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Where have the Great Big Verdi Voices Gone?

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Is Verdi singing in terminal decline?[1] Whether one overhears standees conversing in a queue, reads critics in a major newspaper, or seeks recommendations for recordings, one senses that the heights reached by the very best *spinto* and dramatic singers have eroded since the 'Golden Age' of the mid-20th century. Nowhere is this more conspicuous than in performing the mature works of Giuseppe Verdi. Prominent conductors paint 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 forza del destino*, *Un ballo in maschera* and *Aïda*. We just don't have the same density of that kind of singer now."[2] Riccardo Muti observes: "We have a lot of singers good for Mozart and Rossini, but singers in the heavy repertory are becoming fewer and fewer. It's certainly impossible to cast an opera like *La forza del destino* well."[3]

For the first time since Verdi was alive, most opera professionals believe that it is impossible to cast these operas at a level that would once have been considered minimally acceptable. Consider the vocal abundance available to the Metropolitan Opera a half-century ago. During the 1968-9 season six legendary tenors whose recordings of the role of Radamès (*Aïda*) remain definitive and who still had the role in their active repertoire appeared on the Met roster: 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.[4] Few observers believe that

any of the seven top tenors hired by the Met to sing Radamès during the entire half decade from 2008 to 2012–Roberto Alagna, Marcelo Alvarez, Marco Berti, Johan Botha, Marcello Giordani, Richard Margison, and the late Salvatore Licitra–approach those historical standards.[5] And in casting Verdi operas today, finding a suitable tenor is not the biggest challenge. More severe, according to those tasked to to it, is the scarcity of baritones. "We all know," one former general director at two major houses states, "that no one today can sing better than a B-plus Rigoletto. But we must perform the opera because audiences demand it."[6] According to most of those who select singers for major houses, the situation is hardly better for *spinto* sopranos, dramatic mezzos and Italian basses–occasional exceptions notwithstanding.

Producing great *spinto* and dramatic singers is critical to the future of opera. About 40 per cent of opera performances worldwide are of late 19th and early 20th century works that call for such voices, including such staples as *Aïda*, *Il trovatore*, *Die Walküre*, *Tristan und Isolde*, *Tosca* and *Turandot*.[7] Such operas capture the popular imagination as few others do. They sell the most tickets, cross-subsidizing more adventurous programming. They dominate media representations of the art form. They make new converts to the art form.

If Verdi, Wagner and Puccini operas are to stay relevant and meaningful in the 21st century, great *spinto* and dramatic voices with the proper power, resonance and range to do their works justice must still exist. For all its multi-media trappings, opera touches us most deeply when it is sung by great extemporaneous artists. It is singers who have traditionally driven audiences to frenzies of wild enthusiasm lasting far into the night and created transcendent moments by which opera lovers have traditionally marked lifetimes of listening and connoisseurship.[8] And it is the uniquely memorable interpretations of specific roles by specific artists–some still remember Maria Callas and Leontyne Price, Giulietta Simionato and Fiorenza Cossotto, Jussi Björling and Franco Corelli, Tito Gobbi and Leonard Warren, Ezio Pinza and Boris Christoff–that mark the creative frontiers of what can be expressed through opera as an art form.

The *spinto* and dramatic voices required to do this are unique. They are 'great big' voices, the most powerful, resonant and weighty in the opera world, able to project over a massive orchestra with a unique edge and bite and a particular dark color suited to expressing bold and direct emotion.[9] At the same time, late 19th century composers–not least Verdi–still demand much of the subtlety, agility, range and diction associated with their *bel canto* and classical predecessors.[10] No matter how great such operas are on paper, if the ability to sing them creatively atrophies, performances will be reduced to a mélange of supporting symphonic, theatrical and vocal elements that are realized more fully in other art forms–the shadow of a once grand tradition.

Fans, journalists and opera professions often decry the shortage of *spinto* and dramatic singers, yet scholars have ignored it. This paper presents preliminary results from the first academic study, based at Princeton University, which seeks to measure and explain the current shortage of such voices. It addresses two questions: Does an unprecedented shortage of Verdi singers really exist, or have they always been scarce? If a decline has occurred, what has caused it? The empirical research to answer these questions, which is ongoing, rests on over 130 confidential interviews in 10 countries (so far), an analysis of trends in recordings over 80 years, and many other types of historical, biographical and sociological evidence.

This evidence clearly reveals an unprecedented and significant decline in the number of great *spinto* and dramatic singers, especially of Verdi, beginning around 1980. This shortage is doubly puzzling, because it seems unique almost across the traditional performing arts, including opera. Many explanations widely held among opera professionals cannot account for it. Little evidence attributes the decline to a drop in opera's relative pay-scale or cultural prestige; the rise of Baroque and early music; young singers being pushed to take on heavy roles too early; deterioration in the quality of vocal teaching; or acoustical stress imposed by big houses, high pitch or louder orchestras.

The shortage appears instead to be caused by three other factors. First is the disappearance of non-amplified singing by young people

in churches, schools and popular music. Second is the relatively high cost and risk incurred during their 20s and 30s by *spinto* and dramatic singers, whose voices mature later than other singers. Third is the rise of visual and theatrical values in opera, enforced by ever more powerful stage directors, which means that even if *spinto* and dramatic singers enter the profession and remain to maturity, they face a system that will cast them increasingly on the basis of their looks, not their voices. All three trends have worsened in over the past two generations and all specially disadvantage *spinto* and dramatic singers. Taken together, they are destroying the traditional path upwards for potential young Verdi singers: today they are less likely ever to begin singing in the requisite manner, less likely to stay in the opera profession long enough to realize their vocal potential, and less likely to be rewarded for vocal excellence if they stick it out. Given that truly great *spinto* and dramatic vocalists have always been relatively scarce, the combination of these three factors across a generation or two can easily reduce the number of great singers in any given category close to zero. The analysis presented here focuses primarily on Verdi singing, but the conclusions are relevant to the singing of operas by Wagner, Puccini and many other late 19th and early 20th century composers.

Assessing Quality: Has *Spinto* and Dramatic Singing Really Declined?

Many observers believe *spinto* and dramatic singing has declined. Yet are there really fewer great singers, compared to previous eras? This study is the first to attempt to measure and date this phenomenon precisely, using two methods.

The first method is to ask opera professionals. We have interviewed more than 135 leading opera professionals, with more interviews underway. Our interview subjects include current and retired singers, conductors, impresarios, casting directors, consultants, coaches, accompanists, vocal teachers, academic administrators, critics, scholars and agents at the very

highest levels in 10 countries. These interviews are taped, transcribed and citable, but remain anonymous for 15 years before they will be placed in an open archive. The interviews are mostly open-ended, but also include a few standardized, identically worded questions.

One question we asked every interviewee is whether he or she perceives "any change over recent decades in the quality or quantity of the very best *spinto* and dramatic singing." Over 95 per cent perceive a significant decline. From the perspective of those whose profession it is to select and cast Verdi operas for the very top houses, this decline appears dire. A leading casting consultant, for example, reported that when major houses ask for help in casting a heavier Verdi opera like *Il trovatore, Aïda,* or *Otello,* the consultant's first response is, "Just don't do it!"[11] Better to program a Verdi opera that can be managed by three lighter voices, like *La traviata.* (In part as a result, *La traviata* has become, for the first time in history, the most performed of Verdi operas, while a traditionally popular warhorse like *La Forza del destino,* which requires five or six robust *spinto* voices, has become all but extinct.[12]) Another option, so the consultant advises clients, is to supplant Verdi operas with Puccini ones, most of which are less challenging technically.[13]

The consensus among those we interview is no coincidence, but instead reflects a convergence of genuine and considered views. 95% convergence of opinion in response to an open-ended survey question to over 100 people is an extraordinarily high level of consensus in social scientific research.[14] Even more striking, the interview subjects agree on more detailed points.

1. Almost all respondents believe that decline is *not uniform* across different types of operatic repertoire. Verdi singing faces the most severe crisis, Wagner and Puccini singing somewhat less of a decline, while other (neither *spinto* nor dramatic) opera singing—of Mozart, Baroque, *bel canto* and modern opera, for example—remains relatively healthy or has even improved.[15]

2. Almost all respondents agree on *timing*. They date the decline in Verdi singing to somewhere around 1970-1980, plus or minus a decade, with the decline in Wagner somewhat earlier.

3. When asked what modern singers lack, most respondents point to a dearth of basic vocal capacity and technique: the absence of comfort across a sufficiently wide range, dynamic and melodic flexibility; an appropriately warm and dark timbre; and a large and penetrating enough voice to project in a major house.[16]

4. Respondents do not appear to believe the 'average' quality of *spinto* and dramatic singing has declined. Recall that we asked professionals at leading opera institutions about the quality of the top ('the very best') singing, that is, singing by the most important *spinto* and dramatic artists, usually a dozen or less, presenting given roles in a given epoch. Assessing changes in the quality of the *average* singer of Verdi or Wagner–i.e. the basic level of singing on an average night in a mid-level house–is much more difficult. Our interviews consistently give the impression that the average singer has enhanced his or her ability to perform in a professionally competent manner, that is, to read music, sing on pitch, manage basic technical challenges, handle foreign languages, sing in an appropriate style, and memorize roles, though we cannot be sure.

The fact that our respondents generally agree on these four points further increases our confidence that the decline is real rather than spurious, and helps define its precise nature.[17]

The second method used to measure changes in *spinto* and dramatic singing is to track trends in the quality of recordings over time. Since the beginning of the 20th century, recordings have offered the best continuous documentation of the greatest singers at work. Our research team recently conducted a systematic study of published reviews of every extant commercial recording–audio and audiovisual–since 1927 (the

advent of electrical recording) of any part (arias, excerpts or complete performances) of two operas each by Verdi (*Il trovatore* and *Aïda*), as well as two operas by Wagner and one each by three other composers. We then asked multiple individuals to rate, using a standardized scale, how positive they found the reviews of the performance of individual singers (with the names of singers kept anonymous), adding a battery of controls designed to limit potential biases.[18] Full presentation of this data would require too much space here, but this evidence precisely confirms the perception of the opera experts we interviewed.[19] Since the 1970s the quality of the best Verdi singing has dropped markedly and that of the best Wagner singing slightly less, whereas operas by composers like Handel, Mozart and Rossini have remained unchanged or improved.

One obvious objection to using interviews or reviews to assess the quality of vocal performance is that opera lovers may belong to a subculture that has always been obsessed with the past. Does the perception of decline simply reflect the typical nostalgia of opera buffs with a soft spot for youthful memories, old recordings and ageing divas?[20] We guard against such a 'nostalgia bias' in a number of ways. The most important is the use of a strict set of 'control cases'.[21] In examining trends in interviews and recordings, we did not simply study operas by Verdi and Wagner, but by Baroque, classic and *bel canto* composers as well. If nostalgia bias (or any other measurement bias) is at work, critics and interview subjects should perceive an equal decline in all types of opera. Yet they do not.

The opera professionals we interviewed distinguish clearly and consistently between *spinto*/dramatic and other types of singing. They believe Verdi singing has declined the most, and Wagner singing somewhat less and earlier–but they maintain almost unanimously that vocal standards in Baroque, Mozart and *bel canto* opera have improved or at least remained steady. (Indeed, some insist we are currently living in a 'Golden Age' in some of these areas.) Also, when we ask how well conductors conduct and orchestras play in opera houses today, almost all respondents reply that they have improved. We impose similar

controls on our examination of recordings: we evaluated not just reviews of Verdi and Wagner operas but also one opera each by Handel (*Giulio Cesare*), Mozart (*Le nozze di Figaro*) and Rossini (*Il barbiere di Siviglia*). Again, both Verdi and Wagner declined, the former more and later than the latter, yet Handel vocalism has increased in quality over the past generation or two and the quality of singing in recordings of the Mozart and Rossini operas remained stable or improved. The consistency of these controlled results means that the perceived decline in *spinto* and dramatic singing is unlikely to have resulted from 'nostalgia bias' or any other measurement error.

The uniqueness of the decline in *spinto* and dramatic singing also underscores how truly puzzling this phenomenon is. What needs explaining is not simply the fact of the recent decline in *spinto* and dramatic singing, especially of Verdi, but why it only happens in this one artistic domain. Performance standards in other types of opera—not to mention solo piano and instrumental playing, chamber music, orchestral performance, conducting, new music composition, and even jazz instrumental playing and ballet—are almost unanimously considered to be at least as accomplished as they were a half century ago.[22] The sidewalks of New York and London are crowded with prize-winning young concert pianists. We live in a golden age of string quartets.[23] Great and obscure orchestras alike—including the house orchestras that accompany opera singers—play better than ever.[24] In our wealthy and multi-cultural societies, it is exceedingly rare for the standard set by the best artists to decline noticeably in any traditional performing art for which there remains reasonable demand. *Spinto* and dramatic singing is an unusual and troubling exception in need of an explanation.

Explaining the Changes in the Quality of Verdi Singing: A Brief Note on Method

How can we explain this decline in the very best *spinto* and dramatic singing, especially of Verdi? We began by culling all available conjectures about the causes of this decline from informal chats with opera lovers, online forums, daily and specialized opera publications, and our interviews with opera professionals. We selected the most common and plausible among them for systematic evaluation. Some were discarded. For example, a distinguished singer leaned over to me in California and confided, dead seriously: "We *know* what it is ... it's that stuff they put in the water."[25]

What detailed empirical evidence about the way each cause actually functions in the contemporary opera world should be sufficient to convince us that any plausible explanation of the decline in singing is right or wrong, or (more subtly) that it should be accorded a greater or lesser weight and combined with other explanations in a particular way?[26] In keeping with general principles of qualitative and historical explanation, we draw on four different types of empirical evidence.[27]

1. **The Premises and Cause:** Do the premises and cause actually exist as claimed?

2. **The Causal Process:** Do the essential narrative steps that link the basic cause to a decline in singing actually exist as hypothesized?

3. **Timing:** Do the cause and process emerge around 1980, the time of the observed decline, and not before or after?

4. **Uniqueness among the Performing Arts:** Does the account explain not just the decline of spinto and dramatic singing, but the absence of a decline in other types of opera singing, classical instrumental performance, and traditional performing arts?

With these criteria in mind, let us now turn to possible explanations.

Red Herrings: What has *Not* Caused the Decline in Verdi Singing?

Before considering more convincing explanations and suggesting my own synthetic account, this section assesses five superficially plausible causes that many opera professionals believe have caused the shortage of *spinto* and dramatic singers. The balance of evidence leans against each one, and none is a plausible cause of the recent decline in great Verdi singing.

1. Has the Cultural Marginalization of Classical Music Depressed Salaries and Prestige?

One potential cause of the decline of *spinto* and dramatic singing is the increasing marginality of traditional classical music, including opera, in Western elite and mass culture and society. Since the mid-20th century, we have witnessed the immense popularity of 'no-brow' pop culture and, especially, music. As a result, one might conjecture, opera singers no longer receive the generous pay and the high social prestige they once did. This may dissuade talented people from entering the profession. A recent example: Adele's latest album *25* sold 3.4 million copies during its first week on the US market, whereas that same week the top classical recording (Yo-Yo Ma's 60th Birthday Album entitled, *Songs from the Arc of Life*) sold 493 copies in all formats.[28]

While the cultural, social and economic marginalization of opera may well be a background condition for the decline of *spinto* and dramatic voices–a point to which I return below–it is doubtful that it does so by directly dampening pay and prestige. The basic premise of this explanation is in fact questionable. Many studies have shown that most individuals choose a career in the arts primarily for internal satisfaction–as long as it is minimally viable.[29] Yet even if we were to assume that musicians follow the money, the data belies the notion that their economic position has deteriorated. Earnings of successful opera singers rose significantly during precisely the period over which *spinto* and dramatic voices

declined. In 1956, the MET offered a top fee of $1000 per performance, but "by the 1980s, the maximum had reached $9000 per performance, and in the nineties fees blasted off into monetary hyperspace," with publicly-subsidized European fees reaching even higher–reputedly up to $75,000 in extreme cases.[30] Today the Met offers $17,000 a night as a top fee (with up to $30,000 reputed to be offered for special singers and special occasions) and some European houses are said to top that.[31] This growth over six decades is double the inflation rate, and faster (at least for men) than the rise in the median income in the US.[32] Many leading singers also hold comfortable teaching positions at universities and conservatories.[33] Some do even better: the last quarter of the 20th century was the heyday of Luciano Pavarotti and the "Three Tenors," who earned tens of millions of dollars and attracted hundreds of millions of fans–something unequaled since the early 20th century. Today Andrea Bocelli does likewise: he is reputed to be worth $40 million.[34]

If remuneration is not the critical issue, then what about fame and social recognition? Today popular music is highly visible, whereas classical music is less so–even if Pavarotti and Bocelli are close to household words. Yet if declining social prestige (or material rewards) were critical, why do other performing arts, including other types of opera singing, continue to flourish? In other words, cultural marginalization seems unable to explain the uniqueness of the decline in *spinto* and dramatic singing compared to other art forms. This uniqueness is doubly surprising, because to judge by the size and age of audiences, opera actually remains relatively fashionable among traditional performing arts. Within the opera world, moreover, *spinto* and dramatic singers are privileged: their scarcity means that they are paid up to twice as much more per performance than other types of singers, and they are often among the most prominent and prestigious opera stars. More broadly, no classical form is fashionable and trying to make a living from any of them remains quixotic, yet this does not stop young people from trying to do so. The piano, for example, has been a declining cultural element for a century now, yet there is no shortage of young concert pianists on the make.[35]

2. Has the Rise of Baroque and Early Music Undermined Verdi's Popularity?

Some suggest that a shift in operatic taste toward Baroque, *bel canto* and modern opera in the wake of the 'authentic' and 'performance-practice' movements may be driving a corresponding decline in *spinto* and dramatic voices. To suit the latter repertoire, singers are increasingly adopting a cleaner, 'whiter' and lighter mode of vocal production, with less vibrato, chest voice and laryngeal manipulation. This type of sound, some argue, does not lend itself to late 19th century repertoire. In sum, Verdi has grown musically unfashionable.

This explanation does not make logical or empirical sense. The fact that Baroque, *bel canto* and modern are *in* doesn't necessarily mean that Verdi is *out*. Why should better singing in some styles imply a decline in other styles, any more than better violinists imply worse cellists or, more analogously, why should better Baroque orchestras imply worse traditional symphony orchestras—neither one of which we observe? 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.

In any case, our interviews reveal that Verdi, Wagner and Puccini remain popular with both audiences and young singers.[36] Worldwide, performances of this repertoire are far more likely to sell out than performances of Baroque, modern, *bel canto* or even Mozart. Our interviews also reveal that, insofar as young singers come to opera out of an intrinsic musical motivation, most aspire to sing mainstream Italian opera, especially Verdi and Puccini. Moreover, interviews suggest that voice teachers do not generally seek to lighten or 'whiten' the voices of their students, but to enlarge and darken them.[37] Indeed, the intrinsic musical interest of the late 19th century repertoire, along with a lack of competitors and higher salaries, has led some singers, whose voices might traditionally have been thought of as too light or small for *spinto* and dramatic roles, to migrate to this repertoire in recent years.[38]

3. Has the General Quality of Vocal Training Declined?

Some observers presume that if young opera singers are not up to snuff, the problem must lie with their teachers. Quite a number of our interview subjects—particularly those who work in opera houses—point their fingers at modern vocal training, which since the mid-20th century has been based increasingly in universities and conservatories. One often hears that they are stocked with vocal instructors who lack real-world experience as successful professional singers, and that such teachers tend as a rule to be incompetent, whereas in generations past, by contrast, most teachers were retired professional opera stars with genuine knowledge or venerable conductors who took young singers under their wing. The teenage Maria Callas's celebrated relationships with her teacher, retired soprano Elvira de Hidalgo, and her subsequent mentor, the conductor Tullio Serafin, are celebrated examples. Others maintain that universities teach students to sing in a style suited to small rooms and choruses, not opera houses.[39]

Such claims are empirically dubious. It is unclear whether any correlation exists between prior excellence as a vocal performer and current excellence in teaching: no such evidence emerged from our research, though we are still collecting data.[40] No one knows what makes for a good vocal teacher, and charlatans have always been among them, even at the highest levels. This does not seem to have changed.[41] Many Golden Age singers—among them Birgit Nilsson and Franco Corelli—insist that their teachers were incompetent or harmful.[42] Others view teachers as conveyers of technical information but the individual talent as primary: talented and committed students make the teacher, not the reverse.[43]

Critiques of pedagogy also struggle to explain the uniqueness of the decline in *spinto* and dramatic singing. No firm evidence suggests that the overall quality of vocal pedagogy has declined; on balance, the evidence suggests that it has probably improved, bringing the average level of opera singing with it. Over the last 50 years, the same pedagogues and educational establishments that are blamed for spoiling *spinto* and

dramatic singers have undeniably helped create a brilliant Baroque and early music performance-practice tradition of whole cloth, maintain high standards in Mozart and *bel canto* singing, prepare singers for technically challenging modern repertoire, contribute to a flourishing tradition of Lieder-singing, and increase standards of basic repertoire knowledge, diction and languages, acting, and professional decorum—not to mention produce generations of ever-improving instrumental musicians. This helps explain why most interview subjects believe that the *average* level of singing has improved. We see also that those countries with the most formally professionalized infrastructure in music grounded in conservatories and universities—for example, the US, UK, Russia, Finland and even Germany—continue to produce a disproportionate number of singers, even of a *spinto* and dramatic type. They are 'net exporters' of singers and train nationals of many other countries. If teachers in institutionalized music education systems can achieve all that, it seems implausible to accuse them of professional malpractice specifically in regard to Verdi singers.

4. Do Agents, Casting Personnel and Teachers Push Singers into Heavy Roles Too Soon?

Our interviews uncovered a common belief in the opera world that agents and casting personnel (and perhaps also some teachers) push young singers to perform heavy roles before their voices are fully mature. This premature 'overparting' of young singers can ruin voices. Many interview subjects, most especially in Germany and Austria, mention this as a likely cause—perhaps the cause—of the decline in spinto and dramatic singing. Of course some singers in every generation, young and old, damage their voices by singing heavy roles when they should not, and some agents, casting directors and teachers have always been myopic, greedy or musically illiterate in encouraging them to do so.[44] Why are things different now? Some observers believe that we now see more overparted singers cast in *spinto* and dramatic roles than in decades past. Indeed, the very fact

that singers with voices that once might have seemed light or stressed are now considered mainstream in mature Verdi (and Wagner or Puccini) roles is an essential element in what we have characterized by a 'decline' in *spinto* and dramatic singing.

Yet the empirical evidence does not suggest that premature overparting of young singers has caused the sudden shortage in *spinto* and dramatic voices. While agents and casting directors may tempt some young vocalists to sing beyond their means, the advice from an overwhelming consensus of contemporary professionals, especially teachers and coaches, runs strongly in the opposite direction. Almost all voice pedagogues hold it as a matter of faith that young singers should avoid vocal damage by restricting themselves to Baroque, Mozart and *bel canto* opera repertoire until they are at least 30, if not older.[45] And most singers pay heed. Preliminary results from an analysis we have conducted of hundreds of singer biographies over the last century reveals that, on the average, singers begin studying and performing heavier (*spinto*/dramatic) repertoire at *an older age* today than their counterparts did 50 or 100 years ago.[46]

It is far from obvious, moreover, that training singers to sing such roles at a young age is vocally risky. To be sure, *spinto* and dramatic voices reach full maturity later than other types. Yet the analysis of historical singers mentioned above finds no correlation between learning or attempting *spinto* and dramatic roles at a young age and a shorter career. Indeed, there is reason to believe that the real danger today may well be the opposite: singers with *spinto* and dramatic potential are learning and attempting such roles not too early but *too late* to train and shape their voices properly—a concern to which I return below.

If young singers are receiving and heeding advice to delay learning *spinto* and dramatic roles, one might ask, why do we appear to be witnessing an increasing number of overparted singers on stage? One plausible explanation is that the causality is in fact reversed. Rather than the overparting of singers causing a shortage of *spinto* and dramatic voices, a shortage of voices is encouraging overparting—

independent of the singer's age. In an era of scarcity, houses cast singers who can manage a role, even if their voices lack the traditional weight and color.[47] The examples of many mature baritones moving in mid-career beyond what would traditionally have been considered their *Fach* into heavy Verdi roles lends this explanation credibility.[48]

5. Do Higher Pitch, Bigger Houses and Louder Orchestras Place Singers under Greater Acoustic Stress?

A final explanation considered in this section asserts that in recent decades rising orchestral pitch, bigger houses, and louder orchestras led by insensitive conductors have placed singers under ever-increasing acoustic stress. They are thus perceived as having less powerful and resonant voices, and, because they are constantly straining, cannot execute their roles with the requisite technical competence and artistic flexibility. Yet none of the three factors is empirically plausible.

1. *Pitch*: Some argue that a recent rise in concert pitch from A=440 to A=448 (and perhaps beyond) has undermined great *spinto* and dramatic singing. This explanation has found champions, ranging from the legendary soprano Renata Tebaldi to the American right-wing activist Lyndon LaRouche.[49] Yet its basic premise is factually incorrect. Verdi himself, who campaigned to lower pitch, may have had a point in his day, but over the past half century, concert pitch has unambiguously *dropped.* In the 1950s and 1960s it was A=448 in some places (such as the Wiener Staatsoper under Herbert von Karajan), but now it is A=440-444 everywhere (Vienna now plays at A=443).[50] Ironically, then, it is the 'Golden Age' stars we revere on recordings, not modern singers, who suffered most from this form of acoustic stress. Also, this account offers no explanation why Mozart, *bel canto* and Baroque singers seem unaffected, even though their music was written to be sung at a significantly lower pitch than Verdi or Wagner operas.

2. *House Size*: Some cast the blame on bigger opera houses. Again the factual premise is false. Most of the leading venues in which top singers perform today date back nearly a century or more, including venerable theatres in London, Milan, Vienna, Munich, Berlin (*Staatsoper*), Bayreuth, Paris (Garnier), Barcelona, Zurich, Buenos Aires, San Francisco, Moscow, Rome, St. Petersburg (Marinskii 1), Chicago, and Dresden.[51] A few theatres are newer, but still date back to the 1950s and 1960s, a decade or two before the shift we seek to explain: these include Berlin (*Deutsche Oper*), Frankfurt, Hamburg, Los Angeles, New York, Salzburg (*Großes Festspielhaus*) and Seattle. Only a handful of large houses opened at roughly the correct time to help explain the decline, notably Houston (1987) and Paris Bastille (1989).[52] Acoustically problematic or not, this handful of houses is insufficient to drive the global perception of singing. In any case, our interview subjects do not report that singers sound good in some places but not others, but that the decline in *spinto* and dramatic singing occurs in old as well as new houses, small as well as large houses, in concert, and on recordings. Nor is it clear why large auditoriums should have such a disastrous impact on Verdi singers, but a reverse effect on Baroque, Mozart or *bel canto* singers, for whom modern auditorium acoustics are even less appropriate.

3. *Loud Orchestras*: A final acoustic claim is that louder orchestral playing and self-indulgent conductors are overwhelming fine *spinto* and dramatic singing. One might speculate that modern conductors are less likely to have had the traditional early career experience as an operatic *répétiteur*.[53] Others blame louder orchestral instruments. Yet most of the transition toward star conductors and modern orchestral instruments took place in the century between 1850 and 1950, when gut strings were replaced with metal, and brass instruments were redesigned

to double or quadruple their sound.[54] Subsequent shifts in orchestral volume were relatively minor. In any case, observers do not claim that great singers exist but cannot be heard, but that few great singers still exist.

Ironically, rather than offering a plausible explanation for the recent decline in *spinto* and dramatic singing, these acoustic changes may help explain the 'Golden Age' period of the mid-20th century we fondly remember. That era of excellence can be seen as a case of successful co-evolution of architecture and vocal style: bigger halls, along with higher pitch, louder orchestras and star conductors, encouraged the big-voiced 'Golden Age' singers of the mid-20th century, and vice versa.[55] This leaves the more recent decline in need of explanation.

Social Barriers in the Life of a Young Singer: A Tripartite Explanation

We have seen that declining pay and prestige, changing operatic fashions, bad teachers, pushy managers and unfavorable acoustics cannot explain the decline in *spinto* and dramatic singing. The evidence points instead to three other trends, less often considered in this context: a decline in the number of young people ever singing without a microphone, the abnormally long time to maturity required by *spinto* and dramatic singers, and the increasing emphasis of the opera industry on appearance and theatricality. Taken together, these three factors undermine the traditional 'life-cycle' of a singer: they explain why fewer young people start on the path to becoming Verdi singers; why fewer who start remain on that path; and why fewer who reach vocal greatness are recognized by the opera profession. Each cause has its roots in a basic economic, cultural or institutional trend in modern society that influences *spinto* and dramatic singing more than any other types of performing art.

Step 1 – Obstacles to Identifying Young Talent: The Microphone and Pop Culture

The process of cultivating a great *spinto* or dramatic singer begins by identifying an individual with a one-in-a-million physical talent. Searching for young people with the physiological capacity for musical greatness is akin to searching for young people with the potential to become successful professional athletes or Olympic medalists. Yet, while the world today is organized to find and train young soccer or basketball stars almost anywhere in the world, it is no longer organized to find individuals who can project the unamplified human voice. Amidst an unprecedentedly healthy, long-lived and physically robust global population of seven billion, potential Caballés, Corellis and Cappuccillis surely exist, but every year it grows harder to identify them. Opera rests on a shrinking pool of raw talent.

There is only one way to identify that talent: a large proportion of the population must sing in public without amplification and continue to do long enough for us to assess their mature voices.[56] In past generations this occurred naturally. Singing was a near universal social activity in Western homes, churches, schools, clubs, towns, and cities. Opera crowned a pyramid of vocal activities–popular, semi-classical and classical–all performed without a microphone. Everyone in a community knew who could sing sweetly, accurately and, above all, loudly–for, absent amplification, being heard was a precondition for all else.

In the mid-20th century this changed. Fewer and fewer people sing publicly. This trend reflects deep sociological transformations, such as declining religiosity (and changing religious practices), shifting educational priorities, evolving popular music preferences, and the atrophy of live music-making in the face of high-quality recorded sound. Even fewer sing 'legitimately'–that is, without a microphone. In contrast to fifty or seventy years ago, amplification is now ubiquitous–including in youth choruses, *a cappella* groups, musical theater, churches, popular music concerts and other places where young singers might perform,

not to mention lectures, political speeches, sermons and speeches at private gatherings. In nearly every society on earth, unamplified public vocalism has been pushed to the obscure cultural margins of society. In the West, even school choruses, oratorio tradition, Broadway musicals, 'acoustic' folk music, gospel singing and high school oratory are now amplified; classical solo vocalism stands alone. As a result, most people who possess the physiological talent to excel at classical singing never reveal it to others–indeed, they remain ignorant of it themselves.[57]

The inability to identify those with vocal talent reduces the supply of all types of opera singers, but it particularly diminishes the supply of *spinto* and dramatic singers. This is because such voices are far rarer in the general population than lighter voices suitable for singing Baroque, classic and *bel canto* repertoire (e.g. lyric sopranos and mezzos, light baritones)–or the ability to play piano or violin well.[58] Even in the best of times, only a handful of historically important singers of any given *spinto* or dramatic type have ever emerged. It is not implausible to think that a significant reduction in the initial pool could depress the number in each generation near zero.

Additional empirical evidence supports this explanation.[59] If the lack of ability to locate raw talent is a key factor, we should expect to see the largest decline in *spinto* and dramatic singing in those countries where religious, educational and cultural supports for traditional singing have atrophied the most, such as Italy–a traditional center of such singing, but one no more. (I return to Italian institutions in more detail below.) Conversely, countries that retain a rich institutional infrastructure should remain opera singer exporters. Among them are the United States, with its relatively robust churches and universities; the Nordic countries, with universally available musical education; Eastern Europe and Russia, with relatively stable conservatory and musical culture; and South Korea, with its vibrant Methodist-inspired religious life.[60]

Step 2 – Obstacles to Keeping Singers in the Profession: The Problem of Late Maturity

Identifying a pool of talented candidates is only the first step in producing great singers. The second step is to keep them committed to singing classically until it becomes evident who has the mature talent and perseverance to become a great singer. Here *spinto* or dramatic opera singers face a barrier nearly unique among musicians, athletes or anyone else who seeks to make a living by honing a physical talent: they mature late. The prodigious talent of instrumentalists is almost always evident by their early teens, and they usually reach maturity by their late teens or early twenties. The same is true for most athletes, ballet dancers, actors and popular musicians. By contrast, singers must essentially start over when their voice matures in their mid-to late teens, and they reach full maturity much later. Still, lighter-voiced opera singers generally reach that point sometime in their 20s. *Spinto* and dramatic singers are unique in that they do not normally mature fully until the age of 30, 35 or, in exceptional cases, 40 or more. (See Table 1.)

Table 1: Operatic Voice Types and Typical Age of Vocal Maturity[61]

Typical Age of Maturity	Male Voice Types	Female Voice Types
≈ 25 years	Light or lyric tenor, countertenor	Lyric soprano, soubrette, lyric coloratura soprano
≈ 30 years	*Lirico spinto* tenor, lyric baritone	*Lirico spinto* soprano, jugendlicher dramatischer Sopran, lyric mezzo
≈ 35 years	Bass-baritone, basso cantante, Italian/Verdi baritone, Helden-Bariton, tenore robusto (or *tenore di forza*)	Dramatischer Sopran, Italian dramatic soprano, Verdi and Wagner dramatic mezzos
≈ 40 years	Heavy (‚schwerer', ‚tiefer' or ‚schwarzer') Bass, *basso profondo*	Contralto

This striking delay in artistic maturity has tremendous consequences for rational career planning. Molding a *spinto* or dramatic voice into a smooth and elegant operatic instrument can be a frustrating, difficult and costly process extending from age 15 or 20 to age 30 or 40. Unless one is lucky enough to be a splendid Baroque, Mozart or *bel canto* stylist in the early years–which *spinto* and dramatic singers rarely are–this delayed maturity creates a 10-25 year career hiatus that many do not survive. Before they are fully mature, *spinto* and dramatic voices are often uncomfortably large, throaty and unwieldy, which hinders singers from having successful professional outings in their younger years, as their predecessors did.[62] All this is not just costly but risky: *spinto* and dramatic singers often sound quite ordinary in the first years of their careers, only to emerge later, sometimes suddenly, as Verdian or Wagnerian stars. Others sound promising when young, but derail. Faced with decades of delay, 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. Giulietta Simionato, one of the great Verdi mezzos of the 20th century, once said that if she had it to do over again, she would never become a singer, because "I suffered too much...[waiting] 14 whole years for my debut in a leading role...they destroyed me, stripped me of all my self-confidence.... I was broken inside."[63]

These inherent costs are exacerbated by some recent operatic trends discussed above. In part due to the (probably mistaken) belief that younger singers should not even study heavy Verdi before they are 30, conservatories and young singers' programs limit student performances almost exclusively to Baroque, classic and *bel canto* repertoire. The spread of a lighter, highly specialized performance-practice approach to Baroque and classic repertoire further inhibits the ability of future *spinto* and dramatic singers to work their way up by singing such works.

The unique problem of late maturity generates two further predictions about *spinto* and dramatic singers. First, the relative scarcity of different types of vocal types (*Fächer)* should be proportional to the age at which they reach maturity–which is precisely what we appear to

observe. In Verdi repertoire, great 'heavy basses' and contraltos, who reach maturity near 40, have become nearly extinct.[64] Among those who mature in their 30s, great Verdi baritones, bass-baritones and mezzos (e.g. the successors of Simionato, Barbieri, Bumbry and Obraztsova), as we have seen, seem similarly threatened. One might even argue also that few if any top tenors today bring a traditional voice type to Italian *tenore robusto* roles. By contrast, singers of types that mature in their 20s–lyric (or coloratura) sopranos and mezzos, lyric tenors and baritones, not to mention countertenors–remain relatively plentiful.

A second empirical consequence is that fewer young opera singers come from the US and Europe, where career expectations are higher and alternative economic opportunities are plentiful, and more come from countries with poorer and less diverse economies, where alternatives are scarce. In comparison to previous generations or poorer societies, waiting decades for a crack at success imposes higher 'opportunity costs' on today's singers. Indeed, over the past generation an ever larger number of singers come from countries outside the US and Western Europe: Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, East Asia, and, to a lesser extent, Latin America.[65]

Step 3 – Obstacles to Casting the Biggest and Best Voices: The Rise of Theatrical Values

After identifying a pool of talented vocalists and keeping them singing long enough to determine which fulfill their promise, the third step in producing singers is to select the great ones to perform in major venues under favorable circumstances. This may seem simple: surely, one might think, great houses cast great singers. Yet this is no longer necessarily so, because the culture of selecting opera singers seems increasingly to be driven by appearance rather than voice.

In many countries, notably German-speaking ones, critics and top opera administrators–though less so audiences–increasingly treat theatrical concept, rather than musical expression, as the most important element in operatic performance. In many countries, most notably in

Germany, acting, directions, stage sets, lighting, costumes, the charisma of singers and other elements contributing to theatrical impact are now the primary topic of journalistic reviews, company publicity, and internal discussions about company priorities.[66] Some attribute this shift to a more visually oriented mass culture heavily influenced by television and cinema; one might also point to a more literarily-oriented approach to elite cultural discourse. Opera has also been pushed to be more theatrical because performances increasingly reappear in video form. The number of opera recordings has increased greatly over the past half century. Yet most no longer take the form of audio recordings but instead almost exclusively appear as DVDs, video-casts, private video clips, promotional excerpts, and other digital visual media.

Institutional changes within the opera industry over the past two generations reflect these artistic and technological trends. Most notable is the rise in influence of stage directors (as well as set designers and dramaturgs) at the expense of conductors and music directors.[67] In German-speaking countries–responsible for 40% of the demand for opera singers in the world today–this so-called *Regietheater* ('Director's Theater') has become particularly entrenched, to the point of naming theater directors not just to lead production teams, but to head major opera houses–something almost unheard of in past generations.

The greater focus on theatricality has a particularly negative effect on *spinto* and dramatic singing. One reason is that singers are increasingly placed in environments designed to optimize visual impact at the expense of musical resonance. An example is the widespread shift to 'open' stage sets. In opera sets were traditionally 'closed', that is, constructed from flat panels of painted wood, canvas or plaster, sometimes with ceilings, thereby creating a relatively small room of resonant material that captured and reflected vocal sound out into the audience. Modern sets have become more 'open': they employ a wider and deeper space on stage, with the sides and top generally unenclosed and backgrounds often comprised of semi-solid curtains and scrims (to facilitate the use of projections and other lighting effects), or elements of glass, metal, cloth, gauze and

other non-acoustic materials.[68] Such sets are fashionable and varied, but stage directors thereby neglect the multi-media function of traditional operatic stage technology. Closed sets served as a form of amplification, whereas open sets reduce the amount of vocal sound that reflects out to the audience, dampen the resonance and color of what remains, and thereby shift the acoustical balance against voices and toward the orchestra. Singers are thus perceived as having less powerful, resonant and colorful voices. One might argue that this change assumes particular importance in performances of late 19th and early 20th century repertoire, where singers must make themselves heard over a large orchestra–exacerbating what might otherwise be relatively minor increases in house size and orchestral volume.[69] More research is required to test this effect rigorously.

The greater focus on theatricality has a second implication: singers are increasingly cast on the basis of looks rather than voice. Stage directors, not conductors or music directors, now often dominate casting decisions.[70] In some top houses in Germany, good looks are now reputed to be a necessary condition for employment, and houses elsewhere in Continental Europe, and even America, are following suit.[71] Knowing they may be filmed, artists now aim to become 'HD ready.'[72] Even the MET, which traditionally welcomed big voices in big bodies, is moving in this direction.[73] Some charge that the commercial pressure to be slim and attractive, as well as the hostile critical reaction to those who are not, is directed disproportionately at females by males.[74]

Casting on the basis of appearance, especially with broadcasts in mind, is likely to impact the quality of *spinto* and dramatic singers more than other types of vocalists–for three reasons. First, *spinto* and dramatic singers are more likely to have hefty physiques that pose theatrical challenges. As Marilyn Horne succinctly puts it: "The bigger the voice, the more behind it."[75] Second, the extreme scarcity of great *spinto* and dramatic singers means that casting on the basis of appearance degrades their vocal excellence more severely. Third, broadcast technology renders everyone similar in volume, thereby neutralizing one of the greatest natural advantages of the big-voiced

singer. Broadcast directors have less incentive to worry about vocal appropriateness–and in extreme cases may entirely forego altogether casting true *spinto* or dramatic singers who can be heard well in the house in order to achieve the right look.

Considerable evidence suggests that greater theatricality actually has a significant negative impact on *spinto* and dramatic singing. One of the most frequent comments by our interviewees (and the opera press) is that, on the margin, the opera industry is increasingly casting performers who are better-looking and slim at the expense of vocal excellence. This is true even at top houses, where vocal coaches and singers in particular grumble about this trend.[76] Singers seek to avoid the fate of the soprano Deborah Voigt, one of the world's great dramatic sopranos at the time, who was fired from the title role in the 2004 Royal Opera House new production of *Ariadne auf Naxos* when the company deemed her figure incompatible with the little black dress that the director had mandated for her character.[77] Yet the alternative may be worse. Voigt responded by having surgery to lose weight, which, some observers feel, shrunk and damaged her voice.[78] The evidence is compelling, though hardly conclusive, that Maria Callas permanently damaged her voice in the same way.[79]

To be sure, *spinto* and dramatic singers are so scarce that once they make it to the top, singers without good looks and a slim waist still work in top houses. The more serious problem may be that it is becoming increasingly difficult for them to reach that point. Discrimination on the basis of looks is more likely at lower levels–in second-tier houses, B-casts at top houses and filling *comprimario* roles–where no proven *spinto* or dramatic star is at hand. It occurs in vocal competitions for young singers, which bans on contestants over 30 years old and with extensive professional experience mean it is relatively rare for *spinto* and dramatic singers to enter.[80] Even when such singers can participate, they rarely win. Former judges report consistent splits between those who favor singers with the best voices and those who favor singers with a more attractive overall 'package'–with the latter prevailing more and more.[81] Such decisions

can derail the careers of younger Verdi singers, depleting the ranks of future stars more effectively than decisions about stars in top houses–though since we may never again hear them, it is difficult to estimate precisely how significant the impact is.

Culling the heavy and homely from opera is now so pervasive that it even influences whether students receive advanced vocal training at all. Some top conservatories, our interviews reveal, have begun admitting 18-year-old singers not simply on vocal ability but also on 'charisma'–a politically correct code word not just for stage presence, but for looks and weight. (We have already seen that once they are admitted, they are less likely to perform.) One long-time admissions officer at a top institution–after sharing memories of great singers he had heard on the world's stages for 50 years–dismissed my surprise at his institution's growing focus on charisma with a shrug: "My primary responsibility to make sure that our graduates work."[82]

While it is likely that the rise of *Regietheater*, digital opera and appearance consciousness has significantly degraded *spinto* and dramatic singing, we should not exaggerate the importance of weight and appearance. Their impact is subtle and complex. Some of the causality may run in the opposite direction. Even if attention to theatricality and appearance degrade singing, it may also be true that the absence of great voices has led the opera world to place more emphasis on appearance. Moreover, it is anachronistic to believe that ours is the first era to obsess about looks and weight, or that–as some advocates of *Regietheater* like to believe–singers in previous generations cared about nothing except voice.[83] Indeed, in many respects, early- and mid-20th century singers had more reason to care about their appearance than do their counterparts today.

Fifty or one hundred years ago, opera stars were akin to Hollywood stars, hounded by photographers and featured in glamor magazines, which meant they had to be extraordinarily appearance-conscious. Consider simply the matter of weight. In the past, critics and opera houses pressured singers much as they do today. During his first year at the Met, New York critics pilloried Beniamino Gigli as too fat ("well

fed") to be a credible romantic lead. Even though he had a three year contract in hand, he was to debut as Roméo (*Roméo et Juliette)* early the 1922-23 season. To avoid "another avalanche of scathing comments," he added a personal trainer to his entourage and, through rigorous daily sessions, lost 20 pounds by opening night.[84] Fifteen years later, when the Met hired Zinka Milanov (already then a world-famous singer) as its new leading Verdi *spinto* soprano, her first contract stipulated that she lose 10 kilos (22 pounds) "under medical supervision" before she stepped on stage.[85] In the 1950s, at the height of their powers, both Maria Callas and Renata Tebaldi lost weight–Tebaldi commenting that "people want to see a slim *prima donna.*"[86] And thirty years after that, the top Verdi tenors of the 1960s listed in the introduction to this article were arguably slimmer and more conventionally handsome than their contemporary counterparts.

Conclusion: The Impossibility of Being a Modern Verdi Singer

This is the first systematic scholarly research on how opera singers are produced in the modern era, and its results remain preliminary. Yet the evidence strongly suggests that discovering and cultivating a great *spinto* and dramatic singer is a social process that passes through three stages of that singer's life, each governed by a distinctive social mechanism. The successive weakening of those mechanisms over the past two generations explains why we face an unprecedented shortage of Verdi singers today. In stage one, the ubiquity of the microphone, the disappearance of appropriate cross-over genres, and the decline of religion and music in the schools mean that fewer young people ever sing unaided by amplification and thus have a chance to find out that they are vocally gifted. In stage two, increasing wealth, opportunities and expectations mean that *spinto* and dramatic singers are less inclined to wait out their exceptionally long period to maturity. And in stage third three, due to the rising importance of appearance and theatrical impact, as opposed to musical ability, even those who make

it through the first two stages and prove to be great singers are ever more likely to be ignored by those who cast and set operas.

Taken together, these shifts provide a plausible explanation for the shortage of *spinto* and dramatic singers today. One important example of all three at work over generations is the striking decline of Italy–whence have come, traditionally, a third to a half of Verdi voices–as a source of *spinto* and dramatic singers.[87] Consider the changes in Italian society since the birth of tenor Enrico Caruso in 1873. This celebrated child of the Neapolitan ghetto grew up surrounded by institutions supportive of unamplified singing. From age 10, he attended a private school specializing in choral singing, earned money as a soloist for church weddings, services and holidays, and sang amateur opera. After leaving school, he was–in addition to continued church work–active as a traditional street and café singer of Neapolitan songs. As he matured, difficulties in taming his voice ushered in a difficult period, in which his voice seemed unreliable and lacked the distinctive baritonal quality it would later acquire.[88] Yet support continued: he received lessons in exchange for a percentage of future income, avoided military service because he could sing, and then, starting at age 22, began performing in provincial Italian opera houses, with uneven results.[89] Though he remained so poor that he owned only one dress shirt, Caruso never seriously considered quitting, for that could only have meant his return to the Neapolitan ghetto. He eventually made millions worldwide through the new audio-only medium of the phonograph.

When Luciano Pavarotti was born to a Modenese baker and factory worker a half century later, surprisingly little had changed. He was swaddled as an infant alongside Mirella Freni, followed in his father's footsteps as a church soloist, and toured Europe with an award-winning city choir. After trying soccer and teaching, he studied voice for seven years with little visible success and then, at the age of 25, launched a professional operatic career in the provinces. Within ten years he became the most famous of modern singers, again finding his greatest fame through the phonograph–despite a growing weight problem and diffident acting.

It is hard to imagine any young Italian after 1965 retracing the steps of Caruso or Pavarotti. In a country that once boasted the highest church attendance in Western Europe, religiosity has fallen, with youth leading the decline. Only 17% of young people attend mass regularly, disproportionately in extremely rural areas from which fewer opera singers emerge.[90] For those who still attend mass, the Vatican II reforms of the early 1960s supplanted the special role of classically-trained choirs with simplified music, popular genres and congregational hymns.[91] On the street and in everyday life, amplified popular music has drifted so far away from the classical tradition that it incubates few opera singers. With a relatively low level of spending on schools and universities, music education in Italian schools has all but disappeared.[92] One by one, provincial opera theaters in Italy have closed. The broader range of available economic opportunities means that few young singers have an incentive to stick with the profession through their impoverished 20s–let alone the added 5-10 years that some *spinto* and dramatic singers require–for an uncertain shot at operatic stardom. Finally, with audio recordings replaced by DVDs and *Regietheater*, only those slimmer and more attractive than their illustrious predecessors are likely to find a shortcut to the top. In sum, had Caruso or Pavarotti been born within the last half century, the odds are that we would never have heard of him.

If this view is correct, then producing great singers who can manage the heavier Verdi roles–and similar works by Wagner, Puccini, Strauss, and other composers whose works require *spinto* and dramatic voices–is deeply embedded in broader social, economic and cultural institutions. This implies that the prevailing shortage of such singers will be difficult to reverse. Returning to a world in which young people attend schools, churches and choirs; teaching them to sing without mikes; creating extra decades of meaningful full employment for emerging Verdians; or transforming our operatic culture into one in which musical values are more important than theatricality and appearance: each is a quixotic, perhaps futile, aspiration. The latter may appear the most feasible, yet anyone who has witnessed the rising disdain that many modern opera administrators, critics and

scholars express toward those who prize traditional vocal virtues may suspect that the operatic establishment will prove even more resistant to reform than schools, churches or governments.

If we wish to avoid the disappearance of great *spinto* and dramatic singing, it may well be that the best we can do is to take smaller steps that address the symptoms of the decline rather than its root causes. Such reforms are more likely to be adopted and to succeed. One step would be to show greater openness toward singers in their 20s studying and performing Verdi, as they did until a generation ago–a practice the mezzo Dolora Zajick is encouraging.[93] Another would be to mount more performances of heavy repertoire in smaller houses. Yet another would be a return to more acoustically resonant sets. More universities and young singers programs might also follow the examples of the Met's Lindemann and San Francisco's Merola Young Artists programs in creating 'affirmative action' program for *spinto* and dramatic singers. The same consideration might be extended to casting *comprimario* roles in general. One might consider creating a general international program of fellowship support designed to help promising *spinto* and dramatic singers through the gap decade–akin to support for other endangered cultural practices world-wide. Greater efforts could be made 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. More discussion in the opera world, led by umbrella organizations like Opera America and Opera Europa, could extend this list.

One thing seems certain: if *spinto* and dramatic singing is not reimagined and reorganized, the core of operatic tradition we have known for so long–most notably the operas of Giuseppe Verdi–may not survive the 21st century.

Annotations

[1] This paper draws on Andrew Moravcsik, "Twilight of the Gods: Where Have the Big Voices Gone?", in: *Opera* (November 2013). Thanks to the Princeton Center for Arts and Cultural Policy for financial support; to Hanwei Kantzer, Sarah A. Paden, Jackie Levine and Jason Weinreb for research assistance; and to Carolyn Abbate, John Allison, Cori Ellison, Stanley Katz, Robert Keohane, Paul DiMaggio, Isolde Schmid-Reiter, Luca Zan and participants at the seminars at Princeton University, University of Bologna, New York University, and the Verdi's Third Century Conference for comments and suggestions.

[2] Zinta Lundborg, "Tanglewood's Harpo-Coiffed Levine Mentors Youth, Recalls Idols: Interview with James Levine", in: *Bloomberg News* (29 July 2009). Available at: http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=amGhZTKk39nA

[3] John Allison, "Riccardo Muti", in: *Opera*, December 1996, p. 1392.

[4] This comparison is inspired by a parallel one, with a similar result, by Paul Jackson, the preeminent published expert on the history of Met broadcasts: "In the final decades of the century, Verdi singers became increasing rare creatures. Imagine a season's roster with five great tenors capable of singing Manrico: Tucker, Bergonzi, Corelli, McCracken, Domingo—with Flaviano Labò on the reserve list as backup. And each could bring distinctive gifts to the assignment." See: Paul Jackson, *Start-Up at the New Met: The Metropolitan Opera Broadcasts, 1966-1976*, Pompton Plains, NJ: Amadeus Press, 2006, p. 131.

[5] The only contemporary singer whom one might place in the former category is Jonas Kaufmann, who has become an all-purpose answer to the question of where all the great tenors have gone, whether the discussion concerns Puccini, Verdi or Wagner.

[6] Interview Material. This is a near universal view in private. For a different view, see Dominique Meyer, "Verdi besetzen," p. 215. "Ich habe in den letzten Jahren gehört, es gäbe keine Verdi-Baritone mehr. Wir werden in Kürze einen Bildband veröffentlichen, der die ganze Spielzeit dokumentiert, und er wird auch Fotografien von

Verdi-Baritonen beinhalten. Ich erinnere mich in der vergangenen Saison beispielsweise an Hvorostovsky, der großen Erfolg mit *Simon Boccanegra* hatte. Ich spreche jetzt nicht von Domingo, er ist ohnehin eine Ausnahme. Ludovic Tézier oder Franco Vassallo: wunderbar! Leo Nucci, mit siebzig Jahren immer noch an der Spitze! Simon Keenlyside können Sie heute Abend noch genießen. Das sind nur ein paar Beispiele – natürlich gibt es Verdi-Baritone!" ["I have heard in recent years that there are no more Verdi baritones. We will soon publish a picture book that documents our entire season, and there are also photos of Verdi baritones. I remember last season, for example, Hvorostovsky's great success in *Simon Boccanegra*. I won't mention Domingo, who is an exception anyway. Ludovic Tézier or Franco Vassallo: wonderful! Leo Nucci, seventy years old and still at his peak! Simon Keenlyside you can enjoy this evening. That is just a couple of examples. Of course there are Verdi Baritones!"]

[7] This percentage is calculated from www.operabase.com, which tracks live opera performances worldwide.

[8] For this view of opera from an expert, see John Steane, *The Grand Tradition: Seventy Years of Singing on Record, 1900-1970*, Portland: Amadeus Press, 1974. Steane remained quite optimistic about Verdi singing in 1971: "the line in the progress-chart still moves upwards." p. 559, also pp. 537-545, 557-559, 568-571.

[9] The felicitous phrase "great big" here and in the title comes a widely read article by Anne Midgette. Anne Midgette, "The End of the Great, Big American Voice", in: The New York Times (13 November 2005). Available at http://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/13/arts/music/the-end-of-the-great-big-american-voice.html.

[10] Consider the example of the 'Verdi baritone', a unique voice type that emerged to sing mature operas by the Italian master. "With Verdi, the orchestra emerges from its former position as mere accompaniment: it becomes the singers both partner and counterpart ....This 'revaluation' of the orchestra demands more power and vocal stamina...in most cases Verdi requires big powerful and 'round' voices, and especially the 'villains' need something in their voices, which in the singers'

jargon is called 'a biting sound'. The *tessitura* of Verdi baritone roles, which lies relatively high, calls for a solid technique, especially in the *passaggio* area (the transition from the...middle range to the top notes) and a powerful and easy top. The low-middle range and the low notes, of course, must not be neglected....For singing Verdi you need a good breath-control to produce those big melodic arches and finely spun *legati.* On the one hand, the music calls for noble phrasing and a broad range of shades and colors, on the other hand, the singer must keep enough reserves for the big emotional outbursts." See: Laura Semrau, "Unnamed Essay," in: booklet accompanying *The Art of the Verdi Baritone* (Lebendige Vergangenheit, Historic Recordings, CD - Mono 89948, 2000).

[11] Interview Material.

[12] By contrast, on 15 March 1958, San Carlo opera house in Naples mounted a legendary opening night performance of *Forza*, starring Renata Tebaldi, Franco Corelli, Ettore Bastianini, Boris Christoff, Oralia Dominguez and Renato Capecchi, under Francesco Molinari-Pradelli. A grainy black-and-white broadcast tape from RAI remains of a marvelous evening at the opera. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FtUS8REy-4g&list=PL991DC18684E4DA3C. A long-time musical administrator and critic observed that what is extraordinary about this performance is not just that it is a much better cast than anything in recent decades, but that in 1958 one could have cast *Forza* three times over with singers of this quality. Interview Material.

[13] Interview Material. The vocal parts are less exposed and, *in extremis*, the conductor can cover residual vocal weaknesses by boosting Puccini's instrumental parts, which, unlike those of Verdi, often double the vocal lines. As the consultant colorfully put it: "Just tell the conductor to turn up the f—ing dial."

[14] This 95% response is extraordinary, given that it is elicited by an open-ended, not a multiple choice, question about trends in singing. We do not 'prompt' respondents in a favored direction by asking, for example, whether they perceive a decline or even offering

options. We simply ask whether they have noted any change and, if so, what it is. The answer comes from them. Even the residual 5% probably contains ill-considered answers. We followed up by asking respondents to name and compare ideal casts then and now, and most of those who claimed there was no decline admitted they were unable to name a cast of *Aïda* that was equal or superior to one in the 1960s.

[15] Opera professionals perceive a decline in Wagner singing as well, but they believe it has been milder. Nina Stemme, arguably today's finest Brünnhilde, speaks for many: "Leider muss man feststellen, dass sie [Flagstad] und Lauritz Melchior uns nachgeborenen Wagnersängern eigentlich alles ‚kaputtgemacht' haben. Da kommt keiner heran...". ["Unfortunately one must conclude that she [Flagstad] and Lauritz Melchior have really wrecked everything for we subsequent Wagner singers. Because none comes close..."] See: Stephan Mauß, "Nina Stemme: Eine unendliche Endstation", in: *Das Opernglas*, 7-8/2005, available at http://archiv.opernglas.de/archiv/jahrgang-2005/ausgabe-07-08-2005/nina-stemme-1.html.

[16] Many interview subjects also mention that modern singers lack distinctive and diverse interpretive insights, as compared to their predecessors. Whereas both vocal talent and technique, on the one hand, and interpretive diversity, on the other, seem in short supply, the former problem is more fundamental, because communicating deep interpretive insights requires that opera singers possess outstanding talent and technique with regard to dynamics, color and phrasing. Almost all of those who believe that a parallel development over recent generations has rendered *spinto* and dramatic singers less interesting do not believe that as many singers as ever can manage *spinto* and dramatic roles technically and the sole problem is that they are boring.

[17] Respondents tend not to perceive the decline as resulting simply from more houses chasing fewer singers and being forced to cast with more lead time–though of course that situation does pose logistical problems. It is not simply more difficult to cast singers, but

the general quality of the very best singing world-wide has declined. This is why we ask about assembling 'ideal' casts and whom they could hire if they faced no constraints.

[18] We compiled the dataset from reviews published in *Gramophone* magazine, assuming that this source would focus on a selection of the best available recordings. We began in 1927, with the advent of electrical recording. To avoid having the results influence by non-vocal concerns, we broke each review up into segments focusing on the performance of a specific role, without any mention of conducting, recording quality, ensemble, visual aspects, etc.. We then asked multiple individuals to assess how positive critics were in each case about the quality of the singing. We believe that this result is unlikely to be driven by bias: indeed, this measure of quality is intrinsically biased *against* any finding that vocal standards have declined because (despite widespread beliefs to the contrary) the number of recordings of operas and fragments issued annually has increased, recording quality has improved, and the ability to manipulate recordings to improve the apparent quality of singers has increased. We took account changes in the recording industry, making no differentiation between live and studio recordings, or between audio and audio-visual recordings. To avoid the problem of changing standards and reviewing styles over time, we only employed reviews of CD versions released after 1983, not the original reviews. We also noted singers who sang repertoire on CD that they would not and/or could not duplicate in an opera house, and we checked live 'bootleg' recordings to make sure singers could replicate their roles adequately.

[19] The result is a series of tables measuring annual change in the perceived quality of recorded performances of specific roles in specific operas, as reflected in subsequent reviews.

[20] Claudio E. Benzecry, *The Opera Fanatic: Ethnography of an Obsession*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

[21] Any control we employ to check for 'nostalgia bias' also controls for *any other type* of generic bias (i.e. a bias not specific to *spinto* and dramatic singing) on the part of reviewers against newer recordings.

[22] Interview Material. Conductor, music historian and university administrator Leon Botstein writes: "The level of technical proficiency audible among young performers is astounding. There is no need to wax nostalgic about the past. Just as in tennis or golf, the minimum standard of professionalism among violinists, cellists, and pianists is higher than it has ever been. In Carl Flesch's class of violinists in the late 1920s and early 1930s, few if any of his best pupils could play all of the Paganini 'Caprices' in public as part of their repertory. It may be reasonable to claim that there is no one around today to take the place of Heifetz or Milstein, but there are many more violinists on a level of proficiency of an extraordinarily high standard than ever before. The problem is not narrowly one of technique." See: Leon Botstein "Notes from the Editor: The Training of Musicians", in: *Musical Quarterly* 84 (2000), p. 329. Soloists, chamber music groups and orchestras may play for smaller and older audiences, and may be going bankrupt as a result, but they play wonderfully. Some do protest that classical music performance has become interpretively more homogeneous, but, as we have seen, this is not the primary concern with *spinto* and dramatic singing.

[23] Corinna da Fonseca-Wollheim expresses an uncontroversial view when she observes: "Is ours the new golden age of string quartets? It certainly feels that way ..." See: "Rising Quartets, Hip and Passionate," *New York Times*, 8 November 2014.

[24] As an additional control, we asked interviewees about the quality of opera orchestras in their house (or their experience). Not a single one believes they have declined, though some believe they play too loudly—a point we discuss below.

[25] Interview Materials.

[26] It is of course insufficient simply to posit a coherent theory along with some anecdotal evidence. The standard, which is what one encounters in most journalistic writing about opera, is too low. That is the standard we use to place a cause in the category of 'plausible' explanations in the first place.

[27] On the general method of qualitative causal analysis via 'process

tracing', see Alexander George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005. In the larger study, we use other types of evidence, including historical description and the geographical distribution of young singers.

[28] As reported by Norman Lebrecht in his column, *Slipped Disc*, in November 2015. http://slippedisc.com/2015/11/adeles-album-sold-3-4m-last-week-the-classical-1-sold-493/.

[29] Interview Materials.

[30] Paul Jackson, *Sign-off for the Old Met: The Metropolitan Opera Broadcasts, 1950-1966*, Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1997, p. 178.

[31] Rupert Christiansen, "How much do opera singers earn? Since state subsidy to classical music has been slashed, the whole sector has declined", in: *The Daily Telegraph*, 24 July 2009.

[32] In 1956 the fee ($1000) for a top singer was 28% of the annual US median individual income, whereas the today that fee ($17,000) is 63% of the 2012 annual US median individual income. On median income in 1956, see "Income of Men at All-Time High in 1956", in: *Current Population Reports: Consumer Income*, Washington DC: U.S. Department of Commerce, Series P.-60, No. 25, July 1957, p. 1. On median income in 2012, see Russell Sage Foundation, "Chartbook of Social Inequality," derived from US Census Data. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Personal_income_in_the_United_States p. 1. On inflation, see http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl?cost1=1%2C000.00&year1=1956&year2=2015.

[33] Christiansen, "How Much Do Opera Singers Earn?"

[34] http://www.celebritynetworth.com/richest-celebrities/singers/andrea-bocelli-net-worth/.

[35] On the long-term decline, see Arthur Loesser, *Men, Women and Pianos: A Social History*, New York: Dover, 1954, Section Seven.

[36] More literary-minded participants at academic seminars and conferences (but almost no one in the opera industry) have suggested to me that the themes and plots of Verdi and other 19th century and early 20th century operas are too musty to attract modern young people (including singers and teachers) to his operas. This is implausible for

four reasons. First, the shortage of singers varies by role, not by opera or composer: some lighter roles in certain (musty) Verdi operas, for example, Gilda and the Duke in *Rigoletto*, Cassio, Desdemona and perhaps even Iago in *Otello*, as well as all three leading roles in *La traviata*, can still be cast at high levels, because they do not require *spinto* or dramatic voices, whereas the roles of Rigoletto, Otello, Azucena and Manrico in the same or contemporaneous operas are harder to cast, because they do require such voices. This implies that the problem is not the plot or composer but the precise style of vocal writing. Second, we learned from our interviews that Verdi operas (particularly the mustiest among them, such as *Il trovatore* and *Rigoletto)* remain the extremely popular both with audiences and young singers. Third, it is unclear what exactly about Verdi's plots—and also those of Puccini and Wagner—which is musty. (Why should *Rent* sell out when *La bohème* does not?) Finally, whatever that explanation might be, it would encounter great difficulty accounting for the uniqueness of the decline of *spinto* and dramatic singing: why, for example, should we see continued or enhanced success of operas by Handel, Mozart and Rossini operas. Any argument that these libretti are uniquely relevant would seem to face insurmountable barriers—particularly in the case of Handel.

[37] Interview Materials.

[38] See discussion below of medium-weight baritones who have moved up to Verdi roles.

[39] Interview Materials.

[40] Though some great former singers make great teachers, most do not. Some of the greatest teachers had unimpressive careers or none at all. It is unclear even that the percentage of teachers who are former singers has declined, though we are still researching this question.

[41] How to teach opera singing has always been even more controversial than how to teach instrumental performance, since the instruments of singers are varied and hidden in their bodies, and because singers cannot hear themselves undistorted, rendering them exceptionally

reliant on teachers for advice. Vocal pedagogy is not based on a single fixed method, let alone a science, and teachers and singers disagree amongst themselves about what works.

[42] Corelli believed his conservatory teacher destroyed his upper register, and subsequently decided to become his own teacher. He referred to voice teachers as 'dangerous people' and a 'plague to singers'. See: Anthony Tommasini, "Franco Corelli, Italian Tenor of Power and Charisma, and Pillar of the Met, Dies at 82", in: *The New York Times,* October 30, 2003. Birgit Nilsson recalls almost entirely negative influences from her vocal teachers, particularly those who were the most famous teachers. See: *La Nilsson: My Life in Opera,* Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2007, pp. 31-33, 39-43.

[43] E.g. "Giulietta Simionato," in Jürgen Bartels, et al., eds. *Die Interviews: Einblicke der großen Stars in die Welt der Oper: Highlights aus 20 Jahren "Das Opernglas" 1980-2000,* Hamburg: Opernglas Verlagsgesellschaft, 2000, p. 306.

[44] Dominique Meyer states: "Oft sagt man, Sänger singen spezielle Rollen zu früh und machen sich damit kaputt. Das ist leider wahr, und ist auch keine Neuigkeit. Ich bin sicher, dass Sie das alle schon erlebt haben, und wir könnten jetzt den ganzen Tag damit verbringen, Beispiele aufzuzählen. Martha Mödl zum Beispiel." "Verdi besetzen," p 217. ["Often one hears it said that singers attempt particular roles too early and destroy themselves that way. That is unfortunately true but it is also nothing new. I am sure...we could spend all day listing cases...for example, Martha Mödl."] One could name many other examples from the post-World War II Golden Age, most prominently Giuseppe di Stefano.

[45] When we ask interviewees why they believe that young singers should not begin studying *spinto* and dramatic roles until an advanced age, most treat it as an eternal verity too obvious to require detailed defense. Pressed for examples (other than Maria Callas), a few cite the generation of surprisingly short-careered (mostly American) *spinto* sopranos who came of age in the 1970s and 1980s—among them, Susan Dunn, Alessandra Marc, Aprile Millo, Katia Ricciarelli, Cheryl

Studer and Sharon Sweet—who are widely believed to have destroyed their voices by singing *spinto* and dramatic roles prematurely.

[46] For an anecdotal example, see the reminiscence in "Kurt Moll," in Bartels, et al. *Die Interviews,* p. 225.

[47] Interview Material.

[48] Critics have pointed out that, whatever their many virtues, some of the leading baritones currently cast in mature Verdi operas in top houses—Dmitri Hvorostovsky, Thomas Hampson, Simon Keenlyside and Plácido Domingo, to name a few—would have traditionally been considered too light-voiced for Macbeth, Rigoletto, Amonasro, Don Carlos (*Forza)* and other heavy 'Verdi baritone' roles. Simon Keenlyside, who is intelligent and sensitive enough to weigh the trade-offs subtly, has been elegantly ambivalent about his status as a Verdi singer: "I feel a little like Mark Antony talking to the crowd about Brutus, after the murder of Julius Caesar: endlessly repeating the mantra that Brutus is an honorable man and yet, slyly, saying quite the opposite. I say that I am not a Verdi singer. And I am not. I just sing some of the lyrical Verdi roles and... I like to sing them many times." See "Interview with Simon Keenlyside," on *Blog: Stephen Costello,* 20 November 2014, at http://stephencostellotenor.com/2014/11/20/stay-calm-dont-panic-my-interview-with-simon-keenlyside/. Yet of course Keenlyside sings Verdi roles that are not 'lyric', such as Rigoletto, and the general critical view appears to have been that he is less convincing musically than dramatically in such roles. See, for example, http://www.theoperacritic.com/reviewsa.php?schedid=rohrigole0914

[49] Carlamaria Casanova, *Renata Tebaldi. La voce d'angelo,* Editore Azzali, 1987, p. 154; "Renata Tebaldi," in: Bartels, et al., *Die Interviews,* pp. 348-9. On LaRouche's Schiller Institute, see http://www.schillerinstitute.org/music/revolution.html. The pitch can rise further, close to A=460, by the end of the performance, as instruments warm up.

[50] Interview Materials. In most places pitch has, of course, risen since Mozart's day and fallen since Verdi's day, but this is not the relevant time period for us.

[51] For a dissenting view on the renovation of Dresden's Semperoper in the 1980s, David Griesinger, "Phase Coherence as a Measure of Acoustic Quality, part two: Perceiving Engagement" in: Proceedings of 20th International Congress on Acoustics, ICA 2010, 23-27 August 2010, Sydney, Australia ICA 2010.

[52] Others are too new, such as houses in St. Petersburg (Marinskii 2), Firenze, Tokyo (New National Theater), Baden-Baden (Festspielhaus), Dallas (Winspear Opera House), Copenhagen, Valencia, Oslo, and various Chinese cities.

[53] Not all old-school conductors with a past as a *répétiteur* were respectful of singers. Solti and Klemperer played loudly and Karajan was famous for overparting small-voiced singers.

[54] Interview Material. Isaac Stern, *The Evolution of the Symphony Orchestra: History, Problems and Agenda*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1990, p. 10; Anne Mischakoff, Heiles, *America's Concertmasters*, Sterling Heights, Mich.: Harmonie Park Press, 2007, p.26, 60, 145; D. R. Reimer, *Violin Performance Training at Collegiate Schools of Music and its Relevance to the Performance Professions: A Critique and Recommendation*, PhD diss., Ohio State University, 2003.

[55] I am indebted to Carolyn Abbate for suggesting this formulation.

[56] In the end, any sport or art must assess ability by learning and doing, but here there is not even a first-cut way to select promising talent, analogous to selecting out tall people for basketball or fast ones for soccer, and letting them play a bit.

[57] Meyer, "Verdi besetzen", pp. 219-220.

[58] While quite a number of singers in any given era can sing lighter roles at a high level, great *spinto* or dramatic singers have almost always been quite scarce, with only a handful of historically preeminent exemplars of each vocal type per generation.

[59] One more general result is that a surprising number of opera singers today are found by chance at around age 20, a later age than traditionally. They have sung in musical theater, church, choral or popular music, or are instrumentalists with modest choral background, who never gave any thought to solo classical singing

and are coincidentally overheard in college or conservatory by a vocal teacher.

[60] Nicholas Harkness, *The Voices of Seoul: Sound, Body and Christianity in South Korea*, PhD Thesis: Department of Anthropology, University of Chicago, 2010.

[61] Pedagogue James Deere observes: "Maturation is a very individual matter, but lighter voices generally mature earlier. Soubrettes and coloratura sopranos can be ready for professional work as early as twenty years of age—if they have a solid grounding in vocal technique, foreign language and vocal literature. Roberta Peters made her debut at the Metropolitan at not quite twenty, and Patrice Munsel was only eighteen! Lyric sopranos are almost as quick to mature and are usually ready by age twenty-five. Lirico spinto sopranos, tenors and baritones should be ready by age thirty. Dramatic sopranos, Mezzo-sopranos and bass-baritones (*bassi cantanti*) are often ready at thirty-five, and true contraltos and Schwarzebassen [sic] may require almost to age forty for complete maturation, although some may be ready earlier. Singers need to focus on technique, literature, musicianship and language early, so these elements can be ready by the time the voice is ready. Part of building vocal technique requires time for understanding and accomplishment, so one should begin as early as practicable. Girls may study voice at fifteen or sixteen if physically mature, and the boys at sixteen or seventeen. Piano or violin study is recommended for younger singers, and may begin at eight or nine ..." See: Deere, *Singing in the Twentieth Century: A Recollection of Performance and Pedagogy*, Bloomington: Anchor House, 2005, pp. 86-87, also 36.

[62] Such voices also have problems integrating into choruses.

[63] "Giulietta Simionato," p. 308.

[64] Contraltos have always been scarce, but "in recent years few true contraltos have been identified." See: Deere, *Singing*, p. 24.

[65] Interview Material. This is evident in all vocal types: in competitions, for examples, winners increasingly come from Asia and Eastern Europe or Russia, as well as Latin America.

[66] Interview Material.

[67] Previous to the current era, even composers who placed a strong emphasis on visual and theatrical effects, such as Richard Wagner, ultimately privileged the ability to sing roles. His grandson Wieland Wagner, who was a stage director, still had extensive musical knowledge and made singing a priority.

[68] See above. Some argue that singers are required to do things–move continuously, contort their bodies, concentrate on facial expression, and, more importantly, act in ways quite at odds with the score in the interest of a Brechtian interpretation of the libretto against its apparent meaning, etc.–that are difficult to combine with optimal vocal production. This may be true, though it does not particularly explain why *spinto* and dramatic singing should uniquely be in decline.

[69] Late 19th century operas also require more demanding theatrical and spacious theatrical effects.

[70] Interview Material. For one of many examples, Marilyn Horne with Jane Scovell, *Marilyn Horne: The Song Continues*, Baskerville: Ft. Worth Publishers, 2004, pp. 227-9

[71] Interview Material. The Knoxville (Tennessee) Opera recently advertised auditions restricted as follows: "Knoxville Opera will cast age appropriate, attractive artists in these roles." In the firestorm of debate that followed, defenders argued that the Knoxville Opera was unfairly singled out for making explicit something all opera companies now do. To be sure, this was for an educational, not main stage, performance. http://www.knoxnews.com/entertainment/music/knoxville-opera-notice-spurs-national-online-debate-over-casting-ep-1399489562-361264371.html.

[72] Interview Material.

[73] Deborah Voigt observes: "There is no way the Metropolitan Opera would have made me Brünnhilde as they did years later had I still been obese–it just wouldn't have happened." See: *Call Me Debbie: True Confessions of a Down-to-Earth Diva* (New York: Harper, 2015), p. 197.

[74] Anastasia Tsioulcas, "In 2014, the Classical World Still Can't Stop Fat-Shaming Women," *Deceptive Cadence - NPR Classical* (20 May 2014), Available at: http://www.npr.org/sections/deceptivecadence/2014/05/20/314007632/in-2014-the-classical-world-still-cant-stop-fat-shaming-women. Also, Voigt, *Call Me Debbie*, p. 189.

[75] Richard Meryman,"A Tale of Two Great Throats", in: *Life* (1970): 65. Also, Harold Schonberg, "Of Wagnerian Sopranos," in: *Facing the Music*, New York: Summit Books, 1981, pp. 276-283, who argues, ""It is a truism of the opera house that a big voice is to be found in a big body, and the bigger the voice the bigger the body." (p. 276). Marilyn Horne recalls an inadvertent experiment she once conducted. She lost 30 pounds at one point to sing a more visually appropriate Carmen and felt she had thereby reduced the size of her voice by 50%. She gained the weight back and her customary voice returned.

[76] Interview Material.

[77] For her side of the story, which primarily blames herself, see Voigt, *Call Me Debbie*, Chapter 14.

[78] Even Voigt admits this was true for a period of time. See Voigt, *Call Me Debbie*, pp. 192-195.

[79] For a subtly persuasive case for the role of Callas's weight, see Michael Scott, *Maria Meneghini Callas*, Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992.

[80] A few contests self-consciously cut against the grain, such as Seattle Opera's International Wagner Competition.

[81] Interview Material.

[82] Interview Material.

[83] One sometimes hears that opera before 1970s was a world of singers who cared only about voices ("prima la voce") and not at all about appearance. This is clearly exaggerated.

[84] Beniamino Gigli, *The Memoirs of Beniamino Gigli*, translated by Darina Silone, London: Cassell and Co, 1957, p. 130. As long as Gigli remained in America, he kept the man, H. J. Reilly, on his payroll. Also Luigi Inzaghi, *Beniamino Gigli*, Varese: Zecchini Editore, 2005, pp. 143-144.

[85] Bruce Burroughs, "Zinka Takes Off," in: *Opera* News 69:5, November

2004. Available at: http://www.operanews.com/Opera_News_Magazine/2004/11/Features/Zinka_Takes_Off.html.

[86] Harold Schonberg, "Renata Tebaldi: A Prima Donna who Does Not Act like One (15 November 1957)", in: *Facing the Music*, New York, Summit Books, 1981, pp. 266-267.

[87] If we return, for example, to the leading Verdi tenors who sang Radamès and performed at the MET mentioned at the start of this essay, Italian comprise four of nine in 1968 and four of seven (five, if one counts Alagna) in recent years.

[88] Pierre V.R. Key (with Bruno Zirato), *Enrico Caruso: A Biography*, Boston: Little, Brown, 1922, p. 30.

[89] Key, *Enrico Caruso*, 38-40, Chapter 4.

[90] On religious trends, using multiple sources and modern methods, see Cristiano Vezzoni and Ferruccio Biolcati-Rinaldi, "Church Attendance and Religious Change in Italy, 1968–2010: A Multilevel Analysis of Pooled Datasets", in: *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (2015) 54(1):100–118, especially on youth, pp. 114-115.

[91] Lucy A. Carroll "Vatican II Didn't Abolish Choirs. So Who Did", in: *Adoremus Bulletin* Vol. IX, No. 2, April 2003. http://www.adoremus.org/0403Choirs.html.

[92] Interview Material. Horne, *Marilyn Horne*, p. 233.

[93] An organization co-founded by mezzo-soprano Dolora Zajick, the Institute for Young Dramatic Voices, seeks to provide younger singers with training and performance opportunities in heavier roles. http://www.instituteforyoungdramaticvoices.org/.