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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Introduction

> Before leaving the subject of practising I should like to add a word as to the value of the gramophone to the intelligent student. This is, indeed, a truly invaluable adjunct. If to hear the greatest singers is the finest of all experiences for the student, how can it indeed be otherwise? For here in the most convenient manner possible is the means provided for doing this. […] And he can hear them not only now and again, but as often as ever he likes and by his own fireside. If he happens to be studying some particular rôle he can be "coached" in this most practical and unrivalled manner by all the greatest artists of the day. He can take a particular aria and hear it sung by Caruso again and again until he is familiar with every detail of his rendering—can note his breathing, his phrasing, and every other detail in a manner which would be quite impossible by any other means. And having heard Caruso he can then hear the same number sung by various other great artists if he chooses, and benefit still more by comparing their respective readings—by noting how they resemble one another or how they differ, as the case may be, incidentally learning in the process how widely one interpretation may differ from another and still be of the highest order. […] Whether it will be so or not remains to be seen. But certainly it may be said that never before have students been so wonderfully helped. I myself have pleasure in testifying that I have derived the greatest benefit as well as delight from the records of Patti, while Mr. John McCormack has similarly acknowledged his indebtedness to the wonderful renderings of Caruso. And I hope in all modesty that students of the present generation may derive similar help in turn from the records which I myself have made.[1]

Were it not for words like 'gramophone' or 'fireside' and the reference to the iconic, but possibly passé figures of Enrico Caruso and Adelina Patti, not to mention the lesser-known John McCormack, we might think that this opinion was expressed by a singing teacher commenting on the plethora of recordings now available from the Internet. Instead, this passage comes from Luisa Tetrazzini's volume *How to Sing*, which was published in 1923. As early as 1908 Tetrazzini, herself a pioneer of audio recordings, admitted to using discs to form an opinion about her colleagues' vocal and interpretative qualities. Having the opportunity to listen to a reference musician again and again, to take notice of his or her breaths, phrasing, use of staccato and, most importantly, to draw a comparison between different interpretations of the same piece must have sounded revolutionary to a generation of musicians who could not have access to other artists, except for those who taught them in local schools or whose performances in municipal theatres and concert venues they could attend in person.

> In my younger days only those dwelling in the great capitals could hope to hear such artists as Patti, Tamagno, Caruso, Battistini, and so forth, and even those only if means permitted, which was not often in the case of poor students. To-day any one can enjoy this priceless privilege, wherever he may happen to reside, for a comparatively small outlay through the agency of the gramophone.[2]

Tetrazzini, like anybody else at that time, did not have access to her colleagues or illustrious predecessors until audio recordings were made commercially available: 'Have I ever heard Patti? Melba? Not until quite recently', she admitted in 1908, 'except through a gramophone, which I listen to frequently'.[3] Although 'so imperfect a musical instrument', Tetrazzini became already familiar with this new technology at the outset of its development, having her voice recorded as early as 1904 for the American Zon-O-Phone.[4] However, it was on the occasion of her

1 Luisa Tetrazzini, *How to Sing* (New York: Doran, 1923), pp. 111–14. The same passage can be found at pages 103–05 of the first English edition (London: C. Arthur Pearson, Ltd., 1923).
2 Tetrazzini, *How to Sing*, p. 112 (p. 103 in the English edition).
3 'Making of a Great Singer', *The Sun*, 8 March 1908, p. 6.
4 See Charles Neilson Gattey, Luisa Tetrazini, *The Florentine Nightingale* (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1995), p. 333.

https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0277.08

London début in 1907 that her interest in the gramophone and the fast-evolving discographic market took a new turn. As she recalls, the most interesting of her visitors on the Monday morning following her first appearance at Covent Garden as Violetta 'were the representatives of the numerous gramophone companies which have their offices and works in and around the British capital'.[5] She was approached by, among others, the managers of The Gramophone Company, which she considered the best. Having signed a contract and recorded a number of discs, the gramophone became one of her most trustworthy musical companions from then on.

> Let me say here how astonished I have been by the great improvements made in the gramophone which is now unquestionably capable of exquisitely reproducing high-grade music. I have one in each of my homes in Italy, and I find it a delightful entertainer as well as a very serviceable instructor. I have records by all the well-known artists of every one of the operas and ballads which I sing. I constantly try these records over and listen intently for the faults of the artists, and try to profit by their mistakes. I also try over my own records and find that this practice helps me considerably in the task of keeping my voice in perfect condition.[6]

In a moment when recording technologies were ground-breaking and a new market was arising, Luisa Tetrazzini seems to have been among the first to comprehend how useful a disc could be, not only for entertaining, but also for learning purposes. She immediately understood how valuable a tool a recording could be for analysing the style and technique of other performers. After a century, Tetrazzini's words resonate strongly with any of those among us who have worked on discs, whether new or old, and who have learned how much they can teach us about our past as well as today's boundlessly rich musical present.

What Tetrazzini could not possibly predict was the extent and rapidity of this development and the manner in which recordings would change our musical habits, affect our learning strategies and shape our understanding of music. A hundred years after those words were pronounced, listening to a recorded interpretation has become a simple and inexpensive gesture, with countless audio and video files easily accessible via the Internet, uploaded not only by commercial streaming and media service providers but also countless individuals, eager to share with the rest of the world their private collections of musical memorabilia, even if it means infringing international copyright regulations. More discs are digitised and uploaded to the Internet every day, thus offering us the opportunity not only to cross distant geographical frontiers, but also to travel back into our musical past. It is just a matter of a few clicks and the whole musical world discloses itself, in the form of hundreds and thousands of recordings. Whether a single operatic aria, a solo recital or a fully staged opera, what is most striking in this new soundscape, and for some of us most worrisome, is the diverse quality of these recordings, with international stars being as easily accessible as those many home-made performances by passionate, but sometimes insufficiently trained, music practitioners. This abundance of recordings, however confusing with regard to quality and authoritativeness, gives us the opportunity to put our favourite interpreters and interpretations in perspective. Never before has it been so easy to navigate through generations of performers and compare their renditions, as Tetrazzini envisaged in 1923.

But, if these countless audio and video recordings form an incredibly rich body of evidence that each of us can so effortlessly access, how effectively are we taking advantage of them? Do we listen to them critically? How easy is it for us to decide the merits of recorded interpretations of different quality and value, always excepting those few great masters whose credentials and reputation are undisputed? Does anyone with the necessary competence guide us in the process of familiarising ourselves with past and possibly long-forgotten recordings? And, most importantly, how do we respond to them? As has been suggested, this vast body of phonographic evidence has led to a considerable change in our approach to the canonical compositions of the European concert tradition, and has challenged many of our current interpretative norms and habits.[7] Still, research conducted on responses to recordings suggests that they are often regarded negatively for allegedly stifling artistic originality and

5 Luisa Tetrazzini, *My Life of Song* (London, New York, Toronto and Melbourne: Cassell, 1921), p. 214.
6 Ibid., pp. 214–15.
7 Dorottya Fabian, *A Musicology of Performance: Theory and Method Based on Bach's Solos for Violin* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2015), https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0064.

significantly reducing performance individuality and variability.[8] Uninformed listeners and even music students still tend to disregard early recordings and respond with incredulity to the interpretations which they reveal.[9] This is certainly the case for portamento, which was used very liberally by singers like Luisa Tetrazzini, Adelina Patti, Nellie Melba and Marcella Sembrich, but is considered tasteless and inappropriate today, unless used very sparingly.[10] Similarly, the idea of adding unwritten ornamentation and cadenzas into repertoires other than the Baroque may cause many of our colleagues to fall into narrower stylistic prejudices. In recent years scholarly studies in the field of nineteenth-century opera performance practice have made tremendous progress and after long and animated discussions the well-documented practice of adding and substituting for coloratura passages in Italian romantic operas seems to be more generally accepted by both opera conductors and singers.[11] Still, sometimes voice students are forbidden to insert portamentos, to modify tempos or to insert new cadenzas in the arias they are learning, on the grounds of bad taste and improper style. If, on the one hand, it is fair to assume that the habit of learning from recorded performances is extremely common among music practitioners, the likelihood that a young performer will take an early recording as a model is still low. This becomes all the more striking if one considers that, as Robert Philip suggested almost thirty years ago, 'many of the musicians heard on early recordings were trained in the late, or in some cases mid, nineteenth century, and their performing styles can be seen as remnants of nineteenth-century style'.[12] A much stronger case can be made when considering the recorded interpretations left by early twentieth-century composers like Igor Stravinsky, Claude Debussy, Sergei Prokofiev and Benjamin Britten, to name but a few. Should we not consider their recorded interpretations as the strongest evidence of their compositional and interpretative intentions?

Music practitioners are often confronted with a dilemma: even when they come to value the living tradition that discs reveal and make accessible, they are constantly urged to express their originality and define their own creative space, a condition that forces them to steer away from models that are perceived as anachronistic and passé. However authoritative, early recordings are often understood as the remnants of a tradition that has become obsolete and tasteless. To some extent, this helps to explain the paradox behind the commercial success of modern recordings of early music as a consequence of the extraordinary growth of so-called historically informed performance practice (HIPP). The repeated attempts made by performers specialising in a particular genre or period to recreate a musical past which is documented only in text-based sources has led to numerous interpretations that, however different from each other, appeal to a large audience and make a big impact in the discographic market on grounds of novelty and originality rather than historical accuracy or verisimilitude, let alone authenticity.[13] In a way, the lack of aural models has been instrumental in enhancing the interpretative creativity of those who re-invented, say, the Baroque by reading eighteenth-century treatises like Johann Joachim Quantz, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach and Francesco Geminiani; instead, listening to and using past recordings as a model would cause them to fall into what may be considered a poor imitation or even a bad replica of those

8 Georgia Volioti and Aaron Williamon, 'Recordings as Learning and Practising Resources for Performance: Exploring Attitudes and Behaviours of Music Students and Professionals', *Musicae Scientiae*, 21.4 (2017), 499–523.

9 Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, 'Listening and Responding to the Evidence of Early Twentieth-Century Performance', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 135.1 (2010), 45–62.

10 Deborah Kauffman, 'Portamento in Romantic Opera', *Performance Practice Review*, 5.2 (1992), 139–58. https://doi.org/10.5642/perfpr.199205.02.03

11 Philip Gossett, Divas and Scholars. *Performing Italian Opera* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2006), p. 264. See also David Lawton, 'Ornamenting Verdi's Arias: The Continuity of a Tradition', in *Verdi in Performance*, ed. by Alison Latham and Roger Parker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 49–78; Will Crutchfield, 'Vocal Ornamentation in Verdi: The Phonographic Evidence', *19th-Century Music*, 7.1 (1983), 3–54; Roger Freitas, 'Towards a Verdian Ideal of Singing: Emancipation from Modern Orthodoxy', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 127 (2002), 226–57. Hilary Poriss, *Changing the Score: Arias, Prima Donnas, and the Authority of Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Romana Margherita Pugliese, 'The Origins of Lucia di Lammermoor's Cadenza', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 16.1 (2004), 23–42.

12 Robert Philip, *Early Recordings and Musical Style* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 1.

13 In this regard, Richard Taruskin's idea still holds good, that today's notion of authenticity is more a symptom of commercial propaganda than a description of a historical approach to the past; as he suggests, often 'a thin veneer of historicism clothes a performance style that is completely of our time, and is in fact the most modern style around. Richard Taruskin, 'The Pastness of the Present', in *Authenticity and Early Music*, ed. by Nicholas Kenyon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 137–206 (p. 152).

models. No matter how much one values early recordings and the authority of those interpreters, the imperative of originality prevails over any effort to develop a historically informed approach by referring to those recordings. Reviving a style now considered outdated or, even worse, aping the voice of an old but unsurpassed master, would jeopardise a young artist's effort to gain credibility and climb the podium of international recognition.

But, if imitating the voice of one old master would be detrimental to one's creativity, one could safely assume that comparing different models would result in a larger palette of interpretative choices, a more critical understanding of our past and a less idiosyncratic response to the musical contents revealed by these recordings. With this in mind, it should be easier to understand why reconstructing Luisa Tetrazzini's vocal style through the systematic analysis of her recordings is an enterprise worth undertaking. Still, why on earth should anyone embark on such a thankless task as the transcription of the operatic arias a singer may have recorded a century ago? What's the point in wasting endless hours transcribing a recorded voice when one could so easily form an idea by simply playing those very discs? Although the importance of working on sound material from the past in order to understand and reconstruct a performance practice should be more obvious now, the same cannot be said of the necessity of transcribing it in music notation, a task that, as ethnomusicology has long demonstrated, implies an enormous loss of information. Then again, what's the point in listening to a crackling sound recording over and over again with the idea that its transcription will capture something that our ear may have missed?[14] If we assume that music notation by its very nature fails to capture all the details and subtle nuances that make the difference between a music score and its realisation, is there anything we can gain among all that we lose?

In a way, the answer lies in the persisting tyranny of the printed page, that is to say our inclination, whether as music scholars or practitioners, to rely more strongly on texts than any other kind of source. It is not just a question of habit, nor is it a pedantic insistence on the traditional paradigms of historiography. The need for text-based sources, or better, the necessity to turn sound sources into texts, lies in one of the conditions that allow us to study and investigate them: comparability. Historians do not rely on just one source to study an event or a historical process, but on many; they construct their interpretation of the past by collecting and comparing sources. This task becomes much easier if the sources we try to compare lie in front of us in the form of a written document; on the contrary, if we had to listen to one recording after the other and rely uniquely on our memory, the task would become extremely challenging, if not impossible.

There is at least one more good reason why transcribing and comparing may represent a particularly effective way of investigating the recorded interpretations of singers like Luisa Tetrazzini: transcriptions can be especially helpful when it comes to examining a performing tradition in which changing the score was not just a common habit but a stylistic feature endorsed by generations of musicians and distinctive of each individual interpreter. These changes, which included the addition of cadenzas, the use of ornamentation, coloratura passages, small graces, vibrato, portamento and so forth, were considered as expressive devices to be used with taste and consideration, in order to convey the sense of the drama. Each interpreter was encouraged to shape her own stylistic identity by way of a distinctive approach to the repertoire; this involved choosing a set of interpretative devices that worked as a unique and characteristic watermark.

Transcriptions can also be extremely helpful when it comes to comparing the contents of recorded interpretations with what we read and learn from nineteenth- and early twentieth-century singing methods and other text-based source material. By comparing the coloraturas suggested by, say, Manuel García and Mathilde Marchesi with what we hear in early recordings, we form an idea of what the line of continuity may have been, between the nineteenth-century masters who set the paradigms of bel canto and the younger generations of interpreters who inherited that tradition. How this singing culture evolved, or what survived of it at the outset of the twentieth century, may be better understood by analysing the early recordings left by those singers who had been trained in that tradition.

14 For a discussion on the necessity for any of us to analyse by comparing see also Nicholas Cook, 'Performance Analysis and Chopin's Mazurkas', *Musicae Scientiae*, 11.2 (2007), 183–207, https://doi.org/10.1177/102986490701100203

Of course, it is hazardous to draw generalisations from the relatively poor evidence we have at our disposal. Can we draw a line between those traits that were distinctive of an individual interpreter and those that were shared among all those who had been trained in the same singing culture? To what extent are these outstanding—and in many ways exceptional—interpretations typical of a broadly shared musical language? To what extent were the tenets of the so-called bel canto still valid at the beginning of the twentieth century? How does Tetrazzini's voice and style compare with those of her contemporary colleagues? What is the relationship between her and those singers whose career and reputation were connected with the modern Italian operas of, say, Giacomo Puccini, Pietro Mascagni and Ruggiero Leoncavallo? Unfortunately, we have no recordings of Romilda Pantaleoni, the first Desdemona in Verdi's *Otello* in 1887 and the first Tigrana in Puccini's *Edgar* in 1889; nor do we know much of Cesira Ferrani, one of the most celebrated interpreters of Puccini at the beginning of the twentieth century, and whose recordings date back to 1903.[15] In other cases, comparisons can be more easily drawn, although with reference to a small number of arias and a select number of interpreters: among them Nellie Melba, Marcella Sembrich, Amelita Galli-Curci, Claudia Muzio and Tetrazzini's protégée Lina Pagliughi, just to name a few, assume special interest.

Although early recordings represent a valuable source and a great opportunity for anyone willing to form an idea of what our musical ancestors' music making sounded like, a few caveats are necessary before we begin. First, compared to modern standards, the sound of acoustic recordings is dramatically poor. This has much to do with the technical constraints and the rudimentary technologies involved in early discs. An accurate description of these is offered by Fred Gaisberg, possibly the first sound engineer ever, the person who literarily wrote the history of early recording technologies by recording most of the greatest stars of the time.

> Acoustically recorded sound had reached the limit of progress. The top frequencies were triple high C, 2088 vibrations per second, and the low remained at E, 164 vibrations per second. Voices and instruments, especially stringed instruments, were confined rigidly within these boundaries, although the average human ear perceives from 30 to 15'000 vibrations per second and musical sounds range from 60 to 8'000 vibrations.[16]

As Gaisberg explains, much of what contributes to defining the distinctive quality of each voice or instrument, its timbre, is lost if only a small portion of the acoustic information is captured by the recording medium. This can be easily seen in the following picture, which shows the spectrogram of the opening bars of Tetrazzini's 1908 recording of 'Ah! Fors'è lui' in Verdi's *La traviata* (Figure 1).[17]

The yellow horizontal squiggled lines represent Tetrazzini's unaccompanied voice, with her distinctive vibrato, when pronouncing the words 'È strano! È strano' at the beginning of the scena. The parallel yellow lines are the first and most resonant harmonics in the harmonic series, while the green background represents the whole frequency range which early gramophones could capture. Its upper limit falls around 4'500 Hz and the dark area above it, spanning the frequencies between 4'500 and 15'000 Hz, visualises the amount of acoustic information that has been lost in the process. In a modern recording that area would be colourful, with the upper harmonics contributing to a better definition of the timbral quality of the recorded voice. This is why voices sound thin and reedy in early recordings; they should be understood as a good approximation of what they really sounded like.

Fortissimos and pianissimos were almost impossible to capture, and singers were forced to adapt to awkward restrictions in order to cope with the limited range of dynamics that early phonographs could support. This was the case when in 1905 Fred Gaisberg and his brother Will were sent to Craig-y-Nos, in Wales, to record Adelina Patti's voice. She sang into the small funnel while standing still in one position, and Will had to pull her back when she attacked a high note; in 1906 she was placed on a small, movable platform so that she could be pulled

15 All Ferrani's Puccini recordings are included in the 2 CD set *Creators of Verismo*, Marston Records 52062-2. For a review of Puccini's sopranos see Richard Dyer 'Puccini, his sopranos, and some records', *Opera Quarterly*, 2.3 (1984), 62–71, https://doi.org/10.1093/oq/2.3.62

16 Fred W. Gaisberg, *The Music Goes Round* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1942), p. 86. A detailed account of the early development of the d iscographic industry in Great Britain can be found in Peter Martland, *Recording History, The British Record Industry, 1888-1931* (Lanham, Toronto, P lymouth: The Scarecrow Press, 2013).

17 Sonic Visualiser was used to process the audio track, for which a commercial digital transfer of the original disc was used.

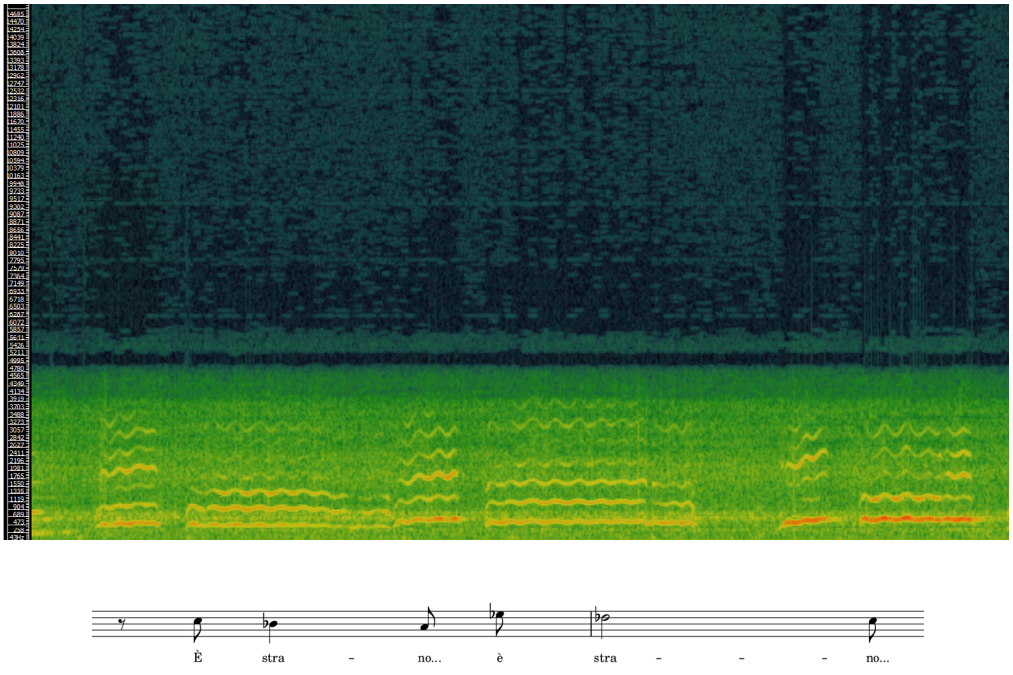

Figure 1 shows the spectrogram of Tetrazzini's 1908 recording of 'Ah! Fors'è lui' in Verdi's *La traviata*.

away from or pushed closer to the horn more easily, depending on the loudness of the passage.[18] Despite these technical limitations, Tetrazzini's *messa di voce* is always distinctively clear in her discs.

A second issue is presented by the use of small instrumental groups instead of real orchestras. As documented by many contemporary accounts and pictures, especially at the beginning of its development, the recording horn could not capture an entire orchestra, even when two funnels were used in combination. As a consequence, orchestras had to be turned into small ensembles with a few instruments representing whole families or substituting for those whose sound did not work well. Again, an account of what was a common practice in early recording studios is provided by Gaisberg.

> The inadequacy of the accompaniments to the lovely vocal records made in the Acoustic Age was their great weakness. There was no pretence of using the composer's score; we had to arrange it for wind instruments entirely. The articulated tuba tone was altogether too insistent. Though marked advances were made in the technique of manufacture which reduced the surface noise on the disc, nevertheless the artist and the selection had invariably to be selected with care so as to cover up all instrumental deficiencies. Only full, even voices of sustained power could be utilized, and all nuances, such as pianissimo effects, were omitted.[19]

String instruments, Gaisberg writes, were often recorded by a subterfuge. A Stroh violin substituted for violins and violas; for a cello they used a bassoon, and a tuba for the double bass.[20] As can be imagined, any pretence of truthfulness, not to talk of philology, should be abandoned when listening to these early discs.

A third limitation was recording time, which in early discs amounted to ca. three to four minutes in total. This raises further questions concerning not only the chosen tempo, but also the cuts and adaptations that were necessary in order to fit the disc length.[21] However, as I have already suggested, even though measuring

18 John Frederick Cone, *Adelina Patti: Queen of Hearts* (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1993), pp. 241–48.
19 Gaisberg, *The Music Goes Round*, p. 85.
20 Ibid. The Stroh violin was developed by Augustus Stroh at the beginning of the twentieth century. Its body consisted of a long, narrow piece of wood, the upper surface of which served as the fingerboard. A flexible membrane mounted at one side of the bridge worked as a pick-up and projected the sound to a metal horn. Hugh Davies, 'Stroh violin', *Grove Music Online*. 2001, https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000047635.
21 See also Neal Peres Da Costa, *Off the Record* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 3–23.

performance parameters such as duration, amplitude and pitch can be problematic, relative variations in tempo and pitch within a recorded performance are still quite reliable. They can provide us with important information on the use of tempo modifications as a means for dramatic expression.[22]

One last question regards the distance between a studio recording and a live performance. It would be naïve to think of a recording (especially an early one) as evidence of what happened in a fully staged, live performance. Still, the consistency between Tetrazzini's recordings and many contemporary reviews of her interpretations in capital cities like London and New York suggests that once she had learned a role, she remained consistent with her original interpretative idea. As we will see, many contemporary reviews describe in some detail the same roulades and melodic modifications that we find in her recordings.

Of course, there is much more that can be learned from these recordings but, as has been already suggested by Dorottya Fabian, to engage with the richly complex phenomenon represented by a music performance or, even more complicated, a recorded music performance may sound like 'dancing to architecture'.[23] As a matter of fact, any attempt to describe expressive devices like vibrato or portamento, to draw comparisons between tempo variations, or to describe the technical and timbral differences in one's voice may lead to potentially hazardous oversimplifications, or shift the focus to a perceptual level different from the aural. One example is the use of a richly metaphorical language, which again, in the attempt to describe those subtle nuances that make Tetrazzini's interpretations unique, result in a flourished, still pointless piece of scholarly prose. A second form of oversimplification involves the use of descriptive statistics to draw evidence-based generalisations on nineteenth-century performance style, for instance by identifying recurring patterns in the analysis of tempo modifications. However robust the results, performers and mere listeners may find it challenging, if not impossible, to draw sufficient practical insight from complex datasets, no matter how closely related they are to a given interpretative device. It should be added that the jargon used in some articles may sound overwhelmingly challenging to both music practitioners and listeners.

All these difficulties notwithstanding, I will touch on those qualities of Tetrazzini's technique and style that were so greatly appreciated by generations of opera-goers and sound so unfashionable to many of today's music practitioners. In a way, the figure of Luisa Tetrazzini is unique in the early twentieth-century operatic scenario: she epitomises the essence of an Italian *prima donna assoluta* with regard to both her vocal talent and personality, at a time when the glorious history of opera was reaching its conclusion. For instance, in 1888, Nellie Melba who was ten years her senior and one of the most celebrated representatives of bel canto, was found deficient 'in that indescribable something which we call charm' by Hermann Klein of *The Sunday Times*. 'Her accents lacked the ring of true pathos', he continued, and although she possessed admirable intelligence, 'the gift of spontaneous feeling has been denied her'.[24] According to Henry Pleasants, 'she learned to go through the motions with professional aplomb, although these motions were said by her detractors not to have gone beyond the raising of one arm in situations of some intensity and two arms for an outburst'.[25] The distance between Melba and her Italian colleagues was also noted by John Pitts Sanborn from *The Globe*, who heard Tetrazzini and Melba many times throughout their careers.

> Melba sang accurately and with dignity of good workmanship. Her singing was stereotyped without the excitement of the unexpected, the suddenly improvised, the inspiration of the heat and joy of song. Sometimes, as Tetrazzini's harshest critics insist, the soprano injuries the music by the variations she introduces; oftener she lifts it above the clouds. This sort of thing was inherent in the great Italian style as in the Italian temperament. Melba's style was rather mid-century French, the style of *Faust* and *Roméo and Juliette* than that of the older Italian roles, though in many respects she sang those roles so well and so delightfully.[26]

22 See Massimo Zicari, 'Expressive Tempo Modifications in Adelina Patti's Recordings: An Integrated Approach', *Empirical Musicology Review*, 12.1–2 (2017), 42–56.

23 Fabian, *A Musicology of Performance*, p. 4, https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0064

24 See Henry Pleasants, *The Great Singers from the Dawn of Opera to our own Time* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1966), pp. 271–72.

25 Ibid., p. 272.

26 Charles Neilson Gattey, *Luisa Tetrazzini. The Florentine Nightingale* (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1995), p. 105.

The aplomb these contemporary critics highlighted can still be heard in Melba's recordings, especially if one focuses on the flawless but slightly inexpressive manner in which she controls the voice and keeps a steady pace. In this regard, the distance between Melba and Tetrazzini could not be more striking, especially if one thinks that they were both described as the personification of bel canto. The same cannot be said of Marcella Sembrich, whose career and vocal qualities very much resemble those of Luisa Tetrazzini; but, Sembrich belonged to that group of nineteenth-century divas who although not Italian, assumed a pivotal role in the development of the Italian operatic tradition. A proficient violinist and pianist, she was appreciated for her intellectual skills, which placed her art on an 'infinitely superior plane to her peers in vocalisation'. [27] Her refined (maybe too refined for an operatic diva?) skills, intelligence and dramatic intensity were noticed also in her interpretation of the Lieder of Robert Schumann, Franz Schubert and Johannes Brahms. Even in the private sphere her figure defies the stereotyped image of a vain, affected and temperamental creature, a woman who constantly changes her mind and entertains dissolute relationships with her *protettori*, with all the sexual implications that this term often carried.[28] Sembrich remained married to Wilhelm Stengel for her entire life and upon his death she withdrew from performing.[29] Other figures like Amelita Galli-Curci and Claudia Muzio made their début when Tetrazzini was at the apex of her career and, one may argue, reached the status of operatic diva in a moment when opera had lost its allure, and cinema was taking over. The careers of singers like Gemma Bellincioni, Rosina Storchio and Cesira Ferrani do not bear comparison with Tetrazzini's: significantly, none of them scored large successes in either London or New York despite their regular tours in Europe. Their singing style was characterised by expression and declamation, two features that were associated with verismo and required bigger voices and more convincing dramatic talents. In Bellincioni's case, her determination to sing roles like Santuzza, which required strong and sustained singing, caused major damage to her voice.

This volume analyses the interpretations of those arias from the so-called bel canto repertoire which Luisa Tetrazzini recorded between 1904 and 1922. In Chapter One I sketch the figure of Luisa Tetrazzini, whom some contemporary commentators described as the voice of the century. In spite of all we know about her public image, professional life and career, not much can be gleaned about her inner thoughts and musical opinions. I put her figure in context and provide a description of those features that were considered typical of bel canto, a notion that needs further consideration.

In Chapters Two to Five I focus on the four composers who are considered the cornerstones of nineteenth-century Italian opera and whose works are still at the core of modern opera singers' professional life: Gioachino Rossini, Gaetano Donizetti, Vincenzo Bellini and Giuseppe Verdi. Select operas from each of these composers were in Tetrazzini's repertoire, together with other Italian and French nineteenth-century works. Although her repertoire was much larger, what she recorded on disc represents a selection of operatic evergreens that were emblematic of a still vibrant operatic tradition. Chapter Two delves into the Rossinian tradition and explores the recordings related to the roles of Rosina and Semiramide, even though Tetrazzini never performed *Semiramide* on stage during her career. Particular attention will be paid to the so-called lesson scene in *Barbiere*, which had already assumed a metatheatrical dimension, breaking the imaginary fourth wall with the audience. Chapter Three focuses on Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammeroor* and *Linda di Chamounix* and addresses, again, the question of the so-called mad scene and the controversial origin of the famous flute cadenza. In Chapter Four, where I deal with Bellini's works, I expand on this issue; Tetrazzini's recordings of Amina's arias from *La sonnambula* see the recording studio transformed into a creative workshop where new and apparently unprecedented cadenzas with obligato instruments originated. Chapter Five elaborates on Verdi's style and the end of bel canto. Tetrazzini's impersonations of Violetta and Gilda were memorable and her recordings are testament to a performing tradition that continued despite Verdi's dramatic treatment of the voice.

27 *The Sun*, 14 March 1900, p. 7 cited in Stephen Herx, 'Marcella Sembrich: A Legendary Singer's Career Rediscovered', *The Record Collector*, 44(1) 1999, 2–38 (p. 18).

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

29 Herx, 'Marcella Sembrich'.

Each chapter tries to reconstruct the phases of the performing tradition to which these composers belonged and focuses on the main characteristics of the arias taken into consideration. Given the much insisted-upon importance of the connection between the dramatic settings and the music, each aria is discussed with regard to the connection between lyrics and musical structure. It is worth remembering that nineteenth-century Italian opera composers worked with a well-established set of conventions in mind (*convenienze*, as they called them), which served as a basis for singers to interact and intervene. The *solita forma* is a case in point: it represents the kind of formal segmentation that is most typically associated with Rossini, Donizetti, Bellini and Verdi. Put in simple terms, a typical set piece, whether a scena and aria, a duet, a trio or even a larger enesemble, involved a first preparatory scena, a *tempo d'attacco*, a *cantabile*, a *tempo di mezzo* and a *stretta* or *cabaletta*.[30] The necessity for a modern interpreter to be familiar with this structure and understand how it worked cannot be sufficiently emphasised since it was, and should be still today, the starting point for the development of different kinds of ornaments, cadenzas and other textual modifications. In fact, the chordal structure typical of a cadenza that singnalled the end of a major section, or the suspended dominant chord accompanied by a *col canto* indication and a fermata sign that preceded the beginning of a repeat, were expected to prompt specific interpretative responses. In a way, by understanding the manner in which music notation and formal segmentation were used, modern interpreters may feel more strongly encouraged to reconstruct the performing practice that was associated with them.

In my analysis of Tetrazzini's recorded interpretations, I will draw attention to those melodic modifications that were typical of the Italian nineteenth-century vocal performance practice and can be found described and exemplified in many contemporary sources. This tradition continued into the twentieth century, to be eradicated soon after the disappearance of the generation of singers to which Tetrazzini belonged. This process, as has long been discussed, was carried out in the name of a much-debated notion of faithfulness to the composers' intentions, of which Arturo Toscanini is considered one of the most emblematic representatives.[31] Much work still needs to be done to bridge the gap between the scholarly knowledge we have amassed on the pre-war performance practice and singers' current approach to this repertoire. Today, we seem to have stripped the training of singers of any memory of that performing practice, and students may find it difficult to understand the manner in which this system of coded information worked. In fact, the concept of *Wecktreue* which still prevails in most of our higher music education institutions contradicts the principles underpinning a tradition that was transmitted orally. Traces of this tradition can be found not only in methods and treatises, but also in recordings, which we should use to complement the sometimes very incomplete instructions offered by a notated score.

For these reasons, this book is aimed not only at scholars but also singers and conductors, in the hope that the overarching discussion regarding nineteenth-century vocal performance practice, together with the many examples and the complete transcriptions of the arias under scrutiny, may guide them in the process of better understanding a century which, in my opinion, still needs to be understood. The book can be seen as a tool to be used in vocal tuition, in a rehearsal room, or when learning a new role. Singers, having read these pages, may feel encouraged to listen to Tetrazzini and her colleagues' recordings again, and to use the transcriptions to find inspiration for more courageous interpretative solutions and ideas. By looking back, they will also look forward.

This book does not embark on a more general discussion on late nineteenth- early twentieth-century operatic divas. Discourses on the prima donna, her role in operatic life, her image, status and condition, can be found in monographs like *The Prima Donna and Opera, 1815–1930* by Susan Rutherford, or *Technology and the Diva*, edited by Karen Henson, to name but two. I refer those readers interested in this different kind of discussion to the above authors, whose contribution and scholarly work prove invaluable.

30 See Marco Beghelli, 'The Dramaturgy of the Operas', in Emanuele Senici (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Rossini* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 85–103, and Scott L. Balthazar, 'The Forms of Set Pieces', in *The Cambridge Companion to Verdi*, ed. by Scott L. Balthazar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 49–68. With regard to Verdi, Balthazar makes a distinction between arias, where the *cantabile* immediately followed the scena, and duets and larger ensembles, where the *tempo d'attacco* connects the scena to the aria.

31 See Robert Philip, *Early Recordings and Musical Style* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511470271