 28; Katarina BEDINA, Valerija Heybal (1918–1994): Sopranistka, operna primadona [Valerija Heybal (1918–1994): A Soprano, An Opera Prima Donna], in Pozabljena polovica: Portret žensk 19. in 20. stoletja na Slovenskem [The Forgotten Half: A Portrait of Women of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries in Slovenia], edited by Alenka Šelih et al., 563–566 (Ljubljana, 2007); Vladimir FRANTAR, Spomini na ljubljansko opero: Valerija Heybal [Memories of the Ljubljana Opera: Valerija Heybal], Bilten [The Bulletin], year 3, no. 7 (December 2007), 28–29; Primož KURET, Sto slovenskih opernih zvezd [One Hundred Slovenian Opera Stars], 122–123 (Ljubljana, 2006); Peter BEDJANIČ, Valerija Heybal: O življenjih in delu operne pevke [Valerija Heybal: On the Life and Work of the Opera Singer], Kamniški zbornik [The Miscellany of Kamnik], year 14 (1998), 108–110.

18 Her international success, particularly that related to the Italian opera stages, was amply exposed by Slovenian publicists: Vladimir FRANTAR, Spomini na ljubljansko opero: Ksenija Vidal [Memories of Ljubljana Opera: Ksenija Vidal], Bilten [Bulletin], year 4, no. 9 (December 2008), 30–31; Kristjan UKMAR, Ksenija Vidal Žebre (1913–2004): Primadona evropskih opernih hiš [Ksenija Vidal
to Milan and sang on Italian opera stages. The soprano Vilma Bukovec\(^{19}\) (Kambič), was probably the most celebrated postwar prima donna in the country, and the internationally successful coloratura soprano Ana Pusar\(^{20}\) (Jerič), who is remem-

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\(^{19}\) Her status of the Ljubljana Opera’s supreme prima donna in the period of communism was never doubted or neglected: Joži SINUR, Slavnostni poklon Vilmi Bukovec: Dolgoletna prva dama ljubljanske Opere: Ob 95. rojenstvu ... [A Solemn Tribute to Vilma Bukovec: The Lasting First Lady of the Ljubljana Opera: For Her 95th Birthday ...], Dolenjski list, year 66, no. 9 (5 March 2015), 7; Ida PLEVNIK, Mila Bukovec: Diplomsko delo [Vilma Bukovec: A Diploma Thesis] (Ljubljana, 2012); Vilma BUKOVEC – Nataša ELVIRA JELENC, Vilma Bukovec: Memories of Great Artist], Opera: Bilten Društva Richard Wagner Ljubljana [Opera: Bulletin of Ljubljana Richard Wagner Society], year 7/8, no. 14/15 (December 2011), 2; Primož KURET, Sto slovenskih opernih zvezd [One Hundred Slovenian Opera Stars], 126–127 (Ljubljana, 2006); Lidija MARKELJ, Dolenjski operni slavček po vsem svetu: Vilma Bukovec Kambič [An Operatic Nightingale of Lower Carniola All Over the World: Vilma Bukovec Kambič], Dolenjski list, year 55, no. 23 (10 June 2004), 24; Ivan ZORAN, Njen neponovljiv glas: Sopranistka Vilma Bukovec, dolgoletna prvakinja ljubljanske Opere [Her Amazing Voice: Sopranistka Vilma Bukovec, A Many Years’ Prima Donna of the Ljubljana Opera], Dolenjski list, year 33, no. 6 (11 February 1982), 7.

\(^{20}\) After she came back to the Ljubljana Opera from abroad where she earned the position of first-class singer, her internationally designed etiquette of great prima donna experienced some disagreeable moments and negative accents in the provincial world of Slovenian operatic scene. However, many local opera connoisseurs have agreed about her highly profiled vocal professionalism. But yet, between the lines in several interviews she gave to the Slovenian newspapers and magazines, one can decode an intimate disappointment hidden behind the impression that in Slovenia she never got the recognition she deserved and a reception comparable to that on German and Austrian opera stages: Ana PUSAR JERIČ (interviewee) – Saša T. OCVIRK (interviewer), ’Vso dediščino mladosti sem vzela s seboj’; Ana Pusar Jerič od vedoželje deklice s Kalobja do svetovne operne zvezde [All the Heritage of My Youth I took With Me]; Ana Pusar Jerič from a Curious Girl from Kalobje To Global Opera Star, Novi tednik [New Weekly], year 63, no. 31 (18 April 2008), 8; Ana PUSAR JERIČ (interviewee) – Peter BEDJANIČ (interviewer), Sprehod skozi kariero [A Journey through the Career], Glasnik: Občanski Glasbene matice Ljubljana [Herald: A Periodical of Ljubljana Philharmonic Society], year 2, no. 3/4(2007), 13–17; Ana PUSAR JERIČ, Opera: Bilten Društva Richard Wagner Ljubljana [Opera: Bulletin of Ljubljana Richard Wagner Society], year 7/8, no. 14/15 (December 2011), 2; Primož KURET, Sto slovenskih opernih zvezd [One Hundred Slovenian Opera Stars], 126–127 (Ljubljana, 2006); Lidija MARKELJ, Dolenjski operni slavček po vsem svetu: Vilma Bukovec Kambič [An Operatic Nightingale of Lower Carniola All Over the World: Vilma Bukovec Kambič], Dolenjski list, year 55, no. 23 (10 June 2004), 24; Ivan ZORAN, Njen neponovljiv glas: Sopranistka Vilma Bukovec, dolgoletna prvakinja ljubljanske Opere [Her Amazing Voice: Sopranistka Vilma Bukovec, A Many Years’ Prima Donna of the Ljubljana Opera], Dolenjski list, year 33, no. 6 (11 February 1982), 7.

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bered as the sublime Marschallin in Der Rosenkavalier at the inauguration of the Semper Opera in Dresden in 1985. However, Ljubljana and Maribor are not metropolitan cultural centres, but rather provincial cities with limited cultural resources and potential for the intense artistic migration of opera performers. This is why there has always been a lack of high level operatic achievements and first-rate singers. Perhaps, this is the reason why two of the internationally most acclaimed Slovenian opera singers, mezzo-sopranos Marjana Lipovšek and Bernarda Fink, have worked almost exclusively outside Slovenia. Strangely, Lipovšek, with such a respectable international operatic career, never appeared on the stage of the Ljubljana Opera in the production of an opera. While yet in 2009, at the closing of her career, she agreed to make her first true home operatic debut, meaningfully enough, not in Ljubljana, but at the Maribor Opera, in the role of the countess in Tchaikovsky’s The Queen of Spades. Also Fink, born to Slovenian family in Argentina and living in Austria, rarely appears in Slovenia, and has only given concerts and never appeared in the production of an opera. Therefore, each and every foreign singer of good quality who came to work on Slovenian operatic stages in the past should be therefore seen as a precious rarity which importantly enriched and opened up the national operatic milieu.

In the early 1990s when the Maribor Opera, under the leadership of the then director Stane Jurgec, decided to strengthen cooperation with foreign opera ensembles and invite singers from abroad to contribute to the Slovenian opera repertory, certain Slovenian cultural circles evaluated this process critically. In the spirit of a society going through the turbulent times of economic and political transition when some believed that the idea of »Slovenianness« was seriously in danger, there were views – supported by media and legitimated by the cultural bureaucracy – expressed with nationalistic overtones, that with such new administrative approaches the Maribor Opera was losing its national character and would become a »foreign agency« which would impede the endeavour of the then opera administration to also obtain the status of national theatre. There were also critical views claiming that the majority of foreign singers who had been brought to the Maribor Opera were not better than the domestic ones and through their presence, the idea of »Slovenian opera« was slowly disappearing, and so on. Nothing like that really happened, at least not with the help of few foreign performers who came to Slovenia and tried to find a new chance to work and develop there. On the contrary, the Maribor opera audiences accepted operatic newcomers exceptionally well, especially women singers who quickly became the main protagonists of the Maribor Opera. Principal singers are usually in the focus of public attention everywhere in the world. According to them, the media and opera critics formulate their views about the performances in general. Even opera administrators, sponsors and patrons of arts take decisions on the basis of what they achieved on stage. This is probably so due to the complex historical depen-
idence of this profession on varied social factors reflecting the fact that the production of opera has from the mid-seventeenth century on been a distinctly transnational enterprise which employed people of very different social affiliations, national belongings and ethnic origins.

In the early 1990s, the outstanding soprano of Ukrainian origin Natalya Vorobiova (Biorro), got an opportunity to work at the Maribor Opera. As a new member of the ensemble she first appeared in full brilliance in Verdi’s *La Traviata* in the season 1990/91. Her Violetta was praised at home and abroad and even ambitiously compared with the biggest divas, such as Mirella Freni and Maria Callas. At the end of the 1990s, Vorobiova-Biorro was by far the brightest star of the Maribor Opera. She sang all the important principal female roles, among them Lucia in Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor*, Desdemona in Verdi’s *Otello*, Micaëla in Bizet’s *Carmen*, Rosalinda in Strauss’s *Die Fledermaus*, Liù in Puccini’s *Turandot*, Elvira in Verdi’s *Ernani*, Mimi in Puccini’s *La Bohème*. She was not only a darling of the local audience but also the bearer of soprano repertory in Maribor and a true prima donna. Unfortunately, her life ended tragically at the height of her creative power. Unexpectedly, the Maribor Opera lost one of its most valuable singing champions.

However, in the meantime, when some individuals from the rival Ljubljana Opera and certain bureaucrats from the Ministry of Culture turned their focus fully on establishing the idea of »ethnically clear« operatic production as a precondition for the development of national opera culture in the country, something much more important happened for the Maribor Opera and its audience. Namely, the cultivated opera audience did not buy the prejudices based on the ethnic differences of singers on the stage; it was interested mostly in cultural pleasures, artistic credit, and the delights that singers can offer them. And some of those delights happened at the Maribor Opera thanks to the singers, especially women singers, who migrated to Slovenia from abroad. Despite some criticism about the poor recruitment of foreign singing recourses, the Maribor Opera administration firmly continued to be open to new promising singing talents. In 2002, a little-known coloratura soprano from Bulgaria Petya Ivanova was invited to perform the role of Musetta in *La Bohème*. The first prize from the singing competition in honour of local soprano Ondina Otta in Maribor brought her regular engagement in the Maribor opera ensemble. This was another exceptional choice of the then opera administration, because Ivanova in the following years – with the roles of the Queen of the Night in Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*, Cunegunde in Bernstein’s *Candide*, Olympia in Offenbach’s *Les contes d’Hoffmann*, Gilda in Verdi’s *Rigoletto* and Violetta in *La Traviata* – proved to be an exceptional coloratura soprano qualified for the most demanding operatic renditions. Her international breakthrough is probably linked with her brilliant interpretation of Lakmé on the stage of the Maribor Opera in 2007. The performance of Léo Delibes’ *Lakmé* was enthusiastically applauded by large audiences in Slovenia. The English critic
Christopher Norton-Welsh wrote that Ivanova as Lakmé «was the success of the evening. Blessed with more colours in her voice than most such high sopranos, she gave a performance that would have graced many higher-profile stages» (Norton-Welsh 2007: 326). In the eyes of critics from abroad, her success was also the success of the Maribor opera house. In 2008, her comic Despina in Mozart’s Cosi fan tutte was so convincing that it quickly became clear that she was transforming her supporting role into a leading one. After so much success in Maribor, she soon started to perform in Austrian, German, French, Dutch, Swiss, Japanese and Chinese opera houses as well. Her success there also raises the reputation of the Maribor Opera where she is employed full-time. The Maribor Opera owes much of its recently achieved international reference precisely due to its prima donnas who became the magnets for far more renowned opera houses. In the case of Maribor Opera, it was the prima donna – embodied recently in Vorobiova-Biorro and currently in Ivanova, Cvilak, Bernarda Bobro, Guadalupe Barrientos or Rebeka Lokar – whose singing credentials have made this city a little bit closer to the most developed European operatic centres.

To this brief outline of recent post-socialist Maribor opera prima donnas and current opera stars should be added that the preceding communist period was marked above all by two prima donnas, both coming, interestingly, from the city of Trieste: the first was internationally renowned soprano Ondina Otta21 (Klasinc), the daughter of an Italian father and Slovenian mother, who deserves to be considered the greatest prima donna at Maribor Opera from the late-1950s to the early-1970s. The second was Ada Sardo, born to a Triestine mother and Hungarian father, whose singing was appreciated in Maribor from her arrival in 1957 until her last appearance in 1985, and was through her entire career in Maribor «the only true dramatic soprano of the Maribor Opera» (Košir 2013: 199–239).

The Ljubljana Opera was once also an opportunity for many migrant women singers who later also became internationally renowned. The famous soprano of Croatian origin Zinka Kunc (Milanov), who in the 1940s and 50s became the prima donna at the New York Metropolitan Opera, experienced her first truly professional appearance on the operatic stage at the Ljubljana Opera in 1927 with the role of Leonora in Verdi’s Il trovatore. In her native town of Zagreb, the administration of the local opera house was not willing, writes Slovenian musicologist Primož Kuret, to offer her a chance to perform as she was an unknown singer. In the following years of her stay in Ljubljana, she had a number of impressive appearances on the basis of which the door for her was open to the world (Kuret 2006: 81). From the 1950s on, several female singers of good quality migrated to work in Ljubljana: among them, for instance, Croatian born Božena Glavak who was »for forty years the leading mezzo-soprano of the Ljubljana Opera« (Kuret

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21 For more, see Primož KURET, Sto slovenskih opernih zvezd [One Hundred Slovenian Opera Stars], 146–147; Marko KOŠIR, Mariborske operne zvezde [Maribor Opera Stars], 91–197.
2006: 164), mezzo-soprano Zlatomira Nikolova from Bulgaria, and from neighbouring Croatia young soprano Vlatka Oršanić who later became the internationally celebrated prima donna. Her meteoric rise with the roles like Lucia in Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor*, Violetta in *La Traviata* and Donna Elvira in Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* was called a »singing wonder«. In an interview for the Croatian newspaper *Nacional* in 2008 she reminisced about her diploma performance on the Ljubljana Opera stage as a very young debutante in the role of Lucia and said »The audience literally went crazy – they were shouting and stamping their feet so much that it seemed the whole theatre was going to collapse. Such a reaction is very unusual for the Ljubljana audience which is notorious for its coldness and reserve. I am not exaggerating at all when saying this – it was truly so noisy like in the earthquake, and it was very impressive« (Oršanić and Ožegović 2008). In the Ljubljana operatic scene of the 1980s and 1990s, she was successfully competing for the audience’s recognition with several other remarkable local prima donnas of her generation like Olga Gracelj, Milena Morača and Irena Baar.

However, after the independence of Slovenia, almost no new foreign singers were seen who would invigorate the quite lethargic and in certain moments almost entirely defunct Ljubljana operatic scene. This managerial and artistic decline of the Ljubljana Opera was in total contrast to what was happening with opera in this city during the hard times of communism22 when the Ljubljana opera stage flourished and was, consequently, filled with local and guest stars on a regular basis. The most fervent members of the Ljubljana audience were waiting for years for a new prima donna to worship. Their once beloved opera house finally got in the season 2003/04 a new true prima donna personified in the excellent Croatian soprano Martina Zadro whose highly cultivated voice is distinguished by full high notes and refined lyrical pianissimi. She has achieved great success in Slovenia and abroad and won the highest praises of musical reviewers and opera critics for her principal role of Armgard, singing on the opening night of the rediscovered first Offenbach opera *Die Rheinnixen* [The Rhine Nymphs], premiered at Ljubljana Opera in January 2005.23 Her other remarkable appearances in Ljubljana expanded from her Fiorilla in Ros-

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22 For the ambivalent social position of opera under the communist regime in Slovenia, see Kotnik 2010: 98–99, 116–120. Soprano Zlata Gjungjenac was awarded in 1947 with the Grand Prešeren Award which is the highest official state honour in culture and arts in Slovenia, for her Ljubljana performances of Violetta in Verdi’s *La Traviata* and Jenůfa in Janáček’s opera of the same title. After her, no other foreign female singer achieved such recognition on the national level in Slovenia.

23 In the influential Viennese daily, Oskar Tonkli described Zadro as »the secret queen of the evening« (*Wiener Zeitung*, 15 January 2005), while Jürgen Otten praised her in the German newspaper by stating that she deserved the greatest compliment, because »she fascinated with the warm colour of the voice and with the joy of risk-taking with which she surmounted sensitive high notes« (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 19 January 2005).
sini’s *Il Turco in Italia* premiered in October 2005\(^\text{24}\) to many roles up to her recent Desdemona in Verdi’s *Otello*, premiered in January 2016.

For all these exceptional female artists mentioned above it is maybe not unique that they came from abroad. However, it is specifically unique that they importantly marked both past and recent Slovenian opera productions, a fact which was, unfortunately, overlooked even by the Slovenian music scholarship, critics, and the media. This insight is even sadder considering that the work of these prima donnas contributed vitally to the higher standard of the culture of opera singing in both Slovenian opera houses. But even more, they were maybe the only reason why it was and still is worthwhile to go to the opera in Slovenia. Of course, following from what has just been said one question remains: why foreign opera artists, who are proven successful by Slovenian audiences, remain systematically marginalized by the national mainstream media as well as by other national institutions. Except for a few remarks within the opera reviews and criticism section of the newspapers, they receive no adequate public attention and wider recognition in Slovenian society. It is simply preposterous to claim, as some people in Slovenia vigorously do, that »imported« singers do not serve the local community at all as they only steal jobs which are meant to be available for native singers. Such views are not only exclusive but also grossly unfair, because anyone who is able or willing to understand the world of performers a little is then also well equipped to understand what it means for each and every serious singer to go to the stage and try to earn the audience’s recognition and respect again and again. This task is not easy anywhere, but especially not in Slovenia, where the standards of developed cultural centres and the criteria of social evaluation and of reception of cultural practices are still in their early stages, and sometimes even turned topsy-turvy. The production of opera in Slovenia is one of such social activities which are protected by the strong hue of perfidious national defence which goes like this: everyone who comes from abroad is welcome, on principle, but only as long as he or she intends to stay there as guest or tourist who will soon leave the country. But, if a foreign singer wants to settle down in the opera business and be an equal part of the community, then things can get more complicated. If there yet exists a clinging-to-life mechanism of national homogenisation, which should supposedly contribute to a more vital national cultural scene, then this is a serious problem due to the fact that the functioning of this mechanism is based on the principle of ethnic differentiation: instead of distinguishing between good and bad practices, good and less good artists, the mechanism rather prefers to distinguish between »ours« and »non-ours«, thus between the »true Slovenian« singers and those who are not Slo-

\(^{24}\) The Slovenian opera connoisseur Vladimir Frantar enthusiastically reported in London’s renowned opera magazine: »The Croatian soprano Martina Zadro is not (yet!) a Callas, Caballé or Bartoli, but her Fiorilla was anyway charming, seducing and spontaneous – hers was the best performance.« (Opera Magazine, February 2006).
venians. This is something which removes this country from the sphere of the most developed cultural societies to which the Slovenians always wanted to belong. The above-mentioned women singers are an example which deserves recognition at the highest level of Slovenian society. Part of the symbolic capital on which both Slovenian opera houses build their value and reputation is connected to non-Slovenian prima donnas whose contribution to the opera culture of this country can hardly be denied. The past and recent achievements of imported prima donnas who, whether occasionally, temporarily or permanently, worked on Slovenian opera stages, directly contradict the fears and prejudices of those who believed and maybe still believe that Slovenian opera is dying out due to migrant singers. This article argues, on the contrary, that the presence of those migrant prima donnas was and remains the best guarantee for the vital, multicultural and potent status of opera as national culture in post-socialist Slovenia. The real problem with which the Slovenian opera administrators, cultural managers and cultural bureaucrats should deal is how to keep »our« and »non-our« best artists – who start their career in Slovenia or come to work in Slovenian cultural institutions and consequently win local and broader recognition which later becomes their springboard for more renowned opera houses abroad – in contact with the Slovenian opera stages, also in such a way that they will not later have to »conceal« their beginnings or temporary work in »unknown« Slovenia. The major challenge of the Slovenian opera management and cultural policy should be how to make the opera scene so vital and potent that it will automatically become an important biographical reference for artists as well. This part is not reflected and contextualised enough when dealing with opera production in Slovenia.

From Singing Commodities to Postnational Divas

At the beginning of the twenty-first century the persona of the singer, particularly of the prima donna, is still a key aspect of our attention in opera’s culture. Today’s prima donnas are media stars and part of modern celebrity culture.25 They communicate directly with fans through e-mails, YouTube, Facebook and other platforms. Due to this, their lives are enacted on new multiple occasions. Never more so than today has it been obvious that prima donnas have a dual identity: they perform characters in opera, and simultaneously, they

25 In the chapter »Operatic‘ Commodities« of his book Phantasmagoria (1999), British sociologist David EVANS offers an interesting perspective on the popularisation and commodification of opera singers as celebrities and stars. Through them, opera enters into a consumerist economy, popular culture and advertising industry (347–352). While in his chapter »Singers‘ Opera,« one can find a kind of media ethnography of prima donnas gleaned from their published interviews, including the invariable Callas stories, along with the usual complaint, surely heard in every era, that modern singers lack »great personalities« (277, quoting Leonie Rysanek).
perform their own identity as singers, stars and celebrities in public. Today’s prima donnas produce and perform narratives of self and career not only in operas or at opera houses but beyond that. So, within the music-theatre contemporary opera performers have a dual presence: a prima donna first performs her own self within the company where she works or is employed; however, she performs some other self as well, which is related to her openness to the world in which media and other communication platforms are involved. In brief, she does something that frames her relationship with the opera companies and audiences. She gives interviews on radio and television, her name appears in reviews of daily newspapers, her lifestyle is promoted in magazines, she makes CDs, DVDs and other records, her face is used in advertisements and so on. All this suggests an interpretative context for the public to validate, what French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu would term her social capital. So, today’s prima donna does things beyond her opera company in order to enrich her operatic biography with extraoperatic credentials. But there is more to this. Just as opera singers enact different identities, so opera companies, as British social anthropologist Paul Atkinson points out, have multiple performative functions as well. They perform operas for their audiences. Further, they rehearse the partnership, in particular, with sponsors and financial supporters. They perform themselves for media and wider publics. They organise events for audiences. In doing so, opera companies enter into symbolic and material exchanges with different publics and social groups of interest (Atkinson 2006: 137). The past, recent and current management teams of the two Slovenian opera companies evidence a systematic shortcoming of quality, flexibility and openness toward many of these performative acts. It is striking that some prima donnas, employed or working in these two companies, appear in other opera houses abroad, and their international success is not engaged in a process of symbolic exchange with the promotional activities of their home opera companies. The success of local prima donnas achieved somewhere else is almost entirely ignored by the marketing of their domestic opera houses. There are different sorts of cultural performances and self-presentations that can arise when the life of a prima donna is intelligently exchanged with the life of an opera company. In Slovenia, both opera companies and their prima donnas are performing themselves on a regular basis, but not for each other. I give here just two recent examples to illustrate the point. When Petya Ivanova made her debut at Wiener Staatsoper with the Queen of the Night, or premiered Elvira of Donizetti’s I Puritani at Aalto-Musitheater in Essen, or Lucia in Lucia di Lammermoor at Tiroler Landestheater in Innsbruck, or Gilda on the stage of Klagenfurt’s Stadttheater, no one paid much attention to it at her home opera company in Maribor, where she is employed full-time. The same usually happens at Ljubljana Opera. When the promising soprano Urška Arlič Gololičič and tenor Aljaž Farasin were invited to perform La traviata at Rijeka Opera House in Croatia in April 2015, they were presented in some Istrian media as »young stars of Ljubljana Opera.« However, this news had almost no resonance at their home opera company.
The management of the most influential and most renowned opera houses in the world is aware of the fact that the promotion of its leading singers is part of its professional duty to present the opera house as such. There is one single motto which connects successful opera companies to successful prima donnas: if a prima donna wins, her company wins as well. Wise opera managers and wise prima donnas therefore know quite well that the benefits of mutual professional interaction in opera business can be and should be shared and common on both sides. The individual success of a singer may resonate as the success of her or his opera company too, and nothing is wrong with that if there are developed systems of signification and connotation that are shared among those who are involved in opera business on the individual as well as on the collective level. The cultural sociology of Pierre Bourdieu provides valuable insights here (see Bourdieu 1984). In addition to the economic capital represented by wealth, finance and material goods, there are also cultural and social capitals. Cultural capital resides not in material but in symbolic goods. For instance, a prima donna’s cultural capital is mostly vested in her capacity to use the symbolic systems that encode such things as her »beautiful singing«, »physical attractiveness«, »mother figure«, »artistic charisma«, »stage presence«, »vocal virtuosity« or »divine status«. All these labels reflect the implicit orderings of her operatic legitimacy which define the difference of a »must-see prima donna« among numerous others good female singers who will never achieve her position. In a similar vein, social capital is manifested in phenomena such as one’s social reputation, prestige, or standing. The social capital is on the prima donna’s side if she is perceived by others as a »singer with the name«, »first-rate singer«, »famous singer«; a singer who is related to the major opera houses of the world; a singer who is able to sell out opera houses; a singer who is able to perform a wide variety of different characters and roles; a singer who is capable of moving across the repertory from the works of Baroque era to modern operas; a singer who is talented enough to sing in different, even less known languages; and so on. So, prima donnas can possess their individual cultural and social capital. On the other side, opera companies are themselves a source of economic, social, cultural and symbolic capitals. They offer opera performers a certain amount of economic capital through payments, salaries, royalties, fees etc. They also offer singers a certain amount of social capital represented by the social status, social ranking and social prestige which opera houses have gained through years, through their traditions, through their repertories, through their collective memories, through their relationships with communities, publics and audiences. And finally, they can offer cultural capital by providing a highly valued and legitimated form of »high« culture, »fine« art, »classical« music, and the like. This is why going to the opera is a socially valued ritual by many individuals and collectives, whether or not they themselves actually attend opera performances. So, an unknown female singer can get a great amount of her individual economic, social and cultural capital through the opera house and
with the help of the opera house. Later in her career, if she becomes a prima donna of great renown, she is able to return her individually gained social and cultural capital back to the opera house. Opera companies namely »invest« a relatively small portion of their economic and social capital through opera singers in order to transform singers’ individual social and cultural capital into companies’ collective cultural and symbolic goods. The cultural return on material investment in singers is maybe not readily calculable in purely monetary terms, but it is clearly very good value, especially in the case of a newly-emerged prima donna who is able to associate the company with the highest forms of cultural value and highly visible operatic excellence. In this case, the prima donna »costs« comparatively small amounts of the company’s wealth, when compared to the turnover she is able to provide (paraphrased according to Atkinson 2006: 149–152). If some French sociologists and anthropologists dared to say that Maria Callas prolonged the life of opera, which was in the early twentieth century already declared a »dead art«, then this article dares to argue here that rare prima donnas, »ours« and »others«, who have appeared on the Slovenian opera stages, have made and still make sense of the Slovenian operatic machinery in the twenty-first century when opera is certainly not our cheapest pastime.

Conclusion

Through this brief historical outline, there is one thing that comes out clearly. The opera prima donna is not only a woman acting and singing on operatic stage. Above all, she is an institution of opera’s culture; perhaps the strongest one that was ever managed in opera. This institution did not belong to men only but was lucratively managed by women too. Culturally, the idea of the prima donna is a concept showing the central but vulnerable and changeable status of woman in opera. It seems she has been always there standing supremely, conceitedly or pragmatically in the centre of opera, but very rarely with the real possibility to control her own status or position. The idea of the prima donna, taken within the inter-textual referential frame of the anthropology of sex and gender, however, has been defined more or less in relation to the supreme metaphor of man. As the feminist critique teaches us, the »man« is a humanistic abstraction of a special kind, made and measured politically, economically and socially, to use Jacques Derrida’s famous neologism, in a phallogocentric manner. This universalistic discourse which formulates the identity of this abstraction, with the history and philosophy of great men in the foreground, resonated normatively in relation to the metaphor of woman and, specifically, of prima donna in opera too. In order to become universalistic and absolutely valid, this discourse which separates men and women and pushes the sexual and gender difference into the sphere of woman’s otherness had conferred the title of man upon the male individual alone. How this affected the idea of prima donna?
In the sixteenth and seventeenth century, it is determined mostly by the paradigms of absence and replaceability supported by the misogynistic contamination of woman. The status that was delivered to prima donna, was that of the courtesan or plaything for men. In the time of post-Renaissance humanism, rising anthropocentrism, political absolutism and operatic moralism, her artistic credibility is subordinated to the basic difference between man and woman. Even though she is allowed to appear on stage, she is not autonomous, but depended on men through patronage, protection, honour and other postulates of patriarchal society. It is characteristic that actresses and female singers in late sixteenth-century Italy and Spain are allowed to step on the stage within the frame of the marriage institution, or, in Italy in particular, through the institution of *cortigiane oneste*.

Later on during the eighteenth century, under the ideological cover of enlightened rationalism, historical universalism, philosophical idealism, cultural sentimentalism, theatrical machinerism and artistic hedonism, the most »erotic« moment for singing emerged, since opera was entirely concentrated on the two artistic profiles of vocal acrobatics and virtuosity, castrati and prima donnas. A woman as a singer manages to legitimately and professionally step up on stage as a place of the perfect union of erotic and vocal magic around the mid-seventeenth century but, once she is there, she is, in the collective fantasy, promptly attributed the role of a courtesan (which is, of course, the stigma and practice to which the profession of female singers was related in early opera). And if we know that the question of the theatrical norm of sexual congruence in the seventeenth century was regularly conceived through the figure of a travestied actor (in the context of the re-questioning of sexual identity, the body as the possible impression of a physiologically confirmed truth of human nature, sexual hierarchy as social regulation, etc.), we can say about eighteenth-century opera that its castrati are a prominent review of a censored representation of sexual difference, which is censored to the extent that it diverges the poetry of »naturalness,« loaded with the obsessive problematization of ontological, phenomenological and ethical consubstantiality of the male/female singer and the played character, to the level of executive operatic tra(ns)vestism, supposedly creating the illusionist effect of representing the triumph of artistic form over physiological substance. But the castrati can become the object of artistic fascination only when a male body (as a regulation of unproblematic, uncontaminated, stable, good, etc.) is not only symbolically (e.g. in theater) but also physically fabricated or transformed into the register of compensatory female physiology, which, in opera, no longer raises the dilemma of domination of nature over cultural norm, but only gives the impression of the inversion of male identity, and therefore, on the contrary, the impression of subduing nature by cultural norm. The status of prima donna in the eighteenth century is therefore fundamentally marked by the paradigms of human nature and the body. So, when influential prima donnas began to rule the operatic stage, their stigma of feminization is transformed into new paradigms, the
paradigms of human nature, body, sexuality, gender, character, costume and their complex imaginary systems. The prima donna is reduced to the body as machinistic mechanism for »natural« producing of beautiful tones and high cultured notes. She is una creatura vocale represented by her virtuosic ability not only to use and control parts of her body, like throat, chest and stomach but to impose a strong communication channel with the audience’s emotional system.

In the nineteenth century, the prima donna is determined by the paradigms of aura and fetish, or, an archaized object of divinization and demonization. In the spirit of essentialism, scientific evolutionism, religious clericalism, sexual hegemonism, nationalism and colonialism, the fetishization of the Romanticist prima donna is burdened by romantic ideas of angel’s light on the one hand and of diabolic darkness on the other. Accordingly, prima donnas became national divas. They are metonymic bearers of national cultures melting the allegory of the nation as female body and voice with the subversive metaphors of misogyny, madness, hysteria and other normative constructions of womanhood. Due to this, the Romanticist and particularly the modernistic prima donna had to confront several social functions which kept her past image of anti-rationalistic, anti-realistic and de-naturalized creature firmly petrified. The worst symptom of this image was the neglect of her potential autonomy and freedom in opera. The modernistic prima donna seems to be a direct attack on the ideological and mythological aura of the traditional Romanticist prima donna. In a way, she denies an old conservative acte de présence which was characteristic for the prima donna appearing in the time of high nineteenth-century liberalism. However, even though one might say that the screaming avant-gardistic heroine or realistic ordinary everywoman became the prima donna, who both actually contradicted this status, by strange forces of social constellations in the period from late-Romantic avant-gardism through fin-de-siècle’s realism and naturalism to early-twentieth-century modernism, this was not the end but rather a transitional phase after which her future mystifications in the twentieth century were imposed.

However, if previously the prima donna is interpreted through dominant medical and philosophical discourses or those of psychology and psychoanalysis, later in the twentieth century she becomes a matter of economic discourse entirely. Under the umbrella of numerous new ideologies of the twentieth century, from academic positivism and functionalism, political pacifism, media pluralism, historical revisionism, artistic internationalism and transnationalism, and late capitalism or neoliberalism, she is now defined almost exclusively through the contemporary concept of identity as she finds herself in the centre of numerous social exchanges, down-to-earth decisions, business-driven careers and pragmatic transactions of opera’s highly competitive industry. The numerous identities she has to play today should not be taken, ontologically, as intrinsic essences or objective substances of her professional self, but rather as aspects of numerous intertional, interpersonal and inter-subjective relationships she makes with others and
with herself too. Therefore, her identities are not natural, self-evidently given, fixed or eternal, but culturally constructed, socially ascribed, negotiated and therefore subjected to constant change. As a matter of fact, the prima donna is not born with her identities. Also, they are not inscribed in here genes or female nature as it was thought in the past. But rather, she is a product of a complex social process called »cultural production of prima donna« in which she is created by others on the one hand, but on the other she actively co-creates and identifies her professional identities. Through her actions, she actually constructs and performs her identities too. But that does not mean that she has finally liberated herself, become entirely autonomous and got rid of past social constraints. On the contrary, she has to take up some new demanding challenges that are set up in front of her, and sometimes against her. Having been economized, de-sacralized and epitomized by the mass media, she has finally become a normal human being (see Hanson 2016). The past mystique of prima donna is gone. But her phantas-magorical institution lives on right through our most intrinsically patriarchal, paternalistic and idealistic phantasms of woman. Paradoxically, she was thrown from the throne so that she could continue to rule the world of opera’s audiences and publics, markets and industries.

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V. Kotnik: The Idea of Prima Donna: the History of a Very Special Opera’s Institution


Sažetak

Ideja primadone: povijest jedne vrlo posebne operne institucije

U članku se istražuje povijesno utemeljenje i konstrukcija primadone (prima donna), vjerojatno najistinskih operne institucije što se proteže od kraja 16. stoljeća do danas. Opera primadona doživjela je brojne kulturne transformacije i robna postvarenja – od post-renesansne kurtizane do profesionalne umjetnice u baroku i klasicizmu, od belkantičke luđakinje do modernističke plačljive dive, od bespomoćne žrtve tradicionalnog patrijarhata do moćne politički emancipirane heroine, od ranokapitalističke alpske djevice do kasnoromantičke nacionalne sirene, od snimanog anđela u ranom 20. stoljeću do apsolutne primadone (prima donna assoluta) iz sredine 20. stoljeća, od poslijeratne božice do globalne medijske zvijezde na kraju 20. stoljeća, od domorodačke pjevačice lokalnih socijalističkih periferija do post-socijalističke inozemne omiljene i putujuće kraljice (u ovome članku s posebnim naglaskom na kulturnu produkciju primadone u Sloveniji), od kasnokapitalističke pjevajuće robe do post-nacionalne dive. Ideju primadone određivale su paradigme i koncepti odsutnosti i zamjenjivosti u 16. i 17. stoljeću, ljudske prirode i tijela, spolnosti i roda, karaktera i kostima u 18. stoljeću, aure i fetiša u 19. stoljeću, te identiteta u 20. i 21. stoljeću. No, premda je puno izgubila na mistici, grandomaniji i fantazmagoriji iz prošlosti, institucija primadone nastavlja vladati opernim svijetom.