

## OBSERVATIONS ON THE TECHNIQUE OF ITALIAN SINGING FROM THE 16TH CENTURY TO THE PRESENT DAY

One of the primary requirements for the purpose of realising aesthetically and historically correct interpretations of the music of the past is to identify the music's original sound-medium. But it is not always possible to establish this precisely, above all as regards vocal compositions. For whereas we have available to us a comparatively wide range of period instruments whose particular characteristics can be objectively determined, in the case of song the sound produced cannot be separated from the actual performer. The human voice is extremely malleable, and varies in accordance with the anatomy, taste and technical equipment of the singer. There are also the effects of a multiplicity of cultural, social, anthropological and other factors which tend to change over time.

This kind of variability can be experienced in listening to the earliest gramophone recordings: the voices of famous singers from the beginning of this century are generally thought not to correspond to the tastes of today. But if there is a large difference to be found after barely a hundred years, one is bound to ask oneself what sort of a surprise one would have in listening to music sung in a yet more remote past.

Discordant positions have been taken in the debate among musicians and scholars concerning an historically appropriate style of vocal performance. Within the cultural ambit of Northern Europe, respected opinions on the topic call for a vocal production in which vibrato is slight, if not indeed entirely absent. This practice does facilitate extremely clean intonation; but while it reflects the musical customs of more northerly peoples, it is strikingly removed from the usual pattern in traditional Italian singing.

Philological disputes on this matter are still unresolved: however, a reasonably definite way forward is indicated by the writings of the period. A variety of works from the late 16th and early 17th centuries discuss, albeit briefly, the art of singing. In his *Prattica di Musica*<sup>1</sup>, one of the earliest texts in which we find extensive remarks on the subject, Ludovico Zacconi asserts:

Il tremolo nella musica non è necessario; ma facendolo oltra che dimostra sincerità, e ardire; abbellisce le cantilene [...] dico ancora, che il tremolo, cioè la voce tremante è la vera porta d'intrar dentro a passaggi, e d'impatronirsi delle gorge [...] Questo tremolo deve essere

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<sup>1</sup> LUDOVICO ZACCONI, *Prattica di Musica*, Venice, Bartolomeo Carampello, 1596; anastatic reprint, Bologna, Forni, 1983.

succinto, e vago; perché l'ingordo e forzato tedia, e fastidisce: Ed è di natura tale che usandolo, sempre usar si deve [sic]; accioché l'uso si converti in habito; perché quel continuo muover di voce aiuta, e volentieri spinge la mossa delle gorge, e facilita mirabilmente i principij de passaggi [...]

(The tremolo is not necessary in music; but to perform it, besides demonstrating sincerity and boldness, embellishes the cantilenas<sup>2</sup> [...] I say further that the tremolo, that is, the trembling voice, is the true way of access to passaggios<sup>3</sup> and to the command of gorgias. This tremolo should be succinct, and graceful; because the excessive and forced is tedious, and annoys: And its nature is such that if one uses it, one must use it always [sic]; in order that the use be converted into habit; because that continual movement of the voice is helpful, and readily assists the production of trills, and facilitates wonderfully the bases of passaggios [...]<sup>4</sup>)

In the light of the instructions cited, it may legitimately be supposed that Zacconi's 'tremolo' is neither a device of emphasis, to be used for expressive effect, nor indeed an ornament, like the trill or the mordent<sup>5</sup>; rather, it presents itself as a constant attribute of the voice. The essential traits in terms of which Zacconi describes the 'tremolo' coincide almost entirely with those which characterise the vibrato of today. It is important, however, to distinguish the natural vibrato from the vocal effect which results in oscillations so wide (owing, usually, to efforts to increase the volume of the voice) as to impair intonation and sound-quality. Further confusion is caused by various artificial practices, such as the use of the diaphragm to 'move' the sound intentionally by means of small impulses, as in the technique employed by some players of wind instruments, or such as the more or less rapid contraction of the muscles of the larynx, a habit fairly widespread among singers of popular and pop music. These expedients do not add to the beauty of the voice or provide emphasis in the singing; one might conjecture that Zacconi is referring to something analogous when he speaks of the 'excessive and forced' tremolo which 'is tedious, and annoys'.

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<sup>2</sup> *Ib.*, Bk.I, folio 55, Ch.LXII.

<sup>3</sup> Diminutions and improvised passages of agility. Since the art of 'passeggiare' (executing passaggios) constituted one of the essential elements in the training of singers from the 16th to the 19th century, the reader interested in this fundamentally important aspect of the performance of arias in this period will find it useful to consult the works cited in the present article, as well as in the general bibliography under 'riproduzioni in fac simile'.

<sup>4</sup> *Ib.*, Bk. I, f. 60, Ch. LXVI.

<sup>5</sup> This is the view maintained by Thurston Dart in *The Interpretation of Music*, London, Hutchinson University Library, 1954, p. 50 of the 1967 edition, where he claims that the vocal vibrato is an effect like the trill or the mordent, and is to be employed as such; in the performance of ancient music therefore, according to the English musicologist, voices with vibrato would be entirely inappropriate in polyphony and solo singing alike.

It is a reasonable supposition that even the singers of the past practised a form of breath-control<sup>6</sup>: «L'ottava [regola è; n.d.r.] che spinga appoco appoco con la voce il fiato [...]» («The eighth [rule is (Ed.)] that one push the breath little by little with the voice [...]»<sup>7</sup>). Maffei's words appear to describe a technique of production similar to the one used in modern singing, in which the apportionment of breath produces in the voice an involuntary vibration. In the baroque period, too, the vibrato probably formed part of the singer's technical equipment, independently of any expressive purposes. One could say that - contrary to the opinion that has become established even among musicians - the fixing of the voice is a distinctly unnatural and mechanical effect, resulting from the stiffening of the muscles of the larynx and the uncontrolled expulsion of the breath. It is possible in singing to suspend from time to time the vibration of the sound, whether voluntarily or otherwise, but it has to be said that in the case of most singers who lack the requisite awareness the voice remains fixed at all times, resulting as it does from a faulty production.

In spite of the vocal models that have been transmitted by the media in recent decades, there still exist today people who, though they have never engaged in specialised study nor listened to trained voices, sing in an open manner that displays a soft and fresh vibrato. It is difficult to believe that an hypothetical listener of the past should regard a voice having these same characteristics as defective and unsuited to artistic ends, as is still maintained by some scholars.

Recordings made by the singers of the beginning of this century disclose some 'specimens' appreciably divergent from the vocal standard of today's musical culture. One recognises the above-mentioned 'firm' or even vibrato-less sounds, but these are disposed in occasional episodes, as dictated by the circumstances of

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<sup>6</sup> Some remarks on the use of the breath in singing can also be found in: PIER FRANCESCO TOSI, *Opinioni de' Cantori Antichi e Moderni*, Bologna, Lelio dalla Volpe, 1723 - Repr. con note ed esempi di Luigi Leonesi, Naples, Di Gennaro & Morano, 1904; anast. repr. Bologna, Forni, 1985. On p. 65 one reads: «Il Maestro può correggerne lo Scolaro con quegli insegnamenti da cui si impara di far un buon uso del respiro, di provvedersene sempre più del bisogno, e di sfuggir gl'impegni se 'l petto non resiste. In ogni composizione gli faccia poi conoscere il sito di respirare, e di respirar senza fatica, poiché ci sono de' cantanti, che con affanno di chi sente penano come gli asmatici ripigliando stentatamente fiato ad ogni momento, o arrivando all'ultime note sfiatati morti.» («The maestro may correct the pupil by means of those instructions through which one learns to use the breath well, to provide oneself always with more than is needed, and to avoid demands with which the chest cannot cope. He should also enable him to recognise in any composition the points at which to draw breath without becoming tired, for there are singers who, to the distress of their audience, struggle like asthmatics, and laboriously catch their breath from one moment to the next or reach the last notes expiring from breathlessness»). Compare also the paragraph 'diminutions' in the authors' 'Notes on the Criteria of Realisation'.

<sup>7</sup> GIOVANNI CAMILLO MAFFEI, *Delle lettere del Signor G. C. M. da Solofra libri due: dove tra gli altri bellissimi pensieri di Filosofia e di Medicina v'è un discorso della voce e del modo d'apparar di garganta senza maestro*, Naples, 1562; in *Revue de Musicologie*, no. 38 (1956), p. 20.

actual performance. If the voice is without vibrato for reasons connected with expressive needs or the pronunciation of the text (one might listen for instance to the *Lamentationes Jeremiae* as declaimed/sung by Alessandro Moreschi<sup>8</sup>, or to the other recordings of the same singer), the sound nonetheless remains soft, and the notes without vibrato are never fixed. Such vocalisation differs from what is usual in operatic singing in our own day, but it is also far distant from the hard voices presented by many northern European performers.

In the 16th century, almost all the music produced took the form of vocal polyphony. Performance ‘a cappella’ normally took no account of the notes’ absolute pitch; the only advice was «avere riguardo a quelli che hanno da cantare, che stiano commodi di tuono, né troppo alto, né troppo basso» («to have regard for those who are to sing, that they be at ease with the pitch, neither too high, nor too low»<sup>9</sup>). With the passing of the centuries, these suggestions were to remain valid; see for example *Scola di Canto Fermo*<sup>10</sup> of 1715, or the preface by Raffaello Casimiri to the ‘opera omnia’ of Palestrina, as cited in note 15 below. The classical typology of roles in polyphony assigned the ‘bassus’ part to a bass voice, the ‘tenor’ to a mid-range male voice, the ‘altus’ to a high tenor exploiting the resonance of the head voice in a very high tessitura, and finally the ‘cantus’ to a ‘puer’ or a falsettist. Polyphonic compositions are often to be encountered which seem to lie very high in relation to such a disposition of voices. But the melodic ranges in these cases are not to be taken to correspond to the actual pitches in performance; the fact is that where the so-called ‘chiavette’ or ‘chiavi trasportate’ (‘transposed clefs’) were present, the vocal performance<sup>11</sup> was customarily a fourth or a fifth lower<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Alessandro Moreschi (1858-1922), ‘castrato’ soprano of the Sistine Chapel who earned the sobriquet ‘angel of Rome’, recorded in 1902-3 some ten G&T discs. These recordings were put together on the CD *The last castrato*, which sold quite widely in the USA. The ‘Crucifixus’ of Rossini’s *Petite Messe Solennelle* (originally G&T 54764 or 54733) has recently featured in the EMI Classics compilation *L’epoca dei Castrati*.

<sup>9</sup> L. ZACCONI, *op. cit.*, Bk. I, f. 78, Ch. LXIX.

<sup>10</sup> FABIO SEBASTIANO SANTORO, *Scola di Canto Fermo*, Naples, 1715, Novello de Bonis ed. p. 255.

<sup>11</sup> As may readily be supposed, the transposition to a fourth or a fifth below could be waived in the case of exclusively instrumental performances. See e. g. the *Cartella Musicale* of Adriano Banchieri, Venice, Giacomo Vincenti, 1614 (transcribed into modern notation by A. Bornstein, Bologna, Ut Orpheus Edizioni, 1994), where for example among the *Duos* we read: «Duo del Quinto Modo autentico, non corrisponde al tuono. Questo Quinto Modo corista et trasportato è comodo per strumenti acuti, ma riesce incomodo per le voci [...] Per strumenti acuti. Trasportato una quarta sotto [è adatto; n.d.r.] per voci umane» («Duo of the Fifth Mode proper, does not correspond to the pitch. This transposed chorist’s Fifth Mode is convenient for high instruments, but proves inconvenient for voices [...] For high instruments. Transposed a fourth lower [it is suitable (Ed.)] for human voices»).

<sup>12</sup> As regards the ‘chiavette’ and their relation to mode of the pieces, cf. the article by H. F. ANDREWS, *Transposition of Byrd’s Vocal Polyphony* in *Music & Letters*, vol. 43, 1962, pp. 25-37; or ARTHUR MENDEL, *Pitch in the 16th and early 17th Centuries*, Part I (pp. 28-45), Part II (pp. 199-221), Part III (pp. 336-357), Part IV (pp.

The singers did not always confine themselves strictly to the vocal roles assigned to them:

Or dico dunque, che queste voci nascono dalla propria materia della canna; et intendo per la canna tutte le parti sopradette, che concorrono a far la voce, si che, se quella sarà molle, farà la voce flessibile, pieghevole, e variabile. Ma se per sorte sarà dura, farà la voce riggida, e dura. Percioche essendo duro l'istromento, non puo (come bisognaria) piegarsi; si come essendo molle, agevolmente piegandosi, puo formare, e fingere ogni sorte di voce. E di qui nasce, che molti sono i quali non ponno altra voce ch'il basso cantare. E molti anchora se ne veggono che non sono, se non ad una delle voci del conserto inchinati, e quella con grandissimo fastidio dell'orecchia, appena cantano. E per il contrario, poi se ne trovano alcuni, ch'il basso, il tenore, et ogni altra voce, con molta facilità cantano; e fiorendo, e diminuendo con la gorga, fanno passaggi, hora nel basso, hora nel mezzo, et ora nell'alto, ad intendere bellissimi.

(I say, then, that these sounds originate from the actual material of the windpipe, that is, of all the parts mentioned above which together produce the voice, in such a way that if that is soft, it will produce a voice that is flexible, pliable and variable. But if it happens to be hard, it will produce a rigid and hard voice. For if the instrument is hard, it cannot bend itself as required; just as, if it is soft, and bends itself readily, it can form and shape every sort of voice. This is why there are many who are unable to sing any voice but the bass. And there are many others who turn out unsuited to any of the voices of the consort save one, and that with a very great irritation of the ear as soon as they sing. There are also some to be found who, by contrast, sing the bass, the tenor, and every other voice with great ease; and making ornaments and diminutions with the throat, they execute passaggios now low down, now in the middle, now high, that are most beautiful to hear.<sup>13</sup>)

In secular music the higher part could be sung by women too<sup>14</sup>, but towards the end of the 16th century there appeared on the Italian musical scene the 'castrato' singers of the 'third sex', to whom were entrusted the roles of soprano

575-593) in *The Musical Quarterly*, vol. XXXIV, 1948. Cf. also the *Cartella Musicale* of A. BANCHIERI (see preceding note). There also existed, on the other hand, 'chiavette' that indicated transposition to a fourth or a fifth above, used in Italy by, above all, Giovanni Gabrieli. A recent contribution to the analysis of this vexed question has been made by PATRIZIO BARBIERI in the essay 'Chiavette' and Modal Transposition in Italian Practice (c. 1500-1837), in *Recercare*, vol. III, 1991, pp. 5-79. However, the absence in this period of a universally adopted 'diapason' makes it impossible to specify pitches objectively, whether in instrumentally accompanied performance or, still more, in performance 'a cappella'.

<sup>13</sup> G. C. MAFFEI, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-18.

<sup>14</sup> There exist rare cases of sacred music being sung in church by women. A single example may suffice: Ignazio Donati declares in the «Avvertimenti spettanti alla presente opera» («Suggestions concerning the present work») on his *Salmi*: «Et volendo servirsene le Monache potranno cantare il Basso all'Ottava alta, che riuscirà un Contralto.» («And if it is so desired, nuns may sing the bass part at the octave above, which will then be a contralto.») (IGNAZIO DONATI, *Salmi boscarecci concertati a 6 voci*, Venice, Alessandro Vincenti, 1623). All the same, the practice of liturgical singing was always strictly intended for men. See following note.

and contralto<sup>15</sup>. The majority of the arias composed in the 17th and 18th centuries - and many of those contained in the present collection - were intended for these singers. An examination of the vocal characteristics of these legendary performers will undoubtedly prove to be of value in determining a correct line of interpretation.

'Castrato' singers could take the place of children and falsettists with excellent results. The 'puer' in particular represented a poor investment, in that the breaking of the voice at puberty cut off irreversibly the career of soprano that had been initiated only a few years previously.

The castrati, as Rodolfo Celletti<sup>16</sup> has written, plied their art with total dedication, «giacché l'altro punto di forza dei castrati fu che l'orchiotomia, precludendo certi rapporti, certi obiettivi dell'uomo normale - uno per tutti: la famiglia - fatalmente li destinava ad assumere, nel mondo dell'opera, una funzione che potremmo quasi definire sacerdotale. Di qui studi ed esercitazioni di particolare rigore che assorbivano praticamente tutta la giornata del neofita» («given that the other strong point of the castrati was that orchiotomy, by precluding certain relations, certain goals of the normal man - the family, for one thing - made it his settled destiny to assume, in the world of opera, a function that one could almost describe as priestly. Hence the especially rigorous studies and

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<sup>15</sup> It could also happen that emasculated singers took parts in chapel choirs that were in a different vocal register from those which they took in operas. Giovanni Francesco Grossi, known as 'Siface', played contralto roles on stage, but, as emerges from the exhaustive enquiries of Enrico Celani, he was admitted at the Sistine Chapel on 10 April 1675 as a soprano (Cf. ENRICO CELANI, *I Cantori della Cappella Pontificia nei secoli XVI-XVIII*, in RMI, 1907, vol. XIV, p. 87 and RMI, 1909, vol. XVI, p. 65). The contraltos of the same papal choir were usually high tenors, and in every sense men; this view is supported by, among other things, the voluntary dismissal presented by the contralto Lorenzo Sanci. It emerges, in fact, from the daybook of the Chapel «che [il 10 dicembre 1626] il Signore Iddio lo chiamava ad altro stato essendosi risoluto di pigliar moglie» («that [on 10 December 1626] the Lord God called him to another condition, as he had decided to take a wife») (*Ib.*, RMI, 1907, vol. XIV, pp. 775-776). The performance of liturgical music was reminiscent still of the Renaissance practice which had it that the 'altus' be sung by high tenors - a tradition which survived in the chapels of Rome until this century. See also the preface by Raffaele Casimiri to *Le Opere complete di Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina* in the 1590 reprint, volume III and others edited by Casimiri, Rome, Fratelli Scalera, 1939, in which may be read: «Soltanto la parte o voce del 'cantus' era affidata - e sarà quindi da affidare - ai 'putti cantori' o fanciulli, sia pur sorretti da qualche voce-guida di falsetto. La parte o voce dell'altus dovrà essere sostenuta - come anticamente - da giovani tenori acuti. Di conseguenza [...] è necessario 'intonare' le composizioni in modo che la parte o voce dell'altus non superi mai nella regione acuta la nota 'la' del nostro attuale corista (la - 870)» («Only the part or voice of 'cantus' was entrusted - and therefore is to be entrusted - to the 'singing putti' or boys, supported as the case might be by some falsetto voice as guide. The part or voice of altus ought to be taken - as in ancient times - by young high tenors. In consequence [...] it is necessary to pitch the compositions in such a way that the part or voice of altus never goes higher than the A of the modern chorister (A - 870)»).

<sup>16</sup> RODOLFO CELLETTI, *La vocalità al tempo del Tosi*, in *Nuova Rivista Musicale Italiana*, year IV, 1967, pp. 676-684.

exercises which took up virtually the whole of the neophyte's day»). Bontempi, in *Historia Musica*<sup>17</sup>, writes:

Le scuole di Roma obbligavano i discepoli ad impiegare ogni giorno un'ora nel cantar cose difficili e malagevoli per l'acquisto dell'esperienza. Un'altra nell'esercizio del trillo. Un'altra in quello de' passaggi. Un'altra negli studi delle lettere ed un'altra agli ammaestramenti ed esercizi del canto, e sotto l'udito del Maestro ed avanti ad uno specchio per assuefarsi a non far moto alcuno inconveniente né di vita né di fronte né di ciglia né di bocca. E tutti questi erano gli impieghi della mattina. Dopo il mezzodì si impiegava mezz'ora nel contrappunto sopra il canto fermo, un'ora nel ricevere e mettere in opera i documenti del contrappunto sopra la cartella; un'altra negli studi delle lettere; ed il rimanente del giorno nell'esercitarsi nel suono del clavicembalo, nella composizione di qualche salmo o mottetto, o canzonetta, o altra sorta di cantilena secondo il proprio genio. E questi erano gli esercizi ordinari di quel giorno nel quale i discepoli non uscivano di casa. Gli esercizi poi fuori di casa erano l'andar spesse volte a cantar, e sentire risposta da un'eco fuori della Porta Angelica verso Monte Mario, per farsi giudicare da se stesso de' propri accenti: l'andar a cantare quasi in tutte le musiche, che si facevano nelle chiese di Roma: e l'osservare le maniere del canto di tanti cantori insigni, che fiorivano nel pontificato di Urbano VIII, l'esercitarsi sopra quelle; e renderne le ragioni al Maestro, quando si ritornava a casa, il quale poi per maggiormente imprimerle sulla mente dei discepoli, vi faceva sopra i necessari discorsi e ne dava gli opportuni avvertimenti.

(The schools of Rome obliged their pupils to devote an hour of each day to singing difficult and awkward pieces for the sake of acquiring experience. Another hour to practising the trill<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> GIOVANNI ANDREA ANGELINI BONTEMPI, *Historia Musica*, Perugia, Costantini, 1695, p. 170.

<sup>18</sup> The significance accorded to this term by the various authors merits separate discussion. Leaving aside the Caccinian trill «sopra una corda sola» («on a single note»), which is to be understood as being a repeated note (cf. GIULIO CACCINI, *Le Nuove Musiche*, Florence, I Marescotti, 1601; also in anastatic reprint in the series *Archivum Musicum. La Cantata Barocca*, no. 13 - Florence, S. P. E. S., 1983), it is worth noting that a number of treatises make reference to the formation of the trill («gropo» according to Caccini's terminology). At the beginning of the 18th century, Tosi asserts that «Chi ne è privo non sarà mai un gran Cantante» («Whoever is without it will never be a great singer») (P. F. TOSI, *op. cit.* note 6, p. 54), and that this embellishment should be «eguale, battuto, granito, facile e moderatamente veloce, che sono le qualità sue più belle» («even, crisp, articulated, easy and moderately swift, which are the most beautiful of its qualities»). On p. 167 of his *Riflessioni*, Mancini cites in full from Tosi this same characterisation of the trill (GIAMBATTISTA MANCINI, *Riflessioni Pratiche sul canto figurato..., Rivedute, corrette, et aumentate*. III ed., Milan, Giuseppe Galeazzi, 1777). On the subject of the virtuoso use of this ornament, he goes on to relate that the musician Baldassare Ferri was «cantante unico e prodigioso [...] Egli in un sol fiato saliva e discendeva due piene ottave, continuamente trillando, e marcando tutti i gradi, oggigiorno detti cromatici, con tanta aggiustatezza, anche senza accompagnamento, che se all'improvviso l'orchestra toccava quella nota in cui egli si trovava, fosse B-molle o fosse Diesis, si sentiva nel medesimo istante un accordo così perfetto da sorprendere ognuno» («a unique and prodigious singer [...] With a single breath he would ascend and descend two full octaves, trilling continuously, and marking all the degrees nowadays called chromatic with such exactitude, even without accompaniment, that if the orchestra were suddenly to play the note which he had reached, be it a flat or be it a sharp, there would be instantaneously heard a unison so perfect as to surprise everyone») (GIAMBATTISTA MANCINI, *Ib.*, p. 16). Carrying the enquiry forward into later periods, one may reasonably ask oneself what the performance of trills might have been like in the 19th century. In one of the first editions of Donizetti's opera *Caterina Cornaro* (Milan, Ed. Ricordi G 17132 T, p. 56), in Caterina's romanza, next to a long trill on the note A,

Another to practising passaggi. Another to literary study and another to training and exercises in song, in the hearing of the Maestro and in front of a mirror so as to develop the habit of making no unsuitable movement, whether of waist or brow or eyelashes or mouth. And all these were the activities for the morning. After midday, half an hour would be devoted to theoretical instruction, another half-hour to counterpoint over a cantus firmus, one hour to receiving the parts for the counterpoint and putting them up on the 'cartella' [a small enamelled board on which the musical exercises were written and then erased (Ed.)]; another hour to literary study; and the remainder of the day to practice in playing the clavicembalo, and to the composition of a psalm or a motet, or a canzonetta or other type of cantilena, depending on the inclination of the individual. These were the regular exercises of the days when the pupils stayed in their school. And when they went out, the exercises included going frequently to sing and listen to the resulting echo at a place outside the Porta Angelica, towards Monte Mario, so as to evaluate for themselves their own singing; going to sing in virtually all of the musical events held in the churches of Rome; and to observe the manners of singing of many distinguished singers who flourished during the pontificate of Urban VIII, to do exercises based on these, and to give account of all this, on their return, to the Maestro, who would then add the necessary commentary and give suitable pieces of advice, so as to increase the impression made on the minds of the pupils.)

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one finds a simplified 'ossia' as an alternative, with the marginal note «non potendo fare il trillo» («if incapable of the trill»). The difficulty of this vocal effect is further indicated by a case mentioned by Alberto Mazzucato in his translation of the *Trattato completo dell'arte del Canto* of García: «E ne sia esempio la signora Pasta. La voce di questa celebre cantante era dura e velata. Malgrado il più ostinato studio, una difficoltà naturale le aveva sempre impedito l'esecuzione del trillo, come pure delle volate ascendenti in tempo mosso; ogni sua esecuzione consisteva in scale discendenti e passi di salto. Le scale ascendenti restarono per lei d'una invincibile difficoltà; così però non fu del trillo, del quale giunse finalmente a possedere il meccanismo. Ed infatti il 15 novembre 1830 nel teatro Italiano di Parigi, dopo dieci anni di brillante carriera, fece udire nella cavatina del *Tancredi* il più magnifico trillo a gradazioni che immaginar si potesse. Ella lo eseguiva nel punto coronato che precede la ripresa del motivo 'Sarò felice'» («Let signora Pasta be an example of this. The voice of this famous singer was hard and veiled. In spite of the most persistent study, a natural impediment had always kept her from performing the trill, and likewise ascending roulades in tempo mosso; every performance of hers contained only descending scales and leaps. Ascending scales remained for her an unconquerable difficulty; but it was not the same with the trill, whose mechanism she finally did acquire. In fact, on 15 November 1830 in the Italian theatre in Paris, after ten years of a brilliant career, she brought forth in the cavatina of *Tancredi* a trill with gradations so magnificent as to defy imagination. She produced it at the pause just before the reprise of the motif 'Sarò felice'») (MANUEL PATRICIO RODRIGUEZ GARCÍA, Milan, Ed. Ricordi 2185, 1841, Part I, ed. by Alberto Mazzucato, p. 54). Quite unlike the articulated and «moderately swift» trill described by Tosi and Mancini, García's trill «n'est qu'une oscillation régulière de bas en haut, et vice versa, que reçoit le larynx. Cette oscillation convulsive prend naissance dans le pharynx par une oscillation toute pareille des muscles de cet organe» («is nothing but a regular oscillation of the larynx, from lower to higher and vice versa. This convulsive oscillation has its source in the pharynx, thanks to an entirely similar oscillation of the muscles of that organ»). This ornament «ne résulte pas de deux notes frappées l'une après l'autre et accélérées jusqu'à la plus grande vitesse [...] Ce passage ne sera jamais qu'un trait d'agilité qui peut précéder ou suivre le trille; c'est une variété du trille que l'on nomme 'trillo molle' [...]» («does not result from two notes articulated one after the other and accelerated up to the greatest speed [...] This can never be anything but a mark of agility which may precede or follow the trill; it is only a variation on the trill, called 'trillo molle' [...]») - M. P. R. GARCÍA, *Traité complet de l'Art du Chant*, Paris, Heugel and Co., 1840 - reprint VII, 1878, p. 42).



The use of castrati in the liturgy - a delicate issue which the church handled with discretion - was formally in accordance with the ecclesiastical norm which had did that the rank of 'lettore', to which the singers belonged, was to be filled by men. Having taken minor orders, the singer enjoyed clerical status and participated actively in the rites of the liturgy, like the priests or the deacons; it was thus indispensable that the singer be of the male sex, at least nominally.

The growing success achieved by these artists produced in composers a fascination with the new possibilities of virtuosity and expressiveness, and intrigued the public, whose morbid curiosity it also aroused.

One of the most celebrated exponents of the art of the 'castrato' singer was Pier Francesco Tosi, a famous soprano, teacher and author of *Opinioni de' Cantori Antichi e Moderni*<sup>19</sup>, the first systematic exposition of the singer's technique. Published in 1723, the *Opinioni* constitute an exceptionally valuable source regarding the teaching practices of the second half of the 17th century; Tosi was born, in fact, in 1653, and was seventy when he published his guide. The voice-production described by him differs from modern practice above all in respect of the combined use of chest and head registers and the pronunciation of vowels<sup>20</sup>.

Un diligente Istruttore sapendo, che un soprano senza falsetto bisogna che canti fra l'angustia di poche corde non solamente procura di acquistarglielo, ma non lascia modo intentato acciò lo unisca alla voce di petto in forma che non si distingua l'uno dall'altra, che se l'unione non è perfetta, la voce sarà di più registri e conseguentemente perderà la sua bellezza [...] Se tutti quegli che insegnano i principii sapessero prevalersi di questa regola, e far unire il falsetto alla voce di petto de' loro Allievi, non vi sarebbe in oggi tanta scarsezza di soprani. [...] quanto più le note son' alte, tanto più bisogna toccarle con dolcezza, per evitare gli strilli [...] Nelle

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<sup>19</sup> See note 6 above.

<sup>20</sup> P. F. TOSI, *op. cit.*, p. 44. To quote an interesting note by L. Leonesi: «Leggendo questo lavoro viene sovente e spontanea alla mente che la principale regola del canto è l'unione dei registri. Ma non è dato trovare né nel Tosi, né in alcuna tradizione antica, tanto meno nei dizionari tecnico-musicali la frase oggi così in uso che la difficoltà del canto consista nell' 'impostare' la voce [...] in verità questa frase non la si trova neppure nei metodi di Fétis, del García, di Delle Sedie, Lablache, ecc. [...] Altrettanto dicasi delle frasi 'voce aperta' e 'voce chiusa' anche esse ignorate nei dizionari tecnici e nelle tradizioni classiche. Si parla di vocali aperte o chiuse, ma per l'esigenza della parola, mai per indicare un dato sistema di canto. Sono convinto che queste due qualità di voci siano avvenute da un falso sistema di canto.» («As one reads this work, it often and spontaneously comes to mind that the chief rule of singing is the uniting of the registers. But one will not find either in Tosi or in any ancient tradition, and still less in dictionaries of musical technique, the phrase today so much in use which has it that the difficulty in singing is to achieve a 'placing' of the voice [...] in truth this phrase is not to be found even in the treatises of Fétis, García, Delle Sedie, Lablache, etc. [...] The same may be said of the terms 'voce aperta' (open voice) and 'voce chiusa' (closed voice), which are also unknown in technical dictionaries and in the classical traditions. One does speak of open and closed vowels, but with regard to the demands of the word, never to signify some given system in singing. I am convinced that these two voice-qualities have arisen from a false system of singing.»)

femmine che cantano il soprano sentesi qualche volta una voce tutta di petto, ne' maschi sarebbe però una rarità, se la conservassero, passata che abbiano l'età puerile.

(A diligent instructor, being aware that a soprano without a falsetto voice has to sing within the narrow range of a few notes, not only seeks to provide him with one but tries by every means possible to unite it with the chest voice in such a way that there is no contrast between the one and the other, since if the union is not perfect the voice will have more than one register and will consequently lose its beauty<sup>21</sup> [...] If every teacher of the basic elements took up this precept, and united the pupil's falsetto with the chest voice, there would not be such a scarcity of sopranos today. [...] the higher the notes are, the greater the need to sound them gently, so as to avoid shrieking<sup>22</sup> [...] ... Among females who sing soprano one sometimes hears a chest voice over the entire range, but among males it would be unusual if they were to keep it once the boyhood years were past<sup>23</sup>).

The fusion of the two registers, which according to the old school constituted the indispensable prerequisite for the extending of the vocal range, became less and less common in later times, and was eventually replaced by a technique designed for the use of the voice mainly in a single register. Singing with the chest voice was not a novelty; as far back as the late 16th century Zacconi addressed the matter:

[...] in fra tanti diversi pareri (osservando), ho trovato che tra le voci di testa e quelle di petto, quelle di petto sono le migliori per comun parere. [...] Quelle poi che sono meramente di petto sono quelle che nel intonar che fanno, uscendo dalle fauci, par ch'eschino fuori cacciate da vehemenza pettorale; le quali sogliono assai più dellettare che le di testa [...]

([...] (making observations) among so many differing opinions, I have found that as between head voices and chest voices, it is chest voices which are by general consent the better [...] Those, further, which are pure chest voices and the ones which, when produced, seem to issue from the mouth under a vehement impulse from the chest; these are usually much more delightful than head voices[...]<sup>24</sup>)

Even if one is unwilling to grant absolute validity to these assertions, they do at any rate attest that the technique of singing with a chest voice, in an acceptation perhaps analogous to our own, was already in use in late Renaissance Italy.

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<sup>21</sup> P. F. TOSI, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

<sup>22</sup> P. F. TOSI, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

<sup>23</sup> P. F. TOSI, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

<sup>24</sup> L. ZACCONI, *op. cit.*, Bk. I, f. 77, Ch. LXVIII.

By way of addition to the confusion to which the term ‘passaggio’<sup>25</sup> has given rise, it is sometimes incorrectly supposed that in female voices the passaggio is located an octave higher than in male voices<sup>26</sup>. The mixed register, which permits the gradual and gentle joining of the chest voice with the head voice and the disguising of the break between registers, is situated in the same range of pitches for both sexes; thanks to it, women can sing even low notes with vigour, while in tenors, baritones and basses it facilitates a large upward extension of the voice.

Tosi’s falsetto is not that used by today’s sopranos and contraltos, much less the voice «which a man can use when he wishes to make a burlesque imitation of a woman»<sup>27</sup>. Modern falsettists generally use a pure head register, unblended with the chest register; they also ‘cover’ the sound, a practice not supported by the documents of the baroque period. The voice-production they obtain is somewhat hard at times, by contrast with the softness and richness which one hears in, for example, the recordings of famous Italian falsettists of the Pontifical Chapel made in the first decades of this century, or from Alfred Deller<sup>28</sup>, who displays a bright timbre and, even though he belongs to the English vocal tradition, a notably sweet sound.

Le voci ordinariamente si dividono in due registri, che chiamansi, l’uno di petto, l’altra di testa, ossia falsetto. Ho detto ordinariamente, perché si da anche qualche raro esempio, che qualcheduno riceve dalla natura il singolarissimo dono di poter eseguire tutto colla sola voce di petto. Di questo dono non parlo. Io parlo solo della voce in generale divisa in due registri, come comunemente succede. [...] La grande arte de’ cantanti dev’esser quella di rendere impercettibile a chi li sente, o li vede cantare la minore o maggiore difficoltà, concui cavano le voci dei due differenti registri di petto e di testa. Ciò solo può ottenersi unendole finemente [...]

(Voices ordinarily comprise two registers, called the chest and the head registers. I say ‘ordinarily’, because there are also to be found some rare instances of a person’s being able,

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<sup>25</sup> In the jargon of singing, the term ‘passaggio’ is used broadly to refer either to the transition between chest register and head register or to the prolongation of the chest register as far as the zone where a male voice would pass to the head register. There is no connection between the singing-techniques of the past and the modern acceptance of the term to denote the passage beyond the head register (in sopranos) at around the notes E4-F4. Finally, as we have already seen, this same word is synonymous in the ancient terminology with virtuoso ‘diminution’.

<sup>26</sup> MANUEL PATRICIO RODRIGUEZ GARCÍA, *Trattato completo dell’arte del Canto*, Ed. Ricordi 2185 - Part I (ed. Alberto Mazzucato). In the *Relazione sulla Memoria riguardante la voce umana*, p. V, one reads: «Afferma il signor Garcia che questa parte comune ai due registri [di petto e di falsetto; n.d.r.] abbraccia le stesse note tanto nelle voci d’uomo come in quelle di donna» («Mr. Garcia asserts that this overlap between the two registers [chest register and falsetto (Ed.)] embraces the same notes in male voices as in female»).

<sup>27</sup> P. F. TOSI, *op. cit.*, p. 38, note 2 by Luigi Leonesi.

<sup>28</sup> Alfred George Deller (1912-1979), English falsettist. His many recordings are widely available.

thanks to a very special gift of nature, to sing everything with the chest voice alone. This gift I am not speaking of here. I am speaking only of the normal voice divided between two registers, which is what commonly happens<sup>29</sup>. [...] The great art of singers should be that of rendering imperceptible to the listener or onlooker the greater or lesser difficulty with which they bring forth the voices of the two different registers, chest and head. This can only be achieved by subtly uniting them[...]<sup>30</sup>)

Giambattista Mancini, author of the *Riflessioni Pratiche* from which this passage is taken, clearly holds to the principles of Tosi. He writes, however, that:

Farà meraviglia a molti de' miei Leggitori, come mai, dopo un sì gran numero di valorosi cantanti, che tuttora fioriscono, possa essere invalsa l'opinione, in cui da qualche tempo sono, non solo gl'Italiani, ma anche gli Oltramontani stessi, che la nostra Musica sia affatto decaduta, e che vi manchino buone scuole, e buoni cantanti. Convien però confessare, che se tale opinione è falsa rispetto alle scuole, purtroppo è vera rispetto ai cantanti, de' quali nessuno si vede sottentrare per riempire con onore il vuoto lasciato dai vecchi artisti.

(Many of my readers will wonder how it can be that, in view of the accomplishments of such a host of singers, who are still flourishing, it has for some time now been the established opinion, not just among Italians but among those of the north themselves, that our music has thoroughly declined, and that good schools and good singers are lacking. It should be acknowledged, though, that even if this opinion is false in regard to the schools, it is regrettably true in regard to the singers, among whom there are not emerging any successors who manage to fill honourably the void left behind by the artists of old<sup>31</sup>.)

Flourishing at the time of Zacconi<sup>32</sup> but already in decline in Tosi's day<sup>33</sup>, the Italian singing described by Mancini at the close of the 18th century no longer enjoyed the prestige previously accorded to it; perhaps the fault did not lie solely with the vices of the 'modern singers' who had put vocal virtuosity to wrong uses. The glowing Italian vocal style was on the wane, and was being outshone in spite of itself by the new rays from beyond the Alps. The hopes of the old masters who

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<sup>29</sup> G. B. MANCINI, *op. cit.* in note 18, pp. 62-63.

<sup>30</sup> G. B. MANCINI, *ib.*, p. 64.

<sup>31</sup> G. B. MANCINI, *ib.*, p. 42.

<sup>32</sup> L. ZACCONI, *op. cit.*, Bk. I, f. 8, Ch. XII: «Per il che possiamo senz'altro concludere [...] che essendo le musiche moderne fatte con buonissime regole, e cantate da buonissimi cantori, patroni degli accenti vaghi, e delle gratiose maniere, che le abbiano molta più forza che non haveano l'antiche». («From which we may certainly conclude [...] that since modern music is governed by the best of rules, and sung by the best of singers, who have command of pleasing sounds and graceful manners, it is much finer than ancient music.»)

<sup>33</sup> P. F. TOSI, *op. cit.*, p. 30: «Signori Maestri, l'Italia non sente più le voci ottime de' tempi andati»; p. 129: «E che in oggi si canta male». («Italy no longer hears the excellent voices of the times that are gone»; «And these days singing is poor».)

looked for a restoration of the ancient rules of singing went unheeded, as alternatives were sought that might accord with the desires of the new, composite European society. The French, with their history of restive antagonism, had long since adopted stylistic and aesthetic tendencies that were independent of Italy; as early as 1638, some of the madrigals of Monteverdi had contained in their supplementary directions - a genuine and telling indication of performance practice - the phrase «Canto a voce piena, alla francese» («Singing with full voice, in the French manner»<sup>34</sup>).

The year 1840 saw the publication in Paris of the celebrated *Traité complet de l'Art du Chant* of Manuel Garcìa<sup>35</sup>, which can be regarded as the manifesto of the new developments in singing. In this work precepts are laid down which are alien to the orthophonic parameters of the Italian language, and which are without theoretical precedents in the treatises of the maestros of bel canto. In keeping with the didactic course adopted by Tosi and Mancini, Garcìa still prescribed the unifying of registers, but it made a complete break with the Italian language and vocal tradition in some of its suggestions regarding the pronunciation of vowels. The pursuit of the appropriate 'timbre'<sup>36</sup> was codified in the manner of a fully-fledged 'mécanisme', which undoubtedly latched onto habits already well-spread but not yet made official: «l'a s'approche de l'o ouvert; l'è ouvert s'approche de l'é, puis de l'eu; l'i s'approche de l'u sans le secours des lèvres; l'o s'approche de l'ou» («the a is close to an open o; the open è is close to é, and then to eu [ö], the i is close to an u [ü] pronounced without assistance from the lips; the o is close to ou [a very closed o almost tending to a u ]»<sup>37</sup>.) This criterion, which is consonant above all with the French idiom, appears to have been formulated by Garcìa with expressive ends in mind:

[...] le timbre de la voix doit se modifier autant que nos passions l'exigent. Si la mélodie et les paroles exprimaient une profonde douleur, le timbre qui ferait briller l'instrument fausserait la pensée [...] Si la mélodie, au contraire, exprime des sentiments brillants, le timbre clair peut seul fournir et la couleur de la passion et l'émission éclatante du son. Le timbre couvert produirait l'effet de l'enrouement.

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<sup>34</sup> CLAUDIO MONTEVERDI, *Madrigali Guerrieri et Amorosi* [...] Bk. VIII - Part Two: *Canti Amorosi*, Venice, Alessandro Vincenti, 1638: Madrigals *Dolcissimo uscignolo, Chi vol haver felice*. Transcription into modern notation ed. by Gian Francesco Malipiero in *Tutte le opere di Claudio Monteverdi*, tomo VIII/2, Bologna - Vienna, Universal, 1926-1942 (2nd rev., 1954).

<sup>35</sup> M. P. R. GARCÌA, *Traité complet de l'Art du Chant*, Paris, Heugel & Co., 1840.

<sup>36</sup> M. P. R. GARCÌA, *ib.*, 7th repr., 1878. See in this connection the account given in the paragraph entitled *Des timbres (metalli della voce)*, p. 82.

<sup>37</sup> M. P. R. GARCÌA, *ib.*, p. 50.

([...] the timbre of the voice should be modified whenever our passions require it. If the melody and the words expressed a profound sorrow, the timbre which made the instrument shine would falsify the thought [...] If, conversely, the melody expresses shining sentiments, only the bright timbre can supply both the colour of the passion and the bursting quality in the sound. The covered timbre would produce an effect of hoarseness.<sup>38</sup>)

In the opera seria of the 19th century, subjects and situations were borrowed mainly from Romantic literature and the historical novel. Great heroines, violent emotions, tragic epilogues were settled ingredients for librettists and composers. The passions expressed were more often of sorrow than of joy, and moments of interior travail were much more frequent than the heedless lightheartedness of so many of the characters who had featured in the opera semiseria and opera buffa of 18th-century Italy.

The geographical heart of 19th-century Europe coincided with its political and cultural heart, and the musical taste of *grand-opéra* favoured weighty scenographic, choral and orchestral apparatus. However convenient it might have been, it was impossible to alter the anatomical structure of the soloist's vocal organs so as to effect a corresponding increase in volume; such a result is obtainable nowadays only with the aid of the resources of artificial amplification, which were unthinkable at that time. The different techniques in the construction of instruments, designed to increase their sonorous power, the expansion of the orchestral personnel, and the building of theatres of vaster dimensions were undoubtedly decisive for the spreading of the vocal modifications ordained by García. Although perhaps initially motivated only by interpretative considerations, this pragmatic orientation showed itself to be of advantage in making voices more powerful, especially in high notes. In addition, the prospering fortunes of the French language in melodrama, combined with the ever more frequent creation of operas in languages other than Italian, intensified the changes in singers' phonetics; all of which could not but undermine further the intelligibility of the text. It is also worth stressing that the new trends in singing exposed the singers to an increased risk of costs to the vocal apparatus from the incidence of both functional and organic pathologies.

There was thus, from the first half of the 19th century, a change in style and in the use of the voice, with a distinct preference for «suoni oscuri, voce di petto e declamazione» («dark sounds, chest voice and declamation»<sup>39</sup>) rather than the

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<sup>38</sup> M. P. R. GARCÍA, *ib.*, p. 50.

<sup>39</sup> ANDREA DELLA CORTE, *Vicende degli stili del Canto ... in Canto e Belcanto*, Turin, G. B. Paravia & Co., 1933,

decorative virtuoso manner of 17th-century Italian singing. The chest voice, less capable of the agility in gorgias but more powerful than the head voice, became prevalent among singers. To sing high notes in this register it is necessary to ‘turn’ (‘girare’) the sounds, by the application of the pronunciation system set out by Garcìa for ‘dark coloration’. The new fashion for the ‘voix sombrée’ did not gain its footing all at once, nor did it mark an abrupt change in relation to the earlier vocal manner. Deploying the ancient technique of ‘impasto’ (‘mixture’) of registers, which helps a singer to produce even very high notes while maintaining a bright timbre, Mattia Battistini<sup>40</sup> achieved a level of sweetness and comprehensibility rarely to be heard from a modern singer of the same vocal register<sup>41</sup>. The famous singer Tamagno was chosen by Verdi for the name-part in *Otello*. Today, as is well known, this is regarded as an heroic role, both in dramatic and in vocal terms. Yet in the recordings of this legendary singer one can hear high notes that ring out with great force as well as others of a suggestive softness, all produced by judiciously blending the chest voice with the head voice<sup>42</sup>. Nowadays the tenors considered suitable for dramatic roles have difficulty in singing piano and with grace, particularly in high tessituras; this incapacity tends to be wrongly attributed not to lack of technical expertise but to the innate character of the voice.

A 1906 recording of the soprano Adelina Patti<sup>43</sup>, contained in a widely available anthology<sup>44</sup>, shows plainly that this historic singer possessed at the age of 63 the freshest of voices, with an extensive range and a robustness even in low

p.245.

<sup>40</sup> Mattia Battistini (1856-1928), Italian baritone. He sings *Perché tremar* from *Zampa, ou la fiancée marbre* by Ferdinand Hérold - 1906 - on Gramophone 052148 (889C) (now also on the CD *Lebendige Vergangenheit*, Mono 89045 H. R. 1991).

<sup>41</sup> Besides great facility on high notes, singing that follows the principles of ‘impasto’ of registers also offered the performer a great extension of the vocal range. The 17th century provides a variety of relevant instances. Caccini’s arias *Poi ch’a mortal rischio* and *Io che l’età soleva viver* range respectively from D1 to G3 and from D1 to F3. They are printed in the collection *Le Nuove Musiche e Nuova Maniera di scriverle*, Florence, Zanobi Pignoni & Co., 1614, which bears on its frontispiece the inscription «Con due arie particolari per tenore, che ricerchi le corde del basso» («With two special arias for tenor encompassing bass notes») It is evident that the range of the 16th-century tenor does not correspond to that of the modern tenor: in today’s performances - whether polyphonic or solo - the tenor part is taken by baritones or tenors whose vocal qualities do not coincide with those favoured at that period.

<sup>42</sup> Francesco Tamagno (1850-1905), Italian tenor. On the EMI Classics CD *Grandi tenori di ieri e di oggi* (CDOC 16369), he sings *Sopra Berta* from Meyerbeer’s *Il Profeta* - 1903 - Ed. Ricordi; his voice-production on this recording recognisably ‘mixes’ chest and head voices, contrasting markedly with the high notes sung almost exclusively from the chest which are normal today.

<sup>43</sup> Adelina Patti (1843 - 1919) sang a number of times for Rossini and was enthusiastically appreciated by the Maestro, particularly for the virtuosity she showed in the art of belcanto.

<sup>44</sup> CD *La Scala* edition, EMI Classics 0777 7 64860 2 4.

notes, not unlike other singers who feature in the collection. Overall, Patti's vocal manner is close to that of her contemporary Alessandro Moreschi (cf. note 8): a singer at the Pontifical Chapel, he was the last castrato and the only one for whom we have the evidence of recordings. Two centuries after Tosi's *Opinioni*, Moreschi still mixes in degrees the natural or 'chest' voice-production in the lower register<sup>45</sup> with the head voice in the higher part of the range. 'The angel of Rome', as this singer was deservedly called, Patti and all the singers of the same period pronounce open vowels with an unmistakable crispness, a quality neglected in operatic singing of the present day. In fact, female singers today alter their diction systematically, and beyond any genuine expressive needs, conforming obsequiously to the darker voice-colour of male singers, particularly baritones and basses. Among all the types of voice, tenors alone have maintained an adequate phonetic equivalence between the sung and the spoken word. Unfortunately, pronunciation is even more starkly deformed in the head register, of which it is female voices that make most use; the consequences are plain to all and displeasing to many: 'casta diva' is increasingly often sung 'costa düva', 'kyrie' 'korüe' and 'di primavera' 'do promovöre'... In the light of textual exegesis, this device shows itself to be philologically incorrect even in performing works of Rossini, Bellini or Donizetti, or other 19th-century Italian composers.

Singing studies in the present day aim at rendering the voice homogeneous, but endorse excesses which tend to sublimate the voice in an almost abstract way, making it alien to the basic nature of the vocal organs, which should always be guided by an awareness that their vital spark is the word. Many take the view that the brightness of an open 'è' or 'ò' disturbs the uniformity of vocal production or of timbre, and, in pursuit of a smooth and 'noble' sound, they depart from correct pronunciation, and thus render the text incomprehensible.

In singing, the text is sovereign. Think of pop music: pieces that are solely instrumental are very rare. With sporadic exceptions, the repertory is entirely made up of songs in which the voice, almost always solo, is the single unqualified

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<sup>45</sup> P. F. TOSI, *op. cit.*, p. 40-42. According to Tosi, this register reaches as far as D4. In addition, the following assertions taken from the *Opinioni* give one to understand that in castratos (as is still the case today in children) the chest register reached higher than in female voices. «La giurisdizione della voce naturale, o di petto, termina ordinariamente sul quarto spazio, o sulla quinta riga, [in chiave di soprano; n.d.r.] ed ivi principia il dominio del falsetto si nello ascendere alle note alte, che nel ritornare alla voce naturale ove consiste la difficoltà dell'unione; Consideri dunque il Maestro di qual peso sia la correzione di quel difetto, che porta seco la rovina dello Scolaro se la trascura». («The jurisdiction of the natural, or chest, voice, normally ends at the fourth space, or the fifth line [of the soprano clef (Ed.)], and there begins the dominion of the falsetto, alike in ascending to high notes and in returning to the natural voice, which is where the difficulty of unifying them lies; Let the Maestro consider, then, of what moment is the correction of that defect, whose neglect entails the ruin of the scholar.»)



protagonist. Even when the music is of a mediocre standard, the voice – however much it may depart from the parameters required in vocal studies – ensures a direct communication with the listener.

Until about fifty years ago, there was still no great difference between the vocal manners of a singer of ‘cultivated’ music and a fine performer of the popular or light repertory, so that switching from one genre to the other was not only possible but straightforward and common. The divide that has opened up between the opera singer and the public of today is an index of how greatly communication has been disturbed. The voice, assimilated to an instrument and deprived of its distinctive feature, the word, has lost its status of signifier; it is a confirmation of this that even among devotees of classical music the prevailing tendency is to prefer purely instrumental performance. This cultural situation, unthinkable until a few decades ago, at least in Italy, is a sound barometer of the condition of vocal music today. The choice on the part of the singer of what sort of vocal manner to adopt, with a view not only to beauty and volume but also to the comprehensibility of the text, is crucial to the quality of performance. In order effectively to restore an historically correct style of performance, it is desirable to bring out, with the help of correct diction and the resulting intelligibility of the words, the connection between the text and the setting created by the composer, thus contributing to interpretation that is semantically coherent, and respecting the integrity of the musical text.

In conclusion, exactness of pronunciation should be a fundamental requirement: «[Il maestro; n.d.r.] Faccia profferir distintamente allo Scolaro le vocali, acciò siano intese per quelle, che sono». («Let him [the maestro (Ed.)] have the pupil put forth the vowels distinctly, so that they may be understood as what they are.»<sup>46</sup>) Open vowels should be well distinguished from closed ones, just as single consonants should be from double; also to be observed are the requirements of the orthoepical phenomenon of syntactic reduplication (‘Che fiero costume’ and ‘Tu mancavi a tormentarmi’ are properly pronounced ‘Cheffièro costùmè’ and ‘Tummancàvi attormentàrmi’).

Dopo che lo Scolaro si sarà impadronito francamente del Trillo e del Passaggio il Maestro gli dovrà far leggere, e pronunziare le parole senza quegli erroracci ridiculi d’Ortografia in cui molti tolgono a qualche vocabolo le sue doppie consonanti per regalarle ad un altro, che le ha semplici.

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<sup>46</sup> P. F. TOSI, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

Corretta la pronunzia procuri, che profferisca le medesime parole in maniera, che senza affettazione alcuna siano così distintamente intese, che non se ne perda sillaba, poiché se non si sentono, chi canta priva gli ascoltanti d'una gran parte di quel diletto, che il Canto riceve dalla loro forza: Se non si sentono, quel Cantore esclude la verità dell'artificio: E se finalmente non si sentono non si distingue la voce umana da quella d'un Cornetto, o d'un Haut-bois. Questo difetto, benché massimo in oggi è poco men che comune con notabile pregiudizio de' Professori e della Professione; e pur non dovrebbero, che le parole son quelle, che li fanno prevalere a sonatori, quando sieno d'uguale intendimento.

Il Maestro moderno sappia servirsi dell'avviso, perché la correzione non è stata mai tanto necessario come adesso.

(Once the scholar has thoroughly mastered the trill and the passaggio, the maestro's next task is to have him read and pronounce words without those gross and ridiculous errors of orthography by which many people take away from one word its double consonant and bestow it on another word whose consonants are single.

The pronunciation once corrected, let him ensure that he brings forth those same words in such a way that, without any affectation, they are so distinctly grasped that not a syllable is lost, for if they are not heard the singer deprives the listeners of much of that charm which singing acquires from their force; if they are not heard, the singer leaves out the truthfulness of the artifice; and finally, if they are not heard, the human voice is not distinguished from the sound of a cornet or an oboe. This defect, for all its gravity, is today little short of commonplace, much to the disadvantage of the profession and those who practise it; and yet it should not be so, for it is precisely the words which enable a singer to outshine an instrumentalist, when they are of equal accomplishment.

Let the modern maestro take heed of the advice, since this rectification has never been as necessary as it is today<sup>47</sup>.)

The rules and warnings commended by Tosi might appear superfluous, but deep-rooted habits of study have led many singers into a misunderstanding; certain among them regard the pair 'low voice' and 'dark sound' as equivalent (and the latter is even held to be synonymous, in a quite arbitrary way, with 'beautiful'); on the contrary, the fashioning of the dark timbre has rendered almost all voices, and especially female voices, unnatural.

As has already been explained at length, the importance of study for the sake of blending the chest and the head registers, while concealing the transition from one to the other, is evident. Given that «La voce di testa è facile al moto, possiede le corde superiori più che le inferiori, ha il trillo pronto, ma è soggetta a perdersi per non aver forza, che la regga» («The head voice is mobile, involves the higher more than the lower notes, finds the trill simple, but is liable to be lost for lack of

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<sup>47</sup> P. F. TOSI, *op. cit.*, pp. 64, 65.

force to support it»<sup>48</sup>), it is necessary to unite it with the chest voice, thus forming a special intermediate register to function as a 'medium' between the two and hide the so-called 'step' ('gradino'). Male voices should, when singing high notes, use head sounds too. This technique increases the possibilities of expression and of sweetness of voice, and allows the polished performance of passages demanding agility: «Tutta la bellezza del Passaggio consiste nell'esser perfettamente intonato, battuto, granito, eguale, rotto e veloce» («The whole beauty of the passaggio consists in its being perfectly pitched, crisp, articulated, even, separated and swift»<sup>49</sup>). In an analogous way, female voices, especially sopranos, when singing middle and low notes, should blend the head sound gradually with the chest sound, in such a way as to strengthen the often rather inconsistent medium-low part of the voice.

Observing a few simple recommendations culled from the most authoritative texts of the past is not to be thought of as an arid reinstatement of obsolete and outmoded formulae; a reconstruction absolutely identical with the singing of the past is in any case unrealisable. The ancient rules are by now disconnected from the present ones, so much so that they turn out paradoxically to be new. It is to be hoped that their revived use, reestablishing the natural and healthy approach to phonetics, may rectify many errors and abuses that have led to a decline in singing and an estrangement of the public. «E finalmente faranno sentir le Arie, più gustose e meno simili: Più naturali, e più cantabili.» («And at last they will make the Arias be heard, more tasteful and less uniform; More natural, and more singable.»<sup>50</sup>)

ANTONELLA NIGRO

(Translation by David Mitchell)

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<sup>48</sup> P. F. TOSI, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

<sup>49</sup> P. F. TOSI, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

<sup>50</sup> P. F. TOSI, *op. cit.*, p. 93.