

“She Was No Beauty, But—“  
The Careers and Public Images of Pauline Viardot, Emma Calvé, and Sibyl  
Sanderson

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## Introduction

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, female singers were at the heart of the opera scene. Prima donnas experienced more power on and off the stage as artists and as celebrities in this period than perhaps any other. They were central in negotiations with distribution of arias in operas, visits to the impresario, theater owners and composers, dressing rooms, carriages to take them to their destinations, and more. They collaborated with the composers who wrote for them, performed title roles in a significant number of operas, and were widely loved by the public.

These women's identities, however, presented perhaps a unique dichotomy. They were both a seductive siren and a powerful and financially independent career woman. They held agency, yet they were also seen as an object for consumption and pleasure. Many of these divas left a legacy of distinct and well-designed careers, as well as the memory of voices that drew an entire public to them. While it may seem, at first glance, that their long-lasting careers were a result of their voices alone, looking deeper shows us that they crafted their brand carefully.

In this thesis, I explore how three nineteenth-century singers shaped their public personas and brand in terms of their interactions with the press, their colleagues, and their audience through career moves and publicly-released images. I seek to illustrate that there were numerous factors beyond the diva's voice that contributed to the trajectory of her career, many of which were shaped by a diva's own agency. I have chosen, as my case studies, three singers whose careers centered around Paris in particular: Pauline Viardot, Sibyl Sanderson, and Emma Calvé. While each singer had a unique career that

drew attention to different parts of their identities as women and singers, all three needed to cope with the misogyny inherent in nineteenth-century patriarchy. For that reason, each singer developed her own strategies around a system that was challenging both in professional and personal ways.

All three divas discussed in this thesis have very different experiences that contrast one another greatly, providing a spectrum of case studies. Sibyl Sanderson's career focused on her physical beauty, and most of her experiences relating to the public focus around that narrative. In direct contrast to Sanderson, Pauline Viardot was respected as an artist and composer, though the press frequently commented on her lack of conventional beauty. Emma Calvé is an interesting mix of both of these narratives. While she was considered conventionally beautiful, she was also highly respected as an artist and performer. These three careers touch on the many ways female singers interacted with the public and the way the press responded.

Chapter one begins my analysis of the singers' agency by focusing on the very different relationship with the press that these three divas experienced. In chapter two, I look at the relationships these divas forged with others in the industry, as well as distinct choices each diva made to create a specific brand for themselves and their career. In the third chapter, I offer a closer reading of the role of images in the public presentation of divas through photographs and engravings. While all three careers unfolded in the same environment around the opera houses of nineteenth-century Paris, the unique character of each diva's presentation in public reflects her individual approach to her career.

Pauline Viardot (née Garcia) (1821–1910), was a French mezzo-soprano and composer of Spanish origin.<sup>1</sup> She was born in Paris to a Spanish opera family, her father being the impresario and singing teacher Manuel García. Her sister Maria Malibran was a famous singer herself, but died young. Viardot was taking piano lessons, some from Franz Liszt, and wanted to become a professional concert pianist.

After her sister's death, Viardot began singing professionally. In 1837, she gave her first concert performance in Brussels, and in 1839, she made her opera debut as Desdemona in Rossini's *Otello* in London. There was a highly positive reception of this performance, specifically of her technique and passion. At age seventeen, she met Alfred de Musset who became a close friend and colleague, as did George Sand. She married Louis Viardot in 1840, and he became the manager of her career. Their four children all became involved in music.

Throughout her career, Viardot interacted with male colleagues and friends, especially during her days of hosting Thursday salon-style meetings. Some of these male colleagues include Charles Gounod, with whom she created the title role of *Sapho*, as well as helping with other aspects of his career. She also worked very closely with Giacomo Meyerbeer. He helped her career significantly at its beginning, especially through her premiering of *Le Prophète*. Other important relationships include Camille Saint-Saëns, Gabriel Fauré, Frédéric Chopin, Jules Massenet, Hector Berlioz, and Johannes Brahms, among many others.

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<sup>1</sup> This brief biography of Pauline Viardot is based on the material consulted for this thesis, including Barbara Kendall-Davies, *The Life and Work of Pauline Viardot Garcia*, Vol. 1, and Angela Cofer, "Pauline Viardot-Garcia: The Influence of the Performer on Nineteenth-Century Opera."

Viardot sang in concert halls and opera houses across Europe, and spent the years of 1843–1846 at Saint Petersburg. As a composer, she arranged instrumental works by Johannes Brahms, Joseph Haydn, Frédéric Chopin, and Franz Schubert as songs. She also wrote two operettas and over fifty *lieder*. Moreover, she facilitated the careers of numerous other musicians, and performed alongside young artists. Her Thursday evening musical gatherings were not only a high-caliber musical environment but also meetings that gave opportunities to young artists admitted there. Indeed, these gatherings brought together some of the most important figures in music, poetry, and art in Europe to hear new works and sometimes discover new artists and musicians. In 1910, Pauline Viardot died at age eighty-eight.

Emma Calvé (1858–1942) was a French soprano, perhaps the most famous French singer of the Belle Époque.<sup>2</sup> She had an international career, somewhat unusual for the time, and sung at the Metropolitan Opera House and Royal Opera House in London regularly. She lived in Spain throughout her childhood and moved to Paris with her mother after her parents separated. There, she attended the Paris Conservatory and studied with Mathilde Marchesi. She trained herself in stagecraft and gesture, which became central to her image in years to come.

Calvé made her operatic debut in 1881 in Gounod's *Faust* in Brussels. She then sang at La Scala as well as the most important opera houses in Rome, Florence, and Naples. When she returned to Paris in 1892, she performed in the French premiere of

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<sup>2</sup> This brief biography of Emma Calvé is based on the material consulted for this thesis, primarily the singer's autobiography, *My Life*.

*Cavalleria Rusticana* as Santuzza, a role that brought her much success and work. After this came the triumph of *Carmen*. To learn this part, she went to Spain and bought authentic clothing, observed the women of the cigarette factories, and learned Spanish dances. In 1894, she made her first appearance as Carmen at the Opéra-Comique in Paris. She was fêted by audience and press alike, a response that would continue for the rest of her life as she was playing this role.

She sang Ophélie in Ambroise Thomas's *Hamlet* in Paris in 1899, but she did not like the part and eventually dropped it from her repertory. She appeared with success in many other roles, among them, the Countess in Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*, the title role in Félicien David's *Lalla-Roukh*, Pamina in *Magic Flute*, and Camille in Ferdinand Hérold's *Zampa*, but she remained best known for her Carmen. Later in her life she wrote the autobiography, *My Life*. Calvé died on 6 January 1942 in Montpellier.

Sibyl Sanderson (1864–1903) was an American coloratura soprano active during the Parisian Belle Époque<sup>3</sup>. She was born in Sacramento, CA. Her father was a Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of California. Following his death in 1866, she moved to Paris where she studied with, among others, Mathilde Marchesi. It is worth noting that Marchesi was Emma Calvé's teacher, as well. Sanderson began her singing career in Brussels, and then went on to perform first at the Opéra Comique and then at the Opéra in Paris. She was known for her vocal range and acting ability, as well as her beauty.

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<sup>3</sup> This brief biography of Sibyl Sanderson is based on the material consulted for this thesis, primarily Jack Winsor Hansen, *Requiem for a Diva*.

Sanderson premiered a number of Jules Massenet's operas, as well as performing in operas by many other composers of the time. Her debut in Paris was in the title role in *Esclarmonde* by Massenet in 1889. She was famous for her interpretations of *Manon* by Massenet, as well. She had the title role of *Phryné* created for her by Camille Saint-Saëns, an opera first performed in 1893. In 1894, she premiered the title role of *Thaïs* by Massenet. Outside of Paris, Sanderson had a difficult time establishing herself professionally. Her time at the Metropolitan Opera and Covent Garden was brief and uneventful.

In 1897, she married Cuban sugar heir and millionaire Antonio E. Terry and slowed down her singing career significantly. She was never able to make a full comeback. During her final years, she is said to have been depressed and struggling with alcoholism and illness. She died of influenza at age thirty-eight in Paris.

Viardot, Calvé, and Sanderson experienced gendered language and misogynistic writing in the press. Viardot and Sanderson distanced themselves from the press, but Calvé talked with the press frequently. Viardot had her physical appearance used as a direct contrast to her talent by the press, as if the two had a relationship. Many of her press reviews framed her lack of conventional beauty as a surprising contrast to her powerful talent. Sanderson was, on the other hand, considered a "beauty," but was often left with reviews that mostly focused on this part of her identity. Regardless of the quality of the performance, it appears the press still found a way to focus on her body, similar to Viardot. The least gendered reporting may have been with Calvé, and she was the closest to the press of the three. Perhaps her personal relationship with journalists and the



consistent use of her own voice by providing interviews forced journalists to feel as though they owe her more than superficial comments about her body. Because they knew her, it seems, she was humanized.

At this time in opera history, divas held power denied to women in most other fields. Each of the three divas made distinct choices of how to define and form their legacies as artists by accessing this power in one form or another. Viardot focused on her relationships with composers. Early on, she made positive impressions that led her to big opportunities, with Meyerbeer for example. As she gained more clout, she began to work with composers to boost their careers by helping compose their works and premiering in roles. Calvé had the artistic freedom to practice method acting before it was a defined practice, which greatly influenced the productions and brought her much success and great reviews. Method acting would later be described as a practice in which actors focused on relating to their character's thoughts, feelings, and actions as if they were their own. This often includes either living as a character did in some way to research for the role, or conjuring an emotion by thinking of a similar experience that elicits the same emotion from oneself. Constantin Stanislavski was one of the first acting teachers to develop this concept more fully. It came as a response to the less realistic and more affected acting that offered an actor a toolbox of specific gestures and facial expressions. Finally, Sanderson used her sexuality to her benefit, performing roles that emphasized her body, which brought her success and fame.

Photographs were a way both for productions to advertise and for divas to present themselves to the public in a manner perhaps more permanent than any one performance

or press interview. The photographs I have found strengthen the respective images created by these divas throughout their career. Viardot's photographs seem to not emphasize her body and instead present her looking regal or simply modest. Sanderson, perhaps as expected, has photographs that are focused on her physical figure, often making it central to the image. This applies both to her sexualized roles and to photographs that were not attached to roles. Calvé's images for specific roles have props and costumes that seem genuine in nature, aligning with her practice of method acting. These elements do not seem to appear to the same degree in the photographs of other divas I have examined.

It is clear that each diva presented in this thesis spent time and energy to craft her image over any aspect in which she had control. Sanderson played into the patriarchal idea that her body was a commodity to empower herself, which worked well for most of her career. Calvé stood out from other divas by attempting to add method acting to her roles to a degree that no one had tried it before. This brought her great success. Viardot used her intellect to gain respect in the music world, as her physical appearance would not be a vehicle to help her in any way. Though each diva had to navigate a patriarchal system and learn to stand out to shape a memorable career, they did so in a distinct way from one another that showed there were many paths that could be paved when a diva was creative.

## Chapter One: The Press

Pauline Viardot, Sibyl Sanderson, and Emma Calvé experienced varying degrees of gendered language in the press. While Emma Calvé interacted with the press frequently, it appears that both Sanderson and Viardot placed more distance between themselves and the press. Sanderson, considered a “beauty,” was often left with article after article focusing on her body, whether it was a poor performance or a laudable one. Viardot, similarly, had her physical appearance used as a vehicle for comparison or contrast to the quality of her performance, but it was her lack of conventional beauty that journalists emphasized. Calvé, who interacted with the press more than Sanderson or Viardot, seems to have had the least gendered reporting. It may be that her personal relationship with the journalists and the consistent use of her voice, in interviews and quotable sound bites, forced the press to humanize her, and that critics therefore found it difficult to revert to superficial comments on her body and appearance.

Pauline Viardot’s experience in the spotlight was heavily filtered through the male gaze. In some of her press reception, there is an undercurrent of concession that she is indeed not beautiful by the conventional Western European beauty standards of the day. Some of the remarks are very explicit, others are more subtle. A superb artist and musician, she had a large amount of praise heaped on her work. The contrast of her beautiful voice with her lack of conventional beauty made her a very “mysterious” entity, a phenomenon that was hard to define for many who wrote of her. Often, her lack of “beauty” gave space for reviewers to focus on her singing and artistry, even if it was

shrouded in the narrative of her success being somewhat surprising because of these circumstances.

Two reviews, in particular, mention her lack of beauty, as if it must be accounted for when lauding her artistry. What makes these reviews interesting is that they are written in the twentieth century, long after her time on stage and decades after she died. This implies that the trope of Viardot's lack of beauty was so strongly entrenched that it became much more than a clever remark in operatic criticism. Indeed, it became a major part of who she was as an artistic figure, so much so that in Harold G. Schonberg's review (Fig. 1.1) her physical appearance is featured in the title: "She Was No Beauty, But—". Schonberg drew on the painter Ary Scheffer as a witness who described Viardot as "terribly ugly." Schonberg did concede that Viardot did, indeed, "have a brain." This played into the talent versus beauty dichotomy we see in much of the narrative about her.

## *She Was No Beauty, But—*

By HAROLD C. SCHONBERG

THE exhumation—one cannot really say revival—of Pauline Viardot's "Cendrillon" at the Newport Music Festival sent me looking up some facts about this great lady. Any singing buff automatically recognizes her name as one of the great vocalists of the 19th century. And students of Russian literature know all about Pauline through her liaison with Ivan Turgenev. They met in 1843, when Viardot was making a triumph in Italian opera during the St. Petersburg season. He fell in love with her, followed her all over Europe, and eventually ended up as one of the partners in a *ménage à trois* with Pauline and her husband, Louis Viardot. Louis had been director of the Théâtre-Italien in Paris, and was 21 years older than she when they got married in 1840. Does any singing career in music parallel Viardot's? She came to singing by birth. Her father was Manuel Garcia, a tenor, teacher and impresario. Rossini created for him the role of Almaviva in "Il Barbiere." There were three children: Maria, who married Eugène Malibran, was one of the most sensational sopranos in history, but she died at the age of 28 from injuries resulting from falling off a horse. Manuel was a baritone and then a teacher. He invented the laryngoscope, developed a school of singing, and taught, among others, Jenny Lind. He died in London in 1906 at the age of 101. Then there was Pauline.

She was no beauty. Her head was large, her features irregular, her upper lip much too long. But her enormous eyes looked intelligently at the world, her figure always was trim, and men kept flocking around. "She's terribly ugly, but if I were to see her again I should fall madly in love with her," said Ary Scheffer, the painter, who did see her again, painted a famous portrait, and did fall in love with her. So did Alfred de Musset. So did others. Berlioz came under her spell later on. There was something in the woman that was different—in her looks, her art, her life. She was one of the originals.

And she had brains. There was nothing she could not do. She drew and painted sensitive portraits. She was a wonderful pianist, and Saint-Saëns put her on a level with Clara Schumann, the greatest of all women pianists. She could speak nine or ten languages fluently and was familiar with the literature of all. She composed, and composed gracefully. Her songs are lovely, and those little salon operettas she wrote, to texts by Turgenev and, in "Cendrillon," herself, were admired by many of the great composers of Europe.

As a singer she was unique. By all accounts her voice was one of immense power and authority. Also, by all accounts, it was a flawed voice. April Fitzlyon, in her biography (the only one in English), puts her range at over three octaves, from low C to the F above high C. Henry Pleasants, in his "The Great Singers," puts it at low G to the high F. But it seems that the lower and upper extremities of her range were unnatural. What she had—and in that her singing must have been like another flawed voice, that of Maria Callas—was tremendous temperament and intensity coupled to musicianship of a superior order. All that, plus acting ability far ahead of anybody of her day.

Figure 1.1: Harold Schonberg, "She Was No Beauty, But --," *New York Times*, August 17, 1969.

Jacques Barzun also found Viardot particularly “remarkable” for bewitching her environment “even without regular or beautiful features”:

Indeed, this remarkable woman, . . . was a personage whose place in the century has not yet been adequately presented. A great actress, a superb voice, a strong intellect, a fascinating woman without petty arts and even without regular or beautiful features, she bewitched all those who came near her. <sup>4</sup>

The many reviews that did not mention her appearance at all delved into her intelligence and artistry in a way unseen in the reviews of Calvé or Sanderson. For example,

Her voice combines the range of contralto- vigorous and pronounced- with the high tones of the soprano; the low notes of this voice especially have an accent and irresistible power. Miss Garcia’s voice has not yet acquired all its development in the top range, all its desirable purity. But what struck us especially in Miss Garcia’s voice is the novelty of the ornaments that she adds; they are not just embellishments, which are common to all the singers. Everything with her is new and unexpected. Her talent will be especially appreciated by

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<sup>4</sup> Jacques Barzun, *Berlioz and the Romantic Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 158.

artists. . . . When study and age have been added to her rare qualities a successful future cannot miss Miss Pauline Garcia<sup>5</sup>

This focus on her artistic approach to singing is the norm for Viardot, one that does not seem to be the case for Sanderson or Calvé. Ludwig Rellstab also spent a significant amount of time analyzing the quality of Viardot's voice when reviewing her Berlin concert of 1838.

It is not a sound that is absolutely beautiful; on the contrary, the instrument has defects in parts, but one senses a soul, a spirit, or what we could call the physiognomy of the voice, and it is this individual expression which moves the writer of this article to such an extent. This voice is already remarkable because of her range, which is one of the rarest, since it encompasses at least two-and-a-half octaves. This voice does not have the quality of the contralto in the low range- we will more or less label it as a mixture of soprano and tenor- so the lower part has affinity with the cello and the upper with the violin. We have in fact never heard a human voice which reminds us so much of the properties of these two instruments

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<sup>5</sup> "Bruxelles: M. de Beriot, Mile Pauline Garcia," *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris* (hereafter, *RGMP*) 4, No. 52, December 24, 1837, 566-568.

<sup>6</sup> Ludwig Rellstab, "Concert de M. de Beriot et de Mlle P. Garcia," *RGMP* 5, No. 22, June 3, 1838, 228-229.

These two reviews are illustrative of a pattern that emerges in many of her reviews. A great deal of effort is put into describing the nature of Viardot's voice, and the artistry she applies to it. The press was also quick to mention Viardot's "genius" in her professional work. For example, Legouvé spoke with admiration in sharing this anecdote in 1838:

But what [the public] doesn't know is that this talented singer is a musician of genius; that she composed herself in a very distinguished manner; that the day before at the rehearsal... she was consulting and guiding the entire orchestra.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, reviews frequently discuss Viardot's intellect, artistry, and professional work. While some concede that she is not "beautiful," most dedicate the majority of the article to her outstanding work.

Sibyl Sanderson's relationship with the press can be described as progressively more strenuous as her marriage begins, and as densely packed with remarks about her physical appearance. Perhaps because of her strong adherence to conventional beauty standards, the press was heavily focused on Sanderson's physical appearance. It may also be that, by communicating with the press fairly minimally, she became victim to a patriarchal system in which a woman without a voice is easier to dehumanize and, therefore, to objectify. While the countless remarks about her physical appearance seem, at first glance, intended to compliment her performance, they also disrespect her position

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<sup>7</sup> Ernest Legouvé, "Concerts de M. de Beriot et de Mlle P. Garcia," RGMP 5, No. 51, December 23, 1838, 518-520.

as an esteemed artist by reducing her validity to a body subjected to the male gaze. As Sanderson began her romantic affair with Antonio Terry, much of the press shifted from her musical accomplishments to gossip about her personal life. This prompted one of the few noted interactions with the press that she had, one of extreme displeasure.

In the many articles and reviews I have collected, hardly any came without an explicit reference to of her physical beauty. Her beauty was used as a vehicle of criticism during a poor performance, an enhancing element on a good one, and a seemingly non-sequitur remark in many other contexts.



Figure 1.2: "SIBYL SANDERSON.: The California Prima Donna Makes Her American Debut," *Los Angeles Times*, January 17, 1895.



Sibyl Sanderson's Success.  
*The Washington Post* (1877-1922); Apr 21, 1891;  
ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Washington Post (1877-1997)  
pg. 4

**Sibyl Sanderson's Success.**

Sibyl Sanderson is considered by the famous Massenet the most finished singer that America ever produced. The critic of *Figaro* wrote in a review of a recent performance: "At the end of the fourth act she reached a note, the *contra sol* sharp, which, as far as I know, has never yet been uttered by any human voice." Miss Sanderson is strikingly beautiful, has conquered fashion and the public and her future is full of golden promise.

Figure 1.3: "Sibyl Sanderson's Success," *The Washington Post*, April 21, 1891.

In this first article above (Fig. 1.2) the comment about her physical beauty seems entirely irrelevant. Above it lies a description of a singer who has earned the privilege of having a role closely associated with her name, befitting for a singer performing at the Metropolitan Opera. Somehow, despite these accomplishments, the second to last line makes a seemingly unnecessary remark on her physical appearance. In the second article (Fig. 1.3) we see the same phenomenon, with an identical sense of irrelevance to the article's information.

We also find reviews that make her physical beauty central to the reception of the work. For example, in *L'Indépendance belge* we read of Sanderson's performance of *Manon* in 1891,

If any priest had been in the audience that night, he would have defrocked himself immediately.<sup>8</sup>

We note this again, but this time used as a vehicle of criticism. In a performance of *Rigoletto* by Verdi, in which much of her singing of Gilda took place in the shadows, the Belgian papers suggested that she ought to avoid roles in which “the action transpires in the dark.”<sup>9</sup>

One of the most notable instances in the relationship between Sanderson’s body and the press happened at the dress rehearsal for *Thaïs* in 1894. At the dress rehearsal, Sanderson’s dress unhooked and fell down to her waist. Henri Gauthier Villars called her Mademoiselle Seinderson (*sein* being the French word for breast).<sup>10</sup> The press wrote endlessly on the “scandal,” and the development of this nickname is telling for the lack of respect the press had for Sanderson’s body and artistry. This illustrates the insidious pendulum that swings between compliment and derision inherent in the male gaze as it controls the female body.

Although the examples that focus on beauty are damaging to her identity as a serious and respected artist, they are far different from the type of damaging and difficult press Sanderson received once she married Antonio Terry. In fact, one of the few examples of Sanderson’s interaction with the press is when she found herself

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<sup>8</sup> Jack Winsor Hansen, *The Sibyl Sanderson Story: Requiem for a Diva* (Pompton Plains: Amadeus Press, 2005), 149.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

overwhelmed with a number of rumors published by the press. She responded with an interview to set the record straight (Fig. 1.4):

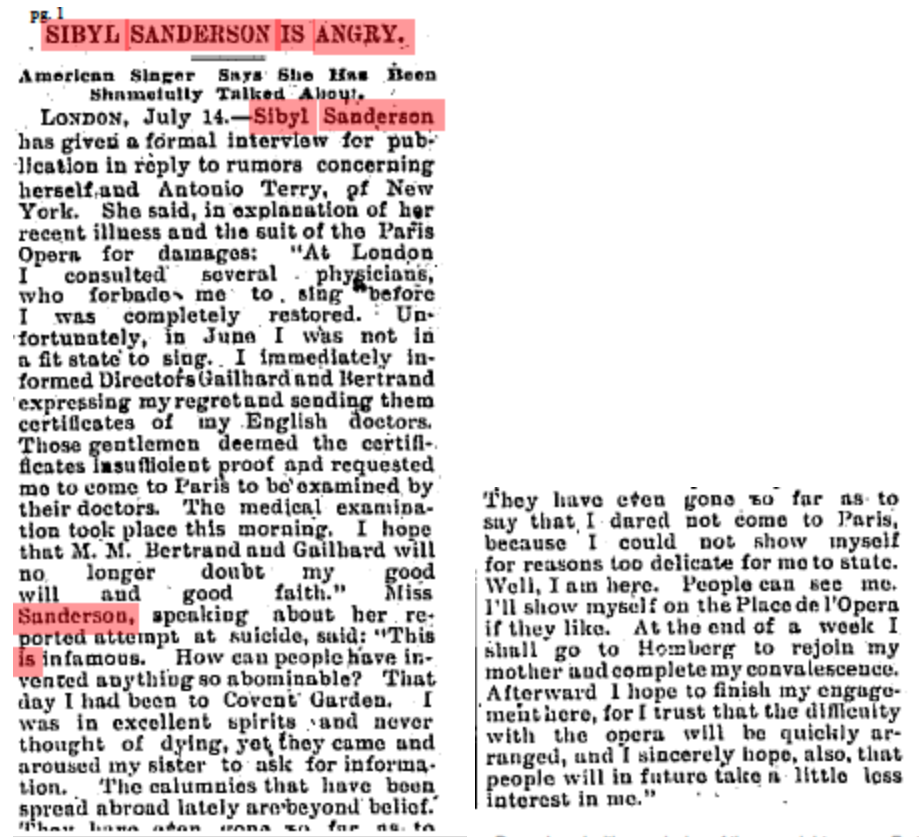


Figure 1.4: "SIBYL SANDERSON IS ANGRY: American Singer Says She Has Been Shamefully Talked About," *The Nashville American*, July 16, 1895.

Some of these rumors, which appeared entirely after her marriage, included attempted suicide (Fig 1.5), quarrels between her and her husband (Fig 1.6), potential pregnancies, and any thread of evidence of friction in relationships in her work life. Fig. 1.5 is a press notice that referred to one of the more jarring rumors published. Did Sanderson's marriage devalue her further under the patriarchal system? It is possible that, by marrying, Sanderson alienated herself from her diva persona of independence. This persona of independence was perhaps subconsciously associated with a masculine

energy, therefore an energy with more authority. Sanderson's marriage may have stripped this power from her, and left her open to more scrutiny by the press.

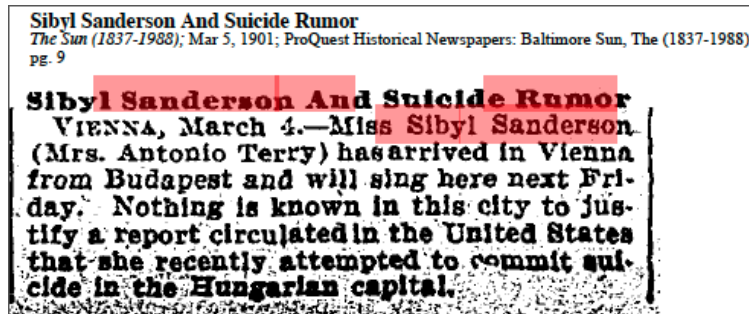


Figure 1.5: "Sibyl Sanderson And Suicide Rumor," *The Sun*, March 5, 1901.



Figure 1.6: "SIBYL SANDERSON'S SEVERE COLD: That Brought Her from Chicago, Not a Quarrel with Antonio Terry," *New York Times*, March 14, 1895.

Emma Calvé seemed very cognizant of the media's power, perhaps more than all of the three women studied. She did charity work that ended up in the papers, went through hoops to avoid media attention on at least one documented occasion, and often interacted with the media in a more personal way.

For her brand, this meant that people continued to see her name. Whether it was a short blurb in "Musical Gossip," a short notice announcing an arrival to America, or a review, she was in the papers frequently. Offering time to journalists for interviews and quotable remarks was an additional step that provided a more personalized picture of Calvé, one from which the press benefited and that the public enjoyed. Beyond the deliberately provided material, there are many articles written of Calvé's charitable efforts, as well as her many antics. Whether or not there was behind-the-scenes work to have these events published can hardly be proven. Perhaps we can say that her additional interviews and her efforts to remain on good footing with the press increased the number of stories written about her overall, therefore increasing her presence in the newspapers in a manner far more consistent than either Viardot's or Sanderson's.

Another benefit to this relationship is the image of Calvé that the press presented. Unlike the case of Viardot and Sanderson, there is far less content that is driven by physical beauty. Many of the articles focus on her work and her voice. The exact reason for this is hard to say, though the most striking difference from Viardot and Sanderson is the amount of the singer's communication with the press. In making these remarks and giving herself a voice, it is possible that she then humanized herself to the press, creating less of a superficial focus on her appearance and more on her work as an artist and full

human being. It is also possible that this move put pressure on journalists to write content-based reviews of her work, as they knew her personally and felt morally obligated.

Three interactions with the press illustrate her level of familiarity with the fourth estate. Unlike Sanderson and Viardot, Calvé was comfortable interacting with the press in a very informal way. Indeed, she seemed to have had a good rapport with journalists. When making a joke in this article, she is choosing to give herself a voice, and a memorable one at that, as her comment has distinct feminist undertones.

**CALVE ON MARRIAGE**  
**Prima Donna Thinks the Wedded State a Blessed Thing, Especially for the Men.**  
[By Federal (Wireless) Line to The Times.]  
**NEW YORK BUREAU OF THE TIMES, Oct. 1.—[Special Dispatch.]**  
Mme. Emma Calvé arrived yesterday on the steamship Martha Washington. She was accompanied by her husband, M. Gasparri, an Italian, and the pianist, Emilino Renaud of the Boston Operahouse.  
Mme. Calvé was asked her opinion of marriages. Her answer was: "Well, I am married. I think that marriage is one of the most blessed gifts and institutions of heaven, especially for the men."  
The singer then announced that her present concert plans included a tour to the Pacific Coast.

Figure 1.7: "CALVE ON MARRIAGE: Prima Donna Thinks the Wedded State a Blessed Thing, Especially for the Men," *Los Angeles Times*, October 2, 1912.

The next article is from a more extensive interview with Calvé in *The Washington Post* in which she spends an ample amount of time discussing the subject of fashion and individual expression in a very candid way.

From London Answers.

"Before I say a word," said Mme. Emma Calve, smiling up at me from the couch in her boudoir, "about my views in general, I must describe to you the costume which I love the most in all the world."

"No, no, no," said Calve; "not Carmen-cabmen! My favorite dress is the red waistcoat and fawn-colored coat and trousers of the cabdriver—not for myself, but because so many Paris cabmen come from the Cevennes, and so do I."

"To be well dressed—really well dressed—a woman should so dress that she herself, and not her clothing, attracts attention. A dress, with its complementary adjuncts of hat, gloves, and umbrella, is the picture frame. The woman is the picture, and if the frame be too garish, or even, without expressive brightness in the coloring, too obtrusive, it must of necessity, in my opinion, be in bad taste. A woman should be dressed so that her clothes become a part of her, and she should choose them so that she forgets them when she puts them on. Nothing is more objectionable both to the wearer, and her friends than the self-consciousness of clothing many women make apparent."

"No; let them devote as much attention as they like to the choice, the cut, and

"No; let them devote as much attention as they like to the choice, the cut, and the making of their dresses, but when they are completed—when, to resume our simile, the picture has been framed and varnished—clothes and woman should be, or should, at all events, appear, as indivisible as were the Centaurs, of whom no one could say where the horse began and where the rider ended."

"I think, too, that three women out of four pay far too much attention to the fashions. Women who dress according to the fashion merely, and without the exercise of their own individuality, must necessarily achieve unsatisfactory results."

"Fashion should be used as you would use a lorgnette in a theater—that is to say, when necessary only, and not all the time; otherwise, by too much attention to detail, you lose the ensemble. And in dress, as in a picture, the ensemble is everything; and, as any dressmaker who is worthy of the name will tell you, line and ensemble tastefully combined will make the well-dressed woman."

"Fashion, you see, is very much like fire in one respect. It is the best of servants, but the worst of masters. A woman should adapt the fashions to herself, and not herself in slavish imitation to the fashions. Even in stuffs this is important. How often have I seen small silks

unwritten role perfectly, unobtrusively, and utterly."

"And of the fashions of to-day, madame?"

"I like them," Calve said, "and think that they approach true beauty nearer than those of earlier days. We have become enfranchised of the awful custom which made women hide themselves as much as possible in their dresses; and we have learned, though we have taken years to learn, that the woman's form is a thing which should be clothed for its better showing, not dissembled. No crinolines, no pulled-out shoulders, no abnormal shapes and waists crushed into nothing."

"I like the fashions of the day because they carry out my theory that woman's dress should be a picture frame, and not a method of concealment, bunched in here and tightened there, built upon framework, and altogether made in such a way as to make of the woman in it a mere artificial thing of basketwork or whalebone."

"A well-dressed woman should be a woman well dressed, first of all; but first of all, you understand, the woman, then the dress. A frame, no matter how exquisite of itself, which took away atten-

tion from the picture would be inartistic. And so it is in dress. Do not follow the fashions, nor let them follow you, but go hand-in-hand with them in harmony."

Figure 1.8: From, London Answers. "Madame Calve's Finely Dressed Woman," *The Washington Post*, December 27, 1903.

Although Figure 1.8 covers a topic that may appear frivolous to some, her stance is described with extensive detail and thoughtfulness. She seems to feel comfortable discussing, at length, her opinions on the subject of contemporary fashion. Her comfort in sharing her voice and dominating a space with her opinion may have further contributed to the persona she was creating for herself in the press. The more she shares her ideas, the more intimately she is known, and the more she is respected for her intellect and artistry. Though it is rooted in a patriarchal system in which a woman must “prove” herself, it seems that Calvé has found a way to do just that.

In these next two examples, we see a different side of Calvé. While journalists reported on charitable acts and recitals for both Viardot and Sanderson as well, it seems only Calvé had examples of her antics and silly moments recorded in the presses. Was this because she was closer to the press, and therefore more loved and sought after? Was it because she purposefully had the information leaked to keep it in the news? In either instance, the root seems to be that Calvé kept her name in print, and perhaps believed all press is good press.



Emma Calve's Mistake.  
From Colliers Weekly.  
*The Washington Post* (1877-1922); Feb 6, 1900;  
ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Washington Post (1877-1997)  
pg. 9

**Emma Calve's Mistake.**

From Collier's Weekly.  
Mme. Calve tells this story on herself:  
"When I went to the Theatre de la Monnaie, in Brussels, in 1881, I made my debut as Marguerite. My second performance was to be Cherubino. At that time I was very slight. My neck and arms were thin, and so, of course, were my legs. I did not think I could possibly appear in breeches without something to make me look a little plumper. So I went to the costumer of the theater and told him I wanted some pads. He made them according to his own ideas of what beautiful legs should be, and sent them to me so late that I had no time to try them on. I don't know what I must have looked like when I stepped on the stage thin and girlish from the waist up, but provided with the most enormous calves. After the first act the manager rushed around to my dressing-room. 'My heavens,' he exclaimed, 'where in the world did you get those legs? They certainly are not your own.' I admitted that they were not, and said I thought I was too thin to dispense with pads. 'Don't you know,' he said to me, 'that a young girl with straight, slender legs is far better suited to the part of a page than when she disfigures herself with such things as those? Take off the pads and go out in your own'

Figure 1.9: From, Colliers Weekly. "Emma Calve's Mistake," *The Washington Post*, February 6, 1900.

**Calve Sings in Hospitals.**

[BY A. P. NIGHT WIRE.]

NEW YORK, Nov. 20.—Emma Calve, the opera singer, is serving with the Red Cross in France and soothing the wounded with song. She made this known in a letter written to a friend in this city, it was learned yesterday.

Figure 1.10: "Calve Sings in Hospitals," *Los Angeles Times*, November 21, 1914.

Interestingly, there is also an instance of Emma Calvé attempting to flee from press attention. Given that her consciousness of the press and its effect on her career must have been very pronounced, it seems apt that she would avoid journalists when she decided it would be best for her. In this instance, it took a good deal of planning as well, making it very explicit that the action was taken for the purpose of avoiding any and all press attention.

Savannah, Ga., January 17.—(Special.)  
Lost for four days, with the newspaper men of Savannah, Jacksonville and other cities searching for her, and the members of her own company mystified, Madame Emma Calvé, prima donna, has been found under the care of a throat specialist in the Oglethorpe sanitarium, in this city, at her ease, except for the cause that sent her there, in a private suite of rooms, a mystery to even the other patients.  
Madame Calvé sang in Savannah Tuesday night, and immediately disappeared. She was booked for Jacksonville, and failed to appear. To throw newspaper men off the trail, her company returned to Savannah, went on towards Columbia, but her maid doubling back from Hardeville, was caught at the depot and trailed to the sanitarium, where Calvé admitted her identity. The singer declares her voice is the same golden voice that it has been for years. It was stated that she will not appear in Columbia, but would go from here to Augusta, her next booking place.

Figure 1.11: "MME. EMMA CALVE IN SANITARIUM," *The Atlanta Constitution*, January 18, 1909.

Most importantly, we have the allegiance to Calvé as an artist made by those in the press in her many reviews. Though abundant reviews that illustrate this phenomenon, the two below are interesting to note, as they center on her physical movements, and yet mention nothing of her physical beauty. In, *Music, Theater, and Cultural Transfer : Paris, 1830-1914* we see many reviews that focus on her dramatic and vocal choices as an artist. For example, Vernon Blackburn describes one of her performances by saying,

Calvé's movement is... finely attuned to the motion of the voice, with its swiftness, solemn with its majesty; and thus she affects an extraordinary unity of accomplishment. The voice distracts you from no preponderance of bodily activity; the weakness of action distracts you from no undue effort of the voice... as a vocally dramatic artist she stands where no modern operatic actress can approach her. Shut your eyes, and listen to her as she enters upon any dramatic circumstance of opera and you can picture her pose, her gesture, her facial expression.<sup>11</sup>

Herman Klein similarly focuses on stage presence when recalling her performance as Santuzza by saying,

Emma Calvé had no difficulty in surpassing her rivals of the period in this particular role' for it fitted her to absolute perfection... Calvé seemed to bring

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<sup>11</sup> Steven Huebner, "La Princesse Paysanne du Midi," in *Music, Theater, and Cultural Transfer : Paris, 1830-1914*, edited by Annegret Fauser and Mark Everist, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 376.

into the opera the Sicilian atmosphere of Verga's story, just as Duse had brought it into the drama... Unforgettable, then, was the impression made on 16 May, by the first real Santuzza, when she emerged from a hot, dusty lane into the burning sunshine of the village market-square. Gliding covertly, restlessly, in search of her missing lover; glancing from side to side with anxious face; her fingers pulling at her Sicilian shawl, as ever and anon she slipped it off and replaced it on her shoulders - she looked a veritable picture of abject, hopeless misery... [she fills] in the picture with a hundred little artistic touches that tell the story where the librettist and musician cannot.<sup>12</sup>

It is interesting to note that in both reviews, there is intense detail about Calvé's physical presence, though her "beauty" is not mentioned at all. Her movements are described in close detail with respect to the art of opera and acting, but there is nothing sexual in the description. The journalists merely make note of her artistic choices.

Gender-focused language in the press affected all three divas, regardless of their conventional beauty standards or distinctly different careers. Viardot often experienced the framework of beauty versus talent when critics were reviewing her work as an artist. That is to say, although she possessed the talent they found admirable, it was always placed in direct contrast to her lack of conventional beauty standards, as if the two had any sort of dependent or necessary relationship. Sanderson's relationship with the press was arguably the most tragic. While the biggest focus was on her physical beauty, which

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 367.

played out as somewhat benevolent sexism, the press turned to a more scathing and dark tone as Sanderson married. Calvé, out of the three, interacted with the press the most frequently. She also had the least amount of sexist reporting, benevolent or not. Perhaps her personal relationship with journalists helped form a relationship that humanized Calvé and provided a level of accountability for her. Regardless of any conscious and unconscious efforts made, however, it appears all three divas were subjected to gender-biased reporting.

## Chapter Two: Career Strategies

At the juncture of the twentieth century, prima donnas experienced a tremendous amount of influence and freedom. They held power over the management of the opera house, the content of seasons, and compositional practices. In the midst of this diva-centric era, Pauline Viardot, Emma Calvé, and Sibyl Sanderson each made distinct choices of how to define and form their legacies as artists. While there were career moves they all shared by the nature of their work, each had a unique focus that shaped their identities as artists.

The arc of Pauline Viardot's career can be seen through the lens of the relationships she forged. These relationships led to significant work, historical collaborations, and promotions that defined both her and the composers she worked with. Additionally, while an important aspect of most careers, her influence on individual roles, both new and revived, is significant not only in operatic history, but also in the creation of the identity of the mezzo soprano as a voice type.

Perhaps the most memorable focus of Emma Calvé's career is her evocation of authenticity. The projection of authenticity as a tool, or as her true character, was central to her career. Authenticity in her choice of execution of characters, authenticity in doing what she desired even if it had not been done before in a conventional opera career, and authenticity in the way she behaved and presented herself. These choices made her beloved to all, from Queen Victoria to coal miners in Pittsburgh.

There is a different case to be made for Sibyl Sanderson. Like the two divas

discussed above, she had roles created for her, relationships forged, and had adoring fans across Europe. Her most defining narrative, however, may be the adoration she received for her body and physical beauty, and the subsequent career collapse that began after her marriage. This narrative speaks to the simultaneous valuing and devaluing of a woman's experiences when physical beauty is central to her public persona. While it can affect a career positively, especially at the outset, it can quickly become bitter when a female artist uses her agency as an individual over her own body, and for her own pleasure. This stands often in direct contrast to the idea of the female artist whose body exists as a relic of beauty and purity for the public eye and the public eye only.

Many pivotal relationships formed from the impression Viardot made on various important composers and critics of the day. One of the relationships that made the biggest impact on her career was with Giacomo Meyerbeer. When Meyerbeer met Viardot in 1843, he was the most important opera composer in Paris. He wanted her to have a place in the world and “vowed no new work of his would be performed there unless she was engaged to appear in it.”<sup>13</sup> In 1849, Viardot premiered *Le Prophète*. It was a huge success, with Viardot creating the role of Fidès, and because of Meyerbeer's popularity, it solidified Viardot on the Paris Opera stage. Another early relationship that helped launch her career was with Alfred de Musset. He is said to have been deeply moved by a performance of hers, and found her to be a good conversationalist and singer as well. They became friends, and she heeded his advice as a young singer, which proved fruitful for her. At the time, Alfred de Musset was an important and well respected writer and

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<sup>13</sup> Angela Faith Cofer, “Pauline Viardot-Garcia: The influence of the performer on nineteenth-century opera” (D.M.A. dissertation, University of Cincinnati, 1988), 47.

poet, and he often published in the newspapers of the day. These early relationships required Viardot to prove herself a serious musician, intellectual, and artist, and she managed not only to do so, but also to sustain relationships for many years to come in mutually beneficial ways.

As Viardot's career took off, composers began to appeal to her for collaborating and potentially launching their careers. Following the success of *Le Prophete*, for example, Viardot supported the young Charles Gounod's career. He was initially granted an interview with her, and as she liked what she saw and heard, she agreed to work with him. Until this time Gounod had mainly composed church music, and nothing for the stage. Saint- Saëns described this event as follows: "Madame Viardot, after arranging for Emile Augier to write the libretto of *Sapho*, opened to Gounod the doors of the Opera." Viardot had three "essential conditions: 1) it must be short; 2) it must be serious; 3) a woman must have the principal part."<sup>14</sup> This power dynamic is rare between men and women in this period, and speaks to the power wielded by Viardot through her musical artistry and star power as a diva. When collaborating on *Sapho*, Gounod corresponded with Viardot regularly, asked her approval, and gave her an inventory of what had been composed. *Sapho* proved a huge success and launched Gounod's career.

An important aspect of Viardot's collaboration with Meyerbeer and Gounod is what their operas meant for the mezzo-soprano. Early on in her career, she sang a wide variety of material. As Cofer's thesis states, however, "It would be through Meyerbeer that she would establish the prototype of the modern mezzo-soprano."<sup>15</sup> Through

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<sup>14</sup> Cofer, "Pauline Viardot-Garcia," 42.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 126.



Viardot's star power and musical artistry, she elevated the mezzo-soprano to a primadonna position. As was the case with the overall focus on Viardot's performance on stage, these operas also began to center around a personality and emotional experience of a character, not simply vocal virtuosity. For example, in a letter written during the making of *Sapho*, Viardot asked for the, "insertion of a small coronation ceremony for Sapho at the beginning of the act 1 finale, mainly to give herself and the audience a longer rest between the ode and the spacious hymn 'Merci Venus'." Viardot suggested to Gounod that he replace his original ending by an unpublished melodie entitled "Lamento: Chanson du pêcheur," the most famous piece in the opera.<sup>16</sup> This legacy, through her work with Gounod and Meyerbeer, had a major impact on the mezzo-sopranos repertoire to this day.

Viardot helped shape many additional careers. She inspired such composers as Camille Saint-Saëns, Gabriel Fauré, Frédéric Chopin, Jules Massenet, Hector Berlioz, and Johannes Brahms. She used her influence to promote the careers she deemed worthy, and wielded a tremendous amount of power. After Viardot's successful recreation of the role of Orphée, the director of the Parisian Opera, Alphonse Royer, asked Berlioz to do a revision of Gluck's *Alceste*, both giving him more work and great success, and Viardot another role to recreate. Fauré's career was also significantly influenced by Viardot. Through her circle, he met many influential people who provided significant contacts for his future. He dedicated many songs to Viardot's children, and at her death, he wrote a personal tribute to her in *Le Figaro*.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 134.

Another significant influence she had was on the career of Saint-Saëns. He frequently attended her Thursday evening musical gatherings and served as her accompanist, both opportunities offering him many contacts. These evening musical gatherings were salon-style meetings in which the most important figures in music, poetry, and art would gather to hear work, and sometimes discover new artists and musicians. One more very significant relationship that requires mention is that with Massenet. He came into Viardot's life in a time when he was better known for his orchestral works. When he played a part of his oratorio *Marie-Magdeleine* for Viardot, she thought so highly of it that she offered to sing the lead. This was a tremendously successful performance and a huge turning point in Massenet's career.

Some smaller examples of collaboration, if not major career-trajectory influence, include Brahms, who asked Viardot to sing the premier of his Alto Rhapsody, Op. 53 for contralto, male chorus, and orchestra. He is also said to have composed a serenade in honor of Viardot's birthday. Brahms and Viardot met in 1864 and quickly became friends. Many years later, in a letter to a student who was to study with Viardot, he reflected, "You are a very lucky girl and should be grateful at having the opportunity to study with Pauline Viardot, a most remarkable and superior woman and the greatest artist of the century. Give her my most heartfelt greetings, and assure her that I am still devoted to her, and shall be loyal and grateful to my last breath. She has advised me wisely."<sup>17</sup> It is clear that Brahms felt indebted to Viardot for her artistic guidance and thought very highly of her after collaborating with her. Additionally, Viardot also performed,

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 26.

with much success, many vocal transcriptions of Chopin's mazurkas, much to the composer's approval. As Chopin was famous by this time, however, their collaboration was more to mutually benefit one another.

Viardot's star power and influence made her central to any cultural scene she was a part of, regardless of where she lived. Most writers, musicians, and artists would flock to her salon. The power dynamic between her and the men to whom she offered her assistance was significant, as it was very different from the standard societal gendered power relations between a man and woman. For men to be asking for a meeting with her, sending her constant updates on compositions and requesting feedback, and collaborating directly with her as an equal was a dynamic that was unusual to gender roles in this period. What makes this particularly special for Viardot, compared to Calvé and Sanderson, is that this empowerment came from her ability to use her musicality and intelligence to collaborate on works. This provided her with a freedom and power that was uncommon otherwise, even within the sphere of divas.

For her part, Emma Calvé distinguished herself from the divas in this period through her unprecedented commitment to research and through her choices to participate in many personally fulfilling experiences not traditionally associated with an opera career. One potential reason why Calvé was so beloved was her honesty and seeming authenticity in her behavior and portrayals of her most beloved characters. The realism she infused into her characters could be perceived as so true that the public resonated with the characters and the emotions she portrayed in a very poignant and powerful way. Her commitment to using what she knew about the period and culture associated with an

opera's plot and her embrace of what later became known as method acting also defined her many career moves that were tangential to her dramatic commitment, such as travels and charity work.

Calvé herself said that, "a high intelligence, a well informed mind, a sensitive and generous heart, history, literature and language all are essential to the development of an interesting artistic career."<sup>18</sup> The lengths to which Calvé went to be true to the characters she portrayed were virtually unprecedented, but they were almost always very well received by the public. The quintessential example of her research-driven interpretation is that of Carmen. Calvé described her preparations as "scientific"<sup>19</sup> and did detailed research while traveling. She countered a director when preparing a show by not performing the suggested dance, but instead showing him the "true dance of the gitanas."

<sup>20</sup> She had traveled to Grenada, specifically the district of Albaycin, where many gypsy bands lived. She watched their daily lives, dancing, singing, gestures, movements, and fashions. While studying their mannerisms in performance and their daily lives at the cigarette factories, she also took it upon herself to buy the clothing and makeup that would be worn by a character such as Carmen. She both scuffed her shoes to imitate running over cobblestones of Seville and carelessly pinned her hair.<sup>21</sup> In her autobiography, she explained that she faced criticism and discouragement from directors when initially setting out to do this, further emphasizing this as a revolutionary approach

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<sup>18</sup> Susan Rutherford, *The Prima Donna and Opera, 1815-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 112.

<sup>19</sup> Huebner, "La Princesse Paysanne," 371.

<sup>20</sup> Emma Calvé, *My Life*, Translated by Rosamond Gilder (New York, NY: D. Appleton and Company, 1922), 81.

<sup>21</sup> Huebner, "La Princesse Paysanne," 371.

that very much defines her legacy.<sup>22</sup>

An additional role for which Calvé allotted significant research is that of Ophelia in Ambroise Thomas's opera *Hamlet*. Calvé mentions in her autobiography that she visited a woman in an asylum who had lost her sanity in a story similar to that of Ophelia.

<sup>23</sup> Though it haunted her, Calvé claimed it provided her with significant sympathy and understanding in playing the role. Additionally, Calvé often made the choice to not wear makeup, thereby looking genuinely mad and off-putting to the audience. She stumbled upon this method accidentally, as she was very frantic and desperate in an early performance of this role. In her autobiography she says, "I had no makeup on, my dress was in disorder, I must have seemed indeed half mad! The audience thought it was a studied effect, and I felt a current of interest and sympathy sweep through the theater. I began singing with complete abandon, a tragic fervor. . ."<sup>24</sup> This proved to be one of the major triumphs of her career, and perhaps one of her earliest experiences experimenting with the power of realism on the stage. Although this may have been accidental at first, it became standard practice for her not to wear makeup and to appear disheveled as she played Ophelia throughout her career.

Outside of her role preparation in a form of method acting, Calvé created other experiences for herself that helped define her legacy. The most significant were her travels. Calvé was among the first opera singers who pursued a global career that included extended tours of the U.S. and Asia. Throughout her autobiography, she discusses her love for travel and discovery, speaking about her encounters with other

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<sup>22</sup> Calvé, *My Life*, 81.

<sup>23</sup> Huebner, "La Princesse Paysanne," 369.

<sup>24</sup> Calvé, *My Life*, 59.

cultures. Among her travels, she visited China, witnessing performances of Peking opera; she also visited Hawaii, Japan, multiple places in India, Australia, Singapore, and sang for the Sultan in Turkey. Additionally, she contributed in many ways in World War One that may have been seen as below her position as an international star. Calvé volunteered to clean the feet of soldiers arriving from the battlefield, helped plant wheat with the wives of farmers at her castle, sang at the Met for no pay, but to raise money for France, and sold her costumes for charity.<sup>25</sup>

Calvé was a strong-willed woman who shaped her career in a very unique way simply by making choices that pleased her, even if they sometimes weren't precedented or initially received well. In the long run, these decisions stand as some of the first examples of realism in dramatic performance, as well as presenting the diva as a humanized citizen and not just an untouchable star on a pedestal.

Sanderson provides a contrast to Calvé and Viardot as an ultimately disempowered diva. One possible reading of the narrative of her career is that of a loved beauty and virgin servant to the art of opera, followed by a quick drop off in her status after she married. Early on in her career, she worked hard and felt the stress to please and establish herself. Some of her earlier performances in Belgium had a rocky start, but the public fell in love with her as she worked for their respect. As she became more loved, she received more work. She was singing three nights a week, and rehearsing a new opera every other afternoon in Belgium. In 1886, she moved to Paris. In her five years in the French capital,

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<sup>25</sup> Calvé, *My Life*, 216-217.

she had three roles created for her: *Esclarmonde* (1889), *Phryné* (1893), and *Thaïs* (1894). In 1897, Sanderson married a Cuban millionaire and sugar plantation heir named Antonio Terry. After her marriage to him, her opera career slowed and then stalled. Her last years did not include much work, but instead suicide rumors and other scathing press. Although the marriage cannot absolutely be defined as the causation for her career drop off, there might be a stark correlation.

Additionally, as discussed earlier, the image of Sanderson in the press was focused heavily around her physical appearance and body. This was aided by the nature of the roles she had written for her. In *Thaïs*, Sanderson is the most beautiful courtesan in Alexandria. In *Esclarmonde*, she has a veil covering her face, effectively making her body and beauty the focus in an indirect way. Finally, in *Phryné*, she is again noted for her beauty and seductive powers as a courtesan. These roles solidified the brand of Sanderson as one of a body-centric and beauty-centric figure.

In this period, opera was full of female characters that were passive victims, virginal, innocent, or repentant sinners. Sanderson became type-cast early on as a fair beauty that personified this idea of womanhood, especially in *Thaïs* whose heroine is a saint. As previously noted, the press focused heavily on her physical beauty. For Sanderson to cross the boundary from diva, a position which allowed her to be desired and almost symbolic, to a married woman, broke the spell. It destroyed the illusions that the press and public had of her, as she reclaimed her body and happiness as her own. This, sadly, may have been the reason for the significant drop off in her artistic trajectory.

Viardot, Calvé, and Sanderson molded careers for themselves and made unique

choices about how to present and sustain the creation of their legacies. While they, like many divas of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century opera, were able to influence the production of the works they participated in, each chose to focus on different parts of their identities or artistic focuses to maintain an influential and unique career that would stick out in the diva-heavy era they worked in. For Calvé, her method acting was noticed and appreciated; Sanderson's choice to take eroticized yet contained roles that paralleled her image in society furthered the public admiration, at least for a time; and Viardot's choice to engage her intellect as a musician brought her significant success, as well as influence and legacy beyond solely singing opera roles.



## Chapter Three: Images

Images were an important tool for divas in this period, as they helped solidify their public personas in more permanent ways than a performance. These photographs were used as a publicity tool for certain productions, but also as one for the divas themselves. Many of these were either a cabinet card or a carte-de-visite. These types of prints were popular as photography was becoming more accessible, and to have a photograph was an exciting thing, something to show off.

While it is difficult to draw a line between the directions these divas were offered for their poses and facial expressions, and the agency they had to choose the way they were represented, we know a certain amount about the process. Photographers desperately wanted to be able to photograph elites in society, which would include opera singers in this period. A carte de visite or cabinet card could be purchased at an opera house, and signed by a singer. According to Max Hochstetler, the singers used their own acting skills when collaborating with photographers, implying that they were perhaps not directed to do very much<sup>26</sup>.

Such photographs and drawings offer a picture of these three divas aligned with the personalities and identities presented in other sources such as autobiographies, interviews, reviews, etc. The images of Pauline Viardot seem to present her in a very modest way and do not emphasize her body per se. Sibyl Sanderson's images, unsurprisingly, focus heavily on her physical figure, sometimes even taking her face

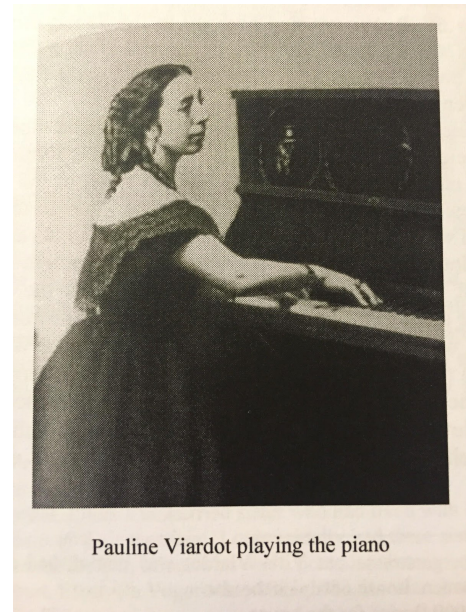
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<sup>26</sup> Max Hochstetler, "19th Century Opera Stars," Luminous- Lint. June 1, 2007.

completely out of focus. This is aligned with her typecasting that seems to be heavily built upon her figure. Finally, Calvé's portraits focus on her authenticity. Most photographs of Calvé for her specific roles have elements of the kind of method acting that she discusses in her autobiography. The images have very realistic parts of the character, such as props, clothing, and hair choices that are not present in character photographs for any other diva.



Figure 3.1: “Pauline Viardot.” Engraving. *Femininemusique.com*, <http://www.femininemusique.com/main.php?page=pauline>



Pauline Viardot playing the piano

Figure 3.2: (left) *Madame Viardot-Garcia, Théâtre Italien / Vigneron*. Engraving, 1840. Bibliothèque Nationale de France. <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8426716r>.

Figure 3.3: (right) *Pauline Viardot playing the piano*. Photograph. Barbara Kendall-Davies, *The Life and Work of Pauline Viardot Garcia*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2003).



Figure 3.4: *Pauline Viardot as Alceste*. Photograph. Barbara Kendall- Davies, *The Life and Work of Pauline Viardot Garcia*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2003).



Figure 3.5: *Pauline Viardot in her costume as Gluck's "Orfeo"*. 1859. Photograph. Barbara Kendall- Davies, *The Life and Work of Pauline Viardot Garcia* Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2003).

In the five images above, we see recurring themes in the way Viardot has decided to present herself. None of the images show her in a very sexualized way, nor does she pose to appeal to the male gaze. She appears very regal and dresses in a way that does not draw focus to her body. Two of the photographs above (Fig. 3.4 and 3.5) were used for publicity for specific productions in which she had lead roles. One is from Gluck's *Orfeo* in 1859, and the other is from Gluck's *Alceste* in 1861. In both pictures, she is wearing an outfit that does not emphasize her figure, nor does she pose in a way that could potentially draw erotic attention. It is clear that these pictures are her as the character, not sexualized in any way. In both images, she inhabits the character as well, she is not posing as Pauline Viardot. In Fig. 3.4, her body language implies grief and sadness, as is the state of Alceste in much of the opera, so much so that she does not even engage the viewer, as she is so wrapped in her grief. Fig. 3.5, Viardot as Orfeo, has her standing straight, puffing out her chest implying a masculine stance, and holding a lute. This instrument is associated with Orfeo's character, as he plays it in a pivotal moment in the opera. It is clear in these photographs that she is choosing to put the character first, not emphasizing her figure or physical appearance.

In the other three images, Viardot is not portrayed in any specific role. These pictures could have many purposes, but their continued presence to this day implies that they made an impression and supported Viardot's character to the public. She is presented with simplicity and a lack of direct or indirect sexual elements. Her clothing in all three portraits shows very little of her figure, and it is not fancy or frilly in any way.

Interestingly, in Fig. 3.3, she is playing piano. Where this image comes from is unknown, but neither Sanderson nor Calvé have images that are readily accessible that showcase them in a position in which they are making music or working with their craft. While all of these artists worked tremendously hard at their craft according to testimonies and autobiographical material, Viardot's narrative continues to be that of a hardworking and highly intelligent musician. This was evident in the way others talked about her, as well as in her own work and collaborative efforts. It appears that these images simply strengthen the narrative the public has of Viardot as a hardworking and dedicated musician that is not known nor respected for her beauty, but for her music and artistic work. The choice not to present sexualized images was a very conscious one, as the images above very clearly reflect almost every other image available.



Figure 3.6: *Sibyl Sanderson*. Photograph. Bibliothèque Nationale de France. <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b84247112>



Figure 3.7: *Mademoiselle Sanderson, dans "Esclarmonde."* Engraving. Bibliothèque Nationale de France. <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8424715q>

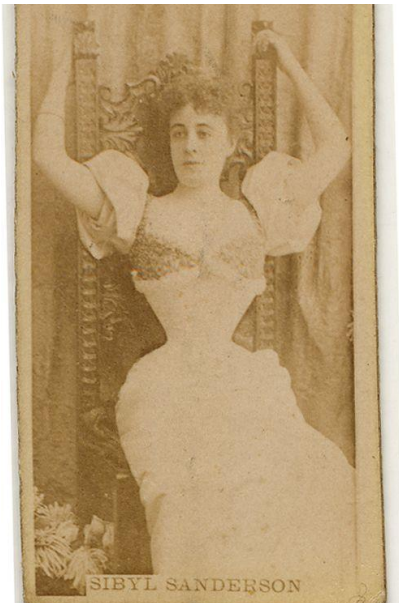


Figure 3.8 (left) *Sibyl Sanderson*. 1890. Photograph. Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee Theatre Research Institute. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/60966199@N08/5588944302/in/set-72157626312413421>



Figure 3.9 (right) *Mademoiselle Sanderson, dans le rôle de Manon. (Opéra-Comique)*. Photograph. Bibliothèque Nationale de France. <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b84247149>



Figure 3.10 *Sibyl Sanderson and Jean- François Delmas in Jules Massenet's opera Thais*. Photograph. Getty  
 Images.463897003-sibyl-sanderson-and-delmás-in-jules-massenet- gettyimages.jpg



Figure 3.11 *Mary Garden*. Photograph. *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary\\_Garden](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Garden).



In the photographs and engravings of Sibyl Sanderson, we see her playing to her biggest strength: her physical appearance and conventional beauty by nineteenth-century standards. There are a few reasons for the poses, costumes, and central focuses in the photographs above. In some of the images, Sanderson is dressed as the character she performs in an opera. As discussed, many of these operas focused heavily on her body and her sexuality, only furthering this as her central identity to the public. In this sense, she does not simply inhabit a character, but is still “Sanderson,” in a sense, due to the blurred lines between her real-life persona and the characters she was given to portray. Many of the other images draw a strong connection to her sexuality from her pose and dress. This seems to follow suit with the way she was talked about in the press, and the way she chose to present herself in other mediums.

In the engraving in which Sanderson is holding a mirror, and in the drawing in which she is wearing a veil, she is posing as her character for publicity for a production, not simply as Sanderson. In Fig. 10 in which she is holding a mirror, she is posing for Thaïs, Fig. 3.7, *Esclarmonde*. The costumes these characters wore emphasized her body, and these images illustrate this.

In *Esclarmonde*, Sanderson’s character was considered so beautiful that she had to be sequestered by her emperor father and hide behind a veil. One of the climactic moments is when *Esclarmonde* lifts her veil and is revealed. The focus on her physical figure as a central plot point to this opera furthers the narrative of Sanderson as a physically beautiful diva. The publicity picture for this opera has Sanderson lifting her veil to reveal her face, again, making her body the focal point of the publicity efforts. In

the image for *Thaïs*, Sanderson is holding a mirror and wearing a dress that is particularly flattering to her figure's shape. The mirror draws a focus to her beauty and physical figure, as does her primping her hair in the mirror. In Massenet's *Thaïs*, Sanderson is the most beautiful courtesan in Alexandria. In the scene represented, she is being looked at by a man, inviting the viewers to see an illustration of how she is both wanted and adored by men.

The remaining two photographs also cater to the male gaze, though it is less clear what the roles are that Sanderson is portraying. In Fig. 3.6, she is dressed in a very low cut dress for her time, or for today. It is clear that she is dressed for her role in *Thaïs*, as her hairstyle and dress are classic for the look of her character. It is worth noting the difference in the dress for Mary Garden (Fig 3.11). Garden wears a dress that is much higher cut, and a shawl covering much of the rest of her body shape from the camera. The vast difference in exposure of each singer's body is apparent and solidifies the idea of Sanderson's brand as one of emphasis on physical beauty. This shows her body in a very direct way, which is very sexualized for the time, as not many women did that. In the other two, she is either posing sideways for *Manon* (Fig. 3.9), or in a dress that emphasizes her waist by having her arms above her head (Fig. 3.8) this one without a potential production attached to it. She is explicitly making her body's shape the focus of these two photographs. Her face is not the focus, nor is the dress overall as a garment, it is only her body that is the center of the photograph, specifically her small waist. At that time, this was an admirable and desired trait in a woman.



Figure 3.12: *Calvé in "Le Chevalier Jean"*. Photograph. Emma Calvé, *My Life*, translated by Rosamond Gilder (New York, NY: D. Appleton and Company, 1922).



Figure 3.13: *Emma Calvé*. 1894. Photograph. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/96173/Carmen>



Figure 3.14: *Emma Calvé as Ophelia*. Photograph. Emma Calvé, *My Life*, translated by Rosamond Gilder (New York, NY: D. Appleton and Company, 1922).



Figure 3.15: *Emma Calvé as Carmen*. Photograph. Heritage Images. Private Collection. 520714037-emma-calvé-as-carmen-private-collection-gettyimages.jpg

The photographs of Calvé show her playing to her strengths. In her autobiography, she discusses her commitment to the acting process later to be known as method acting. In this form of acting, it is necessary for the actor not only to study the role in depth, but also to do historical research and experience the background of the character directly. This would include the culture in which they lived, the location, their clothing, their mannerisms, accent, day-to-day life, emotional state, relationships, and more. Calvé discusses her love of this process for many of her characters, especially Carmen. Each photograph above highlights the results of this process. This process was a choice she conveyed as artistic integrity, but it cannot be ignored that it was also a choice to boost her career. In almost every instance in which she made dramatic or presentational choices on stage that aligned with her research, she received positive feedback.

In Fig. 3.12, we see Calvé in the role she created in Victorin de Joncières' *Le Chevalier Jean*. This image does not present her in a particularly flattering way, leading the viewer to think she is posing in character. She is slightly bent over, her expression is intent, and her hair is messy and frizzy. It is the first time in this research I have found a picture of a diva with hair that is anything less than perfect. For Calvé to make the choice to display herself not done-up shows that, for her, the character and production are more important than her own beauty. It is also possible that she wanted the viewer to believe this choice also about her artistry, regardless of whether or not it's the case, it may be a

profitable choice for Calvé and her image. In Fig. 3.14, Calvé as Ophelia, she has covered herself in flowers and is looking behind her. In her autobiography, she discusses the many experiments within method acting that attempted for this role<sup>27</sup>, one of which is putting many flowers in her hair, which she has done in the picture above. This also solidifies her image as a singer who takes on the character and situation of the character to a higher degree than most divas of the time.

Finally, we have Calvé in her most famous role of Carmen. In her autobiography, she discusses her time living in the area where “Carmen” is from, and watching women in the cigarette factories. She also discusses buying authentic clothing and learning their dances<sup>28</sup>. It is not surprising to see the results of this work displayed in the images meant to advertise the productions, as this went over well with audiences. In Fig. 3.15, Calvé is holding a cigarette, and in Fig. 3.13 she is showing her Spanish shoes and standing in a position as though she were about to dance the traditional dance she learned. These images, as well as all of the others, helped to solidify Calvé’s niche in the diva world as an artist with the image of sacrificing conventionality for her art and committing to it to a degree that had never before been seen.

Photographs allowed productions to use their divas to draw audiences, but divas also used them to solidify their image. Whether it was for emphasizing their sexualized image, their image an artist committed to her craft, or the image of a respectable woman and artist, these photographs and engravings survive and provide us with a large amount of information. These images allowed viewers of the time to extrapolate who they

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<sup>27</sup> Huebner, *“La Princesse Paysanne du Midi,”* 369.

<sup>28</sup> Calvé, *My Life*, 81.

thought these divas were, so divas may well have made careful choices how to display themselves. The information we have from other sources such as autobiographies, interviews, and reviews align closely with that which we see displayed in the photographs, which allows us to understand how carefully divas and their entourage crafted their images, and how important these photographs were to their image as both women and artists.

## Conclusion

Each diva had the opportunity to affect her image through playing into patriarchal ideas or countering them. While Sanderson used her beauty to her benefit, Viardot and Calvé decided to attempt to garner respect and admiration through their skills. It is clear from reviews and the trajectory of her career that Sanderson did, indeed, have talent, yet foregrounded her body, Viardot and Calvé, on the other hand, did not play into their beauty significantly to boost their careers. Viardot used her intellect to garner respect from the many people in the music business that she worked with. This eventually led to a career in which she was the intellectually respected person, making for decisions about editing and improving operas and other musical works that she supported. Calvé decided to be open to the press, and to pursue a career known for intense role preparation that was deeply admired.

Gendered language and misogynistic undertones in nineteenth-century society forced Viardot, Calvé, and Sanderson to make decisions about how to engage with the press and their audiences. Viardot sticks out because of her unique narrative. Her body, when mentioned, was discussed in a negative way, often in contrast to a deep respect and admiration a journalist had for her work. The artist who interacted with the press the least was Viardot. Viardot never engaged with the press to call them out for insulting her physical appearance. She decided distancing herself was the best option. Though perhaps a risky choice, she went on to have a very respected career, with skills that even the press acknowledged.



Sanderson and Calvé both engaged with the press more than Viardot. Early on in Sanderson's career, she did not engage with the press very frequently. As the years went on and she married, however, she began to directly counter the vicious rumors being published about her. This may have affected things very little, but it may have made her feel more empowered to have done so. Regardless of her interaction with the press, however, it was always very focused on her body. After her marriage, it turned from admiration to maliciousness, for, perhaps, a variety of reasons. It is, therefore, understandable that she chose then to begin to engage. Calvé engaged with the press on a very frequent basis. She also seems to have had a very positive experience with the press overall. While correlation is not causation, it seems it is human nature to feel an obligation to treat a person with more respect when they engage directly and on equal footing with others.

In terms of putting a unique stamp on their careers, each diva chose a very different aspect of their identity as women and artists to focus on. Viardot seemed to focus mainly on the integrity of her work and her influence on her roles, as well as others' music. Early on, Viardot's relationships greatly benefited her and the start of her career. They were mostly forged because others found her intelligent and interesting. Later in her career, once she held this power, she was able to choose whose career she wanted to help launch, and greatly influenced their compositional process. Sanderson used the sexuality that brought her much attention to take and help create title roles that were focused around women's bodies and sexuality. This brought her great fame and success, though much of it collapsed with her marriage. Calvé traveled far to prepare for

the role of Carmen, and made many unique choices in her stagecraft. This, along with her autobiography and openness with the press, encompassed an image of “authenticity” that the public adored.

Images were important both to productions and to the individuals playing the roles. While they had an obligation to the character and the production, each diva seems to embody the identities we have seen in other parts of their careers. Sanderson’s pictures are very sexualized, regardless of whether or not they are for a production. Calvé’s images have her with frizzy hair, flowers in her hair, and a cigarette in her hand in various roles. She chooses to embody these characters perhaps past a point that divas had before her. Viardot either embodied the roles with very little sexual energy in her choice of costume, or had very modest pictures that were hardly evocative of sexuality in any way, simply “respectable”. We see these divas presenting themselves in the same way in their choices of poses and costumes as we do in their identities throughout their interaction with the public.

This period in operatic history contained many important and legendary divas, specifically in the Paris opera scene. Many of them were very beautiful and very talented. Viardot, Calvé, and Sanderson stand out for their ability to build an image for themselves within a power structure that did not always afford them that privilege as both women and artists. All three divas found ways within the standard path to a career to make sure they would have significant and memorable careers.

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