

# NINETEENTH CENTURY'S DONIZETTIAN SINGERS AND THEIR CONTRIBUTION TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE VOCAL TECHNIQUE

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**Abstract:** *The opera has always reflected the historical times it has been going through. Romanticism brought on stage tragic themes, inspired from history, imposing the typology of the Romantic hero. The dramatic scoring, sketched by the profile of the Romantic roles, induced the need for powerful vocal emission and for wide extension of the vocal registers. A revolution in the field of the vocal technique occurred and new resonating modalities were thereby found. The female main characters dominated the Romantic period and the roles of heroines were entrusted to sopranos, the vocal typology with the widest expressive and technical palette. All opera creators' general tendency was to confer real identity upon the protagonists. These exigencies turned into expressive connotations with nuances of heroic exaltation, in an innovating technical-vocal manner.*

**Key words:** *opera, Romanticism, vocal technique, typology.*

## 1. Introduction

The opera, as blending of all arts, has always mirrored the historical times it has been going through; hence, in early nineteenth century, change was identically a prerequisite and singing was adapted to the new requirements.

Until that watershed moment in the art of the opera theatre, composers and singers had been equal partners in show construction; the composer would sketch a simple melodic line, to be subsequently completed with variegated ornaments, by singers.

Therefore, in a short while, the singers transformed the opera show in a mere costumed concert, wherein the characters

would lose their own contours and only the extremely long and intricate cadencies would be highlighted, technically introduced for one's personal fame.

## 2. Change of perspective

In Italy, during the period 1820-1830, the taste for opera show developed, out of the audience's desire to see and listen to tragic themes, inspired from history, in the sense of Romanticism. There had been forbidden, until then, the deeply tragic subjects, concluded with the death of one or several characters; all theatres had employed censors and the libretto had to pass censorship.

Romanticism brought on stage the

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sacrifice, the death for a noble cause, as refusal of the compromise, imposing thereby the typology of the Romantic hero.

These new subjects, with a powerful denouement, rapidly stood out on the lyrical stage, captivating the audience by the possibility to step into the psychology of the main character, which chooses death, as unique option.

Under the influence of the libretto and out of necessity to bring on stage believable characters, the vocal scoring modified, in order to illustrate the heroes' inner torment, and it became intensely dramatic, by renouncing useless cadences and coloraturas and by pre-eminently using the *tessitura*; whereas the acute range was only used for culminating moments, climaxes, or in conclusive moments.

### 2.1. Vocal technique and expressiveness

Vocal-scenic expressiveness was the major perspective aimed by Romantic composers, imposed by the musical drama of the time, as well as by the main characters' new typologies; in Baroque *Bel-canto* opera, the triad of the main typologies was ensured by the castrato, the tenor and the soprano; the Romantic *Bel-canto* opera placed in the forefront, the triad made up of soprano, tenor, baritone, as leaders of the dramatic conflict. Vocal colour became, for the first time in the history of the lyrical theatre, defining in differentiating the vocal *fachs*; therefore, the singers had to choose between the flexible vocal genre, adequate for the ornamented phrases, and the vocal genre based on timbre amplitude.

Vocal technique, in early nineteenth century, had not yet allowed a single voice to possess both flexibility, mobility in executing coloraturas, and amplitude, necessary for the Bellinian or Donizettian-specific phrases. The newly emerged vocal sub-categories, the lyrical genre and the dramatic genre, mainly addressed the

prevailing voices of the Italian lyrical theatre, namely the soprano and the tenor. The dramatic scoring, sketched by the profile of the Romantic roles, led to the need for powerful vocal emission and for wide vocal ranges. Therefore, the robust voices of tenors, sopranos or mezzo-sopranos were a prerequisite, leading to a revolution in the field of vocal technique, likewise explained by new resonating modalities (chest resonance for the tessitura and low register, as well as chest resonance in combination with head resonance for the high register) and by new respiratory modalities, with a view to sustaining the dramatic phrases. Bellini and Donizetti introduced the tenor with high vocal texture and of heroic nature – a typically Romantic genre of scoring, inexistent until then, in the Italian opera. The tenors' vocal texture was much like the one of today's baritones, given that the baritone's typology had not yet been clearly defined in Italy, in early nineteenth century (except Mozart's operas, wherein the baritone's voice acquired a special distinction, by the roles destined to this typology - *Don Giovanni*, the Count and Figaro, in *Le Nozze di Figaro*) whereas the tenor's vocal scoring displays high texture, deprived of heroic character (Don Ottavio, in *Don Giovanni*, Ferrando, in *Così fan tutte*); the differentiation between the two male typologies is clear and it transpires from the texture of the vocal lines and from the character's personality). The combination between chest resonance and head resonance conveys the brilliance and homogeneity of the registers, allowing the direct attack of the high sounds.

### 2.2. Vocal typologies

Vocal technique evolved thereby; timber amplitude and register extension became basic elements for the opera voice. In terms of amplitude, voices are nowadays

divided in subcategories: lyric baritone, dramatic baritone, *leggero* tenor, tenor *di grazia*, lyric tenor, lyric-spinto tenor, dramatic tenor, heroic tenor, lyric mezzo-soprano, dramatic mezzo-soprano, coloratura soprano, lyric-*leggero* soprano, lyric soprano, lyric-spinto soprano, spinto soprano, dramatic soprano, dramatic soprano *d'agilita*. The German theory of the vocal *fach* prescribes, with reference to the soprano typology, the subdivision into the following vocal groups, based on the integration of the coloraturas and ornaments into the dramaturgical musical context and on the technical requirements, which stood out throughout the twentieth century. According to these ones, any vocal typology is endowed with extension and flexibility, which allow the singer to approach a wide repertoire, with a view to fully manifesting one's vocal technical aspect, as well as one's acting, interpretative aspect.

The vocal texture and dramatic aspect of the roles are the two ways to make a distinction and further classification into vocal typologies, with a view to distributing the roles based on the characteristics of each voice.

### 3. Main female characters

The main female characters dominated the Romantic period; the roles of heroines being entrusted to sopranos, which is the vocal typology with the widest expressive and technical palette. The sopranos' voice may express the most variegated feelings, technically highlighted by cantilenas that require homogeneity, equality of the air column; likewise, sustained in varied dynamics. The themes of the Donizettian operas call for special soprano voices, with exceptional natural endowments and technical possibilities: dramatic soprano *d'agilita* (essential vocal typology in the creation of Vincenzo Bellini, Gaetano

Donizetti, Giuseppe Verdi, characteristic for the Romantic period, along with the spinto-dramatic tenor). The voice of the dramatic sopranos *d'agilita* interweaves the qualities of the dramatic soprano with the ones of the lyric-*leggero* soprano: powerful voice, full tessitura and low register, flexibility, softness, easiness in attacking high sounds, *agilita di forza*.

Since late nineteenth century, roles such as Norma or Abigaille (*Nabucco*), extremely strong characters, who impose their authority on a community, have been sung by dramatic sopranos; whereas roles such as Amina (*La Sonnambula*) or Gilda (*Rigoletto*), characters who embody young, simple women, who turn into innocent victims of their own personality, have been sung by lyric-*leggero* sopranos. In the times of Bellini, Donizetti or Verdi, these roles were sung by dramatic sopranos *d'agilita*. The vocal scoring for sopranos intensified, covering the whole ambitus.

#### 3.1. Vocal-interpretative approach in contemporaneity

The ambiguity in terms of vocal-interpretative approach to female Romantic *Bel-canto* roles, in contemporaneity, starts from the absence of the nineteenth century's total voices, despite the intense development of the vocal-technical phenomenon, during the last decades. The vocal scoring for wide register, towards both extremes of the vocal ambitus, allows mezzo-sopranos with stable, firm emission in the high register, as well as sopranos with powerful tessitura and low register, of a strong timber, to assume Romantic roles.

The exceptional natural endowments and technical skills of the current female voices denote a wide expressive palette, an intensely cultivated timbrality in the *Bel-canto* spirit, without deeming the closeness to certain Romantic roles, an error, in the choice of the repertoire (Giacchino

Rossini – *Othello* – Desdemona – soprano or mezzo-soprano, Gioacchino Rossini – *La Donna del Lago* – Elena – soprano or mezzo-soprano, Gaetano Donizetti – *Maria Stuarda* – Elisabetta – soprano or mezzo-soprano).

Nevertheless, most female Romantic roles evince clear register and vocal texture addressed to the sopranos' typology, especially in the creation of Donizetti (*Lucia di Lammermoor*, *Lucrezia – Lucrezia Borgia*) and Bellini (*Norma*, *Elvira – I Puritani*).

The baritone voice is defined as dramaturgical necessity, useful in portraying male negative characters (a similar case are the low female voices), who intervene in the love story between soprano and tenor (*Enrico – Lucia di Lammermoor*), forming the triangle of the intrigue underlying Romantic melodramas (the typology of the baritone voice is accomplished in Verdi's creation: *Iago – Othello*, *Giorgio Germont – La Traviata*, *Il Conte di Luna – Il Trovatore*).

“A romantic specificity is the manner of assigning the characters, depending on the vocal typology, in line with the convention emerged in the Italian lyrical theatre, which prescribes that sopranos represent heroic or tender, ailing characters; likewise, that tenors portray warriors, knights, heroic typologies, being permanently in the company of the characters embodied by sopranos, forming a couple of positive characters, as eternal lovers, with moralizing effect on the audience (*Edgardo – Lucia di Lammermoor*, is a distinct hero in the Romantic opera creation), in antithesis with the female and male low voices, which constitute negative elements (in Donizetti's creation, the exception is *Leonora's role – La Favorita*, mezzo-soprano).” [3]

In the context of the nineteenth century, the *fach*-based voice-characterization

system was still rudimentary; yet it grows in significance, once with the composers' vision upon the roles, as regards their vocal portrayal by a certain generalized typology of singers, more than their being pre-eminently destined to a certain singer. The mezzo-soprano voice stands out, after the decline of the castrati, embodying distinct characters, as against sopranos; oftentimes, in full opposition with the femininity expressed by the sopranos' roles. The mezzo-sopranos' personal or social attributions on the opera stage are manifest halfway between feminism and male features; the dramatic character and musical aspect of the great roles destined for mezzo-sopranos evince the masculinity of scenic attitudes. The opposite are the inert roles of maid, nanny or mother.

A great number of Romantic creations develop the idea of staging two main female characters, related to the theatrical convention called *contrast of characters*, doubled by the association of contrasting vocal typologies, such as soprano – mezzo-soprano, according to the model previously imposed by Mozart's operas (*Vincenzo Bellini – Norma*, *Norma – soprano*, *Adalgisa – mezzo-soprano*; *Gaetano Donizetti – Maria Stuarda*, *Maria – lyrical soprano*, *Elisabetta – mezzo-soprano or dramatic soprano*).

#### 4. Main male characters

Until mid-nineteenth century, A was the last sound in the acute register of the tenor's voice, to be issued with mixed resonance; and the emission in *falsetto* was used for the other high sounds. All tenors, during the Romantic period, had a very good *falsetto* technique and achieved a mixture of resonances between registers, *voce mista* (*Andrea Nozzari 1775-1832*, *Manuel Garcia, senior 1775-1832*, *Domenico Donzelli 1790-1873*, *Giovanni Davide 1790-1864*, *Giovanni Rubini 1794-1854*).

By the year 1835, in France, the tenor Gilbert Duprez (1806-1896) discovered the emission of the passage towards the high register, as well as of all sounds making up the high register, with chest resonance, and he became thereby the prototype of the Romantic lyrical tenor.

#### 4.1. Technique of the *vibrato*

In Italy, Giovanni Rubini used, for the first time, the *vibrato* of the sounds; until then, most singers only used the sound vibration in culminating moments, as against the other non-vibrated sounds. The soprano Henriette Meric-Lalande took the technique of the *vibrato* from Rubini and was the first woman to have applied this vocal emission in an opera show. An elegant *vibrato* enhances any type of voice; and in late nineteenth century, its use became normality among all singers.

It represents a technical element particularly valuable, which distinguishes among voices, much like timber does.

High-quality vocal emission is based on an attentively studied *vibrato*, on a good distribution of the sound column and of the air quantity, necessary for the process of phonation.

With reference to the noteworthy sopranos of the time, one can say that Giuditta Pasta (1797-1865) and Maria Malibran are emblems of the Donizettian glory, the only ones who drew close to the composer's vocal and scenic ideal.

#### 5. Wide expressive resonances

All opera creators tended to confer a real identity upon the protagonists and to provide an explanation, in the case of the male roles. These new exigencies turned into expressive connotations, laying the stress on heroic exaltation and youthful impetus, in an innovating vocal-technical manner, by imposing the high tenor-related typology.

Vocal masculinity meant the discovery of the chest resonance, for the high register and for the emission of the extremely high notes – a procedure whereby the voice acquired the vehemence necessary for emphasizing heroism. The two tenorial typologies, to wit the *leggero* tenor and the Romantic *Bel-canto* tenor (bari-tenore), shine in the forefront, along with the sopranos, amid the generalized lack of interest in the average voices, regarded as inadequate for the heroic characters.

The tenor's voice acquires wide expressive resonances in roles such as: Ugo (*Parisina*), Edgardo (*Lucia di Lammermoor*), Gennaro (*Lucrezia Borgia*), Fernando (*La Favorita*), Riccardo di Chalais (*Maria di Rohan*), Enrico (*Maria di Rudenz*) or Nemorino (*L'elisir d'amore*) and Tonio (*La filled du Regiment*) for the comic genre or *semi seria* genre. They are the great protagonists, to whom arias and duets of great vocal difficulty and Romantic pathos are dedicated – a vocal typology in full expansion, conjugating male virility and the delicacy of the *legato*.

The vocal scoring is characterized by the syllabic chant and by an extremely reduced frequency of the ornamentation, which mainly addresses the high register, with a view to substantiating passionate, superb, grandiose personalities.

“The tenors' *Bel-canto* style in Donizetti's creation refers to the distinction of the vocal line, to a steady *legato* and to the spontaneity of the discourse. In opposition with the roles destined for tenors, the heroines' figures are more varied, in vocal and dramaturgic terms; the main female characters' deep interiority transpires from their impossibility and interdiction to manifest them, by explaining these contrasts.”

The great female figures of Donizetti's operas are a collectiveness of frailty, wherein the contradiction of overall

society converge, which seem to be unleashed by the fate bearing the seal of all heroines' death.

Bringing the female voices on the opera stage represented, in an aesthetic light, the woman's assertion, her detachment from the mediocrity whereto she had been condemned; in brief, a moral victory over existence.

The sopranos' voice bears narrative-expressive values; hence, the focus on centralizing female figures, through a genre of show imposed and led by the concept of opera-specific chant.

In strict vocal terms, Romanticism substantiated three fundamental directions in the evolution of the vocal technique: the disappearance of the castrati, the imposition of all vocal typologies with wide scoring and the emphasis on the ethic character of vocality.

## 6. Opera theatres

The vocal-dramatic style introduced by composers and librettists, which was to be accomplished, thereafter, by singers, enabled the enlargement of the space afferent to opera theatres, in terms of both number of seats for the audience and scene for the artists.

Technical changes improve the show quality: the prompter's box is set in the middle of the stage, being opened towards the stage; the orchestra pit is much enlarged, the conductor's position – in front of the orchestra – is finally agreed upon, so that the instrumentalists and soloists might be in permanent visual contact with the leader of the show, and the sound mass could be directed rather towards the audience, than to the stage.

Opera theatres of great capacity (La Scala – Milano, 3600 seats) required, at the same time, a strong orchestral assembly; La Scala, in early nineteenth century, had an orchestra consisting of fifty

instrumentalists, as regards the party of the strings; the wood and brass wind instruments blowers had four persons in their parties. The technical progresses in the musical-instrument construction allowed the composers to introduce, within the orchestral assembly, the English horn, the bass clarinet and the contrabassoon.

## 7. Conclusions

The opera theatre still exerts its fascination over the audience at large and the spectators still pay special attention to all aspects thereof, although the shows seem to be ever more subordinated to television or audio-video recording. The century of communications has seized the sphere of the opera, whose each and every show is rendered public, debated and wholly consecrated to the media phenomenon.

Even under such circumstances, the opera preserves its own invaluable message destined for the audience, which is deciphered through the overwhelming emotions and unique experiences that are conveyed by the musical-scenic artistic act.

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