"I canti esaltino il suo valore"[1]

Gendering the Operatic Sound of the Heroic

Anke Charton

In April 1826, singer Giuditta Pasta signed a contract with the King's Theatre in London, then under the management of John Ebers. Pasta, who at this point was one of the most celebrated singers of her generation, had previously appeared in London to great success, a fact evidenced by the conditions of the contract granting her not just her pick of roles[2] and the right to refuse any she found unsuitable to her voice, but also the right to choose the colleagues who would appear on stage alongside her.[3] Most remarkable, though, is Pasta's standing among the theatre employees, as declared in the opening article of the contract:

> Art. 1. That Madame Pasta will be hired in the function of *Prima Donna Assoluta* and of *Musico assoluto*, to sing and act in the *opera seria* at the King's Theatre in London for three and a half months, from April 15 to July 31, 1826.[4]

More than any specific *Fach* – Giuditta Pasta, as a *soprano sfogato*,[5] sang a wide selection of stylistically differing parts – this first sentence stakes a gender-crossing

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1 Gioachino Rossini, Tancredi: Dramma per musica, Turin 1815, p. 39 (Act II, scene 8).

2 All English translations, unless otherwise indicated, are my own. "5. Madame Pasta ne sera obligée de chanter pendant la durée de son engagement que dans les opéras suivants: *Tancredi*, *Romeo*, *Otello*, *Semiramide*, *Rosa bianca e rossa*, *Nina*, et *Medea*; Mr. J. Ebers s'engage à monter tous les dits opéras si Madame Pasta le juge nécessaire. [...] 7. En outre des opéras sus-mentionnés, Madame Pasta consent à jouer dans un opéra nouveau qui sera composé exprès pour le dit Théâtre du Roi, de condition pourtant qu'elle doit être entièrement contente de son rôle, autrement elle ne sera pas obligée d'y chanter." (5. Madame Pasta will, for the duration of her engagement, be obliged to sing only in the following operas: Tancredi, Romeo, Otello, Semiramide, Rosa bianca e rossa, Nina, and Medea; Mr. J. Ebers commits himself to producing all of these operas if Madame Pasta should deem it necessary. […] 7. In addition to the operas mentioned above, Madame Pasta consents to appear in a new opera that will be expressively commissioned for said King's Theatre, under the condition that she must be fully satisfied with her part, otherwise she will not be obliged to sing it.) John Ebers, Seven Years of the King's Theatre, London 1828, p. 388.

3 "6. Dans tous les opéras ôu jouera Madame Pasta, ce sera elle seule qui aura le choix des acteurs, la distribution des rôles, la direction absolue pour tout ce qui regarde les répétitions et tout autre pour la mise en scène des dits opéras." (In all the operas in which Madame Pasta will appear, she shall have the sole choice of performers, the casting of the roles, the power of decision for everything concerning the rehearsals and anything else pertaining to the staging of said operas.) Ibid., p. 388.

4 "ART. 1°. Que Madame Pasta s'engage en qualité de *Prima Donna assoluta* et de *Musico assoluto*, pour chanter et jouer l'opéra seria au Théâtre du Roi à Londres pendant trois mois et demi, depuis le 15 Avril au 31 Juillet, 1826." Ibid., p. 387.

5 The *soprano sfogato* is a voice type that does not fit within the *Fach* terms of the twentieth century. It means a voice with a wide range, which was typically crafted through the combination of a mezzo-range tessitura with a lighter, differently colored head register, sepa-

claim on the position of lead singer.[6] The text also specifies that Pasta is taking on the central representative genre, the *opera seria*, a term already slightly outdated at the signing of this contract. In contrast to the comical subgenres of opera, the *opera seria* is central to the construction of uncontested heroic figures: it is an affirmative genre.[7] And even though the selection of parts proposed by Pasta for London range from the naïve country girl driven to madness out of heartbreak in Giovanni Paisiello's *Nina* (1789) to a raging Medea in Giovanni Simone Mayr's *Medea in Corinto* (1813),[8] all of these remain heroic parts in regards to their position within the dramaturgy of each opera, and none of them is a comedy.

The only part on the list actually depicting a hero is Tancredi in Gioacchino Rossini's opera of the same title (1813), a swashbuckling warrior in stark contrast to Desdemona in Rossini's take on *Otello* (1816) or Nicola Antonio Zingarelli's lovelorn Romeo in *Giulietta e Romeo* (1796), an opera that Pasta sang under the title of just *Romeo*.

Vocal depictions of the heroic in opera in the late 1820s are, it seems, not bound by content as much as by the situating of a part within the dramaturgical hierarchy of an opera, and by the singing which constructs aural images of the heroic through a distinct vocal range and style. Heroic demeanor, then, is less a matter of who is singing, but how – also transgressing the borders of a binary gender model.

Pasta's singing both male and female leads as *prima donna* and *primo musico*, a term that was primarily used for castrato singers from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, is not unusual or an exception within opera: in the first half of the nineteenth century, after the demise of the castrati, female singers labeled with the term *contralto musico* inhabited the vacant vocal space of the heroic that those singers had left behind. It is a sign of the gender order of the nineteenth

rated by a noticeable gap. The different coloring of separate registers, which contradicts a late-twentieth-century singing aesthetic, was an artistically valued feature of expression for the *soprano sfogato*, as evidenced, for instance, in Stendhal's effusive praise of Giuditta Pasta's "two-voiced" singing, see Stendhal, La vie de Rossini, Vol. 2, Paris 1824 (Repr. 1923), p. 142.

6 Further underlined in article 3, see Ebers, Seven Years (Fn. 2), p. 387: "3. Dans tous les opéras où jouera Madame Pasta elle aura toujours le choix des rôles de son double emploi." (3. In all the operas in which Madame Pasta will appear, she will always have her choice of role as given by her double engagement.)

7 Affirmative in the sense of being a central genre of mainstream representation, as *opera seria* was for absolutist rule and the space of the court, as opposed, for example, to genres stemming from the traditions of the *théâtre de la foire* with their commenting distance to affirmation.

8 The corresponding operas are *Tancredi* (1813), *Otello* (1816) and *Semiramide* (1823) by Gioachino Rossini, *Giulietta e Romeo* (1796) by Nicola Antonio Zingarelli (usually with the last act swapped out for the variant by Girolamo Crescentini, the Romeo of the opera's world premiere; Romeo was one of Crescentini's signature parts just as it was to become one of Pasta's central roles a generation later), *Nina* (1789) by Giovanni Paisiello and *Medea in Corinto* (1813) as well as *La rosa bianca e rossa* (1820) by Giovanni Simone Mayr.

century, however, that *prima donna* and *primo musico* are seen as two distinct entities divided by gender and distinct enough to have them both listed in Pasta's contract.[9]

A hundred or even merely fifty years prior, a female singer taking on a male part in *opera seria* or in a comedy genre such as the Neapolitan *commedia per musica*[10] was likewise a common occurrence. But other than in Pasta's elaborate 1826 contract, it usually did not warrant more than the brief note "da uomo" (as a man),[11] if at all.

How opera fashions a sound – not only in composition but also in execution, two areas that are still very much interwoven in *bel canto* singing – of the heroic is historically variable, but looking at it through the lens of gender allows a more layered understanding of the heroic and the way it was constructed. This includes not only the sound of the heroine as opposed to the sound of the hero but also the underlying issue of what kind of sound is understood as heroic in the first place, which may or may not be tied to exclusive notions of gender.

Giuditta Pasta, despite her prominent position that allowed her to create spaces outside of social and artistic expectations, serves as a prime example for how notions of gender both inform ideas of the heroic *and* render these ideas more accessible through the lens of the additional construction of gender-based patterns. Pasta's repertoire, then, makes it discernible that the heroic in opera is not, in fact, a rule tied to male and female bodies in different manners but to a voice that embodies the heroic, largely independent of the body that produces its sound. This becomes especially notable when compared to other signifiers beyond gender that contribute to the construction of the heroic, such as age, ability, and ethnicity. All these markers, just like gender, show themselves to be surmountable by the operatic sound of the heroic: it is the voice that makes the hero or the heroine. It does not matter if a singer is far older or far less physically agile than the role they portray: the sound of the voice is the code that defines a role portrayal.[12]

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9 Pasta's London contract has been discussed in Naomi André, Voicing Gender. Castrati, Travesti, and the Second Woman in Early Nineteenth-Century Italian Opera, Bloomington, IN 2006; Heather Hadlock, Women Playing Men in Italian Opera, 1810–1835, in: Jane Bernstein (Ed.), Women's Voices across Musical Worlds, Boston, MA 2004, pp. 285–307; Anke Charton, *prima donna*, *primo uomo*, *musico*. Körper und Stimme: Geschlechterbilder in der Oper (Leipziger Beiträge zur Theatergeschichtsforschung; 4), Leipzig 2012.

10 See Nina Treadwell, Female Operatic Cross-Dressing. Bernardo Saddumene's Libretto for Leonardo Vinci's *Li zite'n galera* (1722), in: Cambridge Opera Journal 10, Issue 2, 1998, pp. 131–156.

11 See the popular example of Carolina Perini being cast as Annio (a *secondo uomo*) in Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *La clemenza di Tito* (1791). Johann Anton André, W. A. Mozart's thematischer Catalog, Offenbach 1828, p. 62: "Sra. Carolina Perini / da Uomo" (Mrs. Carolina Perini / as a man).

12 For a take on the (gendered) physique of the opera singer and its implication in creating an image of the heroic voice, see Sam Abel's discussion of the "Fat Lady", in Sam Abel, Opera in the Flesh. Sexuality in Operatic Performance, Boulder, CO 1996, pp. 12–20.

The *contralto musico* not only gives testimony to a mindset that did not tie the heroic exclusively to just male or just female bodies, it also bespeaks a curious lack of linking the heroic in a fundamentally different manner to male- and female-identified bodies. Still, this does not mean that the space of the heroic in opera is not regulated by gender; instead the importance of gender in constructing portrayals of the heroic is increasing or lessening at different points in history.

Rather than thinking about whether the heroic is linked more closely to male or female figures, the more fruitful question might be whether a hero or a heroine is described as heroic through different patterns. Much of *opera seria*, as the core genre of affirmative opera until the late eighteenth century, holds male and female characters to the same standard of heroism: courage, self-sacrifice, disdain for death, and the willingness to uphold their beliefs against all odds, lest the sovereign demand otherwise. In addition, these standards are expressed in a very similar vocal idiom in male and female roles alike.

As of the nineteenth century, beyond the realm of internationalized *opera seria*, these standards drift towards a binary gender stance, with socially compliant self-sacrifice – usually motivated by romantic love – understood to be heroic when assigned primarily to female characters, while a consciously chosen, unconventional path expressed in warfare or death centered around male-identified characters. These changed standards, structured intricately around a gendered divide, are then also expressed in different music-writing for the singing voice, requiring a different – gender-adjacent – sound.[13]

Opera also knows spaces where the requirements to constitute something as heroic are nearly gender-neutral. It warrants mentioning, however, that in lieu of gender – which has less of an importance, e.g., in *opera seria* – other social markers become essential for the heroic. In *opera seria*, this requirement is class, evident in the removal of non-heroic parts from the plot with the so-called libretto reform around 1700,[14] which was heavily inspired by the *doctrine classique*.[15]

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13 A symbolic fixture for this development is the "ut the poitrine", the "high C" sung in chest voice, first anticipated in broad reception as a sonic choice in 1837 by tenor Gilbert Duprez in Rossini's *Guillaume Tell*. While subsequently, also in concordance with larger orchestra bodies, dramatic voices gained traction, the surplus of a powerful sound, generally at the expense of agility and the stylistic criteria of falsetto singing, was far more strongly applied to men's voices, as evident e.g. in the mid-nineteenth-century writing for the *grand opéra*.

14 The approaches of, among others, Apostolo Zeno and Pietro Metastasio shaped the aesthetic of the *opera seria* libretto around 1700, particularly in regards to eliminating comic personnel and any content not compatible with the concept of *bienséance*.

15 The *doctrine classique* pertains to the French classicist drama of the seventeenth century, but largely influenced the aesthetics of affirmative theatre genres. One of its core principles was stylistic and narrative propriety (*bienséance*), applied to the Venetian-based model of *opera seria* in the late seventeenth century through the libretto work of Apostolo Zeno and Pietro Metastasio. Central to this libretto reform was the removal of supernatural personages and interferences, leaving the stage to a uniformly classed body of aristocracy.

Taking a step back to look once more at the different fields of creation of the heroic within opera – to the content of a work, the dramaturgical constellation of parts, and the voice perceived as heroic – the singer producing the heroic voice needs to be added, which is a field intricately linked to historically variable ideas of gender and of representation at large. If the heroic voice bears male and female variations, they may not just concern a stylistic gendering of sound – meaning, for instance, that a forceful tone or the distinct use of chest register might be exclusively associated with masculine heroism – but it might also concern soundspaces: are there absolute ranges or notes that are only to be sung by a male hero or only by a heroine?

The most striking example of this is the casting of high voices (in the mezzo and soprano range) for the operatic hero, a convention that lost traction around 1800 and was finally aesthetically shunned as of the 1840s. In addition, those high-voiced male heroes sung by men – most prominently by castrato singers between the late 1500s and the Age of Enlightenment– were nearly exclusively taken on by female singers throughout the early nineteenth century in the figure of the *contralto musico*. This twofold application of gender to sound – one in style, one in range – finally connects to the body of the singer and the question whether the gendered expectations of heroic sound can be fashioned onto any body, or whether they are linked to a body under gendered assumptions. In this context, a gendered body can preclude a stylistic and vocal portrayal of the heroic or turn it into a commentary on patterns of the heroic, which as a mode of telling belongs more into the realm of comic opera.[16]

Still, gender, if understood as the interpretation and enactment of a supposedly physical difference of sexes, can matter less or little, given historic circumstances, even while the context is not exempt from gender as a category: it was present, even though it did not necessarily need to be defined by a singing *body*. In Early Modern and Baroque times, the gender of a voice was generally assigned due to how it was employed, both in regards to style patterns and rhetorical positioning. A voice displaying virtuosity was understood as fit for a hero (and a heroine), as was a voice singing from a position of power within the text.[17]

16 On the concept of comedy narrative as an "ex-centric" perspective, see Sebastian Hauck on the example of Stendhal: Zimtfarbener Überrock und Spazierstock-Pirouetten. Über Henri Beyle und Stendhal, in: Friedemann Kreuder [et al.] (Ed.), Theater und Subjektkonstitution. Theatrale Praktiken zwischen Affirmation und Subversion (Theater; 33), Bielefeld 2012, pp. 437–448, here p. 438.

17 On the importance of rhetorical agency in constructing the heroic with regards to the hegemonic dynamics of both power and gender in a vertical order of society, see Anne MacNeil, Music and Women of the Commedia dell'Arte in the Late Sixteenth Century, Oxford 2003, pp. 60–61, and Sarah Colvin, The Rhetorical Feminine. Gender and Orient on the German Stage, 1647–1742, Oxford 1999.

An occurrence that reveals the influence of gendered tropes on the heroic in both physical and vocal form can be seen in the specific tradition of casting female singers in male roles of *opera seria* during the early eighteenth century. It allowed for portrayals of heroic masculinity through voices tied to female bodies, while at the same time limiting these female singers to the repertory of the *secondo uomo*, which seems to bring the (female) body back into play: to make a true hero, it apparently takes a male body. This casting practice is not to be generalized throughout the reign of *opera seria*; it is one of many regional microclimates within the relatively stable fabric of the genre. It was commonplace and the rule of the day for George Frideric Handel's works for London,[18] while at the same time in Venice, Antonio Vivaldi repeatedly worked with *prima donna* singers, who traditionally held a special standing in Venice[19] and were cast as *primo uomo* next to castrato singers as *secondi uomini*.[20] Yet another microclimate governed Rome where the law-mandated absence of women within the ranks of the Catholic Church bore an influence on the public Roman stages, which often resulted in all parts being cast with male singers, generally castrati, a practice also at work in the genres of comic opera.[21]

In contrast, male singers in heroic female roles in *opera seria* did not occur in London, and a similar gender border applied vice versa to the male heroic. After an early *primo uomo* for a soprano (Margherita Durastanti in the first rendition of *Radamisto* in 1720), Handel's considerable output of male roles written for female singers remained restricted to *secondi uomini*, including, for instance, the hero's friend or brother in arms, an unlucky (or sometimes lucky) rival in love, and the outright antagonist.

The casting of women singers in the slot of *secondo uomo* was not exclusive in return: castrato singers and, at times, lower-voiced male singers such as tenors

18 The particular Handelian casting of female singers as *secondi uomini* was recently discussed at the annual Handel conference in Halle/Saale (Handel and his interpreters, June 2015) by Thomas Seedorf: Der doppelte Radamisto. Zur Besetzungspraxis von Heldenpartien bei Händel, in: Händel-Jahrbuch 62 (2016), pp. 165–176.

19 Regarding the status of the *prima donna* within the specific social fabric of Venice, see Wendy Heller, Emblems of Eloquence. Opera and Women's Voices in Seventeenth-Century Venice, Berkeley, CA 2003, and Beth Glixon, Giulia Masotti, Venice, and the Rise of the Prima Donna, in: Journal of Seventeenth-Century Music 17, 2011: http://sscm-jscm.org/jscm-issues/volume-17-no-1/giulia-masotti-venice-and-the-rise-of-the-prima-donna/, 8 January 2018.

20 See, for instance, Vivaldi's *Farnace* (1726) and *Orlando furioso* (1727) that both saw a female singer in the role of the *primo uomo* next to two castrati as *secondi uomini*. See Reinhard Strohm, The Operas of Antonio Vivaldi, 2 vols., Florence 2008; Charton, *prima donna* (Fn. 9), p. 238.

21 See, for instance, the reference in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Italienische Reise (1816), in: Goethes Werke (Hamburger Ausgabe), Vol. 11, pp. 372–373: "Nachts in die komische Oper. […] Die als Frauenzimmer verkleideten Kastraten machen ihre Rollen immer besser und gefallen immer mehr." (In the evening at the comic opera. […] The castrati dressed as women are getting better and better at their roles and garner more and more praise.)

were also cast, while the part of the *primo uomo* was generally reserved for a star castrato. This adds another twist to a modern-day look at the gendering of operatic heroes, since it was the castrati who themselves came under heavy fire as supposedly 'effeminate' and 'emasculated' in the mid- and late eighteenth century,[22] with Enlightenment thought gaining a stronger footing throughout Europe. It seems forced, then, to exclusively tie the casting of *primo uomo* and *secondo uomo* parts to a gendered divide, particularly since castrato singers of a lesser standing often appeared as *secondi uomini*, making apparent the financial factor of simply casting the most expensive singer as the lead, and since the castrato singer himself, while perfectly understood as male, represented a distance from a later, 'naturalized' idea of gendering.

Trying to analyze the castrato singers and their ability to embody the sound of the heroic from a post-Enlightenment perspective will usually struggle with moving past (or, as it were, to a point before) those naturalized gender assignments that are in their institutionalized objectivity an inherited burden of nineteenth century thought. It is important to remember that the castrati, much like the casting in *opera seria* at large, simply followed a different layout of masculinities, and an overall different understanding of representation and identity.

Within that particular frame of mind, the castrato, as a fashionable vocal powerhouse and an emblematic figure of artifice, fits the hero's bill better than a perhaps equally well-voiced female singer, which makes the casting not just about sound, but marks it as a place where social assumptions of onstage and offstage spaces are linked (and in which gender may or may not take a part): the most famous would portray the most heroic.

From this perspective, Giuditta Pasta's portrayals of the heroic both in male and in female roles also warrant another reading: Of course Pasta's standing was, in the late 1820s, such that it would have been incomprehensible to have her cast in anything *but* the lead role. Pasta could have chosen for her London 1826 contract a line-up of solely female roles. She did, however, not only include Romeo and Tancredi, but had herself expressively hired as both *prima donna* and *primo uomo*, staking a claim on all the registers of the heroic, by mastery of her craft.

A look at Pasta's roles in London 1826 – the warrior Tancredi, the lyrical Romeo, the mad lover Nina, the raging Medea, the victimized Desdemona, the

22 See, for instance, Christian Friedrich Daniel Schubart, Ideen zu einer Ästhetik der Tonkunst, Stuttgart 1839, p. 52, on "die Menschenstimme durch Entmannung fortzupflanzen" (propagating the human voice through emasculation), or Johann Adolf Scheibe, Critischer Musikus, Leipzig 1745 (Repr. Hildesheim 1970), p. 155: "Wie lächerlich ist es nicht, die Könige, die Helden […] und überhaupt alle männlichen Personen durch […] solche Leute, die schon von Natur dem Charakter widersprechen, vorzustellen? Wie […] ekelhaft ist es nicht, wenn wir in einem großen und starken Stücke nichts anders, als zarte und weibische Stimmen vernehmen." (How ridiculous is it to present the kings, heroes […] and all male persons through people who contradict that character by their very nature? Is it not disgusting to hear in a grand and powerful piece nothing but soft and effeminate voices?)

scheming queen Semiramide, and the since forgotten Enrico of *La rosa bianca e rossa*[23] – showcases the necessity to shy away from a broad demarcation of gender lines within this repertory: there may be three male and four female parts at hand but in fashioning these heroes and heroines, very different ideas of masculinity and femininity come to light. Nina and Medea could be called polar opposites despite being located on the same side of the binary gender divide. Romeo's laments are a far cry from Tancredi's bravado, juxtaposed also in vocal style, between the slow legato showpiece of the Zingarelli/Crescentini *Giulietta e Romeo* and the swaggering coloratura of the early Rossini hit. All roles qualify as heroic, even if it is as the villainous mirror image of social ideas, as in Semiramide and Medea – who, as an addendum on gender and the heroic, are vilified in particular through their breach of gender-assigned demeanor. Questions of age, marital status and social acceptance are essential to the construction of a gendered idea of the heroic: the behavior accepted by the socially ostracized male figures such as Tancredi and Enrico differs from the expectations placed upon the similarly ostracized Medea.

Giuditta Pasta's repertoire opens up a gallery of roles that are, at times, linked more by age or social status than by sharing the same gender. This serves as a reminder that gender is a historically variant category, not a binary one, with shifting degrees of relevance, including in constructing images of the heroic.

The common ground Pasta's repertoire offers, if one was to try trace the singer's motivation beyond a selection of parts that made a good fit for her voice, is a wide scope of emotions, often extreme ones, to portray. Pasta excelled at dramatic acting and seems to have sought out roles that allowed her to showcase this ability. Pasta's "natural"[24] acting linked her to new dramatic developments of her time, though it is noteworthy that her core repertoire, including most of her male roles, is made up of older works. Paisiello, Zingarelli, and Rossini, for instance, also adhered to an older model of codification of emotion in song and onstage[25] that is not yet striving towards the readily available emotionality constructed by the romantic composers. Those composers tied the gendered heroic increasingly more closely to the singer's gendered body, as in the rise of the tenor to the hero of the main affirmative opera genre, and the different employment of a specifically *gendered* heroic voice that had the hero sound different than the heroine. This is put in place in addition to both of them – the hero and the heroine – not sharing the same soundspace any longer: the high-voiced realm in earli-

23 Giovanni Simone Mayr set the Felice Romani libretto into music, with the story based on René Charles Guilbert de Pixérécourt's *La rose blanche et la rose rouge*, which in turn draws from the English War of the Roses.

24 See Ebers, Seven Years (Fn. 2), p. 219.

25 On the registers of acting styles, see Gerda Baumbach, Schauspieler. Historische Anthropologie des Akteurs, Leipzig 2012.

er traditions equally peopled by the heroes and heroines of *opera seria* is left to the soprano heroine, while the hero sets up shop an octave below.[26]

The question of what a male or female hero sounds like on the opera stage and what renders a sound heroic heeds a different answer not just in different times, but also depending on the social conventions regarding gender within a limited geographic framework. London, Venice, and Rome knew at different times different casting conventions even within the relatively uniform aesthetic of the Italian-born, internationalized *opera seria* that adhered to the same ideal of sound: a refined, high-voiced tone capable of seemingly effortless mastery of breath, thus commanding the slow legato line as much as the realm of extensive ornamentation. Still, despite this shared *bel canto* aesthetic, different casting customs arose, tied also to different conventions of gender and representation. It is the bodies into which the sound of the heroic is placed that seem to make the difference. Yet, concerning the styling of gendered heroic sound, *opera seria* remains a readily accessible genre even while taking into account regional and historic casting variants, also because the ideal of the heroic tends to be linked more firmly with affirmative genres.

A comparable study on comic opera would lead to different results, particularly with regard to the gendered body, as the genre is traditionally linked to parody and the subversive mode. Gender in comic opera has an equal, at times perhaps even stronger bearing on the dramaturgy than in *opera seria* (where sometimes all that matters is that a person is aristocratic enough to join the narrative) because the common subversion of gender roles is tied to the very existence of those roles and their continuous reestablishment in the first place. Cross-gender casting, such as writing the type of the bawdy nurse for male singers with lower voices, or the young hero, as in Neapolitan *commedia per musica*, for a female singer,[27] is common, but rather than making gender not matter, it draws attention to gender as a binary category. As a narrative of power that places the male above the female, it is closely linked to other power narratives, such as that of age, which places seniority above youth, even while it keeps turning them on their heads.

It is no coincidence that the nurses marked by a lower man's voice are usually written as older women, while the high-voiced hero embodied by a female singer is codified as youthful. It is precisely this game of turnabout that destabilizes the figure of the heroic: a 'hero' or 'heroine' in comic opera is by definition subject to the subversion of their own heroic status.

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26 The development was echoed differently in France, where high tenors (*haute-contre*) had been used instead of castrato singers; those tenor voices, however, were also subject to change along with the castrati. For a more detailed look into singing traditions linked to the *haute-contre*, see the overview in Thomas Seedorf (Ed.), Gesang (MGG prisma), Kassel [et al.] 2001; Dagmar Hoffmann-Axthelm (Ed.), Singen und Gesangspraxis in der Alten Musik, Winterthur 2003; Corinna Herr, Gesang gegen die "Ordnung der Natur"? Kastraten und Falsettisten in der Musikgeschichte, Kassel [et al.] 2013.

27 See Treadwell, *Le zite 'n galera* (Fn. 10).

The already discussed casting differences of *primo uomo* and *secondo uomo* in *opera seria* as well as the different femininities and masculinities on display in the repertoire of Giuditta Pasta's London contract bring about another facet pertaining to the gendered heroic: the *order* of gender, particularly in a historical model not yet adhering to the contemporary tropes of the later nineteenth century. Rather than juxtaposing a male and a female heroic demeanor as evidenced in sound, affirmative opera up to the late eighteenth century revolves around a more vertical order. The idea, very prominently perpetuated in *opera seria*, of not a male versus a female kind of heroism, but rather of degrees of the heroic linked to degrees of gender, as seen, for instance, in the systematization of *primo uomo* and *secondo uomo*, allows for a more precise reading of the construction of the heroic within the operatic context.

The postmodern gender model of hegemonic masculinity as developed by Raewyn Connell[28] and Jack Halberstam[29] echoes this earlier organization of degrees of gender and lends a vocabulary to a current analysis of the gendered heroic. The hero is, then, the embodiment of heroic masculinity, which is defined through all other masculinities being 'less than'. The *primo uomo*, as the part featuring the greatest number of arias as well as the most spectacular, is thus differentiated from the *secondo uomo*, a figure in contrast marginalized and given less stage exposure. Echoed in an offstage constellation, one could argue within the aforementioned London context that a star castrato performing a *primo uomo* role, as a carrier of idealized masculinity, is 'more' masculine than a female star singer performing a *secondo uomo* part and operating within the same soundspace, even while both are perceived as masculine (an equation not to be confounded with the later critique of the castrato as less masculine than most other men, or even as not male at all).[30]

The gendered sound of the heroic is, in opera, at different times heralded by a refined or a powerful tone,[31] extreme vocal agility or an absence thereof, the governing of a high tessitura, or the refraining from accessing that tessitura at all.[32] In addition to this construction of heroic sound, other facets may play into it, such as – to summarize – a dramaturgical layout (e.g. the hero or the heroine should be given the largest number of arias) or the singer's body (e.g. heroic female roles being or not being accessible to male singers, and vice versa).

28 See Raewyn [formerly Robert] Connell, Masculinities, Berkeley, CA 1995.

29 See Judith [Jack] Halberstam, Female Masculinity, Durham, NC/London 1998.

30 A popular trope of early nineteenth-century castrato critique, in compliance with the tethering of figures perceived as ambiguous or feminine, as discussed in Herculine Barbin, Herculine Barbin dite Alexina B., ed. by Michel Foucault, Paris 1978.

31 The castrato singers were often framed as refined, yet powerful in sound, though refinement remained the deciding factor.

32 As often evidenced in the twentieth-century discussions on falsetto use, e.g. in Viktor Fuchs, Die Kunst des Singens. Musizieren mit der eigenen Stimme, Kassel 1967, p. 120.

Three examples of a mid-century opera – from 1647, 1737, and 1843 – all feature a high-voiced male hero and are all linked to the same ideal of singing within the general frame of affirmative, so-called 'serious' opera. This provides a larger context for the previously established thoughts and takes leave from the early nineteenth-century constellation of Giuditta Pasta and her repertoire, whose appropriation of the gendered voice of the heroic serves as a stepping stone to access the complexities regarding its construction. The works discussed do not only revolve around the singing hero but also around the singer *as* a hero, which, over the centuries, does lead to different repercussions regarding the hero's gendering.

In 1647, Luigi Rossi's elaborate stage affair *Orfeo* placed the mythical singer and demigod at its narrative center, sung by the castrato Atto Melani.[33] Pietro Metastasio's *Achille in Sciro*, set by Domenico Sarro in 1737, features a scene where the cross-dressed hero Achill, embodied by the female contralto Vittoria Tesi, is asked to sing and accompanies himself on a lyre, the instrument of Orpheus. Finally, Daniel-François-Esprit Auber's *La part du diable*, which premiered in Paris in 1843, employs some of the biography of the most famous of castrato singers, Carlo Broschi, with the stage name Farinelli. Carlo's voice, performed by female soprano Giovanna Rossi-Caccia, is central to the opera's plot.

Rossi's *Orfeo* places the soprano hero within the context of early internationalization of Italian-conceived opera, written for Paris at the insistence of Cardinal Jules Mazarin. *Orfeo* was not Mazarin's first attempt to import the opera style of his native Rome to Paris, where in the second half of the century, the *tragédie lyrique* employed an aesthetic that avoided the soprano hero altogether. Despite a lack of outward artistic reception, *Orfeo* became hugely influential for what was later to be known as the French Baroque operatic style,[34] even if the sound of the gendered heroic differed: the Italian castrato was replaced by the French *haute-contre*.

The *Orfeo* was a thoroughly Italianite affair, with the core singers imported from Italy, among them the well-established castrato Atto Melani, who was not the only castrato featured. Marc'Antonio Pasqualini, who was a protégé of the Barberini in Rome, sang the part of Orfeo's rival Aristeo, and two rising castrato stars who worked within French court music, Domenico del Pane and Marc'Antonio Sportonio, were also involved.

A look at the entire cast does not only reveal a rather numerous ensemble but also shows the tapestry of vocal registers employed: Among twenty-nine parts listed, seventeen are set for soprano voice, flanked by five contralto parts, four tenor parts and three parts written for bass. And of the twenty-two parts written for either soprano or contralto, it seems at least two thirds were initially taken on

33 See Roger Freitas, Portrait of a Castrato: Politics, Patronage, and Music in the Life of Atto Melani, Cambridge/New York 2009.

34 For a discussion of the stylistic implications, see Margret Murata, Why the First Opera Given in Paris Wasn't Roman, in: Cambridge Opera Journal 7, Issue 2, 1995, pp. 87–105.

by castrato voices (which did not mean fourteen castrati were involved, as parts were doubled).

The soprano voice appears in *Orfeo* not only as the voice of the hero, in the figure of the *primo uomo* (Orfeo) and *secondo uomo* (Aristeo), and as the voice of the heroine (sung by Margherita Costa), but also as the voice of graces, goddesses, and allegories, and even among the comic characters. It seems that in the mid-seventeenth century, while used as the sound of the heroic through stylistic and dramaturgical devices, neither the castrato, nor the soprano range, signal an exclusive gender, moral status, or class.

Still, a look at the voice ranges exemplifies the allegorical understanding of vocal timbre: low voices tend not only to be assigned to characters of lower social or moral standing but also to the topographically low, like figures pertaining to the underworld, and to voices of age and authority. The soprano range is more often than not used to codify deity, youth, or a higher moral standing. Youth, in an Early Modern figure of thought, also garners the assignation of the social context of love, which was seen as possibly destabilizing gender, rather than the more 'adult' offices of war or politics.[35]

The act of singing itself, especially in a lavish manner, is *not* seen as destabilizing gender, a trope that later is a common fixture of Enlightenment polemic against the castrato singers.[36] Rossi's castrato Orfeo is not feminized through his singing, but made heroic: His voice is the audible proof of his divine ancestry and his singing is, in accordance with the myth, powerful enough to gain passage to the underworld and warrant immortality. The part is characterized by sumptuous melisma styled to show both rhetorical process and vocal agility.

The sound of the heroic, independent of gender, is in later seventeenth-century opera written nearly exclusively for a soprano voice,[37] with instances of being taken on both by male and female singers – although the employment of castrato singers can further intensify this symbolic order of sound, as a physical embodiment of idealized, permanent youth. This, in turn, has to be understood in a context of sublimated sexuality: virtuosity means virtuousness. Moreover, virtuosity, as artful artifice demonstrating a governing of nature, is indicative of a higher moral standing. The high voice as a celestial voice ties back to medieval thought that superimposes a symbolic order of religious belief onto every aspect of life and also places the heroic within a metaphorical reading of the divine. In Early Modern and Baroque music, the high heroic voice is thus not yet gendered as female but as closest to God.

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35 Discussed in Roger Freitas, The Eroticism of Emasculation. Confronting the Baroque Body of the Castrato, in: The Journal of Musicology 20, Issue 2, pp. 196–249, here p. 209–210.

36 Gottsched complained about "das unverständliche Singen weibischer Kastraten" (the unintelligible singing of effeminate castratos), see Johann Christoph Gottsched, Der Biedermann, ed. by Wolfgang Martens, Stuttgart 1975, p. 178.

37 Understood within the contemporary, broader scope of 'soprano'.

This figure of thought still had consequences in casting the operatic hero in 1737, when contralto Vittoria Tesi-Tramontini took on the role of young Achilles in Domenico Sarro's version of Metastasio's *Achille in Sciro*. Tesi, who was renowned for portrayals of heroes[38] and older heroines,[39] celebrated one of the biggest triumphs of her career in this role, which vocally could just as well have been taken on by a castrato. It is however possible that the plot, which hinges on Achill wearing women's clothes for most of the opera, made the casting of a female singer a conscious, gender-related choice.[40] This would be an early instance of the performer's body being superimposed over the performed body, independent of a sound of the heroic that is still not prefigured by gender.

Differing from Rossi's *Orfeo*, singing is framed in *Achille in Sciro* not as the key feature of a superhuman hero but as less heroic than warfare – with 'less' being linked to femininity, on display through Achill's disguise as Pirra. In the pivotal reveal scene in Act II, 'Pirra' is asked by the King to sing to entertain the court. Pirra/Achill complies, but at the sound of fighting outside, 'Pirra' throws the lyre to the ground mid-song and reaches for weapons instead, showing his true colors. Singing, in this scene, is showcased as non-heroic in a man and has now been positioned as 'closer to femininity'. Achill directly plays into this dichotomy when he throws the lyre to the ground as a "vile instrument" in an agitated *accompagnato* – contrasting the leisurely lull of Pirra's song (a mandolin-accompanied number in 3/8 time)[41] – and calls the weapons provided by Odysseus "worthier".[42]

While *Achille in Sciro* discusses heroic male behavior in opposition to femininity in the figure of its lead character, it still illustrates the relatively similar treatment that hero and heroine in the form of the *prima coppia* receive in *opera seria*. Achill's love interest, Deidamia, is composed for a slightly higher tessitura, but the vocal idiom is the same: the heroic is not gendered through a different vocal

38 See the (retrospective) characterization by Johann Joachim Quantz in Friedrich W. Marpurg (Ed.), Historisch-Kritische Beyträge zur Aufnahme der Musik, Vol. 1, Berlin 1755, p. 227.

39 See the example of Andromache detailed in Kurt Sven Markstrom, The Operas of Leonardo Vinci, Napoletano (Opera Series; 2), Hillsdale, NY 2007, p. 124.

40 Wendy Heller has taken on this libretto to discuss a shift from intentional gender ambiguity in *seicento* opera to a more stable, biologically founded idea of gender at large, also linked to questions of the heroic. See Wendy Heller, Reforming Achilles: Gender, *opera seria* and the Rhetoric of the Enlightened Hero, in: Early Music 26, Issue 4, 1998, pp. 562–581.

41 See the manuscript score (archived in the Rare Collection at the Biblioteca del Conservatorio di Musica S. Pietro a Majella, Naples (Rari 7.2.1), and available digitally: http://imslp.org/wiki/Achille_in_Sciro_(Sarro,_Domenico_Natale)), ff. 115–120, 8 January 2018.

42 "E questa cetra dunque è l'arme d'Achille? Ah no; la sorte altre n'offre, e più degne. A terra, a terra vile istromento. All'onorato incarco dello scudo pesante torni il braccio avvilito." (And this lyre is supposed to be the weapon of Achill? Oh no, fate offers him others, and worthier ones. To the ground, to the ground, vile instrument. To the honored duty of the heavy shield turn your debased arm.) Pietro Metastasio, Achille in Sciro, Vienna 1736, ll. 762–767.

range. Ornamentation and legato line are equally allotted to both, and the dramaturgical, rhetoric, and affective situating is likewise the same, as is the shared repertoire of aria types. In this, Achill and Deidamia echo the layout of *opera seria* at large, which does not make gender a distinctive feature of the heroic, much less use a gender dichotomy to establish the heroic in the first place. It may be a postmodern assumption, then, that the – in this instance female – body of the performer contributed to destabilizing the hero's masculinity onstage.

The opposite scenario is at play in Auber's *La part du diable*, conceived when the tradition of the *contralto musico* tradition was already drawing to a close, and male roles written exclusively for female singers – for instance after the demise of the castrati – did increasingly focus on the depiction of marginalized masculinities such as young pageboys or unrequited lovers, eschewing the heroic.

Auber's opera, belonging to the *opéra comique* as opposed to the *opera seria*, is, regardless of this genre difference, still employing a similar construction of the heroic through its sentimental set-up. The opera's lead character, Carlo, is written for soprano voice and not for the mezzo or contralto range that had by then taken over the castrato legacy of the masculine heroic sound. Carlo is supposed to be the famous castrato Farinelli, yet he is always referred to as a boy – thus never gaining the status of heroic masculinity – with a castration or a stage career never even being hinted at. The only thing reminiscent of the actual Farinelli is the plot device of Carlo's singing curing the melancholy of the ailing Spanish King. The music written for the part is richly ornamented, yet primarily sentimental, differing not at all from the sound of a 1840s heroine, but much from the sound of the newly refigured hero.

The actual *prima coppia* of Auber's opera are Carlo's sister Casilda (soprano) and the young soldier Raphaël (tenor), while Carlo's profession is that of a music teacher in a nun's convent. Even within the plot, Carlo's voice is framed as a woman's voice: the King had once tried to abduct Carlo's sister after falling in love with her singing voice. He thinks himself guilty of her death, which causes his melancholy. Carlo's voice is to him, and to the audience, merely the mirror image of this lost voice, seen through the prefigured lens of a female sound.

Carlo, the boy, is a hero only on paper: his patterns of behavior – chaste and without belligerence[43] – are among the ones typically ascribed to the nineteenth-century ideal of woman. And while the act of singing is not feminizing per se in *La part du diable*, the singer's office is only that of a boy, whereas the tenor hero is a warrior. Singing, in 1843, evokes the gendered hero or heroine, depending on vocal range, the performer's body and stylistic parameters: lavish embellishment and ornamentation or a surplus of coloratura are increasingly codified as feminine. The male hero, in turn, is signaled by a more powerful and less adorned sound, with more and more notes sustained in chest voice.

[43] In the libretto, the motherly figure of the Queen characterizes Carlo as "timide et doux" (timid and sweet), see Daniel F. E. Auber, La part du diable, London/Mainz n.d., p. 45.

The "two voices"[44] of Giuditta Pasta, who could still bridge the gap of the gendered heroic in the 1820s, had fallen silent by the mid-nineteenth century and the Baroque aesthetic of artifice as supremely governing nature, which is so prominently and audibly on display in *opera seria*, had disappeared. This shift in the idea of heroic sound, towards one strongly rooted in gender dichotomy, serves to illustrate the historically differing associations between not just gender and the heroic, but also between representation and performer in shaping the voice that is heard as fit to make a hero or a heroine.

44 "la voix de madame Pasta; elle n'est pas toute d'un seul métallo" (the voice of Madame Pasta, it is not all forged from the same metal), Stendhal, Rossini (Fn. 5), p. 142.