

## ARCHIVING THE PRIMA DONNA: ELENA TEODORINI AND THE FORMATION OF ROMANIAN OPERATIC CULTURE

ADRIANA FESTEU<sup>1</sup> 

**SUMMARY.** This article examines the role of the Romanian opera singer Elena Teodorini (1857–1926) in the emergence of Romanian operatic culture through the interaction between her international performance career, her pedagogical input and the archival documentation that these activities generated. Drawing on correspondence preserved in the Ricordi archive and contemporary press accounts, the study investigates the way in which Teodorini’s career was documented, evaluated, and subsequently incorporated into narratives of national musical history. Although born in Romania, Teodorini received her professional training in Italy and built most of her performing career abroad, appearing on major European stages including La Scala in Milan. After her performing career declined, she developed an extensive pedagogical network by establishing singing academies in Milan, Paris, Buenos Aires, and Rio de Janeiro before returning to Romania late in life to teach at the Bucharest Conservatory. These initiatives reveal both her entrepreneurial spirit as well as her contribution to the transmission of operatic knowledge across borders. By tracing the relationship between archival discourse, institutional memory, and pedagogical practice, the article establishes Teodorini’s active participation in the formation of operatic historiography and in the construction of Romanian musical identity within international operatic culture.

**Keywords:** Teodorini, Romanian opera, historiography, opera archives

### Introduction: women, archives, and operatic historiography

Opera history has long been structured around institutions, composers, and stylistic schools, while performers - particularly women - have frequently been positioned as fitting into these male-dominated structures rather than

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<sup>1</sup> *Dr. Adriana Festeu is a mezzo-soprano, voice teacher and lecturer currently active at the Royal Academy of Music in London and Leeds Conservatoire. E-mail: a.festeu@ram.ac.uk*



as shapers of this history. Recent work in musicology<sup>2</sup> and historiography has challenged this narrative, by foregrounding performers as active participants in the construction of musical knowledge.<sup>3</sup> Within this framework the current



article moves beyond recuperative biography to examine the mechanisms through which women enter, transform, and are preserved within historical discourse, using Elena Teodorini as a case-study. This paper argues that Teodorini's international career, pedagogical entrepreneurship and the archival traces of these accomplishments, played a formative role in the emergence and consolidation of Romanian operatic culture. Celebrated during her lifetime for an international operatic career that connected major European and (South) American stages, she survives today in a constellation of archives: correspondence among critics, composers, and publishers; press accounts of her performances and teaching; photographic documentation; and later institutional commemorations in Romania.

These materials do more than record her activities. They constitute a network of discourses through which her artistic identity emerged and stabilized.

### Life, performance and roles

Elena Teodorini (1857–1926) is widely regarded as the first Romanian singer to achieve a sustained international operatic and pedagogic career. Teodorini was born in the south-western city of Craiova, from an educated

<sup>2</sup> Reproduced with the permission of Archivio Storico Ricordi © Ricordi & C. S.r.l. Milano]

<sup>3</sup> See Susan Rutherford, *The Prima Donna and Opera, 1815–1930*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006; Susan Rutherford Verdi, *Opera, Women*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017; Marcia J. Citron, *Gender and the Musical Canon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

family of actors. Her parents encouraged her musical studies, providing a supportive environment for her artistic training.<sup>4</sup> Teodorini's musical education began at the Milan Conservatory, where she studied piano for three years. She subsequently returned to Craiova, where she undertook private voice lessons with a local teacher before continuing her vocal training with George Stephănescu, a Romanian conductor, composer, and pedagogue who later became a central figure in the development of the national opera in Bucharest.<sup>5</sup> This sequence of training prepared her for the demanding dramatic repertoire that would later define her career. She began her operatic career in 1877 as a contralto, but her voice soon developed into a dramatic mezzo-soprano of considerable range and power. Early engagements in Italian provincial theatres established her as a versatile performer capable of sustaining both lyrical and dramatic roles.

Her international breakthrough came with her debut at La Scala, in 1880 as Marguerite in Gounod's *Faust*, followed by further appearances, in the 1881–1882 season in Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots* and in the premiere of Smareglia's *Bianca da Cervia*.<sup>6</sup> During the 1880s she performed frequently at Rome's Teatro Costanzi and other leading Italian theatres, consolidating her reputation as a leading mezzo-soprano. Contemporary critics praised the breadth of her low register, the homogeneity of her middle voice, and the brilliance of her upper range, noting her dramatic intensity and musical discipline.<sup>7</sup>

Teodorini became associated with major mezzo-soprano roles in Verdi's operas, including Azucena in *Il trovatore*, Amneris in *Aida*, and Ulrica in *Un ballo in maschera*. These roles formed the core of her repertoire during extensive tours in Italy, Romania, and South America. She appeared regularly at the Bucharest Opera and sang at the Teatro Colón in Buenos Aires during the mid-1880s, often alongside prominent international artists.<sup>8</sup> Her interpretations of Verdi's heroines were widely admired for their emotional force and vocal command. In 1886 she also appeared at Covent Garden in London in the soprano role of Valentine in Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots* and in the mezzo-soprano role of Laura in Ponchielli's *La Gioconda*, both demanding considerable vocal stamina and dramatic presence, in different tessituras.<sup>9</sup> Meyerbeer's operas remained an important part of her repertory during subsequent European

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<sup>4</sup> Viorel Cosma, *Elena Teodorini* (Bucharest: Editura Muzicală, 1962), 12.

<sup>5</sup> Viorel Cosma, *George Stephănescu și începuturile Operei Române* (Bucharest: Editura Muzicală, 1964). Cosma, *Elena Teodorini*, 21.

<sup>6</sup> Cosma, *Elena Teodorini*, 42, 51

<sup>7</sup> Cosma, *Elena Teodorini*, 37-40

<sup>8</sup> Cosma, *Elena Teodorini*, 52

<sup>9</sup> Cosma, *Elena Teodorini*, 53

tours. She also maintained a strong connection to the bel canto tradition, performing roles such as Rosina in Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia* and the soprano title role in Donizetti's *Lucrezia Borgia*.<sup>7</sup> Her repertoire developed more into the soprano vocal category, through the additions of roles such as Donna Anna in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, Desdemona in Verdi's *Otello* and Amelia in *Un ballo in Maschera*.<sup>10</sup> Her movement between soprano and mezzo-soprano repertoires reflects late nineteenth-century performance practice, when emerging systems of vocal classification had not yet imposed the stricter boundaries familiar in the twentieth century. This flexibility of voice classification has also been noted in later reference literature. The *Guide de l'opéra* describes Teodorini as "one of the last 19th-century singers who, endowed with an authentic mezzo-soprano voice, sang with equal success the tessituras of *falcon* and soprano, even *soprano sfogato*".<sup>11</sup> The descriptions of her voice preserved in archival correspondence would suggest her closest modern voice-type to be a spinto or dramatic soprano – which would explain the eclectic mixture of projection power combined to a present and expressive low register.

### **Archival correspondence and the construction of vocal authority**

To add a further layer of information to our understanding of Teodorini's voice - beyond what can be inferred from the roles she performed - I turn to the correspondence preserved in the Ricordi archive; here, authoritative figures of the time, including Giuseppe Verdi, articulated their views on her vocal qualities and on the roles they considered most suited to her artistic and technical strengths. This type of professional correspondence illustrates the way in which a significant portion of operatic history was written - it represents a space where singers were evaluated, compared and recommended. In these letters, Teodorini appears less as an individual biography and more as a reputational unit - a singer whose name can establish decisions about casting, repertoire, and production.

One letter attributed to Filippo Filippi (Brussels, 1881) evaluates Marthe Duvivier's suitability to the title role in Richard Strauss' *Salomé* – assessing her voice quality and expressive intensity - while also noting physical appearance ("bella donna" followed by a critique of size):

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<sup>10</sup> Cosma, *Elena Teodorini*, 78

<sup>11</sup> "une des dernières cantatrices du XIXe siècle qui, dotée d'une voix authentique de mezzo-soprano, ait chanté avec le même bonheur les tessitures de falcon et de soprano, voire de soprano 'sfogato' " Roland Mancini and Jean-Jacques Rouveroux, eds., *Guide de l'opéra* (Paris: Fayard, 1995), 831–32.

Salomé. Mad Duvivier: very good: beautiful voice, strong, precise and expressive. Beautiful lady but too big and fat. Remember that this part was written expressly for Teodorini (recte Theodorini); it is her tessitura, her true genre.<sup>12</sup>

Filippi's insistence that Salomé's role seems "made expressly" for Teodorini, situates her as a standard against which other performers are measured. Such evaluative discourse presupposes an infrastructure of circulation: letters travel alongside singers, carrying reputations across cities and institutions. In this sense, correspondence acts as an extension of the singer's body, enabling her presence to be negotiated in absentia. In an 1882 letter to Giulio Ricordi, Filippi expressed confidence in Teodorini's interpretive authority upon learning that she had accepted the title role in Massenet's *Hérodiade*:

Dear Giulio: I'm sorry you're not at the Studio, because I wanted to read you the little piece that will be released tomorrow morning on the talented Teodorini [recte Theodorini]. I'm delighted that she's accepted the part of Herodias, which I'm sure she'll give great prominence to, especially in Act II, where Deschamps was so inadequate in Brussels.

Filippi's remarks position Teodorini as a performer capable of conferring dramatic prominence on a role, particularly in contrast to a previously "insufficient" interpreter. The letter also serves to illustrate how confidence in a singer's interpretive capacity could shape expectations about a work's success. Reputations were negotiated within professional networks, where artistic legitimacy depended not only on vocal ability but also on endorsement within these predominantly male-controlled channels of cultural power.

The Verdi letters of 1887 intensify this interplay between textual circulation and embodied performance. When Verdi names Teodorini among the few artists capable of realizing his conception of Desdemona, he inserts her into a network of compositional imagination that transcends immediate performance:

This is how Desdemona needs to be understood! But who could do it? Maybe la Teodorini, la Borghi Mamo, la Ferni!!? They are very talented and leaving aside the vocal and tessitura issues, with them [ie these singers] I might make myself understood.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> "Salomé. Mad. Duvivier: ottima: voce bella, forte, estesa e molto accento. Bella donna ma troppo grande e grossa. Ricordati bene che questa parte par fatta apposta per la Teodorini [recte Theodorini]; è la sua tessitura, il suo vero genere." Filippo Filippi to Giulio Ricordi, letter discussing the role of Salome and Elena Teodorini, Brussels, 1881, letter no. LLET007196, Archivio Storico Ricordi, Milan,

<https://www.digitalarchivioricordi.com/it/letter/display/LLET007196>

<sup>13</sup> "Così bisognerebbe capire Desdemona! ma chi lo potrebbe? Mah!! Forse la Teodorini, la Borghi Mamo, la Ferni!!? Hanno molto talento, ed a parte la questione voce e tessitura, con

Here the singer becomes part of the composer's conceptual framework: an imagined solution to a dramaturgical problem. What matters is not only that Verdi mentions her, but that such mentions illustrate how women performers enter the historical record through genre-specific protocols: the letter as a site where evaluation becomes durable, quotable, and retrospectively "evidence" of artistic stature. In other words, correspondence itself can be seen as a device of canon formation - one that can preserve women's professional agency while simultaneously filtering it through gendered descriptors and the gatekeeping power of male critics, publishers, and composers.

Although the correspondence of the early 1880s consistently presents Teodorini in positive terms-endorsing her performances of both soprano and mezzo-soprano roles, retrospective evidence suggests that this period may also have concealed early signs of vocal strain. The very breadth of her engagements, celebrated at the time as versatility, may in hindsight signal an overextension of vocal resources. By the late 1880s indications emerge that her instrument was no longer in ideal condition. This tension is obliquely reflected in Verdi's 1887 letter concerning *Desdemona*, where, despite naming Teodorini among the few singers endowed with the "instinct" required for the role, he concludes with a troubling remark:

Ah, this Desdemona is a very difficult role, and I dreamt of artists of talent - or at least instinct - for it, yet I do not see them, nor do I find them. Muzio writes to me that Gabbi (who has a good voice) sings the Willow Song poorly... she tightens the first triplet too much and sustains the final C, which cadences to F, too long. The usual provincialism of those who have no talent. For this part I wanted either Teodorini or Borghi Mamo, or Turolla, or perhaps Ferni, who have instinct: but they all give me the saddest information about the voice[.] Poor Desdemona!<sup>14</sup>

The final phrase introduces a note of uncertainty that contrasts sharply with the confidence of earlier correspondence. While Verdi does refer

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loro potrei forse spiegarmi e farmi intendere." Giuseppe Verdi to Giulio Ricordi, Genoa, 22 April 1887, letter no. LLET001213, Archivio Storico Ricordi, Milan, <https://www.digitalarchivioricordi.com/it/letter/display/LLET001213>.

<sup>14</sup> "Ah questa Desdemona è una parte ben difficile, ed io sognavo delle artiste di talento o almeno di istinto per questa parte, e non le vedo, né le trovo! Muzio mi scrive che la Gabbi (bene come voce) dice male la Canzone del Salice ... stringe troppo la prima terzina e tiene troppo lungo il do finale che fa cadenza al fà. Le solite provincialate di quelli che non hanno talento. Io desideravo per questa parte o la Teodorini o Borghi Mamo, o Turolla, o magari Ferni che hanno istinto: ma tutti mi danno le più tristi informazioni sulla voce[.] Povera *Desdemona!*" Giuseppe Verdi to Giulio Ricordi, Sant'Agata (Piacenza), 5 May 1887, letter no. LLET001215, Archivio Storico Ricordi, Milan, <https://www.digitalarchivioricordi.com/it/letter/display/LLET001215>.



to three singers and does not specify the nature of the problem, his remark corroborates with others circulating at the time (1887), which raised concerns about Teodorini's vocal condition. In hindsight, this fleeting archival trace acquires greater significance when read alongside the documented vocal crisis of the late 1890s. During the 1898 season Teodorini appeared in the title role of *Carmen* alongside fellow Romanian soprano Hariclea Darclée at the Teatro Real and later in Lisbon, engagements that proved among her last major appearances on the operatic stage.

Contemporary accounts report that in one performance of *Carmen* her voice failed before the end of the opera, forcing her to speak her final lines rather than sing them.<sup>15</sup> The following year, during a tour in Romania, the playwright and critic Alexandru Davila - previously an enthusiastic admirer - remarked with

evident disappointment that she was no longer able to sing well.<sup>16</sup>

A similarly critical review appeared in February 1899 in *România Muzicală*, where Iuliu Roșca observed that her singing was no longer “at a high enough level,” adding that <sup>17</sup> her condition had deteriorated to the point that certain solo passages in *Carmen* were replaced by instrumental lines and that she avoided joining the chorus in ensemble numbers.<sup>18</sup> These contemporary assessments illustrate the extent of her vocal decline. At around the turn of the century she continued to appear primarily in recital performances, including engagements documented in 1901, where the reduced demands of the concert format allowed her to remain active despite

<sup>15</sup> Cosma, Elena Teodorini, 95

<sup>16</sup> Cosma, Elena Teodorini, 96

<sup>17</sup> Reproduced with the permission of Archivio Storico Ricordi © Ricordi & C. S.r.l. Milano]

<sup>18</sup> Iuliu Rosca: Romania Muzicala, *Stiri Scurte: Elena Teodorini va canta cu ansamblul Operei Romane* Bucuresti, 10, 1899 nr. 17, p 135.

her vocal issues. In 1902, at the age of forty-five, she formally announced her retirement from the operatic stage, citing paralysis of the vocal folds as the principal cause. Although she occasionally continued to sing in public after this date, her appearances became infrequent, and by 1904 she had largely ceased performing. A small number of early recordings have occasionally been attributed to Teodorini in discographic listings of 1903; however, their authenticity remains uncertain. Viorel Cosma's biography of the singer does not mention any recording activity, and the chronology of her vocal decline - culminating in her retirement from the operatic stage in 1902 due to paralysis of the vocal folds - makes such recordings unlikely. These attributions should therefore be treated with caution.

The archive therefore preserves not only the construction of Teodorini as an authoritative performer, but also the earliest signals, gradual development, and eventual culmination of her vocal decline—processes documented and mediated within predominantly male-dominated correspondence networks.

### **From performance to pedagogy: a continuation of agency**

After withdrawing from the operatic stage, Teodorini devoted herself increasingly to teaching and institutional work. Teaching represents a crucial but often undervalued site of historiographical transmission, especially when the teacher is a woman whose authority is narrated through the achievements of others. In 1902 Teodorini established a singing school in Milan, drawing on the technical foundations of the Italian vocal tradition in which she had been trained. In a letter addressed to the composer Enrico Menzetti in Iași, Teodorini explained that she chose Milan as the place of her voice studio because in Romania she had not found “a suitable medium, nor moral help, nor the financial conditions that might ensure her a reliable future and career.”<sup>19</sup>

The statement reflects both the practical and institutional challenges faced by professional musicians in Romania at the turn of the century and clarifies the motivations behind her permanent move toward pedagogical work abroad. However, the Milan venture proved relatively short-lived, and the school was closed in 1904. A 1908 French article portrays her as an established singing teacher at the Romanian Lyric Academy in Paris, an institution she founded with the aim of training of young singers.<sup>20</sup> Despite its initial success, The Romanian Lyric Academy closed down after only a few years, reportedly due in part to resistance and hostility from segments of the French vocal

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<sup>19</sup> Cosma, *Elena Teodorini*, 118-119

<sup>20</sup> “Elena Theodorini,” *Excelsior* (Paris), 20 January 1918, Bibliothèque Nationale de France (Gallica), <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k7646063b>.

establishment, where professional jealousy and protectionist attitudes toward foreign teachers limited her institutional foothold.<sup>21</sup>

Teodorini continued her pedagogical career in South America. In 1909 she founded the *Accademia Teodorini* in Buenos Aires, where she taught until 1916 before relocating to Rio de Janeiro, remaining active there as a teacher from 1916 to 1922. In Rio she opened another singing academy, the *Escola Superior de Canto Ars et Vox*, which continued its activity until 1923, even after Teodorini's departure. Among her students was the Brazilian soprano Bidú Sayão. Posters from Teodorini's academy *Ars et Vox* depict Sayão dressed in Romanian national costume while performing *Doina Oltului* by Grigore Vasiliu, an image that underscores the circulation of Romanian repertoire within the transnational networks shaped by Teodorini's teaching.<sup>22</sup>

After nearly two decades in South America, Teodorini returned to Romania in 1924 and, in 1925, was appointed professor of singing at the Bucharest Conservatory of Music, where she taught until her death in 1926. She did not return alone: Bidú Sayão followed her mentor to Romania in order to continue her lessons and to perform. The visit appears to have been mutually beneficial. Sayão's vocal success served as a living testament to Teodorini's pedagogical authority while simultaneously recalling the latter's own distinguished performing career. At the same time, Sayão's performance of Romanian songs as part of her concert repertoire illustrates a broader phenomenon in which singers and voice teachers acted as transnational agents of repertoire circulation.

A striking feature of Teodorini's pedagogical activity is her determination on formally naming each of the schools she established. Rather than teaching privately- as many retired singers did - she consistently framed her work within institutions that carried distinctive titles, several of which bore her own name. These academies were not conceived as solitary studios but as organized pedagogical centres, often including other notable artists among their patrons; the celebrated baritone Titta Ruffo, for example.<sup>23</sup> Teodorini's reputation as a *médecin des voix* - a "doctor of voices", renowned for her ability to diagnose and correct vocal faults - further reinforced this institutional identity.<sup>24</sup> By establishing named academies rather than maintaining a private teaching practice, she effectively institutionalized her pedagogical authority, ensuring that her name remained visibly associated with vocal excellence even after her performing career had ended. In this sense, the

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<sup>21</sup> Cosma, *Elena Teodorini*, 143

<sup>22</sup> Cosma, *Elena Teodorini*, 151-153

<sup>23</sup> Cosma, *Elena Teodorini*, 145

<sup>24</sup> Cosma, *Elena Teodorini*, 156

schools functioned not only as sites of instruction but also as mechanisms for preserving and extending her artistic reputation within the professional networks of international opera. At the same time, the institutional traces these academies left - posters, programmes, and press coverage - became part of the documentary record through which Teodorini's legacy would later be reconstructed, effectively contributing to the ongoing process of archiving the prima donna within the historiography of Romanian operatic culture.

Yet these ventures may also be interpreted within the structural constraints that shaped the careers of aging female performers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Opera offered women extraordinary visibility during their vocal prime, but it provided little institutional security once that prime faded. Unlike composers or conductors, whose authority often increased with age, most women singers frequently faced rapid marginalization once vocal decline became audible. Within this gendered economy of fame, pedagogy was not merely a secondary occupation but one of the few available options for converting ephemeral celebrity into sustained professional legitimacy. Teodorini's repeated founding and relocation of teaching institutions therefore suggests continual negotiation with precarity- financial, institutional, and reputational. This dimension becomes particularly significant when read alongside the earlier archival correspondence that first constructed her authority. The archive preserved her as a celebrated performer; the academy enabled her to remain active in the circles where she had already established her reputation as a performer. In resisting anonymity, she resisted historical erasure. Her pedagogical entrepreneurship therefore represents not only personal resilience but intentional participation in the making of operatic history: through teaching and institution-building, Teodorini did not simply survive her performing career - she shaped the structures through which Romanian operatic culture would remember, reproduce, and narrate itself.

### **Performance, diplomacy, and the politics of mobility**

The correspondence surrounding Elena Teodorini not only documents professional evaluation; opera singers have also functioned as agents of what might now be called cultural diplomacy: mobile figures whose performances mediated relationships among courts, cities, and nations.<sup>25</sup> Teodorini's archival traces illustrate how correspondence operated simultaneously as a mechanism

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<sup>25</sup> See Freitas, Roger. *Portrait of a Castrato: Politics, Patronage, and Music in the Life of Atto Melani*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009., Ahrendt, Rebekah, Mark Ferraguto, and Damien Mahiet, eds. *Music and Diplomacy from the Early Modern Era to the Present*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

of reputational formation and as part of a longer historical tradition linking musicians with diplomacy.

Press reports from the First World War period introduced a markedly different narrative into Teodorini's public image. A French newspaper article published in 1918 claimed that the singer had been detained while traveling from South America to Europe after allegedly coming into contact in Buenos Aires with the German diplomat Count Karl von Luxburg and being suspected espionage.

How a spy of Luxbourg was arrested: Thanks to our vigilance, the Italian opera singer Elena Teodorini was unable to return to Europe after a stay in Buenos Aires.<sup>26</sup>

The report described the interception of the Spanish steamer *Reina Victoria Eugenia* by British and French naval authorities and the subsequent search of her luggage, which reportedly led to her arrest. The press account also reveals a notable inaccuracy: it identifies Teodorini as an "Italian opera singer". This misidentification of her correct nationality becomes less surprising when considered in the context of nineteenth-century operatic culture, where singers' names were frequently adapted to suit the linguistic conventions of the regions in which they worked. Performers often adopted Italianized or French forms of their names depending on the operatic market in which they were active. Teodorini herself lived and worked extensively in Italy, and her surname circulated in multiple spellings, most commonly *Teodorini* and *Theodorini*. Such variations are visible in the Ricordi correspondence, where Filippo Filippi explicitly corrected the spelling of her name. The ambiguity surrounding both the spelling and perceived nationality of Teodorini illustrates that in the nineteenth-century operatic networks artistic reputation often circulated more readily than biographical precision.

English-language newspapers amplified the story in sensational terms, portraying Teodorini as a cosmopolitan performer entangled in wartime intrigue.<sup>27</sup> The article made a sensational claim that Teodorini carried encoded intelligence on her own body, alleging that a key to the cipher discovered among her belongings had been tattooed on her shoulders. These accounts, however, rely largely on conjecture and journalistic embellishment, and they illustrate the ways in which the mobility of opera singers could be reframed through the lens of wartime suspicion and media spectacle. While the episode had

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<sup>26</sup> "Comment fut arrêtée une espionne de Luxbourg Grâce à notre vigilance, la cantatrice italienne Elena Teodorini ne put rentrer en Europe après un séjour à Buenos-Ayres. "Elena Teodorini," *Comœdia* (Paris), 13 November 1908, 2, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Gallica, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k46059887/f2.item.r=Elena%20Teodorini>.

<sup>27</sup> "Famous Singing-Girl Tattooed with Secrets for Germany," *The Daily News* (Perth, WA), August 17, 1918, 6. <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/81366851>

little lasting impact on her professional activities, it demonstrates how performers' reputations could be shaped by political anxieties and press narratives beyond the sphere of artistic evaluation. The same mechanisms that enabled reputational circulation also intersected with notions of surveillance that long predated Teodorini's career.<sup>28</sup> Importantly, the Ricordi and Verdi correspondence itself participates in a form of benign surveillance. Each mention of a city or engagement situates Teodorini within a web of connections that extends beyond purely musical concerns. From a historiographical perspective, the coexistence of celebratory correspondence and sensational journalism underscores the instability of archival representation. The same mobility that enabled Teodorini's artistic success also rendered her susceptible to narratives of suspicion. Correspondence therefore functions as a medium through which diplomatic and artistic information converges.

## Conclusion

Within Romanian musical historiography, Elena Teodorini's international career has frequently been interpreted as evidence of national cultural achievement. Yet the trajectory of her career also invites a more nuanced interpretation: the prestige she accumulated abroad ultimately became an important resource for the construction of Romania's own operatic identity.

When Teodorini appeared on the stage of Milan's La Scala in 1880, Romanian musical culture had not yet produced the international compositional figure of George Enescu, underscoring the pioneering character of her achievement. Her presence at Europe's most prestigious operatic institution therefore marked more than a personal triumph: it signalled an early moment of Romanian visibility within the international operatic sphere. Long before Romanian musical modernity would be articulated through composition, it was embodied in performance.

This article has argued that the historical significance of Teodorini lies not only in her performances but also in the archival and institutional processes through which her career has been preserved, interpreted, and mobilized. Correspondence preserved in the Ricordi archive reveals the evaluative language through which nineteenth-century operatic reputations were constructed, situating Teodorini within professional networks that shaped casting decisions and repertoire formation. These documents allow us to reconstruct how leading musical figures of the time - including composers, critics, and publishers -

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<sup>28</sup> See Roger Freitas, *Portrait of a Castrato: Politics, Patronage, and Music in the Life of Atto Melani* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), April Fitzlyon, *The Libertine Librettist: A Biography of Mozart's Librettist Lorenzo Da Ponte* (London: John Calder, 1955)

understood her voice and the roles most suited to her dramatic and vocal profile.

At the same time, these sources reveal the fragility of operatic careers. The same correspondence that attests to her artistic authority also contains early indications of the vocal difficulties that would eventually bring her performing career to an end. In this sense, the archive preserves not only the consolidation of a singer's reputation but also the gradual erosion of the performing body on which that reputation depended. The archival record therefore captures both the rise and the limits of operatic celebrity, offering a rare glimpse into the mechanisms through which singers' careers were evaluated, discussed, and ultimately historicized.

Teodorini's later activities as a teacher demonstrate another dimension of historical agency. The academies she founded in Milan, Paris, Buenos Aires, and Rio de Janeiro reveal both entrepreneurial ambition and the precarious realities faced by singers whose performing careers had ended. At the same time, they illustrate how pedagogical networks functioned as vehicles for the transmission of repertoire and technique.

Teodorini's career exemplifies the ways in which women performers contribute not only to the artistic life of opera but also to the historiographical structures through which that life is remembered.

The figure of the prima donna becomes inseparable from the archival systems that preserve and reinterpret her work. Archiving the prima donna therefore refers not only to the preservation of documents but also to the broader cultural processes through which performance is translated into historical knowledge. Teodorini's legacy illustrates how women performers participate in the making of operatic history not merely as interpreters of repertoire but as generators of the archival and institutional structures through which that history is written and remembered.

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