

# THE VOICE OF THE CENTURY

The Culture of Italian Bel Canto in Luisa  
Tetrazzini's Recorded Interpretations



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# 1. The Voice of the Century

## Luisa Tetrazzini and Her Discographic Legacy

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The discographic career of Luisa Tetrazzini (1871–1940) spans a period of almost twenty years, and includes about 120 recordings, which she realised between 1904 and 1922. She collaborated with two firms: the Gramophone and Typewriter Company, which in 1907 became the Gramophone Company of London, and the Victor Talking Machine of Camden (New Jersey, USA).<sup>1</sup> The composer who features most prominently in her catalogue is Giuseppe Verdi, with eleven arias from five operas, *Traviata*, *Rigoletto*, *Trovatore*, *Un ballo in maschera*, *Vespri siciliani*, amounting to twenty recordings in total. Donizetti follows suit, with six arias and eight recordings from *Lucia di Lammermoor* and *Linda di Chamounix*; then come Bellini, with four arias and six recordings (*La sonnambula*, *I puritani*), Rossini with two arias and five recordings (*Barbiere di Siviglia*, *Semiramide*), Giacomo Meyerbeer (*Dinorah*) and Charles Gounod (*Faust*) with three arias and four recordings each. Mozart (*Don Giovanni*, *Nozze di Figaro*, *Flauto magico*) counts for three arias and five recordings and Georges Bizet (*Les pêcheurs de perles*, *Carmen*) three arias and four recordings. The list includes some more Italian and French opera composers (among them Ambroise Thomas and Léo Delibes), song writers like Gaetano Lama and Ernesto De Curtis, who wrote in the Neapolitan dialect, and figures like Julius Benedict, J. L. Gilbert, Reginald De Koven. Tetrazzini's discography reflects well the repertoire she performed most frequently during a life-long career:

1. *Lucia di Lammermoor* (113 productions)<sup>2</sup>
2. *Rigoletto* (67)
3. *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* (61)
4. *La traviata* (60)
5. *La sonnambula* (37)
6. *I puritani* (21)
7. *Dinorah* (18)
8. *Crispino e la Comare* (17)
9. *Gli ugonotti* (16)
10. *Faust* (13)

As can be seen, Tetrazzini's repertoire features prominently those Italian composers who were long inscribed into the nineteenth-century bel canto tradition, with *Lucia di Lammermoor* occupying a leading position throughout

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1 The complete discography can be found in Gattey, *Luisa Tetrazzini the Florentine Nightingale*, pp. 333–53. In his discography, Gattey mentions also The Universal Talking Machine Company of New York. However, this company, which issued records under the Zonophone label, was taken over by Victor and the Gramophone & Typewriter Company in 1903; Tetrazzini's Zonophone records were made in New York on 8 September 1904 by Victor. For an account of the history of Zonophone see Allan Sutton, 'The American Zonophone Discography: A History of American Zonophone, 1900–1912', *Discography of American Historical Recordings*, <https://adp.library.ucsb.edu/index.php/resources/detail/393>

2 The number of individual performances cannot be determined since once a stock opera was mounted, the number of individual performances depended on its success.

her entire career. Years after her début in this role, she remembered that ‘no opera could have been selected which gave me a greater opportunity, for Lucia’s arias have more possibilities for the prima donna than any of the other operas’.<sup>3</sup>

Two figures hold a prominent position in Tetrizzini’s discographic career, the English conductor and composer Percy Pitt (1870–1932) and the American cornet player, conductor and composer Walter B. Rogers (1865–1939). The first was involved in the recordings made by the Gramophone Company of London, while the second was responsible for most of the orchestral arrangements on recordings made for the Victor Talking Machine Company between 1904 and 1916. Pitt studied organ in Leipzig and Munich where he started to familiarise himself with the exigencies of opera productions. In 1907 he was appointed as musical director at Covent Garden where he worked in close contact with Hans Richter. Apparently, having decided not to have Tetrizzini sing in the summer season at Covent Garden in 1907, it was Pitt who persuaded the Directors of the Syndicate to invite her to participate in the autumn season.

Cleofonte Campanini, her brother-in-law, who had succeeded Mancinelli as Conductor-in-Chief of the Italian opera at Covent Garden, had occasionally mentioned her name and extolled her virtues [Percy Pitt wrote], but it was considered that there was no very great demand for this type of singer, as the operas which served as a vehicle for such musical fireworks had fallen into desuetude, except for two or three well-known examples such as *Rigoletto* and *Traviata*; and as the lady had her own ideas with regard to her value and the fees she should command, ideas which were not shared by the Directors of the Syndicate, it had never been possible to come to an understanding with regard to her appearance in London.<sup>4</sup>

As Pitt suggests, the anachronistic position occupied by Tetrizzini’s voice and repertoire represented a challenge that could be won only at the cost of great determination and by means of an extensive ‘papering policy’, that is to say by giving out a large number of free tickets. As we will see, Tetrizzini’s début in London was a great success and all the recordings she would realise for the Gramophone Company were conducted by Pitt himself. Walter Rogers was a cornet player with many years of experience in bands and orchestras. He served as cornet soloist and assistant conductor in John Philip Sousa’s Band until 1904, when, tired of travelling, he became music director of the Victor Phonograph Company, a position he held until 1916.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, no mention of these musicians can be found in Tetrizzini’s autobiography, and one may only speculate as to the role they may have played in her discographic career and artistic development.

After Charles Neilson Gattey’s comprehensive reconstruction of Tetrizzini’s life and career it would be pointless to delve again into a biographical account of the diva; however, a rapid review of her personality, ideas, attitude and opinions, as she expressed them in her writings, can be worth undertaking. One interesting issue relates to her musical education and the lack of a vocal pedigree. Unlike Nellie Melba, a student of Mathilde Marchesi, and Marcella Sembrich, who moved to Milan in 1876 to study with Giovanni Battista Lamperti and, subsequently, with his eminent father Francesco Lamperti,<sup>6</sup> Tetrizzini was never affiliated with any important school or leading master. During her comparatively short formal training in Florence she studied with Giuseppe Ceccherini (1824–1909), the teacher who had taught her older sister Eva.<sup>7</sup> In *My life of Song* Tetrizzini insists on her innate talent and emphasises more than once that she did not make her voice, since it was there already.<sup>8</sup> When recalling her conservatoire years in Florence (then called the Istituto Musicale) she never mentions one

3 Luisa Tetrizzini, *My Life of Song*, p. 74.

4 Daniel Chamier, *Percy Pitt of Covent Garden and the B.B.C.* (London: Edward Arnold, [1938]), p. 113.

5 Ronald W. Holz, ‘Rogers, Walter Bowman’, *Grove Music Online*, 2 Jun. 2011, <https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-1002103573>

6 Sembrich, like Tetrizzini, was saluted as the new Patti, or the Polish Patti, very early on during her career and, like Tetrizzini, her London début launched her towards a career of international acclaim. See Herx, ‘Marcella Sembrich’. The New York Public Library—Music Division owns a collection of documents that covers the entirety of Sembrich’s professional career from her childhood training to her death, and provides details of parts of her personal and family life (particularly the early years) through correspondence, legal and financial documents, newspaper clippings, and concert programs: <http://archives.nypl.org/mus/20137>

7 Gattey, *Luisa Tetrizzini*, p. 2.

8 Tetrizzini, *My Life of Song*, p. 34.

particular teacher who may have played a central role in her training and early artistic development; while her *maestri* remain colourless figures in the background, she often insists on the importance of her frequentation of the Florence opera theatre, the Teatro Pagliano, in shaping her musical taste.

Tetrazzini's musical and vocal development is likely to have received an acceleration after her successful début in 1890, when she made her appearance as Inez in Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine*, together with Rosa Caligaris-Marti as Selika.<sup>9</sup> In this regard, the role of the *basso comico* Pietro Cesari, whose touring company she joined soon after her début, cannot be underestimated. Nor should it be forgotten that in the following years she had the opportunity to work with some of the best opera singers of the time: in 1897, when she made her first appearance at St. Petersburg, she worked with Angelo Masini and Mattia Battistini, and appeared with Marcella Sembrich in *Mignon* and *Don Giovanni*. Upon returning to Buenos Aires she collaborated with Francesco Tamagno, Giuseppe Borgatti and Mario Sammarco, not to speak of her lifelong friendship with Enrico Caruso, with whom she sang *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *Un ballo in maschera* and *Bohème* in Russia in the 1899–1900 season. Tetrazzini must have learned a lot from all these masters and evidence of this informal training is to be found in her cadenza notebooks: these were little booklets where the young soprano wrote down the cadenzas passed on to her by experienced teachers. Luisa seems to have given one of them as a gift to the Brazilian soprano Bidu Sayao. Unfortunately, not much is known about these booklets, which have disappeared after her death.<sup>10</sup>

Another important aspect of Tetrazzini's personality is the awareness she manifested of the anachronistic position she occupied in the early twentieth-century operatic firmament. In many pages she suggests how the repertoire she sang and the vocal style connected with that were often stigmatised by music critics as outmoded, trite, and hackneyed, especially when compared to the recent development of modern opera in Italy, France and Germany. Her London début made it clear to her how the operatic world was then divided into two parts, the grave and the gay, as she recalled. The grave part featured the gloomy figure of Richard Wagner, while the gay one was dominated by bel canto Italian composers.<sup>11</sup> Thus, she wondered what the future of coloratura might have been, in a world where, even though people continued to crowd to hear it, composers were no longer interested in this old-fashioned genre and young singers did not even possess the voice to sing it.<sup>12</sup> Although dreaming of a day when a new Donizetti would be born and coloratura music would take a new turn, Tetrazzini must have been well aware that the days of bel canto belonged to a long-gone, golden past.

About her voice comparatively much has been written in past decades, although many questions still remain unanswered. Her vocal compass, as she writes, went from the B below the stave to the E above it and the ease with which she could reach the top notes is confirmed by her recordings: she took the opportunity to show off her wonderful top Es whenever she could, most frequently in the final cadenzas, while she never ventured further down than the D below the stave. Her staccato had a pearly quality which critics did not fail to notice, together with the proverbial agility she showed in the upper register. Of great interest is the question of the uneven quality of her voice, a characteristic that drew the attention of many commentators during her career and is audible also in her recordings; as has already been suggested, this had to do with an expressive method called *voce bianca*, 'white voice' used by high sopranos.<sup>13</sup> Commenting on Tetrazzini's successful début as Violetta in 1908 New York, Sylvester Rowling described in some detail the gap between her very sweet high notes and the childlike quality of her lower register: 'her middle register is luscious. She takes her upper notes with bird-like sweetness. Her lower tones are clean cut even when she falls into an odd utterance that savors somewhat of a

9 Gattey, *Luisa Tetrazzini*, p. 4.

10 One of them belonged to Sayao, who seems to have passed it to William Seward. See Aspinall, *Luisa Tetrazzini: The Voice and the Records*, liner notes to *Luisa Tetrazzini—The London Recordings*, EMI, 1992, and Will Crutchfield, 'A Treasury of Voices, from Galli-Curci to Lily Pons', *The New York Times* (Music Notes), 23 June 1985. <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/06/23/arts/music-notes-a-treasury-of-voices-from-galli-curci-to-lily-pons.html>

11 Tetrazzini, *My life of Song*, p. 177.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 313.

13 Nicholas E. Limansky, 'Luisa Tetrazzini: Coloratura Secrets', *Opera Quarterly*, 20.4 (2004), 540–69.

child's'.<sup>14</sup> Far from being a simple flaw in her technique, the unevenness in the voice resulted in a particularly expressive contrast that, as Tetrizzini would reveal, she adopted in passages where the dramatic situation called for such a richness of shades.

Too wide a smile often accompanies what is called 'the white voice.' This is a voice production where a head resonance alone is employed, without sufficient of the appoggio or enough of the mouth resonance to give the tone a vital quality. This 'white voice' should be thoroughly understood, and is one of the many shades of tone a singer can use at times, just as the impressionist uses various unusual colors to produce certain atmospheric effects. For instance, in the mad scene in *Lucia*, the use of the 'white voice' suggests the babbling of the mad woman, as the same voice in the last act of *Traviata*, or in the last act of *La Bohème* suggests utter physical exhaustion and the approach of death. An entire voice production on this colorless line, however, would always lack the brilliancy and the vitality which inspires enthusiasm.<sup>15</sup>

She mentions the same device also in the chapter on 'Faults to be corrected', where she adds that 'The "white voice" (*voce bianca*) is a head voice without deep support and consequently without color; hence its appellation. One can learn to avoid it by practicing with the mouth closed and by taking care to breathe through the nose, which forces the respiration to descend to the abdomen'.<sup>16</sup> It seems clear that Tetrizzini was well aware that the *voce bianca* should be used sparingly; still, she used it for expressive reasons, especially in her middle- and lower-register.<sup>17</sup> Reviews that were published in a more mature phase of Tetrizzini's career suggest that she had come to master a smoother transition between the lower and the higher notes. Of this vocal feature a detailed description has been provided by Michael Aspinall when referring to the white and open tone coloratura sopranos came to cultivate deliberately during the nineteenth century and Italians called a *bamboleggiante* (baby-doll) voice.<sup>18</sup> In Aspinall's opinion it is plausible that Tetrizzini came to master a better control over the transition between the different voice registers as a response to those critics, especially English and American, who disparaged this effect. Tetrizzini's vocal unevenness can be understood as the remnant of what seems to have been a feature typical of singers from earlier generations. Rossinian interpreters like Maria Malibran were sometimes called contraltos and presented an incredibly wide voice compass, from E above the stave (like Tetrizzini) to the G (or even Eb) below it. Their voice was double, in that it included the soprano and the contralto but at the cost of a remarkably audible timbral difference in the passage from the head to the chest register. A similar characteristic was noted in Giuditta Pasta, Marietta Alboni and, much later, in Guerrina Fabbri (1866–1946) and Elisa Bruno (1869–1942). These last two left a few recordings where the gap between the different registers is clearly audible, causing what may be defined as a yodel effect.<sup>19</sup> What Tetrizzini's recordings have in common with other recordings left by singers trained in the same tradition is a similar timbral gap between lower and higher notes. Of this vocal feature not much seems to have survived in the younger generations of singers, whose vocal quality confirms how important it has become to master a complete timbral evenness and the smoothest possible transition from one register to the other.

Other distinctive features of her voice are the extensive use of portamento, the frequent use of *messa di voce* and a comparatively thick, continuous vibrato. Although now considered tasteless unless used sparingly, Tetrizzini and her contemporary colleagues used portamento as a means to express tender, mournful, or even vigorous feelings, as suggested by García's highly-celebrated school.<sup>20</sup> A case in point is represented by her rendition of 'Ah

14 Sylvester Rowling, 'Tetrizzini, Hammerstein's New Prima Donna, Whom London Has Proclaimed the Greatest of Living Singers, Makes Brilliant Debut at Manhattan Opera-House', *The Evening World* (NY), 16 January 1908, p. 3.

15 Tetrizzini, *My life of Song*, p. 314.

16 Tetrizzini, *The Art of Singing*, p. 58.

17 See again Limansky, p. 545.

18 Aspinall, *Luisa Tetrizzini: The Voice and the Records*, p. 23.

19 See Marco Beghelli and Raffaele Talmelli, *Ermafrodite Armoniche, Il contralto nell'Ottocento* (Varese: Zecchini Editore, 2011). It is possible to hear Guerrina Fabbri's and Elisa Bruno's voices on the CD included in the volume.

20 Manuel García, *Scuola di García, Trattato completo dell'arte del canto* (Milan: Ricordi, [1842]), vol. II, pp. 29–30.

non credea' in Bellini's *La sonnambula*, where the mourning of the lost love is the prevalent feeling: portamentos are conspicuously present, especially when compared to modern standards, and a slight continuous vibrato is observable also in those moments where the voice is gliding up or down.<sup>21</sup> Tetrazzini emphasises the dramatic quality of the scene also by slackening the tempo towards the close of the passage (Figure 2).

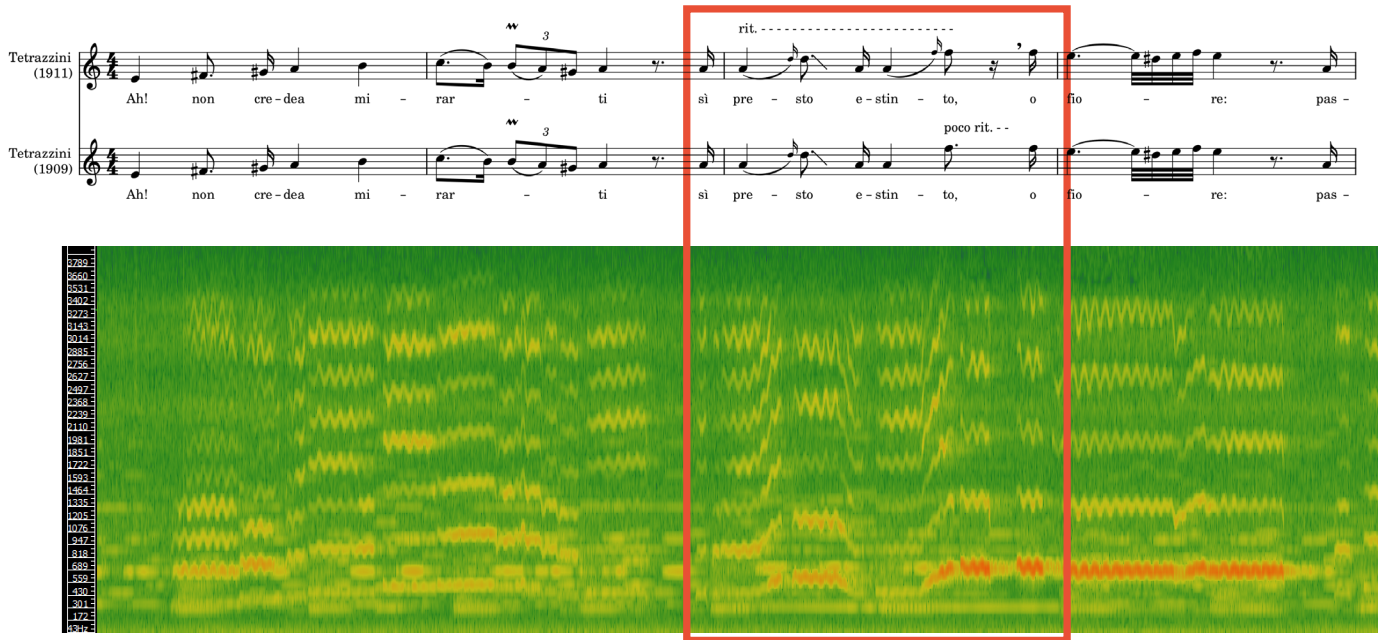


Figure 2 shows the use of vibrato and portamento in Tetrazzini's 1911 recording of 'Ah non credea mirarti'.

A similar pattern can be observed in Adelina Patti's 1906 recording of the same aria, where the strongly pathetic quality of the moment is conveyed by a similar use of portamento. Patti's vibrato is, instead, much thinner, almost inaudible and sometimes unstable, probably due to her age at the time of the recording (Figure 3).

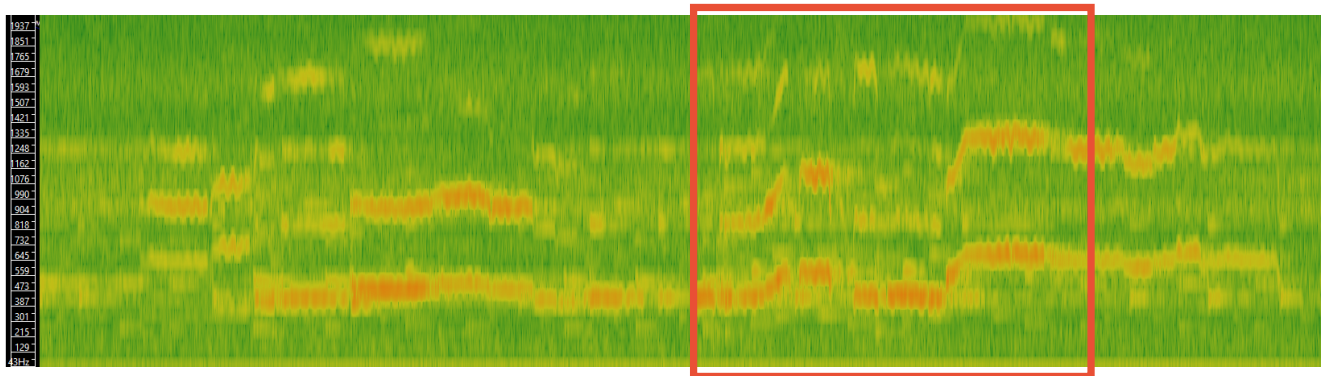


Figure 3 shows Patti's use of portamento in her 1906 recording of 'Ah non credea mirarti'.

A similar use of portamento and vibrato can be observed in the first measures of 'Ah, fors'è lui' in Verdi's *La traviata*, where again, a sense of hesitant trepidation pervades the scene and the music (Figure 4).

21 The following images have been produced using Sonic Visualiser, a program for viewing audio files and extracting data. Chris Cannam, Christian Landone, and Mark Sandler, *Sonic Visualiser: An Open Source Application for Viewing, Analysing, and Annotating Music Audio Files*, in Proceedings of the ACM Multimedia 2010 International Conference.

Figure 4 shows the first four measures of Verdi's 'Ah, fors'è lui' in *La traviata* as sung by Tetrassini.

Figure 4 shows the first four measures of Verdi's 'Ah, fors'è lui' in *La traviata* as sung by Tetrassini.

The spectrogram shows a consistent use of portamento not only between two consecutive notes, but also at the beginning of the phrase, according to a performance practice that would be considered tasteless today. A constant vibrato is present also in the moments where the voice is gliding (Figure 5).

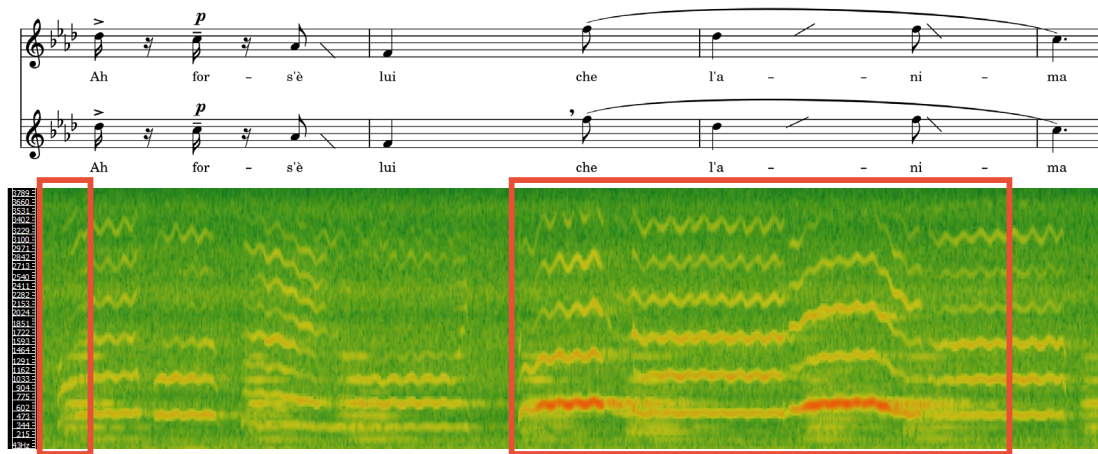


Figure 5 shows Tetrassini's use of *portamento* in the opening bars of Verdi's 'Ah, fors'è lui', recorded in 1911.

Slightly different is the pattern observable in Marcella Sembrich's rendition recorded in 1904; while she uses the descending portamento in a way similar to Tetrassini, the upward intervals are taken without any perceivable gliding (Figure 6); her vibrato is also continuous, but thinner than Tetrassini's.

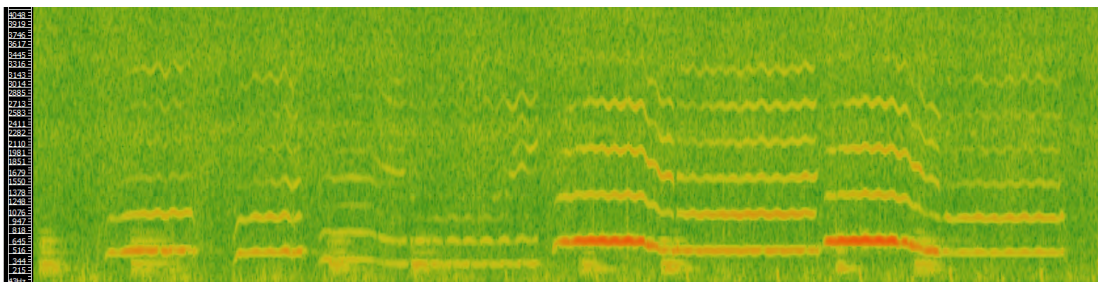


Figure 6 shows Marcella Sembrich's use of *portamento* in the opening bars of Verdi's 'Ah, fors'è lui', recorded in 1904.

In her 1904 recording of the same aria Nellie Melba shares with Sembrich a preference for the descending portamento and a thinner vibrato, while the onset of the notes is sometimes prepared by a short but still audible ascending portamento (Figure 7).

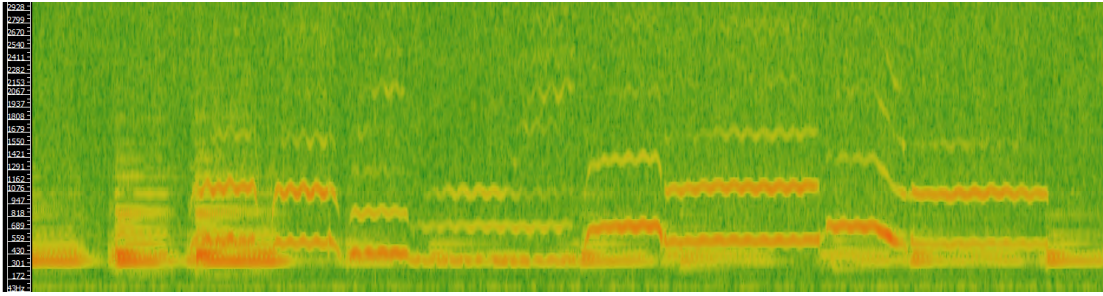


Figure 7 shows Nellie Melba's use of *portamento* in the opening measures of Verdi's 'Ah, fors'è lui', recorded in 1904.

The examples discussed so far suggest that although individual differences could be large, portamento was an expressive device widely used by singers trained in the bel canto tradition. The same can be said of vibrato, which we hear in Tetrazzini's voice and is characteristic of most singers of her generation, used in combination with the *mesa di voce* when special emphasis was called for, particularly at the end of a cadenza.

Another long-debated trope suggests that bel canto divas like Luisa Tetrazzini were champions of improvised coloratura and ornamentation. According to Nicholas Limansky, Tetrazzini was above all 'an instinctive performer', a singer for whom 'improvising was of paramount importance'. In his reconstruction of her coloratura secrets, he over-confidently relies on the review the critic of the *Globe-Democrat* wrote of a concert she gave at the Coliseum in Saint Louis, Missouri, on 6 February 1920, which included Julius Benedict's *Carnival of Venice Variations*, to emphasise how she improvised in her performances. 'It seemed' the critic reports 'that Tetrazzini at one time during the rendition was improvising and roulading and trilling ad libitum'.<sup>22</sup> According to the critic, Limansky continues, some of the variations were especially spontaneous. Although similar recollections suggest that Tetrazzini appeared to be composing 'new *cadenzas* at the spur of the moment', one may wonder whether she was really composing extempore, or rather giving the impression of doing so. As I will argue in the course of my analysis, Tetrazzini used to perform a well-prepared set of variations, ornaments and cadenzas, which she delivered with calculated theatricality, thus making the audience believe that she was following the whim of the moment. Whether she collected the train of her gown or added a new roulade to an already richly flourished cadenza, the evidence I have amassed suggests that she was performing a set of gestures that she had long rehearsed and carefully prepared in order to impress the audience. Even in the case reported by Limansky, one may wonder whether the critic of the *Globe-Democrat* was sufficiently knowledgeable about Luisa Tetrazzini's coloratura secrets to draw a line between genuine improvisation and a well-calculated *coup de théâtre*. The *Concert variations on Carnival of Venice arranged for voice and piano by Julius Benedict*, which Tetrazzini sang in 1922, were published in Boston by Oliver Ditson in 1882, with a piano introduction, Andantino, by Jules Schulhoff. Luisa Tetrazzini recorded these variations twice, once on 25 May 1909 with Percy Pitt in London, then again on 16 March 1911 with Walter B. Rogers in Camden. Although the two CDs in which we find the original discs digitised and remastered present the entire piece in one single audio track, each recording consists of two separate takes (matrix 3079f and 3080f form the first, and matrix C10066-1 and C10067-1 the second).<sup>23</sup> The recordings are identical: they present the same cuts and we hear Tetrazzini sing her own cadenzas and passages with not one single note changed, added, or substituted for. Of course, we do not know whether Tetrazzini sang these *Variations* in 1922 in the exact form she had recorded them more than ten years earlier. However, as we will see, some more detailed descriptions of Tetrazzini's live performances in London and New York are consistent with what we hear in her recordings, thus supporting the claim that, once she had learned a piece, she remained true to her first interpretative idea for years.<sup>24</sup> As I will argue, the impression that she was improvising

22 Nicholas E. Limansky, 'Luisa Tetrazzini: Coloratura Secrets', *Opera Quarterly*, 20.4 (2004), 540–69 (p. 547).

23 *Luisa Tetrazzini—The London Recordings*, EMI, 1992, and *Tetrazzini*, Prima Voce vol. II, 1999.

24 Massimo Zicari, 'Identità stilistica e capriccio: Luisa Tetrazzini nelle registrazioni discografiche', *Rivista Italiana di Musicologia*, 40 (2020), 153–209.

following the whim of the moment was the result of a well calculated, long rehearsed set of theatrical gestures. The careful attention with which she developed an interpretation extended to the preparation of ornamentation and cadenzas, as is testified by the existence of her cadenza notebooks.

Luisa Tetrazzini is also the author of *How to Sing*, a monograph in which she elaborates on the different aspects related to bel canto and gives advice to prospective singers. She touches upon a number of topics, including the best age to start learning, the qualities needed to become an accomplished singer, the necessity for the sternest self-discipline and the most unremitting application as a condition for success. In the chapter on coloratura singing, she writes that many have asked her how to acquire agility, to which she answers that 'it is simply a case of perseverance and hard work, plus, of course, whatever natural abilities in that direction you may possess'.<sup>25</sup> Scales, she suggests, are the foundation of flexibility and coloratura. She takes a stance in defence of coloratura which, she continues, is so often contemptuously spoken of: 'Coloratura music is false, showy, superficial, unworthy, dramatically unreal, and so on. But what nonsense this is!' <sup>26</sup> Tetrazzini is perfectly consistent with the tradition of which she was one of the best representatives: coloratura, she continues 'should please the ear by its brilliance, but at the same time it should not, and need not, obscure the dramatic significance of what is sung'.<sup>27</sup> As she recalls, music critics 'were all more especially struck by the manner in which I managed, while singing Verdi's florid music brilliantly and effectively in the purely vocal sense, at the same time to make it expressive'.<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately, she does not delve into the topic any further, thus leaving many questions unanswered; among them, the manner in which a coloratura singer should choose the appropriate ornaments, and develop her own cadenzas and roulades. In discussing issues like enunciation, language and so forth, Tetrazzini often mentions illustrious singers and singing teachers like Lilli Lehmann, Francesco Lamperti, Salvatore Fucito and Enrico Caruso; she met many of them in person, collaborated with some and must have read their methods, although no specific reference to them is given in her volume.

As to the issue of style and interpretation, Tetrazzini worked on the assumption that the signs in a score are 'a mere approximation to the composer's complete meaning'. Therefore, '[i]t is the duty of his interpreters to supply what is missing—to breathe the spirit of life into the dry bones and to convert dead printed notes into living human music'.<sup>29</sup> Of course, the singer must possess all the skills necessary to understand and grasp the composer's intention, and, 'the musical taste and knowledge required in order to present it in conformity with the appropriate rules and traditions'.<sup>30</sup> She raises the question of stylistic appropriateness and suggests that every singer 'must be familiar also with the varying needs of the different schools of music, with the historical traditions associated with them'.<sup>31</sup> However, since every repertoire has its own different requirements in terms of both vocal technique and singing style, it is unlikely, if not impossible, she holds, for an artist to excel in all of them. As a consequence, her advice to a young singer is 'to confine himself to the class of work more particularly suited to his talent'.<sup>32</sup> Tetrazzini herself made a clear professional choice and steered away from works that did not fit her vocal skills and artistic personality, even at the cost of harsh criticisms: 'People blame me sometimes, for instance, for confining myself mainly to music of a certain school. But I think I know best as to this, and that I am exercising sound judgment in adopting this course. There is much music which I admire and love, but I do not always try to sing it'.<sup>33</sup> If, on the one hand, she encouraged flexibility as a quality, to push oneself into foreign lands and embrace a repertoire that did not fit one's voice was a completely different and hazardous thing to do. No Italian operatic composer of the verismo generation appears in her discography, not to mention Richard Wagner or Richard Strauss. She provides only one description of how she interprets an aria or a song

25 Luisa Tetrazzini, *How to Sing*, p. 73.

26 Ibid., p. 75.

27 Ibid., p. 78.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid., p. 93.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid., p. 95

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

when talking of the 'Recitative and Polonaise' from the opera *Mignon*, by Ambroise Thomas, but she is more concerned for the manner in which a singer should feel what she sings, than the criteria that lie behind specific interpretative choices, including good taste and appropriate style.

Luisa Tetrazzini's personality was perhaps best described by Kenneth Muir, manager of the Milanese offices of the Gramophone Company, when corresponding with Theo Birnbaum, his colleague from the London headquarters, on 6 November 1907.

This artiste is undoubtedly as I stated over a year ago at a managers' meeting the best light soprano of the day and the most likely to step in the Melba's shoes to who she is undoubtedly superior. In character she is capricious and wayward and if you wish to succeed in obtaining her you must pamper her like a spoiled child by sending her gifts, boxes for theatres, paying her compliments and little personal attentions; in a word you must appeal to the woman in her nature. She is extremely dissolute in her private life and much affected by flattery and champagne. She is besides a bright, clever woman and rather apt to treat everybody in an independent and off-hand fashion.<sup>34</sup>

Capricious and wayward, dissolute and clever at the same time, Tetrazzini embodies the stereotyped image of the bel canto diva; during her lifelong career, she was often able to draw the attention of the international press not only because of her unforgettable interpretations, but also on account of her extravagant personality and debauched behaviour. She often appeared in trials (more than once a lawsuit was brought against her), had controversial sentimental affairs with figures of public visibility (among them Julio Zeigner Uriburu, the son of a president of Argentina, who acted as her secretary and whom she sued for embezzling large sums of money while in her employ),<sup>35</sup> got married three times and died in poverty, having dissipated a fortune. Her disastrous third marriage to Pietro Vernati, an adventurer twenty-three years her junior, gave her the last and definitive blow. In her last years, Tetrazzini was surrounded by some good old friends, among them her protégée Lina Pagliughi, but also besieged by spiritualists and other charlatans who tricked her into unsuccessful real-estate investments and similarly disastrous financial enterprises. The lady who in 1910 was able to bring together and keep spellbound two-hundred thousand people in the streets of San Francisco for a memorable and unprecedented Christmas open-air concert, was lonely and almost destitute when she died on 28 April 1940.<sup>36</sup>

Before embarking upon the analysis of Tetrazzini's recordings, one last word needs to be said about bel canto, a term to which singers and music practitioners habitually refer in a broad sense, often signifying an uninterrupted operatic tradition where composers of different epochs may find their place upon condition that Italian be the common language. Lucie Manén writes that her teacher Anna Schoen-René, a former student of Mathilde Marchesi and Pauline Viardot—the second a daughter of Manuel García (1775–1832)—never mentioned bel canto, a term that, she says, has never been clearly defined.<sup>37</sup> Philip Duey agrees that bel canto is not so easily defined and suggests that it was not before Nicola Vaccai's *Dodici Ariette per Camera per l'Insegnamento del Bel-canto italiano*, published around 1838, that this term had been used in a more precise manner.<sup>38</sup> Although this expression appears in a collection of songs written by himself, Vaccai never used the term bel canto in his method entitled *Metodo Pratico di Canto Italiano per Camera in 15 Lezioni*, which he published in London in 1834. However, in the *Dodici Ariette* he seems to be concerned neither with the singing style of the past, nor with that of his contemporary colleagues. One might even doubt that referring to the teaching of Italian bel canto resulted from

34 Letter preserved at EMI Group Archive Trust, Hayes, partly reproduced by Gattey, *Luisa Tetrazzini*, p. 77.

35 John Pennino, 'Tetrazzini at the Tivoli: Success and Scandal in San Francisco', *The Opera Quarterly*, 8.2 (1991), 4–26.

36 Ample coverage was granted by *The San Francisco Chronicle* and *The San Francisco Call* to the unprecedented event which took place on 25 December 1910; reporters could not agree on the correct number of attendees: the estimates were between ninety and two hundred thousand persons.

37 Lucie Manén, *Bel Canto: The Teaching of the Classical Italian Song-Schools, Its Decline and Restoration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 3.

38 Philip Duey, *Bel Canto in Its Golden Age* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1951), p. 5. Duey refers to Nicola Vaccai, *12 Ariette per camera (in Ch. di Sol), per l'insegnamento del bel-canto italiano*, Ricordi [pre 1840], Catalogue number 12076–12087, <https://www.digitalarchivioricordi.com/en/catalogo/12076>. The second song, 'Il Cosacco della Volga' can be found at the Biblioteka Akademii Muzycznej, Katowice: <https://www.sbc.org.pl/dlibra/publication/335300/edition/316819/content>.

an editorial decision, and that marketing reasons had prevailed over musical ones. Still, the title suggests how the vocal culture that was associated with the concept of bel canto had assumed a more precise identity.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the notion of bel canto became increasingly associated with the idea of an old and unsurpassed school of singing which was all too often threatened by the composers of the new generations. It soon came to signify the growing concern of Italian authors over the aggressions of the German *stile parlante*, and the declamato style of Bellini and Verdi. This concern saw in Rossini the last champion of this glorious tradition and in Bellini the turning point towards its decline.<sup>39</sup> In touching upon the different aspects related to the bel canto tradition, Duey refers to a number of methods and treatises spanning the years from the early seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth century, also suggesting the idea of a long and uninterrupted tradition. In his comprehensive analysis James Stark also maintains that bel canto is a term still 'in search of a meaning, a label that is widely used but only vaguely understood'.<sup>40</sup> In his opinion, bel canto is a concept that takes into account two separate but related matters: a highly-refined method of singing in combination with any style of music that employs this kind of singing in a tasteful and expressive way.<sup>41</sup> He sets the foundation of this style at the beginning of the seventeenth century and elaborates on its main principles, referring to the method by Manuel García II (1840–1842); his analysis includes Giulio Caccini's *Le nuove musiche* (1602), Pier Francesco Tosi's *Opinioni de' cantori antichi e moderni* (1723), Giambattista Mancini's *Practical reflections* (1774) and Francesco Lamperti's *Guida teorica-pratica* (1864), among many others. What Manén, Duey and Stark have in common, is the idea that the scientific study of the voice has been a pivotal component in the bel canto tradition, that is to say the analysis of the physiological functions and the use of the mechanisms of voice production as investigated by Manuel García II thanks to the laryngoscope. Duey is mainly concerned with what he calls the physiological and hygienic factors in its development,<sup>42</sup> while Stark focuses on the mechanisms regarding voice production, registers, expression, and touches only *in passim* on the question of ornamentation and coloratura.

What appears to be problematic in this approach is the idea that the works of Caccini, Cimarosa, Rossini, and Verdi (at least in so far as his early operas are concerned) are to be associated with the same notion of bel canto, an approach that late nineteenth-century singers do not seem to have shared. Moreover, singers were trained in the bel canto tradition long after the mid-nineteenth century. If we look at the careers of Patti, Melba, Sembrich and Tetrizzini, their repertoires featured no composer earlier than Rossini, with the occasional exception of the worshipped Mozart; eighteenth-century operas were out of fashion and therefore no longer sung, while composers like Giulio Caccini and Claudio Monteverdi were virtually non-existent. Composers from the late nineteenth century were also out of the picture. In this regard Rodolfo Celletti argues that

with Bellini and Donizetti (except for a few operas) the right of the opera historian to speak of bel canto, whether for or against, begins to decline, either positively, or in a polemical sense. When the hot-headed fan in the gallery, or the professional hagiographer, refers to a soprano who makes an impeccable job of the runs in *Traviata*, or a tenor who tosses off a top note in *Tosca*, as a bel canto singer, it is simply a misnomer. In fact, the moment opera begins to admit realism and to advocate it in place of abstraction, stylization, and ambivalence of timbre, bel canto is on the wane.<sup>43</sup>

In the turn towards the declamato style used in combination with more realistic plots and dramatic settings, what was lost was the aim of bel canto, or, as Celletti suggests, the capacity to evoke a sense of wonder through unusual quality of timbre, variety of colour and delicacy, virtuosic complexity of vocal display, and ecstatic lyrical abandon. In order for them to evoke the sense of wonder Celletti refers to, singers were not only entitled, but

39 Duey, pp. 8–10. See also Martha Elliott, *Singing in Style, A Guide to Vocal Performance Practices* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 126–59. As we will see, Francesco Lamperti was among the first to point the finger at Vincenzo Bellini.

40 James Stark, *Bel Canto, A History of Vocal Pedagogy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), p. xvii.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 189.

42 Duey, *Bel Canto in Its Golden Age*, p. 60.

43 Rodolfo Celletti, *A History of Bel Canto* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996 (first Italian edition 1983)), pp. 12–13. Rossini himself seems to have declared that bel canto consisted of three elements: the instrument, that is the voice, the technique, and the style, this last involving taste and feeling. See Leonella Grasso Caprioli, 'Singing Rossini', in *The Cambridge Companion to Rossini*, ed. by Emanuele Senici (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 193.

encouraged, to make all those changes that were necessary to keep the audience spellbound, in accordance with the dramatic situation and the meaning of the lyrics. This idea informed bel canto singers' approach to music notation and guided their use of ornamentation, passages, runs, and roulades. This point has been emphasised by Robert Toft, who illustrates how central this practice was and provides modern singers with practical advice on how to approach the repertoire, taking reference from the relevant contemporary source documents.<sup>44</sup> The principles governing this performance practice are to be found in the most important voice tutors and singing methods of the time. Suffice here to say that, despite the continuous attacks coming from those contemporary critics and commentators who were concerned with the manner in which bel canto singers enslaved poets and composers to their vanity at the expense of dramatic consistency, singers were encouraged to work wonders by adorning melodies and making changes, on the condition that they did so with taste and consideration.

Hector Berlioz thus described Italian singing in 1832:

No doubt beautiful voices—not only sonorous and clear, but agile and flexible—are more common in Italy than elsewhere. Such voices facilitate vocalisation, and, by pandering to that natural love of effect which I have already mentioned, must have given birth to the mania for *fioriture* which deforms the most beautiful melodies, and to those convenient formulas which give all Italian phrases so strong a family likeness. We may thank the same causes for those final cadences which the singer may embellish as he pleases, but which torture many a hearer by their insipid uniformity, as well as for that incessant tendency to buffoonery that obtrudes itself even in the most pathetic scenes; in fact, for all those abuses which have rendered melody, harmony, time, rhythm, instrumentation, modulation, the drama, the *mise-en-scène*, poetry, the poet, and the composer, all abject slaves to the singer.<sup>45</sup>

The idea that singers abused the scores and were not true to their intentions continued in the following decades. Traces of this concern can be found, among others, in Castil-Blaze, who wrote in 1856: 'The sopranists were at all times extremely insolent. They forced the greatest masters to conform to their caprices. They changed, transformed everything to suit their own vanity. They would insist on having an air or a duet placed in such a scene, written in such a style, with such an accompaniment'.<sup>46</sup>

On the other hand, García illustrates the application of this principle in his celebrated method:

As the ornaments do not contain in themselves particular sentiments, the feeling they convey will depend of the way in which they are accented; their choice must, notwithstanding, be regulated by the meaning both of words and music, for instance, such ornaments as would be used to depict a *grandiose* sentiment, would be unsuitable to the air of Rosina in the *Barbiere*; the merest discrepancy between the character of the piece and its *fioritures* would constitute a striking fault.<sup>47</sup>

As an example, García offers two ornamented versions of the 'Cavatina' of the Conte in *Barbiere*, 'Ecco ridente il cielo' (Figure 8).

García considers the second version too languid for the character who sings it, a young and noble lover, while the first does not raise any question. Instead, to our eyes the first example is likely to appear overloaded with embellishments of different kinds, while the second might be understood as more discreet, hence more appropriate and tasteful. García then provides the reader with some more detailed instruction on how to add

44 Robert Toft, *Bel Canto, A Performer's Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

45 *Mémoires de Hector Berlioz: comprenant ses voyages en Italie, en Allemagne, en Russie et en Angleterre, 1803–1865*, English translation by Rachel (Scott Russell) Holmes, and Eleanor Holmes, *Autobiography of Hector Berlioz* (London: Macmillan and Co. 1884), p. 259.

46 Castil-Blaze, *L'Opéra-Italien de 1548 à 1856* (Paris: 1856) p. 317.

47 García, *Treatise on the Art of Singing*, ed. by Albert García (London: Leonard, [1924]), p. 57. See also the Ricordi edition, 1842, p. 38. 'Siccome non é possibile di stabilire preventivamente delle categorie di fioriture adatte al bisogno dei diversi sentimenti, perciò l'allievo dovrà considerare gli abbellimenti, non in sé medesimi, ma relativamente al sentimento che esprimono. Questo sentimento dovrà il suo carattere, non solamente alla scelta delle note ed alla forma dei passi, ma forse più ancora all'espressione che loro comunica il cantante. Quello dunque che è mestieri consultare continuamente nella ricerca delle fioriture si è l'intenzione particolare delle parole e della musica. Quelle fioriture che dipingessero un sentimento grandioso non potrebbero convenire, per esempio, alla cavatina di Rosina, ecc. Il più piccolo disaccordo tra il carattere del pezzo e quello delle fioriture basterebbe per costituire un errore'. While the first volume of the French edition had appeared in 1840, the second volume appeared only in 1847, five years after the Italian translation (1842).



or substitute for an ornament. The general principle is, in short, that 'a musical idea, to be rendered interesting, should be varied, wholly or in part, every time it is repeated'. In the same chapter he discusses the use of appoggiaturas, turns, trills (or shakes) and cadenzas, whose importance should not be underrated.<sup>48</sup> In light of what he suggests, the example discussed above presents a richly embellished version that is consistent with the expression of the young Count's passion, where vigorous feelings equate to fast passages and brilliant runs. The cadenza in the penultimate measure invites a similar approach, in opposition to the second, which is more languid.

However, it is not easy for us today to understand what these authors meant when talking of good taste. Luigi Lablache thus defines it in his method.

True taste consists in an exquisite judgment of what is appropriate; in an aptness to invest one's self with the character of the piece to be performed; in adding energy to it by analogous coloring, and in putting oneself into a state of feeling, so well in accordance with that of the author, that there results a oneness, perfect as if it were the product of a single thought. He who possesses this faculty, knows how to put grace and spirit into gay pieces; elegance into those which are only pleasing; sadness into pathetic songs; grandeur and mystery into religious music; warmth and transport into pieces where strong passions are in play. [...] There are two conditions dictated by good taste, and from which we should never swerve in adorning melody.—First, the adornment must never change or obscure the phrase. Second, the ornaments must always be of a character analogous to that of the piece. Thus it would be ridiculous to introduce light ornaments in grave and sustained pieces; it would be equally so to employ impassioned accents in songs of a merely pleasing and elegant character.<sup>49</sup>

He then provides a number of examples illustrating how a plain melodic phrase could be consistently adorned using divisions. These examples are of paramount importance for us to understand how different types of melodic modification were associated with different feelings. For instance, syncopated figures were related to the expression of an impassioned emotion, while a frequent use of appoggiaturas was typical of a mournful condition.

Other contemporary testimonies agree that the difference between a good and a bad singer lay in the taste and consideration with which they chose their ornaments with regard to the role and the aria they had to impersonate. Stendahl, for instance, lamented that bad singers started a new roulade in a light and brilliant way, to conclude it in a tragic and serious manner, or vice versa. A good singer, instead, would not make such a mistake for the sake of showing off the voice at the expense of both the music and the drama. A case in point was Giuditta Pasta.

Extremely restrained in her use of *fioriture*, she resorts to them only when they have a direct contribution to make to the dramatic expressiveness of the music; and it is worth noting that none of her *fioriture* are retained for a single instant after they have ceased to be useful. I have never known her guilty of those interminable frescoes of ornamentation which seem to remind one of some irrepressible talker in a fit of absentmindedness, and during which one suspects that the singer's attention has wandered far out into vacancy, or else that he had started out with one intention, only to change his mind upon the subject half-way through.<sup>50</sup>

Of the same opinion was Henry F. Chorley, the music critic of *The Athenaeum*, who praised Pasta for her realism and for the careful attention with which she chose her *fioriture*, which she never changed. Chorley recalled her singing 'Il soave e bel content' from Giovanni Pacini's *Niobe* (1826) on two different occasions over two decades, with the same ornaments.<sup>51</sup> Fury, rage and revenge were associated with the use of brilliant divisions and rapid passages, frequent appoggiaturas convey a sense of gravity and dignity, small graces were synonyms for elegance

48 On the practical use of these devices see Toft, *A Performer's Guide*, pp. 106–63.

49 Luigi Lablache, *Method of Singing* (Philadelphia: Ditson, [n.d.]), p. 96. First edition: Luigi Lablache, *Metodo completo di canto* (Milan: G. Ricordi, 1842), p. 90, facsimile edition with an introduction by Rodolfo Celletti (Milan: Ricordi, 1997).

50 Stendhal, *The Life of Rossini (La vie de Rossini, 1824)*, translated by Richard N. Coe (New York: Criterion Books, 1957), p. 368.

51 Henry F. Chorley, *Thirty Years' Musical Recollections* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1862, two volumes), vol. I, p. 130.

and nobility.<sup>52</sup> As already mentioned, a completely different question would be whether and to what extent singers were really able to improvise these changes.<sup>53</sup>

Having been a long time dying, the age of bel canto expired with Giovanni Battista Rubini's last breath (1854), argues Henry Pleasants.<sup>54</sup> As early as the 1860s Francesco Lamperti was among the first to address the issue and lament the death of bel canto: 'It is a sad, but nevertheless undeniable truth, that the art of singing is in a terrible state of decadence', he laments in the opening chapter of his *The Art of Singing*.<sup>55</sup> If the repertoire associated with this tradition was such that a singer endowed with the necessary talent could find the best and surest master in the music itself, things changed dramatically with Bellini and Verdi. However, if it is not clear whether and to what extent operas later than Rossini's should still be considered as bel canto, it is safe to argue that singers continued to be trained in its principles well beyond the first decades of the nineteenth century. Tetrizzini's recorded interpretations, as well as those of many other contemporary divas, are testament to this tradition.

<sup>52</sup> See also Henry Pleasants, *The Great Singers, from the Dawn of Opera to Our Own Time* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1966), pp. 19–21.

<sup>53</sup> Let us remind ourselves of the tirade against songstresses in Benedetto Marcello's *Teatro alla Moda*, or the concerns expressed by Maria Anfossi on whether singers were really able to improvise. Maria Anfossi, *Trattato teorico-pratico sull'arte del canto*, London, ca. 1840, p. 72, cited in Toft, p. 109. John Gothard also recommended that singers memorise their cadenzas in order to avoid useless risks: John Gothard, *Thoughts on Singing* (Chesterfield: Pike, 1848), p. 46. On this topic see also Damien Colas, 'Improvvisazione e ornamentazione nell'opera francese e italiana di primo Ottocento', in *Beyond Notes. Improvisation in Western Music of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, edited by Rudolf Rasch (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), pp. 255–76.

<sup>54</sup> Pleasants, *The Great Singers*, p. 134.

<sup>55</sup> Francesco Lamperti, *The Art of Singing* (New York: Schirmer, 1890), p. 1. First edition Francesco Lamperti, *Guida teorico-pratica-elementare per lo studio del canto dettata dal Prof. Francesco Lamperti per le sue allieve del R. Conservatorio di musica di Milano* (Milan: Ricordi [1864]).