

LES QUERELLES DE LA VOIX : FRENCH AND ITALIAN STYLISTIC RIVALRY IN 18TH CENTURY VOCAL PRACTISES, AS REFLECTED IN WRITINGS AND TREATISES

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SUMMARY. The current paper continues the investigation begun in the previous study, which focused on vocal technique and style in 17th century treatises. The final decades of the 17th century witnessed the emergence of an aesthetic and stylistic dispute between the French and Italian traditions of music composition and singing. This rivalry extended into the 18th century, alongside the broader stylistic transformations of the period: the transition from the late Baroque style to the Classical aesthetic, passing through the elegance of the Galant style, and ultimately culminating in the pre-Romantic sensibilities of the late 18th century. This study examines the stylistic rivalry between the French and Italian traditions from the perspective of the period's vocal practices. While the Italian singing school continued to be regarded as exemplary and worthy of imitation, 18th century debates also centered on linguistic questions: which language, Italian or French, is better suited to singing? The divergence was further intensified by the controversies surrounding opera buffa, particularly *Les Querelles des Bouffons*, as well as the rivalry between proponents of Gluck's reform operas and those aligned with Piccinni's operatic approach.

The Italian perspective on vocal practices is primarily reflected in the writings of Tosi and Mancini, whereas other sources — such as Quantz or Burney — offer insights from non-French and non-Italian viewpoints. As in the previous study, the authors emphasize that the historical sources cited represent only a portion of the available material, the selection having been guided by the relevance of each source to questions of vocal production.

Keywords: voice, France, Italy, singing, language, style

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Introduction — The Transition Towards the Classical Aesthetic

The 18th century brought about numerous changes in vocal production and aesthetics alike. During the time of such composers as Scarlatti or Händel, the leading operatic figure was the *castrato*, as proven by the scores ascribed to these singers and the accounts in various pieces of writing dating from that period. A further analysis of these operatic scores also reveals that alongside the castrato, another favoured voice type was the *alto* or *contralto*. According to Marek, the use of the term *alto* in the early 17th century referred rather to *falsestists* and later to *castratos* (alto castratos); the common term when referring to this vocal type was *alto* and not *contralto*³, which came into later in the 17th century. Sources from the 18th century already refer to certain castrato singers as possessing contralto voices. Nonetheless, female contralto singers also performed regularly and were appreciated by such Baroque composers as Händel. Several decades later, Rossini would become one of the composers whose works still reflect the appreciation of the female contralto voice.

The castrato singer continued to be employed in *opera seria*, which would gradually lose its popularity to *opera buffa*, a genre that brought about significant changes regarding the voice types required to portray various characters. Gradually, the *female soprano* gained importance, rising above the castrato voice, and paving the way for the era of the *prima donna* (that reached its height in the 19th century). Several leading female singers of the 18th century were referred to as sopranos, despite the fact that the range they sang in would be considered mezzo-soprano today — a term that was not often employed in the 18th century, according to several sources.⁴

Among the celebrated singers of the 18th century, associated with the works of Händel and Hasse, the singer Faustina Bordoni was praised for her penetrating voice and brilliance in the practice of embellishments. Flutist Johann Joachim Quantz (1697–1773) referred to Bordoni as *mezzo-soprano* — probably owing to the range of her voice, from B flat to G (below high C), with its limits extending downwards — thus designating a subdivision for this voice type among the feminine voices of the era.⁵ Bordoni married composer Johann Adolf Hasse, a leading figure in the establishment of the Galant style. The balance between a more transparent, cantabile style and

³ Marek, Dan H. *Alto. The Voice of Belcanto*. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016, p. 5–6.

⁴ For example, Faustina Bordoni. See also: Wigmore, Richard. *Singing in A Performer's Guide to the Music of the Classical Period*, edited by Anthony Burton. London: The Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music, 2007, pp. 77–79.

⁵ Quantz in Pleasants, Henry. *The Great Singers: From the Dawn of Opera to Our Own Time*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1966, pp. 98–99.

virtuosity is clearly discernible in the works of Hasse, requiring singers to adapt their technique in order to achieve excellence in agility and the ability to sustain long phrases. In his work, *Practical Reflections on Figured Singing* (1774), Giambattista Mancini refers to Faustina Bordoni as a singer who possessed a rare method of singing used with incomparable facility.⁶

The rivalry between France and Italy, already evident in music, was present in the writings of 17th century authors, and continued to be cultivated in the theoretical works of the 18th century. French composers preferred the low male voices, as reflected in the works of Lully or Rameau, but Gluck also favoured the *haute-contre* (high tenor). Regarding the female voices, the Italian predilection for the low voices in the 17th and early 18th centuries was replaced with the preference for high female voices in France. The particularities of the French language, alongside with the aesthetic preferences of the French could explain these inclinations, as well as the notable stylistic differences.

18th century French and Italian treatises describe the qualities a good singer should possess, placing particular emphasis on technical requirements. The similarities and differences between French and Italian vocal styles and techniques are examined in several treatises of the period, highlighting the ongoing musical and stylistic rivalry between the two traditions.⁷

Carrying the Stylistic Rivalry Forward: The French Perspective

The debate between the Italian and French styles of singing, frequently referenced in 17th century treatises⁸ (among these the writings of Millet and Bacilly, for example), became a notable subject of dispute in the early 18th century, as evidenced by the writings of Abbé François de Ragenet and Jean Laurent Le Cerf de La Viéville. The writings of the two authors evoke the controversies between the imitators of Lully and his opponents.

Abbé François de Ragenet (1660–1722) visited Rome in 1698 and expressed his admiration for Italian music and singers. In 1702 he published *Parallèle des Italiens et des Français en ce qui regarde la musique et les opéras*, in which he draws a comparison between French

⁶ Mancini, Giambattista. *Practical Reflections on Figured Singing* (1776). Translated by Pietro Buzzi. Boston: Richard G. Badger. The Gorham Press, 1912, pp. 36–39.

⁷ It is interesting to ponder, whether the dispute between the representatives of the Garcia school and the Lamperti school was a continuation of the dispute between the two traditions, the French and the Italian.

⁸ See: Karácsony, Noémi; Rucsanda, Mădălina Dana. *Considerations Regarding Vocal Technique and Style in Various Treatises from the 17th Century* in *STUDIA UBB MUSICA*, LXX, 1, 2025 (pp. 163–178).

and Italian music and singers. Raguenet considers that Italian language is more naturally adapted to music, and thus to singing, due to its sonorous consonants, in contrast with the numerous mute consonants and rules of pronunciation that characterize the French language.⁹ He praises Italian composition and the manner in which dissonances are treated. Nonetheless, Raguenet confesses that French recitative is superior to Italian, for the latter is too simple and is not properly sung, the voice lacking inflections or modulations.¹⁰

Raguenet observed that the French had a particular fondness for the bass voice in their operas, noting that its use added beautiful contrast and variety to the music. On the other hand, the Italians favored the castrati, whose vocal abilities were regarded by the author as unique: their voices were clear and expressive, soft and agreeable, yet at the same time piercing, powerful, and full of vitality. Raguenet remarked that the voices of the castrati could carry across the largest theatres, while the voices of the French female singers lacked sufficient power to be clearly heard, except by those seated near the stage. The author also praises the castrati's ability to execute long phrases, enriched with dynamic shaping and swellings, as well as passages of agility, noting the manner in which they conclude certain phrases with what appears to be the description of a *trillo*: "(...) with a chuckle in the throat, exactly like that of a nightingale, (and then, they'll conclude with a cadence of an equal length)".¹¹ Raguenet also mentions the exceptional vocal longevity of the Italian castrati. Despite the fact that he strives to be objective, the entire text suggests that Raguenet favors the Italians and holds them in higher esteem than his own compatriots.

Jean Laurent le Cerf de la Viéville (1647–1710) expressed his support for French music in his *Comparaison de la musique italienne et de la musique française* (1702–1706), written as answer to Raguenet's critical perspective in his *Parallèle des Italiens et des Français*. Le Cerf de la Viéville published his work in three parts, reprinted in 1725. According to the author, late 17th century France preferred simplicity, naturalness, and favoured the superiority of reason over the beauty of the senses, even in arts. Unlike Bacilly, who declared his preference for small and high voices, owing to their

⁹ Raguenet, Abbé François. *Parallèle des Italiens et des Français en ce qui regarde la musique et les opéras* (1702). The original edition of the anonymous English translation of 1709, attributed by Sir John Hawkins to J. E. Galliard, published in *Source Readings in Music History. From Classical Antiquity through the Romantic Era* — Selected and annotated by Oliver Strunk. New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 1950. p. 476.

¹⁰ Idem, p. 482.

¹¹ Idem, p. 483.

flexibility,¹² Le Cerf de la Viéville considers that the perfect voice is large and beautiful, sonorous, possessing a wide range, sweetness, precision (*nette*), liveliness, and flexibility.¹³

Liveliness, flexibility, and precision contribute to the preservation of the voice's freshness, in the author's opinion, protecting it from hoarseness — this affirmation could allude to the fact that a solid vocal technique is important for vocal longevity. Le Cerf de la Viéville mentions precisely those qualities that are considered important in the great singing treatises of the 19th century. According to such esteemed vocal pedagogues as Garcia, Lamperti, or Lilli Lehmann, all voices should possess a certain degree of flexibility, that prevents the voice from becoming too heavy; a perfect breath control ensures the liveliness of the voice, the flowing of the musical phrases; precision is related to both intonational purity, but also to the precision of onset and vocal "placement" or "focus".¹⁴

Furthermore, Le Cerf de la Viéville claims that the most important requirement for a singer is correct pitch. Regarding expression and style, he advises recitatives and smaller airs to be sung lightly, while the great airs with more force.

Contrary to Raguenet, regarding pronunciation Le Cerf de la Viéville believes that Italian singers have a faulty pronunciation and have difficulty in being understood.¹⁵

The Impact of Opera Buffa

This dispute between the French and the Italians led to the musical battle known as *Les Querelles des Bouffons*, which unfolded between 1752 and 1754. In the middle of the 18th century, the comic dimension of the

¹² Bacilly, Bertrand de. *Rémarques curieuses sur l'art de bien chanter*. Paris: Guillaume de Luyne, 1671, pp. 41–44.

¹³ Le Cerf de la Viéville, Jean Laurent. *Comparaison de la musique italienne et de la musique française* (1725 edition, published in Jacques Bonnet's *Historie de la musique*) in *Source Readings in Music History. From Classical Antiquity through the Romantic Era* — Selected and annotated by Oliver Strunk. New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 1950, p. 501.

¹⁴ The term "vocal placement" or "singing in the mask" is often controversial, since numerous vocal pedagogues assert that the voice cannot be placed. The term refers to "resonance imagery" according to Stark: "sensations of localized vibrations are used as indicators of good vocal function"; (...) referring "to the notion of directing the tone to the bridge of the nose, the nasal pharynx, the sinuses or cheekbones, the back of the teeth, against the palate, and so on". See also: Stark, James. *Bel Canto: A History of Vocal Pedagogy*. University of Toronto Press, 2003, pp. 51–52.

¹⁵ Le Cerf de La Viéville, Jean-Louis. *Comparaison de la musique italienne et de la musique française*. Bruxelles: F. Foppens 1705, pp. 14–15.

French *ballet comique* gradually increased, while the *opéra bouffon* grew in popularity. In 1752, Pergolesi's *La serva padrona* was performed at the *Académie royale de musique* — an unexpected turn of events, since the *Académie* usually presented *tragédies lyriques* or *tragédies en musique*. The event created an uproar, causing a split among the audience: the supporters of the French tradition against the supporters of Italian *opera buffa* and its French counterpart, the *opéra bouffon*.

Philosopher and writer **Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778)** was also active as a composer, his musical works reflecting the rise of the Galant style and the emerging Classicism. Although Rousseau had not been educated to become a musician or composer, he maintained a deep interest in music, reflected both in his compositions and in such theoretical writings as the *Dictionnaire de musique* (1768). The dispute between French and Italian music, *Les Querelles des Bouffons*, preoccupied Rousseau, whose preference for and advocacy of Italian music is also reflected in one of his compositions, *Le Devin du village* (1752), a French comic opera that suggests the influence of Italian opera buffa.

Rousseau's writings emphasize his preference for Italian music, which he regarded as superior to French music. In his famous *Lettre sur la musique française* (1753), Rousseau compares the two musical traditions, eventually concluding that the Italian style is superior owing to several factors. Regarding the importance of melody and harmony, Rousseau asserts that melody should take precedence — a principle exemplified in Italian music. In contrast, he expressed doubt that true melody exists in French music, describing it as “a sort of modulated plainsong which has nothing agreeable in itself”, only capable of pleasing the ear when adorned with ornaments and *port de voix*.¹⁶ While French music is rendered beautiful only through the performance of skilled singers, Italian music possesses intrinsic beauty, independent of the performer's vocal abilities.

The perfection of Italian melody, according to Rousseau, is the result of several factors: the softness of the language (allowing for expressive inflexions), the perceptible modulations that colour the musical discourse and create delightful contrasts, and the precision that imparts animation to the singing, while the accompaniment remains lively.¹⁷

At the same time, Rousseau maintains that French language is more languid and French voices lack flexibility, most French monologues have

¹⁶ Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Lettre sur la musique française* (1753) in *Source Readings in Music History. From Classical Antiquity through the Romantic Era* — Selected and annotated by Oliver Strunk. New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 1950, p. 640.

¹⁷ Idem, p. 641.

a slow tempo, thus rendering operas rather doleful and tiresome — aiming to touch the heart, the music distresses the ear.¹⁸ Regarding the French recitative, Rousseau is bold enough to state that *“the true French recitative, if one is possible, will be found only by a path directly opposite to that taken by Lully and his successors, by some new path which assuredly the French composers, so proud of their false learning and consequently so far from feeling and loving what is true, will not soon be willing to seek and which they will probably never find.”*¹⁹ He maintains that the Italian recitative represents the ideal model to be followed, combining vivacity and a remarkable imitation of speech with melodiousness, thereby expressing passions without overstraining the singer’s voice.

It is noteworthy to mention that in 1750 Rousseau had written a letter to Baron Grimm,²⁰ in which he compared French and Italian operas, and in which he claimed that French opera is superior to Italian. In this letter, Rousseau wrote that Italian music pleased him, yet failed to move him, whereas French music was enjoyable precisely because it stirred the emotions: Italian music seduces and pleases, but French music truly touches the spectator. Regardless of the skilled Italian singers, pleasant sound, and moving scenes, Italian music failed to truly touch the French audience, according to Rousseau. This lack of emotional stir could also be related to the description of the Italian singers, who torture their throats in order to display their vocal agility, thus placing vocal bravura in the foreground: *“(…) au lieu par exemple d'une femme passionnée qui exprimerait avec sentiment les transports de son âme, on ne voit toujours qu'une chanteuse qui fait des grimaces, et donne la torture à sa glotte, pour vous faire admirer l'agilité de sa voix.”*²¹

If available at the time when Rousseau wrote his praise on Italian music, in 1753, during the *Querelles des Bouffons*, this document could certainly have caused a sensation.

The Italian perspective on the matter is reflected in the treatises of the celebrated singing teachers Tosi and Mancini. However, before delving into a more detailed analysis of this perspective, it is worthwhile to consider Algarotti’s critical view of 18th century Italian opera. **Francesco Algarotti** (1712–1764) was an Italian art critic and essayist, a genuine *uomo universale* of his era, interested in a variety of subjects related to culture, arts, and sciences. In his *Saggio sopra l’opera in musica* (1755), Algarotti writes that

¹⁸ Idem, p. 650.

¹⁹ Idem, pp. 652–653.

²⁰ Jansen, Albert. *Jean-Jacques Rousseau als Musiker*. Berlin, G. Reimer, 1884, pp. 455–463.

²¹ Rousseau to Baron Grimm in Jansen, Albert. 1884. *Op. cit.*, p. 461.

Italian music was often disagreeable to the French ears, yet with the advent of *Serva padrona*, an *intermezzo* that stirred quite a revolution, the French became advocates of the Italian music — referring to the *Querelles des Bouffons*. Algarotti criticized the mediocrity of numerous contemporary Italian compositions, as well as their poor performances, comparing them unfavourably to the successful works of the past. He observed that, “since that time, by a strange vicissitude, as soon as poetry was made to return into the right path, music ran astray.” Nonetheless, Algarotti acknowledges that “all the good musical composition modern Italy can boast of is not absolutely confined to the *intermezzi* and comic operas, for it must be confessed that in some of our late serious pieces there are parts not unworthy of the best masters and the most applauded era of music.”²²

Gluck's Reform of the Opera

It is not known whether Gluck was influenced by Algarotti's *Essay of the Opera*, nonetheless Algarotti's observations reflect Gluck's efforts to purify *opera seria* from all the superfluous elements, both in the vocal and instrumental dimension, and place all the elements of opera (music, dance, staging) in the service of drama and expression. *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762) was Gluck's first opera to embody his reformist ideas, followed by *Alceste* (1767) and *Paride ed Elena* (1770). Gluck's style represented a harmonious union between the Italian operatic tradition, the French declamation, and ballet.

Regarding the vocal dimension, Gluck abandons the virtuosic style of writing, avoiding opportunities for singers to display their agility in long melismatic passages. Instead, he focused on a more syllabic setting of the text and on musical choices that emphasize dramatic meaning. This reform was further achieved through the softening of the distinction between recitative and aria (with Gluck favouring the *recitativo accompagnato*) and through a more fluid musical unfolding. *Orfeo ed Euridice* was first performed in Vienna, with castrato Gaetano Guadagni in the title role, yet for the 1774 Parisian premiere, Gluck transposed the role of Orfeo from castrato to *haute-contre*, to conform to the conventions of French opera — since the French rarely, if ever, used castratos.

In the prefaces of his operas, *Alceste* and *Paride ed Elena*, Gluck elaborates on the principles of his operatic reform, observing that Italian opera in its current state had fallen into ridicule: “When I undertook to write

²² Algarotti, Francesco. *Saggio sopra l'opera in musica* (1755) in *Source Readings in Music History. From Classical Antiquity through the Romantic Era* — Selected and annotated by Oliver Strunk. New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 1950, pp. 670–671.

the music for Alceste, I resolved to divest it entirely of all those abuses, introduced into it either by the mistaken vanity of singers or by the too great complaisance of composers, which have so long disfigured Italian opera and made of the most splendid and most beautiful of spectacles the most ridiculous and wearisome."²³

The dispute sparked by *opera buffa*, which culminated in the *Querelle des Bouffons*, was soon followed by the controversy between the supporters of Gluck and those of Niccolò Piccinni. This new polemic arose after the première of Gluck's *Iphigénie en Aulide* in 1774 at the Salle du Palais-Royal in Paris. Although neither composer appears to have actively engaged in the debate, the zealous support of their followers reveals the enduring nature of the stylistic opposition between the two traditions.

The libretto for *Iphigénie* was adapted from Racine's play by F. L. Du Roullet. Du Roullet wrote a letter in 1772, in which he expressed his support for Gluck's opera, although he clearly states at one point in the letter, that he is not involved in the newly risen stylistic dispute regarding style: *"This great man, after composing more than forty Italian operas, which have had the greatest success in all the theatres where that language is accepted, has been convinced by a thoughtful reading of the ancients and the moderns and by profound meditations upon his art that the Italians, in their theatrical compositions, have strayed from the true path; that the French style is the true style of musical drama; that if it has not yet attained to perfection, the reason must be sought less in the talents of French musicians than in the authors of the poems (...)"*. He further notes that Gluck, a connoisseur of both Italian and French (although the latter spoken with difficulty), clearly expressed his preference for the French language, valuing its clarity and energy. Moreover, the composer was indignant at those who claimed that the French language was incapable of producing valuable musical compositions.²⁴

German and English Perspectives on the Debate

The insights of German flute player and composer **Johann Joachim Quantz** (1697–1773) are worthy to mention, as they provide a more objective

²³ *Dedication of the opera Alceste* (1767) by Gluck in: Einstein, Alfred. *Gluck*. London: J. M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., 1936, pp. 98–100.

²⁴ Du Roullet, F. L. *Letter to M. d'Auvergne* in *Mercure de France*, Octobre 1772, pp. 169–174. Translated to English in *Source Readings in Music History. From Classical Antiquity through the Romantic Era* – Selected and annotated by Oliver Strunk. New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 1950, pp. 676–677.

perspective on the musical landscape of the era. Quantz travelled to Italy, France, and England between 1724–1726, thus having the opportunity to become acquainted with the stylistic particularities of music performance in various important musical centres of his era. In 1752 he published an influential treatise on flute performance, *Versuch einer Anweisung die Flöte traversière zu spielen*, in which he also discusses general questions regarding the musical aesthetics of the period. In the 11th chapter of his treatise, *Vom guten Vortrage im Singen und Spielen überhaupt*, Quantz discusses the Italian and French manners of singing. The author characterizes the Italian manner of singing as expressive, more profound, and artful than the French style, which is simpler, resembling speech more than song, and marked by exaggerated expression, a lack of taste, and insufficient stylistic delivery.²⁵

Quantz claims that the French style of singing is not suitable to virtuosic display, since the pronunciation of the words requires flexibility of the tongue rather than agility of the throat (probably also referring to aspects regarding vocal tract and registration). Furthermore, he adds that the lack of good singers explains why the French compositions lack complexity or difficulty, becoming readily available to be performed by amateurs. Nonetheless, he acknowledges the superiority of the French in matters of theatrical expression.²⁶

English music historian, composer, and musician **Charles Burney (1726–1814)** travelled to France and Italy in 1770, then to Germany, Austria, and the Low Countries in 1772, gathering information for his *General History of Music*, published between 1776–1778. His accounts provide valuable insights into the musical landscape of his time. The author's experiences in France and Italy are recorded in *The Present State of Music in France and Italy* (1771), a work that was well received and served as a model for the fashionable travel diaries of the period.

In Paris, he attended productions of the *Theatre Italien*, noting that “the singing was the worst part of the performance”, because of the faulty vocal emission of the singers (as perceived by Burney): “the French voice never comes further than from the throat; there is no *voce di petto*, no true *portamento*, or direction of the voice, on any of the stages.”²⁷ Regarding the stylistic dispute between the French and Italian music, Burney observed

²⁵ Quantz, Johann Joachim. *Versuch einer Anweisung die Flöte traversière zu spielen*, First edition. Berlin: Johann Friedrich Voß, 1752, pp. 323–324.

²⁶ Quantz, Johann Joachim. 1752. *Op. cit.*, p. 316.

²⁷ Burney, Charles. *The Present State of Music in France and Italy*. Second Edition. London: T. Becket & Co. Strand, 1773, pp. 17–19.

that “the French do not like Italian music; they pretend to adopt and admire it; but it is all mere affectation”.²⁸

With regard to Italian music, Burney praises the excellent singing heard in various theatres, while also offering remarks on performances that were less favourable or even mediocre. After an extensive journey through Italy, Burney eventually returned to France, arriving in Lyon in December 1770, where he attended an opera by Grétry, an experience thus described: “(...) I arrived at Lyons (...) where, in visiting the theatre I was more disgusted than ever, at hearing French music, after exquisite performances to which I had been accustomed in Italy.” Regarding the music, he notes that there were many pleasant passages, “but so ill sung, with so false an expression such screaming, forcing, and trilling, as quite made me sick.”²⁹

Although, as Burney remarks, the expression of French music “is notoriously hateful to all the people in Europe but themselves”, he nonetheless acknowledges that, owing to Rameau, the French are exceptional judges of harmony. He further observes that they can boast agreeable melodies originating from the regions of Provence and Languedoc. Moreover, in their comic operas the French deserve credit for successfully imitating the music of the Italian burlettas, while in dramatic works their poetic composition surpasses that of every other nation.³⁰

The Italian Ideal of Vocal Art

As shown in the authors’ previous research, the origins of the old Italian school of singing may be traced back to the late 16th and early 17th centuries and the emergence of solo singing (accompanied monody). In his *Le Nuove Musiche* (1602) Giulio Caccini outlined several principles regarding what he considered agreeable vocal production (emphasizing the blending of vocal registers to avoid *false* *setto*), as well as guidelines for ornamentation and expressive delivery. Stark argues that Caccini’s vocal technique, along with the style cultivated by the Florentine school, was regarded by later authors and vocal pedagogues as the foundation of good singing.³¹ Although the flourishing of opera in the 17th century is often linked to the growing prominence of castrato singers, the principles later articulated by pedagogues such as Tosi and Mancini (both castrati) had already been established before their rise to fame.

²⁸ Idem, p. 25.

²⁹ Idem, p. 402.

³⁰ Idem, pp. 403–404.

³¹ Stark, James. 2003. *Op. Cit.*, p. 197.

In 1723 the renowned castrato, composer, and teacher **Pier Francesco Tosi** (1653–1732) published his treatise *Opinioni de' cantori antichi e moderni*, translated to English in 1743 and to German in 1757 — which attests to the high esteem in which the work was held by singers and teachers of the time. Apart from vocal technique and instruction, the treatise also deals with aspects regarding theory, tuning, or style. In the opening chapter of his treatise, Tosi laments the scarcity of refined voices in the Italy of his time, with particular concern for female singers. He considers that the main reason behind this is the ignorance of the parents, who aspire to turn their offsprings into singers, regardless of their vocal deficiencies. Tosi agrees with other pedagogues, that one of the capital requirements of the art of singing is perfect intonation, for teacher and student alike. A teacher who does not possess a good ear should neither attempt the delicate task of instruction, nor perform as a singer. At the same time, it is primordial to correct the student's faulty intonation, and, where natural aptitude proves insufficient, the teacher should guide the student toward another profession. Surprisingly, Tosi claims that, with the exception of certain instructors, *"modern intonation is very bad"*.³²

Tosi speaks about two registers, *voce di petto* and *voce di testa*, and insists that the singer must be taught to use both. The idea advanced by Tosi was that the *natural voice* or *chest voice*, advocated for by the 17th century treatises, is limited, therefore the singer must learn how to unite the registers: *"A diligent Master, knowing that a Soprano, without the Falsetto is constrained to sing within the narrow Compass of a few Notes, ought not only to endeavour to help him, but also to leave no Means untried, so to unite the feigned and the natural Voice, that they may not be distinguished; for if they do not perfectly unite, the Voice will be of diverse Registers, and must consequently lose its Beauty."*³³

According to Stark, the English translation of Tosi's treatise, accomplished by J. E. Galliard who also added his footnotes as gloss, created even more confusion regarding the meaning of this terminology, advancing a three-register theory in which the head voice and the falsetto are considered two separate registers.³⁴ Thus, Galliard points out that *"Voce di Petto is a full Voice, which comes from the Breast by Strength, and is the most sonorous and expressive. Voce di testa comes more from the Throat than from the Breast, and is capable of more Volubility. Falsetto is a feigned Voice which*

³² Tosi, Pier Francesco. *Opinioni de' cantori antichi e moderni*. First Edition. Bologna: Lelio dalla Volpe, 1723, pp. 9–11.

³³ Idem, pp. 14–15.

³⁴ Stark, James. 2003. *Op. Cit.*, p. 64.

is entirely formed in the Throat, has more Volubility than any, but [is] of no Substance."³⁵

Despite the fact that Tosi refers to the soprano voice (probably owing to the fact that during Tosi's time the castrato was the favored voice type and the author himself was a castrato singer), and that the register breaks mentioned by him refer to particular voice types, nonetheless it is safe to assume that his method and advices regarding the union of registers were addressed to other voices as well.

Tosi advises against shrill or trembling tones — both of which could be relatable to breathing and support. Despite the fact that the author does not offer explicit indications on breathing, it is noteworthy that he recommends the early study of the *messa di voce* — described as the gradual swelling of the voice from *piano* to *forte*, and then back to *piano* — as a means of demonstrating vocal stability and, by extension, mastery of breath control.³⁶

Similar to the treatises of the 17th century, Tosi as well considers oscillations of the voice and pushing the voice ("*l'inventato stile ermetico di chi canta a onda di Mare provocando le note innocenti con villane spine di voce*"³⁷), as well as and the improper execution of the trillo — resulting in a sound that resembles the bleating of a goat — great vocal faults. In his English translation of the treatise, Galliard interprets Tosi's remark, "*Difetto disgustoso (...) venuto anch'esso di là, da Monti (...)*", as a critique of the French manner of singing, which had been imitated by Italian singers.³⁸ This further raises questions about the accuracy of translations and underscores the importance of consulting sources in their original language, continually comparing the available translations with the originals.

Tosi places great emphasis on aspects regarding ornamentation: the tasteful and technically correct execution of the *appoggiatura*, *trills*, *passaggi*, or *portamento*, stressing the importance of improvising graces within performances. He also explains how recitatives and arias must be sung and offers advice regarding performance. An important aspect is Tosi's insistence that the students spend considerable time in studying sight reading (*solfeggio*), composition, grammar, diction, and acting — all of which contribute to the formation of a complete singer.

³⁵ Galliard's observations in Tosi, Pier Francesco. *Opinioni de' cantori antichi e moderni*. English Translation: *Observations on the Florid Song*. Trans. by John Ernest Galliard, London: J. Wilcox, 1743, p. 22.

³⁶ Tosi, Pier Francesco. 1723. *Op. Cit.*, pp. 17–18.

³⁷ Idem, p. 104.

³⁸ Galliard. 1743. *Op. cit.*, pp. 163–164.

Giovanni Battista Mancini (1714–1800), soprano castrato and voice teacher, published in 1774 his important treatise *Pensieri e riflessioni pratiche sopra il canto figurato*. Similar to Tosi's treatise, the work was so popular that it was translated to English, French, and German as well. Mancini refers to the earlier teaching method in order to highlight the fact the vocal education has declined, students and teachers alike rushing to become successful, yet lacking a solid foundation and a gradual acquirement of technical skills, which could ensure the longevity of their voices: "*When the schools were teaching in good order, the graded study was most observed and since every student gradually passed through all the rules of art, the result was that each voice was perfectly sure in every kind of singing. (...) Other youths suffer from similar mistakes, because their teachers expose them too soon in the theatre, and the praise received deceives both student and teacher.*"³⁹

Mancini maintains that vocal education should proceed gradually, beginning with solfeggio, progressing towards the *messa di voce*, cadenzas, trills, vocal agility, while the study of the recitative should follow after the cadenza has been mastered. He further recommends the study of duets, to refine intonation, develop the ability to blend with another voice, and enhance expressive capacity.⁴⁰

Like Tosi, Mancini also believed in the existence of two vocal registers: *chest voice* and *head voice* or *falseto*. The change of registers is recognized through the weak sounds when the singer reaches limit of the first register and enters the second. Mancini notes that certain voices have the same quality throughout the entire range, probably referring to those singers who have accomplished the blending of registers. The union of registers is deemed a difficult, yet not impossible task, the result of diligent study: "*The great art of the singer consists in acquiring the ability to render imperceptible to the ear, the passing from the one register to the other. In other words, to unite the two, so as to have perfect quality of voice throughout the whole range, each tone being on a level with your best and purest tone. This is art and it is not easy to reach the goal. It takes study, work and industry to correct the defects originated from the more or less strong constitution of the vocal organs, and it requires ability and such a careful use of the voice to render it equally sonorous and agreeable, that few students succeed.*"⁴¹ Nonetheless, the author gives no clear solution as to how the weaker register can be strengthened and the process of uniting the registers seems ambiguous as well.

³⁹ Mancini, Giambattista. 1912. *Op. cit.* pp. 191–193.

⁴⁰ Idem. pp. 190–191.

⁴¹ Mancini, Giambattista. 1912. *Op. cit.*, pp. 58–60.

Although Mancini maintains that proper training and study can remedy numerous vocal faults, he argues that agility cannot be acquired without a natural predisposition. In such cases, the study of agility should extend only as far as the voice allows, since forcing it may cause harm.⁴² He also cautions that agility training should begin only after the registers have been blended, in order to prevent unevenness at register transitions.

French contemporary sources often mentioned the superiority of the French recitative, both regarding style and manner of execution. In his chapter dedicated to *Recitative and Acting*, Mancini praises the contribution of Gluck to the reform of opera and the execution of the recitative. He also notes the severity of French sources with respect to non-French music: “*France, who is so jealous of the glories of her sons, and a strict and severe judge of the glories of foreigners, raised a monument to him [to Gluck] in the middle of the XVIII century.*”⁴³ Mancini quotes Tosi regarding the proper execution of the recitative, emphasizing throughout the chapter that the rules of perfect declamation must constitute the foundation of the recitative — therefore, the recitative should be delivered in a manner that resembles speech, rather than sung. In order to achieve this, the singer must have mastery over his intonation, breath control, support, and projection of the voice, paying attention to the meaning of the text, to accents, points, and commas. He also recommends the use of theatrical recitatives for study, such as those from the operas and cantatas of Scarlatti, D’Astorga, Bononcini, Porpora, etc.

Mancini also identifies several defects, such as the “goaty” or “horse” trill, attributing them to faulty vocal production, more precisely to improper coordination of the mouth and the pillars of the fauces: “ (...) *when a singer does not make use of the fauces but only of the mouth and opens it to the point and shape that he takes when he laughs, it naturally follows that he bleats like a goat or neighs like a horse.*”⁴⁴ These defects are characteristic not only for the trill, but for vocal production in general.

Often throughout the work, Mancini advises against pushing the voice and singing with force, a mistaken singer often does when encountering difficult passages. However, he also cautions against practicing in a soft voice, which often leads to difficulty when having to sing in full voice and in a larger hall, for the voice fails to find its proper *appoggio* and place of projection.

The treatises, written accounts, as well as musical scores of the period attest to the fact that singers had the freedom to choose a tempo and

⁴² Idem, pp. 147–148.

⁴³ Idem, p. 175.

⁴⁴ Idem, p. 137.

dynamic range that was most suitable for them, but at the same time they were expected to have perfect command on the execution of ornamented passages, as well as the ability to improvise ornaments in a tasteful and expressive manner.

Conclusions: 18th Century Developments in Vocal and Stylistic Aesthetics

Criticism of French singing persisted into the 19th century, with several authors attributing the perceived shortcomings of vocal performance to the inherent nasality of the language, but also to the French temperament and culture.⁴⁵ Owing in part to their long tradition of performing dramatic works, the French were particularly concerned with issues of language, pronunciation, and articulation. Aspects pertaining to singing seem to have been of secondary importance to the French, as also suggested by Bérard's *L'art du chant* (1755). The work offers an interesting perspective on French vocal practices in the second half of the 18th century and represents an important resource for understanding the aesthetic ideal of French vocal music of the era. Bérard's treatise is divided into three parts: the first part discusses the voice in relation to singing (*La Voix considérée par rapport au Chant*), the second part, also the most ample section of the treatise, deals with pronunciation and articulation in singing (*La Prononciation & l'Articulation envisagées eu égard au Chant*), while the third and final chapter discusses perfection in singing (*La perfection du Chant*).⁴⁶

The stylistic rivalry between French and Italian music – also evident in the vocal differences of the two schools of singing — can be traced to the divergent aesthetics of their respective traditions. French opera placed greater emphasis on *divertissements*, dance scenes, and ensembles, using music primarily to enhance the meaning of the dramatic text, with singing occupying a secondary role. By contrast, Italian opera privileged solo singing, celebrating virtuosity and the execution of agile *passaggi*, and elevating the voice to a position of primary importance within the musical framework.

Apart from the stylistic rivalry between France and Italy, the 18th century was marked by significant aesthetic and stylistic transformations: from the late Baroque, passing through the Galant style to the balanced ideals of Classicism, culminating with the emergence of pre-Romanticist ideals in the final decades of the century. The Baroque fascination with the grandiose

⁴⁵ Stark, James. 2003. *Op. cit.*, p. 211.

⁴⁶ Bérard, Jean-Antoine. *L'Art du chant*. Paris: Dessaint & Saillant, 1755.

subjects of *opera seria* was gradually replaced with the more realistic portrayals of *opera buffa*. This shift also brought about changes in the vocal types favoured by the audiences and composers alike: the dominance of the castrati began to decline, while the soprano and tenor voices steadily rose in prominence. Although Gluck sought to clear opera from superfluous ornamental passages that had no dramatic meaning whatsoever, florid singing continued to be cultivated well into the 19th century, as Rossini's works also suggest. The range of the singing voice was also expanded, with special attention given to the high notes.

Despite the historical dispute between the two traditions, today's performers of 18th century music must adhere to certain stylistic and technical requirements, regardless of whether the work is Italian or French. These prerequisites include the ability to produce free and even tones with perfect intonation; full control over the voice's dynamic range and mastery of legato; consistent and well-supported sound; a balanced vibrato, akin to the natural vibration of a violin or cello; and the capacity to execute *messaggio di voce* — considered mandatory by Tosi and Mancini, as it demonstrates complete mastery of breath control — as well as *portamento*, the smooth joining of notes through an imperceptible glide across intervals.⁴⁷

Similar to the 17th century, nasal and guttural sounds, as well as tonal instability (such as the wobble or goat-like vibrato), were regarded as vocal faults by 18th century sources as well. Singers were expected to master the free production of sound, avoiding laryngeal constriction and ensuring proper breath support — thus creating the impression of “*singing in the mask*.” The question of vibrato in the performance of 18th century repertoire, however, remains a subject of debate. A correctly produced tone naturally contains vibrato, which should not be suppressed in the pursuit of a straight, “pure” sound. Allowing the natural vibrato to emerge is important not only for vocal health but also for the expressive power it imparts to the voice.

Ultimately, the debate between French and Italian music and vocality may be addressed impartially by recognizing that both traditions are commendable, each within its own domain and suited to its respective language. The music of the two schools reflects their distinct aesthetic ideals, temperaments, and linguistic particularities.

⁴⁷ Wigmore, Richard. *Singing in A Performer's Guide to the Music of the Classical Period*, ed. by Anthony Burton. London: The Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music, 2007, pp. 79–80.

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