

# Divining the "diva", or a myth and its legacy : female opera singers and fandom

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## Divining the “diva”, or a myth and its legacy: female opera singers and fandom

Tutto è transizione, mezze tinte;  
tutto mite, vizj, glorie e virtù...

*La fama*, 1 January 1836

Divas are everywhere, nowadays. The contemporary media’s term of choice for a female opera singer also encompasses virtually every other kind of performer: there are pop divas, soul divas, disco divas; divas of cinema, theatre and wrestling; soap divas, catwalk divas, surf divas, even dot.com divas. Numerous businesses similarly exploit the term, including (amongst others), an Italian radio station (Radio Diva FM), a lesbian magazine, an all-woman jazz orchestra based in New York, a model agency in Singapore, a hotel in San Francisco. The allure of the diva as a concept can be used to reinforce the innate glamour of a product (as demonstrated by an Australian fashion jewellery retailer) or to confer glamour where it is ostensibly lacking (such as the “DivaCup”, a “green” alternative to sanitary pads). Some uses of the term are the result of felicitous acronyms, such as the “Double Interferometer for Visual Astrometry” (DIVA), a scientific instrument designed to measure the positions, movements and brilliance of the stars.<sup>1</sup> And there are countless self-help books designed to enable us to realise our “inner” divas: Elon Bomani’s *Dynamic diva dollars: for women who aren’t afraid to be millionaires* (2007), Merci Miglino’s *From doormat to diva! Taking center stage in your own life! 10 steps to personal stardom!* (2004), or Bates, O’Crean, Thompson and Vaile’s *I am diva! Every woman’s guide to outrageous living* (2003), with its recommended mantra:

I am sensuous, succulent, passionate;  
I am outrageous, electrifying, fabulous;  
I AM DIVA.<sup>2</sup>

What does it all mean? Where did it begin? And where will it end?

An attempt to answer such questions might start with lexicology. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “diva” as “a distinguished female singer, a prima donna”. Although most early divas were indeed prima donnas, not all prima donnas were divas. “Prima donna” was

1 <[www.aspbbooks.org/a/volumes/article\\_details/?paper\\_id=18711](http://www.aspbbooks.org/a/volumes/article_details/?paper_id=18711)> (accessed 24 November 2017). Rather more of a stretch is an engineering research project funded by the EU, ‘Dynamic Variability in Complex, Dynamic Systems’ (DiVA): <[www.ict-diva.eu](http://www.ict-diva.eu)> (accessed 24 November 2017).

2 Elena Bates – Maureen O’Crean – Molly Thompson – Carilyn Vaile, *I am diva! Every woman’s guide to outrageous living* (New York: Warner Books, 2003).



a contractual term denoting the leading female singer in a company, and thus applicable not just to élite opera houses but also to small theatres and touring troupes, where major stars rarely performed. Few of the usages cited above involve singers, however; and so we must ask what else is meant by the term “diva”. What extramusical qualities are implied, and why? And why has modern scholarship so willingly appropriated this slippery, fantastic term as a synonym for the female opera singer? It is something I have occasionally done myself, and probably will do so again, but nonetheless I grow increasingly dissatisfied with the term.

This essay is therefore a reflection on how, where and why this nomenclature originated, and what might be its broader implications. I want to consider one small detail on that canvas: a tableau of three Italian sopranos – Giuditta Pasta, Giulia Grisi and Adelina Patti – that reveals something of the emergence of this term in Italy in the 1820s and its subsequent entry into the English language. Finally, I consider the impact of the image of the “diva” in current discourses, and invite a rethinking of our use of the term in musicology.

## 1. Italy

The myth of the opera “diva” was largely a nineteenth-century construction, deriving from a clutch of interlocking factors: women’s brief predominance on the operatic stage in the early decades of the period and their appearance of “otherness” from conventional femininity (increased by Romanticism’s postulation of music performance in the realm of the “uncanny”); the expansion of the opera industry and the development of large public audiences, with the concomitant emphasis on narratives containing strong female roles; and the emergence of a press dedicated to musico-theatrical matters.<sup>3</sup> The term itself, of course, had a much longer history. Deriving from the feminine form of the Latin “divus” (god), “diva” in Italian literary tradition was a term of homage to a beautiful woman, in the elaborate and often mythological imagery used by early poets.<sup>4</sup> In renaissance poetry, it was initially conferred on women who had died (see, for example, Petrarch on Laura, or

3 On the history of women singers in the nineteenth century, see John Rosselli, *Singers of Italian opera: a history* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Susan Rutherford, *The prima donna and opera, 1815–1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); *The arts of the prima donna in the long nineteenth century*, ed. Rachel Cowgill and Hilary Poriss (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); *Technology and the diva: sopranos, opera and media from Romanticism to the Digital Age*, ed. Karen Henson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

4 Francesco d’Alberti di Villanuova, *Dizionario universale critico, o Enciclopedia della lingua italiana*, 6 vols. (Lucca: Domenico Marescandoli, 1797), vol. 2, p. 219. Only in later dictionaries was the term broadened to include female performers: see *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana*, fondato da Salvatore Battaglia, 21 vols. (Torino: UTET, 1961–2002), vol. 4, pp. 850–851: “3. Attrice famosa e applaudita; cantante valente e ricercata (e si riferisce in particolare alle prime donne dell’opera lirica, alle più celebri attrici cinematografiche, alle prime ballerine dello spettacolo di rivista”. The earliest example it provides of such usage is taken from Giovanni Verga’s *La serata della diva*, in *Don Candeloro e Compagni* (1894).



Bernardo Pulci's sonnet about Simonetta Cattaneo), as a mark of their passing to celestial realms.<sup>5</sup> Increasingly, it also came to be applied to living women: Michelangelo to Vittoria Colonna, or Ercole Strozzi to Lucrezia Borgia ("De diva Borgia canente").<sup>6</sup>

How then did this element in the standard courtly lexicon on women come to acquire other meanings beyond the acknowledgement of admired and beloved beauty? Although early opera audiences encountered the term through the mythological focus of many plots with their casts of gods and goddesses, "sirena", with its hint of delight and danger, was the more common expression used about female singers during the first two hundred years of opera history.<sup>7</sup> The gradual substitution of that term by "diva" begins to appear in the early nineteenth century, as in a sonnet addressed to Isabella Colbran published in Bologna in 1809.<sup>8</sup> This shift received its biggest impetus, however, from the later discourses around Giuditta Pasta.

During the 1820s, Milan was in the grip of the "regno delle ballerine" (the reign of the ballerinas) and the feverish competition between the state-sponsored Teatro alla Scala and the city's other theatres, particularly the Teatro Carcano. The growing commercialisation of the operatic marketplace and the cultivation of a more inclusive audience was fed by the new Italian musical press.<sup>9</sup> Publishing a range of material on the singer (sonnets and odes, formal reviews, items of gossip, satirical treatments and short stories), musico-theatrical periodicals spawned the development of modern notions of celebrity.

A conflict soon emerged, however, between an increasingly laudatory style of journalism and the pedagogical bias of the older critics. One particular focal point was the much-anticipated return to northern Italy in 1829 of the soprano Giuditta Pasta, whose performances in Paris, London, Naples and Vienna over the previous decade had

5 Pulci's sonnet, entitled *La diva Simonetta a Giuliano de' Medici* (published in 1494) was written following her death. *Stanze di messer Angelo Poliziano per la giostra del magnifico Giuliano di Piero de' Medici*, a cura di Vincenzo Nannucci (Firenze: Giuseppe Magheri e Figli, 1812), pp. 96–97.

6 *Rime e prose di Michelangelo Buonarroti, pittore, scultore, architetto, e poeta fiorentino*, a cura di Giannina Mazzuchelli (Milano: Giovanni Silvestri, 1821), p. 66. *Lucrezia Borgia nell'opera di cronisti, letterati e poeti suoi contemporanei alla corte di Ferrara: studi nel V centenario delle nozze di Lucrezia Borgia e don Alfonso d'Este*, a cura di Gianna Vancini (Ferrara: Este, 2003), p. 96. In discussing Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*, Giambattista Giraldo Cinzio (1504–1573) argued that the term "diva" should only be used after the death of one's beloved – not while she was still alive. *De' romanzi, delle comedie e delle tragedie: ragionamenti*, 2 vols., ed. G. B. Pigna (Milano: G. Daelli, 1864), vol. 2, pp. 133–134, 138–139. Metastasio's libretto *Angelica* (1720, Naples), based on *Orlando*, reproduced the addresses of the rival suitors, Orlando and Medoro to the heroine as respectively "o mia bella diva" and "mia cortese diva". *Opere del signor abate Pietro Metastasio* (Paris: Herissant, 1733), vol. 10, p. 216.

7 Rutherford, *Prima donna and opera*, pp. 27–57.

8 "Quando, o Diva ISABELLA, il tuo dolore / Canti a lui che disio nuovo ti accende / Tanta dolcezza per chi ben l'intende / Move or la tua pietate ed or l'amore". *Due secoli di vita musicale: storia del Teatro Comunale di Bologna*, a cura di Lamberto Trezzini (Bologna: Nuova Alfa Editoriale, 1966), ill. 58.

9 Marco Capra, "La Casa editrice Sonzogno tra giornalismo e impresariato", in *Casa Sonzogno*. Vol. I: *Testimonianze e saggi. Cronologie*, a cura di Mario Morini, Nandi Ostali, Piero Ostali jr. (Milano: Casa Musicale Sonzogno, 1995), pp. 243–290; also id., "Alla ricerca dei periodici musicali: in margine alla pubblicazione del catalogo dei periodici musicali delle biblioteche della Campania", in: *Rivista Italiana di Musicologia*, 32/2 (1997), pp. 367–382.



acquired unusual plaudits. Stendhal's long paean to her in 1824, redolent with mystic allusions, claimed her voice could "weave a spell of magic about the plainest word in the plainest recitative", and had "the ability to produce a kind of resonant and magnetic vibration, which, through some still unexplained combination of physical phenomena, exercises an instantaneous and hypnotic effect on the soul of the spectator".<sup>10</sup> On her arrival in Milan at the newly refurbished Teatro Carcano in her roles as Semiramide (Rossini), Nina (Paisiello), Tancredi (Rossini), Desdemona (Rossini) and Medea (Mayr), Pasta fulfilled all expectations – at least for her audience and most of the critics. She was recognised as an exceptional artist, who brought something "wholly new" in her dramatic conception of her roles.<sup>11</sup> By the end of the season, Carlo Ritorni, editor of *L'Eco*, had dubbed her "diva del mondo".<sup>12</sup>

Yet there were also voices of dissent. Some criticised the "veiled" quality of Pasta's middle notes, her uneven intonation, and even her acting.<sup>13</sup> In a letter to *L'Eco* on 29 April 1829, an anonymous subscriber took issue with the hyperbole Pasta was attracting. He was content for her to be described as "unica e divina" (unique and divine), because such qualities were now rather common, but he could not forgive the statement made in an album dedicated to her, that "tutta l'Europa va debitrice" (all Europe was indebted) to Pasta's mother. What debts, he inquired with heavy irony, could Europe have towards either Pasta or her mother? Was Pasta by any chance "una legislatrice, un genio universale? Andrebbesi a lei debitori dei progressi dell'incivilimento, della filosofia, delle scienze, di qualche utile e miracolosa scoperta, o che so io?".<sup>14</sup> And while Pasta was to be praised for rousing her audiences to such enthusiasm (particularly given the ephemeral nature of singing), "le esagerazioni finiscono per generare il ridicolo" and thus wronged the object of praise herself.<sup>15</sup>

Ritorni's account three months later of Pasta's farewell evening after fifty performances at the Teatro Carcano demonstrated that such "exaggeration" was not confined to written reviews:

Folla immensa, centinaja di persone rimandate anche di buon'ora per mancanza di luogo; applausi prima del canto, nel canto, e dopo il canto; col battere e ribattere, con fazzoletti sventolanti, con festose grida, per non dire di più, e poi fiori, mazzi, e mazzetti, corone, sonetti, quaglie, colombi, e anche passere, e pioggia d'oro; la riunione insomma di tutti i modi e i mezzi d'esprimere aggradimento, favore, applauso straordinario, infinito, incredibile, modi antichi e moderni, indigeni e esotici. Tutto fu posto in opera e pareva che nulla bastesse. E infatti non bastò, ché una folla immensa accompagnò a casa madama Pasta, e rimase applaudendo, e farneticando sotto le sue finestre fino a giorno. Noi conveniamo volentieri, che vi fu esagerazione ed eccesso: ma altri poi converrà che questi eccessi e questi esagerazioni non hanno

10 Stendhal, *The life of Rossini*, trans. Richard Coe (1824: repr. London: John Calder, 1985), pp. 371–374.

11 *L'Eco*, 25.05.1829, p. 248.

12 Carlo Ritorni, *Annali del teatro della città di Reggio anno 1829* (Bologna: Nobili & C., 1829), p. 192.

13 See, for example, *Il censore universale dei teatri*, 09.05.1829, p. 146.

14 "a legislator, a universal genius? Might Europe be indebted to her for the progress of civilisation, of philosophy, of science, of some useful and miraculous discovery?" *L'Eco*, 29.04.1829, p. 203.

15 "exaggerations end up by generating ridicule" Ibid.



luogo ove non sia un vero merito. Questa risveglia l'entusiasmo, che una volta eccitato non conosce limiti, non ha confine: ma, ripetiamo, il troppo è sempre troppo e non è mai tutto vero. Qui v'è spirito di partito, come doveva essere ove sono aperti due teatri dello stesso genere di spettacolo, e due prime donne di prima sfera.<sup>16</sup>

Even Ritorni, whose plaudits (although more measured than some) were partly responsible for whipping up this frenzy, finally seems to have thought enough was enough.<sup>17</sup>

The aspect of “excess” became increasingly troublesome to other commentators. On 5 December 1829, Luigi Prividali, the editor of *Il censore universale dei teatri*, complained of the “divinizzazione” of singers such as Pasta.<sup>18</sup> In order to deserve such an epithet, he argued, a singer would need to demonstrate perfection:

una bellissima voce, un'intuonazione sempre sicura, un positivo registro, una somma facilità di cantare in tutti i generi, e di crearsi uno stile di canto tutto suo proprio e tutto bello con infiniti modi e frasi ragionevolmente e gustosamente diversificarlo; gli domanderò sul teatro una bella presenza, una chiara ed esatta pronunzia, una rappresentanza naturale ed illusoria dei caratteri da esso assunti.<sup>19</sup>

In short, there needed to be an unassailable level of objective achievement, not just fame.

Although many argued that Pasta's artistry was indeed extraordinary, Prividali had a point. The process of “divinizzazione” was a legacy from Roman times, when emperors and increasingly their wives and relatives were deified in religious cults on their death (and sometimes before). A subsequent brief period of acclaim and worship was then mostly followed by an equally vigorous act of erasure, enforced by the latest ruler; as Harriet Flower points out, “oblivion and disgrace” became the “logical opposite of deification of each emperor”.<sup>20</sup> The new cult of celebrity in nineteenth-century periodicals and newspapers became a similar cycle of lavish attention and ignominious humiliation, as Pasta herself would

16 “An immense crowd, hundreds of people turned away because of the lack of a place; applause before the singing, during the singing, and after the singing; clapping and more clapping, with handkerchiefs waving, with festive proclamations... and then flowers, bouquets upon bouquets, garlands, sonnets, quails, doves and even sparrows, and a shower of gold coins – In short, the union of all ways and means of expressing extraordinary, infinite, incredible pleasure, favour, and praise/approval; ways old and modern, indigenous and exotic. All was put to work and it seemed that nothing was enough. And in fact it was not enough, because an immense crowd accompanied madame Pasta home, and remained applauding and raving under her windows until daybreak. We willingly agree that there was exaggeration and excess: but these excesses and exaggerations do not take place where there is not real merit. It is this that arouses enthusiasm, which once excited knows no limits and has no confines: but we repeat, too much is always too much and is never wholly genuine.” *L'Eco*, 3 August 1829, 2/90, p. 368.

17 See, for example, the article on *La farfalla* in *L'Eco*, 16.01.1829, pp. 25–26.

18 *Il censore universale dei teatri*, 05.12.1829, pp. 386–387.

19 “a very beautiful voice, consistently secure intonation, a consummate ability to sing in all genres and to create a style of singing wholly unique and wholly beautiful with infinite ways of logical and tasteful variation... an excellent stage presence, clear and precise pronunciation, [and] a natural, convincing representation of the character portrayed” *Ibid.*

20 Harriet I. Flower, *The art of forgetting: disgrace and oblivion in roman political culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), p. 271. See also Stefano Pietro Zecchini, *Dizionario di sinonimi della lingua italiana* (Torino: UTET, 1860), p. 191.



shortly discover. At times, such qualities existed side by side, as in the two party faction on Erminia Frezzolini (the *frezzolinisti* and the *rigoristi*) who dominated the final fifteen years of her career from 1854 onward – one group lauding her to the skies, the other describing her as first the “shade” of her former self, then the “shade of a shade”, and finally “Lazzaro in gonnella” (Lazarus in a skirt).<sup>21</sup>

Attempts to restrain the growing enthusiasms and manipulations of fandom were largely futile – in part because such adulation was not simply a spontaneous, uncomplicated response to female endeavour. The publicity machine of the media, manipulated (indeed, increasingly owned by) by impresarios, music publishers and theatrical agencies, was an obvious influence. There were other factors too. In 1835, *L'Eco* published a spoof dialogue between the Portuguese mezzo-soprano Luisa Todi (who had died two years previously) and Eaco, the judge of the underworld. Required to account for her life, Todi describes her career as a singer – to the envy and derision of a host of illustrious writers (including Dante, Petrarch, Ariosto, Goldoni and Byron). When they are astonished at the 6000 lire she earns per performance, she advises them to read Adeodato Ressi's *Dell'economia della specie umana*, which demonstrates that “diletto ha il suo valore rappresentativo come tutte le altre cose trafficabili della terra, e l'oro lo rappresenta. Ora si poteva mai spenderne abbastanza per udire la Todi?”<sup>22</sup> Ressi's tract, first published in 1817, had indeed argued that the arts were an important part of the Italian economy and that local consumption of the arts was necessary in order to maximise their export value.<sup>23</sup> The valorisation of opera and its stars was thus aligned with national economic growth. There were additional nuances of political import. The élite opera houses were financially supported by the various, mostly foreign, rulers of the Italian states. Massimo D'Azeglio was not alone in believing that in Milan, for example, the “regno delle ballerine” in the 1820s and 1830s was manipulated by the Austrian political authorities in order to distract the populace from more dangerous ideas of insurrection.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, the discourses around the female singers were inscribed by the period's gender politics. In many respects, Italian theatres were inversions of domestic life among the middle and upper classes. The auditoriums were secular temples of pleasure, adorned with mythological imagery that recalled the source and inspiration of art.<sup>25</sup> The tiered boxes, with their small private ante-rooms where one could dine and entertain, provided miniature alternatives to the drawing-rooms at home. And the “diva”, with her potent, mysterious voice, was the binary opposite of the “angelo del focolare” (the angel of the hearth). Both images were idealised through religious connotations: one Christian,

21 Antonio Mariani, *Erminia Frezzolini: grandeur e décadence (1818–1884)* (Orvieto: Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Orvieto, 2005), pp. 206, 218.

22 “pleasure has its representative value like every other commodity on earth, and gold represents it. Now, could one ever spend enough to hear la Todi?” *L'Eco*, 18.02.1835, pp. 81–83.

23 Adeodato Ressi, *Dell'economia della specie umana* (Pavia: Pietro Bizzoni, 1822), pp. 308–311.

24 Massimo D'Azeglio, *I miei ricordi* (Firenze: Barbera, 1891), p. 501.

25 Such as the figure of Apollo depicted on the curtain at the Teatro Carcano or the scene of Parnassus on that of the Teatro Sociale at Mantova.



the other pagan. While the domestic angel was loving, obedient and suffering, the diva was passionate, wilful and proud. Both images were defined by, and designed to support patriarchal hegemony; both could inspire extreme adoration at best and abuse at worst. And both were intrinsic to the epoch because “Woman” was regarded philosophically and scientifically as an “essence”, lacking the individuality of man.<sup>26</sup> Women could – to some degree – appropriate these images for their own purposes and find ways of negotiating between the fiction and the actuality of female experience. But neither gender could fully escape the patriarchal network of practices, laws and discourses.

The emergence and exploitation of the diva was thus born in a complex of social, economic and political factors, which continued to influence the marketing and reception of opera for many years to come.

## 2. Britain

How then did the term “diva” enter the English language?<sup>27</sup> It initially became familiar with British audiences as part of opera itself, via the *cavatina* “Casta diva” in Bellini’s *Norma* – and brought to London in 1833 by none other than Giuditta Pasta.

The role of Norma had been composed for Pasta at La Scala two years previously.<sup>28</sup> Embodying her vocal and dramatic qualities with peculiar effectiveness, it gave a particular shape to the developing myth of the operatic “diva”. Norma, the high priestess of the Druids, was an onstage analogy of the “prima donna”: the leading woman of her pre-Christian community, whose strength, nobility and passion were coupled to duplicity and sexual transgression (a common trope in images of singers, although Pasta herself led a blameless domestic life), courtesy of the two children Norma has secretly borne by the leader of her enemies, Pollione; and whose costume offered – deliciously so, to some critics – the exposure of the female body, particularly the arms and shoulders (Fig. 1).

26 Ludmila Jordanova, *Sexual visions: images of gender in science and medicine* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), p. 8.

27 British periodicals of the same period also described the theatre’s female stars as “deities” and “divinities”. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives the date for the first recorded entry of “diva” into English usage as 1883, citing *Harper’s Magazine*. Yet it had begun to appear rather earlier. In the first four decades of the century, the *Times* printed the term twice in sonnets about singers – one written in Latin, the other (on the death of Maria Malibran) in Italian.

28 Within the space of twelve months Pasta created three extraordinary roles: *Anna Bolena* (Donizetti) on 26 December 1839 and *Amina* in *La sonnambula* (Bellini) on 6 March 1831, both at the Teatro Carcano; and finally *Norma* at La Scala on 26 December 1831.





Fig. 1: Giuditta Pasta (François Gérard, 1831); Museo teatrale alla Scala.

In some senses, then, Norma is performing the character of a prima donna – who is herself performing Norma. This double-sided image even had her own musical theme: “Casta diva”. Sung to the chaste, serene goddess of the moon (with her overtones of a secular Madonna), it is an anthem not simply *to* but *of* a diva: a bravura display that cruelly exposes a singer’s skill and stamina, encapsulating the essence of early romantic opera in its beauty and virtuosity.<sup>29</sup>

With this role enshrining her artistry and translating its ephemeral nature into a concrete imprint, Pasta’s place within the “monument” of art was assured. Conversely, her grasp in the temporal arena of live performance soon began to weaken. When she introduced *Norma* to London two years later in her final season at the King’s Theatre, Henry Fothergill Chorley remarked: “The glory of Madame Pasta already showed signs

29 Pasta, in fact, believed that the aria was unsingable, and only Bellini’s coaxing and coaching persuaded her to attempt it in performance. For a detailed discussion of Pasta’s performance style and *Norma*, see Susan Rutherford, “La cantante delle passioni”: Giuditta Pasta and the idea of operatic performance”, in: *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 19/2 (2007), pp. 107–138.



of waning; she steadily began her evening's task half a tone too flat. Her acting was more powerful and striking than ever – if that could be.<sup>30</sup>

Nevertheless, the transfer in Britain from onstage to offstage usage of the word “diva” lay not in the discourses around Pasta, but stemmed ten years later from articles by the *Era*'s Parisian correspondent about a quite different singer, the Italian soprano Giulia Grisi (1811–1869). Of great personal beauty, Grisi possessed a voice remarkable for its power, flexibility, and limpid tone quality. From the mid-1830s, she alternated between seasons in London and Paris; and it was in a review of her performance in Rossini's *Otello* at the Théâtre-Italien in Paris by the *Era*'s foreign correspondent on 26 February 1843 that Grisi was seemingly first described as a “diva” in the British press:

The part the burly Diva undertakes is the patient, meek, bashful Desdemona; and yet, in *Don Pasquale*, mindful of her matron-like appearance, she insisted, very wisely, on the innocent village maiden being converted into the buxom widow, as more suited to her matronly appearance. Her personification of Desdemona will dress in new colors the beauteous conception of the dramatic bard.<sup>31</sup>

It was a less than flattering baptism: the adjective “burly” immediately undercuts whatever allure the term “diva” possessed, as do the following insinuations on Grisi's weight and “matronly appearance”. Why was this term “diva” used at all? In part, because it reflected French usage (as James Davies has ably demonstrated),<sup>32</sup> and therefore denoted the critic's familiarity with exotic continental customs. In fact, he uses it twice: later in the same article, he refers to Giuditta Pasta, recently retired and living in her villa on Lago di Como: “The ex-diva, delighted with the locality, lives there entirely *sans façons*. Her costume is a classic negligé [sic] – sandals, a toge [sic], or a blouse, and rarely with any other garment; she botanises with ardor, and passes much of her time in the garden”. Describing Pasta as the “ex-diva” suggests that the title has now been passed on to Grisi, who was often considered as Pasta's heir (or, by less generous critics, her “imitator”) and who sang a number of her roles – including *Norma*, a role with which she had a special connection given that she had created *Norma*'s confidante and rival, *Adalgisa*, alongside Pasta in the original La Scala production of the opera.

What had provoked the critic's hostility? A few days later, his antipathy towards Grisi is even more marked:

There was, of course, no lack of bouquets and crowns for the Diva, nor had the band of *claqueurs* a *congé* on the occasion; by their perseverance and audacity they merited whatever they earned. In the midst of such homages a poor white pigeon was observed fluttering about the theatre, embarrassed by a wreath tied to one of its wings. We are yet to learn how a snow-white dove, emblem of candour and innocence, could have been deemed an appropriate offering to la Grisi. It fell fatigued in the midst of the pit, and left

30 Henry Fothergill Chorley, *Thirty years musical recollections*, 2 vols. (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1862), vol. 1, p. 61.

31 *Era*, 26 February 1843.

32 James Q. Davies, “Gautier's ‘diva’: the first French uses of the word”, in: *The arts of the prima donna*, pp. 123–147.



the spectators in the uncertainty whether it was a *mal-adroit* friend or a concealed enemy whose ingenuity had prepared this equivocal symbol for the Diva.<sup>33</sup>

The suggestion that a white dove (the “emblem of candour and innocence”) was an inappropriate analogy for Grisi was a reference to the gossip recently surrounding the soprano. Once a favourite with the young Queen Victoria, Grisi was now regarded in a rather different light. Her reputation had first wobbled when her husband, Vicomte Gérard de Melcy, fought a duel with Viscount Frederick Stewart Castlereagh, in June 1838.<sup>34</sup> The press initially presented Grisi as the innocent victim of Castlereagh’s infatuation; but within a short time she and her husband separated, and in November 1839 she bore Castlereagh a son. Their relationship lasted until April 1841 – and curiously it was also in that month that the *Era*’s attitude toward her began to change. Two years previously, the paper had described Grisi’s performance in *Norma* as “truly great and masterly sustained from beginning to end”.<sup>35</sup> Now she was suddenly criticised for lacking “nobleness, dignity, feeling, sentiment, and graceful action” and an inability to express “passion”.<sup>36</sup>

The *Era*’s attacks on Grisi’s professional qualities continued throughout the season, in contrast to consistently positive reviews in both the *Times* (“The fine voice of Grisi, her brilliant execution, her passion rising to violence, are now identified with Norma”)<sup>37</sup> and the *Musical World*.<sup>38</sup> Then, in August 1841, Grisi began what was to be a solid and lasting alliance with the Italian tenor, Mario.<sup>39</sup> She quickly fell pregnant, and this second impending illegitimate birth provoked comments of an even more personal nature from the *Era*. In reference to a production of Mercadante’s *La vestale* (in which Grisi played a vestal virgin) in Paris on 6 January 1842, the paper reported:

33 *Era*, 05.03.1843.

34 Elizabeth Forbes, *Mario and Grisi: a biography* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1985), p. 38.

35 *Era*, 02.06.1839.

36 “*Norma* ranks as one of Pasta’s most brilliant efforts. Her declamation was Sidonian; her singing was forcible, clear, and impassioned; her action noble, dignified, and classical. Two years after its first appearance – that is, six years ago – Grisi essayed the part. She was *then* new, and her Asiatic eyes and peculiar beauty were sufficient to disarm all criticism. She had wisely availed herself of Pasta’s incomparable conception; and possessing certain imitative powers, she acquitted herself very well. She played this difficult part six years since infinitely better than she has done since. Grisi has her merits. She has a full, round organ of agreeable quality; great flexibility and much facility; but we have no respect for her powers as an artiste in the higher walk of the art. She lacks nobleness, dignity, feeling, sentiment, and graceful action. She can express no passion. There are no outbursts of genius – all is theatrical and conventional. Exertions unsupported by the divine afflatus will wear out organs even made of metal. Time will make encroachments. A change in voice is perceptible, particularly in recitative – there are certain nasal sounds which penetrate to, and sound hardly on the ear.” *Era*, 18.04.1841. There are other possible explanations for this review, beyond Grisi’s separation from her aristocratic lover and protector. Perhaps she had indeed given a poor performance. The *Times* did not agree, however: “The fine voice of Grisi, her brilliant execution, her passion rising to violence, are now identified with Norma”. (*Times*, 19.04.1841, p. 3.) Or the tone of the review might have been provoked by other off-stage debates about *la vieille garde*, the quartet of singers (Grisi, Rubini, Tamburini and Lablache) who exerted such power at Her Majesty’s Theatre.

37 *Ibid.*

38 *Times*, 23.04.1841, p. 6.

39 Giovanni Matteo, Cavaliere de Candia, known under his *nom-de-plume* as “Mario”.



Grisi, as one of the French theatrical papers states, “is more occupied with attending to her *embonpoint*, which is increasing daily,” than in studying the *Vestale*. Nothing could be less in character, less dramatic, than her appearance. There is really no illusion left.

News of the pregnancy also found its way into other papers and periodicals. By May, the *Musical World* was simply exasperated by the gossip: “What possible pleasure can it be to know that Madame Grisi is in a “delicate situation”? that Signor Mario is implemented in the said “delicacy”?”<sup>40</sup> Shortly afterwards Grisi gave birth to a daughter, and acknowledged Mario as the father.<sup>41</sup> The *Era*’s baptism of her as a “burly Diva” occurred on Grisi’s return to the French stage six months later, with those comments about her weight and matronliness being sly digs about her recent pregnancy.<sup>42</sup>

Thus the emergence of the term “diva” in English usage was from the outset associated with two quite different shades of meaning. In the mouth of the *Era*’s Parisian critic, it seems little more than a sneer: an attempt to derail Grisi’s claims to operatic excellence and a means of underlining her foreignness (always a popular slant in the xenophobic British press, which both fêted Italian singers but continually complained about their behaviour and fees). Nonetheless, it was gradually appropriated in a more laudatory sense by other newspapers. Before long, “La Diva” became an accepted soubriquet for Grisi, appearing in other popular newspapers and journals. There were exceptions: the *Times* used it on only two occasions – once in 1848 in a review of a concert, and then not again until her farewell performance in 1861; the *Musical Times*, which virtually ignored Grisi’s career (even denying her an obituary), used it only after she had left the stage.<sup>43</sup>

Grisi’s acquisition of the title owed much to her performances as Norma. Over her twenty-seven years on the London stage, Norma was the role that came to define her, marking her re-entry into London every season (see Fig. 2). And her reviews (the *Era* excepted) were remarkably consistent. In 1843, the *Times* declared that Grisi’s “magnificent representation” made *Norma* “the most popular of modern operas”;<sup>44</sup> in 1852, her “majestic, passionate, terrible” Norma “is one of those efforts which time and experience have matured into perfection”;<sup>45</sup> in 1859, her rendition of the role was “a performance of unsurpassable merit”, an “effort of genius”.<sup>46</sup> If Pasta’s creation of Norma was one contribution

40 *Musical World*, 05.05.1842, p. 137.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 223. Marie Jeanne Catherine died on 22 January 1844.

42 The *Era* remained a staunch enemy of the couple, but this new relationship – though outside the law, as Grisi was unable to obtain a divorce – became a life-long companionship. Both press and public (who had never had much difficulty with it) learned to accept the situation.

43 *Times*, 02.05.1848, p. 4: “The ‘Diva’ was in fine voice”; 30.05.1861, p. 12: “The ‘Diva’ reigned once more.”

44 *Times*, 19.04.1843, p. 5. In 1846, “Those who would see Grisi in perfection – see all she can do in one character – should see her in Norma”; *Times*, 29.04.1846, p. 5.

45 *Times*, 30.04.1852, p. 8.

46 *Times*, 06.06.1859, p. 7. Grisi’s interpretation spanned greater extremes than that of Pasta – more tenderness in Act II, more violence in Acts I and III. “Grisi has been extravagantly praised for her energetic qualities – her vigour, force and stamina, her fierce irony, and overwhelming assumption of passionate rage; but it is in the exhibition of womanly tenderness that she has always surpassed, and even now surpasses, her contemporaries.” *Times*, 02.05.1856, p. 12. We might speculate on the “intertheatricality” of Norma’s



to the myth of the diva, Grisi's longevity and persistence in the role (and in her career in general) was thus another: as one journalist commented, "Nothing could prevail against her. She outlived every omen, every adverse or threatening contingency".<sup>47</sup> Her link with that first Milanese performance back in 1831 and her status as Pasta's heir acquired legendary characteristics. On the final occasion she sang the role in London – the first of her "Eight Farewell Performances" in 1861 – the *Times* critic remarked that when the black veil was thrown over her head as the Druidess awaits execution, "a conviction suddenly flashed upon the audience that 'the last of the Normas' had been seen *for the very last time*".<sup>48</sup>



Fig. 2: Giulia Grisi (Richard Lane and Alfred Chalon, 1837); London, Victoria and Albert Museum.

A successor – of sorts – already had her feet on the stage. In Grisi's ultimate farewell performance as Donna Anna in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, an eighteen-year old Italian-American

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tenderness towards her children and her desperate plea in the final act ("Deh! non volerli vittime / Del mio fatale errore") and the public awareness of Grisi's own three infants born outside marriage – and the way in this might (or might not) have mediated spectatorial response and sympathy.

47 *Times*, 30.05.1861, p. 12.

48 *Times*, 20.05.1851, p. 12.



soprano sang the role of Zerlina (see Fig. 3). Her name was Adelina Patti, and she had appeared in London for the first time a few days earlier as Amina in *La sonnambula*.



Fig. 3: Adelina Patti as Zerlina (Camille Silvy, 1862-1863); London, Victoria and Albert Museum.

Patti's success was immediate and astonishing: "the greatest sensation we have known at Covent Garden for years", declared the *Musical World*.<sup>49</sup> Unlike Pasta and Grisi, Patti never sang *Norma* in its entirety (her much lighter voice was destined for different repertoire), but the role nonetheless attended discourses around her London debut like a shadowy fairy godmother at the feast. The *Musical World* reported that the day before Patti's birth on 19 February 1843, her mother (the soprano Caterina Barilli) had sung the title-role of *Norma* at the Grand Theatre in Madrid<sup>50</sup> – a pure fabrication, although Barilli had sung

<sup>49</sup> *Musical World*, 18.05.1861, p. 310; see also *Musical World*, 10.08.1861, pp. 504–506.

<sup>50</sup> *Musical World*, 11.05.1861.



in Donizetti's *Marino Faliero* at the Teatro del Circo a few days earlier.<sup>51</sup> Similar circum-spection is required for the much-reported story that the first sign of Patti's musical genius was when she supposedly astonished her family at the age of seven by singing "Casta diva" "wholly by ear and without a mistake";<sup>52</sup> which then launched her career as a child prodigy in the US. Yet how, with such auspicious auguries and such conspicuous talent (Verdi, always difficult to please, described her as a "perfect balance between singer and actress, a born artist in the fullest sense of the word")<sup>53</sup> could Patti fail to inherit Grisi's title? And indeed within a mere four years of her London debut, the *Musical World* described her as "the youthful *diva*".<sup>54</sup> No longer "La Diva", given always in quotation marks and upper-case initial letters – the one and only "diva" – but as a more common and invariably italicised (to denote its foreignness) noun.

The loss of that typeface framing signalled an important change. Although invariably applied to Patti, the term "diva" nonetheless began to lose its exclusivity in the British press. Between 1874 and 1886, for example, the *Musical Times* used it about Patti, Pauline Lucca, Christine Nilsson, Etelka Gerster and Emma Albani. Like Grisi, however, Patti demonstrated longevity and a popular reach beyond that of most singers. Even towards the end of her career, on tour with a number of other stars at the Metropolitan in 1890, the theatre was full only on the "Patti nights", when women "in bonnets and shawls" came in from the suburbs to hear her.<sup>55</sup> Where Patti differed from both Pasta and Grisi was in a taste for excess and eccentricity, exemplified by her private theatre built in 1891 at her neo-gothic Welsh castle, Craig-y-nos, where she gave lavish performances to guests that somehow suggested (perhaps unfairly) an appetite for exhibition that extended beyond professional display.<sup>56</sup>

The discourses on these three women, spanning the century, thus endowed the myth of the diva with different qualities. Pasta, *diva del mondo*, created the archetype of classical stamp and the role that marked out the musical and dramatic territory; Grisi, "La Diva", brought a more human passion, the suspicion of temperament, and the element of sexual transgression; Patti, simply the *diva*, contributed aspects of social brilliance, conspicuous display, eccentricity and excess. Such attributes combined with the loaded (and often hostile) meanings already prevalent in the broader image of the prima donna.<sup>57</sup>

51 *El Anfi3n Matritense*, 05.02.1843, pp. 39–40. Patti was born on 19 February 1843. There seems to have been some dispute about the quality of this production – certainly, Barilli must have been heavily pregnant. A performance of *Norma* did take place at the Teatro del Circo that year, although Barilli's name is not mentioned: see *El Anfi3n Matritense*, 14.05.1843, pp. 148–150. The soprano was Cristina Vill3 Ramos (who also sang it in Madrid the previous year) with Corradi-Pantanelli as Adalgisa – see *Revista de teatros: diario pintoresco de literatura*, 23.04.1843, p. 2.

52 Hermann Klein, *The Reign of Patti* (1920; repr. Ayer Publishing, 1977), pp. 15–16.

53 Letter from Giuseppe Verdi to Ricordi, 05.10.1877, in: *Verdi's Aida: the history of an opera in letters and documents*, ed. Hans Busch (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1978), pp. 407–408.

54 *Musical World*, 04.02.1865, p. 68.

55 Ira Glackens, *Yankee diva: Lillian Nordica and the golden days of opera* (New York: Coleridge Press, 1963), p. 147. The other stars were Lillian Nordica, Francesco Tamagno and Emma Albani.

56 John Frederick Cone, *Adelina Patti: queen of hearts* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1993), pp. 188–205.

57 An illustration of the hostility towards the prima donna is provided by Gerolamo Alessandro Biaggi's article in *L'Italia musicale*, 09.02.1848, p. 250: "La prima donna assoluta vorr3 essere la protagonista, e vorr3 essere



Born out of fandom, the term “diva” was therefore deployed – sometimes cynically – by agents and journalists for commercial purposes. When informed critics, composers and impresarios used it, it was often ironically, as a mode of contempt.<sup>58</sup> Attempts were sometimes made to counter popular misconception. In 1886, the impresario Maurice Strakosch claimed that “genuine” divas were rare,<sup>59</sup> by which he meant singers consistently able to command large international audiences. Only six singers from 1820–1914 really achieved that status: beyond Pasta, Grisi, and Patti, that list might include Maria Malibran, Pauline Viardot, and Nellie Melba. Such efforts toward restraining hyperbole were unsuccessful. When in 1903 the *Gazzetta teatrale italiana* finally dubbed Emma Carelli a “superdiva”, it surely signalled the exhaustion of the term.<sup>60</sup>

### 3. Modern culture and scholarship

What then of the legacy of that myth in both scholarship and modern society? For many scholars in literary studies and musicology, the current tendency seems to be a preference for the term “diva” in place of “singer” or “prima donna”: research on female singers is even often denoted as “diva studies”. This trend, however, raises a number of questions. One noteworthy text in this respect was Wayne Koestenbaum’s *The queen’s throat: opera, homosexuality and the mystery of desire* (1993).<sup>61</sup> Koestenbaum’s confessional outpouring of his impassioned response to the lyric stage was revealing and insightful about modes of listening and fandom.<sup>62</sup> Nonetheless, as Heather Hadlock points out, its lack of synthesis between “feminist” and “gay” agendas discloses the “sinister, impersonal aspects of queenly adulation”: a “love for mannerism and accoutrement, a love for an artifact rather than an artist”.<sup>63</sup> While Koestenbaum’s autobiographical account emphasised the individuality of

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l’ultima a cantare; e vorrà un punto coronato a mezzo una frase, per isfoggiare una rancida cadenza; e della parte affidata alla comprimaria numererà persino le battute, e se, secondo il suo computo, le troverà oltrepasare il segno, vorrà un accrescimento alla propria....quando non fosse altro, una romanza dentro le quinte, e accompagnata dall’arpa; e vorrà la musica piuttosto in un *modo*, che nell’altro; e vestire la tunica romana, quand’ anche l’azione si svolgesse in ispagna e nel cuore del medio-evo.”

58 See, for example, Eugenio Tornaghi to Verdi about Giuseppina Pasqua, 16.08.1892, in: *Verdi’s Falstaff in letters and contemporary reviews*, ed. Hans Busch (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), p. 234.

59 Maurizio Strakosch, “Memorie di un impresario”, in: *L’impresario in angustie: Adelina Patti e altre stelle fuori leggenda (1886–1893) di Strakosch e Schürman*, a cura di Eugenio Gara (Milano: Bompiani, 1940), p. 149.

60 “La grande artista, la *superdiva* ricca di affascinante talento di attrice, cantatrice sapiente [...]”. *Gazzetta teatrale italiana*, 30.06.1903.

61 Wayne Koestenbaum, *The queen’s throat: opera, homosexuality, and the mystery of desire* (1993; New York: Da Capo Press, 2013).

62 See, for example, Mary Ann Smart’s discussion of Koestenbaum in *Siren songs: representations of gender and sexuality in opera*, ed. Mary Ann Smart (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 10–11.

63 Heather Hadlock, “Peering into the ‘The Queen’s Throat’”, *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 5/3 (1993), pp. 265–275; here, pp. 272–273.



the opera queen as spectator, the object of his desire was generalised as a “diva”: a composite persona of different characteristics born from a conflation of the roles she sings and an imagined profile of the personal qualities presumed to underpin her success. The only divergence between this essentialist categorizing of the singer and those of the nineteenth century is Koestenbaum’s appreciation: instead of condemning the diva as “perverse, monstrous, abnormal, and, ugly”, he reveres her for those very same qualities, for her association with “difference itself”.<sup>64</sup> His influence in shaping other scholarly depictions of the diva is widely evident. Cary M. Mazer draws on Koestenbaum to describe her as the epitome of “arrogance, grandeur, and self-fashioned hauteur and sublime bitchiness”;<sup>65</sup> Melissa Bradshaw does likewise in claiming that “*diva* connotes egotism, arrogance and tempestuousness”.<sup>66</sup> But admiration in itself does not make this reductive assemblage of supposed personality traits a more genuine reflection of the actual female artist. And if we must stoop to essentialism, one wonders: why “arrogance” instead of “confidence”? Why “grandeur” instead of “seriousness”? Why “self-fashioned hauteur” instead of “self-belief”? Why “sublime bitchiness” instead of “assertiveness”?

Somehow, the female singer as a living, complex, individual human being is lost, swallowed into emptiness. Even writers who exploit the diva image to rework ideas of womanhood acknowledge its limitations. Susan Leonardi and Rebecca Pope remarked that in their attempts to “separate the literary divas from their real-life counterparts” they came to view the diva as “not so much a person as a position, a condition, a situation”;<sup>67</sup> Kimberly Nichele Brown writes that the term “has come to encompass everything and nothing at all”.<sup>68</sup> To what degree, then, does this academic borrowing of the vocabulary of opera fandom tempt us to mythologise rather than demystify the figure of the working female artist? And how much is it influenced, either deliberately or unconsciously, by commercial investment in the concept of the diva?

Certainly, that lucrative potential is considerable – and growing. The word “diva” in the title sells books: in 2014 Amazon’s website listed 1,372 titles, of which around 131 were biographies, autobiographies and studies of classical and popular music singers<sup>69</sup> (and 101 other titles were children’s books). It sells records too: just as Maria Callas was packaged

64 Koestenbaum, *The Queen’s Throat*, p. 104.

65 Cary M. Mazer, “Masterclass and the paradox of the diva”, in *Terrence McNally: a casebook*, ed. Toby Silverman Zinman (London: Taylor & Francis, 1997), pp. 165–180; here, p. 166.

66 Melissa Bradshaw, *Amy Lowell, diva poet* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), p. 4.

67 Susan J. Leonardi – Rebecca A. Pope, *The diva’s mouth: body, voice, prima donna politics* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), p. 9.

68 Kimberly Nichele Brown, *Writing the black revolutionary diva: women’s subjectivity and the decolonizing text* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), p. 10.

69 A small sample includes: Charles Mintzer – Rosa Raisa, *Rosa Raisa: a biography of a diva with selections from her memoirs* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 2001); Mary Jane Phillips-Matz, *Rosa Ponselle: American diva* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1998); Hansen Jack Winsor, *The Sybil Sanderson story: requiem for a diva* (Pompton Plains, NJ: Amadeus Press, 2006); Robert Pullen – Stephen Taylor, *Montserrat Caballe: casta diva* (London: Indigo, 1996); Leonardi-Pope, *The Diva’s mouth*; Edward Baron Turk, *Hollywood diva: a biography of Jeanette MacDonald* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).



as “La Divina” by Angel Records back in the 1950s, now the recording companies compete over like territory, such as Carolyn Sampson’s *A French baroque diva* (Hyperion, 2014), Joyce DiDonato’s *Diva/Divo* (Virgin Classics, 2011), *Diva – Danielle De Niese* (Decca, 2010), or Renée Fleming’s *Homage: the age of the diva* (Decca, 2006), to name but a few.

Most newspaper articles about or interviews with opera singers similarly allude to the notion of the diva. Some singers obligingly demonstrate appropriate characteristics of temperament and excess (Lynn Barber described Angela Gheorghiu as “the last of the old-fashioned divas”, in the *Observer* in 2003);<sup>70</sup> others present a rather more enigmatic image (“Dangerous diva with backpack” is Peter Conrad’s take on the “scruffily-dressed” Cecilia Bartoli in the *Guardian*, in 2001).<sup>71</sup> Yet others firmly distance themselves from the term. In an interview for *The Guardian* in 2002, Joan Sutherland said:

I’m a mum. I never thought of becoming a diva. I just wanted to sing the roles and get on with my work. I used to come to the theatre in a taxi, not in some Rolls-Royce. I didn’t have time to do all that silly stuff.<sup>72</sup>

Sutherland’s frustration is all too apparent. Indeed, it is difficult to think of any other profession whose practitioners are continually measured against a set of largely hostile and – with regard to the actual performance of the music – meaningless criteria.

Beyond the opera house, the diva has acquired subtly varied meanings in a range of contexts. Some relate to issues of aspiration and political voice. African-American women authors and activists draw on the term’s potential as a sign of triumph over exclusion and invisibility, articulating concepts of “diva-citizenship” and “black divadom” connected to political action;<sup>73</sup> Alberto Mira’s dictionary of Hispanic gay and lesbian culture defines divas as women “who should make us believe that they live in their own sphere and that the norms and conventions applying to us do not serve them”.<sup>74</sup> Less positive aspects of the diva as a model for personal empowerment emerge in those innumerable self-help books. One author of *I am diva* described her sense of drudgery in her commitments to the “Parent-Teacher Organization, and the church, and community service projects, and work”, and began asking herself: “*What would a Diva do?*”

Whenever I felt powerless or helpless, I would imagine what Audrey Hepburn, or Madonna, or Oprah would do in the same situations. [...] I would actually visualize Audrey Hepburn, head held high, back straight, shoulders erect, and my demeanour would automatically shift. It worked every time.

70 *The Observer*, 29.06.2003.

71 *The Guardian*, 14.10.2001.

72 *The Guardian*, 02.05.2002.

73 See, for example, Christine Philip – Elizabeth Alexander, “An interview with Elizabeth Alexander”, in: *Callaloo*, 19/2 (1996), pp. 493–507; Gwendolyn D. Pough, *Check it while I wreck it: black womanhood, hip-hop culture and the public sphere* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 2004), pp. 78–88; Daphne A. Brooks, *Bodies in dissent: spectacular performances of race and freedom, 1850–1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 320–321; Kimberly Nichele Brown, *Writing the black revolutionary diva: women’s subjectivity and the decolonizing text* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), pp. 17–19.

74 Alberto Mira, *Para entendernos: diccionario de la cultura homosexual, gay y lesbica* (Barcelona: Ediciones de la Tempestad, 1999), p. 235.



There is a curious conflation between image and reality at work here – but does it matter? At best, isn't this absorption in the diva, this need to possess her, even *become* her, rather admirable? At worst, is it anything more than postmodernist playfulness with notions of camp? Doesn't operatic and theatrical excess invite such parodies? Perhaps. But there are three aspects of this appropriation of the diva that might be considered.

First, her portrayal in popular culture often reads as little more than an adult version of the Disney princesses – another heavily commercialised manipulation of female fantasy – with an emphasis on style over substance. While this clearly appeals to a large readership, others are less impressed. One exasperated reader of *I am diva!* described the book as a “TOTAL waste of time”:

The suggestions are ridiculous (seriously, wear a tiara, call your girlfriends, fingerpaint with your feet) and some even borderline offensive. There's a section about being “cosmopolitan” that suggests things you can do to be French, Italian, etc. On the French page, one of the suggestions is to “skip the shower.” On the Spanish one, it is “skip the underwear.” These women have got to be NUTS.

If anyone ever calls me a diva again, so help me...<sup>75</sup>

Exaggeration, as *L'Eco* stated in 1829, invites ridicule. Much more importantly, as recent research shows, infatuation with idealised female images allied with the cult of celebrity in the popular press and social media can have serious detrimental consequences for women's physical and psychological health.<sup>76</sup> In some respects, the diva's diadem is every bit as constrictive and punishing for modern women as the corset was for their nineteenth-century forebears.

Second, the diva's patina of transgression is overplayed – or, at the very least, misinterpreted. The back cover of Miglino's *From doormat to diva* urges: “Use Diva vision and adopt a Diva-tude [...] to re-define selfishness, empowerment and extreme self-care.” Compare this, however, to the *Times*' description of Giulia Grisi in 1854:

Eager, industrious, indefatigable, always at her post, anxious to do her utmost, ready to come forward at a moment's notice, and disdaining to let any petty casualties interfere with the performance of her duties, she has entitled herself to unanimous respect, and has won such a name for punctuality and zeal that her engagements have, on every occasion, proved as much a source of profits to her employers as of gratification to her patrons.<sup>77</sup>

In truth, real divas didn't break many rules – they simply followed the old ones and then added some more of their own. To become a prima donna of international calibre

75 Reviews available on the <amazon.com> <website: goo.gl/3xEW5q> (accessed 11.02.2018).

76 See, for example, Maggie Wykes – Barrie Gunter, *The media and body image: if looks could kill* (London: Sage Publications, 2005); Marika Tiggemann, “The status of media effects on body image research: commentary on articles in the themed issue on body image and media”, in: *Media Psychology*, 17/2 (2014), pp. 127–133; and Zoe Brown – Marika Tiggemann, “Attractive celebrity and peer images on Instagram: effect on women's mood and body image”, in: *Body Image*, 19 (2016), pp. 37–43.

77 *Times*, 02.06.1854, p. 10.



demanded an ability to learn, profound knowledge of music, superb performance skills, and a strict adherence to the requirements of professional life. If such qualities sound dull, acquiring them constituted to a large part the genuine transgressiveness of those early opera singers. Another commonly used term in the nineteenth-century music world was “maestro. Granted to male composers and conductors, “maestro” implied the mastery of a topic and therefore the acquisition of knowledge and erudition. “Diva”, in contrast, suggested an innate, supranatural quality: the passive recipient of too many gifts bestowed at birth, as much in thrall herself to her voice and body as her spectators. Such a reading fitted well with the period’s distrust of female learning. In the 1820s, the Italian writer and politician Cesare Balbo (who regarded scholarly women as “monsters”) advised: “le donne non debbono far mostra mai di avere studiato; ed ogni lor produzione dee parere spontanea, e come una diversa ma sempre semplice espressione dei loro affetti”.<sup>78</sup> This insistence that women conceal their knowledge affected how singers were represented in the media. A common complaint by nineteenth-century singers was that young women – and the public in general – failed to realise the degree of intelligence, sheer hard work and application necessary to develop such high levels of musico-theatrical skill and ability.<sup>79</sup> When the most famous diva of the twentieth century, Maria Callas, was asked what she was attempting to instil in her students at New York’s Juilliard School in 1972, she replied: “Discipline... Everything is discipline”.<sup>80</sup> Not much rebellion here, we might think – or at least, not of the kind we might expect.

Thirdly, the animosity latent from the term’s beginnings towards self-assertive women in public life is still perceptible. Some psychologists have even defined a “diva syndrome”, described as a “particular combination of avoidant and narcissistic personality disorder”.<sup>81</sup> Similar nuances are common in reportage on modern female performers. Headlines such as *Stone denies diva antics* (concerning Sharon Stone’s alleged behaviour on a film set in 2006),<sup>82</sup> or *Diva driven by her demons* (about Amy Winehouse’s problems with alcohol and drugs in 2007) demonstrate that the prejudices faced by performing women have changed little over the course of two centuries and more.<sup>83</sup> We need only recall the careers of not just Winehouse but Judy Garland, Marilyn Monroe and Maria Callas to appreciate that the myth of the diva combined with society’s voracious appetite for celebrity has an ominously destructive capacity.

78 “Women must never demonstrate that they have studied; their every creation must appear spontaneous, and as a different but always simple expression of their feelings”. Cesare Balbo’s essay was published in periodicals during the 1820s, and reproduced in his posthumous *Pensieri ed esempi* (Firenze: Felice Monnier, 1857), p. 174.

79 See, for example, Frances Alda, *Men, women and tenors* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1937), p. 305; and Lilli Lehmann, *How to sing* (1902), trans. Richard Aldrich (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1993), p. 6.

80 Ralph Graves, *Objects of desire: portrait of a marriage* (New York: Tiasquam Press, 2003), pp. 117–118.

81 Mark B. Borg Jr. – Eugene A. Magnetti, “The diva is/in the organization: exploring personal/interpersonal/organizational dynamics and their enactment”, in: *Psychodynamic Practice*, 10/2 (2004), pp. 221–247.

82 *The Guardian*, 13.04.2006.

83 *The Guardian*, 22.07.2007.



What, therefore, does the word “diva” signal with regard to our methodological approaches in musicology? We might begin by adopting greater caution towards the use of the term and recognising its historically-specific characteristics: that in the nineteenth century, it was used less commonly than supposed and mainly about a few highly exceptional singers; that it denoted an *idea* of the singer that was problematic and conflicted; and that it was a populist creation of the operatic marketplace and publicity machine, not a usual part of professional discourses.

Furthermore, too great an emphasis on star performers provides a misleading picture of the broader complex of operatic activity. It restricts our exploration of performance to a handful of élite opera houses in capital cities, where such artists spent their careers – to the detriment of our knowledge of the far greater number of smaller theatres or touring troupes and their audiences spanning first Europe and then the globe, and the myriad singers who filled those venues with their voices.

Finally, we might ponder the analogy with the difficulties early feminists faced with that contrasting nineteenth-century image of womanhood, the “angelo del focolare”, or in Coventry Patmore’s phrase, *The angel in the house*.<sup>84</sup> In Patmore’s case, as with Koestenbaum’s diva-worship, his poem was penned as homage to his beloved. To the suffragists, however, this image of the “feminine ideal” was a profound distortion of female experience. In 1931, Virginia Woolf claimed that it was incumbent on every woman writer to kill the “angel in the house”, because one cannot write “without having a mind of your own, without expressing what you think to be the truth about human relations, morality, sex.”<sup>85</sup> Nine years earlier, the French soprano Emma Calvé had written in similarly vigorous manner about her own art: “only the artist who radiates a personality of her own, who expresses her own self, her own mind, her own soul, instead of the traditions of others, wins [...] achievement and success.”<sup>86</sup> Calvé’s sense of intellectual ownership and curiosity, of the capacity to generate and pursue ideas, of individuality, was in itself a form of rejection of the diva’s essentialist image. But as Woolf said, “it is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality.”<sup>87</sup> As we have seen, the ghost of the nineteenth-century “diva” haunting contemporary singers and other female performers in our celebrity-obsessed world has similarly acquired such a disturbing obstinacy that it threatens to obliterate the realities of their actual lived experience.

In short, does the path toward addressing gender inequalities really lie in replacing one essentialist image with another – even if this new one is a “goddess” of different ilk? By all means let the efforts to *divine* the diva, to interrogate her construction, iconography and effects within the historical representation of women, continue to flourish. But, I suggest, the use of “diva” as a casual, ubiquitous synonym for “singer” perpetuates a form of discourse

84 Coventry Patmore, *The angel in the house: the betrothal* (London: John W. Parker and Son, 1854).

85 Virginia Woolf, “Professions for women”, in ead., *The death of the moth and other essays* (London: Hogarth Press, 1942), p. 151.

86 Emma Calvé, in Frederick Martens, *The art of the prima donna* (London: D. Appleton & Co., 1922), pp. 42–43.

87 Woolf, “Professions for Women”, p. 151.



masquerading as glorification while deliberately undermining the real achievements and multiple, shifting identities of the female artist. Exaltation is merely another form of objectification, after all. Surely, at least as historians and musicologists, it is time to acknowledge the female singer in more accurate and rational terms, as a professional musician and working woman with full rights to our respect – and in full possession of her own, very human, dignity.

## Abstract

The notion of the “diva” currently extends ever deeper into both popular culture and scholarly material. The origins of the modern usage of this term lies in the critical reception and commercial exploitation of nineteenth-century Italian opera singers. Various discourses on three Italian sopranos, spanning the century, endowed the myth of the diva with different qualities. Giuditta Pasta, “diva del mondo”, created the archetype of classical stamp, transcendence and grandeur; Giulia Grisi, “La Diva”, brought a more human passion, the suspicion of temperament, and the element of sexual transgression; Adelina Patti, simply the “diva”, contributed aspects of social brilliance, conspicuous display, eccentricity and excess. Such attributes combined with the loaded (and often hostile) meanings already prevalent in the broader image of the prima donna. This paper explores the development of the myth of the operatic “diva” and its ambiguous legacy in modern culture – and asks whether it is now time to reconsider the casual use of the term as a synonym for the female singer.

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