

Readers' letters

Opera on TV (or not)

I was delighted to read David Patrick's letter (October, p. 1246) about the BBC's decision not to televise the Barenboim *Ring* cycle. On opening the Proms programme on the day of publication, I wrote at once to the Director General and four heads of department expressing great disappointment that this opportunity was being missed, and making Mr Patrick's point that the technological infrastructure appeared to be in place. I added that I had enjoyed the WNO's 2010 *Die Meistersinger* on TV much more than some friends who had had to endure the heat and acoustics of the Albert Hall.

There is much to be said for televised concert performances of opera. Recordings of these great performances could also have been used for teaching

purposes. I received no answers and wrote again twice as the date of the opening night of the Proms approached. All my letter were ignored and I now deplore both the lost opportunity and the rudeness of these highly-paid people.

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Gardeners' question time

Michael Kennedy's translation 'The Make-believe Garden Girl' undoubtedly conveys the meaning of *La finta giardiniera* (September, p. 1186), but I still prefer a pithier, if marginally less accurate rendition made by a friend of a friend: 'The Fake with a Rake'. An option for Glyndebourne next year?

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TWILIGHT OF THE GODS

Andrew Moravcsik asks where the big voices have gone

The bicentennial celebrations of Giuseppe Verdi and Richard Wagner have brought many questions out into the open once more, but an important one seems to remain fundamentally unaddressed, that regarding the opera world's ability to cast their works adequately. I refer, specifically, to what is perceived to be a shortage of those voice types that came into being while these composers were at their peak, and continued to dominate the lyric stage well after their deaths: *spinto* sopranos and tenors, dramatic sopranos and mezzos, Verdi baritones, Heldentenors, Wagnerian bass-baritones and basses.

About 40 per cent of operas performed worldwide every year require *spinto* or dramatic voices, including such staples of the repertoire as *Aida*, *Il trovatore*, *Die Walküre*, *Tristan und Isolde*, *Tosca* and *Turandot*. These works capture the popular imagination like few others; they sell the most tickets, cross-subsidizing more obscure programming. They dominate media representations of opera and make new converts to the art form. Above all, they have traditionally been vehicles for the greatest singing actors.

Yet today, to a degree unprecedented in operatic history, worries have surfaced that almost no singers anywhere can perform these roles at the highest standards. Whether one overhears conversations in the standing-room queue, reads critics in a major newspaper, or seeks recommendations for recordings, one is struck by the overwhelming sense that the very best *spinto* and dramatic singing, especially of mature Verdi and Wagner, has steeply declined since the 'Golden Age' of the mid 20th century. What great conductors have to say about contemporary Verdi performance paints a sobering picture. James Levine waxes nostalgic about the singers he worked with a generation ago: 'They were sensationally full-scale in every artistic way. I'd give so much to hear them sing again ... In any given Met season now, it's unlikely we could play *Don Carlo*, *La*

■ As they were: Lauritz Melchior and Kirsten Flagstad as *Tristan and Isolde* at the Met





■ *Verdian paragon: Carlo Bergonzi as Ernani at the Met*

forza del destino, Un ballo in maschera and Aida. We just don't have the same density of that kind of singer now.' Zubin Mehta recalls his own early years: 'I never realized how lucky I was with singers. I did a lot with Leontyne [Price], and we just don't have singers like her today. And find me an Otello!' Riccardo Muti observes: 'We have a lot of singers good for Mozart and Rossini, but singers in the heavy repertoire are becoming fewer and fewer. It's certainly impossible to cast an opera like *La forza del destino* well.'

But does such a decline really exist? Or have these dramatic singers always been scarce, and opera buffs perennially nostalgic and critical? And if a decline has occurred, what might have caused it? For the last three years, I have headed a team of researchers from across the arts and social sciences at Princeton University (supported by the university's Woodrow Wilson School and the Center for Cultural Policy Studies) examining

this question—the first academic study ever to attempt systematic scholarly research on the issue. The research continues and our findings remain preliminary, but this article presents some of what we have found. We focused primarily on heavier Verdi and Wagner opera, but what we found might reasonably be applied to some Puccini and Strauss roles, and other dramatic repertoire.

One way we tried to find answers was by asking opera professionals. My research team has conducted confidential interviews with (to date) more than 125 leading impresarios, conductors, coaches, casting directors, critics, scholars, consultants, singers, accompanists, agents and teachers, in nine countries. Asked whether they perceived any change over recent generations in the quality or quantity of the very best *spinto* and dramatic singing, over 95 per cent reported that they felt there had been a significant decline dating back to the 1970s or '80s. The period up until the 1960s is widely viewed as a 'Golden Age' for these voice types. When asked what modern singers lack, by far the most common response refers to basic vocal capacity and technique: comfort across a sufficiently wide range, dynamic and melodic flexibility, and, above all, an appropriately warm and dark timbre, and a big enough voice to project in a major house. Some also believe they lack interpretive insights, but the more common view is that communicating such insights requires that singers possess a sounder basic voice. In other words, the opinion of most analysts is not that as many people can sing these roles as ever, but suddenly they are boring; it is that almost no one sings these roles well at all.

Almost everyone we interviewed singled out Verdi singing as the area of greatest crisis. A top consultant told me that when a major house asks him to cast an opera like *Il trovatore* or *Aida*, his first response is, 'Just don't do it!' Better to programme a Verdi



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opera that requires lighter voices, like *La traviata*. To see how things have changed, we need only remember the abundance of Verdi voices available at the Met a half-century ago. During the 1968-9 season, six legendary tenors on the roster had Radames in their active repertoire: Carlo Bergonzi, Franco Corelli, Plácido Domingo, James McCracken, Richard Tucker and Jon Vickers. Three distinguished substitutes waited in the wings: Sándor Kónya, Bruno Prevedi and Flaviano Labò. Few observers believe that any of the star tenors hired by the Met during the last half-decade who have recently sung Radames there or elsewhere (Roberto Alagna, Marcelo Alvarez, Marco Berti, Johan Botha, Marcello Giordani, Richard Margison and the late Salvatore Licitra) approach the standard set by their illustrious predecessors. Even more severe, according to those who do the casting, is the shortage of Verdi baritones. ‘We all know,’ one American impresario told me, ‘that no one today can sing better than a B-plus Rigoletto.’ According to those who cast for major houses, the situation is hardly better for dramatic mezzos, *spinto* sopranos and Italian basses—a small number of exceptions notwithstanding.

Opera professionals perceive a decline in Wagner singing as well, but they believe it began earlier and has been milder. Nevertheless, in the most demanding roles the result is often uneven and unequal to the best casts of the mid 20th century. Nina Stemme, arguably today’s finest Brünnhilde, speaks for many: ‘Unfortunately we must recognize that Flagstad and Melchior really ruined everything for subsequent Wagner singers. No one today comes close.’

Another way to measure the quality of singing is to examine the critical reactions to recordings, and our research team recently conducted a systematic study of published reviews of every extant recording—audio-only and video—since 1927 of any part of two operas each by Verdi (*Il trovatore* and *Aida*) and Wagner (*Tristan und Isolde* and *Die Walküre*). We took into account changes in the recording industry, and used reviews of both live and studio recordings. We broke up each review into separate segments focusing on the performance of a specific role (thereby leaving out assessment of conducting, visual aspects, recording quality, ensemble etc.) and asked multiple individuals to assess how positive critics were in each case about the quality of the singing. The data thus drawn from these reviews backs up the perception of the industry experts: the quality of the best Verdi singing has dropped markedly, and that of Wagner singing slightly less, since the 1970s.

But is this all just part of the widespread belief that it was all better in the old days—the typical nostalgia of opera buffs with a soft spot for youthful memories, old recordings and ageing divas? To try to guard against ‘nostalgia bias’, we asked in interviews about the performance quality not only of Verdi and Wagner, but also of Baroque, Mozart and bel canto opera. Opera professionals almost unanimously believe that things have improved or remained steady in those genres over the same period. Similarly, we evaluated reviews not just of Verdi and Wagner operas, but also those of one opera each by Handel (*Giulio Cesare*), Mozart (*Le nozze di Figaro*) and Rossini (*Il barbiere di Siviglia*). The critical reception of the recordings of *Giulio Cesare* suggests that the quality of Handel recordings has risen over the past two generations, while the reviews suggest that the quality of singing in the other two operas has remained the same (various factors within the recording industry perhaps mean that with the case of Rossini, in particular, the data does not reflect what many feel—that we are currently living in something of a ‘Golden Age’ of Rossini singing).



■ Voices for ‘Aida’: (l. to r.) Franco Corelli as Radames, Marilyn Horne as Amneris and Leontyne Price as Aida

Perhaps even more striking is that contemporary observers, inside and outside our interviews, widely praise instrumental performance in all its guises—and even jazz instrumental playing—as more accomplished than 50 years ago. Some do protest that classical music has become interpretively more homogeneous, but, as we have seen, this is not the primary concern with *spinto* and dramatic singing. In sum, the decline in Verdi and Wagner singing seems not only real, but quite unusual in the classical music world, where standards of performance over the past half century have generally improved.

There are plenty of possible reasons for this decline, and I will deal with some of the more implausible ones before suggesting my own. An example from the more unlikely end of the scale came when an extremely distinguished singer leaned over to me and confided, dead seriously: ‘We know what it is ... it’s that stuff they put in the water.’ Blaming bad singing on hormones and chemicals in the water supply is among numerous explanations that are clearly incorrect. Most are flatly contradicted by the facts, but, more subtly, also fail to explain why the decline should be restricted to only one aspect of musical performance. Other explanations might sound more plausible, such as when it is suggested that rising orchestral pitch and larger opera houses now place singers under greater acoustical stress. Not likely: Over the past 50 years pitch has actually dropped slightly, from A=448 in some places down to A=443 or below, and most venues in which top singers perform today are essentially the same houses as before, including venerable theatres in London, Milan, Vienna, Munich, Berlin, Bayreuth, San Francisco, Chicago, Barcelona, Zurich and Buenos Aires. A few theatres, such as those in Berlin, Los Angeles and New York, are newer but still date back to the 1960s.

Another question regards agents and directors today: are they myopic, greedy or musically illiterate, pushing singers to attempt heavy roles before they are mature? Some say overparting young singers ruins their voices forever. Yet our interviews reveal that the near universal advice among teachers and coaches today is that younger singers should avoid these more demanding roles until they are in their mid 30s at least—and singers pay heed. As a result, singers today begin studying and performing heavier repertoire at a more advanced age than their counterparts did 50 years ago. One wonders if overparting is a consequence, not a cause, of the shortage of *spinto* and dramatic singers. If anything might be a problem, it is singers starting to sing these roles too late, not too early.

Others suggest that it might be a result of a shift in operatic tastes. But while Baroque and modern are in, that doesn't necessarily mean that Verdi, Puccini and Wagner are out. While the canon has expanded, nearly half of operas performed worldwide still require *spinto* and dramatic voices. Verdi and Puccini remain the most performed composers, with Wagner ranking fourth. These composers, interviews reveal, remain popular with both young singers and audiences. Why should better Baroque, Mozart and modern singing imply a decline in other styles, any more than better violin players imply worse cellists? One also encounters the suggestion that young singers are ruined by university- and conservatory-based training, the premise apparently being that those who are not themselves former professional opera stars make incompetent opera teachers. This is doubtful, even though some fine teachers are of course former singers. And in any case, why should the same teachers who can maintain high standards in Mozart and bel canto singing, or in technically challenging modern repertoire, Liedersinging or early music, not be able to prepare students for Verdi and Wagner?

The actual reasons for the decline seem to reside in more fundamental structural changes in the opera world. First of all, fewer people than ever in the population try to sing without amplification. Opera today rests on a narrowing base of talent. A century ago, singing was a nearly universal social activity in Western churches, schools, clubs, homes and concert halls. Opera crowned this vocal pyramid. In the middle of the 20th century this changed. Now fewer people sing, due to declining religiosity, a shift in educational priorities, the atrophy of live music-making in favour of recorded sound, and the rise of rock, pop and other amplified music. Fundamentally, many fewer people sing legitimately, that is, without a microphone. In contrast to the situation 50 years ago, youth choruses, non-classical *a cappella* groups, Broadway shows, popular concerts, and even lectures are now almost all amplified, thereby pushing classical singing, traditional folk music, gospel groups, oratorio singing, unamplified public oratory, traditional unmiked Broadway performance and other non-amplified vocal activity to the cultural margins. A performer rarely finds any use for—or even has any chance to hear whether he or she has—a genuinely big voice that can fill a large hall. In part as a result, the stylistic distance between pop and classical music has widened to the point where it is now nearly unbridgeable. Nor is it by chance that the cultivation of *spinto* and dramatic opera singers is collapsing in Italy, a traditional centre of operatic performance where today fewer people attend church, where schools and where universities are underfunded, and where the appeal of traditional music has declined among the young.

This makes it a great deal more difficult to identify young operatic talent. Cultivating a great *spinto* or dramatic singer requires, first and foremost, locating a one-in-a-million physical talent, akin to locating a high-performance athlete with the potential to win an



■ Today's Wagnerians: (l.) Jay Hunter Morris as Siegfried at the Met; (r.) Nina Stemme as Brünnhilde at San Francisco Opera

Olympic medal. Today the world is set up to find and train athletes, but it is no longer set up to find people who can project their unamplified voice. This trend has reduced the supply of all types of classical singers, of course, but the effect is exacerbated with potential singers of late-19th-century opera, given the inherent scarcity of these voice types.

Second, *spinto* and dramatic singers mature later. The voices of Baroque, Mozart, modern and even bel canto specialists often approach maturity before the age of 30. At that point, they can assess their true ability, decide whether to commit to their careers, and even sometimes already reap professional rewards. By contrast, the voices of *spinto* and dramatic singers do not normally mature fully until they are in their 30s or, in cases of exceptional mezzos, baritones or basses, perhaps even their 40s. Kirsten Flagstad sang mostly operetta and lighter fare in Norway, essentially unknown internationally, until she was 38. More recently, Jay Hunter Morris endured 23 years of uneven success, including years in his early 40s living at home with his mother, before recently breaking through as Siegfried at the Met at the age of 48. Just five years previously, he says, he could not have sung the role because he lacked a 'strength and a colour only age brings'.

Unless one is lucky enough to be a splendid Mozart, bel canto or Baroque stylist—which *spinto* and dramatic singers rarely are—this delayed maturity creates a one- or two-decade career hiatus that many do not survive. Faced with years of waiting, almost any reasonable person leaves to sing on Broadway, teach music, work in arts administration, start a family or, most often, find another profession entirely. Here the belief that younger singers should not sing heavy Verdi and Wagner has combined with the advent of a lighter, specialized approach to 'early music' to block future *spinto* and dramatic singers from singing professionally in their younger years, as singers in previous generations could.

Third, opera today is driven more by staging, and less by musical values, than it was 50 years ago. The power of directors and stage designers has grown, whereas that of conductors and music directors has fallen—not least in matters of casting. Singers are increasingly hired as much on appearance as on voice, and younger artists speak of becoming ‘HD ready’. This trend particularly hurts singers who are heavy, as many *spinto* and dramatic singers are, because, as Marilyn Horne puts it, ‘big voices come out of big bodies’. Everyone wants to avoid the fate of the soprano Deborah Voigt, who was originally slated for the title role in the 2004 Royal Opera House production of *Ariadne auf Naxos* but was deemed incompatible with the production’s requisite little black dress. Yet is the alternative better? Voigt responded by having surgery to lose weight, which, some observers feel, has permanently shrunk and damaged her voice.

Yet the impact of appearance is often discussed and easy to exaggerate. After all, when Verdi and Wagner singers with the real vocal goods present themselves, they are still cast at many top houses worldwide, even if they are heavy. There is little evidence that truly great singers are being passed over at that level. (In this era of blogs and YouTube, that would be easy to spot.)

Still, interviews reveal that for second-tier houses, second casts at top houses, and smaller roles everywhere—not least in Germany, which constitutes 40 per cent of the world’s market for opera—visual production values loom ever larger. Appearance is increasingly compromising traditional musical virtues. The move to video broadcasting is accelerating this trend. Such decisions may be thinning the ranks of solid *spinto* and dramatic singers before they fully develop. This type of discrimination even influences whether singers may enter the profession as students. Top conservatories are now admitting 18-year-olds not simply on vocal ability but also on ‘charisma’—a politically correct code-word for looks and weight. One long-time admissions officer at a top institution shrugged and explained: ‘Above all it’s my responsibility to make sure that our graduates work.’

This tripartite explanation of why *spinto* and dramatic singers are scarce today is deeply sociological. It implies that the decline in the singing of the heavier Wagner and Verdi roles—not to mention certain works by Puccini, Strauss, and all the other composers whose works require such voices—will be difficult to reverse. Returning to a world in which young people attend schools, churches and choirs where they learn to sing without mikes, creating extra decades of meaningful full employment for emerging Verdians and Wagnerians, or transforming our operatic culture into one in which appearance no longer matters: each is a quixotic, probably futile, aspiration. Smaller steps are more likely to be adopted and to succeed. One might be greater openness toward singers in their 20s studying and performing Verdi and Wagner, as they did until a generation ago—a practice the mezzo Dolora Zajick has encouraged. Another is to mount more performances of heavy repertoire in smaller houses. Others include a return to more acoustically resonant sets, affirmative action for larger-voiced singers in universities and young singers programmes, and greater efforts to recruit singers from countries where Western opera is relatively new—the wealth of operatic talent to emerge from Asia and Africa in the last generation shows the potential in this. One thing seems certain: if Verdi and Wagner singing is not reimagined and reorganized, the core of operatic tradition we have known for so long may not survive the 21st century.