

EDITORIAL



The modern celebrity, or star, is one of the long eighteenth century's most lasting legacies. By 'star' I mean a media-generated personality whom the consumer adores, envies and identifies with, and seeks alternately to emulate and to tear down. Ever since I began my research into eighteenth-century vocal music, I have seen this repertoire as typically a star-driven product. It is not possible to fully grasp or interpret this music without acknowledging, where appropriate, the performer's *imprimatur*. Until roughly 1780 in London, the word 'line' or 'walk' described a kind of character, and a type of stage production, typical of a particular star. London stage music operated in accordance with these dramatic terms, with vocal works cast in the mould of stars who, within a London company, tended to 'own' favourite works. Once you learn to recognize the works owned by a star, their musical referents – genre, topic, gesture, theme, expressive devices – become clearer and more resonant. For the musician today, reinvention in light of our knowledge of the 'owner' of a given composition can nourish the imagination more richly than can studying treatises. For the historian, the star's history sheds light on the meanings and reasoning implicit in musical designs that aimed to highlight the performers' skills, articulate their personas and recall their past performances.

In the eighteenth century star worship was nowhere more intense than in Europe's most prestigious stage music, *dramma per musica*. Traces of eighteenth-century star singers are everywhere in the artefacts – scores, librettos, commentary, encomiums and iconography – through which we try to reimagine its production. In printed music for the London stage, the standard title 'as perform'd by' alluded to the star's presence, even if the notation – often corrupt, and always omitting major aspects of an implied sound event – let the reader down. Manuscript annotations sometimes transmitted what the singer improvised, as in 'Sciolta dal lido . . . con li suoi modi scritti come [Francesca Bordoni] la cantava' (from Alessandro Scarlatti's *La Griselda*, US-DLC, M1500 S28 G5). Italian librettos recorded not just the cast's but also the singers' legendary names ('Giacinto Fontana detto il Farfallino'). Writers striving to theorize music in treatises or in histories sometimes laid aside the appearance of sober empiricism to indulge in apocryphal tales about what singers did on and off stage, and the effects they had on audiences. Poets eulogizing singers tried their best to articulate the star's aura, but how could even the most vivid imagery conjure forth something anchored in a unique performance? The feebleness typical of encomiums to singers indicates not just an author's inadequacies but also the impossibility of the task.

Clearly, it was star singers' ability to manipulate sound that was their most venerated gift. In her pioneering 1995 article 'Magic Mirrors and the Seria Stage' in the *Journal of the American Musicological Society* Martha Feldman explains how principal singers in *dramma per musica* drew on the dynamics of ritual – most crucially on the subtle inflection and variation of repeated material – to entrance audiences. Because arias brought action to a halt, they framed moments dedicated entirely to affective expression; through artistry and a mysteriously powerful voice, the vocalist transported audiences to a moment of Durkheimian effervescence, when passion experienced collectively surpassed the individual's capacity to feel. But what did the star's physical presence bring to the production? The ability to embody affective states – referred to as 'acting', although this art was far removed from its modern counterpart – was also prized. Excellence in stage representation could compensate for deficient singing, and vice versa. Farinelli was famously poor at gesture, yet was the era's unrivalled star, while Nicolini's 'acting' – a combination of gesture, walk, stance, gaze and presence – led audiences to forgive his inferior singing. Evidently, aural and visual stimulants combined in different ways in the audience's apprehension and evaluation of the individual singer.

Fascination with the singer's voice and body helped to fuel a burgeoning trade in stars' portraits. Even in today's visually saturated world, the proliferation of a star's likeness marks out that person's supramundane status, and drives the commerce in his or her persona. Portraits are a proxy for the sitter's presence: the



likeness allows the sitter to seem present, while reminding the spectator of his or her absence – stoking, at least potentially, hunger for proximity to the mute subject. Generally, the era's obsession with portraiture can be viewed as testimony to the power of embodied image over the viewer. Oils, conversation pieces, prints, miniatures, medallions, busts, drawings, pastels and silhouettes were all drawn into the brisk business of personal commemoration that expanded hugely during the century.

Yet the star vocalist's portrait posed problems when it came to representing its subject. How to picture an individual whose power was expressed in sound? Should one try? Let's face it: singers, while singing, often look odd. A portrait's genre also imposed its own visual language and its own decorum, which typically militated against representing the vocalist in action. Then there was the body of the *primo uomo*, which bore overt, discomfiting testimony to the effects of castration. Equally, the dumpiness of a prima donna – for example, Anna Maria Strada del Pò, nicknamed 'The Pig' – could rudely contradict her vocal powers, not to mention painterly ideals of female beauty. More subtly, etiquette prohibited displays of women's professionalism: while portraits might attest to a woman's acquisition of musical skills, these skills had to be represented as an adornment to her domestic talents. In sum, the singer's likeness transplanted poorly from the theatre to the gallery of Worthies. The singer's physiognomy was often intractable, even revolting; the act of singing and the female's professional success were both inadmissible subjects; and the singer's voice was irreducible to any pictorial form.

My current investigations into the portraits of five star singers – the *primo uomo* Antonio Maria Bernacchi and Senesino, the prima donnas Faustina Bordoni and Francesca Cuzzoni and the acclaimed tenor Annibale Po Fabbri – illuminate the ingenuity with which artists integrated singers' music and music-making into a visual representation. These portraits, it seems to me, fall into three broad types: the eroticized, the satirized and the honoured figure.

An example of eroticized portraiture is Rosalba Carriera's intimate rococo portrait, copied also by an anonymous French hand, of Faustina Bordoni singing. Faustina was fortunate in being a friend of Carriera, one of Europe's most celebrated creators of miniature and pastel portraits, who apparently depicted the soprano at least four times. Carriera's talents procured her membership to three separate academies, in Rome, Paris and Bologna – a startling achievement for a woman – and inspired Augustus II, Elector of Saxony and King of Poland, to create a 'Rosalba Room' in Dresden for his unrivalled pastel collections, in which her works were central. Carriera was also much sought after by British patricians on the Grand Tour, whose commissions included, in one case, a portrait of Faustina. Thanks to Carriera, Faustina's likeness entered hanging spaces designed – as Marcia Pointon emphasizes in *Hanging the Head* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993) – to theatricalize social membership and display the degree of intimacy that owners and visitors shared.

Carriera followed a distinct path, both artistically and commercially. Artistically, she fused the verisimilitude of pastel portraiture, a Veronesian subtlety of colour fostered by her brother-in-law Antonio Pellegrini, the allegorical language of her peer Sebastiano Ricci and the grace of the miniature, with which she began her career. She travelled to Paris and Vienna, where she met leading artists such as Watteau, on whose techniques she drew. Yet the artist situated herself primarily in the sphere of 'dilettanti', focusing on modestly sized female pastel portraits, of both sitters and imagined allegorical figures, and on miniatures showing female likenesses and activities. Her famously light palette (pink, blue and white) and the allure of her surfaces – diaphanous materials, blushed flesh tones, gleaming hair locks – clothed a rigorous drawing and contouring, while nuanced expressions of her psychologized subjects collapsed the world of allegory and myth into a private, reflective sphere.

Drawing on this feminized visual language – here my reading differs from that of Kathryn Lowerre ('Beauty, Talent, Virtue and Charm: Portraits of Two of Handel's Sopranos', *Imago musicae* 9–12 (1992–1995), 205–244) – Carriera's eroticized Faustina portrait fuses the myth of the irresistible siren with that of Venice's greatest soprano. Natural, fly-away hair escaping its tie, a nosegay slipping from her headdress, Faustina is shown with heavy-lidded eyes, milky skin and, above all, slightly parted lips revealing pearly teeth in preparation to sing – depictions indistinguishable in their visual signifiers from Carriera's allegories



of femininity and of music. In these paintings, idealism is caught in the orbit of the sensuous female body. In Faustina's portrait, the power of the body manifests itself particularly in her open mouth – whose erotic invitation would be unthinkable in honorific portraiture – and her unlikely dishabille. Escaping a pink ribbon, her blue dress slides off her shoulder to reveal her breast; her nipple is balanced visually against the music manuscript whose pages Faustina holds delicately between index finger and thumb. The music is itself idealized: its few legible notes hover between the stave's top two lines and ledger lines, indicating the soprano's typical range, while the series of semiquavers recalls her celebrated improvised *passaggi*. By entwining the visual language of myth with that of song, Carriera creates a Faustina at once alluring, immediate and personal. In the French copy of this portrait, the anonymous artist heightens the sensuality of the soprano's mouth by slipping a pink tongue between the teeth, although her bared nipple is now covered.

In stark contrast to Carriera's flattering representations of Faustina – her two other extant portraits, although alluring, are propitious – stands the second category of portraiture, the caricature. Caricature, in its infancy as a technique, was pioneered in Rome by Pier Leone Ghezzi and in Venice by the elder Anton Maria Zanetti. Both artists targeted opera singers, but Zanetti in particular picked out the unfounded vanity of prima donnas, the ravages of castration and the rude bodily excesses of singing. The gulf between Rosalba's Faustina and that of Zanetti – drawn in 1716, eight years before Rosalba's portrait – is startling. Standing stiffly with hands clasped, Faustina twists awkwardly from the waist, profiling a large, drooping nose, heavy eyebrows and an overly patched face. Captured in several sketches by Ghezzi, Faustina has devolved into a mannish, squat figure, whose sloping nose and broad girth dominate the visual field. She sings, but mechanically so, mouth slightly open, staring in profile fixedly ahead without engagement with spectator or the music she holds.

Zanetti treated castrated males even more savagely than prima donnas. Castration drastically destabilized the endocrine system during the male's adolescent maturation, generating two typical body types: the 'elephantine' (referred to during the period as 'capons') and the 'elongated'. Zanetti repeatedly thematized these two types: the first with a grotesquely swollen belly, legs splayed under their weight, short neck, fleshy lips and rounded chin; the second with a towering frame with disproportionately long arms and legs, elongated hands and feet, and undersized skull. Zanetti pilloried Bernacchi particularly, depicting him six times in mid-posture, arms and chin outstretched, vainly straining for greater height and nobility. The much-reproduced full-folio caricature of Bernacchi singing a cadenza – pictured as a snaking line of notes looping over the Campanile of San Marco – indicts the hubris of a *primo uomo* whose pretence to nobility, shown through carefully positioned fingers, makes the excesses of his singing and his belly appear even more ludicrous. Senesino, shown twice in bulging profile, fared little better. Copied by Marco Ricci and others, Zanetti's caricatures attest to the fears aroused by castration, from which humour evidently provided relief. Artists in London explored the same fears in similarly styled satires of Senesino, familiar to us from works by William Hogarth (Senesino in the *Rake's Progress*, Plate IV) and John Clark (used in verso to decorate Henry Carey's song 'The Ladies' Lamentation for the Loss of Senesino' in George Bickham's *Musical Entertainer*) and in the familiar visual satire of Senesino, Cuzzoni and Berenstadt in Handel's *Flavio* ('quoted' in Hogarth's *Masquerades and Operas*).

The polar opposite to satire was the singer's honorific portrait, which assumed different forms – oil, engraving after oil, bust, medallion and miniature. Across these types of portraiture, singers, as befits a commemorative artefact, are mute subjects. Yet artists still invoked music, using it to symbolize the singer's achievements, and, I would argue, to trigger aural associations. For instance, in the celebrated 1734 oil of Faustina by the Venetian painter Nazari, the demure soprano, richly dressed and coiffured, appears to play a mandolin or small mandora – not a lute, as previously maintained by scholars – while gazing silently at the spectator. That the instrument she holds is not a lute is important because of the lute's earlier iconographic association with Venice's courtesan culture. Here the symbolism is Orphic but, crucially, Faustina's power is mediated not through her voice, but through her (seeming) realization of a continuo in solo music on a fashionable instrument – in other words, through a musicianship whose brand of expertise contrasts with the theatrical bravura for which she was celebrated.



Very different are the mezzotint portraits of Senesino produced in London around the same time. The print after Thomas Hudson's oil includes a score opened to one of the castrato's most dignified arias, 'Non è si vago e bello' from Handel's celebrated *Giulio Cesare*. The opera's title and the opening bars of the aria are clearly legible, branding the castrato's likeness with an aria that was issued contemporaneously as a song sheet ('Non e si vago. Sung by Senesino'). A second mezzotint of Senesino, after a portrait by Elisha Kirkall, depicts the castrato in a full-bottom periwig whose weight, and expense, registered the subject's material potency; this image omits music notation but contains an epigram extolling the castrato's vocal power.

Whether honorific or satirical, print portraits in London, widely displayed and sold in print shops, stoked the fires of the city's celebrity industry. The opposite was true of the portraits found today in the collection founded by Padre Martini, member of the Accademia Filarmonica in Bologna. In *Collezionismo e storiografia musicale nel Settecento* (Bologna: Nuova Alfa, 1984) Giovanna degli Esposti explains that Martini's ambition was to create a 'family gallery that would mirror . . . the ancestral spirit' of his own library and of his 'contemporary interlocutors'. The Accademia Filarmonica, founded in 1666, was Europe's premier men's club for serious music, organizing the annual feast to Saint Anthony (the academy's patron saint) and hosting assemblies of Italy's leading theorists, composers and musicians. While the Filarmonica contained three categories of members – composers, singers and instrumentalists – Bologna's native sons Fabbri and Bernacchi belonged to the order of composers, having passed the rigorous entrance examination in 1719 and 1722 respectively. Fabbri was also inscribed as a singer. Both were elected president of the academy, Bernacchi once, Fabbri five times, and the portraits of them in the Martini collection are splendid. Bernacchi is represented in a bust: life-like but official, the bust's animation and lively detail echo stylistically the *ancien régime* busts of Antoine Coyzevox, with the eunuch's head slightly turned, his luxuriant hair brushed back and his pudgy lips pressed together. Divested of his ungainly body, and his stage identity, Bernacchi's effigy assumes a nobility flatly denied by Zanetti's images of the castrato. Fabbri, whom Zanetti had caricatured as weedy and stooped, regally claims his status in a three-quarter-length oil in which he points to a score that presumably – though I have not yet been able to identify it – is his creation. Gorgeously attired, with shoulders thrown back, he turns dynamically from the waist, inviting the viewer to study the bound manuscript, which is lying open on a table.

Accounts of historical figures are often titled 'Portrait of', as if portraits were a kind of end-station for knowledge about a person. The trust that we put in portraits is understandable, but misleading. They are richly informative, transmitting a physiognomy, a presence and a manner that vivifies a lost history unlike any other testimony. Yet portraits, particularly in the eighteenth century, aimed to mediate the sitter's representation, establishing and channelling reciprocal relationships between owners, spectators, singers and the display environments. To represent a star singer, a portrait could draw the aural realm into its methods of signification – allusion, symbolism and narrative – to eroticize, mock or dignify the singer's body in part through sound. The acknowledgement that portraits were meant to be heard, as well as viewed, is vital to grasping what these images might have conveyed to viewers in the past.

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