

# THE VOICE OF THE CENTURY

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



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Cover image: Photograph of Luisa Tetrazzini on the front page of *The San Francisco Call*, 25 December 1910.

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# Conclusions

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To form an opinion about the vocal style of a performer like Luisa Tetrazzini through the analysis of her recorded interpretations is not an easy task. As anticipated at the outset of this volume, to embark on such a thankless task as the transcription of the operatic arias a singer may have recorded a century ago may result in a challenging exercise, all the more so if one considers how many details can get lost in the process.

Still, an incredible amount of information can be gleaned from the recordings left by Luisa Tetrazzini, especially if one takes into consideration the context in which she worked and the manner in which the operatic repertoire and its interpretative canons were evolving. One first indication emerges repeatedly from the folds of this discussion, regarding the anachronistic position occupied by Tetrazzini at the outset of the twentieth century. This condition assumes special value if we consider that her recorded interpretations are a testament to a tradition that, although considered as *passé*, was still vibrant. As we have seen, changing the score was a distinctive feature of this tradition and operas that were ascribed to the so-called *bel canto* repertoire were all subject to textual manipulations of some kind. In the case of *Barbiere*, Tetrazzini's interventions went beyond the music and followed a long-lasting tradition involving a metatheatrical dimension. With the lesson scene, divas took the opportunity to transform an aria into a miniature recital where they took over the entire stage, leaving aside the composer, the libretto, the plot and the notion itself of dramatic consistency; the character of Rosina abandoned the stage, to return only after a token of appreciation was paid to the singer, thus originating a mechanism of theatrical estrangement. For this mechanism to work smoothly the complicity of the public was an indispensable condition and, as we have seen, at some point announcing what encore the star of the evening would insert at the end of the lesson scene came to be part of a marketing strategy that was strongly embedded in the operatic production system. However unconceivable for us today, the habit of creating a miniature recital at the expense of the opera, the dramatic mimesis and the composer's intentions tells us a lot about the pivotal role the diva played when it came to promoting the work to be performed, and her status in relation to the composer.

To glean an idea of the charisma these stars exerted on the audience, and their ability to attract thousands of spectators, we should go back to the manner in which ample press coverage was granted to Tetrazzini's public appearances, with detailed accounts of her performances and private life occupying many columns of daily and weekly periodicals. When Tetrazzini arrived in New York in January 1908, the *Evening World* reproduced pictures of Oscar Hammerstein welcoming her upon disembarking from a French liner with two truckloads of trunks. The event was covered by the press, with the attention of the readers drawn to her difficult relationship with her sister Eva, whom she had not seen for years, the contract with the Manhattan Opera House, the quality of her voice, the phenomenal success she had scored at Covent Garden, her seasickness, and the new costumes she would wear on stage.<sup>1</sup> In 1910 *The San Francisco Call* granted ample coverage to an unprecedented Christmas open-air concert Tetrazzini gave in San Francisco on 24 December and described in great detail how the entire city had been kept spellbound by her voice.

The opulent stream of golden voice stopped the city's traffic last night, stilled the din of cars, emptied stores of Christmas eye shoppers, drew families from thousands of homes, where waited the Christmas tree with its unlighted candles and its wrapped mysteries, and turned this town into a grand opera house, the like of which the world has not seen before, nor will again, I fear.<sup>2</sup>

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1 'New Patti here, Ready for Debut at Hammerstein's', *The Evening World*, 11 January 1908, front page.

2 Walter Anthony, 'Diva Sings Gloriously to Stilled Throngs', *The San Francisco Call*, 25 December 1910, front page.

At five o'clock in the afternoon people were already thronging the streets to hear Tetrizzini, and estimates ranged from 90'000 to 250'000 spectators attending the event.

Mme. Tetrizzini, most popular singer of her generation, stood in the free, breezeless air and sang to nigh on 100,000 people. By her an orchestra whispered its accompaniment. Before her, in packed streets, the tens of thousands stood bareheaded, motionless, rapt. The only sound heard was the beautiful tone of the world's most popular colorature soprano—her voice and the balanced undertone of the instruments.<sup>3</sup>

Similar pictures were not unusual in the nineteenth century and accounts of incidents in which opera-goers stormed into the theatre and rushed inside to secure the best places were not exceptional in many European cities; nor was the representation of a successful diva being celebrated to the verge of public hysteria, with members of the overexcited audience dragging her carriage home and serenading her until sunrise. Marietta Alboni, Jenny Lind, Marietta Piccolomini, like Giuditta Pasta, Maria Malibran, and many more, scored triumph after triumph and the excitement they could ignite among international audiences could easily be compared to today's pop and rock stars.<sup>4</sup> In this regard, the presence of Luisa Tetrizzini's public persona in the international press is consistent with a production system that was typical of Italian bel canto operas and would vanish after the World Wars, possibly with the exception of Maria Callas.

What were the reasons for Tetrizzini's phenomenal success? Of course, the quality of her voice and her extraordinary vocal technique were of pivotal importance; still, for a good songstress to rise to the status of a diva other talents were necessary: among them, a strong personality and an even stronger theatricality. Tetrizzini's impersonation of Rosina, as we have seen, was exceptionally successful because it combined an outstanding vocal talent with a sparkling personality and rare dramatic skills. Tetrizzini shared these qualities with, among others, Adelina Patti, whose Rosina was said to exhibit her singular vocal facility and 'to show her to be a comic actress of genuine stamp—lively, piquant, full of intelligence and sensibility'.<sup>5</sup> As Blanche Partington noted in 1905, Tetrizzini appeared to be as comfortable in the part of young Rosina as she was in Lucia and Violetta.

To me Tetrizzini is a little at her best here. Her Lucia is a wonderful performance; and a pretty trick of comedy makes Tetrizzini's Rosina a thing wholly delightful. But as Violetta the little diva wheedles the quite unusual tear from the grand operatic eye. She brings a pathos as rare as it is effective to the acting of the role.<sup>6</sup>

Again, when she made her appearance as Rosina at Covent Garden in 1908 the *Evening Standard* wrote:

The perfect command with which she blended and voiced both the declamatory and the vocal passages of the florid music, the intuitiveness of her gestures, the subtlety of her inflexions, and moreover the humour and reality with which she invested some very unreal situations was little short of amazing.<sup>7</sup>

What is even more remarkable is that Tetrizzini's figure was not particularly elegant, nor was she handsome or beautiful, like, for instance, Nellie Melba. Little Tetrizzini was short, plump, and her well-rounded face was anything but graceful. Her lack of distinction was noticed by the critic of the *New York Daily Tribune* who, when reviewing her Violetta on 7 January 1908, could not help but notice that 'the person of the singer was in crass contradiction of the ideal picture of the heroine'. Still, the critic remarked, the secret of her success lay 'in the combination of beautiful singing as such, and acting. Not acting in the sense of attitude motion and facial expression, although these were all admirable, but in the dramatic feeling which imbued the singing—the dramatic color which shifted with kaleidoscopic swiftness from phrase to phrase, filling it with the blood of the

3 Arthur L. Price, 'Treasures of Song Fills Ears of City', *The San Francisco Call*, 25 December 1910, front page.

4 Massimo Zicari, 'Cultural Stereotypes and the Reception of Verdi's Operas in Victorian London', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 26.1 (2021), 27–40.

5 *The Times*, 11 May 1863, p. 12.

6 Blanche Partington, 'Traviata at the Tivoli a Great Hit', *The San Francisco Call*, 20 January 1905, p. 4.

7 Cited in Gattey, *Queens of Song*, p. 210.

play'.<sup>8</sup> This quality was emphasised even more strongly by the critic of the *Daily Mail* when Tetrizzini made her appearance as Violetta at Covent Garden in 1907.

She brings to the old Verdi opera a human tenderness and pathos which few of us realised that it possessed. She has the magic gift of 'tears in the voice' and is withal a consummate actress... There were actual tears among the audience, too, on Saturday night when she sang 'Dite alla giovine' lifted out of its customary vocal display into a song of renunciation, heart-rendering in its emotional intensity.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, Tetrizzini was able to sing in whatever position, an ability she used to impress the audience, as was the case with 'Ah! Fors'è lui', even though this ostentation outraged the most conservative critics, who did not spare her some very harsh criticism. Tetrizzini became a diva, one may assume, because she was able to mesmerise the audience thanks to a combination of vocal and dramatic talents. Her strong personality and dissolute lifestyle added to the visibility of her public persona and made her a *prima donna assoluta*. Still, the image of a vain, affected and temperamental creature, a woman who constantly changes her mind and is dedicated to her talent as described by Susan Rutherford,<sup>10</sup> does not fit Tetrizzini's profile in so far as her vocal style and her interpretative approach to the repertoire are concerned. As I have already suggested, once she had learned a role, Tetrizzini, like her colleagues, remained consistent over time and only small changes can be detected in her recorded interpretations. The claim that she followed the whim of the moment is not supported by the evidence I have amassed so far.

In terms of voice quality, style and technique, Tetrizzini helps us better understand how much of the tradition of which she was said to be one of the most valuable representatives still lived in the new century. In addition to the practice of textual manipulations, other interpretative devices are characteristic of this tradition: the use of *voce bianca*, vibrato, *messa di voce*, portamento and tempo modifications.

We have seen how often Tetrizzini was criticised for using the *voce bianca*, which consisted in a clearly audible gap between the very sweet quality of her high notes in the head register and the childlike sound of her lower notes in the chest register. These last were sung with a pinched glottis and their pallid colour and pronounced tremolo were often considered a bad imitation of the wailing of a cross infant. This gap, also described in terms of a yodel effect, was associated with the Rossinian contralto, a singer able to reach the extreme ends of the voice compass, from below the stave up to the top notes above it. This incredible extension, however, was possible only at the expense of a homogeneous timbre and a smooth transition between the lower and the higher register, which instead is typical of today's opera singers. Tetrizzini's strong connection with the past is even more clearly manifest in the frequent use of portamento, which was associated with the expression of sorrowful and pathetic affections. In this regard, the strong continuity between Patti and Tetrizzini is clearly audible in their recordings and is consistent with what nineteenth-century methods recommended. Other signs of this tradition can be recognised in the accented trill she uses, for instance, in 'Come per me sereno' from Bellini's *La sonnambula*, which we find described in García (see here Figure 20), and in the *messa di voce*, which Tetrizzini used in combination with the trill on a final note. To this can be added the use of tempo modifications, whose importance as an expressive device is strongly emphasised by García. Still, the extent of tempo modifications depended more on the individual taste rather than a widely shared notion of tempo variability. In 'Ah! Fors'è lui', for instance, Tetrizzini's recordings present a higher degree of agogic freedom than Nellie Melba's, while those left by Marcella Sembrich feature a much higher variability than both Melba and Tetrizzini. Although they were all said to be the best representatives of bel canto of their time, their approach to the same repertoire presented remarkable differences.<sup>11</sup>

8 'Manhattan Opera House: The Advent of Tetrizzini' (Music), *New York Daily Tribune*, 7 January 1908, p. 7.

9 Cited in Gattey, *Queens of Song*, p. 206.

10 Susan Rutherford, *The Prima Donna and Opera, 1815–1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 27.

11 See Massimo Zicari, 'Expressive Tempo Modifications in Early 20th-Century Recorded Performances of Operatic Arias', *Music&Practice*, 5 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.32063/0507>.

Similarly, to individuate specific differences between Tetrizzini and those interpreters who, although belonging to the same epoch, are said to have created (vocally at least) operatic verismo can be challenging, especially if we consider, again, how often individual differences prevail over more generally shared stylistic traits. For instance, the voice of Gemma Bellincioni (1864–1950), who created the role of Santuzza in Pietro Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* in Rome, was uneven, featuring a thick and sometimes throaty vibrato that would be deemed faulty today. On the other hand, Angelica Pandolfini (1836–1916), who studied in Paris and was one of the best Mimì in Puccini's *La bohème* in Bologna with Arturo Toscanini and in Milan with Leopoldo Mugnone, seems to have belonged to a completely different vocal breed. Her voice is clear and even, her vibrato light and regular, she rarely uses portamento but a gap in the lower register of her voice, similar to Tetrizzini's *voce bianca*, can be heard on occasion in her recordings. Even closer to our modern standards sounds the round, smooth voice of Cesira Ferrani (1863–1943) who created the roles of Mimì and Manon.<sup>12</sup>

What these recordings suggest is that a gradual shift towards a less flourished style and a more homogeneous, louder voice quality would become typical of the younger generations of singers; this change should be considered in relation to and possibly as a consequence of the compositional style typical of the so-called *giovane scuola*, that is to say the group of young composers more or less loosely connected with operatic verismo: Pietro Mascagni, Ruggiero Leoncavallo, Giacomo Puccini, Umberto Giordano. Singers involved in the interpretation of verismo operas came to abandon coloraturas and embellishments typical of *bel canto*, while the voice moved from the purity of tone that was so patiently cultivated by songstresses like Tetrizzini to the fuller sound we hear in more recent discs. At the same time the upper register was sacrificed to the middle range of the *tessitura*, which lends itself better to those sobbing, shouting, whispering utterances that are so dear to verismo characters.<sup>13</sup>

While the success of *bel canto* old-timers was strongly dependant on the talent of the interpreters, modern operas attracted the attention of audiences and critics alike by virtue of their compositional and dramatic qualities. After the success of Verdi's late operas *Otello* and *Falstaff*, the works of Puccini, Leoncavallo and Mascagni monopolised the attention of the international press because of the degree of novelty they presented; finally, the notions of compositional progress and dramatic consistency were emerging from the folds of the discussion and a genre traditionally considered as a form of entertainment was rising to the status of music drama. Hence, it is not surprising that many contemporary commentators drew attention to the triteness of the so-called *bel canto* repertoire and the countless incongruities that were attached to it. In the constant tension between old and new, music cognoscenti considered the tradition embodied by singers like Tetrizzini a nuisance, a distraction, a pastime between yesterday's Wagner and tomorrow's Puccini. *Bel canto* divas were often tolerated for the sake of those aficionados who still cherished a theatrical genre that consisted of set pieces to be sung in costume. On the other hand, younger composers rose to the status of international musical stars, drawing the attention of the international press to the new music drama.

What music critics could neither imagine nor foresee was that Tetrizzini, as well as her more advanced colleagues, worked in a moment where opera as a genre was approaching its conclusive phase. After three hundred years of glamour and fascination, opera was undergoing its final mutation and approaching its concluding phase, soon to become a thing of the past.<sup>14</sup> Although still a widely disseminated form of musical entertainment, in the 1930s opera seasons turned into a living museum or, as has been suggested, a mortuary full of wonderful performances. At the same time, not only did a select number of operatic works from the past find an ideal place in this portrait gallery, but so too did the interpreters whose unsurpassed artistry inspired their composers and kept audiences spellbound for centuries. Together with Mozart, Rossini, Donizetti, Bellini, Verdi

12 These recordings can be found reissued in a double CD recently produced by Michael Aspinall and Ward Martson: *The Creators of Verismo* (vol. I), Martson, 2010.

13 See Rodolfo Celletti, 'La vocalità mascagnana', in *Atti del primo convegno internazionale di studi su Pietro Mascagni*, edited by Fedele D'Amico (Milan: Casa Musicale Sonzogno, 1987), 39–48 (p. 41). A discussion on this shift can be found also in Barbara Gentili, 'The Changing Aesthetics of Vocal Registration in the Age of "Verismo"', *Music and Letters*, 102–01 (2021), 54–79, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ml/gcaa029>.

14 See Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker, *A History of Opera* (New York: Norton, 2012), p. 519.

and many more, the divas who impersonated their heroines have also graduated into this gallery, thus becoming symbols of an iconic past to be revived season after season, with aficionados and cognoscenti continuing to cherish the old melodies of their fathers and grandfathers. Maria Malibran, Giuditta Pasta, Adelina Patti and, of course, Luisa Tetrazzini, to name a few, are part of this living museum.

As Anthony Tommasini suggested in 1998, we have to wait until Maria Callas and Joan Sutherland arrived on the scene in the 1950s and 60s to unlock the gates of this museum and revive bel canto. Despite some occasional productions now and then during the post-war period, the operatic world at large had forgotten this repertoire. As Tommasini recalls, 'when Ms. Joan Sutherland, at 33, won international acclaim in Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* at Covent Garden in 1959, the opera had not been performed there in 34 years. When she sang her first Covent Garden Elvira in Bellini's *Puritani*, in 1964, the opera had not been heard in the house since 1887'.<sup>15</sup> Tommasini's advocacy of bel canto reminds us of those critics who felt like they had to plead for Tetrazzini's vocal talent against her detractors.

But these great artists made the public realise that bel canto operas were not just dramatically preposterous showpieces for brainless, chirpy sopranos. When Callas sang Bellini's *Norma*, the opera emerged as a refined and emotionally shattering piece; to hear Ms. Joan Sutherland and Marilyn Horne in Rossini's heroic *Semiramide*, and Callas in that composer's madcap *Italiana in Algeri*, was to marvel at the range of Rossini's compositional ingenuity.<sup>16</sup>

How does Sutherland's approach to bel canto approximate the tradition embodied by Tetrazzini and Patti? What is the distance between Tetrazzini's generation and those singers who took it upon themselves to revive this illustrious tradition? Generally described as a dramatic coloratura soprano, Sutherland's voice went from G below the stave up to the F above it; it was big and powerful but could be bent to the needs of bel canto, thus allowing her to master long runs and pyrotechnic coloraturas. Her worldwide success depended on her contribution to the revival of long forgotten bel canto; still, her repertoire included not only Rossini's *Semiramide*, Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* and Bellini's *La sonnambula*, but also Francesco Cilea's *Adriana Lecouvreur*, Strauss's *Die Fledermaus*, Puccini's *Suor Angelica* and *Turandot*, Wagner's *Die Meistersinger*. It is even more difficult to draw a comparison with Maria Callas, whose very peculiar voice and personality bear no comparison with any other. Even though she was sometimes said to be the reincarnation of Giuditta Pasta and Maria Malibran because of her soprano sfogato texture, opinions on her vocal size, range and registers could not be more diverse. However, what the audience appreciated in Callas was her ability to breathe life into the characters she interpreted; this, together with the scandals that accompanied her life, made her a veritable diva.

The merit of these last interpreters lies in reviving a long-forgotten repertoire and drawing the attention of modern singers to its musical value. Still, the distance between Tetrazzini and singers like Maria Callas and Joan Sutherland could not be more striking. If, on the one hand, these last resumed a performance practice that involved coloratura passages, extended cadenzas and textual manipulations, the quality of their voice is noticeably different: while Tetrazzini's voice could be uneven, featuring frequent use of portamento and messa di voce, both Callas and Sutherland presented a more homogeneous voice, a thick vibrato, with sparing use of both portamento and messa di voce.

Possibly the most revealing sign of the interest modern singers take in their colleagues from the past is offered by Cecilia Bartoli's recent project on Maria Malibran. Bartoli's attempt to dig into Malibran's archival documents to reconstruct her spectacular vocal mastery and personality is emblematic of this interest. Still, as I have already suggested, one must feel on firmer footing when investigating and reviving the singing style of a diva who has left no recordings than when researching one whose voice can be found recorded on discs or wax cylinders. Would it be the same if Bartoli considered an artist whose musical taste and vocal technique, still audible from old discs, were now perceived as intolerably out-of-date? A survey I have conducted among a group of music professors

15 Anthony Tommasini, 'A New Generation Revels in Bel Canto', *The New York Times*, 8 November 1998, section 2, p. 41. <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/11/08/arts/a-new-generation-revels-in-bel-canto.html>. The music critic must have confused *L'Italiana in Algeri* with *Il turco in Italia*.

16 Ibid.

and students confirms the tension between the manner in which early recordings are valued by expert musicians and the extent to which they tend to cause a sense of strangeness. Music practitioners are constantly confronted with recorded interpretations, but the likelihood that one may consider reproducing the interpretative solutions offered by an old disc is remote. Reviving a style now considered outdated or, even worse, aping the voice of an old but unsurpassed master would jeopardise any artist's effort to gain credibility and climb the podium of international recognition. The imperative of originality dominates the arts and even when a performer decides to revive the style of our ancestors, the urge for novelty and originality prevails over the imitation of the past. Still, to be able to dig into the past and reconstruct its performance style (or styles) represents a wonderful opportunity for getting a stronger sense of historical perspective, questioning our current notion of romantic interpretation, and developing new, inspirational renditions of a much-cherished repertoire.