

“CAN’T HELP SINGING”: THE “MODERN” OPERA DIVA IN HOLLYWOOD FILM,  
1930–1950

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## ABSTRACT

Gina Bombola: “Can’t Help Singing”: The “Modern” Opera Diva in Hollywood Film,  
1930–1950  
(Under the direction of Annegret Fauser)

Following the release of Columbia Pictures’ surprise smash hit, *One Night of Love* (1934), major Hollywood studios sought to cash in on the public’s burgeoning interest in films featuring opera singers. For a brief period thereafter, renowned Metropolitan Opera artists such as Grace Moore and Lily Pons fared well at the box office, bringing “elite” musical culture to general audiences for a relatively inexpensive price. By the 1940s, however, the studios began grooming their own operatic actresses instead of transplanting celebrities from the stage. Stars such as Deanna Durbin, Kathryn Grayson, and Jane Powell thereby became ambassadors of opera from the highly commercial studio lot.

My dissertation traces the shifts in film production and marketing of operatic singers in association with the rise of such cultural phenomena as the music-appreciation movement, all contextualized within the changing social and political landscapes of the United States spanning the Great Depression to the Cold War. Drawing on a variety of methodologies—including, among others, archival research, film analysis, feminist criticisms, and social theory—I argue that Hollywood framed opera as less of a European theatrical art performed in elite venues and more of a democratic, albeit still white, musical tradition that could be sung by talented individuals in any location. This reconfiguration began in the 1930s, when professional opera divas first created a market for musical films featuring opera-singer narratives and fully staged

opera excerpts. By the end of the decade, Hollywood established a new operatic ideal for the cinema, casting girl-next-door sweethearts as talented ingénues who sang in domestic settings.

For my family

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

Bentley Historical Library (BHL)

Library of Congress (LOC)

Margaret Herrick Library (MHL)

Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA)

Production Code Administration (PCA)

University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)

University of Southern California (USC)

University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK)

## INTRODUCTION

To most studio executives in 1930s Hollywood, it seemed unfathomable that an opera singer could strike box-office gold. Executives assumed that moviegoers would prefer the “boop boop a doops” of trendy singers similar to Helen Kane and the crooning of such stars as Bing Crosby to the musical pyrotechnics of Metropolitan Opera notables. Columbia Pictures’ surprise smash hit, *One Night of Love* (1934), changed Hollywood’s mind. Starring famous soprano Grace Moore in the lead role, *One Night* offered its viewers a tantalizing taste of opera. The romantic comedy featured multiple excerpts from such audience favorites as Georges Bizet’s *Carmen* and Giacomo Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly*, granting American audiences snapshots of staged opera performances for the relatively inexpensive cost of a movie ticket. Many film studios soon scrambled to cash in on the public’s burgeoning interest in movies featuring opera singers, and, for a brief period of time, renowned artists like Moore, Lily Pons, and Gladys Swarthout enjoyed celluloid fame.

By the late 1930s, however, the film industry replaced its Metropolitan transplants with studio-groomed ingénues, introducing such girl-next-door sweethearts as Deanna Durbin, Kathryn Grayson, and Jane Powell as the new operatic ideal. Similarly to their forebears, these young women starred in contemporary musical films and sang the highlights of the operatic canon as well as a mixture of classical contrafacts, familiar ballads, and popular tunes. Yet their musical numbers typically were set in domestic spaces rather than on the opera stage. In *Three*

*Daring Daughters* (1948), for example, Powell sings “Je veux vivre” from Charles Gounod’s *Roméo et Juliette* to conductor José Iturbi in her living room.

This locational shift framed opera as less of a European theatrical art performed in elite venues and more of a democratic—but still white—musical tradition that could be sung by talented individuals in any environment, from the sitting rooms of shopgirls to the ballrooms of business moguls. Separating opera from its visual cues (i.e., costumes and staging) and relocating it to alternate performance spaces engendered a more fluid understanding of what the term “opera” meant. Indeed, the boundaries between musical styles blurred as arias—unless purposefully identified within a film’s narrative or aurally recognized by moviegoers themselves—were performed alongside art songs, recomposed classical pieces, and other studio compositions. Hollywood thus reconfigured opera as a domesticized and classed mode of vocality rather than a staged art form with a specific repertoire.

In many ways, the film industry’s legacy remains with us still today. Crossover artists Sarah Brightman, Charlotte Church, and Josh Groban, for instance, are frequently described as operatic, despite their non-affiliation with professional opera companies. A non-specialist might very well identify a track from one of these singers’ albums as “opera” because of their vocality, which often serves as a key stylistic signifier. Just a few years ago on *Britain’s Got Talent* in 2012, for example, seventeen-year-old Jonathan Antoine entered to win the televised singing competition with his sixteen-year-old friend, Charlotte Jaconelli. The two sang “The Prayer,” which classical-crossover artist Andrea Bocelli and pop singer Céline Dion first released in 1999 as a duet. Responding to the teenagers’ performance, judge David Walliams used the tenor and

soprano's respective vocalities to differentiate between perceptions of genre: "A pop voice and an opera voice. It was incredible."<sup>1</sup>

This dissertation argues that Hollywood helped change the conception of opera in the popular American imagination, one that indexed shifting social concerns and aesthetic ideals. I analyze musical films from Hollywood's so-called Golden Era (1930–1950) that starred operatic singers to investigate how celebrated divas and studio starlets became ambassadors of opera, helping to popularize the genre in the United States. In each of my four chapters, I contextualize operatic musical films within myriad social and political landscapes spanning the Great Depression to the beginning of the Cold War. By "operatic musicals," I mean films—typically comedies, dramas, and romances—that include musical numbers excerpted from operas or that starred professional opera singers. Most movies showcasing such luminaries featured at least one operatic aria, but there are certain exceptions, including, for example, Grace Moore and Lawrence Tibbett's *New Moon* (1930). Although the film itself was an adaptation of Sigmund Romberg's eponymous operetta, Moore and Tibbett's status as Metropolitan notables firmly created a link between opera and their movies. More characteristically, operatic musicals told stories about aspiring or established opera singers, who performed up to five familiar arias logically integrated into film narratives. By the 1940s, these protagonists could be talented amateur singers rather than professionals.

My dissertation brings three areas of musicological study into closer dialogue with one another: opera studies, film-music studies, and vocality studies. These three areas rarely intersect, often maintaining certain disciplinary focuses that prioritize bounded generic categories, the composer, theatrical stagings, or embodiment. Even though such scholars as

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<sup>1</sup> David Walliams, "Opera duo Charlotte & Jonathan–Britain's Got Talent 2012 audition–UK Version," uploaded by Britain's Got Talent, 24 March 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZsNlcr4frs4> (accessed 19 December 2016).

Marcia Citron and Jeongwon Joe have written about the use of opera in film soundtracks or as filmed adaptations, the subject of opera as diegetic performance in musical films remains underrepresented in the musicological literature.<sup>2</sup> In part, this stems from film-music studies' attention to the composer's score and the use of music as a narrative element or psychological component. Numerous texts such as those written by Mervyn Cooke and Laurence E. MacDonald, for example, chronicle the history of film composition, from the silents to the recent scores of composers such as John Williams.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, scholarship on musical films devotes itself to popular music or adaptations of Broadway shows, canonizing such legendary figures as Rodgers and Hammerstein. As recently as 2014, two publications on early sound film concentrated on American popular song and underscoring: Michael Slowik's *After the Silents: Hollywood Film Music in the Early Sound Era, 1926–1934* and Katherine Spring's *Saying It with Songs: Popular Music and the Coming of Sound to Hollywood Cinema*.

By following opera—and its performers—on a journey from the writer's room into the film studio and through the camera's lens to the audience's seat in the movie theater, I contribute to a new understanding of the genre in U.S. culture. My research counters the present narrative that depicts opera as the preferred music of the moneyed classes and one that quickly disappeared from the musical-film repertory in the late 1930s. Film scholar Jane Feuer, for instance, asserts that movies featuring classical idioms (including opera) could only achieve success with the so-called masses if the “highbrow” repertoire was neutralized within the film's narrative. According to Feuer, musical films depict such “elite” genres as lacking “a potency

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Marcia J. Citron, *Opera on Screen* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), Marcia J. Citron, *When Opera Meets Film* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), and Jeongwon Joe, *Opera as Soundtrack* (Farnham, Surrey, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> See Mervyn Cooke, *A History of Film Music* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008) and Laurence E. MacDonald, *The Invisible Art of Film Music: A Comprehensive History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2013).

which may only be gained by a conversion to popular music.”<sup>4</sup> Susan J. Leonardi and Rebecca A. Pope agree with Feuer’s claims in their discussion of the operatic prima donna and musical films, further positing that the diva faded from Hollywood’s favor prior to the 1940s.<sup>5</sup>

My dissertation instead shows that opera continued to live on in musical films well into that decade. Although prima donnas from professional opera companies no longer graced the silver screen in leading roles as prominently as they did in the mid-1930s—indeed, there are only a few exceptions—Hollywood fashioned a new diva for American audiences. Studio-groomed starlets assumed the guise of operatic stars and offered a new twist on an old stereotype. The modern opera singer as depicted by the film industry projected a relatable girl-next-door persona with nationwide, and even international, appeal. Such singer/actresses as Deanna Durbin and Jane Powell helped Hollywood to construct opera, previously perceived as an elite European theatrical art, as a mode of vocality shaped by social concerns and aesthetic ideals.

My dissertation is grounded in archival materials and primary documents. They have enabled me to investigate the “behind the scenes” decisions made by various industry personnel, from high-powered executives to marketing staff, that affected what came to be depicted onscreen and presented to the public. These “hidden” processes of film production open up a multilayered view of people’s values, perceptions, and aims not always made clearly visible to researchers working primarily from secondary accounts. By digging deep into the archives, I discovered sources that have allowed me to write a counter-narrative to the present story in which opera played an insignificant role in Hollywood film and American popular culture during

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<sup>4</sup> Jane Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 56, 60–65.

<sup>5</sup> Susan J. Leonardi and Rebecca A. Pope, *The Diva’s Mouth: Body, Voice, Prima Donna Politics* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996).

the first half of the twentieth century. In fact, unpublished studio documents have illuminated Hollywood's longtime fascination with opera, one that continues today.

To complete my project, I conducted most of my research in three major Los Angeles film archives: the Margaret Herrick Library; the Cinematic Arts Library at the University of Southern California; and the Special Collections Library at the University of California, Los Angeles. There, I examined a number of unpublished sources—film treatments, scripts, interdepartmental and censorship correspondence, studio production files, publicity materials, and the personal papers of studio employees—as well as film periodicals and magazines. I conducted other vital archival research at the Special Collections Library at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville—where the Grace Moore Papers are housed—and in the Music Division at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. Materials from the Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan further contributed to my work.

During my archival research, I discovered a surprising number of documents for films that I had not considered as central to my project (e.g., *There's Magic in Music/The Hard-Boiled Canary*, 1941). For other films I originally had intended to discuss, few or no traces survived in the archives (e.g., *It Happened in Brooklyn*, 1947). Ultimately, I constructed my dissertation around a series of interlocking stories that I uncovered in the archives, letting them emerge from the letters, scripts, fan mail, censorship documents, and other sources, rather than trying to impose my idea of what I initially thought would be important about these films onto the materials. Yet the richness of these archives also posed challenges as to whom and what to include in the narrative and what to exclude. I cut my planned chapters on Gladys Swarthout and Gloria Jean, for example, because the discussions of the films by Grace Moore, Lily Pons, and Deanna Durbin enabled me to focus more in depth on particularly pivotal moments of female

vocality in Hollywood film. Jeanette MacDonald also was excised because both she and her movies operated differently in the public's eye than the Hollywood presence of her 1930s contemporaries from the Metropolitan Opera.

I have attempted to present all the transcriptions of primary materials and reception documents as faithfully to their originals as possible, maintaining the authors' own spellings, punctuation, and grammatical choices. Editorial decisions made for ease of reading or the purpose of brevity are indicated in the text by brackets and offset ellipses. I also have italicized all movie titles for consistency.

### **Setting the Scene: Opera in Early American Cinema**

My project takes up where other historians have left off: the transition from silent cinema to “talking” pictures. Scholars such as Jennifer Fleegeer have charted the cinema's initial relationship with opera, which began when the silents first illuminated the silver screen.<sup>6</sup> They have shown how filmmakers occasionally used operatic narratives, including those of Georges Bizet's *Carmen* and Jules Massenet's *Thaïs*, to make silent films. Movie orchestras or musicians accompanied the silents with melodies culled from various operas, and the first of the Warner Bros.' Vitaphone Shorts featured a range of famous artists, from Giovanni Martinelli to Marion Talley. But as Fleegeer and others have noted, the merger of sound with film spurred gendered biases in regard to certain genres within the broader film discourse. Critics and various studio personnel posited that early recording equipment did not capture all voices equally well, “preferring” the lower registers of men's voices to the stratospheric heights of the typical soprano range. As Fleegeer points out, part of this rhetorical discrimination stemmed from a

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<sup>6</sup> See Jennifer Fleegeer, *Mismatched Women: The Siren's Song Through the Machine* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

“broader cultural indifference to hearing women make noise” as well as a widespread belief that, if women must make noise, they needed to fulfill the (male) expectations of what women should sound like in the first place.<sup>7</sup> In other words, women’s voices needed to be controlled. The limitations of recording technology and the negative critical reception of early opera film shorts featuring women therefore provided a means for the studios to justify their partiality for male artists.<sup>8</sup>

The press picked up on this “technologically-based” inequality. As the *Los Angeles Examiner* mused in regard to Grace Moore’s debut film, *A Lady’s Morals* (1930): “Naturally one is interested in her voice. It is generally recognized that the voices of women, particularly singing voices, do not fare as well in any sort of mechanical reproduction as those of men.”<sup>9</sup> Moore, however, seemingly did somewhat better than most operatic sopranos on film at the time. The *Examiner* concluded that “Miss Moore is fortunate: her tones are pure and clear at all times, and her speaking voice is as delightful as her song.” *Variety* likewise noted that Moore’s voice “registered magically on the mechanical, with a human quality that gives it remarkable appeal.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, a soprano voice could be in danger of both recording poorly and being stripped of its human character, rendering it unnatural and akin to the voice of the ghost in the machine.

Camera technology similarly did not do any favors for opera divas, many of whom gained a sort of notoriety for their “wooden” acting. As film historian Richard Barrios points out,

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<sup>7</sup> Fleeger, *Mismatched Women*, 9, and Jennifer Fleeger, *Sounding American: Hollywood, Opera, and Jazz* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 70.

<sup>8</sup> Fleeger, *Sounding American*, 70.

<sup>9</sup> “Grace Moore Debut in Films a Triumph,” *Los Angeles Examiner*, 20 October 1930. This review also was reproduced in the *Washington Herald* and the *Los Angeles Herald* on the same date.

<sup>10</sup> Review of *A Lady’s Morals*, *Variety*, 12 November 1930, in “Scrapbook: Newspaper Clippings and Correspondence, 1930–1939,” Grace Moore Papers, Box 3, Folder 17, Special Collections, University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK).

the camera's limited mobility severely reduced the repertoire of camera shots and angles available to directors.<sup>11</sup> They therefore tried to circumvent the static quality of opera scenes, in which singers usually stood still while performing, by creating emotional tension through close-ups of the artists' facial expressions. In spite of these attempts, archival evidence suggests that audiences may have found extended shots of a singer's open mouth to be both boring and silly, especially when these close-ups lasted up to three minutes in length. Consequently, opera singers were held at the mercy of the human agents (sound engineers, editors, and cameramen) who operated the film technologies, the technologies themselves, and audience perception.

Despite these perils, MGM attempted to bring opera to the silver screen amid the "talkies" craze in 1930. The studio produced two musical films starring Metropolitan baritone Lawrence Tibbett and soprano Grace Moore that year. Both *A Lady's Morals* and *New Moon* aimed to bring opera to moviegoers "in a new form."<sup>12</sup> As the *New York Herald* announced on 24 January 1930:

It is believed that the acquisition of these two artists by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer is in line with this company's recently announced policy of developing a new type of screen musical entertainment of which *The Rogue Song* affords the first example. This development will comprise neither the transplanted grand opera nor operettas to the screen, but rather the creation of musical romances and dramas in which prominent singers who possess magnetic screen personalities will be featured.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See Richard Barrios, *A Song in the Dark: The Birth of the Musical Film*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> *A Lady's Morals* premiered on 8 November 1930, and *New Moon* followed swiftly on its heels, with a New York opening on 23 December 1930. The original operetta *New Moon*, which premiered in New York on 19 September 1928, featured music by Sigmund Romberg and lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II, Frank Mandel, and Laurence Schwab. According to the American Film Institute's Online Catalog, MGM "conducted a study of the motion picture market and concluded that this film should have as few songs as possible." As such, the studio eliminated more than half of the operetta's score when adapting *New Moon* for the screen. See "Note" for *New Moon*, <http://www.afi.com/members/catalog/DetailView.aspx?s=&Movie=7840> (accessed 13 November 2016).

<sup>13</sup> Advance publicity, *New York Herald*, 24 January 1930. MGM's *The Rogue Song* (1930) was based on Franz Lehár, A.M. Willner, and Robert Bodansky's play *Gipsy Love* (1912). It told the story of Yegor, the chief of a gang of mountain bandits from southern Russia, who falls in love with the Princess Vera and, in turn, charms her with his singing.

Notably, *The Rogue Song*, Tibbett's debut vehicle, did not feature any operatic arias. By contrast, *A Lady's Morals*, a biopic of the "Swedish Nightingale" Jenny Lind, offered audiences an exciting taste of grand opera with "Casta diva" from Vincenzo Bellini's *Norma* and "Rataplan" from Gaetano Donizetti's *La Fille du régiment*. Although many scholars today consider Jeanette MacDonald, one of the film industry's most notable musical stars and a contemporary to Moore, to be Hollywood's first major operatic actress, she did not perform opera arias until *Naughty Marietta* (1935). Importantly, the film industry, as the *New York Herald* pointed out, looked to embrace a plethora of musical styles for use in motion pictures while simultaneously avoiding the exact reproduction of staged performances of Broadway, vaudeville, or opera. Rather, the studios favored stories suited for a cinematic setting as well as singers with an established name—but only with the camera's selective approval.

While advance publicity heralded the arrival of Moore and Tibbett as "magnetic personalities," critics offered mixed, even somewhat reserved, reviews following the respective releases of *A Lady's Morals* and *New Moon*. With *A Lady's Morals*, the combination of a period "class" picture with the performance of operatic repertoire was believed to impede mass appeal, a perception that would persist well into the 1940s in regard to operatic musicals. The *Hollywood Reporter*, for example, advised theater owners to beware the movie's limited attraction, stating that "it is a film suited only to the cities and larger communities of the country where grand opera and the name of Grace Moore will mean something. In other words, it will be hard to sell [to] the provincials, notwithstanding the film's superior quality."<sup>14</sup> At the same time, the critic noted that the preview:

elicited the highest commendation from an audience the reviewer wagers would not knowingly support what is commonly termed "highbrow" music. This, however, only

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<sup>14</sup> Review of *The Soul Kiss (Jenny Lind)*, *Hollywood Reporter*, 25 September 1930.

bespeaks of its excellency. The audience was there and could not help being swayed by the beauty of Miss Moore's voice, and her capabilities as an actress.

Significantly, the reviewer underscored one of the primary tensions affecting the reception of movies featuring operatic sequences in the 1930s and 1940s: Hollywood subscribed to the idea that audiences were turned off by opera's reputation as music for elite audiences, even though many moviegoers from a wide range of social and economic backgrounds expressed their appreciation for the operatic voice.

Conversely, other film critics observed that recording and camera technologies obstructed the audience's enjoyment of *A Lady's Morals*. Still, they directed their gendered criticisms, however sympathetically worded, toward Moore's performance rather than Tibbett's. As Quinn Martin from the *New York World* reported on 8 November 1930:

Enough of the dignity and beauty of Miss Grace Moore, both vocally and visually, have been captured by the picturemakers in *A Lady's Morals* to make the film richly worth travelling to see, and still the fact remains that in numerous moments of her singing she seems to have been directing her voice toward the bottom of a cistern. Too, in the process of photographing the star, the camera has leaped and fidgeted in a most exasperating fashion. There is no question as to Miss Moore's fine talents as revealed in her first sound and speech cinema, but it is just as apparent that her producers fell down miserably on the job of providing her a first-class presentation ... By this I mean that the sound reproduction and the photographic projection are third class, and this is something which might, it seems, have been spared such a distinctly un-movie person as the alluring and sweet-voiced young woman now at the barrier.<sup>15</sup>

The *Hollywood Daily Screen* similarly noted that some of the dialogue was lost through "poor articulation," while Moore's "glorious voice suffered a bit from poor recording, or possibly poor reproduction, by vibrating."<sup>16</sup> Despite these vexations, this critic observed that the operatic sequences incidentally "were popular with the audience in spite of the fact that neither of them

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<sup>15</sup> Quinn Martin, "The New Films," *New York World*, 8 November 1930.

<sup>16</sup> Review of *Soul Kiss (Jenny Lind)*, *Hollywood Daily Screen*, 26 September 1930. See also the Review of *Soul Kiss*, *New York Evening Herald*, 8 November 1930: "A story which was not manipulated as well as it might have been and some faulty voice recording make of Grace Moore's talking screen debut an indifferent event."

were familiar ones to the largest percentage.”<sup>17</sup> In a comment seemingly aimed at other studios intent on producing operatic pictures, the reviewer advised that “it might be advantageous to the interest at this point to insert a close-up of a program giving the synopsis of the scene about to be sung. In this way more of the audience could be drawn into the spirit.” Unlike a popular tune, which required no such introduction, this critic proposed that operatic arias might be better appreciated with further clues as to their significance and context within the work from which they were excerpted.

Such an observation illuminates pertinent concerns regarding the inclusion of operatic sequences in motion pictures at this time. Unlike the studios, which seemingly professed an interest in integrating operatic voices and repertoire into romances and dramas simply as musical numbers, at least some moviegoers did not perceive operatic arias as mere songs to be enjoyed. Perhaps influenced by the rise of music-appreciation broadcasts offering instructions as to the “right way to listen” to “good music,” such viewers approached these filmed excerpts from an educational vantage point, wanting to understand how particular arias fit within the broader framework of their original theatrical productions. Indeed, the framing of operatic numbers within the movies became an important topic of conversation in the 1930s, as the studios later sought to reproduce select scenes in their staged forms. As I discuss in Chapter 2, however, this recreation of staged sequences became one of the biggest pitfalls for the inclusion of opera in the movies, restoring what appeared to film censors and some viewers as salacious and disruptive visual elements to an otherwise uplifting musical art form.

Moreover, numerous screen treatments and scripts for both *A Lady's Morals* and *New Moon* demonstrate that MGM may have been at a loss as to how to integrate operatic arias into a

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<sup>17</sup> The Metropolitan Opera in New York, for example, put on *Norma* twenty-five times between 1927 and 1930 with Rosa Ponselle as the prima donna. *La Fille du régiment*, on the other hand, was not performed at the Met between 1919 and 1940.

compelling narrative. With *A Lady's Morals*, for instance, the studio crafted a biopic that most audiences found dull because the “Swedish Nightingale” led a rigorously virtuous life. Reviewers frequently commented, in gendered terms, on the protagonist’s “iciness” or “frigidity.” Hoping to recover the public’s interest, MGM quickly released the spicier *New Moon* one month later, which recounted a forbidden and scandalous love affair between a military soldier and an Eastern European princess. The press paid little attention to this film, however. *Photoplay* pithily called it a “music drama of the first rate, with the greatest singing combination on the screen . . . Color, drama, beauty, melody combine in a real musical smash.”<sup>18</sup> Audiences might have forgiven the implausible story had the acting been less wooden and the staging of the musical numbers more active. Operatic musicals certainly seemed destined to remain a Hollywood pipe dream in the wake of these initial experiments. However, there was only a brief hiatus.

### **Class Distinctions, Music Appreciation, and the Middlebrow**

As recording equipment and camera technologies improved in the early 1930s, opera singers stood a better chance at winning over the public with their voices and—thanks to studio training—cinema-friendly acting techniques. The biggest obstacle that Hollywood now foresaw in selling opera to the public was the genre’s elitist associations. As Katherine K. Preston and others have discussed, opera increasingly developed close ties to the upper classes between the 1870s and the early 1900s in the United States. Throughout the nineteenth century, opera in this country had been performed both in its various original languages and in English. But opera split along economic lines as the upper classes began patronizing foreign-language performance, a

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<sup>18</sup> Review of *New Moon*, *Photoplay* 39, no. 3 (February 1931): 14.

move that prompted the middle classes, as Kristen M. Turner notes, to reject it as an art form.<sup>19</sup> With costly ticket prices drummed up by lavish spectacles and large casts, foreign-language opera—mostly performed in urban centers such as New York City—became the high-art luxury of the privileged elite, a reputation that spilled over into the twentieth century and one that the film industry confronted head-on.<sup>20</sup>

The film studios welcomed a number of writers from Broadway and the theater to make operatic musicals more modern and entertaining. By way of modish plots (typically love stories), attractive and down-to-earth singers, and plenty of comedy, Hollywood attempted to market opera in ways that made it seem more accessible to its desired audience. The transference of opera to the cheaper and more democratic movie theater offered millions of individuals the opportunity to see, as well as hear, opera—though perhaps not for the first time. In this sense, Hollywood seemingly looked just as much to the popular realms of entertainment as it did to the opera house. From vaudeville shows and burlesques to band and orchestral concerts, the American public could access opera in multiple forms, whether through parodies or staged excerpts.<sup>21</sup> Opera arias, too, could be performed at home with the assistance of sheet music, or listened to in abridged versions on the gramophone and, later, the radio. As an advertisement for the Columbia graphophone, a version of the gramophone, announced in 1904:

Ring up the graphophone curtain in your home, and the whole world of entertainment appears! The same artistes that sing for you from the Graphophone Stage are famous singers from all the musical centres of the world. Many of these are paid several thousand dollars each for singing a single night in Grand Opera, or to a millionaire's guests—The

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<sup>19</sup> Kristen M. Turner, "Opera in English: Class and Culture in America, 1878–1910" (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2015), 9.

<sup>20</sup> Katherine K. Preston, "Opera is Elite/Opera is Nationalist: Cosmopolitan Views of Opera Reception in the United States, 1870–90," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 66, no. 2 (Summer 2013): 535–38. For more on opera in the United States, see John Dizikes, *Opera in America: A Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

<sup>21</sup> Turner, "Opera in English," 11–12.

Columbia Phonograph Company pay these same prices for YOUR benefit. A single evening with the Graphophone represents thousands of dollars in professional services. At your call come Song and Story, Opera and Vaudeville, Band and Orchestra. The later types of Columbia Disc and Cylinder Machines embody a number of scientific improvements that have resulted in reproducing the exact human tone quality and volume of the original.<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, recordings by opera singers were routinely promoted by such companies as the Berliner Gramophone Company and Victor Records. Victor even published such books as *The Oscar Saenger Course in Vocal Training: Soprano* and *The Victrola Book of the Opera*. The former was advertised as a “complete course of vocal study for the soprano voice on Victor Records” by renowned teacher Oscar Saenger, while the latter presented “stories of the operas with illustrations and descriptions of Victor Opera Records.”<sup>23</sup> The Victrola book defined the genre of opera for non-specialists; offered a brief history of opera as it developed in various European countries; shared notes on proper pronunciation of Italian, French, and German; and presented photographs of costumed singers and iconic opera houses from around the world. Whereas opera as performed in urban theatrical venues became increasingly associated with the upper classes toward the turn-of-the-century, opera as performed or promoted in more “middlebrow” spaces continued to enjoy a robust presence in American culture well into the twentieth century.

Despite opera’s apparent ubiquity in American popular culture, however, Hollywood saw opera as a potentially lucrative genre whose “highbrow” reputation needed to be treated with caution. The film industry perceived opera’s aficionados to come from wealthier walks of life, a belief that caused much anxiety for advertising and sales personnel whose bosses insisted on making movies with operatic artists. Perhaps unable to forget its “Nickelodeon” origins as cheap

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<sup>22</sup> Advertisement for the Columbia Graphophone, 1904, in James N. Weber, *The Talking Machine: The Advertising History of the Berliner Gramophone and Victor Talking Machine* (Midland, Ontario: Adio, Inc., 1997), 33.

<sup>23</sup> See *The Oscar Saenger Course in Vocal Training: Soprano* (Camden, NJ: The Victor Talking Machine Company, 1916), and *The Victrola Book of the Opera*, 6<sup>th</sup> edition (Camden, NJ: Victor Talking Machine Company, 1921).

entertainment for the working classes, Hollywood identified the cinema's primary consumers as "general audiences" or the famous American "masses," a nebulous term seemingly denoting anyone who did not consider themselves to be a member of the country's upper echelons. Consequently, the film industry—at least according to its publicity and press releases—considered "lowbrow" musics to be the preferred choice of its patrons. It therefore relied on classed categorizations of musical preference that placed opera and popular music at odds when devising scenarios and advance publicity.

The film industry seems to have observed the principles of what French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu later described as bounded taste cultures formed by class and in direct opposition to each other.<sup>24</sup> Bourdieu asserts that taste is the "practical affirmation of an inevitable difference ... the refusal of other tastes."<sup>25</sup> Musical preference became increasingly politicized in the United States during the 1920s and 1930s, just as the radio emerged as a standard household commodity and the film industry began experimenting with "talking pictures." The perceived intellectual and artistic gaps between genres coded as "highbrow" or "lowbrow" widened with the rise of the music-appreciation movement, even as the movement's leaders sought to increase art music's accessibility for members of all classes.<sup>26</sup> In part, the venues in which the classics typically were performed, as well as the language used by figureheads of the movement to distinguish between musics (e.g., "sophisticated" and "complex" versus "simple" and "entertaining"), fostered the idea that musical taste was connected to education and class standing. Documentary evidence, however, shows that individuals from all

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<sup>24</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

<sup>25</sup> Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 56.

<sup>26</sup> Media Studies scholar Shawn Vancour discusses this issue in regard to the radio and the music appreciation movement in the United States. See Shawn Vancour, "Popularizing the Classics: Radio's Role in the American Music Appreciation Movement 1922–34," *Media, Culture, and Society* 31, no. 2 (2009): 289–307.

backgrounds listened broadly, despite the fact that music was being categorized and marketed by race, ethnicity, class, and income bracket.<sup>27</sup> So while those involved in the marketing industry saw such factors as useful tools for distinguishing between certain musical sounds and their potential consumers, marketing categories in and of themselves fall short as taste indicators because they do not allow for the fact that most individuals actually possess a wide range of musical predilections.

Still, Hollywood's rhetorical strategies for dealing with opera's elite reputation helped shape the belief that the film industry disliked "good music." This belief has influenced film historiography negatively to this day. Yet my dissertation shows that this supposed antipathy to classical repertoire and such neat categorizations of "highbrow" and "lowbrow" became delightfully messy in the 1930s, as opera singers flocked to the silver screen and as the music-appreciation movement gained momentum.

Although discussions of "good music's" inherent capacity for moral uplift date back to the nineteenth century in the United States, the music-appreciation movement of the early twentieth century owed much of its widespread influence to the advent of modern technologies and to progressive educators. As Julia J. Chybowski points out, for decades RCA Victor surpassed its competitors to become a "leader in music appreciation as a business venture," selling music appreciation records, guides, and textbooks for use at home, in the community, and the classroom.<sup>28</sup> Between 1913 and 1943, the company released multiple editions of its most successful textbook: Anne Shaw Faulkner's *What We Hear in Music: A Laboratory Course*

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<sup>27</sup> For more on marketing music, see, for example, Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010). In regard to operatic films, demographics provided in such evidence as letters to the editors of fan magazines, fan mail and newsletters, and preview comments suggest that these types of films attracted a diverse patronage.

<sup>28</sup> Julia J. Chybowski, "Developing American Taste: A Cultural History of the Early Twentieth-Century Music Appreciation Movement" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, Madison, 2008), 8.

*Study in Music History and Appreciation for Four Years of High School, Academy, College, Music Club or Home Study.*

The introduction of the radio to the commercial market as an affordable technology in the 1920s arguably propelled the reach of the music-appreciation movement even further. Programs such as conductor Walter Damrosch's "Music Appreciation Hour" (1928–42) became staples on such national networks as NBC. Quickly gaining a reputation as an appealing radio personality, Damrosch provided an iconic model for other such ventures. He offered listeners details about each performance, pertinent information about the music's associated plot (if any), instructions as to which instruments or voices to listen for, and other interesting anecdotes about composers, works, or performers.<sup>29</sup> Similar programs subsequently sprung up on the air, including, among others, Serge Koussevitzky's Boston Symphony Orchestra performances on NBC in the 1920s, the Metropolitan Opera Broadcasts (1931–50), Arturo Toscanini's NBC Symphony Orchestra (1937–54), and Leonard Bernstein's "Young People's Concerts" in the 1950s.<sup>30</sup> Even "big business" supported cultural programs with the aim to attract a larger consumer base, particularly the automobile industry. Pontiac and Oldsmobile, for example, sponsored variety and light orchestral music, while Buick and Cadillac underwrote semi-classical and classical concerts on the *Buick Concert* (1932–33) and the *Cadillac Symphony Concerts* (1934), the latter of which was renamed the *General Motors Symphony Concerts* and ran until 1937.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Brian C. Gregory, "Educational Radio, Listening Instruction, and the NBC Music Appreciation Hour," *Journal of Radio and Audio Media* 23, no. 2 (2016): 288–305.

<sup>30</sup> For more on these radio programs, see, for example, Walter Damrosch, "Hearing is Believing," *Music Supervisors' Journal* 18, no. 1 (October 1931): 24, Sondra Wieland Howe, "The NBC Music Appreciation Hour: Radio Broadcasts of Walter Damrosch, 1928–1942," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 51, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 64–77, and Paul Jackson, *Saturday Afternoons at the Old Met: The Metropolitan Opera Broadcasts, 1931–1950* (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1992).

<sup>31</sup> Automobile companies sponsored the types of music they thought would appeal most to their consumer base. Economy car companies catered to more popular tastes, while luxury manufacturers catered to more "highbrow"

Proponents of the music-appreciation movement—music educators, conductors, musicians, women’s clubs, society matrons, arts organizations etc.—heralded the alleged benefits to be reaped from exposure to “good music.” Since the nineteenth century, discussions of the spiritual aspects of Western art music had flourished in American musical discourse. Art music, it was believed, could improve morality and heighten spirituality.<sup>32</sup> Yet following World War I and the onset of what was viewed by some as an increasingly hedonistic, modern age marked by capitalism and consumerism, social reformers deemphasized art music’s capacity to enhance individual religiosity in favor of the attainment of social stability. As Chybowski states, these progressives hoped to “reshape social roles and regulate behavior by promoting social purity and the morally appropriate use of leisure time.”<sup>33</sup> Music appreciation, in effect, became linked to the rise of middlebrow culture in the early twentieth century, as upwardly mobile Americans undertook the quest for “culture” as a means of social advancement.

Often described pejoratively, the term “middlebrow” has been dismissed by critics and scholars alike as connoting conservatism, effeminacy, and the middle class.<sup>34</sup> It might better be understood, however, as a cultural category defined by aspirational taste rather than one strictly

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tastes. See William L. Bird, *“Better Living”: Advertising, Media, and the New Vocabulary of Business Leadership, 1935–1955* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 31.

According to Bird, press releases announcing the renewal of the *Cadillac Concerts* as the *General Motors Symphony Concerts* pitched its return as a “concession to popular demand.” The program featured the New York Philharmonic and a rotation of guest conductors and solo artists. One release claimed that “the magnificent success of the *Cadillac Concerts* last season [is] positive proof of the wishes of the great radio audience to hear the best of symphonic music as interpreted by the foremost conductors and soloists. Insistent demands have been received from every section of this country and Canada for the opportunity of hearing again, in one connected series of broadcasts, the world’s greatest musical talent. The requests to renew the series have been irresistible. We are happy to be privileged to comply.” See Bird, *“Better Living,”* 40–41. GM attracted a weekly audience of approximately seven million in comparison to the *Ford Sunday Evening Hour*, which featured light and semi-classical music and attracted approximately thirteen million listeners a week. See Bird, *“Better Living,”* 41.

<sup>32</sup> Molly Leeanna Barnes, “The Rhetoric of Democracy in American Musical Discourse, 1842–1861” (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2016), 87–133.

<sup>33</sup> Chybowski, “Developing American Taste,” 96.

<sup>34</sup> See Sally Faulkner, “Approaching the Middlebrow: Audience; Text; Institution,” introduction to *Middlebrow Cinema*, edited by Sally Faulkner (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 1.

bound by class or gender.<sup>35</sup> The word “middlebrow” first appeared in print in the Irish *Freeman’s Journal* in 1924, and it was used initially in the United States to refer to the burgeoning vogue for Book of the Month clubs and their readers.<sup>36</sup> But as the economic boom of the 1920s took hold, middlebrow culture inextricably became tied to notions of the American Dream. Many Americans experiencing greater financial security than ever before sought to ascend the social ladder, bettering themselves through the studies of fine art and “great” literary and musical masterpieces.

Despite the United States’ claims as a classless society, multiple factors determined one’s station in life. Age-old tensions between “old money” and “new money” repeatedly have shown that familial or personal wealth alone did not merit one’s social standing. Sophistication in terms of taste, breeding, and cultural refinement also influenced one’s rank. The cultivation of artistic, literary, and musical preferences could therefore illuminate the path to new social heights when money proved not enough. Perceived as the zenith of musical taste in the West, “good music” served as a marker of utmost sophistication for Americans keen on self-improvement and upward mobility. Still, this ascension to greater social heights could be slowed or even impeded by one’s race, ethnicity, religion, or immigration status, as the United States privileged those citizens with Protestant Anglo-Saxon heritage first and other white persons—judged according to

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<sup>35</sup> To such literary figures as F.R. Leavis and, later, Virginia Woolf, “middlebrow” signified the corruption of taste. These critics, for example, feared that a conveyor-belt industry would perpetuate a consumer-based culture, one that ignored the cultivation of individual taste in favor of a mass-produced, generic taste. In other words, the rise of a middlebrow culture cheapened high art and sought to refine the “pure” taste of the lowbrows. See Faulkner, “Approaching the Middlebrow,” 4, and Jamie Harker, *America the Middlebrow: Women’s Novels, Progressivism, and Middlebrow Authorship between the Wars* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 16. For more on the middlebrow, see, for example, Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992), Jennifer Haytock, *The Middle Class in the Great Depression: Popular Women’s Novels of the 1930s* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), and Christoph Ehland and Cornelia Wächter, eds., *Middlebrow and Gender, 1890–1945* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2016). For more on middlebrow and music, see, for example, Laura Tunbridge, “Frieda Hempel and the Historical Imagination,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 66, no. 2 (June 2013): 437–74, and Keir Keightley, “Music for Middlebrows: Defining the Easy Listening Era, 1946–1966,” *American Music* 26, no. 3 (October 2008): 309–35.

<sup>36</sup> Harker, *America the Middlebrow*, 16.

their degree of “whiteness” and by their religious affiliation—second.<sup>37</sup> In its own version of the civilizing mission, then, the United States cast “good music” as a means for improving one’s taste, morality, and social status, an attainable goal for white individuals but only an aspirational one for those of non-white ancestry.<sup>38</sup>

## **Race and Ethnicity**

When it came to racial and ethnic inclusivity on the screen, Hollywood operated according to the normative business practices of many American institutions throughout its “Golden Age”: white people received preferential treatment. Continuing the racist traditions of silent film—in which different racial and ethnic groups were played by white actors in blackface or with exaggerated make-up—studios created films with predominantly white casts for white audiences. Hollywood further privileged a specific type of whiteness that symbolized the so-called authentic American lineage: Protestant, Anglo-Saxon whiteness.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Those of Protestant German heritage, for example, were considered more “white” than the Catholic Irish and Italians, who became “white” when the one-drop rule determined persons with any African ancestry as Black. Different standards of what was considered “Black” developed over the course of the nineteenth century, but the one-drop rule became codified in American law with The Racial Integrity Act of 1924. Although differences between “white” and “black” were defined legally at this time, however, various ethnic groups were not accepted as “white” in mainstream American culture until well into the twentieth century. For more on race and ethnicity in the United States, see, for example, Ronald H. Bayor, ed., *Race and Ethnicity in America: A Concise History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), and Karen E. Rosenblum and Toni-Michelle C. Travis, eds., *The Meaning of Difference: American Constructions of Race, Sex and Gender, Social Class, and Sexual Orientation: A Text/Reader*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2006).

<sup>38</sup> For more on the civilizing mission and African Americans, see, for example, Kira Thurman, “Singing the Civilizing Mission in the Land of Bach, Beethoven and Brahms: The Fisk Jubilee Singers in Nineteenth-Century Germany,” *Journal of World History* 27, no. 3 (September 2016): 445.

<sup>39</sup> Various “white” ethnic groups—for example, the Greeks, Irish, Italians, and Jews—typically were “othered” onscreen according to cultural stereotypes. Before a film was even shot, such characters were marked in the script according to imagined dialects or signature phrases; an Irish policeman, for example, might greet another by saying “Top o’ the mornin’ t’ ye,” whereas an Italian restaurateur might tell a patron that he “recommends-a for you the spaghetti with meat-a-ball-as.” These linguistic codes arguably set the tone for a film’s visual codes—what Lester D. Friedman describes as “easily recognizable signs” of difference such as “dress, food choices, and mannerisms” etc.—that establish a character’s ethnic or racial identity onscreen. See Lester D. Friedman, “Celluloid Palimpsests:

This institutionalized practice afforded very few Black opera singers the opportunity to appear in Hollywood films during the 1930s and 1940s. When the film industry experimented with making musicals in the 1930s, some artists such as Etta Moten Barnett either sang in cameo appearances or perhaps in a scene or two in films similar to *Gold Diggers of 1933* (1933) and *Flying Down to Rio* (1933). Yet as the studio system developed and as recording companies marketed “race records” to the public, musical films highlighted Black artists performing “Black” genres: the blues, jazz, and spirituals.<sup>40</sup> This was also true in Barnett’s case, even though she had studied voice at Western University and the University of Kansas before appearing in seven films between 1933 and 1937. Because of what Nina Sun Eidsheim refers to as “culturally instilled listening practices,” Moten’s performances of “My Forgotten Man” (*Gold Diggers of 1933*) and “The Carioca” (*Flying Down to Rio*)—in which her classical training clearly registered—would have been heard by audiences as a blues song, on the one hand, and a Latin dance tune, on the other.<sup>41</sup> Barnett never once performed an operatic aria or art song onscreen. Similarly to the recording industry, then, Hollywood visually reinforced the segregation of musical styles according to the color of the performer’s body.

Latino/a artists likewise operated as outsiders in Hollywood films. Actors such as Dolores Del Río, Ramon Novarro, and Lupe Vélez became superstars in their own right, but frequently were cast according to the stereotype of the exoticized, fiery, Latin lover. In the

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An Overview of Ethnicity and the American Film,” in *Unspeakable Images: Ethnicity and the American Cinema*, edited by Friedman (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 22.

<sup>40</sup> See, Miller, *Segregating Sound*. For more on race and music, see, for example, Eric Nunn, *Sounding the Color Line: Music and Race in the Southern Imagination* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2015), and John Szwed, *Crossovers: Essays on Race, Music, and American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

<sup>41</sup> Culturally instilled listening practices occur from the moment of birth, when we are exposed to a culture’s established mode of thinking about how to perceive sounds and/or musics. See Nina Sun Eidsheim, “Race and the Aesthetics of Vocal Timbre,” in *Rethinking Difference in Music Scholarship*, edited by Olivia Bloechl (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 338–65.

1930s, and especially in the 1940s, Latin bands, pop singers, and dancers—including Xavier Cugat, Fernando Lamas, Carmen Miranda, and Ricardo Montalbán—became familiar faces onscreen. Still, no Latino/a opera singer appeared in a Hollywood film between the advent of sound film and 1950.

I seek to be as inclusive of the diverse ethnicities and racial identities represented in Hollywood films as possible. Due to the film industry's exclusionary practices and the increasing segregation in film, however, my dissertation focuses solely on white operatic vocalists. Yet I do not wish simply to acknowledge Hollywood's institutionalized racism and move on, but instead use it as a starting point to interrogate the intersections between opera, film, and race. In spite of the absence of Black or Latina divas in Hollywood's operatic films, perceptions of race and ethnicity played a significant part in the film industry's presentation of opera and operatic singers.

In the 1920s, classical repertoire and popular music became increasingly polarized as jazz came to symbolize the modern excesses of a dissipated and degenerate generation intent upon forgetting the horrors of World War I. To some critics, jazz served as both a marker of an ailing modern society and a provocateur of social ills, two reasons deemed serious enough to prompt a social movement focused on the development of American taste for classical music.<sup>42</sup> In part, jazz gained such notoriety because of its origins as an urban African American musical tradition. Indeed, colonialist perceptions of Blacks as primitive and exotic merged with the United States' racism born out of its particular history of slavery to frame jazz as a musical style liable to corrupt the minds of those who listened to it. According to sectors of white America, jazz's "hot" rhythms, bent pitches, and blues notes compelled listeners to dance with wild abandon, an

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<sup>42</sup> Chybowsky, "Developing American Taste," 103.

activity that could lead them to engage in even “worse” carnal offenses.<sup>43</sup> In effect, white America transferred its prejudice against African Americans onto jazz, which became the alleged soundtrack for partying, drugs, drinking, and easy morals. Jazz consequently became a foil against which to cast the advancement of “good music” in the early twentieth century. Using racialized discourses that presented jazz as the musical purveyor of moral corruption and a symbol of degeneration, the proponents of music appreciation made a case for “good music”—a polarizing term itself—as a powerful source of moral edification and social advancement.<sup>44</sup>

Such historical principles of moral and social betterment anchor the study of music appreciation and Western musical traditions even today. It is necessary, therefore, to heed how perceptions of race or ethnicity have shaped, and continue to shape, the production, dissemination, and/or reception of musics across time and cultures. As musicologist Julie Brown writes: “Audiences of today understand a wide range of musics in terms of race.”<sup>45</sup> Even so, Brown points out, scholars tend to discuss race when it is an explicit issue: “Of the historical, ethnographic and theoretical work done, most has concentrated on three broad areas: the anti-Semitic and so-called regeneration theories of Wagner, music and cultural policy of the Nazi period, and African-American music—that is, on repertoires and discourses about music whose

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<sup>43</sup> For more on this historical perception of jazz, see, for example, Fiona I.B. Ngô, *Imperial Blues: Geographies of Race and Sex in Jazz Age New York* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

<sup>44</sup> A historical term, “good music” refers to the Western art music canon, which, by the 1940s, encompassed vocal works in addition to instrumental repertoire. For more on “good music” and uplift, see Douglas W. Shadle, *Orchestrating the Nation: The Nineteenth-Century American Symphonic Enterprise* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), and Barnes, “The Rhetoric of Democracy in American Musical Discourse, 1842–1861.” For more on “good music” and the phonograph, see Mark Katz, *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2010), 56–89. On the concept of “good music” in the context of World War II, see Annegret Fauser, *Sounds of War: Music in the United States during World War II* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 76–134. By contrast, scholars also have questioned what it means for music to be “bad,” particularly in regard to popular music. See Christopher Washburne and Maiken Derno, eds., *Bad Music: The Music We Love to Hate* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>45</sup> Julie Brown, “Introduction” to *Western Music and Race*, xiv–xxii, edited by Julie Brown (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), xiv.

claims to racial meaning are overt.”<sup>46</sup> As a result, musicologists perpetuate a narrative in which concert and operatic repertoire is depicted as “lacking” a racial context. In other words, such music—oftentimes made for and by white people—becomes understood as “just music” in contrast to musics that are “othered” because of the color or heritage of their creators and target audience. Scholars therefore tend to reinforce a hegemonic discourse wherein Western music—arguably, Western art music—assumes the musicological status quo. Brown sees this historiographical problem as one stemming from the processes of canonization and sacralization: “The role played by canons in history and historiography has a bearing on this effect—not only canonical texts, but canonical events, and canonical readings of canonical texts and events.”<sup>47</sup> Because various musics have become canonized and esteemed as “great” over time, Brown argues, certain issues that could be interrogated tend to be “avoided, marginalized, repressed, or denied.” In the succeeding years since Brown wrote this overview of Western music and race, recent debates within the discipline of musicology have prompted scholars to interrogate, perhaps more closely than ever, the institutionalized systems of power that perpetuate the privileged status of Western classical traditions in our field. Inclusivity and diversity are key issues that have come to the forefront of recent musicological inquiry.<sup>48</sup>

Looking at the implicit ways in which race and ethnicity shaped operatic films in the 1930s and 1940s opens up new lines of investigation regarding how opera was promoted and/or

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<sup>46</sup> Brown, “Introduction” to *Western Music and Race*, xiv–xv.

<sup>47</sup> Brown, “Introduction” to *Western Music and Race*, xvii.

<sup>48</sup> The Society for American Music, for example, held a roundtable on “Diversity and the Future of SAM” at its annual conference in Boston, MA, in 2016. The American Musicological Society likewise offered a special session on “Race, Ethnicity and the Profession” at its 2016 annual meeting in Vancouver, B.C. Moreover, on 30 November 2016, AMS President Martha Feldman issued a reaffirmation of the Society’s commitment to “Diversity, Inclusion, and Free Inquiry,” which Feldman posits as values “essential to the very project of music research.” See Martha Feldman, “AMS Reaffirms Its Commitment to Diversity, Inclusion, and Free Inquiry,” American Musicological Society, 30 November 2016, <http://ams-net.org/statement.php> (accessed 12 December 2016).

marketed in the United States and why Hollywood reconfigured the diva as a American girl-next-door. Historical perceptions of race remained, in very problematic ways, at the heart of what Hollywood, film censors, and the public envisioned opera to be. In focusing on white singers only when constructing the ideal American opera singer—and by extension the ideal American—the film industry excluded entire segments of the population from its purview. It also prescribed an ideal type of whiteness. For example, Grace Moore—with her Protestant upbringing, blonde hair, and blue eyes—was framed in her films as more “properly” white than Lily Pons, whose French heritage, Catholic ties, and dark coloring imbued the diva with a touch of exoticism. Hollywood further created filmic situations in which white performers were free to sing across the “color line”—a good singer, for example, could master any musical style—whereas artists of color were essentialized according to their race or ethnicity. As I show in Chapter 2, the “exotic” Pons could assume practically any role in the movies, including the Indian maiden Lakmé, a cabaret/jazz singer, and an African “bird-girl.” Moreover, as I discuss in Chapter 4, Hollywood reified opera as the apogee of Western—in other words, white—musical art through which other musical styles allegedly could be “revitalized” or “reinvigorated.”

### **Gender and Women’s Bodies**

Opera leapt into Hollywood’s limelight in 1934. Columbia Pictures’ *One Night of Love*, which marked the return of Grace Moore to the West Coast, shot to the top ten films of the year and sparked a wave of interest in operatic musicals. Yet the story of how this smash hit changed the game for opera in Hollywood plays a minor role in musical-film and film historiography; when it is mentioned at all, it remains buried deep within the literature. Bringing this film to the forefront of my study, I position *One Night* as the prototype for subsequent operatic films and trace its

influence on similar fare over time. *One Night* established a narrative formula for operatic musicals; prescribed the number and selection of arias as well as how they were integrated into filmic plots; framed opera as an American musical tradition for all classes to enjoy; and fashioned the persona of the opera diva as a democratic American gal.

At the same time, Hollywood's operation as an apparatus for regimenting women's bodies in accordance with the changing beauty standards and American physical culture of the 1920s and 1930s had a significant impact on operatic singers in the movies. Indeed, *One Night* reconfigured the definition of a "good" diva by focusing on physical fitness and visual appeal as much as it did on vocal beauty. The film projected the idea that an opera singer needed to pay acute attention to her looks and bodily health in order to make it big. Modern-day audiences, *One Night* insinuated, would not accept an unattractive singer, no matter the quality of her voice. It also used the stereotype of the old, fat opera diva as a foil for Moore's young(ish), slender prima donna of the modern age, creating a precedent for successive films to perpetuate this trope. However, the mere fact that the fat diva of legend is a *woman* is significant. Women's bodies, as I discuss in Chapter 1, in particular are marked as inherently deviant and in need of discipline in operatic movies.<sup>49</sup> Comedic gags referencing the weight and looks of operatic artists persisted well into the late 1940s, as I show in Chapter 4. What is more, this focus on the female body as the primary means by which the voice could be appreciated remains with us even today.

Besides regulating women's bodies through diet and exercise for onscreen consumption, the film industry also attempted to police them. Following the enforcement of William H. Hays's Production Code in 1934, film censors sought to control filmed operatic performances,

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<sup>49</sup> For an overview of Hollywood constructions of female beauty, see, for example, Christine Adams and Tracy Adams, *Female Beauty Systems: Beauty as Social Capital in Western Europe and the United States, Middle Ages to the Present* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), and Kirsty Sinclair Dootson, "'The Hollywood Powder Puff War': Technicolor Cosmetics in the 1930s," *Film History* 28, no. 1 (2016): 107–31.

attempting to render opera more visually suitable for movie patrons. Soprano Lily Pons's performance of the "Bell Song" from *Lakmé* in her debut film *I Dream Too Much* from 1935, for example, proved that opera could be too scandalous for the newly reformed screen. Censorship records reveal that her navel-baring costume cast suspicion on opera's alleged morality and benefit to humanity. Some censors were dismayed by the camerawork that captured Pons's sexually evocative performance. In their opinion, the camera's medium shots and close ups magnified the singer's body to such a degree onscreen that her exposed midriff—especially her highly visible navel—distracted the audience from the main purpose of the scene: the soprano's expert execution of Léo Delibes's virtuosic aria. The censors' ensuing push for visual conservatism in operatic films drove the first nail into the coffin. By the early 1940s, operatic musicals generally did not feature staged excerpts, and operatic singers did not perform in costumes. Rather, their bodies were cloaked in typical modern-day attire: suitable day dresses and evening wear.

My decision to focus solely on female artists stems partly from necessity and partly from personal choice. On the one hand, discussing only female performers enabled me to construct a more directed narrative. It also allowed me to trace certain themes throughout the 1930s and 1940s that might otherwise have been impossible had I included male artists in my study. Men's bodies, for example, did not come up as a central topic of conversation in film periodicals or in the press.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, after Hollywood overcame its preference for operatic male voices in the early 1930s, the film industry turned its attention to female performers: Nino Martini and

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<sup>50</sup> This would become more of a topic of interest in regard to Mario Lanza, who became a famous operatic tenor in 1950s musicals.

Lawrence Tibbett faded from Hollywood's limelight at the end of the 1930s, whereas Nelson Eddy and Allan Jones' film careers ended in the mid-1940s.<sup>51</sup>

On the other hand, I wanted to write about women. I still believe there is much work to be done in restoring or integrating women's voices into the discipline of musicology. Most of the women I discuss in this dissertation were well known, admired, and, yes, *popular* figures nationally and internationally in the realms of opera and film. Yet many of them have been forgotten today. With this project, I seek to show the ways in which operatic artists such as Grace Moore, Lily Pons, Deanna Durbin, Susanna Foster, Kathryn Grayson, and Jane Powell influenced or changed 1) perceptions of opera and operatic singers in the United States, 2) the musical tastes of moviegoers and film personnel, 3) and even the ways in which people think about "opera" as a musical genre, both then and now, as something more than notes on a male composer's page or a male librettist's words. "Opera" is invoked by voices. Within the purview of this project, it is invoked by women's voices.

## **Vocality**

My study draws principally on the concept of vocality, which encompasses vocal technique (e.g., the use of vibrato); the physical act of producing sound; vocal timbre or quality; and the individual or unique sound of a performer's voice.<sup>52</sup> Historically, the study of vocality has been most commonly associated with feminist musicology and scholarship on female musicians.

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<sup>51</sup> Polish tenor Jan Kiepura and popular Irish tenor John McCormack starred in one Hollywood film each in the 1930s, *Give Us This Night* (1936) and *Song o' My Heart* (1930).

<sup>52</sup> For more on vocality, see Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), and Ryan Dohoney, "An Antidote to Metaphysics: Adriana Cavarero's Vocal Philosophy," *Women and Music* 15 (January 2011): 70–95. On vocality and gender, see Leslie C. Dunn and Nancy A. Jones, eds., *Embodied Voices: Representing Female Vocality in Western Culture* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), and Annette Schlichter, "Do Voices Matter? Vocality, Materiality, Gender Performativity," *Body and Society* 17, no. 1 (March 2011): 31–52.

Outside of philosophical texts, for instance, women's vocality has factored in recent studies of Cathy Berberian, girl singers in the United States and Great Britain in the 1960s, and Bollywood singers.<sup>53</sup> It remains, however, a relatively unexplored theoretical issue in current musicology, albeit one that is garnering more attention rapidly.<sup>54</sup>

Drawing primarily on feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero's theory of *phone*, or the "sounding" of voices, I argue that operatic singing engendered a more fluid understanding of "opera" in the 1930s and 1940s. My analysis of musical films and their reception reveals that moviegoers considered performances to be operatic primarily based on a singer's vocality. The film industry, I propose, aided the reconceptualization of opera as a sonic rather than visual art, ultimately framing opera as a domesticized and classed mode of singing rather than a theatrical production with a specific repertoire.

In her monograph *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, Cavarero advocates for a re-envisioning of the politics of speech, shifting our focus from the words that are said to an individual's unique "saying" of the words. She argues that, by means of a historical practice dating back to the ancient Greek philosophers such as Plato and Socrates, we humans ascribe authorial power to *logos*, the Greek for "word" or "reason." In Western communities in particular, we have come to prioritize written modes of communication because of writing's supposed infallibility in comparison to the more easily mutable modes of oral

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<sup>53</sup> Pamela Karantonis, Francesca Placanica, and Pieter Verstraete, eds., *Cathy Berberian: Pioneer of Contemporary Vocality* (Farnham, Surrey, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014), Pavitra Sundar, "Meri Awaaz Suno: Women, Vocality, and Nation in Hindi Cinema," *Meridians* 8, no.1 (January 2008): 144–79, and Jacqueline Warwick and Allison Adrian, eds., *Voicing Girlhood in Popular Music: Performance, Authority, and Authenticity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016). For more on vocality and performance, see Konstantinos Thomaidis and Ben Macpherson, eds., *Voice Studies: Critical Approaches to Process, Performance, and Experience* (Abingdon, U.K. and New York: Routledge, 2015). For more on vocality and race, see, for example, Nina Sun Eidsheim, "Marian Anderson and 'Sonic Blackness' in American Opera," *American Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (September 2011): 641–71.

<sup>54</sup> A conference on vocality, for example, took place in January 2017, in Great Britain. Conference on Vocality/Instrumentality, 14–15 January 2017, The University of Huddersfield Department of Music and Drama, University of Huddersfield, <https://vocalityinstrumentality2017.wordpress.com/about/> (accessed 28 November 2016).

narration. Yet since the beginning of documented time, men have been the ones in control of words, literally writing authoritative accounts of history and humanity that have been passed down through the ages. Describing the gendered implications behind the valorization of *logos*, Cavarero states:

the symbolic patriarchal order that identifies the masculine with reason and the feminine with the body is precisely an order that privileges the semantic with respect to the vocal. In other words, even the androcentric tradition knows that the voice comes from “the vibration of a throat of flesh” and, precisely because it knows this, it catalogs the voice with the body. This voice becomes secondary, ephemeral, and inessential—reserved for women. Feminized from the start, the vocal aspect of speech and, furthermore, of song appear together as antagonistic elements in a rational, masculine sphere that centers itself, instead, on the semantic. To put it formulaically: woman sings, man thinks.<sup>55</sup>

Patriarchal societies centered on *logos* ascribed credence to topics, morals, or stories deemed important to, and by, men. Moreover, such historical accounts dictated how women have been perceived and represented for millennia. This endorsement of the written text has led to the frequent censure or silencing of women, whose own contributions of *logos* have been deemed negligible or inferior historically.

Positing, as her title suggests, a new philosophy of expression, Cavarero directs her attention instead to *phone*, the Greek for both “sound” and “voice.” She proposes that, although linking words into sentences manifests our thoughts and ideas, new meaning can be found in the way those words are sounded: “The voice that sends itself into the air and makes the throat vibrate, has a revelatory function. Or better, more than revealing, it communicates.”<sup>56</sup> Indeed, for Cavarero, “the typical freedom with which human beings combine words is never a sufficient index of the uniqueness of the one who speaks. The voice, however, is always different from all

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<sup>55</sup> Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 6.

<sup>56</sup> Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 5.

other voices, even if the words are the same.”<sup>57</sup> Cavarero sees the sounding of the voice as a communication of “precisely the true, vital, and perceptible uniqueness of the one who emits it,” or the unique “who-ness” of an individual.<sup>58</sup> Both the “saying” itself and the person emitting the “saying” become just as important as, if not more than, the “said.”

The power behind a philosophy of vocal expression grounded in *phone* is the relationship between sound and the ear. As Cavarero observes: “The emitted voice always comes out into the world, and every ear within earshot—with or without intention—is struck by it. The ear is an open canal; it can be surprised from anywhere at any moment. It is always cocked to a sonorous universe that it does not control. It can try to decipher the sounds ... but it cannot decide on, or control, their emission. The ear receives without being able to select beforehand.”<sup>59</sup> Certainly, we can choose either to ignore or to cease reading a written text willingly, whereas it is much more difficult to stop one’s ears in order to drown out sound.

I take Cavarero’s discussion of the “who-ness” of voices as the point of departure for theorizing operatic vocality. It is my contention that the “who-ness” of the sung voice creates meaning and that the voice serves as an index for historical and cultural markers of class, race, and musical style. In other words, the sound of the operatic voice—its unique “who-ness”—is what prompts listeners to think “opera.” Indicators of operatic singing might include, for example: extensive use of vibrato; a vocal register that extends either much higher or much lower than the average person’s typical range; vocal agility and technical precision, often understood by non-specialists as spectacular virtuosic feats; and, especially prior to the age of amplified performance, an impressive aptitude for vocal projection. The operatic technique

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<sup>57</sup> Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 3.

<sup>58</sup> Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 5.

<sup>59</sup> Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 178.

employed by singers, too, frequently disrupts the listener's ability to understand the text being sung, whether or not it is performed in one's native language. As Cavarero eloquently puts it: "Opera is essentially the sublime working of the human voice, which conquers the meaning of words."<sup>60</sup> *Logos*, then, is overcome in opera by the voice.

The aforementioned sonic codes are not naturally intrinsic or exclusive to opera, however. Rather, they came to be inextricably linked to the operatic voice over time and through a process of social construction and institutionalization.<sup>61</sup> As Nina Sun Eidsheim explains in her discussion of the aesthetics of vocal timbre, notions of the sonorous voice have been "habitually naturalized."<sup>62</sup> Thus, our understanding of the classically trained voice—and, moreover, its ties to whiteness—developed over centuries of musical practice. The nineteenth century, in particular, proved to be a major turning point in shaping perceptions of the sung voice in Western culture, as growing interest in medical research and racial classification schemes permeated musical discourse. Eidsheim states that "from the moment human anatomy became part of the vocal timbral equations . . . it brought all manner of racialized discourses and value systems to bear on vocal production."<sup>63</sup> Emerging pedagogical philosophies took such newfound scientific "discoveries" into account, constructing difference between what Eidsheim refers to as

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<sup>60</sup> Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 121.

<sup>61</sup> For example, performances in smaller rooms and salons did not necessarily require as much vocal power as could be needed, say, for performances in large halls or for executing a Wagnerian music drama in Bayreuth.

<sup>62</sup> Eidsheim, "Race and the Aesthetics of Vocal Timbre," 340.

<sup>63</sup> Eidsheim, "Race and the Aesthetics of Vocal Timbre," 349. Eidsheim explains how Manuel García II's insight into the analysis of vocal pedagogy in the nineteenth century "resulted in what was termed the *voix sombre*, which is the foundation of modern operatic sound, as opposed to the traditional *voix blanche*, the pre-Garcian technique of singing with a high larynx position . . . By the early twentieth century, the *voix sombre* had become naturalized, institutionalized, and—not least—racialized . . . *Voix blanche*, the timbral ideal prevalent before the development of scientific vocal pedagogy, is now conceived as the tone of an untrained voice." See Eidsheim, "Race and the Aesthetics of Vocal Timbre," 353–54.

“vocal timbres” according to perceptions of “racial progress.”<sup>64</sup> Thus, this conceptualization of vocal practice—the trained versus the untrained voice—has influenced listening practices in the West, whereby economic status, gender, race, and other similar social categories are often located in the “who-ness” of the sung voice.

## Chapter Overview

Chapter 1, “The Catalyst for ‘Opera’ Films: *One Night of Love* (1934),” establishes Columbia Pictures’ *One Night of Love* as the model for similar films in terms of repertoire, plot construction, and characterization of operatic protagonists. I interrogate how Hollywood assumed the role of a Foucauldian apparatus for regulating the diva’s body. *One Night*, for example, subverted the stereotype of the Wagnerian Valkyrie to market its operatic star as an attractive, svelte singer who subscribed to Hollywood’s idea of female glamour and sophistication. I also evaluate unpublished publicity documents revealing tensions between classed categories of musical taste to illustrate Columbia’s changing attitudes toward marketing opera to the public.

In Chapter 2, “Film Censorship and Representations of Race in RKO’s *I Dream Too Much* (1935) and *Hitting a New High* (1937),” I argue that film censorship helped bring about opera’s sonic reconfiguration. I use Lily Pons’s two films as case studies, illustrating how film censors sought to control operatic performances onscreen. I compare Pons’s performances and reception of *Lakmé* at the Metropolitan Opera with her performance and reception of the same production in *I Dream Too Much* to contextualize Hollywood’s attempt to “sanitize” opera for the masses. In part, the film censors’ efforts to police women’s bodies and their costumes stemmed from the way movies were shot as well as the magnification of images on the silver

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<sup>64</sup> Eidsheim, “Race and the Aesthetics of Vocal Timbre,” 345.

screen. Archival materials and reception documents highlight the effects that censorship had on making opera cleaner for public consumption in later operatic musicals. *Hitting a New High* demonstrates how Pons's portrayal of an African "bird-girl" went awry with the public, who expressed displeasure with RKO's attempt to integrate opera into a plot based on the decade's low-budget adventure films. According to the critics, RKO had made Pons, and thereby opera, ridiculous by making the celebrated singer wear a midriff-baring "primitive" outfit and appear as "a stupid young woman sputtering phony Africanese."<sup>65</sup>

Chapter 3, "From *There's Magic in Music* to *The Hard-Boiled Canary*: Promoting 'Good Music' in the Pre-War Musical Film," traces the transition from motion pictures featuring Metropolitan transplants to studio-groomed operatic singers. In particular, I focus on teen singer Susanna Foster and Paramount's *There's Magic in Music* to demonstrate how films began depicting opera as less of a theatrical art and more of a mode of vocality. I address the decline of the musical in the late 1930s and the changes that filmmakers instituted in order to resurrect waning interest in the genre. My analysis of marketing materials—centered on the subject of appropriate film titles—further illustrates Hollywood's conflicted attitude toward selling classical music to the public, which ultimately influenced audience reception of 1940s musical films featuring "good music."

In Chapter 4, "Operatic Vocality to the 1940s: Deanna Durbin, Kathryn Grayson, and Jane Powell," I analyze select movies starring these respective actresses to ascertain what it now meant to be an "operatic" singer and what the term "opera" came to signify in musicals produced between the decline of the Great Depression and the onset of the Cold War. Durbin became the archetype of the studio-groomed singer in the late 1930s, bringing opera and the wholesome American girl-next-door ever closer together. Operatic musicals released during World War II

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<sup>65</sup> Review of *Hitting a New High*, *Motion Picture Daily*, 2 December 1937.

depict an even more democratic protagonist who did “her bit” for the war effort, singing operatically to boost morale. As Hitler advanced across Europe, for example, movies such as Grayson’s *Thousands Cheer* (1943) positioned the United States as the guardian of culture. Using Powell’s *Luxury Liner* (1948) as my final case study, I argue that the characterization of Hollywood’s postwar female protagonists helped realign opera’s associations with the elite and moneyed classes in the late 1940s, as the economic conditions in the United States fostered an increasingly prosperous middle class.

My Coda relates the topics of this dissertation to the construction of women’s voices and bodies in opera and the screened arts in the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century. I show how opera largely moved from the cinema to television in the 1950s as the studio system dissolved. Programs such as *The Voice of Firestone* and *Live From the Met* showcased famous musical celebrities and performances of opera for decades. I also address the film industry’s influence on the public’s perception of opera and its female singers, both on and off the stage, tracing current critical commentary on the diva’s body back to Hollywood’s disciplining of women’s figures in the 1930s. Lastly, I discuss the opera singer’s withdrawal from the movies and her seeming replacement with the disembodied operatic voice.

## CHAPTER 1: THE CATALYST FOR “OPERA” FILMS: *ONE NIGHT OF LOVE* (1934)

In 1936, columnist Ramon Romero offered a tongue-in-cheek assessment of Hollywood’s newest musical stars, following the influx of opera singers in recent years:

Voices pitted one against the other. A war with song as the ammunition. A rhythmic conflict which no League of Nations can stop, for in the end the best voice must win. Victory means popularity. Screen immortality. An everlasting niche in the Hall of Fame. Gladys Swarthout versus Grace Moore! Lily Pons against Jeanette MacDonald! ... Musical comedy queens, Grand Opera stars, movie prima donnas—all mixed up in a musical melee, the like of which has never been seen in all moviedom.<sup>66</sup>

These sensational singers, Romero suggested, all were competing for the number one spot in the hearts of motion-picture audiences. And the film that ignited the “battle” of sopranos was Metropolitan Opera diva Grace Moore’s *One Night of Love*, one of the most successful movies—financially and by reputation—among Columbia Pictures’ releases from 1934.<sup>67</sup>

Retrospectively recognized by the press as the first in a series of “opera” films emerging from Hollywood in the 1930s, *One Night of Love* became the standard against which all similar motion pictures were measured. Through the film and its associated publicity, Columbia Pictures established 1) a new prototype for the opera diva, 2) a model for subsequent opera-film narratives, and 3) the repertoire that would be featured in such films. It thus opens a space to discuss the American public’s perception, and reception, of operatic culture as mediated through the lens of a movie camera. Whereas the gramophone and the radio, through their acousmatic orientations, had begun the process of disassociating operatic singing from opera’s optical

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<sup>66</sup> Ramon Romero, “Who will be Hollywood’s Jenny Lind?,” *Modern Screen* 12, no.2 (January 1936): 30–31.

<sup>67</sup> *One Night of Love* premiered nationally on 15 September 1934.

elements and, to some degree, narrative contexts, the cinema restored and revalued the visual—but with a new twist. Drawing on theories of embodied deviance and classed corporeality, I show how *One Night* reconfigured the definition of a “good” singer by focusing on physical fitness and visual appeal as much as it did on vocal beauty, coding the “new” operatic body as normative and democratic.<sup>68</sup> This reorientation of opera as a popularized genre contributed to the movie-going public’s expectations for future operatic performances, both in film and in live settings. I first discuss *One Night*’s production process before investigating how *One Night* fashioned a modern America diva who would prove essential to securing the moviegoer’s appreciation of opera. I then discuss how Moore’s vocalicity proved essential to her film performance. Lastly, I situate *One Night*’s prima donna within the context of 1930s opera culture and American attitudes toward physical fitness and health.

### ***One Night of Love: Origins***

When Grace Moore first ventured to Hollywood to make two films for MGM, *A Lady’s Morals* (1930) and *New Moon* (1930), neither movie made a splash. The press later speculated that weak plots, stilted acting, poor cinematography, unflattering photography, and unfortunate movie titles proved to be a damning combination for these motion pictures.<sup>69</sup> In addition, market oversaturation may have contributed to their lukewarm reception. Composer Sigmund Romberg,

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<sup>68</sup> I build on theories of non-normative bodies as indicative of social and cultural deviance as well as signifiers of class hierarchies. For more on deviant bodies and class, see Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco, “Introduction,” in *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*, edited by Braziel and LeBesco (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001): 1–13, Jerry Dean Mosher, “Weighty Ambitions: Fat Actors and Figurations in American Cinema, 1910–1960” (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2007), and Niall Richardson, *Transgressive Bodies: Representations in Film and Popular Culture* (Farnham, Surrey, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010).

<sup>69</sup> There was some concern over the title for *A Lady’s Morals*. Some audience members were turned off by the idea of watching a film about a woman’s dubious morals while others were disinclined to go to a movie about a woman who had unbending morals.

for example, argued in 1930 that the film industry had flooded the market with too many slapdash musical films by that time, attempting to cash in on the successes of such early “talkies” as Al Jolson’s *The Jazz Singer* (1927).<sup>70</sup> And with baritone Lawrence Tibbett as the only opera singer experiencing early sound-film success, the public seemed to prefer the vaudeville-based acts of comedians like Eddie Cantor and the “boop boop a doop” songs performed by such popular artists as Helen Kane.<sup>71</sup> Grand opera thus rarely appeared in feature-length films until Harry Cohn, Columbia Pictures’ president and production director, offered Moore a contract to make one movie, providing that a decent vehicle could be developed for her.<sup>72</sup>

Cohn became interested in Moore’s movie potential upon seeing her perform live. He first witnessed the singer in action at a 1932 production of Carl Millöcker’s popular operetta, *The Dubarry*, in New York and then the following year at a Hollywood Bowl concert in Los Angeles.<sup>73</sup> Struck by Moore’s singing and musical-theater acting skills, Cohn believed that a film career might suit the vivacious diva.<sup>74</sup> According to director Frank Capra, Cohn also may have been convinced to add Moore to Columbia’s cast of characters by the studio’s musical adviser, Max Winslow: “For a year Max bugged Cohn to make an operatic picture with opera star Grace

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<sup>70</sup> Sigmund Romberg, “What’s Wrong with Musical Pictures?,” in *Celluloid Symphonies: Texts and Contexts in Film Music History*, edited by Julie Hubbard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011), 152–55.

<sup>71</sup> Giovanni Martinelli sparked a sensation with his Vitaphone short in 1926, but other opera singers such as Moore, Everett Marshall, and Alice Gentle did not fare as well at the box office. Their voices worked fairly well with early sound recording, but other factors—including screen presence, personality, and acting technique—contributed to their short film careers. Lawrence Tibbett, by comparison, exhibited a relaxed on-camera persona and convincing acting skills. Film historian Richard Barrios also credits Tibbett’s “comfortable Americanness” with “cutting through audiences’ fear of opera as the habitat of elitist foreigners.” See Richard Barrios, *A Song in the Dark: The Birth of the Musical Film*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 132–33.

<sup>72</sup> Grace Moore, *You Only Live Once* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1944), 200.

<sup>73</sup> *The Dubarry* ran at the George M. Cohan Theatre from 22 November 1932 through 4 February 1933, with a total of eighty-seven performances. Moore revealed that Cohn had told her that he never would have signed the singer had he not seen her in *The Dubarry*. See Moore, *You Only Live Once*, 198.

<sup>74</sup> Moore, *You Only Live Once*, 198.

Moore. His constant argument: ‘A picture with six of the biggest song hits in the world has *got* to be a hit all over the world.’ He was right. *One Night of Love* ... was a *smash* hit all over the world. Max Winslow was elevated to producer status at Columbia.”<sup>75</sup>

On the surface, however, Cohn’s solicitation of Moore may have seemed unusual. His employees and other members of the film industry commonly described the mogul as a disagreeable, hard man with little regard for “creative” people.<sup>76</sup> But Cohn, the president of a studio producing B-grade films financed by the excess grosses of Capra’s hit movies, was intent on bringing Columbia out of Poverty Row.<sup>77</sup> When considering that MGM, possibly the premier film studio at the time, was making opulent operettas with Jeanette MacDonald, Cohn’s pursuit of Moore may be interpreted as a calculated, rather than out-of-character, move. Although she initially hoped to sign with MGM in a comeback attempt, Moore was persuaded to join Columbia when MGM producer Irving Thalberg turned the singer down for a role in *The Merry Widow* (1934). The part went to Jeanette MacDonald instead.

Cohn, however, discovered a potential snag after adding Moore to Columbia’s roster of actors: the studio had never produced a film featuring an opera diva. Great care needed to be taken with the construction of the narrative so as to accommodate the talents of its leading lady plausibly, while satisfying both Cohn and the public’s demands for an entertaining motion picture. The studio, too, had only made one musical film, *Let’s Fall in Love* (1933), since it quit

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<sup>75</sup> Frank Capra, *The Name Above the Title: An Autobiography* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1971), 182. Cohn’s brother-in-law, Winslow was connected closely to songwriter Irving Berlin, in whose revues Moore appeared while starting out as a Broadway performer. Winslow may have seen Moore perform himself or heard about Moore through Berlin.

<sup>76</sup> Edmund North, “Seeing Life in Quick Depth,” in *Words into Images: Screenwriters on the Studio System*, edited by Ronald L. Davis (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2007), 103.

<sup>77</sup> A slang term used in Hollywood, Poverty Row referred to the minor and smaller low-budget studios that typically made B-grade pictures.

producing them three years earlier in 1930.<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, screenwriter Edmund North indicated in an interview published in 2007 that there was a certain resistance to constructing a “light, frothy musical about an opera singer” at the time, in part because Columbia was channeling its energies into two Capra films, *It Happened One Night* (1934) and *Broadway Bill* (1934).<sup>79</sup>

When musical films declined in production circa 1930, the film industry momentarily turned its attention toward making comedies, gangster films, horror films, and westerns.<sup>80</sup> By 1933, however, such movies as Warner Brothers’ *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* (1933) sparked a revival of the musical film.<sup>81</sup> The public, for its part, appeared to respond positively to the new wave of musical releases. Film historian Richard Barrios credits this renewed interest to changes in audiences’ viewing habits following the initial onslaught of musical films in the late twenties. Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s election and the recovery of the nation’s box offices, Barrios notes, “made musicals’ potential for escapist uplift clear once again, and what seemed inane and irrelevant in 1930 was suddenly an ideal conduit for a nation’s optimism.”<sup>82</sup> Still, musical films made their way back into the limelight slowly, as studios gingerly released two or three such films a year. According to the American Film Institute’s Catalog of Feature Films, only eighteen

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<sup>78</sup> Barrios, *A Song in the Dark*, 414.

<sup>79</sup> North, “Seeing Life in Quick Depth,” 103.

<sup>80</sup> As pianist Verna Arvey wrote in 1931, the public began to tire of the “music that was seemingly thrown into every picture without rhyme or reason. Now music is used mainly in the beginning of feature pictures, and for the end. Often there are incidental songs. For those things, almost all the material used is original . . . Sometimes a big musical picture is launched—that is, one in operetta or musical-comedy style.” See Verna Arvey, “Present Day Musical Films and How They are Made Possible,” in *Celluloid Symphonies: Texts and Contexts in Film Music History*, edited by Julie Hubbert (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011), 159.

<sup>81</sup> Barrios, *A Song in the Dark*, 366.

<sup>82</sup> Barrios, *A Song in the Dark*, 366.

out of 563 films released in 1934 were categorized as musicals, two of which were Spanish-language movies.<sup>83</sup>

Despite the seeming resurgence of the musical film, Cohn regretted signing Moore when a suitable story could not be found for the singer.<sup>84</sup> Most likely, the studio's screenwriters simply had not attempted to develop an opera story prior to this point and discovered that the music's particular mode of dissemination and reception (i.e., to focused audiences in an opera house) made writing such a scenario more challenging than a standard musical. Meanwhile, films with popular songs framed their musical performances in a variety of scenes and settings, from nightclubs and musical-theater venues to homes and other community spaces.

The studio's difficulty in locating a decent vehicle for Moore also may have stemmed from prejudices against opera culture and its elitist associations. Columbia's executives in New York, for example, pressured Cohn to abort the project, afraid that the movie would appeal to a limited audience and therefore cheat the company out of a significant amount of money. The executives thought it ill-advised to make a film with operatic music, believing that such fare would not draw audiences outside of metropolitan centers.<sup>85</sup>

In North's opinion, Moore's shrewd business sense was the sole reason that *One Night* was even produced. When Cohn began prevaricating and tried to buy out her contract, Moore borrowed \$25,000 (her pay for *One Night*) from the studio boss, a strategic move that, according

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<sup>83</sup> This designation only refers to films as "musicals." There were more movies, however, that featured musical sequences within the narrative. According to James Wierzbicki: "Hollywood produced more than a thousand feature-length films in 1929 and 1930, and almost two hundred of these could be described as 'musical.' In sharp contrast, of the 990 feature films produced in 1931 and 1932, 'musical' films numbered only twenty-one." See James Wierzbicki, *Film Music: A History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 120–21.

<sup>84</sup> Bob Thomas, *King Cohn: The Life and Times of Harry Cohn* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1967), 96. Cohn policed his writers' scripts to make sure that everything could be understood by the "average" individual. As Thomas stated: "There was nothing obscure or obtuse in Columbia films." Cohn was rarely an innovator when it came to film plots, but he was willing to gamble. Overall, he preferred modern subjects to period films, partly for the sake of economy since historic sets and costumes were expensive to make. See Thomas, *King Cohn*, 73–74.

<sup>85</sup> Thomas, *King Cohn*, 96.

to North, ensured that the film would be made.<sup>86</sup> Unable to purchase Moore's option, Cohn moved forward with production. He assigned producer Everett Riskin to oversee the project and located writers who could create a logical story for an opera singer. Screen and stage playwright Charles Beahan and author Dorothy Spere received credit for *One Night*'s original story, which was based on their unpublished play *Don't Fall in Love* (1931).<sup>87</sup>

Yet even with Beahan and Spere's story as a newfound source of inspiration, *One Night of Love* ran into trouble during its development. According to North, multiple screenwriters attempted to turn the story into a reasonable script, without much success. Eventually, Cohn assigned North and co-writer James Gow to the project. The duo spent approximately twelve to fifteen weeks working on the screenplay.<sup>88</sup> Moore's autobiography as well as various magazine and newspaper articles claim that the soprano collaborated with the writers and offered suggestions based on her own experiences in opera to make the story "believable."<sup>89</sup> It is probable that Moore, after her first two film attempts, wanted to avoid any ridiculous plotlines or stilted dialogue. As her script copies for her subsequent films show, for example, Moore corrected grammar and vocabulary in the dialogue and went over the characterizations of her roles meticulously. When something did not line up with who she believed her characters to be, the singer notated it in the script's margins. Successive drafts reveal that many of the sections she marked were changed, suggesting that Moore made the inconsistencies known to the director or producer. In addition to collaborating on *One Night*'s script, Moore selected some of the

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<sup>86</sup> North, "Seeing Life in Quick Depth," 103. Moore's remuneration was considered inexpensive at the time. According to measuringworth.com, \$25,000 is the equivalent of \$442,000 today.

<sup>87</sup> Spere, who once considered a career as an opera singer, most likely infused the narrative with her own perceptions of operatic culture.

<sup>88</sup> North, "Seeing Life in Quick Depth," 102.

<sup>89</sup> Moore, *You Only Live Once*, 201. North did not corroborate this in his interview with Ronald L. Davis.

film's musical numbers, even persuading Cohn to acquire the rights to Giacomo Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*.<sup>90</sup>

Minimal interference from the Motion Picture Censor Office in Los Angeles aided *One Night*'s rapid release. Unlike many other contemporary films, the movie received hardly any input from the censors.<sup>91</sup> Rather, correspondence from the Los Angeles office indicates that *One Night* caught the favorable attention of the censor board. After reading the first draft of the film, censor Joseph Breen wrote to Cohn on 16 February 1934: "We have received and read with interest the first draft of your GRACE MOORE script. It seems to us to offer the basis for a colorful and effective picture, in compliance with the provisions of our Production Code."<sup>92</sup> Breen's routine follow-up on the film's preview similarly contained an unusually keen response, including a rarely used exclamation point. Breen informed Cohn on 14 May 1934: "I wish to take this occasion to congratulate you on this magnificent production. Not in a long while have the members of this staff witnessed anything quite so delightfully entertaining. More power to you!"<sup>93</sup> Breen was no less enthusiastic in his office report to William H. Hays, the President of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, Inc.: "This is the picture starring Grace Moore and we are indeed happy to report that it is one of the finest pieces of entertainment

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<sup>90</sup> Thomas, *King Cohn*, 96–97. Studios typically sought to use music already listed as public domain or written by their own songwriters in order to save money, rather than acquiring the rights to copyrighted or otherwise protected material.

<sup>91</sup> Most of the objectionable elements of the film consisted of references to, or suggestions of, premarital sex. For example, Joseph Breen wrote to Harry Cohn: "There is however, one element which we believe will need to be treated with considerable care. I refer to the fact that Judith is shown occupying a room in the same house with Montevideo, (although it is made perfectly plain in the dialogue that she is there simply as a pupil). In order to avoid any danger of this being questioned, we would suggest that you make it very clear in the geography of the sets, that Judith is actually in an entirely separate apartment, and to emphasize this fact as much as possible in the shooting of the scenes." See letter from Breen to Cohn, 16 February 1934, "*One Night of Love*, [Col., 19--]," Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration Records, Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library, Beverly Hills, CA (MHL).

<sup>92</sup> Letter from Breen to Cohn, 16 February 1934, "*One Night of Love*, [Col., 19--]," MHL.

<sup>93</sup> Letter from Breen to Cohn, 14 May 1934, "*One Night of Love*, [Col., 19--]," MHL.

we have had the pleasure of reviewing recently. Miss Moore's singing is thrilling, and the direction by Victor Schertzinger is top notch. Unless we miss our guess, this should be another definite hit from Columbia."<sup>94</sup>

Compared to other censorship reactions from that period, many of which read as form letters, these reports are atypical because of the inclusion of Breen's personal inflections and opinions. The censor even highlighted the specific elements that, to his mind, distinguished the film from the standard, or sub-par, Hollywood fare that passed through his office: Moore's singing and Schertzinger's direction. It is possible that the censor board's recent decision to enforce the Production Code rather rigorously may have heightened Breen's enthusiasm.<sup>95</sup> The application of the Production Code was intended to change the way the studios made movies, prohibiting them from including profanity or showing what were then perceived to be indecent actions and morally suspicious situations in their products.<sup>96</sup> The cinema therefore was seen as a space in which it was considered possible, by some, to cultivate a better society by leading through example. As the Code's general principles stated: "no picture shall be produced which will lower the moral standards of those who see it," and "correct standards of life, subject only to the requirements of drama and entertainment, shall be presented."<sup>97</sup> *One Night's* focus on the supposedly culturally and morally uplifting genre of opera perhaps persuaded Breen to consider the film as a harbinger of better motion pictures to come.

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<sup>94</sup> Report from Breen to William H. Hays, 21 May 1934, "*One Night of Love*, [Col., 19--]," MHL. The previous hit was Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night* (1934), with Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert.

<sup>95</sup> See Chapter 3 for more on film censorship.

<sup>96</sup> For a more in-depth history of the Production Code, see MPPDA Digital Archive, <http://mppda.flinders.edu.au/history/mppda-history/> (accessed 8 May 2015).

<sup>97</sup> Production Code General Principles. See MPPDA Digital Archive, <http://mppda.flinders.edu.au/records/2254> (accessed 8 May 2015).

For Cohn's part, the board's emphatic approval may have been a motivator to continue forward with the project. According to his biographer, the studio boss was invested in providing the public with entertaining but tasteful stories.<sup>98</sup> This made business sense, too. Concerned with turning a profit, Cohn did not consider it cost-effective for his writers to include vulgarity and salaciousness in their screenplays. Writing scripts that would run into trouble at the censorship office delayed production and therefore cost the studio money. Instead, it was more beneficial for scripts to be written cleanly right away. Films that appealed to a broader audience would sustain greater financial returns, whereas producing movies that were too brutal or sexually explicit simply was not good for business. Thus, opera, with its patrician associations, allegedly could offer material for a clean narrative as well as bring a certain touch of class to the minor-league studio that Cohn wanted to turn into a major player in Hollywood.

*One Night of Love* spent very little time in production. The film was shot in five weeks, from 15 March through 20 April 1934, a relatively short period of time compared to similar films, which could take up to three months.<sup>99</sup> One of the more expensive productions for Columbia to date, *One Night* exceeded its initial budget of \$185,000 by \$15,000, ultimately costing \$200,000 after retakes.<sup>100</sup> Adding to the film's expenses, the operatic sequences of *Carmen* and *Madama Butterfly* were filmed as live performances to preserve the integrity of their respective scores. And to make these scenes as true to traditional opera productions as possible,

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<sup>98</sup> Thomas, *King Cohn*, 74.

<sup>99</sup> Sidney Skolsky, "Hollywood," 10 October 1934, in "Scrapbook, Newspaper Articles, Magazine Clippings, Programs, 1934," Grace Moore Papers, Box 3, Folder 18, Special Collections, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN (UTK). Also see the American Film Institute's catalog website, <http://www.afi.com/members/catalog/DetailView.aspx?s=&Movie=6511> (accessed 20 April 2015). According to Skolsky, *One Night* was shot in sequence because the screenwriters were still working on the script during filming.

<sup>100</sup> Thomas, *King Cohn*, 98. In today's currency, the initial budget for *One Night* equates to \$3,270,000 and \$3,540,000 with retakes. *One Night* took in \$733,150 (\$13,000,000) at the box office. See John Sedgwick and Michael Pokorny, "The Film Business in the United States and Britain during the 1930s," *Economic History Review* 58, no. 1 (2005): 96. In comparison, Capra's *It Happened One Night* was shot in four weeks for a total of just under \$300,000 (\$5,310,000). See Thomas, *King Cohn*, 92.

Columbia engaged conductor Pietro Cimini of the Chicago Civic Opera to direct and rehearse the Los Angeles Opera Company, the members of which sang the choral parts.<sup>101</sup>

*One Night of Love* underwent an extensive trial period before being released nationally.<sup>102</sup> Cohn, skeptical of the film's potential to draw the so-called masses, ordered multiple previews in Southern California before the formal Hollywood premiere. *One Night* first was previewed in Glendale, receiving, to Cohn's surprise, a small ovation.<sup>103</sup> The movie then went on to Santa Barbara, where many "musicians showed definite excitement."<sup>104</sup> Cohn finally decided to try a Hollywood preview, at which "the purely professional and representative Hollywood audience rose at the end of the picture and cheered."<sup>105</sup> A telegram from Cohn to Moore dated 11 August 1934 suggests the studio boss' relief at the film's warm reception: "My dear Grace. I know now there is only one great singer in the world."<sup>106</sup>

*One Night of Love* became one of the most popular and financially successful films to feature a famous opera singer. According to various newspapers and film magazines, it was

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<sup>101</sup> Genevieve Harris, "Rambling Through the Studio: Opera Star's Voice Thrills Head of Columbia Pictures and Musical Film of Rare Appeal is the Result," in "Scrapbook, Newspaper Articles, Magazine Clippings, Programs, 1934," Grace Moore Papers, Box 3, Folder 18, UTK.

<sup>102</sup> According to the International Movie Database, *One Night of Love* premiered in Los Angeles on 5 September 1934 and in New York on 6 September 1934 before its national release on 15 September 1934.

<sup>103</sup> Moore, *You Only Live Once*, 203. An acquaintance of Moore's from Tennessee also noted the reception of *One Night* in Glendale: "Your glorious voice thrilled me as no other voice ever did especially in that aria from 'Madam Butterfly' ... Grace I sat through two shows just to hear you sing again something I have never done before! ... You have a great number of admirers in this city your picture has had the longest run of any picture that has been in Glendale in the nine years that I have been here." Letter from Henry W. Lucas to Grace Moore, 26 October 1934, "Fan Mail Held for Grace Moore to Read, 1934 October 31–1934 November 24," Grace Moore Papers, Box 1, Folder 18, UTK.

<sup>104</sup> Moore, *You Only Live Once*, 203.

<sup>105</sup> Moore, *You Only Live Once*, 204.

<sup>106</sup> Telegram from Cohn to Moore, 11 August 1934, in "General Correspondence to Grace Moore, 1934 July–1938 September," Grace Moore Papers, Box 1, Folder 5, UTK.

ranked among the top ten films of 1934 and launched Moore as an international star.<sup>107</sup> Moore received many accolades for her performance, claiming later in 1941 that “I suddenly discovered I was listed second among box-office stars that year, voted one of the ‘ten most beautiful women in the world’ (I never did figure how *they* arrived at that astounding conclusion or who *they* were), and awarded a fellowship and gold medal by the Society of Arts and Sciences for furthering the cause of good music in the films.”<sup>108</sup> In addition to Moore’s laurels, *One Night* gained a reputation as a well constructed and entertaining musical film. Hollywood recognized the movie’s quality, nominating it for six Academy Awards: Victor Schertzinger for Best Directing; Grace Moore for Best Actress; Columbia Pictures for Outstanding Production; the Columbia Studio Sound Department and John Livadary, Sound Director, for Best Sound Recording; Gene Milford for Best Editing; and the Columbia Studio Music Department (Louis Silvers, head of department) for Best Music (Scoring).<sup>109</sup> In the end, *One Night* won the Oscars for Best Sound Recording and Best Music as well as a Scientific/Technical Award presented to Columbia for its “application of the Vertical Cut Disc method (hill and dale recording) to actual studio production, with their recording of the sound on the picture *One Night of Love*.”<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> *Film Daily*, for example, listed *One Night* among the top ten according to a poll of critics. According to the *Moving Pictures Association*, too, it was a “box office champion.” See “Note” for *One Night of Love* in the AFI Online Catalog, <http://www.afi.com/members/catalog/DetailView.aspx?s=&Movie=6511> (accessed 20 October 2015).

<sup>108</sup> Moore, *You Only Live Once*, 205–06. Moore received a gold medal from the Society of Arts and Sciences on 16 May 1935 for her performance in *One Night of Love*. She was the second woman to receive the award. See “Prize Presented to Grace Moore: Society Hands Song Bird Medal for Film,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 17 May 1935.

<sup>109</sup> See The 7<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards, 1935, Oscars.org, <http://www.oscars.org/oscars/ceremonies/1935> (accessed 23 April 2015), and “*One Night of Love*,” AFI Online Catalog, <http://www.afi.com/members/catalog/DetailView.aspx?s=&Movie=6511> (accessed 16 May 2014).

<sup>110</sup> See entry for “*One Night of Love*,” Awards Database for the Oscars, <http://awardsdatabase.oscars.org/search/results> (accessed 12 December 2016).

## Conflicts of Marketing Interest

“This one is for you. With your eyes open or closed, it is an evening for the gods!”<sup>111</sup>

*Photoplay*'s tagline for Columbia Pictures' latest release tantalizingly hinted that *One Night of Love* was no ordinary movie. Yet considering the film industry's prioritization of the visual, the suggestion that one could enjoy a film with one's eyes closed surely must have seemed a bit odd to some moviegoers. The advertisement placed in *Photoplay* implied that *One Night of Love* offered an alternative draw: music to be enjoyed by the “gods,” a selection of grand opera sequences from *La traviata*, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *Carmen*, and *Madama Butterfly*. This addition to Hollywood's musical palette distinguished *One Night* from other contemporary films featuring operetta or popular songs. Opera's highbrow associations, however, arguably added a layer of complexity that other musical films did not need to navigate when appealing to a diverse audience. By invoking the universal “you,” the tagline intimated that the music of the gods could be enjoyed by deities and mere mortals alike, thereby elevating any listener to a superior status.

As the archival evidence shows, Columbia Pictures' publicity department presumed that both *One Night*'s operatic content and its leading lady's reputation as an opera singer were obstacles to overcome when marketing the film to the public. Publicity director Hubert L. Voight, for example, expressed such concerns in a letter to Moore regarding the promotion of the new Prince Matchabelli perfume “Grace Moore,” a limited release fragrance created as part of the studio's marketing campaign.<sup>112</sup> Voight even included an excerpted request from Columbia's advertising director in New York, who provided a description of the film's target audience and

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<sup>111</sup> Tagline on advertisement for *One Night of Love*, attributed to *Photoplay*, in “Scrapbook, Newspaper Articles, Magazine Clippings, Programs, 1934,” Grace Moore Papers, Box 3, Folder 18, UTK. *Photoplay* arguably was Hollywood's leading film magazine.

<sup>112</sup> For more information regarding this perfume, see “Prince Matchabelli Blogspot,” <http://princematchabelli.blogspot.com/2014/01/grace-moore-by-prince-matchabelli-c1934.html> (accessed 11 October 2015).

proposed strategies for appealing to the viewers' tastes: "If possible, I would prefer not referring to Miss Moore as a 'Metropolitan Opera, radio, and concert star.' We are trying to sell the picture to the masses, and the mere mention of opera and concert is liable to frighten them away."<sup>113</sup> While various studios often tried to capitalize on name recognition when bringing known talent to Hollywood, the advertising director paradoxically wished to avoid publicizing Moore's stage career in association with the perfume campaign.

Voight's letter demonstrates that the publicity department was operating on assumptions frequently made at this time about musical preferences. The Warner Bros.' Busby Berkeley extravaganzas, for instance, seemed like a sure-fire formula to tap into. Here, we can see that Columbia's publicists were uncertain as to how the "masses" would react to a film featuring operatic music. They therefore relied on established ideas of class and musical taste. Only MGM had experimented with opera films up until this point, and both attempts had proven unsuccessful in garnering accolades or profits. Columbia, then, was dealing with a new type of film that had not yet been tested thoroughly with audiences. Moreover, whereas opera and music-appreciation programs had become part of radio's standard line-up at this time, the government's cultural uplift programs—the Federal Theatre Project and the Federal Music Project, for example—would not come to fruition until 1935.<sup>114</sup> Voight and the publicity department thus took a more

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<sup>113</sup> Letter from Hubert L. Voight to Grace Moore, 2 August 1934, "General Correspondence to Grace Moore, 1934 July–1938 September," Grace Moore Papers, Box 1, Folder 5, UTK.

<sup>114</sup> The Works Progress Administration (WPA), which was part of the Federal Government's New Deal Program, instituted the Federal Music Project (FMP) in 1935 to create new jobs for unemployed musicians. In addition to the FMP, the WPA also created the Federal Writers Project, the Federal Theater Project, and the Federal Arts Project. In his book *All of This Music Belongs to the Nation*, Kenneth J. Bindas examines how the relative conservatism of the FMP leadership created tension within the institution by prioritizing the performance of "cultured" music—music from the European symphonic tradition—over other musical styles. Bindas points out that the FMP's mission to "elevate" the tastes of both musicians and the public resulted in the second-class treatment of musicians who played popular music. See Kenneth J. Bindas, *All of This Music Belongs to the Nation: The WPA's Federal Music Project and American Society* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995).

calculated and conservative approach toward marketing *One Night*, relying more on its plotline than its musical merits.

*One Night's* movie posters similarly reflected ambivalence toward the film's musical content. On one poster, a drawn representation of Moore's smiling face assumes the focal point with a smaller drawing of the singer attired in a glamorous evening gown filling the poster's lower right corner. A few quarter and eighth notes sprinkled across the page serve as the only indication that the motion picture might feature music of any kind. This poster's catch line "A great star comes into her own!" likewise leaves room for interpretation as to who the protagonist might be; she might be a movie star, a musical star, a star from the stage, or any other type of celebrity figure (Figure 1.1).<sup>115</sup>



Figure 1.1: *One Night of Love* Poster

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<sup>115</sup> A Dutch poster, by contrast, announced "Grace Moore, the world-famous opera singer" front and center while a Swedish poster proposed that it was the "season's biggest song and music film."

The poster designers used a publicity photo of Moore as their inspiration. See "Getty Images" for this photo, <http://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/singer-and-actress-grace-moore-about-1930-photograph-news-photo/167439332> (accessed 20 November 2015).

A second poster hinted even less at the film's musical subject matter; Moore offers a sultry glance to the onlooker from the upper-right corner while a lone eighth note hovers at the side of her cheek. In the lower-right corner, the male lead, Tullio Carminati, leans down toward Moore for a kiss (Figure 1.2).



Figure 1.2: *One Night of Love* Poster

Besides Carminati's implied kiss on this second poster, the film's title, "One Night of Love," provided the only other clue as to the movie's content: romance. Love stories, the film industry believed, universally appealed to audiences, and Columbia's publicists most likely decided that romance was the best marketing angle for the movie.

As part of *One Night of Love*'s publicity strategy, Columbia asked Moore to record the film's eponymous theme song with the Raymond Paige orchestra, a popular 1930s dance band, for Victor Records. Voight wrote to Moore that:

Such a record can be sold in music stores during the week in which the picture will be in its first runs throughout the country and have great exploitation value. If a deal were made on a percentage basis, it seems to me as though the theatres could assist in the sale of the records, much as is done by the New York musical comedy producers. The music store in turn would provide the theatre with window space advertising, both of your record and of our picture.<sup>116</sup>

<sup>116</sup> Voight to Moore, 2 August 1934, "General Correspondence to Grace Moore, 1934 July–1938 September," Grace Moore Papers, Box 1, Folder 5, UTK.

According to Voight's letter, Moore appears to have been reticent in cutting a record, due to concerns over appropriate remuneration. The publicity director therefore attempted to persuade the singer to make a deal with Victor because "it would have value in putting over the picture. I have explained this to both Mr. Cohn and Max Winslow, and they agree that a Victor record with you would have considerable value."<sup>117</sup> Moore must not have been able to make a mutually satisfactory arrangement with Victor, however, because she instead recorded "One Night of Love" and another of the film's songs, "Ciribiribin," with the Metropolitan Male Chorus and Orchestra under the direction of Wilfred Pelletier for the Brunswick label (Brunswick 6994).<sup>118</sup>

Voight likewise attempted to convince Moore to appear on CBS's nationally syndicated Thursday evening broadcast for *Photoplay*.<sup>119</sup> The program consisted of a 12-minute long dramatization of a movie and a prepared interview with a guest star. Due to the program's popularity—its estimated audience was 20 million listeners each week—Columbia's publicity department undoubtedly considered securing a spot on the show to be an advantageous move for plugging *One Night of Love*. Voight proposed that Moore guest star on 13 September, two nights before the film's release. Assuring the diva that she would not be expected to sing, Voight stated that the program seemed like "something we cannot afford to pass up."<sup>120</sup> The publicity director indicated further, however, that Moore should volunteer her services for the benefit of the interview's promotional value, pointing out that such stars as Helen Hayes, Ruth Chatterton,

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<sup>117</sup> Voight to Moore, 2 August 1934, "General Correspondence to Grace Moore, 1934 July–1938 September," Grace Moore Papers, Box 1, Folder 5, UTK.

<sup>118</sup> Both "One Night of Love" and "Ciribiribin" became two of Moore's most requested songs for the duration of her career.

<sup>119</sup> I could not confirm whether or not Moore appeared on this broadcast.

<sup>120</sup> Voight to Moore, 2 August 1934, "General Correspondence to Grace Moore, 1934 July–1938 September," Grace Moore Papers, Box 1, Folder 5, UTK.

Claudette Colbert, Adolph Menjou, W.C. Fields, John Boles, George Raft, and many others gave their time freely without payment. For obvious reasons, though, Voight did not mention that these actors were expected to provide these types of services as part of their long-standing studio contracts and agreed-upon salaries.

According to correspondence from the publicity department in Hollywood, Moore did, indeed, conduct various radio interviews and performances leading up to *One Night's* national release.<sup>121</sup> Moore, for example, appeared on the *Fleischmann Yeast Hour* before the New York opening on 6 September 1934. Hosted by popular singer Rudy Vallee, the *Fleischmann Yeast Hour*—a musical variety program on NBC—ranked among the top shows from the 1930s. Rather than plugging the theme song or one of the other popular tunes from *One Night*, however, Moore performed an aria from *Madama Butterfly*.<sup>122</sup> This was a shrewd move. Studio publicist Mary Bartot wrote to Moore that her performance even caused the Columbia office to stop their “hectic” productivity:

The evening you opened in New York and sang over radio just before going to the premiere, our office literally emptied itself into the portrait gallery to listen to the broadcast. It was marvelous too and I believe you would have been gratified to see all the boys strolling in, very casually, you know—just as though they had dropped by accidentally—and waiting through the entire Fleischman [*sic*] hour until you sang . . . We all applauded like mad when the announcer mentioned your picture and introduced you. But of course, the big “hand” came when you did “Butterfly.”<sup>123</sup>

The studio appears to have begun seeing Moore’s operatic background as less of a financial

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<sup>121</sup> On 24 September, for example, Moore performed four songs—*One Night's* theme song “One Night of Love,” “Ciribiribin,” the “Habanera” from *Carmen*, and the waltz “I Give My Heart” from *The Dubarry*—with Joseph Pasternak’s Orchestra on the premiere of the *Atwater Kent Hour* series on CBS/KHJ. Atwater Kent was “a radio-receiving-set manufacturer that pioneered in the production of high-class ether entertainment in 1925.” See Carroll Nye, “Grace Moore Will Be Guest Artist on First Program of New C.B.S.—KHJ Series,” *Los Angeles Times*, 24 September 1934, and George M. Adams, Jr., “Radio Waves and Ripples,” *The Washington Post*, 24 September 1934. Moore also performed “a number of selections” from *One Night* on the Ford Symphony Program on 2 December 1934. See “Sparks from the Antennae,” *Los Angeles Times*, 2 December 1934.

<sup>122</sup> Presumably, Moore sang “Un bel di” because her character did so in *One Night*.

<sup>123</sup> Letter from Mary Bartot to Grace Moore, 10 September 1934, “General Correspondence to Grace Moore, 1934 July–1938 September,” Grace Moore Papers, Box 1, Folder 5, UTK.

threat after *One Night*'s successful previews in Southern California.

Indeed, publicity more overtly began referring to the film as a musical as well as a love story.<sup>124</sup> By November, for instance, the general-interest weekly magazine, *Liberty*, had announced that *One Night* was “The Most Glorious Musical Romance of All Time!”<sup>125</sup> Another advertisement similarly stated: “Thousands are seeing this reigning musical romantic sensation time and again. You, too, will want to see it more than once and experience each time new joy and greater entertainment.”<sup>126</sup> Banking on celebrity influence, Columbia also used the reactions of various Hollywood icons, from Greta Garbo to Clark Gable, to legitimize *One Night*'s merits and Moore's new movie-star status (Figure 1.3).

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<sup>124</sup> Up to this point, most musical films had been associated with popular music or, at the very least, operetta. On the one hand, marketing the film as a musical suggests that Columbia may have been banking on the film's inclusion of popular and traditional songs to situate *One Night* within the musical genre. On the other hand, Columbia may have been conceiving of the musical-film genre as one that soon would encompass opera.

<sup>125</sup> *Liberty*, in “Scrapbook, Newspaper Articles, Magazine Clippings, Programs, 1934,” Grace Moore Papers, Box 3, Folder 18, UTK. *Liberty* was founded by the respective owners and editors of the *Chicago Tribune* and the *New York Daily News*, Robert McCormick and Joseph Patterson.

<sup>126</sup> *Liberty*, in “Scrapbook, Newspaper Articles, Magazine Clippings, Programs, 1934,” Grace Moore Papers, Box 3, Folder 18, UTK.

THE MOST GLORIOUS MUSICAL ROMANCE OF ALL TIME!

Eddie Cantor says: "World's greatest musical star!"

Norma Shearer says: "Glorious voice!"

Clark Gable says: "Divinely melodious music!"

Mary Pickford says: "Delightful entertainment!"

Maurice Chevalier says: "Magnifique!"

FOUR STARS from Liberty Magazine

Gloria Swanson says: "I was thrilled with it!"

Ruth Chatterton says: "One of most radiant personalities!"

**Grace Moore**  
IN  
**ONE NIGHT OF LOVE**  
with TULLIO CARMINATI • LYLE TALBOT  
MONA BARRIE

Figure 1.3: Advertisement from "Scrapbook, Newspaper Articles, Magazine Clippings, Programs, 1934," Grace Moore Papers, Box 5, Folder 18, UTK.

Whether or not these celebrity reports were true, the quotes pinpoint what was considered to be new and exciting about the film. A few advertisements, for example, lauded Moore's performance as well as her distinct voice. In one of these, Norma Shearer supposedly stated: "Dear Grace: You completely won your audience with your warmth and charm and thrilled us with your glorious voice."<sup>127</sup> Even authoritative film columnist Louella Parsons's review was used as promotional material for the film:

When *One Night of Love* is released Grace Moore will be in the same category with Norma Shearer, Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, Joan Crawford and any other scintillating favorite of the films. Not only has she a voice that is so lovely, so resonant and clear in the quality of its tones you get thrills listening to her, but she has a screen personality and real beauty.

I was so impressed with Grace Moore's voice upon the screen that I wanted to cry. Never had it sounded so beautiful, so sympathetic and so expressive. The story given her is one that was created for her. I cannot think of any other screen actress who could play such a part because there is no other motion picture star with this magnetic operatic voice.<sup>128</sup>

Multiple celebrity testimonials distinguished *One Night* from other musical films. Gloria Swanson reportedly claimed that *One Night* would be impossible to top: "Who can dare make a musical film after this one?"<sup>129</sup> The *New York Daily News* quoted entertainer Eddie Cantor as saying that *One Night* was the "most intelligent musical picture that has come out of Hollywood."<sup>130</sup> That same newspaper also credited French star Maurice Chevalier with postulating that the film was "a picture so new it will start a new cycle." Chevalier's alleged

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<sup>127</sup> Unidentified advertisement, 14 October 1934, in "Scrapbook, Newspaper Articles, Magazine Clippings, Programs, 1934," Grace Moore Papers, Box 3, Folder 18, UTK.

<sup>128</sup> "New Star Looms in Films," from unidentified source, 1934, in "Scrapbook, Newspaper Articles, Magazine Clippings, Programs, 1934," Grace Moore Papers, Box 3, Folder 18, UTK.

<sup>129</sup> Unidentified advertisement, 14 October 1934, in "Scrapbook, Newspaper Articles, Magazine Clippings, Programs, 1934," Grace Moore Papers, Box 3, Folder 18, UTK.

<sup>130</sup> Advertisement, *The New York Daily News*, 1934, in "Scrapbook, Newspaper Articles, Magazine Clippings, Programs, 1934," Grace Moore Papers, Box 3, Folder 18, UTK.

assessment proved remarkably prescient, as *One Night* set in motion a wave of interest in “opera” films that brought a plethora of singers—including coloratura soprano Lily Pons and mezzo-soprano Gladys Swarthout—from the East Coast to the West.

## Screenplay

Grace Moore played the role of Mary Barrett, an aspiring American singer who dreams of becoming a famous prima donna.<sup>131</sup> As the movie’s opening credits unfold, Moore/Barrett’s voice can be heard singing the strains of the film’s theme song, “One Night of Love.”<sup>132</sup> The disembodied voice soon becomes a diegetic one as the camera focuses on Barrett, dressed in a light-colored evening gown and singing into a microphone. An audience sits in rapt attention, watching Barrett perform in a radio station’s recording studio. Following the song’s final cadence, they burst into applause and a radio announcer intones: “Ladies and gentlemen, you are listening to the finals of the American Radio Auditions. As you know, the winner of tonight’s contest will receive the opportunity of studying for two years under the greatest operatic maestro in Europe, Giulio Monteverdi. The winner tonight will tomorrow be on her way to operatic stardom.”<sup>133</sup> Although the viewer is set up to believe that Barrett will win the contest, she does not. The protagonist’s rejection serves to portray her as a plucky and determined individual, two qualities often used to describe Moore herself. This characterization thus situates Barrett securely

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<sup>131</sup> For a close reading of Mary Barrett as a diva figure in *One Night*, see Susan J. Leonardi and Rebecca A. Pope, *The Diva’s Mouth: Body, Voice, Prima Donna Politics* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 178–80.

<sup>132</sup> Written by Victor Schertzinger, “One Night of Love” became very popular and was plugged by the studio. Moore performed it while promoting the film, and it became part of her repertoire for the rest of her career.

<sup>133</sup> Monteverdi’s name undoubtedly was meant as a pun on either Claudio Monteverdi’s or his brother Giulio Cesare’s name, although correspondence from the Motion Picture Association of America’s records show that this character’s name was, at one point, “Montevido.” See letter from Breen to Cohn, dated 16 February 1934, “*One Night of Love* [Col., 19--],” MHL.

as the iconic American girl, an identity that would prove essential to audiences' positive reception of the film.

Motivated by her disappointment, Barrett decides to pursue operatic study on her own in Milan, playing into the idea that one must study in Europe, particularly Italy where opera was born, in order to become a great singer. With \$500 in savings, she settles in Milan where the “naturally musical” Italians greet her with open arms.<sup>134</sup> Establishing shots reinforce the supposedly innate musicality of the Italian people: neighboring apartments house a variety of instrumentalists, from a violinist to a harpist, all madly practicing their music. When Barrett leans over her balcony to sing the first operatic aria of the film, “Sempre libera” from *La traviata*, her music-loving neighbors immediately abandon their practicing to support her with orchestral accompaniment.<sup>135</sup> The ease with which Barrett and the Italian instrumentalists enact the impromptu performance reinforces the trope of music as the universal language that can bridge any cultural difference. Her superior vocals, too, impress the Italians, who ecstatically break into wild applause after the aria's final cadence. Yet despite this personally “freeing” and communally “unifying” experience, Barrett's American otherness remains obvious—she is the only individual with light coloring in the camera's frame.

After exhausting her savings trying to secure a vocal coach, Barrett puts her American work ethic to good use, finding employment as an entertainer/waitress at the Café Roma. As luck

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<sup>134</sup> *One Night* plays on stereotypes of Italians as inherently musical, pasta-eating, and temperamental. When Moore tells her Anglo-American parents that she is going to Italy to study music, her distressed mother cries, “But Italy is full of Italians!” The equivalent of \$500 today is \$8,850.

<sup>135</sup> Besides establishing Barrett in an Italian setting, the shots of the musicians makes it seem more “natural” when Moore begins to sing *Traviata* and the viewer hears orchestral music accompanying her. The need to justify orchestral accompaniment stemmed from early film theories on the synchronization of diegetic music and visual image. It was believed that the camera needed to show a musician on the screen in order to make the diegetic music appear completely normal. For more on this early period of musical films, see, for example, Michael Slowik, *After the Silents: Hollywood Film Music in the Early Sound Era, 1926–1934* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

would have it, Maestro Monteverdi discovers her at the café as she is engaging the crowd in a rousing sing-along to the popular Italian tune, “Ciribiribin.”<sup>136</sup> Although Monteverdi heard Barrett’s voice on the air during the radio competition, it is only after he *sees* her perform that he decides to take her under his wing. Following the singer into her dressing room where she just had removed her waitress uniform, he (ironically) exclaims that it is “only once in a lifetime one hears a voice like [hers],” instructing Barrett to sing a series of high C’s while she stands uncomfortably exposed in her slip (Figure 1.4).



**Figure 1.4: Screenshot of Monteverdi and Barrett in her dressing room**

Frustrated by the demanding stranger who refuses to leave, Barrett assents. As she does so, Monteverdi circles her approvingly and gives her the “once over,” musing that Barrett is “not ugly” and that he “always wanted to see a Carmen who weighed less than a bull.” With the condescending stipulation that Barrett must promise not to fall in love with him—one that also would keep the censors satisfied—Monteverdi offers to be her vocal coach if she is willing to “work, work, and work” and “give up everything” but her voice. After he hands her his business

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<sup>136</sup> “Ciribiribin,” an Italian song composed by Alberto Pestalozza in 1898, became one of Moore’s most requested songs throughout the rest of her career.

card and Barrett finally learns who the intruder is, she eagerly agrees. Declaring that he will mold her as “a sculptor with a block of marble,” the maestro alarmingly promises that, from now on, he will be watching her every breath and morsel of food consumed.

*One Night of Love* progresses in a manner akin to George Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion*, with Monteverdi as the Henry Higgins character who molds a young woman into a product for which he ultimately can take credit. The maestro oversees his protégé as she undergoes months of strenuous exercise and careful dieting in order to cultivate a healthy physique for her European debut, all the while forbidding Barrett to sing a single note. A healthy body begets a healthy voice—or so the film insinuates. During a six-minute sequence devoted solely to the disciplining of the opera diva’s body, Barrett executes conditioning exercise after conditioning exercise as Monteverdi calls out instructions, corrects his student’s form, and, in one shot, takes breakfast while Barrett touches her toes and passionately exclaims: “I want to be a singer, not a prizefighter! My abdomen’s alright!”<sup>137</sup> As Barrett performs various exercises, her taskmaster informs her (and, by extension, the moviegoer) that each has a specific purpose for 1) exercising her larynx, 2) tightening her abdomen, and 3) strengthening her diaphragm (Figures 1.5–1.7).<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> These scenes were injected with levity, deflecting attention from their sinister undertones. Indeed, *One Night* offers Barrett’s work-out sessions as fodder for comedy—especially when the prickly teacher-student relationship is revealed to have been a cover for the couple’s growing mutual affection.

<sup>138</sup> According to Moore, these scenes were excerpted from her own experiences: “Little scenes like the one showing the books on the stomach to exercise the diaphragm—which actually happened to me in Milan—gave the story a verisimilitude which any music student would recognize. Of course truth wasn’t carbon-copied. But the spirit of struggle and gaiety was there.” See Moore, *You Only Live Once*, 201.



**Figure 1.5: Screenshot of Barrett exercising her larynx**



**Figure 1.6: Screenshot of Barrett tightening her abdomen while Monteverdi eats breakfast**



**Figure 1.7: Screenshot of Barrett strengthening her diaphragm**

A montage of Barrett's various roles and multiple performances at opera houses in Italy, Spain, and France reinforce the fact that her training, exercise, and dieting are paying off.<sup>139</sup> On the night prior to Barrett's successful debut as Carmen in Vienna, for example, Monteverdi treats his student to a "nice" dinner at an expensive restaurant. Observing Barrett's grim face, Monteverdi instructs her to smile, pointing out that her fans are all watching her. Alluding to his regulation of her caloric intake, Barrett responds that it is "difficult to smile for the customers on an empty stomach." Oblivious to her discomfort, Monteverdi proceeds to order a cocktail, filet mignon, French-fried potatoes, green salad with Roquefort dressing, and hot rolls. When the famished Barrett tries to order something equally delicious, Monteverdi silences her and tells the waiter that she will have plain spinach and Melba toast.<sup>140</sup> Barrett angrily tosses her menu away

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<sup>139</sup> Some of these include *La traviata*, *La bohème*, *L'Africaine*, *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, *Siegfried*, *Tosca*, *Carmen*, and *Martha*.

<sup>140</sup> It is only after they admit their feelings for each other that Monteverdi instructs his cook to prepare a lavish dinner for her to eat.

This scene may have been a tongue-in-cheek reference to the idea of overweight singers. Also, the screenwriters' decision to include "Toast Melba" as one element of Barrett's meal invokes certain cultural

and chastises Monteverdi: “If I faint dead away from hunger, wouldn’t you be just a little embarrassed?” The maestro simply chuckles, amused by her question.

Barrett endures her lifestyle for the sake of her booming career until, quite literally, she can no longer stomach it. On the day that she sings *Carmen*, she goes out on the town to carouse with a friend and experience the *joie de vivre* Monteverdi prohibited. Later that night, Barrett performs the role of her life. Barrett eventually decides that she has had enough of Monteverdi’s rules and accepts an invitation to sing at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. Although most of *One Night* focuses on Barrett’s training in Europe, the screenwriters ensured that the pinnacle of her career would return her to the United States and occur after the singer flaunts the European methods of achieving success to strike out on her own. The film thus affirmed the superiority of American individualism while recognizing the Met’s status as the foremost American opera house, establishing its importance as an international institution.

Prior to Barrett’s debut as Cio-Cio-San, various snippets of dialogue reveal that the Met’s audience is eager to see a slender diva on stage for once. Although mixed in age and gender, the crowd is decidedly white and wealthy. When one older gentleman tells his friends that Barrett’s voice is divine, the middle-aged couple laughs, saying, “You can’t fool me. Opera singers have to be Italian. And very fat, too.” The reference to pervasive stereotypes about opera singers sets up Barrett’s ultimate triumph as a slim American singer with a golden voice. In the longest operatic sequence of the film, Barrett sings “Un bel di,” after which the opera’s patrons burst into cheers and enthusiastic applause. The prima donna cast a spell over a public eager to see a

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associations with opera singers and dieting. On the one hand, Toast Melba reportedly was named in honor of Australian opera singer Dame Nellie Melba. On the other, the Mayo Brothers included toast Melba on the list of approved foods for Ethel Barrymore’s “Eighteen Day Reducing Diet” in 1925. See “Melba Toast,” in World Heritage Encyclopedia, <http://www.worldheritage.org/article/WHEBN0000159718/Melba%20toast> (accessed 24 November 2014).

“believable” Butterfly. And like the audience in the film, many moviegoers were entranced as well.

### **Reception: Extended Play and Audience Applause**

For Hollywood, financial profits determined a film’s success. If a movie’s grosses covered its production, marketing, and distribution costs, the studios were satisfied. But if a film went into the red and did not merit other accolades, it was deemed a flop. The film industry’s perception of “success,” however, did not take into account such other factors as audience attendance and extended play at movie theaters. Arguably, these factors can be equally suitable, if not better, indicators of a hit.

According to multiple sources, from fan letters to newspaper articles and studio communiqués, moviegoers professed seeing *One Night* repeatedly. People frequented the movie three to four times on average—and sometimes even in one sitting. As one avid fan from Sacramento, CA, wrote to Moore:

Last night a constant friend and I dropped into the theater at 5:30 and left it at 11:30, having sat through your picture three full showings. People ought to do that sort of thing more. Besides clearing up many points missed at the first showing there is the thrill of pre-knowledge in anticipation of favorite scenes. To us, who are a bit “cracked” over operatic music, those scenes from the operas were absorbed to the fullest capacity, and never have we heard them sung as you sang them then. “Butterfly” (my pet since I was fifteen) was a perfect gem.<sup>141</sup>

Many individuals even returned for fifth, sixth, and seventh viewings, seemingly unable to get enough of Moore’s performance. In most of the letters addressed to the diva and to fan magazine editors, people provided two reasons for their repeated patronage: 1) they were spellbound by

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<sup>141</sup> Letter from Charles L. Hornbeck to Grace Moore, 8 September 1934, “Fan Mail Sent to Grace Moore with Responses, 1934,” Grace Moore Papers, Box 1, Folder 20, UTK.

Moore's personality and voice, having never heard anything like it before; and 2) they needed to see the *Butterfly* scene at least once more.

Moore's private and business correspondence contains accounts from friends, fans, and studio employees describing *One Night's* reception across the nation. As these letters demonstrate, the movie not only appealed to those from metropolitan centers and those interested in "elite" music as Columbia initially had feared, but it also did well in some small towns and agricultural communities.<sup>142</sup> One such report written by Erle Hampton, a representative of Columbia Pictures' Publicity Department, detailed *One Night's* premiere in Northern California:

I'm enclosing some clippings and reviews of the San Francisco opening. This is a little later than I expected to get these to you, but if you want to avoid similar delays you'll have to stop making such popular pictures as *One Night of Love*.

I went to Sacramento and Stockton, California, from San Francisco to help with the openings there and the reception in both places was tremendous. Five days after the picture opened in Sacramento it did its biggest day's business and that was on a Friday. In Stockton it had the competition of the Lodi Grape Festival where they had the streets piped with free flowing wine and still we had them standing up at the opening night. The town is only 50,000 and the Lodi wine brawl drew 75,000 so you can appreciate what the picture was up against.

In San Francisco the girls in the box-office told me that they recognized people who have come back to see the picture *four* times! That spells popularity in any language. Hal Neides, the Orpheum Theatre manager told me last night that they are holding the picture for the third week and he would not be surprised if it ran four weeks.

Incidentally, the few clippings that I am enclosing is [*sic*] only a small portion of the newspaper publicity in San Francisco. For a week before the opening and up to and including the reviews we had 587 inches of newspaper space, exclusive of advertising. Probably half of that was pictures of you.

Without question, *One Night of Love* is the most talked of picture in years. It will sweep the country. Congratulations!<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Both Richard Barrios and Bob Thomas claim that *One Night* did better in Metropolitan centers than small towns. See Barrios, *A Song in the Dark*, 415, and Thomas, *King Cohn*, 99.

<sup>143</sup> Letter from Erle Hampton to Grace Moore, 11 September 1934, "Correspondence," Grace Moore Papers, Box 1, Folder 7, UTK. San Francisco and Sacramento were the more metropolitan centers in Northern California, while Stockton was a large hub of agricultural activity in the San Joaquin Valley. Lodi, on the other hand, was a small neighboring town north of Stockton, popular for its zinfandel grape crops. Following the premiere of the film in

*One Night* was still playing in theaters weeks after its opening. As one Mrs. K. Yeargin wrote to a film magazine editor: “And they say people do not like good music any more! This is what happened in Sacramento. At a theater here, Grace Moore in *One Night of Love* is in its sixth week. An unheard thing for even the very best of pictures, and likely not to end then.”<sup>144</sup>

Similarly to the extended account from Northern California, Mary Bartot, another publicist from Columbia, reported enthusiastic audience responses in the backwoods of the Sierra Nevadas:

Regarding the success of your picture—Martin and I were up in a little lumber town, Westwood, in northern California. The houses are all made of rough hewn boards and logs. But—in this funny little theatre—seats were sold out and people were coming from all around the mountain country to see *One Night of Love*! Martin says “Grace Moore seems to mean ‘See Moore’ for everyone has to go again and again to the picture,” and your dream of taking opera to remote places is coming true.<sup>145</sup>

Bartot referenced Moore’s oft-publicized comment regarding cinema’s ability to spread—metaphorically—the gospel of opera. As Moore stated: “Movies prepare the way for you. It’s like missionary work. Imagine being able to take music and send it to the ends of the earth.”<sup>146</sup> Congratulating Moore on a job well done, Bartot gushed: “Never since I’ve been in Hollywood, have I known anything like the impression *One Night of Love* has made! Persons who have seen

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Stockton, the *Lodi News Sentinel* printed a picture of Grace Moore in the newspaper’s women’s section. See *Lodi News Sentinel*, September 1934.

<sup>144</sup> “The Stars Who Sing,” from unidentified source and date, in “Scrapbook, Newspaper Articles, Magazine Clippings, Programs, 1934,” Grace Moore Papers, Box 3, Folder 18, UTK.

<sup>145</sup> Letter from Bartot to Moore, 1 November 1934, “General Correspondence to Grace Moore, 1934 July–1938 September,” Grace Moore Papers, Box 1, Folder 5, UTK.

<sup>146</sup> See, for example, “Mayor Welcomes Grace Moore Here,” *New York Times*, 30 August 1935. Moore’s sentiment about disseminating opera to a broader public plays into her biography; when she was a child, she wanted to be a missionary.

it only *twice*, feel as if they are doing themselves out of a treat and are waiting to see it the third and fourth time!”<sup>147</sup>

Bartot’s occupation as a publicist most likely colored her tale of *One Night*’s reception in the small Sierra Nevada lumber town, but her heightened enthusiasm encapsulates what was expressed by many other individuals who saw the film. People from large cities to small towns, many who did not listen to opera regularly or at all, professed similar excitement after being “treated” to Moore’s performance. Indeed, the diva’s voice often held the key to the public’s delight. Jo Zucchero, one Italian-born man from Shreveport, LA, even claimed that his exposure to *One Night* allowed him to recapture his appreciation for singing and music, both of which had been lost in the commercial focus of the American lifestyle:

The greatest treat in my life was in store for me yesterday and to-day to hear you sing in the picture *One Night of Love*.

No words nor utterances can express the thrill your divine voice gave me. I heard you in my dreams last night! I went again to-day, and once more you took me to heights heretofore non existing—and to think that I have hated singing. But your voice, your personality, the ease in which your acting is so different; truly the voice of an angel!

I’m an Italian born, but have spent most of my life in America. I loved such music, as that which you made immortal in the picture when I was very young, but the bustle and mad scramble for money and power, inherent in this land made me forget such music, but you, with your exotic personality and a voice of an angel, has stirred such feelings in my soul, that I shall always, from now on take a real interest in that music, and shall not rest until I shall hear you in person.

... I’m sure this tribute to you means little, but I sincerely hope you will take it as it is intended. I heard you sing *Madame Butterfly* six times yesterday and today. Oh! What voice! What divine gift!<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Letter from Bartot to Moore, 1 November 1934, “General Correspondence to Grace Moore, 1934 July–1938 September,” Grace Moore Papers, Box 1, Folder 5, UTK.

<sup>148</sup> Letter from Jo Zucchero to Grace Moore, 24 November 1934, “Fan mail held for Grace Moore to read, 1934 October 31–1934 November 24,” Grace Moore Papers, Box 1, Folder 18, UTK.

Zucchero's use of celestial descriptors recalls *Photoplay's* ad, which claimed that *One Night's* music elevated its listeners to the heights of "the gods."

Several viewers remarked that *One Night's* magical attributes kept them returning for more Moore. Adjectives used to describe the prima donna's voice routinely involved some sort of reference to otherworldly powers: divine, heavenly, angelic, immortal, spellbinding, entrancing, bewitching. Moore's allure even reached the most hardened moviegoer. As self-professed "tough" guy C.L. Doron from Cleveland, OH, explained to the singer in a letter: "I'm one of the 'inarticulate' public, may I thank you for your picture *One Night of Love*. 'Bravo!' cannot express one one-hundredth of my appreciation. It isn't often that a somewhat hardboiled doctor goes away from a theater in a trance."<sup>149</sup>

### **Good Film, Good Music**

Critics and fans alike asserted that *One Night* brought them a newfound, or greater appreciation, for "good music." For the audience members who rarely had the opportunity to see opera performed live or on a frequent basis, *One Night* operated as an important vehicle for disseminating an idealized performance to the masses. Individuals responded to the film's solid construction, wherein musical segments were interpolated logically with the narrative frame. In addition, the plot was considered to be believable and its characters, modern. *One Night's* accessibility therefore depended on its strength as a contemporary story that brought the antiquated spectacle of opera up to date in a drastically, but pleasantly, abridged form.

Unlike the first wave of musical films in which plot and dialogue often came across as formulaic and stilted, *One Night* offered a compelling through-narrative. The story was equal

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<sup>149</sup> Letter from C.L. Doron to Grace Moore, 11 November 1934, "Fan Mail Held for Grace Moore to Read, 1934 October 31–1934 November 24," Grace Moore Papers, Box 1, Folder 18, UTK.

to—if not more important than—the music. Many viewers considered the film’s portrayal of an opera singer’s bid for success to be absorbing and were pleased by the logical integration of arias within the narrative. As one Mrs. Charles Toles from Colorado Springs, CO, stated:

Superlatives suddenly seem inadequate when trying to describe *One Night of Love* with Grace Moore in the starring role! I thought I’d seen and heard everything worth while! But Miss Moore brings a distinctly new type of personality to the screen to say nothing of the most glorious voice this side of heaven! Deftly worked into the picture as *natural* sequences Miss Moore sings several of the most beautiful arias ever written. Her voice holds a promise of new thrills for millions of music and picture lovers. *One Night of Love* will make screen history! Thanks, Columbia, for giving us such a rare treat!<sup>150</sup>

The public’s appreciation for *One Night*’s “naturalness” seemingly welled up in response to the recent changes made to the filmmaking process, much of which concerned the transition from silent movies to sound films. With silent films, there had been little need for screenwriters. Title cards contained the necessary “dialogue,” but exaggerated acting otherwise conveyed the story. Once sound was introduced, the film industry entered an experimental period, sparking “all singing and talking” feature-length films. The song routines that were so popular at first with the public proved easier to construct, given the established traditions of vaudeville and other musical theater, than developing tightknit plots and fluid dialogue for the new medium.<sup>151</sup>

Yet when the public grew tired of novelty “singing” pictures, the film industry turned its attention toward the production of “all-talking” films. The screenwriter quickly became a vital cog in the Hollywood machine as the development of plausible plots and snappy scripts grew increasingly important. By the time that musical films returned in greater numbers in 1933, their stories mattered as much, or nearly as much, as their music. *One Night* therefore served as a

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<sup>150</sup> Mrs. Charles Toles, “Letter to the Editor,” *Movie Mirror*, 1934, in “Scrapbook, Newspaper Articles, Magazine Clippings, Programs, 1934,” Grace Moore Papers, Box 3, Folder 18, UTK.

<sup>151</sup> Barrios, *A Song in the Dark*, 122–23.

harbinger for a new generation of musical films, a category that soon would be codified as a movie genre.

*One Night's* strength as an enjoyable contemporary film also contributed to the reception of its music, its modern frame rendering the operatic numbers more palatable for audiences unused to listening to classical music. As one journalist pointed out: "One of the chief reasons why *One Night of Love* made a hit is that it wasn't an opera and bore no resemblance to one. It was a quaint, human and interesting story in which the principals sang for a logically and dramatic reason."<sup>152</sup> By infusing the film's plot with verisimilitude and thereby avoiding opera's more fantastical narratives, the screenwriters bestowed operatic singing with cultural relevance for a present-day American context and, at the same time, entertainment value. Moore herself observed that both the film industry and the press heralded *One Night* as a "new kind of picture, using good music so that people would love it."<sup>153</sup>

Underpinning many of the film's reviews or audiences' letters to fan magazine editors was the idea that *One Night's* contemporary sensibility made opera more accessible to a diverse audience. One article, for instance, claimed that several "musical pictures are planned to duplicate the popular appeal of *One Night of Love*, in which for the first time, Grand Opera, stripped of its high-brow tendencies, was served to a music-hungry public in popular form."<sup>154</sup> In a letter to the editor of *Movie Classic*, one Marcia Feldman from Atlanta, GA, expressed similar views:

The man who said: "There is nothing new under the sun," evidently didn't have the movies in mind. I refer particularly to that splendid performance I have just witnessed of

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<sup>152</sup> Unidentified article, in "Scrapbook: Newspaper Clippings and Correspondence, 1930–1959," Grace Moore Papers, Box 3, Folder 17, UTK.

<sup>153</sup> Moore, *You Only Live Once*, 204.

<sup>154</sup> "Production Plans for 1935," from unidentified source and date, in "Scrapbook: Newspaper Clippings and Correspondence, 1930–1959," Grace Moore Papers, Box 3, Folder 17, UTK.

Grace Moore in *One Night of Love*. This sweet singer has actually accomplished an amazing feat. She has taken the “high hat” off grand opera, which could heretofore be enjoyed only by the privileged few. Grace Moore has brought grand opera to the masses, at regular movie prices, and in a way that will make them love it, and make them go out of the theatre whistling them as though they were popular songs. She has started a cycle in the production of sound films and I believe it is only a matter of time before we will have all the famous operas brought to us via the screen.<sup>155</sup>

Feldman’s letter illuminates three key points of *One Night*’s successful configuration of opera for Hollywood movies. By reducing opera to its signature—and most tuneful—arias, they potentially became akin to popular songs, to be whistled after leaving the theater. Secondly, the genre’s arguably less entertaining sections could be replaced by the movie’s own plot. Lastly, such a film made it possible to exchange opera’s stuffy trappings and solemn reverence for the more democratic movie theater, in which patrons from all walks of life could munch on popcorn or peanuts while enjoying highlights of the operatic canon. As one Adine Travis from Chicago, IL, summarized: “For those of us timid of the formalities of opera, accustomed as we are to the banalities of accessible jazz, *One Night of Love* is a welcome experience. Grace Moore with her glorious voice and complete naturalness as an actress will do much to popularize this type of music. Fans all over the world, recognizing her achievement, are crying ‘La Moore, Toujours La Moore.’”<sup>156</sup>

### **Grace Moore and Operatic Vocality**

Grace Moore’s vocality distinguished her from other contemporary singers in Hollywood. First, the diva possessed an operatic lyric soprano—replete with pronounced vibrato and an extensive

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<sup>155</sup> “Moore Removed High-hat from Opera,” *Movie Classic*, January 1935, in “Scrapbook, Newspaper Articles, Magazine Clippings, Programs, 1934,” Grace Moore Papers, Box 3, Folder 18, UTK.

<sup>156</sup> Adine Travis, “Clever,” from unidentified source and date, in “Scrapbook, Newspaper Articles, Magazine Clippings, Programs, 1934,” Grace Moore Papers, Box 3, Folder 18, UTK. Travis refashioned the phrase “L’amour, toujours l’amour” to indicate that everyone loved Grace Moore because of her performance in *One Night*.

range soaring upward of “High C”—that immediately characterized Moore as unique amongst the film industry’s large cast of popular singers. Second, the diva’s rich, full-bodied voice packed much more power than that of the lighter, flutier—even borderline shrill—voice of Hollywood’s only established female operatic singer at the time, Jeanette MacDonald. In effect, Moore’s robust soprano had no other rivals when *One Night of Love* premiered, which allowed the diva to make an indelible impression on a public perhaps overly familiar with the voices of such musical theater and Tin Pan Alley performers as Al Jolson and Eddie Cantor.

The public, as I discussed in the Introduction, first marveled at Moore’s voice as something new and fascinating when she made *A Lady’s Morals* and *New Moon* in 1930, despite certain difficulties with the cinema’s sound recording technology. At that time, both the press and the moviegoer tended to describe the diva’s voice as “lovely.” *Photoplay*, for example, published a review of *A Lady’s Morals* that read: “Introducing Grace Moore, young and beautiful Metropolitan Opera prima donna. A lovely voice and a charming story, based on the life of Jenny Lind.”<sup>157</sup> A Mrs. Ray M. Armstrong from Berkeley, CA, similarly praised: “The silver-throated Grace Moore is truly lovely. Her voice by far surpasses every other singing voice we have heard via the talkies.”<sup>158</sup> Here, Armstrong provided more clues as to what Moore’s voice may have sounded like to the fan. By employing the common trope of using a precious metal to describe the singer’s vocality, Armstrong seemingly interpreted the diva’s vocal timbre as particularly bright. It is also possible that the Movietone sound-on-film technology added a slightly tinny quality to Moore’s voice, because later reviews and letters tended to describe the singer’s voice as more golden in color. For example, *Movie Classic*’s editor wrote in regard to *One Night of Love* that the “woman of the hour, in Hollywood to-day, is Grace Moore. She has

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<sup>157</sup> Review of *A Lady’s Morals*, *Photoplay*, January 1931.

<sup>158</sup> Mrs. Ray M. Armstrong, Letter to the Editor, *Photoplay*, April 1931.

brought a new kind of heroine to the screen in *One Night of Love*—a golden-voiced heroine whose beauty and emotions are more than surface-deep—a heroine who is inspiring, because she is inspired. More than anyone else on the screen to-day, she personifies romance.”<sup>159</sup>

Although most individuals attributed a certain warmth to Moore’s voice by describing it as golden, one critic wanted to go one step further in conveying his appreciation for the diva’s sound. In his review of *One Night*—“a picture that at last brings grand opera to the masses in a way to make them like it”—Larry Reid proposed that “Grace’s voice, singing three operatic arias and glorifying the title-song of the picture, is such a voice as the screen has never given the world before. It isn’t a golden voice; it’s platinum.”<sup>160</sup> Arguably, critics praised a favorite singer’s “golden tones” quite regularly, making the descriptor both a welcome one but also a routine one. Reid’s choice of a metal even more precious than gold thereby created the impression that Moore’s voice was not only unique in sound, but it also was the optimal voice one could hear—at least in the movies. Certainly during the Depression, Reid’s reference to a luxury item with an even greater value than gold would not have gone unnoticed by readers.

Many moviegoers agreed with Reid’s assessment. One wrote to *Movie Classic* that *One Night of Love* “again introduces to the screen, Miss Grace Moore, a superb singer, who has unquestionably the finest singing voice ever heard from the screen.”<sup>161</sup> Indeed, for such individuals—many of whose comments I included in earlier sections of this chapter—Moore’s vocality was a crucial feature that enabled her to appeal to a broad swath of the movie-going

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<sup>159</sup> Editor’s introductory comment to “The Heroine of a Hundred Romances—Grace Moore,” Maude Lathem, *Movie Classic* 7, no. 3 (November 1934): 28.

<sup>160</sup> Larry Reid, “*One Night of Love*—Grace Moore Performs a Musical Miracle,” *Movie Classic* 7, no. 3 (November 1934): 90.

<sup>161</sup> Kay Newton, “Letter from Reader; All Hail Columbia!,” *Movie Classic* 7, no. 3 (November 1934): 94.

public. Perhaps equally as important to her attractive vocality, however, was Moore's svelte body and American identity.

### **Creating the Modern American Diva**

Columbia Pictures' imagination helped to create a modern American diva that could appeal to general audiences. In her guise as Mary Barrett, Moore became a formidable embodiment for a genre that heretofore had acquired a reputation in the popular press as an outdated European theatrical form. Wrapped in the packaging of a contemporary love story, Moore's onscreen glamour, sophistication, personality, and vibrant voice all contributed to opera's Hollywood makeover, adding to a new chapter in the history of the genre in the United States.

In the wake of the Civil War, grand opera in America garnered a reputation as a patrician pastime, an elite art form for the wealthy and privileged.<sup>162</sup> Moreover, opera's Western European roots, vocal virtuosity, and grandiose orchestral accompaniment—not to mention its foreign-language libretti—distinguished it from the various musical traditions that sprang up in the United States, particularly the more popular styles of vaudeville, Tin Pan Alley, ragtime, and jazz. Radio broadcasts by such companies as the Met, however, made it possible, since 1931, for opera to enter the homes of millions around the nation aurally. Broadcasts and recordings, in effect, liberated opera from its visual elements as well as its highbrow settings and therefore somewhat democratized the genre.

Still, to those in Hollywood, opera retained its associations with a decadent European past. Especially during the Great Depression, it became necessary—for the film industry at

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<sup>162</sup> For more on opera and class in the United States during the late nineteenth century, see Katherine K. Preston, "Opera is Elite/Opera is Nationalist: Cosmopolitan Views of Opera Reception in the United States, 1870–90," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 66, no. 2 (Summer 2013): 535–38, and Kristen M. Turner, "Opera in English: Class and Culture in America, 1878–1910" (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2015).

least—to trim the alleged fat of opera’s excesses when adapting to a post-Black Tuesday world. Besides, the genre was considered simply too old-fashioned for the cutting-edge film industry.

With the new exigencies of film censorship changing the playing field, Harry Cohn saw in Grace Moore an opportunity to reinvent opera for the movies, while Moore, for her part, saw in Cohn a way to bring opera to a greater audience. In its efforts to make the genre appealing to the masses, Columbia Pictures and its team of screenwriters fashioned an up-to-date diva in the form a young American in tune with everyday life. Personified by Moore, this modern singer—with her blonde hair, trim waistline, and focus on hard work—subscribed to America’s cherished girl-next-door narrative. In an early scene in *One Night*, the studio even contrasted its “new and improved” diva with the fat, lazy European singer of operas past to demonstrate her superiority, reminding moviegoers of what an outmoded diva supposedly looked like while setting up Moore/Barrett as the new prototype.

Barrett and her friends distract their Milanese landlady—Signora Frappazini, a “300-pound strong” former diva—from collecting the rent by inviting her to sing the sextet from *Lucia di Lammermoor*.<sup>163</sup> The landlady reportedly was the “worst soprano” at La Scala, but the young adults appeal to her sense of vanity by letting her sing Lucia’s part (Figure 1.8).

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<sup>163</sup> As one of the many puns and references to opera culture in the film, the name “Frappazini” undoubtedly riffed on the last name of famously heavy soprano Luisa Tetrazzini. Rosemary Glosz, an actress as well as a Broadway performer, played the role of Frappazini and received credit for her singing.



**Figure 1.8: Screenshot of Signora Frappazini singing the role of Lucia**

Their dialogue establishes the former diva's (somewhat dubious) professional credentials, while the camera draws the viewer's attention to her age and weight, showing the older woman arduously climbing the apartment building's stairs and heaving a great sigh upon reaching the upper landing. When juxtaposed with the dated Italian prima donna, the youthful and vibrant American singer presents a much more desirable alternative.

*One Night's* proposition that successful and attractive opera singers could be "home grown" rather than European imports echoed the changes in the American operatic scene during the early 1930s. Already not the most profitable businesses in the best of times, opera companies felt the effects of the Depression severely as many of its patrons went bankrupt or pulled financial support. Those that did not go under sought ways to cut costs. One solution was to hire American singers to replace European headliners, turning economic necessity into a patriotic and prominently advertised virtue. Eventually, the growing number of American performers appearing on the stages of such companies as the Metropolitan Opera contributed to opera being

cast as an accessible, and even national, musical tradition in the United States that could belong featured in movies about young career women pursuing the American Dream.<sup>164</sup>

As it had in the nineteenth century, the press foregrounded the importance of an artist's biography in various articles and reviews. American singers' national identity and associated character traits were highly valued and instrumentalized as essentializing signifiers of cultural achievement. When nineteen-year-old Marion Talley made her debut in 1926 at the Met as Gilda and skyrocketed to fame, for example, her upbringing on a Kansas farm was much publicized. Talley quit the stage four years later, prompting the press to make much of the fact that the singer had returned home to run the farm.<sup>165</sup> The press likewise celebrated Grace Moore for her small-town Tennessee heritage, frequently pointing out that Moore made it big through hard work, determination, and plenty of gumption. She often received credit for maintaining a certain "down home" quality, despite the fact that she had studied in France and considered herself a part-time resident of its Provençal region. Popular mezzo-soprano Gladys Swarthout, too, was cited for her Midwestern training. The Missouri native began singing at home and eventually made her way north to Chicago, where she attended the Bush Conservatory of Music and debuted with the Chicago Civic Opera Company. As with other such singers, the press lauded these women in terms of their "American" qualities, their industriousness, directness, and down-to-earth attitudes. But while these characteristics may have endeared them to the public, the divas' good looks and slender physiques mattered as much, if not more, in Hollywood circles.

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<sup>164</sup> For more on opera in America during the 1930s, see John Dizikes, *Opera in America: A Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 413–73.

<sup>165</sup> See, for example, Grady Johnson, "Marion Talley Won't Try Again If Her *Follow Your Heart* Fails," *Washington Post*, 23 August 1936.

## Disciplining the Diva through American Physical Culture

With the assistance of a thriving print culture oriented toward female readers, Hollywood soon became the authority on female beauty standards in the United States. Prior to the advent of sound film, individuals looked to women on the stage (from opera and theater to vaudeville and ballet), to those photographed for the society pages, and even to drawn representations of women for their models of contemporary beauty. Charles Dana Gibson, for example, sparked a national phenomenon with his creation, the “Gibson Girl.” Operating as the feminine ideal from the 1890s until the end of World War I, the Gibson Girl possessed a flawless face, a slim hourglass figure, and a languid physical grace. She also was fit and took part in such activities as bicycling, tennis, golf, horseback riding, and swimming.<sup>166</sup>

Following World War I, beauty standards and ideas about physical culture changed. The fun-loving Flapper replaced the long-reigning Gibson Girl. With her “boyishly” slender figure, the Flapper eschewed the curves of the previous era, instead promoting a flat-chested, waist-less silhouette. Silent-film actress Louise Brooks and “It Girl” Clara Bow famously embodied the iconic look of the Flappers. Once freed from the restraints of the Gibson Girl’s corset—which had bound and constricted the ribs, waist, and hips for an hourglass effect—women’s bodies became subjected to a potentially more sinister regulation. Rather than applying such external means of bodily control as the corset, the slim Flapper physique could only be achieved through embodied regimentation.<sup>167</sup> Advertisements for smoking, weight loss potions and pills, fat-

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<sup>166</sup> “The Gibson Girl’s America: Drawings by Charles Dana Gibson,” Exhibition Overview Online, Library of Congress, <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/gibson-girls-america/the-gibson-girl-as-the-new-woman.html#obj0> (accessed 5 October 2015).

<sup>167</sup> Tamara D. Fangman, Jennifer Paff Ogle, Marianne C. Bickle, and Donna Rouner, “An Analysis of *Ladies’ Home Journal* and *Vogue* Magazines,” *Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal* 32, no. 3 (March 2004): 230–35. As Fangman, Ogle, Bickle, and Rouner wrote (p. 220): “The increased prevalence and concern about dieting in the 1920s have been linked to developments in the insurance and medical industries. In the decade between 1910 and 1920, the medical and insurance industries began to describe the healthful body as markedly thinner than had been

dissolving products, and beauty powders as means to achieve the desired physique littered women's and film magazines in the 1920s.<sup>168</sup> As scholars have shown, such advertisements frequently incorporated celebrity testimonials to strengthen their readers' aspirations toward beauty and sophistication.<sup>169</sup> When these product-based modes of achieving the perfect body became too expensive for many women during the Great Depression, diet and exercise were promoted as cheaper and healthier alternatives.

Women could find suggested diets and exercise regimes within the pages of such periodicals as *Photoplay*, a fan magazine that provided its readers with "successful" methods of body control employed by Hollywood's most glamorous stars. Through pages replete with images of lustrous celebrities, these magazines created the illusion that the key to a beautiful body was physical health and fitness. But publicity ignored the fact that many actresses were required to be underweight in order to look "normal" onscreen, attributing the physical forms of Hollywood luminaries to a combination of good eating, exercise, and massage. Even today, it is common to hear that the camera "adds ten pounds."

"Good" eating, however, generally meant borderline undernourishment, and anorexia and bulimia increased nationally in the 1920s.<sup>170</sup> Dieting—which had not been as openly encouraged as other forms of bodily control in the twenties—became a common theme in 1930s film

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the case 50 years earlier. The first medico-actuarial tables of weight and height were developed during this time, and based on these new weight standards, physicians began tracking patients' weights and warning them of the health risks of being overweight."

<sup>168</sup> The 1920s saw an increase in print advertisements, due, in part, to a rise in new industries. Magazine ads increased by 600% between 1916 and 1926, with women's magazines showing the largest growth. See Fangman, Ogle, Bickle, and Rouner, "An Analysis of *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Vogue* Magazines," 222. For more on physical culture in the 1920s, see Heather Addison, *Hollywood and the Rise of Physical Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>169</sup> Fangman, Ogle, Bickle, and Rouner, "An Analysis of *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Vogue* Magazines," 222.

<sup>170</sup> Fangman, Ogle, Bickle, and Rouner, "An Analysis of *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Vogue* Magazines," 223. See also Jerry Dean Mosher, "Weighty Ambitions: Fat Actors and Figurations in American Cinema, 1910–1960" (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2007), 1–8.

magazines and newspapers.<sup>171</sup> Moreover, diet prescriptions, as evidenced by the celebrity diets that sprinkled their pages, were heavily gendered. Opera singer and movie star Lawrence Tibbett's diet, for example, reflected the eating habits of a "robust" man, full of ample doses of fat (butter, cream, milk), protein (lamb chops and rare roast beef), and sugar (cobbler) (Figure 1.9).

| B R E A K F A S T   |  |
|---|--|
| Part of glass of grapefruit juice ½ hour before breakfast   |  |
| <i>When Singing</i>   | <i>Not Singing</i>   |
| 2 poached eggs  | All-fruit breakfast (fresh   |
| Thin buttered whole wheat toast   | figs or any fresh fruit in season)   |
| Crisp bacon   | 1 glass of warm milk   |
| Warm milk   |  |
| L U N C H E O N   |  |
| No luncheon   | Avocado salad  |
|   | Wholewheat toast   |
| D I N N E R   |  |
| <i>(On a night when Mr. Tibbett has to sing an operatic rôle he dines about five hours before time to sing)</i> | <i>(A favorite dinner on a night when Mr. Tibbett is not singing)</i>  |
| Purée of spinach  | Avocado cocktail, Thousand Island dressing   |
| Fresh peas  | Plain tomato soup with celery, no crackers   |
| 2 lamb chops  | Rare roast beef  |
| Head of lettuce with dressing of Italian olive oil, lemon and salt  | Potatoes, mashed with cream and butter   |
| Thin wholewheat toast   | Corn on cob  |
| 1 glass of milk   | Toast, no coffee   |
|   | Combination salad—tomatoes, water cress, romaine, celery, onion, cucumber, raw carrots, raw cabbage — and mayonnaise |
|   | Blackberry or peach cobbler  |

Figure 1.9: Lawrence Tibbett Diet, excerpted from Sylvia Ullbeck, *Hollywood Undressed* (New York: Brentano's, 1931), 190–91.

<sup>171</sup> Fangman, Ogle, Bickle, and Rouner, "An Analysis of *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Vogue* Magazines," 231, 234.

Women's diets, on the other hand, featured spoonfuls of vegetables, lean protein, and carefully regulated amounts of sugar and fat to reach a target range of 1000–1200 calories a day (Figures 1.10 and 1.11).<sup>172</sup>

#### 6. THE INA CLAIRE DIET

*(Overweight plus Anemia)*

##### BREAKFAST

Small glass grapefruit juice  
2 tablespoonfuls of one of the baked patent cereals with a glass of skimmed milk  
Tea, one lump of sugar

##### LUNCHEON

Salad of cottage cheese with shredded pineapple, no dressing  
Cup of broth with liver extract (hot or jellied)  
2 tablespoonfuls of carrots, 2 of spinach and 1 of peas  
Apple mold

##### DINNER

Celery  
Sweetbreads with truffles  
3 heaping spoonfuls of string beans, 2 of summer squash  
Tomato jelly, diet dressing  
Stewed fruit  
Black coffee

Figure 1.10: Ina Claire Diet, excerpted from Sylvia Ullbeck, *Hollywood Undressed* (New York: Brentano's, 1931), 193.

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<sup>172</sup> By the 1920s, dieting was part of American culture. Lulu Hunt Peters' *Diet and Health, With Key to the Calories*, for example, was an instant bestseller when it was published in 1918. It also became the number one selling nonfiction book in the United States in 1924 and 1925. As Fangman, Ogle, Bickle, and Rouner note in "An Analysis of *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Vogue* Magazines," (p. 220): "Peters constructed dieting as a patriotic and humane act, suggesting that by limiting their own food intake, women could help others who did not have enough to eat due to the food shortages of World War I. She further suggested that modern women suffered to be thin and invoked an ideology of guilt to encourage readers to 'stick to' their reducing diets."

| <b>Balanced Reducing Menu.</b>           |                 |
|--|-----------------|
| <b>Breakfast -</b>                       | <b>Calories</b> |
| Dry cereal                               | 50              |
| With 1-2 banana, sliced                  | 50              |
| Whole milk, 3-4 glass                    | 120             |
| Sugar, 1 rounded tsp.                    | 30              |
| Coffee, 1 tsp. cream                     |                 |
| 1 rounded tsp. sugar                     | 50              |
|  | <hr/>           |
|  | 300             |
| <b>Luncheon—</b>                         |                 |
| *Toasted ground steak sand-<br>wich      | 250             |
| Buttermilk, 1 glass                      | 80              |
|  | <hr/>           |
|  | 330             |
| *Send for Reducers' Recipes.             |                 |
| <b>Dinner—</b>                           |                 |
| Lamb chop, trim off fat                  | 100             |
| Green peas, 3-4 cup                      | 100             |
| Butter, 1 level tsp.                     | 33              |
| Stewed tomatoes, 3-4 cup                 | 35              |
| Custard pie, 3-inch                      | 200             |
| Coffee, 1 tsp. cream.                    |                 |
| 1 rounded tsp. sugar                     | 50              |
|  | <hr/>           |
|  | 518             |
| <b>Total calories for day</b>            | <b>1,148</b>    |
| Your Dietitian,<br><b>IDA JEAN KAIN.</b> |                 |

Figure 1.11: Ida Jean Kain, “Your Figure, Madam,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 18 November 1937.

In addition to dieting, actresses often resorted to “massage” to shed unwanted pounds. Massage, though, was not the soothing method of relaxation that we imagine it to be today: in the 1930s, it usually consisted of some element of physical abuse. According to Sylvia Ullbeck—masseuse to various studio personnel—massages consisted of treatments during which the fat was “sucked right out of the bodies.”<sup>173</sup>

In *One Night*, this “healthy” lifestyle was mapped onto the opera diva, whose body presented a particularly easy target due to myths of overweight singers. Indeed, numerous articles and advertisements even highlighted the health benefits of working in Hollywood, citing before-and-after figures. One journalist reported that the soprano Helen Jepson lost fifteen pounds during her stint in the movies, adding health tips and dieting advice as to how the reader

<sup>173</sup> See Sylvia Ullbeck, *Hollywood Undressed* (New York: Brentano’s, 1931), 9–11. Ullbeck described the painful process for ridding unwanted fat. The masseuse would cup her hand, smack it as hard onto her client’s skin as possible in order to create suction, and then lift her hand. The fat, presumably, would be sucked out through the client’s pores. Moore saw Ullbeck when she first ventured to Hollywood in 1930. The only report I have thus far regarding male singers is that Ullbeck regularly saw Tibbett for facials. See Ullbeck, *Hollywood Undressed*, 76.

might do so as well.<sup>174</sup> Celebrated coloratura soprano Lily Pons also acknowledged the film industry's dieting regimens prior to making her debut film, *I Dream Too Much* (1935), confiding to former opera singer Geraldine Farrar in a radio interview that she might have to go on the Hollywood diet in order to lose the thirteen pounds she had recently gained while on tour.<sup>175</sup>

An alleged locus of “good health,” Hollywood assumed a powerful position as an apparatus to control women's bodies. According to French philosopher Michel Foucault, an apparatus is “a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus. The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements.”<sup>176</sup> The apparatus, Foucault states, develops in response to an “urgent need” and to a “strategic elaboration,” the methods for which are oftentimes made to appear the most “efficient” or the most “rational.”<sup>177</sup> In the case of the film industry and health, Hollywood's “urgent need” was its need to control the looks of its female stars in order to sell films. The film industry thus enacted its “strategic elaboration” by disguising its ruthless dictation of beauty standards that fit the visual mediation of the camera as a means of bodily health. This configuration of the feminine ideal as defined by clear lines was one that thoroughly permeated *One Night's* narrative. With the trope of the Wagnerian Valkyrie serving as an invisible foil, *One Night* fashioned a standard for the modern opera diva, recasting the definition

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<sup>174</sup> Ida Jean Kain, “Your Figure, Madam,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 18 November 1937.

<sup>175</sup> Radio script with Lily Pons, 21 February 1935, Geraldine Farrar Papers, Box 14, Folder 1, Library of Congress, Washington D.C. (LOC). According to various sources, Pons weighed around 105 pounds.

<sup>176</sup> Michel Foucault, “The Confession of the Flesh,” in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, edited by Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 194.

<sup>177</sup> Foucault, “The Confession of the Flesh,” 195.

of a good singer as one who valued physical fitness and visual appeal in addition to her voice's beauty.<sup>178</sup>

According to concepts of embodied deviance as theorized by such scholars as Niall Richardson, Jennifer Terry, Jacqueline Urla, and Jerry Mosher, the “fat” body is a non-normative body that is abjected from social regulation.<sup>179</sup> It therefore qualifies as a “deviant” or “transgressive” body, a site onto which various social judgments can be encribed. As Richardson notes, the fat body:

is now deemed the uncivilised body while the thin body is the well managed, controlled body. In this respect, fat is even deemed bestial and uncivilised as fat people are thought to have violated the Cartesian mind/body split and signify no self-control, no mind over matter. The svelte body, by contrast, signifies supreme discipline and excellent self-management.<sup>180</sup>

Richardson proposes, too, that bodies signify their class orientations through their visibility and materiality. He uses the stereotype, “the fat slob,” to demonstrate common connections made between the fat body and the “underclasses.”<sup>181</sup> I refer to this phenomenon of mapping class onto bodies as classed corporeality, the social construction of bodies by means of their visual representation and culturally-coded class identities.

Classed corporeality goes beyond signifying social hierarchies. Mosher, for example, asserts in his dissertation on fat cinematic bodies that Hollywood frequently classes these

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<sup>178</sup> Serena Guaraccino discusses the discourse of “fat” with respect to opera divas. Her research acknowledges that two singers notorious for their sizes in the mid-nineteenth and turn-of-the-twentieth centuries, respectively, Fanny Salvini-Donatelli and Louisa Tetrazzini, may have fueled the public’s imagined perception of the obese prima donna. See Serena Guaraccino “‘It’s Not Over ’Til the Fat Lady Sings’: The Weight of the Opera Diva,” in *Historicizing Fat in the Anglo-American West*, edited by Elena Levy-Navarro (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010), 192–212. The American dish, Turkey Tetrazzini, was named in Luisa Tetrazzini’s honor.

<sup>179</sup> Jennifer Terry and Jacqueline Urla, “Introduction,” in *Deviant Bodies: Critical Perspectives on Difference in Science and Culture*, edited by Terry and Urla (Bloomington and Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 1995): 1–17, Mosher, “Weighty Ambitions,” and Richardson, *Transgressive Bodies*.

<sup>180</sup> Richardson, *Transgressive Bodies*, 80.

<sup>181</sup> Richardson, *Transgressive Bodies*, 81.

“deviant” bodies in two ways: 1) a fat upper-class character might be understood in terms of gluttony or greed, and 2) a fat working-class individual typically is associated with laziness.<sup>182</sup> Thus, classed corporeality also implies such (oftentimes negative) characteristics as gluttony, avarice, sloth, and, to some degree, moral laxity. Understood in this light, the body—because of its materiality—becomes a site upon which various “sins” are made visible. Within the context of early twentieth-century American culture, moral and social uplift therefore might be achieved, in part, through the physical regulation or disciplining of the body. In contrast to the deviant body, then, the disciplined form could be said to symbolize the American way of life.

Using the concepts of embodied deviance and classed corporeality, we may read *One Night*'s disciplining of Barrett as a means to fashion a particular identity for the opera diva, one that would appeal to a broader spectrum of American society. Signora Frappazini, the older ex-diva, for example, represents the lazy European singer who, through gluttony and excess, fell from her prima donna status at La Scala to become a landlady of a mediocre property. In addition, her corporeal identity and advanced age work together to construct fat as old fashioned, situating larger bodies as undesirable and obsolete models for the present and future generations of opera divas. Barrett, in contrast, embodies the normative diva, her fit body becoming a site onto which Hollywood could map an idealized identity for opera singers. Her svelte physique, one might argue, indicates a middling-class identity, one that extends, however, both into the upper and into the lower classes. As a democratic body, it is neither the emaciated nor the gluttonous figure often ascribed to the working-class and the wealthy, respectively. When combined with Barrett's strong work ethic, “American” character traits, and moral uprightness (e.g., refusing to be seduced by Monteverdi in his house), the diva and her body thus are transfigured as democratic, modern, and American.

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<sup>182</sup> Mosher, “Weighty Ambitions,” 21.

Barrett operates as a one-of-a-kind find within *One Night*'s narrative. As the radio competition sequence demonstrated, Barrett's voice alone could not grant her access to world-class vocal training. The radio, through its acousmatic character, had rendered the voice as the only means of securing the attention of the judges. It was only after Barrett's body and good looks became visible to Monteverdi that her voice suddenly proved to be full of potential. Even more interestingly, Monteverdi made his decision to train Barrett as an opera singer after hearing her sing popular songs, her operatic aspirations known only to the movie audience. In Columbia Pictures' imagined world of opera, bodily discipline constituted the logical key to success. Barrett's physical training—viewers are not provided any glimpse of her vocal training—served as the means by which Barrett ultimately achieved stardom. Her transformation through exercise presented the diva as in tune with contemporary expectations for American women. Moreover, Barrett's strict dieting regime, enforced by Monteverdi, resonated with current notions of portion control that adhered to Hollywood's aesthetic ideal.

The character, Giulio Monteverdi, shares disturbing similarities with the film industry as a disciplinarian of women's bodies. In truth, some of his actions resonate with specific anecdotes told about studio bosses Louis B. Mayer of MGM and Harry Cohn of Columbia in regard to Moore's personal experiences in Hollywood. When Moore first signed with MGM in 1930, her contract stipulated that she needed to slim down to the point where the camera showed that she "had only one chin and a modicum of curves."<sup>183</sup> The singer went on a diet in order to reach the weight restrictions Mayer required. During filming for *New Moon*, however, Moore began gaining weight. Mayer allegedly warned his star that her contract bound her to remain at 135

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<sup>183</sup> Moore, *You Only Live Once*, 164.

pounds, ordering Moore to step on the scales in his office to confirm that she had gone over.<sup>184</sup>

The singer refused, finished the film, and returned to the stage.

When preparing for a performance at the Hollywood Bowl in 1933, Moore dieted all summer in anticipation of returning to Southern California. Her goal was to secure another film contract so that she could make a triumphant movie comeback. Moore's actions suggest that she believed she would not receive a second chance unless she looked like a movie star. Yet even when she received a contract from Columbia, the studio required that Moore lose more weight and stick to a strict diet throughout filming. An anecdote offers a glimpse into the studio's control over its employees' looks: "It remained for Joe Walker's camera skill to make Miss Moore appear attractive on the screen. At Cohn's insistence she had continued paring down her weight. She nibbled on celery stalks, and constant hunger contributed to her temperament."<sup>185</sup>

Whereas Monteverdi was a fictional disciplinarian, Hollywood and its executives most certainly were not.

### **Reception of the Modern American Diva**

In the majority of letters printed in film magazines and stored in the archives, moviegoers indicated that Moore's visual appearance proved vital to their enjoyment of the film's operatic musical sequences. Often, they referenced Moore's age as well as her physical form, which

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<sup>184</sup> Thomas offers an intolerant account of this story in his biography of Cohn. Thomas described divas in general as "stolid heavy weights," and Moore as the "chubby costar" to Lawrence Tibbett's "robustness" in *New Moon*. See Thomas, *King Cohn*, 94.

<sup>185</sup> Thomas, *King Cohn*, 97. For her part, Moore spoke out against the standards maintained by Hollywood for its actresses. In one article from 1935, she even attributed the high divorce rates in Hollywood to the borderline starvation of its actresses: "Hollywood has a mania for keeping thin . . . They diet here to the point of undernourishment and weakened physical and nervous systems. Everybody knows underfed people become irritable." Instead, Moore advocated eating regularly and keeping up with exercise to stay healthy. See George Shaffer, "Grace Moore Declares Diets Disrupt Homes: Says Undernourished have Bad Nerves," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 26 November 1935, in "Scrapbook: Newspaper Clippings, Magazine Articles, and Correspondence, 1935," Grace Moore Papers, Box 3, Folder 19, UTK.

indicated that they, like *Screenland*, expected all opera singers to be “fat and forty.”<sup>186</sup> For a Mrs. J. J. Bures from Berwyn, IL, Moore’s “glamour” enabled Bures to appreciate opera for the first time:

Somehow I have never cared for opera singers, due, perhaps to my lack of musical education. But, after seeing Grace Moore in *One Night of Love*, I am handing her a bushel of orchids. She has combined the carefree spirit of youth with beauty and acting ability and has enshrined herself in my heart with her lovely voice. I hope that glamorous Grace Moore does to others what she has done to me—given me a deep appreciation of one of the greatest arts in the world ...grand opera.<sup>187</sup>

Writing to *Movie Classic*, one Kay Newton similarly proclaimed: “Miss Moore gives dignity to the screen through her superior singing and charming stage presence. Here is something rare—a voice of true grand opera caliber, combined with a beauty of face and figure that satisfies the most critical eye. Imagine a *prima donna* able to appear in a scanty gymnasium suit and to be of such slight and perfect proportions as to please and not offend.”<sup>188</sup>

Film reviewers and columnists likewise honed in on the interconnectedness between Moore’s physical appearance and their appreciation of *One Night*’s operatic scenes, frequently using specific language to emphasize opera’s hipness. In her interview with Moore in *Modern Screen*, for example, Elza Schallert observed that Moore’s figure distinguished her as modern and accessible, given that there was “nothing of the old-fashioned *prima donna*” about her: “She is a link between past and present operatic tradition. The *prima donna* with a modern inflection, who eats spinach instead of spaghetti and has luscious high C’s just the same.”<sup>189</sup> Schallert

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<sup>186</sup> “Express Yourself,” *Screenland*, December 1930, in “Scrapbook: Newspaper Clippings and Correspondence, 1930–1959,” Grace Moore Papers, Box 3, Folder 17, UTK. Moore was in her mid-thirties when she filmed *One Night*, but most viewers seemed to think that she was in her twenties.

<sup>187</sup> “Appreciation of Art,” from unidentified source, c. 1934–35, in “Scrapbook: Newspaper Clippings, Magazine Articles, and Correspondence, 1935,” Grace Moore Papers, Box 3, Folder 19, UTK.

<sup>188</sup> Kay Newton, “Letter to the Editor,” *Movie Classic* 7, no.3 (November 1934).

<sup>189</sup> Elza Schallert, “Bravo, bravo! Grace Moore,” *Modern Screen* 8, no.5 (October 1934).

obviously conflated Moore with her onscreen character, Mary Barrett, whose dinner consisted of spinach and Melba Toast in one of the film's scenes. The columnist further proposed that Moore's physical appeal and "modern inflection" allowed opera to transcend its associations with elite culture: "In her picture triumph, *One Night of Love*, the high-brow sting of grand opera was entirely removed. Grace Moore ... humanized operatic excerpts, and transformed them into gems of melodic and dramatic beauty, understandable and appealing to everyone." For Schallert, then, opera had proven to be inaccessible because its performers supposedly did not adhere to modern standards of health and beauty. But opera's "newfound" visual appeal enabled individuals to appreciate the music.

As fan letters and various articles show, many members of the public conceived of the opera diva in Brünnhildian terms. It is probable that these stereotypes became inculcated in American life through such working- and middle-class theatrical entertainments as vaudeville and burlesque. These venues regularly offered parodies of operatic works and culture, a tradition whose continued impact can be seen in, for instance, the Marx Brothers' *A Night at the Opera* (1935) and a comical opera sketch in *Broadway Melody of 1940* (1940). As Daniel Goldmark points out, opera, too, always had been an easy subject to lampoon in Hollywood cartoons.<sup>190</sup> For example, an early Tom and Jerry animated short, *Piano Tooners* (1932), brought the overweight opera diva to the screen, poking fun at her body and looks—yet not necessarily her singing. For persons who neither had the funds nor the inclination to attend grand-opera performances, then, opera parodies and comical opera sketches probably engendered these exaggerated notions about divas and opera culture.

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<sup>190</sup> See Daniel Goldmark, *Tunes for 'Toons: Music and the Hollywood Cartoon* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 133. Many of the cartoons discussed in Goldmark's book were produced in the late 1930s through the 1950s.

Interestingly, the transfer of Hollywood-disciplined bodies to the opera stage became a growing topic of interest in the press around the time of *One Night*'s premiere, further reinforcing the concept that European-style opera singers were overweight and therefore outmoded, even un-American. As a *Chicago Daily Tribune* headline proclaimed in January 1934: "Opera prima donnas take weight cue from the films. Heavyweight diva is passé; today's songbird must have optical appeal."<sup>191</sup> Eleanor Nangle, an influential beauty columnist for the *Tribune*, reported in a hefty article that the cinema was putting pressure on opera to reinvent itself. Addressing changes in operatic culture from the turn-of-the-century to the present day, Nangle argued that while the divas of the previous generations may have charmed the public simply with their voices, "Being realists, the girls who sing the high C's today face the fact that not even the most glorious of voices will so befog the modern audience that it forgets the physical aspects of things and people on the opera stage ... Today art is still art—but heft is heft." According to Nangle, "the silhouette became almost as important to singers as voice quality" by the early 1930s. And like Mary Barrett in *One Night*, younger singers allegedly trained "like athletes in the pursuit and preservation of a slim silhouette. They know they must be slender for audience appeal."

Nangle asserted that this interest in body size developed because contemporary audiences were less inclined to suspend their disbelief. Unlike their forebears, they noticed if the Mimis and the Carmens looked more like Wagnerian Valkyries than sickly teenagers or seductive sirens. Even prima donnas such as the "Great Tetrzzini," the columnist maintained, would no longer be able to convince the audience that she was the consumptive Violetta in *La traviata* solely through her beautiful singing. Citing Tetrzzini's debut performance at the Met in 1908,

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<sup>191</sup> Eleanor Nangle, "Opera Prima Donnas Take Weight Cue from the Films," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 7 January 1934.

Nangle elaborated: “As Tetrizzini languished to a tragic death of her malady and a broken heart at the end of the third act she looked, naturally, not even slightly undernourished . . . The Violetta of our day must be golden-voiced, of course, but her general build must be such that up to the moment of a slow death by tuberculosis she must not look like a patently fat lady. Opera audiences just don’t take it like they used to.”<sup>192</sup> Nangle proposed that if opera were made more visually appetizing, it could attract a wider audience, especially the younger crowd who had grown accustomed to the fashioning of female bodies in the movies.

This “sudden” concern with visual realism and convincing levels of a diva’s attractiveness had antecedents in earlier debates from the nineteenth century where singers from Maria Malibran to Sybil Sanderson capitalized on their normative beauty. Moreover, many members of the public as well as the press seemingly forgot, or had been unaware, that a few of the celebrated beauties of the day were opera singers, most notably Lina Cavalieri. A Google Image search of the female singers on the Metropolitan Opera’s roster in the 1920s through the 1940s belies Nangle’s claim that prima donnas appearing on the opera stage between 1900 and 1930 were generously proportioned. Indeed, the majority of these singers fulfilled contemporary standards of “normalcy” or even slenderness. As one J. Norris from Phoenix, AZ, observed in his review of *One Night*, many excellent singers with good looks and physiques could be seen performing on the stage:

Recently I saw *One Night of Love* and found it so wholly delightful as to demand a second viewing. But there’s one thing it made me think . . . why not let us have some of the really great singers on the screen? Rosa Ponselle, Eide Norena, Lucrezia Bori, Claire Clairbert, Conchita Supervia, are all lovely to see as well as hear, and there are plenty of stories that might be filmed.<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Nangle, “Opera Prima Donnas Take Weight Cue from the Films.”

<sup>193</sup> J. Norris, *Picture Play*, February 1935, in “Scrapbook, Newspaper Articles, Magazine Clippings, Programs, 1934,” Grace Moore Papers, Box 3, Folder 18, UTK.

In actuality, such articles as Nangle's were part of an ongoing discourse about female opera stars in an attempt to reconfigure the diva of the 1930s as one fitting Depression-era standards of beauty. Read in this context, *One Night* was less of a transformative trailblazer than the onscreen codification of broader trends in American musical life that reflected back to operatic culture what had already been part of its practice. Still, by constructing the disciplined body of the diva as both modern and American, the film recast an ideal operatic practice as a visual feast with an appropriate soundtrack.

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With the rise in employment opportunities sparked by the United States' industrial productivity and technological innovations at the turn-of-the-century, women entered the work force in greater numbers than ever before. By the 1920s, many women rejected the conservative conventions of nineteenth-century notions of femininity in favor of more liberated ideals. Quickly appropriated by the fashion industries and Hollywood, the modern woman was endowed with a flawless body that was viewed as a machine.<sup>194</sup> Her slim, attractive physique, carefully maintained by diet and exercise, symbolized physical health, playing into ideas of a machine's proper maintenance and productivity levels. Grace Moore's embodiment of the modern woman in *One Night*—through her good looks, bodily discipline, and determined work ethic—therefore speaks to national narratives of American progress. Brought “up to date” within the film's story, the 1930s diva, depicted as a personable and plucky American gal, simultaneously reconfigured and modernized a new appreciation for a supposedly outmoded and elite theatrical entertainment.

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<sup>194</sup> For more on the modern body as a machine, see Fangman, Ogle, Bickle, and Rouner, “An Analysis of *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Vogue* Magazines,” 237.

In developing a film that would appeal to the masses, Columbia Pictures operated on the assumption that moviegoers bought into, or at least were familiar with, stereotypes of the “fat and forty” opera diva. The studio therefore provided this imagined diva with a Hollywood makeover, supposedly correcting her physical faults and aesthetic failures so that under the acute lens of the camera she would appear to be as glamorous as any movie star. Many viewers’ reactions to *One Night* demonstrate that the old-fashioned diva’s younger American replacement indeed increased opera’s cultural cachet. Yet contrary to the studio’s expectations, the public was not opposed to the music by Giuseppe Verdi, Giacomo Puccini, and other opera composers. Rather, audiences were more concerned with *who* performed it and in what context it was presented. Through its contemporary take on an opera singer’s pursuit of success, Columbia foregrounded the importance of the visual, whereby the body became the means through which the public could appreciate “good music.”

## CHAPTER 2: FILM CENSORSHIP AND REPRESENTATIONS OF RACE IN RKO'S *I DREAM TOO MUCH* (1935) AND *HITTING A NEW HIGH* (1937)

“There is everything to sell in Lily Pons,” claimed the *Hollywood Reporter* about the diva’s debut film, *I Dream Too Much* (1935).<sup>195</sup> The trade newspaper proposed that Pons’s ebullient personality, “intriguing and charming” French accent, and killer clothes-sense were sure to “click in a big way with fans.”<sup>196</sup> Moreover, her spectacular voice was the absolute “tops,” enabling her to appeal to both the upper classes *and* to the masses: “[Pons’s] songs are all show-stoppers, even the ‘Bell Song’ from *Lakmé* is easy to take when she sings it. There is warmth and vitality in her that is seldom found in a colortura [*sic*].”<sup>197</sup> This critic was not alone in his praise of the diva and her singing. Film reviewers, in general, marveled at Pons’s glorious voice, although some thought that Jerome Kern’s popular tunes may have suffered in comparison to Léo Delibes’s virtuosic aria.<sup>198</sup>

Despite the film’s warm reception in the press and film magazines, however, the *Lakmé* scene sparked a lively debate amongst the motion-picture censors—but not about the music. Rather, some were shocked by the prima donna’s navel-baring costume. In their opinion, Pons’s midriff had the potential to distract the audience’s attention from the aria, thereby disrupting the benefit of cultural uplift that opera was purported to have on the American public. A mere two

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<sup>195</sup> Review of *I Dream Too Much*, *Hollywood Reporter*, 16 November 1935.

<sup>196</sup> Review of *I Dream Too Much*, *Hollywood Reporter*, 16 November 1935.

<sup>197</sup> Review of *I Dream Too Much*, *Hollywood Reporter*, 16 November 1935.

<sup>198</sup> See, for example, review of *I Dream Too Much*, *Variety*, 4 December 1935.

years later, Pons once again scandalized the public with her “barely there” feather costume for her third and final film, *Hitting a New High* (1937), in which she played an aspiring prima donna who masquerades as an African “bird-girl” for a publicity stunt. This time, the singer’s “primitive” costume not only was deemed liable to impede uplift and jeopardize one’s morals, it was seen as a challenge to opera’s status as a venerated, elite Western art.

In this chapter, I focus on *I Dream Too Much* and *Hitting a New High* to show how censorship practices and film conventions in 1930s Hollywood helped change the way in which opera was presented to, and received by, patrons of the cinema. I first analyze RKO’s production materials for *I Dream Too Much*, which indicate that the studio sought to build on Columbia’s success with *One Night of Love* in order to market Lily Pons to filmgoers. Such materials also show that RKO, as Columbia did with Grace Moore, made much of the French soprano’s slender physique, although, ironically, the prominent display of the singer’s body during the film’s *Lakmé* sequence launched a controversy over the value of opera’s visual aesthetics. My investigation of *I Dream Too Much*’s censorship documents addresses both the film’s narrative and the studio’s choice of costuming. I argue that the enforcement of the Production Code—essentially Hollywood’s rulebook of do’s and don’ts—in 1934 led to the sanitization of opera for the movie-going public and brought about opera’s sonic reconfiguration.<sup>199</sup> Censorship regulations, especially those pertaining to the policing of women’s bodies, would affect not only what was seen on the screen but also the viewer’s expectations for, and experiences at, the movie theater. I then examine how the film industry’s ensuing visual conservatism shaped the reception of *Hitting a New High* only a few years later in 1937, particularly in regard to the intersections of

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<sup>199</sup> The Production Code, nicknamed the “Hays Code” for President of the Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) William Hays, refers to a set of rules governing what was, or was not, considered to be appropriate for the movies. It was instituted in 1930, but did not truly go into effect until 1934, when Joseph Breen assumed the role as head of the Motion Picture Censorship Office in Los Angeles. I will discuss the Code in greater detail later in the chapter.

opera and race. To do so, I situate *Hitting a New High* within the context of the 1930s adventure film and interrogate the public's mixed reactions to Pons's portrayal of an operatic African "bird-girl."

### **Background: *I Dream Too Much***

Following on the heels of Grace Moore's triumphant appearance in *One Night of Love* (1934), coloratura soprano Lily Pons took a break from her stage obligations in order to pursue a film career in Hollywood. Film columnist Louella Parsons alleged that ever since her illustrious American debut in 1931, the French soprano had been eagerly sought after by a number of studios, particularly Warner Bros. and MGM.<sup>200</sup> Pons, however, weighed all of her options carefully before deciding to join forces with the smallest "major" studio, RKO Pictures.<sup>201</sup>

By the mid-1930s, RKO had established its reputation as a manufacturer of slick cosmopolitan capers and screwball comedies starring such powerhouse celebrities as Constance Bennett, Irene Dunne, Cary Grant, and Katherine Hepburn. It also brought the dynamic duo of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers to moviegoers worldwide, first in 1933 with *Rio Rita*, while simultaneously making film history with such path-breaking pictures as *King Kong* (1933). RKO was also home to the talents of various other legendary cinematic figures, from producer David O. Selznick and actor/director Orson Welles to composer Max Steiner. By signing Pons, RKO added the most famous coloratura soprano in the United States at the time to its impressive line up of "A-list" celebrities.

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<sup>200</sup> Louella Parsons, *New York Herald*, 24 October 1933, in Kristin Beall Ludecke and James A. Drake, *Lily Pons: A Centennial Portrait* (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press), 123.

<sup>201</sup> See Jeannette Meehan, "A Thrilling New Voice for Music-Mad Hollywood," *Washington Post*, 6 October 1935. Meehan's narrative proposed that RKO had been courting Pons since 1932, a statement that I have been unable to verify. For more information on RKO, see Richard B. Jewell, *RKO Radio Pictures: A Titan is Born* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012), and Betty Lasky, *RKO: The Biggest Little Major of Them All*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Santa Monica, CA: Roundtable Publishing, 1989).

The illustrious Pons burst onto the American opera scene with a debut performance in Gaetano Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* at the Metropolitan Opera in 1931. She quickly ascended to operatic stardom and was touted for her spellbinding performances in *Lucia*, *Lakmé*, *Rigoletto*, and *Il barbiere di Siviglia*. Audiences unable to see her live could tune into the radio to hear the celebrated coloratura soprano sing for the Metropolitan's Saturday afternoon broadcasts as well as other programs featuring "good music," including the *Cadillac Symphony Orchestra* and *The Chesterfield Hour*. In addition to her many appearances on the Met and for the radio, the diva landed a record deal with RCA-Victor's prestigious Red Seal Series, which boasted a number of recordings made by the most eminent classical musicians, from conductors Leopold Stokowski and Arturo Toscanini to opera singers Enrico Caruso and Rosa Ponselle. Pons's successful New York debut cemented her status as an artist in high demand, not only across the United States but also in Europe and in South America. After maintaining a grueling performance, recording, and touring schedule for four years, however, the prima donna decided to set her whirlwind stage career temporarily aside in favor of the lucrative movie scene.

Having secured Pons's services, RKO seemingly spared no expense on the diva's initial vehicle. The studio allotted *I Dream Too Much* an A-picture budget, initially estimated at \$671,121.72 with the final production cost coming in below budget at \$627,000.<sup>202</sup> Pons herself was paid a generous flat fee of \$60,000 for ten weeks of work, from 15 July to 21 September

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<sup>202</sup> Daily Budget Reconciliation, 30 September 1935, *I Dream Too Much*, Box 59P, Folder A851, RKO Studio Records, University of California, Los Angeles, Special Collections, Beverly Hills, CA (UCLA), and Richard B. Jewell, "RKO Film Grosses, 1929–51: The C.J. Trevlin Ledger: A Comment," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 14, no. 1 (1994): 51–58. According to Jewell, *I Dream Too Much*'s domestic revenue amounted to \$391,000 (\$6,750,000 today); foreign revenue to \$249,000 (\$4,310,000); and total revenue to \$640,000 (\$11,000,000). After adding distribution costs to the movie's final expenditure, *I Dream Too Much* tumbled into the red with a -35% profit. See Jewell, "RKO Film Grosses, 1929–51," 58.

1935, and accrued an extra \$5,000 for four days of overtime.<sup>203</sup> In comparison, her co-star, the up-and-coming Henry Fonda, was paid a salary of \$30,000.<sup>204</sup> A significant portion of the studio's finances was dedicated to the film's opera scenes, with the costs for scenery, staging, extras, costumes, and music quickly adding up during shooting. Pons's Lakmé costume, for example, cost \$400 to make, while the one for the "I Dream Too Much" musical-comedy number cost \$700, in contrast to the \$250 or so spent on each of Pons's "street" costumes worn during the rest of the film.<sup>205</sup> In addition, the rights to the film's two featured arias amounted to more than half of composer Max Steiner's salary for five weeks of work; the "Bell Song" cost the studio a hefty \$2,100, whereas "Caro nome" totaled a meager \$300 by comparison.<sup>206</sup>

The original idea for Pons's film, tentatively titled *Love Song*, was created by two employees of the *Philadelphia Record*: movie critic Elsie Finn and newspaper editor David G. Wittels. An interview Finn conducted with Pons supposedly inspired the narrative. Impressed by the demands of an operatic career, Finn and Wittels developed a tale about a talented singer who only dreams of romance and longs for a home life.<sup>207</sup> Two studio readers, one from New York and the other from Los Angeles, approved the story for production, arriving at a joint consensus

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<sup>203</sup> RKO Budget of Production Cost, 3 September 1935, and Overtime Records, 23 September 1935 to 26 September 1935, *I Dream Too Much*, RKO Studio Records, Box 59P, Folder A851, UCLA. \$60,000 is the equivalent of \$1,040,000 today, while \$5,000 equals \$86,300. By comparison, Cary Grant made \$2,500 (approximately \$43,000 today) a week at the cusp of his stardom, achieving \$50,000 (approximately \$85,000) per picture as he gained more fame in the mid to late 1930s. See Cary Grant Biography, IMDB, [http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000026/bio?ref=nm\\_ov\\_bio\\_sm](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000026/bio?ref=nm_ov_bio_sm) (accessed 1 July 2016).

<sup>204</sup> \$30,000 equals \$518,000 today.

<sup>205</sup> \$400 is the equivalent of \$6,910, whereas \$700 equals \$12,100. \$250 comes to approximately \$4,320 today.

<sup>206</sup> RKO Budget Detail of Labor and Material, 3 September 1935, *I Dream Too Much*, RKO Studio Records, Box 59P, Folder A851, UCLA. \$2,100 equals \$36,300 today, and \$300 equals \$5,180. Max Steiner was paid \$850 (\$14,700) a week for his services, with an additional "fixed" rate of \$2,500 (\$43,200) for other transcription work.

<sup>207</sup> RKO Studio Advance, *I Dream Too Much*–[RKO 1935], Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration Records, Margaret Herrick Library, Special Collections, Beverly Hills, CA (MHL).

that the scenario was not “unusual” but contained “good dialogue and sufficient characterization” as well as ample opportunities for musical numbers.<sup>208</sup>

Finn and Wittels’ story opened with Cannes native Marianne Grimaldi going to a grand hotel on an errand and encountering a young composer, Raymond Duval, working at the piano.<sup>209</sup> She sings to “help him through a difficult passage,” and they fall in love and get married. The couple moves to Paris where they live on a paltry salary, and Raymond puts his composing on hold to work in a café and support his wife. He writes a “Love Song” for Marianne, who sings it at the café. To Raymond’s horror, the audience applauds Marianne’s singing rather than his ballad. When she is later introduced to an arts patron, Raymond walks out on her in a jealous fit. He soon becomes the lover of Fannie Desmond, a musical-comedy star, who offers him a job writing songs for her new show. Raymond becomes rich and successful. Meanwhile, the abandoned Marianne is haunted by the strains of “Love Song,” which play wherever she goes. After meeting a wealthy broker who agrees to bankroll her talent, Marianne decides to pursue an operatic career. At her Paris debut, she is signed to the Metropolitan. Raymond, who is at the debut, attempts to regain her affection, but Marianne refuses his advances and sails for America. It then comes to light that the broker has been stealing from Marianne. When forced to sing “Love Song” as an encore in Philadelphia, Marianne breaks down from stress and loses her voice. She returns to Cannes to recover, where she reunites with Raymond.<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> Reader’s Report of Elsie Finn and David G. Wittels’ Synopses of *Love Song*, Doris F. Helman, New York Office, 9 October 1934, and Reader’s Report of Elsie Finn and David G. Wittels’ Synopses of *Love Song*, Mildred Fleming, Los Angeles Office, 5 December 1934, *I Dream Too Much*, RKO Studio Records, Box 378S, UCLA.

<sup>209</sup> Following the onset of World War I, Pons and her family moved from the small town of Draguignan to Cannes, France. Grimaldi, an Italian surname, may have been a nod to Pons’s Italian heritage on her mother’s side.

<sup>210</sup> Reader’s Report of Elsie Finn and David G. Wittels’ Synopses of *Love Song*, Doris F. Helman, New York Office, 9 October 1934, *I Dream Too Much*, RKO Studio Records, Box 378S, UCLA.

RKO's reader reports, respectively dated 9 October and 5 December 1934, indicate that *Love Song* was being considered as potential film material for Pons around the time that *One Night of Love* catapulted to the international spotlight. Penciled notes on the back of the 5 December report indicate that whoever wrote them had *One Night* on his or her mind: "Can we build Romantic interest fun? Can we have him with other woman during part of separation? Grace Moore finish? Can we get big eating scene with Roger and others in Attic? Can we build any comedy in last half? Should picture end where it began?" From these questions, one can surmise that the person asking them was interested in turning a dramatic tale into a romantic comedy similar to *One Night*. In fact, the "eating scene" in question may have been a reference to the sequence in *One Night* wherein Maestro Monteverdi "humorously" controls his student's diet.<sup>211</sup> The "Grace Moore finish," too, most likely referred to *One Night*'s show-stopping final scene, in which Moore performed a staged version of "Un bel di" from *Madama Butterfly*.<sup>212</sup>

Screenwriter Edmund North openly conceded that Pons's vehicle was a direct "follow-up" to *One Night of Love*.<sup>213</sup> RKO hired North and fellow writer James Gow, both of whom had worked on *One Night*, to develop the screenplay for *I Dream Too Much*. North stated in an interview that RKO's upper echelons had been aware of Columbia's efforts to turn Moore into a movie star and decided to "look around" to see "who the other opera singers were that were

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<sup>211</sup> Although no one controls Annette Monard's (Pons) diet in *I Dream Too Much*, the film still includes various scenes in which weight or diet are referenced. In one early scene when Jonathan Street discovers he has married Annette, for example, he says: "You're too small ...and skinny too. A man doesn't want to bend down every time he wants to kiss his wife." Monard replies: "I will try to gain some fat." In another scene, a music producer tells Annette: "You don't look like much of a singer at all. You're supposed to be large, homely. Look like a channel swimmer." And in one of the final scenes in which Annette discovers a disgruntled Jonathan to be her taxi driver, she starts crying, saying: "I don't know why I'm crying. I must be hungry."

<sup>212</sup> *I Dream Too Much* ends instead with Annette singing "Jockey in the Carousel" to her young child in the living room.

<sup>213</sup> Edmund North, "Seeing Life in Quick Depth," in *Words into Images: Screenwriters on the Studio System*, edited by Ronald L. Davis (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2007), 104.

presentable enough to be on the screen.”<sup>214</sup> RKO chose Pons, who, North said, “at that time was very attractive. She was a vivacious, slim opera singer and had a name. She had an extraordinary voice, a coloratura. And she was cute in the picture.”<sup>215</sup>

By 25 May 1935, North and Gow had turned Finn and Wittel’s heart-wrenching drama into a light romantic comedy, finalizing their screenplay on 16 July. The film went into production on 29 July and wrapped on 26 September, premiering at the Radio City Music Hall in New York on 29 November 1935. Yet despite the film’s high volume of appreciative reviews, *I Dream Too Much* did not make a profit at the box office. With production and distribution costs amounting to \$990,000 and the total domestic and foreign revenue reaching only \$640,000, Pons’s vehicle reaped a deficit of 35%.<sup>216</sup> Seemingly undeterred by the film’s lack of profits—or perhaps simply locked into a three-picture contract—RKO went on to make two more films with its newfound star, *That Girl from Paris* (1936) and *Hitting a New High* (1937).<sup>217</sup>

### **Screenplay: *I Dream Too Much***

Deviating rather significantly from Finn and Wittels’ original idea, the filmed version of *I Dream Too Much* told the story of Annette Monard, a French girl who longs to escape her secluded life in a small town. She lives with a domineering uncle, a music teacher, who presses her to develop

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<sup>214</sup> North, “Seeing Life in Quick Depth,” 104.

<sup>215</sup> North, “Seeing Life in Quick Depth,” 104.

<sup>216</sup> Jewell, “RKO Film Grosses, 1929–51,” 58. \$990,000 is the equivalent of \$17,100,000, whereas \$640,000 amounts to \$11,000,000 today.

<sup>217</sup> In *That Girl From Paris*, Pons plays Nikki Martin, an opera singer who longs for adventure. While stowing away on a cruise liner departing for the United States from France, she encounters a group of jazz musicians and becomes their “girl singer.” Once in the United States, Nikki has to run from the American authorities, having failed to enter the country legally. She falls in love with the bandleader, Windy McLean (Gene Raymond), who is affianced to an American dancer (Lucille Ball). Trying to get rid of Nikki, the dancer alerts the authorities as to the singer’s whereabouts. After a series of screwball mishaps, McLean ends up falling for Nikki, and the two live happily ever after. *Hitting a New High* will be discussed in detail later in this chapter.

her vocal talents. Tired of her monotonous life and the constant pressure to make something of herself, Annette flees the house one evening to experience the local carnival. There she meets Jonathan Street, an aspiring American opera composer. The two enjoy the carnival's entertainments together only to wake up the next morning and discover that they are married—much to Jonathan's horror and to Annette's delight.

Jonathan struggles to provide for his young bride while attempting to finish his "masterpiece." One day, he overhears Annette singing to a little boy on a merry-go-round and realizes that his wife "sings like a nightingale." Intent upon securing voice lessons for Annette, Jonathan finds a job as a tour guide to cover the cost. Unwilling to let Jonathan foot the bill entirely, Annette secretly finds employment singing in a café. One day, Jonathan takes a group of tourists to that very café, where he discovers his wife conversing with another man. Jonathan assumes the worst and initiates a fight with the owner over his wife's honor.

Annette then decides that she must help her husband achieve his dreams to become a famous composer and takes Jonathan's opera manuscript to a wealthy patron of the arts, Paul D'Arcy. When Annette sings one of her husband's arias, D'Arcy is impressed by her golden voice. More interested in Annette than Jonathan's music, however, D'Arcy sets out to turn Annette into a successful opera singer. She debuts at the Paris Opéra to great success, and her career flourishes. Yet once she becomes a celebrated prima donna, Annette's selfish and jealous husband leaves her, unable to cope with his wife's triumphs and live with his own failure as a composer.

Annette continues her illustrious career, but misses her absent husband. One day, she hails a taxi only to discover that Jonathan is the driver. They go out on the town and find that they still enjoy each other's company. Annette then petitions D'Arcy to produce her husband's

opera so that Jonathan no longer has to live with the shame of being supported by his wife's income. The opera, however, is no good, so Annette has it adapted as a musical theater production. She also sings the leading role to lend the show a bit of operatic glamour and prestige. The production becomes a success, and the couple is reunited. Annette subsequently leaves the stage to become a wife and mother, a theme that the film emphasizes throughout its duration, and her husband becomes much happier as the family's sole provider—despite the fact that he has to stoop to writing for the more lowbrow musical-theater public.

### **Marketing and Vocality: *I Dream Too Much***

The promotional materials for *I Dream Too Much* reveal that RKO advertised the film on the basis of Pons's appearance, biography, personality, and willingness to perform both opera and popular songs. Articles printed in film magazines and newspapers, in particular, underscored the charms of Pons's person as much as her coloratura voice, alternately celebrating the diva's exotic Frenchness or Americanizing her work ethic. RKO's presskit further demonstrates that, only a little over a year after the release of *One Night of Love*, the film industry was still uncertain as to how it should market movies featuring "good music," attempting to reconcile the class-based strategies used by the sales and publicity departments with the notion that one's musical taste was not necessarily informed by one's financial circumstances or educational background.

Hollywood's sales and publicity departments were affected, in part, by industry-wide changes in the mid-1930s. Indeed, the enforcement of the Production Code in 1934—in part, a self-imposed regulatory system imposed by the studios to preempt greater federal interference—changed some of the assumptions made about the cinema and its audiences. On the one hand, it affirmed that the movies appealed to the masses and lower classes, whose preferences needed to

be controlled. The Code's goal to ensure cleaner fare for an impressionable public was accompanied by a side mission to help elevate the tastes of the nation through the production of "better" films based on literature, theater, and uplifting stories. Needing to comply with the Code's restrictions, the studios therefore began prioritizing these "better" films over the more salacious or shocking "nickelodeons" produced during what has become known as Hollywood's pre-Code era. Along with an increased focus on "better" films seemingly came a "better" class of movie audience, necessitating that the studios' sales and publicity departments develop new methods for appealing to those with more "sophisticated" tastes.

Advance publicity for *I Dream Too Much* cashed in on Pons's identity as a celebrated coloratura soprano. In a 25 May 1935 article from the *Los Angeles Times*, drama critic Edwin Schallert underscored Pons's novelty in Hollywood chiefly because of her vocality:

Expectations are that Lily Pons, upon her debut on the screen, will be singing such arias as the "Mad Scene" from *Lucia* and the "Bell Song" from *Lakmé*. And that will be a digression into the coloratura realm. Heretofore most of the operatic numbers chosen for prima donnas in pictures have been of the lyric variety. Miss Pons will be able to do the pyrotechnical feats in song, however, and may therefore create a new sensation.<sup>218</sup>

Another article appearing in the same newspaper one month later likewise branded Pons's voice as "different" and particularly ornithological in quality:

The best way to tell whether or not a soprano is a coloratura is to wait until she hears a flute. No coloratura can long resist imitating its trill-like notes. Future film audiences are likely to have little trouble identifying the style of soprano in Radio Pictures' forthcoming *Love Song* (tentative title), for she is the greatest practicing coloratura of them all, Lily Pons.

Miss Pons has not yet appeared on any screen ... She has a slight figure, dark eyes and a generous mouth, and altogether none of the accepted attributes of the opera singer of

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<sup>218</sup> Edwin Schallert, "Lily Pons Will Sing Difficult Operatic Arias in Forthcoming Screen Debut," *Los Angeles Times*, 25 May 1935.

tradition. Birdlike in more ways than one, she reiterated her approval of the glories of Southern California.<sup>219</sup>

As I discuss later in this chapter, RKO would play on the trope of coloraturas and birds in Pons's third and final film *Hitting a New High*, casting the soprano in the role of a "bird-girl."<sup>220</sup>

Indeed, Pons's vocality served at the heart of film production for *I Dream Too Much*. For example, the *Chicago Daily Tribune's* Mae Tinee expounded upon the centrality of the diva's coloratura to the RKO vehicle in a film review pointedly titled, "Pons Triumphs in Film Built for Her Voice." Citing one of William Shakespeare's songs from *Cymbaline Act 2, Scene 3* and simultaneously invoking the bird/soprano trope, Tinee cheerily greeted her readers:

Good morning!

"Hark! Hark! The lark...!"

It is tiny, joyous, vibrant Lily Pons singing! Singing with the ecstatic abandon of a lark winging upward! And, as the music pours from her slim throat with unbelievable volume, you wonder, with one of the characters in the story: "Where on earth does it all come from?"

... The story doesn't boast much originality. But it does serve admirably as a setting for the star. As for the music—doubtful if anybody else but Lily could sing it. It has been arranged specifically to show off her voice and the topical numbers were written especially for her by Jerome Kern. She sings with a lilt, a sparkle, and a warmth that are captivating—and her glorious voice has recorded—gloriously.<sup>221</sup>

In Pons's case, then, RKO digressed from standard operatic repertoire to accentuate the particular talents of the diva's voice. Coloratura sopranos were not as common as lyric sopranos or mezzo-sopranos in the United States at this time. The Metropolitan Opera in New York, in fact, had not programmed many operas featuring coloratura roles since the early 1900s.

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<sup>219</sup> Philip K. Scheuer, "Lily Pons's Coloratura Soprano Voice Soon will Trill in Screen's *Love Song*," *Los Angeles Times*, 30 June 1935.

<sup>220</sup> This trope dates back to Pliny the Elder. See Pliny, *Natural History, Volume X: Books 36–37*, translated by D. E. Eichholz (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 345–47.

<sup>221</sup> Mae Tinee, "Pons Triumphs in Film Built for Her Voice," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 2 January 1936.

Coloratura repertoire—often associated with early nineteenth-century *bel canto* operas—had long remained absent from the American opera house until Pons’s Met debut in 1932. The limitations of early recording technologies, too, had made it more challenging for coloratura voices to be captured pristinely.

Even in 1936, the coloratura soprano experienced difficulties with recording in the studio. When *Silver Screen*’s Lenore Samuels, for example, asked Pons whether or not it upset the diva “emotionally to sing one aria over and over again for the recording machine, as I heard she had to do in Hollywood,” Pons replied that:

It has to be just right on the screen. And so we work until it *is* right. Twenty, thirty times, it makes no difference. We work until we get the proper pitch and tone. The recording machine, you see, has not been absolutely perfected yet. It is still not sensitized fine enough for my high E’s and high F’s. That is why I brought Alberti [de Gorostiaga]—he is my maestro—with me to Hollywood. Every time I sing he goes into the sound booth and listens. And Mr. [Andre] Kostelanetz—he directed my operatic sequences in the picture—goes with him. Alberti knows my voice so well he can detect the slightest flaw. So with both of them watching so carefully all the time, I am certain that when they say “Good” I have recorded perfectly.<sup>222</sup>

Certainly for many moviegoers, Pons’s vocality—her extreme upper register extending beyond “High C,” her precise execution of florid ornamentation, and her bright timbre—was something completely new. Over the course of the diva’s three years in Hollywood, critics would describe Pons’s voice in terms of its “bell-like clearness”—no doubt a play on her performance of Delibes’s “Bell Song”—as well as its “melting,” “dazzling,” and “thrilling” qualities.<sup>223</sup> In effect, the coloratura soprano’s vocality distinguished her not only from Hollywood’s pop singers, but also her fellow operatic colleagues. The *Tribune*’s Mae Tinee even admonished those

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<sup>222</sup> Lenore Samuels, “Our ‘Lily of the Opera’: Screen Fans Soon Will Hear the Glorious Voice of Lily Pons,” *Silver Screen* 6, no. 2 (December 1935): 33.

<sup>223</sup> See “Portrait,” *Screenland* 34, no. 4 (February 1937): 44, Josephine LeSueur, “Songbird in a Gilded Cage,” *Photoplay* 49, no. 3 (March 1936): 45, 90, Dick Pine, “Ungilded Lily: A Nightingale Who Loves to Skylark, Petite Pons Proves the Prima Donna Needn’t Be Pompous, Here’s a Candid Cameo of the Vibrant Coloratura,” *Screenland* 36, no. 4 (February 1938): 65, and Ramon Ramero, “Pons & Co. Invade Hollywood,” *Modern Screen* 12, no. 1 (December 1935): 44.

moviegoers who grumbled at the influx of opera on screen, stating that by “listening to her you realize anew the gifts the movies have brought to the masses. You who carp—stop and do a little thinking.”<sup>224</sup>

Although Pons’s voice may have provided her a level of distinction in the cinematic scene, the diva, at age 37, did not quite conform to the looks-obsessed Hollywood’s definition of picture-perfect beauty. As a reviewer for *Modern Screen* wrote: “With the arrival of Lily Pons, opera has now completed its invasion of Hollywood. And in Mlle. Pons’ case, at least, it’s all for the best, for while the young lady is not beautiful she is good to look upon, possesses an engaging accent, a surprising flair for comedy, and the best feminine voice that the sound screen has ever offered.”<sup>225</sup> Lacking the film industry’s idea of a beautiful face, the diva’s “slight” figure served as her claim to beauty and became an integral part of RKO’s promotional campaign for *I Dream Too Much*. For example, the studio’s presskit claimed that when “the Metropolitan diva, the greatest coloratura soprano in the world, comes to the screen in *I Dream Too Much* ... audiences will find, not the billowing opera star of popular legend, but a lovely little brunette beauty with a dainty figure.”<sup>226</sup> Various articles similarly professed amazement that such a big voice could issue from the “diminutive diva,” as she was regularly called. Clearly, as was also the case with Grace Moore and *One Night of Love*, the gargantuan Brünnhilde of legend served as an important promotional foil for Pons. Her weight was noted in print frequently so as to emphasize her petite stature, as in a *Washington Post* review of *I Dream Too Much* from 29 December 1935:

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<sup>224</sup> Tinnee, “Pons Triumphs in Film Built for Her Voice.”

<sup>225</sup> Review of *I Dream Too Much*, *Modern Screen* 12, no.3 (February 1936): 98

<sup>226</sup> RKO Studio Advance, *I Dream Too Much*–[RKO 1935], Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration Records, MHL.

Pons is certain to capture the hearts of filmgoers everywhere with her brunette beauty, her vivacity and, above all, her glorious voice. The little diva is the exact antithesis of the opera star of popular legend. Weighing no more than a hundred pounds, she is delicately contoured, and music lovers everywhere are always amazed that a voice of such power and range can issue from such a doll-like little person.<sup>227</sup>

*Modern Screen*'s Ramon Romero likewise asserted that Pons:

is no bigger than a minute, weighs but ninety pounds with her clothes on, and looks like a miniature Mona Lisa. Standing besides [Maria] Jeritza or [Geraldine] Farrar, she would diminish into a female Tom Thumb. She has reached the highest range in music, but in spite of her fame she remains as simple as a child. Meet Lily Pons, Grand Opera's latest contribution to the steadily growing list of songbirds who are bringing to the screens of the world a renaissance in music.

... Aside from a bell-like voice, it is felt that her diminutive personality will do much to endear her to film fans, who demand their heroines slim and slight.<sup>228</sup>

Unlike Moore, however, Pons, as a French citizen, was subjected to national chauvinism.

Whereas the press praised Moore for her fresh American looks, Pons often was referred to—as with Romero's reference to the diva being as “simple as a child”—in infantilizing terms as a “little French girl.” As *Screenland*'s “Honor Page,” a regular feature acknowledging recent feats of film greatness, glowingly professed in February 1936:

The greatest tribute *Screenland* can pay petite Lily Pons is that there is no temptation to greet her screen debut with the cynical salutation: “And still they come!” This latest singer from the Metropolitan Opera House is a very small, rather shy, exceedingly disarming young girl, who flings her thrilling coloratura about as casually as a tap dancer tosses off taps. When she sings *Lakmé* or *Rigoletto* she provides an exciting experience; then she wins us completely with her gay and genuine modesty, as much as to say: “Eet eez nuzzin'. Nuzzin' at all!” Then there's her sparkling sense of humor, somehow unexpected in a great prima donna; and definitely there is the endearing little-girl quality that, probably more than any other one thing, makes Lily Pons a permanent and welcome addition to our short list of really potent and important screen stars. She has been signed to make more pictures for us—let the next one be soon.<sup>229</sup>

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<sup>227</sup> “Pons has Fine Vehicle for Her Picture Debut,” *Washington Post*, 29 December 1935.

<sup>228</sup> Ramero, “Pons & Co. Invade Hollywood,” 44.

<sup>229</sup> *Screenland* Honor Page, “To Lily Pons, the Loveliest Lark Who Ever Hit High C with Voice and Personality,” *Screenland* (February 1936): 10.

*Photoplay* columnist Josephine LeSueur likewise exclaimed that “everybody everywhere is drinking a toast to Hollywood’s latest discovery, a great soprano, an excellent actress, an adorable childlike personality, all rolled into one—Lily Pons!”<sup>230</sup> Although likely steeped in American perceptions of national superiority, such descriptions of the diva may have derived from a pop-culture phenomenon of the previous decade. Anne Douglas Sedgwick’s novel *The Little French Girl*, which addressed cultural differences between the French and the British, became the third-bestselling book in the United States in 1924 and was made into an eponymous silent film by Paramount Studios the following year. The adaptation received positive reviews at the box office and would have been somewhat well known in Hollywood circles. Thus, the recurring references to Pons as a “little French girl” may have originated in comparisons between the artist herself—although more likely her onscreen depiction of the somewhat innocent Annette Monard—and Sedgwick’s sympathetic and naïve, teenaged French protagonist, Alix Mouveray, with whom she even shares the same initials.

Pons’s “youthful” and buoyant personality charmed critics across the board. Nelson B. Bell’s review of *I Dream Too Much* for the *Washington Post*, for example, lauded Pons’s charisma:

If any part of the primary purpose of the cinema is to introduce new faces and new personalities to the mass public, then some portion of that admirable object may be said to have been achieved by the presentation of Lily Pons as star of *I Dream Too Much* ... Mlle. Pons, on the screen and in person, as some of the drama desks were permitted to note on last Thursday afternoon, is a vibrant, fascinating and capable young woman. She possesses in abundance that rare quality of personal magnetism that was such an outstanding attribute of the late President Theodore Roosevelt. E.M. Newman, the eminent Traveltalker, tells me that Mussolini has the same high personal voltage. So have Al Jolson, Jimmie Durante, Lupe Vélez, Will H. Hays and a number of others who might be mentioned. All are in the first flight. Mlle. Pons is no exception. It is only necessary to meet her for a moment to realize that here is a personality that cannot fail to make a

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<sup>230</sup> LeSueur, “Songbird in a Gilded Cage,” 45.

definite and wholly pleasant impression upon the picture-gazers who sit out front and dare the performer to make good.<sup>231</sup>

Although Bell's assortment of celebrated figures perhaps seems incongruous—ranging from a Fascist dictator to the head of the motion-picture censorship board—they all shared similar reputations for their charismatic personalities. Political leaders Roosevelt and Mussolini were known for their unquenchable energy, while actors Jolson and Durante were famous for their larger-than-life stage/screen personas. Hays, the former Postmaster General turned Production Code chief, exhibited an “inspiring” personality, whereas Latina screen siren Vélez, “The Mexican Spitfire,” possessed a vibrant yet explosive temperament.

Pons's captivating personality was even used by RKO in its promotional materials as a means to control its star's Frenchness. The studio fêted the diva's “cute foreignness,” but clearly preferred to emphasize Pons's more “American” qualities. In the studio's presskit, RKO's publicists eschewed any hints of European temperament, instead drawing attention to Pons's down-to-earth nature.<sup>232</sup> In doing so, RKO attempted to imbue its star with a familiar disposition—notably ascribed to Moore—that could mollify xenophobic Americans. In a customarily gendered description of the prima donna, Pons was characterized, for example, as “completely unspoiled by vanity. Her simple manner, unaffected charm and sincere friendliness win all who have the good fortune to meet her. She is a charming mixture of the little girl and the cosmopolitan woman of the world.”<sup>233</sup> Pons, too, shared the work ethic and humility supposedly innate to Americans: “She loves simple things and hates ostentation. She does not like

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<sup>231</sup> Nelson B. Bell, “New Personality Comes to Films and an Old One is Rejuvenated,” *Washington Post*, 5 January 1936.

<sup>232</sup> Whereas Hollywood materials tended to portray Pons as lacking temperament, the press related to her stage career delighted in sharing Pons's “temperamental” escapades.

<sup>233</sup> RKO Studio Advance, *I Dream Too Much*—[RKO 1935], Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration Records, MHL.

nightspots, gay hotels, or large parties. Work is an extremely large part of her life. The price of operatic success is continuous practice and training imposed by self-discipline. Miss Pons never neglects her work.”<sup>234</sup> For RKO, then, it proved beneficial both to embrace Pons’s nationality as exciting and exotic and to neutralize her French origins by casting her as somewhat American in nature. Conversely to Moore, however, Pons never achieved as great a level of screen popularity as she did on the stage.

In regard to *I Dream Too Much* itself, RKO adopted a multifaceted promotional campaign that sought to position the film as “entertainment for all classes of the American public”<sup>235</sup> (Figures 2.1 and 2.2). The presskit highlighted the movie’s “wide variety of brilliant and unique entertainment” that hypothetically would appeal to everyone, including: scenes at a French street carnival; the film’s Paris setting, which provided an element of *joie de vivre*; a “high spot” of singing and dancing in a French café; popular British character actor Eric Blore’s dry humor and interactions with a trained seal; and operatic excerpts sung by Pons that offered the film a touch of sophistication.

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<sup>234</sup> RKO Studio Advance, *I Dream Too Much*–[RKO 1935], Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration Records, MHL.

<sup>235</sup> RKO Studio Advance, *I Dream Too Much*–[RKO 1935], Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration Records, MHL.



Figure 2.1: Poster for *I Dream Too Much*, c. 1935

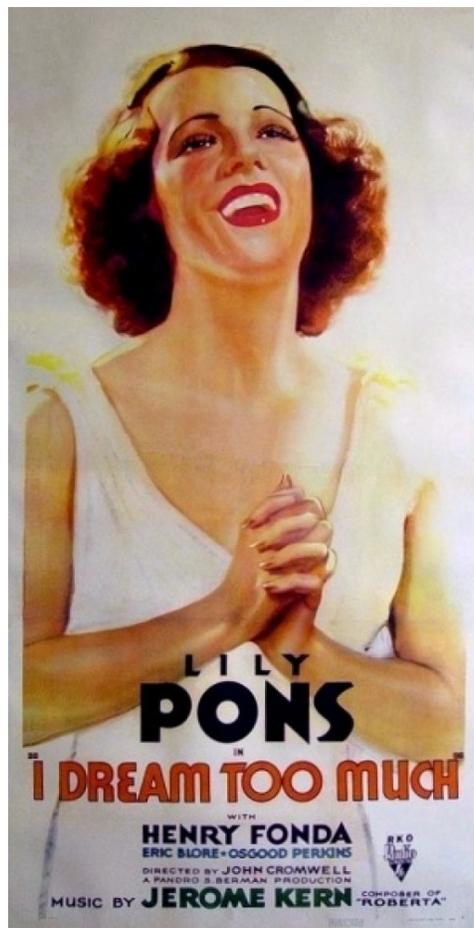


Figure 2.2: Poster for *I Dream Too Much*, c. 1935

According to the presskit's opening description of *I Dream Too Much*, the movie was not simply "an operatic exhibition but a glorious dream of romance set to music."<sup>236</sup> The two arias sung by Pons, the "Bell Song" from *Lakmé* and "Caro nome" from *Rigoletto*, were described as "brilliant highlights" that only composed a "relatively small part of the remarkable entertainment" presented in the film.<sup>237</sup> Instead, the studio advance plugged the movie's four popular numbers, newly written by Jerome Kern and Dorothy Fields: "Jockey on the Carousel," "I Got Love," "I'm the Echo," and the movie's title song, "I Dream Too Much."<sup>238</sup> RKO's prepared biography for the diva also functioned as promotional material for selling the film's tunes: "Miss Pons has no 'highbrow' attitude toward popular music. She says she simply adores it, if it is not too ordinary. She has expressed the greatest enthusiasm for the Kern-Fields numbers written for *I Dream Too Much*."<sup>239</sup> For Pons, then, a popular song could be enjoyable if it offered something special to distinguish it from the constellation of tunes plugged to listeners on a daily basis.

Even though the movie purportedly contained a little something for everybody, theater managers were informed that there was "no blanket campaign that will reach everyone. It will be necessary to direct a separate appeal to each class." To exploit the film, it was therefore recommended that they sell the "opera angle to the highbrows" and the film's "romance and

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<sup>236</sup> RKO Studio Advance, *I Dream Too Much*–[RKO 1935], Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration Records, MHL.

<sup>237</sup> RKO Studio Advance, *I Dream Too Much*–[RKO 1935], Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration Records, MHL.

<sup>238</sup> An abundance of sheet music and printed scores located in the RKO archives at UCLA suggest that Jonathan Street's opera once was going to be prominently featured in the film. However, only the aria "I'm the Echo" was used. Jerome Kern received \$20,000 (\$345,000) for four weeks' guaranteed work, although I could not find any information regarding his contractual agreement for onscreen credit and billing percentage. Dorothy Fields was allocated \$4,250 (\$73,400) plus an additional \$160 (\$2,760) for transportation from New York to Los Angeles. See RKO Budget Detail of Labor and Material, 3 September 1935, *I Dream Too Much*, Box 59P, Folder A851, UCLA.

<sup>239</sup> RKO Studio Advance, *I Dream Too Much*–[RKO 1935], Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration Records, MHL.

popular music to the mass public.” The highbrows ostensibly could be reached through “contacts with women’s clubs, special announcements to members of the social register, through the music editors of your local papers, society sheets, and special telephone calls.” To capture the interest of the masses, on the other hand, the advance notice suggested stressing:

the absorbing romance of the picture and its other down to earth qualities—the young girl’s burning love that will appeal to every young girl, the conquest angle that will appeal to every young woman with a desire for greatness, the male conquest angle that will strike a responsive chord in the young man with ambition. Sell the popular music and the glamorous girls to those whose entertainment ideas are purely sensory. Sell the clothes.<sup>240</sup>

At first glance, RKO’s exploitation tips appear to observe the principles of what I discussed in the Introduction as bounded taste cultures formed by class and in direct opposition to each other.<sup>241</sup> Yet a close investigation of RKO’s marketing strategy for *I Dream Too Much* suggests that the formation of a flourishing middlebrow culture affected the ways in which the studio promoted Pons’s operatic musical. Even while instructing theater managers to distinguish between two categories—high and low—in their promotional campaigns, RKO simultaneously proposed that music lovers could “be found among all classes.” The studio’s presskit claimed that they could be reached via musical organizations, schools, and conservatories as well as through parent-teacher organizations and music centers. To help advertise Pons’s film, the studio’s publicists further recommended inviting the local Better Films Bureau to “get on board”:

“*I Dream Too Much* is a picture worthy of their attention—one to be ranked among motion

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<sup>240</sup> RKO Studio Advance, *I Dream Too Much*–[RKO 1935], Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration Records, MHL. The studio suggested elsewhere in the document that the musical-comedy sequences would contain a chorus of dancers and six mannequins dressed in gowns created by Bernard Newman, a famous New York designer. Newman also designed Pons’s wardrobe of twelve “stunning outfits, all of which will challenge the admiration of the women of your audience.”

<sup>241</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

pictures that are aiding the movement to raise the standard of American pictures. Contact the churches, church organizations and educational organizations. Get them behind your drive.”

RKO’s studio advance reveals the complexity of a class-based promotional strategy when it involved advertising “good music” to the American public. There are two main reasons for this. First, claims of the United States as a democratic society, however imaginary they may have been, sufficiently permeated American culture so as to cut through perceptions of specific musics meant only for the rich or only for the poor, at least for a time.<sup>242</sup> Second, the United States lacked an institutional infrastructure that would have perpetuated significant musical hierarchies. Only a few of the largest American cities boasted an opera house, and opera was routinely performed by traveling companies in the same venues—and even on the same programs—that hosted performances of such genres as vaudeville to patrons from across the economic spectrum. It was only toward the close of the nineteenth century that opera became more closely associated with the moneyed classes.<sup>243</sup> Still, the continuation of opera’s performance in English (as well as its various original languages) by touring companies well into the twentieth century allowed American audiences to resist, in practice, a culture of bounded taste categories, even though outside forces began coding genres more and more according to classed perceptions of musical preference.

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<sup>242</sup> Notions of American exceptionalism underpinned the idea of the United States as unique in terms of class systems. According to political scientist Charles Murray, most Americans polled in the early twentieth century considered themselves as either working or middle class, regardless of financial income brackets. Although the United States obviously was not a classless society, Americans associated class with what one made of oneself more so than one’s economic standing. Hence, the strong sense of aspirational feasibility associated with the American Dream. According to Murray, a lower class did not exist “except for people who earned it. So Americans had invidious names for people with lower-class behavior—‘white trash’ and the like—but not for people who were simply poor or otherwise respectable.” See Charles Murray, *American Exceptionalism: An Experiment in History* (Washington D.C.: AEI Press, 2013), 22. For more on American exceptionalism, see, for example, Hilde Eliassen Restad, *American Exceptionalism: An Idea That Made a Nation and Remade the World* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>243</sup> See Kristen M. Turner, “Class, Race, and Uplift in the Opera House: Theodore Drury and His Company Cross the Color Line,” *Journal of Musicological Research* 34, no. 4 (October 2015): 320–51.

### **Censorship and Reviews: *I Dream Too Much***

*I Dream Too Much*'s portrayal of normative gender roles—the wife longing for domestic bliss with the husband serving as the family's sole provider—might make a modern viewer crave more nuance, but it more or less conformed to the Production Code Administration's (PCA) objective for the movies to uphold the sanctity of marriage. Indeed, the screen adaptation of the original story proposed by Elsie Finn and David G. Wittels even omitted the husband's affair with the musical-comedy star in the end. As Joseph Breen, the director of the Motion Picture Censor Office in Los Angeles, stated, the Code must "jealously guard marriage and firmly ward off from it [the] strongest standing threats against its stability."<sup>244</sup> Film censors mostly were concerned with curtailing depictions of adultery on the screen, but a woman's career could potentially threaten the stability of the family unit as well. This perceived threat surely resonated strongly with many individuals during the Great Depression, whereby traditional gender roles frequently were turned upside down as husbands lost their jobs and wives entered into different types of service—from cleaning to selling homemade goods—in order to alleviate the family's reduced financial circumstances. *I Dream Too Much*, for example, depicted the perils of a wife enjoying more success than her husband: Annette and Jonathan's marriage almost collapses, but it returns to a seemingly harmonious state when she renounces her career for motherhood. Undoubtedly, the censors' aim for the film industry to venerate marriage has been partly responsible for the many uncritical depictions of fairytale relationships that still persist in Hollywood today.

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<sup>244</sup> Joseph Breen quoted in Thomas Patrick Doherty, *Hollywood's Censor: Joseph I. Breen and the Production Code Administration* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 92.

According to the studio advance for *I Dream Too Much*, RKO cast Annette and Jonathan's relationship as "vibrant," "real," and "entrancing," despite the fact that it began as a drunken one-night stand between strangers. As the thumbnail sketch of the plot oozed:

*I Dream Too Much* is the story of an amazing little French girl who runs away from fame and into the arms of love, is overtaken by it and tries desperately to escape from its manacles so she can just live and love a rose-hued life of romance.

The owner of a magnificent voice, she submerges her great talent in a greater love, but fame seeks her out, tears her from the arms of her adored husband and hurls her to the operatic heights. The great opera houses of the world ring with acclaim and the world pays homage at her feet, but she can hear only the thunderous pounding of her tortured heart—a heart that cries out for the man who left her because he couldn't stand the shame her triumphs brought to him. Fame separates them, but fortune reunites them and in the ecstasy of recaptured bliss she pulls him up on the pinnacle with her—to an even greater glory than her own—and then steps down to become one of the world that applauds him and what her heart has always yearned to be—a wife and mother.<sup>245</sup>

Words such as "rose-hued," "romance," "bliss," and "ecstasy" frame the couple's rather disastrous liaison as ideal, and Jonathan's moodiness is condoned as an expected side-effect of his artistic nature despite the fact that it frequently results in brutish behavior toward his wife. "Manacles," "tears," and "tortured" suggest, on the other hand, that Annette's greatest gift—her voice—is also her heaviest burden because it drives a wedge between the couple's happiness. RKO's sketch further downplays Annette's talent in favor of her composer-husband's "greater" genius, celebrating the fact that Jonathan ultimately achieves wealth and fame, while Annette returns to her proper place in the home. In effect, *I Dream Too Much* cautioned against the dangers of women who seek something above and beyond the domestic realm.

Even though *I Dream Too Much* conformed to the PCA's guidelines for preserving the institution of marriage, the script's frequent *double entendres* and references to sex alarmed the Los Angeles office. The censors recommended, in particular, that the screenwriters take care during the scene in which Annette and Jonathan (previously known as "Franz") wake up together

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<sup>245</sup> RKO Studio Advance, *I Dream Too Much*—[RKO 1935], Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration Records, MHL.

after a night out on the town. As Breen wrote to RKO vice-president Bill Kahane on 18 July 1935:

Scenes 29–34, inclusive: The present treatment of these scenes is a somewhat suggestive play on the idea that Annette and Franz have been sleeping together, without “benefit of clergy.” This quality in these scenes is open to considerable objection and is not acceptable from the point of view of the Production Code, on the ground that it is offensively suggestive and treats the idea of a sex affair lightly and for comedy. Some means should be found of rewriting this material, to avoid all possible objection from the point of view of the Production Code. Especially dangerous is the dialogue and action on page 20, which indicates that Franz, in embarrassment, wishes to pay Annette off.<sup>246</sup>

Besides recurring episodes of *double entendres* and sexual innuendo, the censors objected to Annette’s almost obsessive interest in starting a family, which the writers conveyed through dialogue to underscore Annette’s “true desire” to be a wife and mother. In the same letter to Kahane, Breen cautioned: “Page 21: Here and elsewhere where there is a discussion about babies, it should be handled with great care and reduced to an absolute minimum.”<sup>247</sup> The writers must have ignored this instruction, because the censor repeated on 9 August:

Pages 34-35: There should be no prolonged discussion about having a baby. The underlined portions of the following lines should be deleted: “Anyway, I’m too busy... haven’t time to have a baby;” “I have plenty of time;” “I don’t want to have any ideas... I want to have a baby... when you have the time.”

The lines remained in the final cut of the film, but Breen’s objection proved to be slightly justified. All of the reports sent to Breen from the censorship boards in Ohio, New York, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Kansas, and Alberta, Canada, approved the film without eliminations except for the latter. The Canadian board deleted the underlined portion of the line, “I’d like to have a baby, when you have time” from both the film and its trailer. Seemingly, the

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<sup>246</sup> Letter from Joseph Breen to Bill Kahane, 18 July 1935, “*I Dream Too Much*-[RKO 1935],” Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration Records, MHL. All written communications to the studios went out under Breen’s name. According to Doherty, a letter at the bottom of the letter next to Breen’s signature indicated which staffer wrote it. “2,” for example, denoted Geoffrey Shurlock. See Doherty, *Hollywood’s Censor*, 84.

<sup>247</sup> Letter from Joseph Breen to Bill Kahane, 18 July 1935, “*I Dream Too Much*-[RKO 1935],” Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration Records, MHL.

Canadian censors objected more to the suggestion that babies should come second to a career than the idea of a couple trying to conceive.

*I Dream Too Much* once again rose to the attention of the censors after its release, this time due to infractions of the Production Code's guidelines regarding visual decency. In December 1935, Breen received an unusual memo from the head of the New York Censor Board, Dr. James Wingate.<sup>248</sup> Wingate's letter recounted a recent meeting with the board's chairman, a Dr. Irwin Esmond, who:

inquired what our practice was in relation to the showing in pictures of navels of women. I advised him that our general practice was to prohibit it and then I asked him what he had in mind. He replied that he had had before him that day the Lily Pons picture in which there was much display of her navel and that evidently the cameras made the most of it.

Having in mind your letter on that subject to us, I advised him that occasionally where the actress seemed to be dressed in character and no effort was made to exploit the same, we had occasionally permitted it. He then advised me that he had passed the picture but did so with considerable hesitation and suggested that I write to you to that effect.

Some days later he brought up the subject again and advised me that he had obtained an audience reaction and that in his opinion the particular costume—or lack of costume—in this picture detracted from interest in the song which were [*sic*] rendered. He stated the audience even went to the extent of audible tittering or laughter throughout the theatre.<sup>249</sup>

From his first viewing, Esmond expressed his misgivings regarding the scene's decency. Yet even upon receiving Wingate's response explaining the occasional allowance of navels in certain circumstances, Esmond persisted in conveying his disapproval of a scene that seemed to flaunt

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<sup>248</sup> According to the MPPDA Digital Archive at Flinders University in Australia, Wingate was a schoolteacher and principal who then went on to work for the New York State Education Department. He became the Director of the Motion Picture Division of the New York Education Department in 1937 and was responsible for the state's censorship. In October 1932, he became the director of the Production Code Administration until Breen took over as director. At that point, Wingate assumed control over the Eastern Production Code Administration and managed the New York title department. See biography of James Wingate, MPPDA Digital Archive, <https://mppda.flinders.edu.au/people/670> (accessed 22 June 2016).

<sup>249</sup> Letter from James Wingate to Joseph Breen, 10 December 1935, "*I Dream Too Much*-[RKO 1935]," Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration Records, MHL.

the limits of the Production Code. In the censor's opinion, the moviegoers' amused reaction proved that Pons's provocative attire distracted viewers too much from the central focus of this sequence: the music. Esmond's dismay may have been fueled further by the fact that Pons wore a racy costume while singing an operatic aria instead of a popular tune. Indeed, the diva's clothing choice called into question the widely accepted perception of opera as a noble—and ennobling—art form as well as its place in the movie theater. Only two years earlier in the Pre-Code era, for example, a bevy of chorus girls in sparkling and scanty attire—with studded jewels in their navels—entertained moviegoers during the revue sequence of Warner Bros.' *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* (1933) (Figure 2.3).



**Figure 2.3: Bejeweled Chorus Girls from *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* (1933)**

But, provided with a different soundtrack, Pons's bare skin, jewel-less navel, and hip-exposing skirt perhaps appeared to be an attempt on the studio's part to imbue opera with too much of a *Follies* flair (Figure 2.4).



**Figure 2.4: Screenshot of Lily Pons as Lakmé**

After 1934, the Production Code had generally curtailed any such “tantalizing” scenes of the body. Cultural historian Thomas Doherty elaborated what could be considered too much: “The naked body will not appear on screen, nor will its outlines be suggested to titillate: the Code will not abide a game of peek-a-boo. Occasionally, the partially clad body may be outlined, but in the mind only: the dancer who dresses behind a partition, the girl who slips into something more comfortable.”<sup>250</sup> The body and its natural sexuality were deemed, in Breen’s words, as harmful to one’s morality, “subversive to the interests of society, and a peril to the human race.”<sup>251</sup> The human form therefore needed to be covered to preserve the moviegoer’s moral compass.

Moreover, it was not considered socially polite to reveal one’s entire midriff in public at this time. Attitudes toward bared stomachs remained fairly conservative between the 1920s and the 1940s:

Costume designers for theater and film exposed the adult female midsection as early as the 1920s, but the bare midriff was introduced into high fashion in the 1932 [*sic*] by

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<sup>250</sup> Doherty, *Hollywood’s Censor*, 93.

<sup>251</sup> Joseph Breen quoted in Doherty, *Hollywood’s Censor*, 92–93.

couturière Madeleine Vionnet, when she offered an evening gown with strategically cut openings at the waist. Women's swimwear from the 1930s and 1940s incorporated increasing degrees of midriff exposure, from the merest of slivers to two-piece suits with separate bra tops and bottoms. The latter was modestly cut: the navel was always covered and sometimes an extra panel or skirt covered the crotch.<sup>252</sup>

Only by the late 1940s and early 1950s did two-pieces become acceptable for the beach, backyard, and informal events like BBQs and hayrides.

Understandably, then, Wingate and Esmond's qualms over Pons's bared navel were not isolated. In a letter revealing the more bureaucratic side of censorship, Breen informed Wingate that his office had flagged the *Lakmé* scene as a potential problem due to Pons's fashion-forward costume: "I am not at all surprised at what you tell me of Dr. Esmond's reaction. In fact, it is our own reaction, and were it not for the extraordinary circumstances, you may be certain that we would never have allowed the picture to pass."<sup>253</sup> Breen relayed that they had attempted to convince RKO to reshoot the sequence with Pons in "appropriate" attire. The Los Angeles office had insisted that there was a "very grave danger" that the censor boards in other parts of the country might cut the sequence (they did not), and that there was a likely possibility of audiences snickering during the scene and consequently losing "the pleasure of listening to such a glorious voice."<sup>254</sup> RKO, it appears, declined to make the recommended changes. The studio defended its product not only on financial grounds, insisting that it would be too expensive to redo, but also by drawing attention to its high-class properties. A movie featuring filmed sequences of a work

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<sup>252</sup> Claudia Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh, eds., "Midriff Tops" in *Girl Culture: An Encyclopedia* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2007), 434–35.

<sup>253</sup> I could not confirm this take on events in the chain of written communications between Breen's office and RKO during the production period. Their communications concluded with the standard report: "Yesterday, we had the pleasure of viewing a projection room showing of your picture entitled, *I Dream Too Much*, and are happy to report that this production meets the requirements of the Production Code, and should encounter no reasonable censorship difficulties." Letter from Joseph Breen to Bill Kahane, 1 November 1935, "*I Dream Too Much*-[RKO 1935]," Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration Records, MHL.

<sup>254</sup> Letter from Joseph Breen to Dr. James J. Wingate, 12 December 1935, "*I Dream Too Much*-[RKO 1935]," Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration Records, MHL.

staged at all major opera houses and that starred a popular singer from the Met could not be too sordid.

After providing Wingate with this information, Breen—in a masterful shift of political gears—himself adopted RKO’s view when defending his decision to issue the film’s certificate of approval to the New York censors. He deflected attention away from the visual elements of the *Lakmé* scene to focus on the aural:

Incidentally, you may want to know that the recording on this particular scene is talked about here in Hollywood as the finest piece of musical recording that the studio has yet secured. I have heard a number of people suggest that this particular piece of recording may win for the Radio sound department the Academy prize for the year.<sup>255</sup>

By lauding the beauty of Pons’s voice and the superiority of the sound recording, Breen proposed, at least in this in-house missive, that the scene’s musical merits outweighed any visual discomfort produced by the images on the screen. He claimed that the scene held nothing offensive, “nothing dirty, or suggestive, or vulgar. There was no emphasis on the costume—or lack of it—no leering, no snickering.”<sup>256</sup> Certainly, the fact that Pons maintained a vaunted reputation as a coloratura soprano and had worn the costume in character (as per studio regulations) played a role in Breen’s decision to approve the film.<sup>257</sup>

But while Breen defended the scene and his actions in his reply to the East Coast censors, he was not as supportive when forwarding Esmond’s complaint to Kahane. Seemingly reprimanding RKO for putting him in an awkward position, Breen observed that:

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<sup>255</sup> Letter from Breen to Wingate, 12 December 1935, “*I Dream Too Much*-[RKO 1935],” Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration Records, MHL. *I Dream Too Much* was nominated for Best Sound Recording, but lost to MGM’s *Naughty Marietta* (1935). See Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, [http://awardsdatabase.oscars.org/ampas\\_awards/DisplayMain.jsp?curTime=1431743173748](http://awardsdatabase.oscars.org/ampas_awards/DisplayMain.jsp?curTime=1431743173748) (accessed 16 May 2015).

<sup>256</sup> Letter from Breen to Wingate, 12 December 1935, “*I Dream Too Much*-[RKO 1935],” Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration Records, MHL.

<sup>257</sup> If the censors had not approved the entire film, RKO would have had to cut the scene.

you may be interested in knowing that we have had half a dozen or more formal complaints about this particular shot—just as I anticipated we would have. Further: In our peregrinations hereabouts in and out of the studios, together with the members of our staff, I have heard the shot questioned dozens of times. Further still: The tittering and laughter by the audience during the screening of this particular sequence ... has been noted by some of the girls here in the office at the screening of the picture locally. Mrs. Breen tells me also that when she saw the picture, the crowd giggled during almost the entire sequence.<sup>258</sup>

It seems that not even the musical quality of the *Lakmé* aria could supersede the entrenched idea that film operated primarily as a *visual* medium, especially when images were projected to larger-than-life proportions. Breen suggested that the film industry would need to regulate how its actors were dressed and how the operatic sequences were shot in order to direct the public's attention to a scene's aural content. In subsequent films featuring staged operatic performances, women's costumes, as a rule, certainly were more modest than daring. When Kathryn Grayson performed the "Bell Song" in *It Happened in Brooklyn* (1947), for instance, the cut of her costume adhered to that of a contemporary dress: covered shoulders, a moderate neckline, a floor-length skirt, and a covered navel (Figure 2.5).

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<sup>258</sup> Letter from Breen to Kahane, 12 December 1935, "*I Dream Too Much*-[RKO 1935]," Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration Records, MHL.



**Figure 2.5:** Screenshot of Kathryn Grayson as Lakmé in *It Happened in Brooklyn* (1947)

While the censors implied that audience snickering was the common response to the *Lakmé* sequence around the country, Kahane’s reply to Breen offers an alternative account of audience reception. The movie mogul stated that he had seen the film three or four times and had not heard any “tittering.”<sup>259</sup> Furthermore, the press and film magazines—ever eager to spread gossip or fuel scandal—reported a positive reaction to that very scene, which was oftentimes indicated by the public’s enthusiastic cheers and clapping. As one reviewer for *Variety* noted, for example: “Immediately after the *Lakmé* number there is a sequence showing audience applause, which is timed perfectly to avoid possible hold-up of the film through actual applause of the

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<sup>259</sup> Letter from Kahane to Breen, 13 December 1935, “*I Dream Too Much*-[RKO 1935],” Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration Records, MHL.

song, as happened at the Music Hall on the night caught.”<sup>260</sup> *Screenland*’s critic credited Pons herself as the reason why people cheered:

Little Lily Pons makes her screen bow to you in such unpretentious fashion that you’re sure to succumb! Lily is a prima donna—yes. But Lily is not buxom, or palpitating, or awe-inspiring. This frail, tiny thing possesses the world’s greatest coloratura voice; but she has fewer airs than a torch singer. She is humble rather than “gracious,” so when she gives out in arias from *Lakmé* and *Rigoletto* you are all the more ready to blister your paddies in wild applause.<sup>261</sup>

Thus, the very fact that Pons’s svelte body was clearly visible to viewers made her singing all the more enjoyable.

Critics certainly were impressed by Pons’s looks and operatic performances, but the film’s narrative was a different story. The *Los Angeles Times*’ Philip K. Scheuer succinctly called *I Dream Too Much* a “simple, pleasant picture” boasting “little of originality.”<sup>262</sup> As with *Screenland*, Andre Sennwald from the *New York Times* gave all the credit to Pons for saving the somewhat lackluster story:

Lily Pons makes a graceful cinema debut in the pleasant if somewhat minor operatic comedy called *I Dream Too Much*, which the Radio City Music Hall presented to its holiday audiences yesterday. The Gallic coloratura fortifies her brilliant singing with an engaging quality of bird-like charm and a sense of what her countrymen happily call *joie de vivre*. When her film threatens to perish in the languors of dramatic anemia, she rushes charmingly to the rescue with a burst of intoxicating song. Designed pretty candidly as a vehicle for Miss Pons, *I Dream Too Much* suffers from inaction and a limited sense of humor. But it is amiably managed, admirably played, and provides a reasonably painless setting for the gifted soprano ... Miss Pons manages a neat compromise between grand opera and popular melody. Her classical arias are the “Caro nome” from *Rigoletto* and the “Bell Song” from *Lakmé*, this latter work being staged briefly during the photoplay’s

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<sup>260</sup> Review of *I Dream Too Much*, *Variety*, 4 December 1935.

<sup>261</sup> Review of *I Dream Too Much*, *Screenland* (February 1936): 53.

<sup>262</sup> Philip K. Scheuer, “High Spots of Song Hit: Lily Pons Successful in Cinema Debut,” *Los Angeles Times*, 1 January 1936. See also Tinee, “Pons Triumphs in Film Built for Her Voice.”

account of her rise from peasant girl to distinguished diva. The Kern numbers ... are like the film itself, agreeably unimportant.<sup>263</sup>

*Variety*'s thorough review from 4 December 1935 situated *I Dream Too Much* within the current vogue for opera pictures, but differentiated Pons's vehicle as distinctly less operatic than one might expect: "Story basically follows the pattern of the first two Grace Moore pictures, in that it is a simple and fairly obvious yarn of the love life, and difficulties therefrom, of an opera singer. Where it veers off is that the emphasis is not on operatic singing. Six songs are used, four written by Jerome Kern and two operatic arias."<sup>264</sup> For this critic, however, the songs' placement within the narrative were "none too well spotted" because both the "Bell Song" and "Caro nome" were performed early in the film, which made it difficult for Pons to "top them" with Kern's tunes. With a mind acutely toward the songs' success beyond the film, the critic called "Jockey in the Carousel" a "honey" of a song that "should sneak up to big sales." "I Got Love" also had potential, but the "hotcha type of tune" did not suit Pons's voice as she "muffed it badly." *Variety* summarized that, overall, "Lily Pons' first film is by no means the best musical made, but it will be a winner at the box office without breaking any records."<sup>265</sup> Therefore, while the censors exchanged scandalized reports of Pons's Lakmé costume, the press offered a more

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<sup>263</sup> Andre Sennwald, "Lily Pons Makes Her Debut in *I Dream Too Much* at the Music Hall—*In Old Kentucky*," *New York Times*, 29 November 1935.

<sup>264</sup> Review of *I Dream Too Much*, *Variety*, 4 December 1935.

<sup>265</sup> Review of *I Dream Too Much*, *Variety*, 4 December 1935. *Motion Picture Herald*'s reviewer likewise honed in on *I Dream Too Much*'s sales potential: "Showmen have many angles at their disposal with which to sell this picture. While it devotes much of its action to operatic music, it is not a Grand Opera picture, even though it features an operatic star. While there is plenty of good music with which to attract attention from patrons of music, there is also a smartly contrived romance to interest the average person. In presenting a new screen personality, Miss Pons, it does so in a manner that lifts her potential future out of the risky class. It's almost certain that after this picture audiences will want to see her again ... If the entertainment values of all the productions assets are made known to the public, this picture should fare well at the box office." Indeed, the critic seems to have used RKO's advance notice to write his assessment, noting that the movie held "class and mass appeal alike, as there continually is something to interest all types" as well as packed a "human interest punch, aglow with natural comedy in action, situations and dialogue tinged with just enough drama," and operatic and modern music. Review of *I Dream Too Much*, *Motion Picture Herald*, 23 November 1935.

nuanced view in which the coloratura brought “good music” to moviegoers in a charming manner and to appreciative applause.

### **The Production Code, Film Conventions, and Stage Comparisons**

The censors’ concern with ensuring that the film industry produced more wholesome fare escalated in 1934, just one year prior to the release of *I Dream Too Much*. Under pressure from various religious communities and women’s clubs to “clean up” Hollywood, the censors began regulating films more closely in accordance with the newly established Production Code, which was first adopted in 1930.<sup>266</sup> The Code changed the way the studios made movies, prohibiting them from including profanity or showing what were then perceived to be indecent actions and morally suspicious situations in their products. The movie theater therefore was envisioned as a space in which to cultivate a better society by leading through example. As the Code’s general principles stated: “no picture shall be produced which will lower the moral standards of those who see it,” and “correct standards of life, subject only to the requirements of drama and entertainment, shall be presented.”<sup>267</sup>

To make sure that the studios abided by the Code, Joseph Breen oversaw a staff of (mostly) college-educated men who worked on an assembly line system in the Los Angeles

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<sup>266</sup> In the beginning, the Code proved difficult to enforce due to a number of reasons. On the one hand, the censors requested cuts to movies after the filming process, which was costly for the studios. The studios, in turn, could petition to overturn the censors’ demands by a three-way vote between studio personnel. Furthermore, there were no serious repercussions to ignoring the censors’ requests. It was only after the Federal Government became directly involved in the issue of film censorship that the Code began to be enforced in 1934. See Doherty, *Hollywood’s Censor*, 62. For more on this early period of censorship, see also Leonard J. Leff and Jerold L. Simmons, *The Dame in the Kimono: Hollywood, Censorship, and the Production Code*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 1–58. For a more in-depth history of the Production Code, see MPPDA Digital Archive, <http://mppda.flinders.edu.au/history/mppda-history/> (accessed 8 May 2015).

<sup>267</sup> Production Code General Principles. See MPPDA Digital Archive, <http://mppda.flinders.edu.au/records/2254> (accessed 8 May 2015).

office.<sup>268</sup> In the first stage of censorship, two men would read a script or story, make suggestions for improvement, and write an official report. Then, a third, “outside” reader was consulted, after which the studios and censorship office discussed any necessary changes via written communications. Lastly, Breen and select members of his staff would preview the final cut of the film and issue the required Code Seal.<sup>269</sup>

By the mid-1930s, Breen’s office had begun its missionary work in earnest. Raunchy and violent gangster films were on their way out while so-called “class” or prestige pictures—films based on literature and the dramatic arts—were on their way in. It was believed by those invested in cultural uplift that the exposure to such refinements as opera and Shakespeare might foster proper taste in the average American citizen, a sentiment that perfectly aligned with the goodwill mission of the Production Code. In 1937, former postmaster William Hays—the President of the MPPDA (Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America)—even expressed the hope that opera would become a standard part of filmic fare.<sup>270</sup>

For a brief period of time, it did. As I showed in Chapter 1, Grace Moore helped to kick-start a greater interest in grand opera with her smash hit, *One Night of Love* (1934), which was quickly followed up by *Love Me Forever* (1935).<sup>271</sup> Moore’s vehicles, particularly *One Night*, set

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<sup>268</sup> William H. Hays oversaw the network as head of the censor board with Joseph Breen serving as the director of the Los Angeles office. Other staff members in New York and Los Angeles included: Islin Auster, Karl Lischka (linguist, Professor of History and Education Psychology of Georgetown University); Dr. James Wingate (member of Board of Regents, Department of Education in New York and high school principal); Geoffrey Shurlock (college graduate who served as literary secretary to important authors); John McHugh Stuart (newspaper man); Arthur Houghton (New York legitimate theatre); Douglas Mackinnon (employed by Educational Company and other companies that produced short subjects). See Doherty, *Hollywood’s Censor*, 82–83.

<sup>269</sup> See Doherty, *Hollywood’s Censor*, 83–84.

<sup>270</sup> Nelson B. Bell, “Film Production of Complete Grand Opera is Seen by Will H. Hays in His Annual Report to Industry,” *Washington Post*, 5 April 1937.

<sup>271</sup> Columbia released *Love Me Forever* approximately five months prior to *I Dream Too Much* on 28 June 1935. *Love Me Forever* tells the story of Margaret Howard, whose father’s death results in financial ruin for the young socialite. Blessed with a golden voice, she decides to try to make it as an opera singer. A nightclub owner, Steve

a precedent for subsequent opera films to include sequences of staged scenes as one might see in an opera house, thus recapturing the visual elements of the genre that had been lost by the gramophone or radio broadcasts. By way of the movie theater, individuals from all walks of life could appreciate opera—or rather, a selection of the “best hits” of the operatic canon—as a multi-sensorial experience without the high ticket prices and high-class patrons who created a supposedly stuffy environment.<sup>272</sup> And due to the common practice of performing operas in their original languages, there need not be any concern that the average individual might be exposed to questionable lyrical passages. In addition, the studio practice of divorcing an aria from its context—that is, the rest of the opera—and thus excising the more overtly scandalous components of the genre subscribed to the ideals of those concerned with the moral whitewashing of the cinema. With regard to *Lakmé*, for instance, moviegoers would not necessarily be aware that the “Bell Song” was a song of seduction or that the rest of the opera featured a stabbing, an illicit love affair, abandonment, and suicide.

So while the film industry enabled a greater number of persons to experience operatic snapshots at their local movie theater, censorship governed how and what could be seen on the screen. In many ways, then, screened opera was less progressive than its live counterpart—certainly in regard to costuming.<sup>273</sup> In fact, three years prior to the release of *I Dream Too Much*, Pons wore a navel-baring costume for a 1932 performance of *Lakmé* at the Met. Allegedly, Pons and mezzo-soprano Gladys Swarthout had engaged in a friendly competition to see who could

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Corelli, falls in love with Margaret and gives her a job at one of his establishments. Corelli then pours all of his money into turning the nightclub into a classy venue where patrons can go to hear opera. The venture ruins him, and Margaret eventually falls in love with him because of his self-sacrifice.

<sup>272</sup> For more on the behavior of movie audiences, see Richard Butsch, “American Movie Audiences of the 1930s,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* no. 59: Workers and Film: As Subject and Audience (Spring 2001): 106–20.

<sup>273</sup> One only needed to attend a performance of *Tosca*, *Carmen*, or *Madama Butterfly* to be exposed to murder, mayhem, suicide, and corruption.

expose more of their abdomens.<sup>274</sup> Pons, who wore something akin to a bikini top and a wrap-around skirt, won (Figure 2.6).



**Figure 2.6: Lily Pons as Lakmé in 1932 at the Met.  
Courtesy of the Bill Park Collection, University of North Texas Music Library.**

Unlike the aforementioned censors' letters regarding *I Dream Too Much*, the majority of reviews for this Met production neither centered on Pons's stomach nor expressed fear that the costume might disrupt the audiences' appreciation for Delibes's music. Rather, Pons's costume seemed quite suitable to the subject of the opera, fulfilling the spectator's fantasies of the exotic

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<sup>274</sup> See James A. Drake and Kristen Beall Ludecke, *Lily Pons: A Centennial Portrait* (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1999), 186.

other and serving the “male gaze.” As W.J. Henderson wrote in his review for *The Sun*: “The production of last evening was one of much merit. The pictures were opulent and varied. Scenery and costumes were conceived in the spirit of the Far East and the groupings were excellent ... Miss Pons made a charming Lakmé ... Miss Pons, of course, reached her high point with the ‘Bell Song,’ which she sang brilliantly. In some of the other music she also commanded praise.”<sup>275</sup> If anything, the hype about the diva’s costume focused on its apparent authenticity as a two hundred-year old Indian sari. The celebrated critic, Deems Taylor, even lauded Pons’s open-minded clothing decision, albeit in gendered terms, claiming that the diva’s diminutive dimensions allowed her to wear it successfully: “Certainly no prima donna in my memory could have dared to dress it as she does. Her costume ... an authentic Indian dress that is two hundred years old [suggests] the old joke about its certainly being small for its age ... even aside from the risk of catching cold, there have been few operatic coloraturas ... who could have risked the experiment. In Mme. Pons’ case, it was a complete success.”<sup>276</sup> Music critic Olin Downes likewise commented on Pons’s costume: “Miss Pons appeared in her garb of the Indian penitent before the curtain ... The charm of the singer’s personality and art were enhanced by Miss Pons’s attire, for she wore some marvelous Indian jewels, chains, necklaces and what not, and gorgeous clothes in the opening act. The costume of the penitent was pleasing, not only for the contrast of its relative simplicity but for what it revealed.”<sup>277</sup>

The one account I found suggesting that Pons’s bare midriff instigated an uproar in polite society was written by Danton Walker, a reviewer for the New York tabloid *The Daily News* in

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<sup>275</sup> W.J. Henderson, review of *Lakmé*, *The Sun*, c. 20 February 1932.

<sup>276</sup> Deems Taylor, review of *Lakmé*, *New York Times*, 24 February 1932, in James A. Pegolotti, *Deems Taylor: A Biography* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003), 187.

<sup>277</sup> Olin Downes, “Lily Pons Receives an Ovation in Title Role of *Lakmé* in Revival of Delibes’s Pretty Opera,” *New York Times*, 20 February 1932.

1934.<sup>278</sup> According to Walker, his review of *Lakmé* sparked a scandal and skyrocketed him to journalistic success.<sup>279</sup> Walker's account, however, must be treated with caution, as Pons had set the precedent for wearing navel-baring costumes when singing the role of Lakmé two years earlier in 1932. Walker's digest of the performance from the Met's 1934–35 season appeared as follows in the *Daily News*: "It must be confessed that our favorite songbird did considerable flattening; deviating from pitch would be the more musicianly way of putting it. But who cares for a matter of pitch when one can gaze upon the loveliest tummy that every graced the operatic stage? And Miss Pons, despite other defections, was right on the button with the 'Bell Song,' which, after all, is what keeps *Lakmé* alive."<sup>280</sup>

According to Walker's somewhat sensational autobiography, Pons's costume had been kept under wraps by the opera house in advance of the 1934 opening so as to avoid drawing attention to it. Seeing as Pons had worn a similar costume two years earlier in 1932, though, this seems like either a calculated publicity stunt or a conservative move on the part of the Metropolitan Opera Company. The reporter elaborated on his experience: "No word had reached me about her costume; I didn't know that the stuffy *New York Times* had declined to print a picture of it until an air brush artist had properly veiled the midriff, nor that Boston papers had banned the photograph outright."<sup>281</sup> Walker also recalled that when the opera house's curtains went up, the audience gasped audibly: "Not since Geraldine Farrar squirted perfume under her

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<sup>278</sup> Danton Walker, *Danton's Inferno: The Story of a Columnist and How He Grew* (New York: Hastings House, 1955), 7. Walker, initially a part-time assistant in the *Daily News*'s financial department, had been tasked with the job of covering certain musical performances, particularly operatic appearances made by Pons and Grace Moore. His boss allegedly believed that Pons was the greatest coloratura in the world. According to the Metropolitan Opera Archives list of performances, the performance in question must have taken place on 22 February or 12 March 1934.

<sup>279</sup> Walker, *Danton's Inferno*, 10. I have not been able to find any other accounts of this "scandal," however, and believe that it may have become part of opera legend. Drake and Ludecke, for example, describe Pons's performance in such terms in *Lily Pons: A Centennial Portrait*.

<sup>280</sup> Walker, *Danton's Inferno*, 11.

<sup>281</sup> Walker, *Danton's Inferno*, 10–11.

skirts in *Sappho* had such liberties been taken with tradition. The Pons costume was as daring as anything to be seen in a Broadway nightclub. The midriff was bare and there was nothing between the bejeweled bra and the skirt, which was as low slung as a Bikini bathing suit. Miss Pons was probably the only prima donna living who could have risked the exposure.”<sup>282</sup> This last sentence was a thinly veiled reference to Pons’s slender proportions as well as the pervasive idea that the majority of opera singers were overweight. Walker thus projected the sentiment that the prima donna’s appearance was revolutionary because she was the only singer of the present day who could reveal that much skin and look good while doing so. Perhaps, too, her status as an “exotic” French foreigner playing an “exotic” character was enough to explain, at least to Americans, her choice of provocative attire.<sup>283</sup> Still, it is highly probable that the operagoer without opera glasses or sitting close to the stage would not have been able to realize that Pons’s navel was showing. In effect, only a select number of attendees with keen eyesight would have noticed that the diva’s costume bared more than usual, unlike in the movie theater in which everyday objects and people were projected to such a size that each seat offered an excellent vantage point.

Furthermore, while Hollywood continued to grow progressively more conservative in regard to women’s bodies on screen—the censors, for example, even objected to the appearance of “sweater girls,” whose cardigans apparently brought too much attention to their physical contours—the opera stage enjoyed a more flexible situation.<sup>284</sup> For her part, Pons continued to

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<sup>282</sup> Walker, *Danton’s Inferno*, 11.

<sup>283</sup> Americans typically perceived the French as amorous, sensual, and morally lax. For more on famous stereotypes of the French, see, for example, Piu Marie Eatwell, *They Eat Horses, Don’t They?: The Truth about the French* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2014).

<sup>284</sup> A few of the “sweater girls” from the 1930s and 1940s included Jane Russell, Veronica Lake, Ann Sheridan, and Lana Turner. The censors opposed “sweater shots” that outlined or emphasized women’s breasts. See Doherty, *Hollywood’s Censor*, 136.

wear provocative costumes during her tenure at the Met. Some of these included her many midriff-revealing Lakmé outfits worn between 1932 and 1947 and, for the 1936–37 season, a navel-baring outfit with sheer pantaloons for her role as the Queen in *Le coq d'or*, a costume that, after the *Lakmé* scandal, would definitely not have made it past the tightly-laced Hollywood censors (Figure 2.7).



Figure 2.7: Lily Pons as the Queen in *Le coq d'or*, *Vogue* 89, no. 4, 15 February 1937.

### Opera Films Begin to Decline in Public Favor

The vogue for films starring Metropolitan prima donnas lasted only a few brief years but left an indelible impression on Hollywood. It began with Grace Moore's *One Night of Love* in 1934 and reached its zenith in 1937. When Pons and mezzo-soprano Gladys Swarthout followed Moore to

Hollywood in 1935, their debut vehicles premiered just a little over a month apart from each other: *I Dream Too Much* on 29 November 1935 and *Rose of the Rancho* on 10 January 1936. Even former Met soprano Marion Talley left her self-imposed retirement to try the movies, making the lackluster *Follow Your Heart* in 1936.<sup>285</sup> Moore's final two films for Columbia both premiered in 1937, *When You're in Love* in February and *I'll Take Romance* in November, the latter receiving especially disappointing press.<sup>286</sup> That same year, Swarthout's penultimate musical film *Champagne Waltz* also opened to lukewarm reviews.<sup>287</sup> Besides movies starring Metropolitan celebrities, opera-singer narratives regularly appeared in the theaters between 1934 and 1938. One representative example featuring actress Dorothy Dare is *High Hat* (1937), a film that told a story about an opera diva who abandons her waning stage career in exchange for fame as a radio pop star.<sup>288</sup>

By the end of 1937, Hollywood had become saturated with opera stories. Both the public and film reviewers grew tired of watching aspiring prima donnas go through "spring training" to climactically attain a magnificent career. As film critic Frank S. Nugent wrote for the *New York Times* in December 1937:

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<sup>285</sup> *Follow Your Heart* tells the story of an eccentric musical family with a talented daughter who sings opera. With the help of a traveling tenor, the family puts on a show at their Southern home to acquire much-needed funds.

<sup>286</sup> In *When You're in Love*, opera singer Louise Fuller is unable to leave Mexico due to visa problems. She ends up marrying artist Jimmy Hudson, which enables her to return to New York and fulfill her opera commitments. At first, the couple does not get along, but they end up falling for each other in the end. *I'll Take Romance* tells the story of a temperamental soprano who is wooed by her manager so that the contract-breaking singer is coerced into performing in Buenos Aires.

<sup>287</sup> *Champagne Waltz*—in which Johann Strauss II's granddaughter saves his waltz venue from financial ruin caused by a visiting jazz band—opened in February 1937. Swarthout's final musical film, *Romance in the Dark*, would premiere in New York on 19 March 1938. A screwball comedy, *Romance in the Dark* follows a Hungarian peasant girl as she attempts to ingratiate herself into a famous tenor's good graces in order to become an opera singer.

<sup>288</sup> In another example, the screwball comedy *The Road to Reno* (1938), former silent-film actress Hope Hampton played a prima donna and sang excerpts from *La bohème*. I was unable to discern which arias were supposedly performed in this movie. See "The Road to Reno," AFI Catalog, <http://www.afi.com/members/catalog/DetailView.aspx?s=&Movie=7802> (accessed 6 July 2016).

Needling the operatic formula continues to be one of the most popular Hollywood pastimes, and, by and large, one of the least successful. There seems to be something about a soprano that brings out the worst in a script writer. And that “something”—whatever it is—having brought out the worst, extends its fell power to the director, who commonly is reduced to gibbering imbecility; to the leading man, who displays the emotional range of something out of Stonehenge; and to the supporting players, who wrangle among themselves over the bleached bones of a bare script. In short, when the cinema turns to classical harmony the general effect is one of discord.<sup>289</sup>

Nugent admired the “stately and dignified” movies of the *One Night of Love*-era, but observed that these earlier releases came with a handicap: they established an “inescapable” formula for all subsequent opera films. According to this critic, Hollywood’s more recent films either followed the original formula or spun two variations on a theme. One variation posited that the opera singer was not an unknown ingénue but instead a reigning star; the second introduced an “element of humanization,” which brought the vaunted singer “down to earth.” In movies based on this second variation, the diva appealed to the mass public in some way, perhaps by performing a popular song, as when Moore sang Cab Calloway’s jazz tune “Minnie the Moocher” in *When You’re in Love*. The appeal of novelty, Nugent surmised, encouraged Hollywood—“pleased with its democratizing work”—to overreach itself in devising fresh scenarios or comedic gags for opera singers. The film industry therefore churned out such films as Moore’s *I’ll Take Romance* and Pons’s *Hitting a New High* (1937), which, to Nugent, appeared “strained, unnatural, and forcedly ‘popularized.’”

Pons’s three films support Nugent’s suggested trajectory from the early days of opera film to the increasingly screwball. After *I Dream Too Much*, Pons went on to make *That Girl from Paris* (1936), a much lighter romantic comedy about a French diva who falls for an American jazz bandleader and sets out to prove that she also can sing more lowbrow numbers,

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<sup>289</sup> Frank S. Nugent, “Music Hath Alarms,” *New York Times*, 26 December 1937.

swinging such classics as Johann Strauss II's "The Blue Danube."<sup>290</sup> For this feature film, Pons teamed up with one of America's most beloved comedians, Jack Oakie. *That Girl* turned out to be Pons's only major moneymaker for RKO, grossing a respectable 10% profit and indicating that moviegoers were somewhat eager to see the coloratura soprano in action. But when Pons and Oakie—as well as stock comedians Edward Horton and Eric Blore—reunited for *Hitting a New High*, the screenwriters took the idea of screwball comedy to new levels, developing a film that, on the one hand, drew on Pons's reputation as a celebrated coloratura who often performed "exotic" roles and, on the other, played on her notoriety for wearing revealing costumes on stage and screen (Figure 2.8).



Figure 2.8: Poster for *Hitting a New High* (1937)

As a result, the writers adapted the formula of an aspiring opera singer in such a way as to tap into racialized perceptions of the African "other," an approach that did not go over well with most critics and moviegoers, who considered the idea of a French diva playing a "bird-girl" too incredulous to be amusing.

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<sup>290</sup> *That Girl from Paris* was a remake of an earlier successful RKO picture, *Street Girl* (1929), which also starred Jack Oakie.

### Screenplay and Reception: *Hitting a New High* (1937)

*Hitting a New High* tells the story of Suzette, an opera-star hopeful who passes herself off as Oogahunga, an African “bird-girl.” The complicated tale begins when press agent Corny Davis hears Suzette singing in a Parisian nightclub and offers her a chance to audition for his boss, millionaire opera benefactor and aspiring big-game hunter Lucius B. Blynn. Blynn, who does not really have a great ear for music, is always searching for “The Voice.” Corny and Suzette hatch a plan for Blynn to discover the singer on the millionaire’s hunting trip to a remote African jungle. While hot on the trail of lions and tigers, Blynn encounters “Oogahunga the Bird-Girl” in her natural habitat. Dressed in feathers and seemingly only able to speak to the birds, Oogahunga performs a stunning vocalise to a bugle bird (Figures 2.9 and 2.10). Amazed by the “bird-girl’s” voice, Blynn loads her into a bamboo cage and takes her to New York to be groomed for the Cosmopolitan Opera.



Figure 2.9: Screenshot from *Hitting a New High* (1937)



**Figure 2.10: Screenshot from *Hitting a New High* (1937)**

Back in the United States, Suzette’s boyfriend, Jimmy James, prepares to open a club in New York City with Suzette as the headlining act. He overhears her singing on the radio as the “bird-girl,” recognizes her voice, and traces her whereabouts to Blynn’s estate. In a move that does not suggest true love, Jimmy blackmails Suzette into singing at his club every night by promising not to reveal her alternate identity, wanting to keep Suzette at his club even though she wishes to be an opera singer. Blynn, meanwhile, attempts to wheedle impresario Andreas Mazzini and American composer Carter Haig from the Cosmopolitan Opera into seeing Oogahunga perform. They reluctantly agree to attend her debut performance at an estate party, believing Blynn’s “big find” to be yet another in a long series of duds. Mazzini and Haig are therefore astonished to learn that the “bird-girl” is actually Suzette, a singer they had seen performing at Jimmy’s nightclub. Now keen for the golden-voiced singer to perform at the Cosmopolitan, they do everything possible to prevent Blynn from uncovering the truth of Suzette’s real identity and causing a scandal. In spite of their efforts, an astonished Blynn

encounters Oogahunga singing at Jimmy's nightclub, and all is revealed. Once again fulfilling the PCA's requirements that women should choose domestic life over a career, Suzette ultimately renounces her dream to be an opera star to marry Jimmy and to sing jazz in his café.

Before releasing the film, RKO offered an in-house preview of *Hitting a New High*, requesting that its employees comment on the film itself as well as its audience-entertainment and box-office values.<sup>291</sup> The previewers worked for sectors dealing mostly with marketing and sales, including the Contract Department, Foreign Department, Sales Department, and Publicity Department. Also present at the viewing were Leon J. Bamberger, RKO's Sales Promotion Manager, and Harry Gittleson, the studio's General Sales Manager. All employees reported that they enjoyed the film and particularly appreciated the comedy of Edward Horton, Eric Blore, and Jack Oakie. They universally decided that the film's audience-entertainment value ranked somewhere between "good" and "excellent," with the Foreign Department's Michael Joffray giving it a solid "AA-1" rating. *Hitting a New High*'s box office draw was expected to outgross Pons's second film, with foreign sales exceeding domestic revenue.<sup>292</sup> The representatives from the Sales and Publicity departments, however, suggested that *Hitting a New High* would need

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<sup>291</sup> The report instructed that: "Wherever possible, please give your reasons for any adverse criticism. Elbert Hubbard said that the person who criticizes without giving reason is only a common scold. This report is not designed for your own amusement but for the serious purpose of helping your company." See Preview Comments, *Hitting a New High*, 1937, RKO Studio Records, Box 80P, Folder A997, UCLA.

<sup>292</sup> The production cost for *That Girl from Paris* amounted to \$534,000 (\$8,810,000 today) with distribution costs totaling \$428,000 (\$7,060,000). It garnered \$683,000 (\$8,810,000) from the domestic box office and \$380,000 (\$6,270,000) from foreign revenue. The movie's total revenue came to \$1,063,000 (\$17,500,000), with a profit of 10%. See Jewell, "RKO Film Grosses, 1929-51," 56. *Hitting a New High* did not do as well. Its total budget was estimated at \$659,913.91 (\$10,900,000) on 22 August 1937. Pons was paid a generous flat salary of \$75,000 (\$1,240,000) for eight weeks of work. The film went significantly over budget because of delays on set. Oakie, for example, occasionally showed up late or did not report for work, while necessary sets were not provided for in the initial budget. According to an account of the daily budget from 18 December 1937, the film's final estimated cost amounted to \$723,580.54 (\$11,900,000). See Daily Budget Estimation, *Hitting a New High*, 1937, RKO Studio Records, Box 80P, Folder A997, UCLA. Jewell counts the production cost at \$727,000 (\$12,000,000) and distribution at \$192,000 (\$3,170,000). Domestic revenue amounted to \$305,000 (\$5,030,000) and foreign revenue only \$183,000 (\$3,020,000) for a total of \$488,000 (\$8,050,000). The film lost a total of 47%. See Jewell, "RKO Film Grosses, 1929-51," 58.

special treatment in order to reach a broad audience. One salesman believed that the movie was designed to attract only “class audiences,” while publicity man Rutgers Neilson recommended that the studio appeal to the masses’ tastes by selling the “comedy angle and referring to [the] previous teaming of Pons and Oakie.” Gittleston likewise thought that the movie should do “ok” at the box office “if in the advertising the exhibitor places stress on Oakie if his clientele is not Lily Pons-minded.”

A few individuals assessed the film’s musical numbers. Neilson acknowledged that the music was “good,” while Joffray noted that “This excellent picture certainly hits a new high in high quality entertainment. Not a dull moment, and that’s something when prolonged singing sequences take place—Congratulations!” Gittleston solely critiqued the vocal sequences: “The only serious fault I can find with the picture is that the operatic numbers are too long and tend to slow up the continuity. One number in particular (I believe it was the ‘Mad Song’ from *Lucia*) could have the last few minutes cut without harm and avoiding an anti-climax.”<sup>293</sup>

Many film reviewers echoed Gittleston’s critique. On 3 December 1937, for example, *Film Daily* pronounced that:

Here is a picture that should please any audience, with a good story, Lily Pons, gorgeous coloratura soprano, and three expert comedians supplied with plenty of funny gags and situations to make the most of full tonal qualities of the diva’s brilliant voice which have been faithfully recorded, assuring a melodic feast for filmgoers ... Miss Pons delivers several pleasing numbers with the orchestra and also sings several operatic arias ... A possible criticism would be that there is slightly too much aria work by Miss Pons.<sup>294</sup>

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<sup>293</sup> Harry Gittleston, Preview Comments, *Hitting a New High*, 1937, RKO Studio Records, Box 80P, Folder A997, UCLA.

<sup>294</sup> Review for *Hitting a New High*, *Film Daily*, 3 December 1937.

The reviewer for the *Hollywood Reporter*, on the other hand, liked the “daffy comedy” and witnessed the preview audience of 30 November 1937 particularly enjoying the “Mad Scene” from *Lucia*, which drew an ovation from the crowd.<sup>295</sup>

In general, though, most critics were less congratulatory. Gus McCarthy argued that *Hitting a New High* was another “bizarrely premised and presented picture” aiming to “wed grand opera to the more common and plebian forms of screen entertainment.”<sup>296</sup> With Pons singing operatic arias throughout most of the film, McCarthy asserted that those “who understand and appreciate musical art undoubtedly will be impressed. Those whose preferences lie in other directions probably will react otherwise.” The critic also included in his review details of the audience’s reaction at the Pantages Theater in Hollywood: “Eavesdropping on remarks made in the theatre and in the lobby afterwards lead to the forming of the opinion that the patrons thought there was too much of everything and that they would have been better pleased had the material been more expertly shortened.”<sup>297</sup>

The review in *Variety* on 30 November 1937 focused on the seeming disjunction between the screwball plot/“synthetic” humor and the abundance of aria work, predicting that *Hitting a New High* would not do overly well at the box office without “heavy selling.”<sup>298</sup> Although Pons’s singing was “magnificent,” it was “a little long on the coloratura side, calculated to appeal more to the cultivated than to the mob.”<sup>299</sup> Pons’s “essential dignity” also got in the way of her ability to pull off the dual characterization of “a cabaret jazz warbler who yearns only to

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<sup>295</sup> Review of *Hitting a New High*, *Hollywood Reporter*, 30 November 1937.

<sup>296</sup> Gus McCarthy, review of *Hitting a New High*, *Motion Picture Herald*, 4 December 1937.

<sup>297</sup> Interestingly, a significant paring down of the film’s 85 minutes would have resulted in a B-length film.

<sup>298</sup> Review of *Hitting a New High*, *Variety*, 30 November 1937.

<sup>299</sup> Review of *Hitting a New High*, *Variety*, 30 November 1937.

sing classic opera” and a “weird jungle creature masquerading to fool a silly patron of the arts.” *Motion Picture Daily* similarly opined: “It is never for a moment as funny as a thing like that would have to be to amuse people who don’t know or care about opera sponsors, or people who do, and it has the additional demerit of making Miss Pons a stupid young woman sputtering phony Africanese between song numbers.”<sup>300</sup> Lamentably, the movie ranked among the “season’s major disappointments.”

Moreover, Pons once again ruffled the moral feathers of the cinematic community when she wore a two-piece costume for her role as Oogahunga. The diva’s “risqué” outfit—supposedly made of three ounces of feathers and a “generous coating of talcum powder”—made the news, even though Pons’s skirt covered her navel this time.<sup>301</sup> According to the *Washington Post*, everyone admired the diva’s appearance until orchestra conductor Pietro Cimini expressed outrage at the thought that Hollywood was launching “an assault against” the standards of opera by trying to make “a female Tarzan” of Pons: “Putting opera in tights seems unnecessarily undignified, and breaking faith with the opera.”<sup>302</sup> Pons, however, responded by stating that her costumes always conformed to the requirements of the role, alluding to the fact that her outfits for the stage were often more daring than the feather costume she wore in her third film.<sup>303</sup> As the *Hollywood Citizen-News* observed: “Before the movies had any opportunity to provide a

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<sup>300</sup> Review of *Hitting a New High*, *Motion Picture Daily*, 2 December 1937.

<sup>301</sup> United Press, “Thrush’s Wing Ample Costume for Slim Diva: Lily Pons Defends Scanty Attire Against Caustic Attack by Maestro,” *Washington Post*, 15 October 1937.

<sup>302</sup> United Press, “Thrush’s Wing Ample Costume for Slim Diva: Lily Ponds Defends Scanty Attire Against Caustic Attack by Maestro,” and “Singer’s Costumes Pain Musician,” *Hollywood Citizen-News*, c. 1938–39, Constance McCormick Scrapbook Collection, “Lily Pons,” The Cinematic Arts Library at the University of Southern California, Special Collections, Los Angeles, CA (USC).

<sup>303</sup> “Singer’s Costumes Pain Musician,” *Hollywood Citizen-News*, c. 1938–39, Constance McCormick Scrapbook Collection, “Lily Pons,” USC. See also “Stream-Lined Prima Donna: The Story of Lily Pons: She Caused a Controversy,” *Look*, 4 January 1938: “When an orchestra conductor called it undignified, Lily asked: ‘What of it?’ She said she remembers when Mary Garden didn’t even wear this much in *Salome*.”

‘demoralizing influence,’ Miss Pons’s charming contours went on display not infrequently—as many opera lovers could attest.”<sup>304</sup> But bubbling beneath the surface of the critics’ negative reviews of *Hitting a New High* and their widespread concerns over Pons’s “bird-girl” costume was the unspoken question of race.

### **Hollywood’s “African” Films**

Between 1930 and 1937, Metropolitan singers had played a variety of exotic characters, either as film protagonists or for staged opera sequences.<sup>305</sup> Grace Moore, for instance, appeared as a Russian princess in *New Moon* (1930) and performed the roles of Carmen and Cio-Cio-San in staged musical numbers in *One Night of Love* (1934); Gladys Swarthout played Latina vigilante Rosita Castro in *Rose of the Rancho* (1935) and the Hungarian peasant Ilona Boros in *Romance in the Dark* (1937), a character who also moonlights as a Middle Eastern princess; and Pons portrayed the Indian maiden Lakmé in *I Dream Too Much*. As has been discussed by musicologist Ralph P. Locke, such opera characters as Madame Butterfly, Carmen, and Lakmé fulfilled the white composer’s fantasies of an exotic “other” and served as tantalizing objects of desire for the Western opera patron.<sup>306</sup> Hollywood’s international movie characters proved similarly alluring for American moviegoers, whose closest neighbors were Canada and Mexico.

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<sup>304</sup> “Singer’s Costumes Pain Musician,” *Hollywood Citizen-News*, c. 1938–39, Constance McCormick Scrapbook Collection, “Lily Pons,” USC.

<sup>305</sup> There is also a blackface sequence in *Follow Your Heart*. Marion Talley does not participate in that sequence.

<sup>306</sup> For more on opera and exoticism, see, for example, Ralph P. Locke, *Musical Exoticism: Images and Reflections* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), Ralph P. Locke, *Music and the Exotic from the Renaissance to Mozart* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), and Hyunseon Lee and Naomi Segal, eds., *Opera, Exoticism, and Visual Culture* (New York: Peter Lang, 2015).

Yet *Hitting a New High* differed from these earlier opera films by casting Pons in the role of an African “child of nature,” a character not only perceived as exotic but also as primitive.<sup>307</sup>

Since the days of silent film, Hollywood used the African continent as a mysterious destination for adventure pictures in the 1920s and 1930s, although the film industry imagined an Africa that could be easily interchangeable with India or Asia. Most of these motion pictures unrealistically portrayed Africa’s terrain as universally covered by jungle and replete with lions, tigers, crocodiles, snakes, gorillas, and elephants—despite the continent’s richly varied topography and zoology.<sup>308</sup> They also stereotyped Africa’s inhabitants either as “good” natives who helped white adventurers or as “bad” cannibals who wanted to turn them into dinner. Moreover, as ethnomusicologist Mark Slobin points out, film soundtracks drawing on the same set of musical tropes to underscore “otherness” further enhanced the generalized exotic character of these movies.<sup>309</sup> Hollywood, in other words, invented an “Africa” that signified an exotic and mysterious land of the unknown, in which vast riches could be gained and peril lurked around every tree trunk.

Hollywood’s representation of Africa differed somewhat from European films, whose narratives frequently underscored what postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha has described as

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<sup>307</sup> Hollywood films distinguished between “African” characters and African American characters. The former was more closely connected to ideas of British colonialism and primitivism, while the latter developed primarily from Jim Crow stereotypes. For more on Africa in Hollywood cinema, see Kenneth M. Cameron, *Africa on Film: Beyond Black and White* (New York: Continuum, 1994), Robin R. Means Coleman, *Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present* (New York: Routledge, 2011), and Sarah Steinbock-Pratt, “The Lions in the Jungle: Representations of Africa and Africans in American Cinema,” in *Africans and the Politics of Popular Culture*, edited by Toyin Falola and Augustine Agwuele (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2009), 214–36. For more on African American representations in film, see Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition (New York: Continuum, 2001), and Cedric J. Robinson, *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning: Blacks and the Regimes of Race in American Theater and Film Before World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

<sup>308</sup> Note also that African lions inhabit savanna grasslands rather than the jungle.

<sup>309</sup> Mark Slobin, ed., *Global Soundtracks: Worlds of Film Music* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 3–35.

the “civilizing mission.”<sup>310</sup> Historian Sarah Steinbock-Pratt points out two reasons for this difference: on the one hand, Africa was not a popular tourist destination for Americans, and, on the other hand, the United States lacked the colonial histories of such countries as Great Britain, France, Italy, and Belgium.<sup>311</sup> With their own heritage as a former British colony, what little Americans gleaned about Africa stemmed primarily from discourses of British imperialism or other such second-hand narratives as well as from imperialist ideas about race.<sup>312</sup> Some myths of Africa most likely emerged from accounts of big-game hunting and safaris, in which a few Americans—notably President Theodore Roosevelt and novelist Ernest Hemingway—participated. Still, the United States did not identify enough with Britain’s cultural history to wallow in imperial nostalgia films or movies celebrating the realm’s vast empire. Americans, Steinbock-Pratt argues, instead preferred narratives inspired by their own version of imperial expansion, wherein the lone American hero confronts the unknown and untamed African

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<sup>310</sup> According to Bhabha, Western nations justified colonization as part of their natural duty, wherein the white man’s burden consisted of civilizing “primitive” peoples in order to create a pure race. See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 75. In the French film *Princesse Tam-Tam* (1935), for example, a novelist experiencing writer’s block travels to the French colony of Tunisia in order to obtain inspiration from the “dark” continent and refresh his creative genius. There he encounters a local girl and decides to “civilize” her, ultimately returning to Paris where he passes her off as a glamorous foreign princess. In keeping with the civilizing mission, however, the final scene of the movie reveals that the writer has fantasized the whole thing and the Tunisian girl maintains her simpler existence in Africa.

<sup>311</sup> Unlike many European nations, the United States did not officially colonize any African countries. Liberia began as a private civilian settlement of the American Colonization Society, which declared independence from the United States in 1847. The United States, for its part, recognized Liberia’s independence in 1862. Rather, the United States’ strongest ties to Africa were through the American slave trade.

<sup>312</sup> Steinbock-Pratt, “The Lions in the Jungle,” 214–16. Robin R. Means Coleman states that, in regard to 1930s horror films, Hollywood “displayed an obsession with ‘out of Africa’ tales in which Whites ‘conquer’ Africa.” Coleman attributes this trend to American fascination with the early adventures of President Theodore Roosevelt, who went on safaris in Africa. In particular, he visited the Belgian Congo to acquire a variety of “exotic” animals for U.S. museums, returning with “over 11,000 specimens (e.g. elephants, hippos, rhinos, insects) for preservation and/or mounting.” See Coleman, *Horror Noire*, 37–38.

“frontier.”<sup>313</sup> Hollywood therefore cast Africa as a “place of beauty and danger, and most importantly, as a place for white people to act in, fall in love in, change, and dominate.”<sup>314</sup>

The corpus of American adventure films evoking Africa derives from three main scenarios.<sup>315</sup> The first is what communication studies and Afroamerican/African studies scholar Robin R. Means Coleman describes as “Blacks in horror films.” In movies such as *Ingagi* (1930) and *King Kong* (1933), “darkest” Africa (not always geographically Africa) is depicted as a land of savagery, in which Black men are portrayed as sub-human apes or beasts and Black women exude a life-threatening (for white men) sexuality.<sup>316</sup> The second storyline focuses on the white hunter-adventurer who seeks to mine Africa for riches and thrills. In such narratives, the hunter-adventurer tracks down big game; steals gems from sacred sites and ivory from elephant graveyards; or saves the day when shoddy airplanes full of tourists run out of gasoline and crash in the jungle.<sup>317</sup> The third scenario takes the “white goddess” or “child of nature” as its protagonist.<sup>318</sup> Illogically, scores of white men and women, somehow lost as children and raised by kindly (or sometimes not-so-kindly) animals, rule the jungle in films similar to *The Savage*

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<sup>313</sup> Steinbock-Pratt, “The Lions in the Jungle,” 216.

<sup>314</sup> Steinbock-Pratt, “The Lions in the Jungle,” 214.

<sup>315</sup> Hollywood also produced pseudo-documentaries that perpetuated racist stereotypes. See Steinbock-Pratt, “The Lions in the Jungle,” 220–24.

<sup>316</sup> Coleman, *Horror Noire*, 38–47. *Ingagi* tells the incredulous story of a white expedition that travels to the jungles of the Congo to investigate reports of a gorilla-worshipping tribe. They discover the tribe just as a virgin sacrifice occurs, and the expedition hunts down the gorilla in order to save the woman. *King Kong* follows a similar narrative, in which a film crew travels to a tropical island for a location shoot and encounters a giant gorilla. Kong falls for the crew’s blonde star and takes her away. The crew captures the gorilla and puts him on public display in New York City. Havoc ensues.

<sup>317</sup> For more on these types of films, see Steinbock-Pratt, “The Lions in the Jungle,” 217–19.

<sup>318</sup> Steinbock-Pratt, “The Lions in the Jungle,” 219–20.

*Girl* (1932) and the popular Tarzan movies.<sup>319</sup> In these films, white goddesses/children of nature usually encounter a civilized American, who helps them remember their “true” origins. Thus, their whiteness is reawakened, and they are “redeemed” from their status as African natives. Pons’s *Hitting a New High* draws on the latter two scenarios, as I will show in the next section of this chapter.

Hollywood’s adventure films propagated racist stereotypes of Blacks as “other.” As a consequence, Black actors did not have a diverse palette of characters from which to choose.<sup>320</sup> They were instead cast in “stock” roles, chiefly the African native in adventure films or as the servant, slave, or porter in movies set in the United States. Such characters did not feature prominently in motion pictures, oftentimes preventing any deep level of characterization.<sup>321</sup> The film industry also inscribed “Blackness” onto certain roles performed by white actors, either through blackface or white-appearing characters similar to the white jungle goddesses. Common characteristics inscribed through film included: basic speech patterns (i.e., “Me Tarzan, you Jane.”); the use of animal skins, feathers, or plants for “tribal” clothing; and an unfamiliarity with what a society matron might call “civilized manners.” The cinema, in other words, did not always mark racial difference visually or by skin color: it also coded imagined ways of being—speech, actions, character traits—as either “white” or “black.”

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<sup>319</sup> *The Savage Girl* tells the story of a white jungle goddess who is captured by an African explorer. The *Tarzan* series first began in the silent film-era, between 1918 and 1929. Olympic swimmer Johnny Weissmüller took over the role in a second series, produced from 1932 to 1948. Tarzan still continues to be a popular figure in American cinema; the latest Tarzan film, *The Legend of Tarzan*, premiered in Summer 2016.

<sup>320</sup> See Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*.

<sup>321</sup> Hollywood purposefully did this so as to not lose revenue from Southern states. It limited the scenes in which Black actors appeared—or segregated shots of white and Black actors within a scene—so that Southern censor boards could easily cut those sequences. See, for example, Melissa Ooten, *Race, Gender, and Film Censorship in Virginia, 1922–1965* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015).

## ***Hitting a New High* and Representations of Race**

Multiple incarnations of *Hitting a New High*'s synopsis, first titled *Born to Sing* and then *Girl in a Cage*, demonstrate that the film's writers drew on preexisting tropes of Africa and Africans as propagated by the adventure film to formulate their narrative.<sup>322</sup> Robert Harari and Maxwell Shane devised the original story, which was later developed as a screenplay by Gertrude Purcell and John Twist.<sup>323</sup> An excerpt from an early version of the movie's storyline dated 28 June 1937 shows how the authors conceived of their dual characterization for Suzette/Oogahunga (here, indicated by Pons's first name, "Lily") in racialized terms:

Lily finally wins the argument with Corny, and starts another one about what she will sing at the party. Corny insists she must repeat her bird song; as a child of nature and a little jungle savage she naturally would not sing any arias in French or English. Lily insists that the great Cassazza must hear her to advantage, so as an encore she will sing an aria. She starts singing to illustrate, in spite of Corny's fear that Blynn will hear his child of nature singing like a trained opera singer, in French. He hastily starts the Victrola and begins shouting African words to drown Lily out. Lily throws him out of the cabin, and he explains to the astonished captain, as he "oogahunga's" out the door, that the singing he hears is the Victrola.

Then, when Jimmy climbs into her room through the window:

Lily fortunately sees him in a mirror and immediately goes into her bird-girl act, seeming very shy like a frightened wild thing as he enters from the window. She lets loose the bird she has started talking African gibberish to, and stares at Jimmy with shy, frightened eyes.<sup>324</sup>

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<sup>322</sup> According to various incarnations of the screenplay, the writers envisioned a scene in which Oogahunga sang to a feathered community in a caged aviary. This sequence recalls a vocal number in the French film *Zouzou* (1934), in which dancer/singer Josephine Baker sings "Haïti" while seemingly locked in a glittering cage. Baker swings on a bird perch, dressed in a bikini with plumage-like tulle.

<sup>323</sup> Both Robert Harari and Gertrude Purcell wrote *Music for Madame* (1937), a film starring opera singer Nino Martini.

<sup>324</sup> Gertrude Purcell, *Girl in a Cage* Storyline, 28 June 1937, *Hitting a New High*, RKO Studio Records, Box 592S, UCLA. Even though the audience is aware from the beginning of the film that Oogahunga is really the aspiring opera singer Suzette in disguise, *Hitting a New High*'s writers included a backstory that further explained how and why a white woman might be able to speak to birds and act like a "child of nature." Midway through the film, a man pretending to be Oogahunga's father comes to blackmail the singer for money. He introduces himself as a sea captain, claiming that he was shipwrecked off the coast of Africa where he lost his baby daughter to the waves. After hearing the "bird-girl" sing on the radio, the captain "realized" that his daughter was really alive, having grown up on her own in the jungle with birds for friends. Also, the Jimmy referred to in this sequence is not

Purcell and Twist's description of Oogahunga reflects historical perceptions of Africans as "wild savages" from the jungle and "children of nature" who speak only "gibberish." As this excerpt shows, for example, the nonsensical "oogahunga" initially signified an African dialect but was later appropriated as an African name.<sup>325</sup> Further, oogahunga, perhaps purposefully, recalls the familiar phrase, "ooga booga," which has various associations with "bad" or "dark" beliefs such as Voodooism and the Bogeyman.<sup>326</sup>

*Hitting a New High*'s screenwriters evoked two tropes in characterizing the "bird-girl" role for Pons. The first trope originated in operatic culture, wherein displays of coloratura pyrotechnics were compared to the vocal acrobatics of the feathered species. Journalists and publicists, for example, typically deployed words like "warbles," "trilling," or "chirping" in their writings to describe the high tessitura and technical feats performed by coloratura sopranos. Pons's particular vocality, then, no doubt provided partial inspiration behind the "bird-girl" character, a pun that would not have worked in regard to either Grace Moore's lyric soprano or Gladys Swarthout's rich mezzo-soprano. The second trope drew on Hollywood's imagined world of tribal communities, one that the writers combined with screwball humor. Certainly, RKO's portrayal of a woman portraying a "bird-girl" who was raised in an African jungle poked fun at the 1930s adventure films by exaggerating the genre's general features.

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Suzette's boyfriend, Jimmy James, but rather the actor Jimmy Stewart. RKO wanted Stewart for Pons's love interest, but the role ended up going to John Howard.

<sup>325</sup> Following in a long tradition of theater and opera, it was a common practice of the Western European and American artistic communities (particularly authors and filmmakers) to create so-called African names (and even languages) for Black characters. Josephine Baker, for example, played the characters "Zouzou" and "Tam-Tam" in two French films, *Zouzou* (1934) and *Princesse Tam-Tam* (1935). As with "Oogahunga," names similar to "Zouzou" and "Tam-Tam" were invented to sound repetitive and infantile, a purposeful means of casting a character as seemingly childlike or less intelligent.

<sup>326</sup> According to some sources, "ooga booga" is also a nineteenth-century derogatory term used by the British to refer to the inhabitants of Sudan.

Pons's feather outfit, too, signified a new twist on the animal skins designed by Hollywood costumers to represent the "authentic" attire of African, Indian, and Asian peoples from around the globe. It included an above-the-knee length feather skirt, a bikini top, feather bracelets, and an assortment of beaded necklaces. Early in the screenwriting stage and before the costume designers even began their work, Purcell and Twist envisioned Pons's costume as completely made of feathers with a large plume for a tail. In one version of the synopsis, Corny suggests that Suzette wear the feather costume at a debut party where the Cosmopolitan's opera impresario and commissioned composer would first hear her sing. Suzette, for her part, wants to wear an evening gown, but Blynn proposes that Oogahunga would be more comfortable in her "native sarong."<sup>327</sup> When Suzette tears the feather costume to pieces in a rage, "Corny assures Blynn it will be much smarter to present her in as sophisticated a costume as possible, as the guests will be expecting a savage. Defeated, Blynn gives in and Lily gets a stunning evening dress to wear."<sup>328</sup>

Although such scenes were written as comedic gags, many critics and members of the public seemed disinclined to suspend their belief that Pons was playing an "African native." By 1937, moviegoers had grown accustomed to stories of jungle queens/white goddesses, essentially female Tarzan characters whose role, as explained by Steinbock-Pratt, "is to rule over the native population, until she falls in love with one of the White Hunters and promptly loses her power,

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<sup>327</sup> Note that "sarong" is an Indonesian word. Moreover, it became closely associated with actress Dorothy Lamour, who first wore one in Paramount's acclaimed *The Jungle Princess* (1936), in which she played the role of a white jungle princess. Lamour continued to play these types of roles in such films as the popular *Road* films starring Bob Hope and Bing Crosby. It is possible that RKO looked to *The Jungle Princess* as inspirational material for *Hitting a New High*.

<sup>328</sup> Gertrude Purcell, *Girl in a Cage* Storyline, 28 June 1937, *Hitting a New High*, RKO Studio Records, Box 592S, UCLA.

thereby reinforcing ‘natural’ hierarchies of gender and race.”<sup>329</sup> But when combined with the film’s other problems—its inclusion of “too much of everything” and hyper absurdity—Pons real-life identity as a famous opera diva made it difficult for viewers to accept her in such a silly and lowbrow role, even if she was only playing the woman playing the “bird-girl” in the film. Unquestionably, Pons spent more screen time as the fictional Oogahunga than she did as Suzette, making Oogahunga come across as a legitimate character in *Hitting a New High*. Moreover, adventure films ranked among the least sophisticated forms of filmmaking at the time, cheaply made and usually featuring B-grade acting.<sup>330</sup> While poking fun at opera was a longtime tradition in the popular theater circuit, Pons’s status as a professional opera diva made RKO’s attempt at humor seem misplaced and in poor taste. RKO therefore appeared to be cheapening opera’s centuries-long history and reputation as one of the highest cultural achievements of the West by turning the celebrated diva into a spoofy “female Tarzan” and not providing her with a quality screenplay.

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The radio and the gramophone brought opera to a new host of listeners in the early twentieth century, disseminating the genre more widely across the United States than ever before. Over the course of the 1930s, proponents of the music-appreciation movement championed opera as a source of moral and cultural uplift, while an emerging middlebrow audience clamored for the classics. Both the radio and the gramophone had rendered opera as strictly an aural art, however, at least for the majority of Americans purchasing records or tuning in to broadcasts of “good music.” The film industry thus restored the visual element of the genre that had been lost by

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<sup>329</sup> Steinbock-Pratt, “The Lions in the Jungle,” 219.

<sup>330</sup> *King Kong* is an exception to this rule. The film’s special effects added significantly to RKO’s budget.

these media. This recaptured sense of sight initially was met with excitement and approval in Grace Moore's *One Night of Love*. Yet the reactions to Lily Pons's costumes in *I Dream Too Much* and, later, *Hitting a New High* indicate that opera's perceived moral benefits had been challenged by the film industry. According to the Production Code and censorial consensus, the prominent display of Pons's body—particularly in *I Dream Too Much*—imperiled the viewer's morality, essentially negating any good her operatic performances might have inspired. In the end, whether for personal or for bureaucratic reasons, the censors advocated for the film's aural content but censured its allegedly provocative visual elements, thereby locating the value of opera in the music rather than in the total performance.

The sense of disappointment surrounding *Hitting a New High* seemingly lent credence to this way of thinking. As the movie's reception documents revealed, Pons's portrayal of a jazz singer who moonlights as an African "bird-girl" was both visually disconcerting and ridiculous to some viewers. Moreover, *Hitting a New High* directly confronted opera's status as a venerated and sophisticated musical genre. According to the rhetoric of the time, opera would lose its inherent capacity for uplift if its historically white origins became too obscured. Similarly to the one-drop rule, which asserted that any individual with a trace of African ancestry is considered Black, fusing opera with musical elements coded as Black could be seen in white culture at the time as destabilizing the genre's prestige. Indeed, George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*—often referred to as a "folk opera"—for example, remained separate from the operatic canon, in part, because of its engagement with an imagined Black culture.

Socially constructed as white, opera and its performers thus entered racially blurred

terrain in *Hitting a New High*.<sup>331</sup> To the film's many critics, RKO went too far in its attempt to popularize opera by casting Pons in the dual role of a cabaret singer/jungle goddess. The studio appeared to be "blackening" opera by having Pons—the most celebrated coloratura soprano in the United States—embody a nightclub performer and a "female Tarzan," especially since both jazz and Tarzan characters were connoted as "Black" in the movies. Perhaps responding to the peevish reactions to *Hitting a New High*, the film industry did not deviate from this normative purview again. As the 1930s gave way to the 1940s and as Hollywood released a new series of operatic films, the film industry reaffirmed opera's whiteness by almost entirely abandoning the reproduction of staged opera sequences and reinventing the image of the opera singer as the quintessential (white) American girl-next-door.

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<sup>331</sup> This excludes the roles of such various "others" in opera as Cio-Cio-San and Othello. Despite the proliferation of Black opera troupes and Black operatic singers—notably Sissieretta Jones "The Black Patti," Marian Anderson, and Paul Robeson—in the United States, opera clung furiously to its white roots.

### CHAPTER 3: FROM *THERE'S MAGIC IN MUSIC* TO *THE HARD-BOILED CANARY*: PROMOTING “GOOD MUSIC” IN THE PRE-WAR MUSICAL FILM

“Meet those amazing kids from ‘America’s Music Town’—Interlochen!—in the screen’s joy-filled, song-filled entertainment treat! Your new singing-starlet, Susanna Foster, leads the parade of youth!”<sup>332</sup> Such advertisements heralded the opening of Paramount Pictures’ *There’s Magic in Music* (also known as *The Hard-Boiled Canary*, 1941), a film starring the studio’s first operatic ingénue, the 16-year-old Susanna Foster, and a host of talented teenagers representing the students of what was then known as the National Music Camp.<sup>333</sup> Incorporating ideas of intellectual, cultural, and moral uplift proselytized by proponents of the music-appreciation movement, *There’s Magic* celebrated the then widespread belief that “good music” could transform ne’er-do-wells into model citizens.

The movie opens with a sequence in which Michael Maddy, the director of the Interlochen Music Camp, conducts a radio interview with the acclaimed music critic, Deems Taylor—and causes quite a stir. During his interview, Maddy enthusiastically espouses the universal appeal of art music, claiming that he overheard the audience of a cheap burlesque theater in New York going “wild over a young girl singing grand opera.” His idealistic remark prompts the radio’s horrified directors to terminate the interview immediately. Maddy then persuades the publicity director of the Manhattan Opera Company to accompany him to the

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<sup>332</sup> Movie advertisement for *The Hard-Boiled Canary*, *Parents’ Magazine* 16, no. 4 (April 1941): 7.

<sup>333</sup> According to the movie’s publicity, Foster was promoted as a 14-year-old singing sensation. The Interlochen youth were played by members of the California Junior Symphony Orchestra, and the film’s exterior scenes were shot on location at Lake Arrowhead, CA.

burlesque. There they discover the film’s protagonist, a teen soprano named Toodles LaVerne, singing the “Shadow Song” (“Ombre légère”) from Giacomo Meyerbeer’s *Dinorah*.<sup>334</sup> To Maddy’s chagrin, Toodles is “shadowed” by a striptease artist whilst singing her aria for the highly appreciative and chiefly working-class, male audience (Figures 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3).



**Figure 3.1: Screenshot of Toodles at the burlesque show**



**Figure 3.2: Screenshot of Toodles being “shadowed”**

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<sup>334</sup> In various script drafts, Toodles caught Maddy’s attention by singing the “Bell Song” from *Lakmé*, the “coloratura aria from *Traviata*” (presumably “Sempre libera”), and the “*Rigoletto* aria” (presumably “Caro nome”). The studio decided on the “Shadow Song” by 6 June 1940. See *There’s Magic in Music* Script, 6 June 1940, Paramount Pictures Scripts, Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library, Beverly Hills, CA (MHL).



**Figure 3.3: Screenshot of the burlesque dancer**

A police raid subsequently drives everyone out of the theater, and Maddy finds Toodles taking refuge in his car. He whisks the girl away to safety and awards her a scholarship to attend Interlochen, despite the camp's precarious financial circumstances. Surrounded by Interlochen's upright management and middle-class camp prodigies, Toodles eventually renounces her morally dubious past as a reform-school refugee for a future full of magical music-making.

*There's Magic in Music* seemed to contain all the ingredients necessary for box-office appeal. It played on George Bernhard Shaw's *Pygmalion* narrative, one of Hollywood's favorite plot devices. It included a romance between the camp's director and its attractive efficiency expert. It offered dramatic moments meant to tug on the viewer's heartstrings—will Toodles save the music camp from financial ruin?—as well as comic segments designed to make the audience roar with laughter, as when Toodles entertains the camp by imitating famous movie stars. What is more, *There's Magic* featured popular songs in addition to the many sequences of opera, chamber music, and symphonic works performed by gifted adolescents. The film's popular numbers included “Fireflies on Parade,” a dance band tune written especially for *There's Magic* by composer Ann Ronell; Toodles' “imitation song”; and a rendition of John Philip

Sousa's "The Stars and Stripes Forever."<sup>335</sup> The more prominent musical selections drew, among others, on Georges Bizet's *Carmen*, Johannes Brahms' Hungarian Dance No. 5, Charles Gounod's *Faust*, Johann Strauss II's "Voices of Spring," Edvard Grieg's Piano Concerto in A minor, and Richard Wagner's *Rienzi* and *Tannhäuser*.

Despite this nod to a broad spectrum of musical tastes, Paramount's sales department decided shortly before the film's release that the movie needed special advertising to reach the so-called masses. Imagining that these individuals were disinclined to like the classics, the sales department changed the movie's title from the sanguine *There's Magic in Music* to the seedier *The Hard-Boiled Canary*. In doing so, the department effectively rebranded the film as an edgier type of motion picture, more suggestive of a crime drama than a musical about the divine power of the Western European canon. With its new—and arguably incongruous title—the film flopped when it hit theaters in March 1941, causing Paramount to pull the motion picture and re-release it three months later in June under its former title, *There's Magic in Music*.<sup>336</sup>

An abundance of archival materials positions *There's Magic in Music* as a valuable case study for investigating the transitional period of musical film production between the waning of the Great Depression and the onset of World War II. This chapter uses unpublished sources to contribute a new perspective on the complexities of producing and promoting films showcasing Western art music. Censorship records, studio correspondence, comment cards, promotional materials, scripts, and other such primary documents reveal how Paramount's internal debate over what to call *There's Magic in Music* indexed broader cultural and global developments affecting film content, genre conventions, and the studio system's "assembly line" approach to film production.

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<sup>335</sup> I could not find any information regarding the title of the imitation number.

<sup>336</sup> The only change made to the film was its title.

Paramount's internal debate over what to call *There's Magic in Music* shows how the film industry's divided attitudes toward presenting art music in the movies affected product development, marketing, and reception. As I discussed in the Introduction, musical preference, or taste, became increasingly politicized in the 1920s and 1930s as the music-appreciation movement gained momentum and as a middlebrow culture developed. Situated within this context, *There's Magic in Music* serves as a lens through which we might interrogate changes in musical film production and fluid notions of "good music" at the eve of World War II, both as the film industry adapted to, and as cultural taste and political frameworks shifted in response to, a Europe already embroiled in war. This chapter first briefly contextualizes the film industry's mixed attitudes toward the classics within the music-appreciation movement of the New Deal-era before addressing the rising prominence of teenaged actors in the mid-1930s. I then outline the transition of musical-film production from the Great Depression to the immediate pre-war years. Next, I investigate how the shifts in filmmaking and the tension between "good music" as elite art and "good music" as mass entertainment manifested in Paramount's year-long deliberation over what to call *There's Magic in Music*, as the studio sought an inclusive title that would appeal to all audiences. I then analyze two sets of documents to show how the public responded differently to the same film depending on its title. An examination of Paramount's promotional campaign further illustrates how the sales department's late decision to change the movie's title and attract the masses ran counter to the studio's promotional strategies, which targeted music lovers and the middling to upper classes.

## Hollywood and the “Classics”

“...interest in good music is more widespread today than ever before. Radio programs featuring classical numbers are among the most popular on the air, while phonograph records of great singers and symphony orchestras outsell even those of popular dance bands.” Thus claimed Michael Maddy in a speech addressed to radio listeners during the opening scene of *There’s Magic in Music*. The camp director’s sound bite neatly encapsulated the position of art music in the United States at the dawn of the 1940s. By this time, a number of radio programs similar to Walter Damrosch’s *Music Appreciation Hour* had become staples on the air, and the records of such famous artists as Lily Pons and Risë Stevens sold well nationwide. Instituted in 1935, the Federal Music Project, too, brought employment to composers, conductors, and musicians, establishing a host of new orchestras, concerts, music festivals, and music-appreciation courses across the country.

Moreover, Columbia Pictures had proved that there was a market for movies showcasing the classics. As I discussed in Chapter 1, the studio’s smash hit *One Night of Love* (1934) starring Metropolitan Opera soprano Grace Moore received rave reviews and multiple Academy Awards. *One Night* also sparked a wave of musical films cashing in on the popularity of “good music.” Nineteen movies released between 1934 and 1939 starred a number of well-known figures from the Met, including Jan Kiepura, Nino Martini, Grace Moore, Lily Pons, Gladys Swarthout, Marion Talley, and Lawrence Tibbett.<sup>337</sup> In addition to these operatic films, various

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<sup>337</sup> These films were: *One Night of Love* (1934), *Here’s to Romance* (1935), *I Dream Too Much* (1935), *Love Me Forever* (1935), *Metropolitan* (1935), *Follow Your Heart* (1936), *The Gay Desperado* (1936), *Give Us This Night* (1936), *The King Steps Out* (1936), *Rose of the Rancho* (1936), *Under Your Spell* (1936), *Champagne Waltz* (1937), *Hitting a New High* (1937), *Music for Madame* (1937), *That Girl from Paris* (1937), *I’ll Take Romance* (1937), *When You’re in Love* (1937), *Romance in the Dark* (1938), and *Ambush* (1939).

studios developed romanticized biopics of such figures as Frederic Chopin and Franz Liszt as well as narratives about aspiring classical composers.<sup>338</sup>

At the same time, some studios discovered that “good music” could serve well as comedic fodder. Such entertainment as the Marx Brothers’ *A Night at the Opera* (1935) satirized elite musical culture as much as the aforementioned movies fêted it. Other films like MGM’s *Everybody Sing* (1939), which starred popular singer Judy Garland, positioned classical music as particularly boring for young adults. In the movie’s opening scene, for example, Garland and her boarding-school classmates listlessly sing a recomposed Felix Mendelssohn piece in their music course, only to merrily “swing” it when their teacher leaves the room.<sup>339</sup>

But while motion pictures celebrated “good music”—and occasionally poked fun at it—publicity operated as a double-edged sword. Skepticism over art music’s potential for widespread appeal permeated Hollywood, despite film successes and reports issued by trade journals such as *What’s On the Air?*, which proclaimed that the classics were receiving extensive radio airplay and phonograph recordings were selling very well.<sup>340</sup> For their part, columnists frequently reinforced the perception that art music was dull or old-fashioned when plugging Hollywood’s new musical products. One representative example from *Screen Album* in 1936 addressed the recent influx of operatic musicals:

Until lately, the mere mention of grand opera was a signal for people to roll their eyes heavenward, which gesture was supposed to indicate acute boredom. The movie-going public has lived to break down and confess that all the good tunes do not come from Tin

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<sup>338</sup> See, for example, *A Break of Hearts* (1935), *Make a Wish* (1937), *The Great Waltz* (1938), *A Dream of Love* (1938), *The Life of Chopin* (1938), and *Intermezzo* (1939). This theme would continue into the 1940s with *Mr. Strauss Takes a Walk* (1942), *The Great Mr. Handel* (1942), *Heavenly Music* (1943), *Phantom of the Opera* (1943), *Song of Scheherazade* (1947), *Song of Love* (1947), *Night Song* (1947), and *The Mozart Story* (1948).

<sup>339</sup> In *Everybody Sing*, a young girl attempts to tell her dysfunctional family of playwrights, actresses, and singers why she was kicked out of boarding school.

<sup>340</sup> See, for example, Merlin H. Aylesworth, “Radio and the Radio Public of To Day,” *What’s on the Air?* 2, no. 5 (March 1931): 2.

Pan Alley; that an aria can be as popular as a torch song; that prima donnas are not all fat; and that it is a pretty thrilling experience to hear a full, gorgeous voice weaving in and out of the accompanying mazes of a big symphony orchestra.<sup>341</sup>

A multitude of journalistic narratives similar to this one created the impression that the public universally considered the classics to be tedious. Within these texts, live or previously recorded performances of “good music” served as a foil for Hollywood’s releases, which overcame the public’s tedium by rendering the classics more interesting, catchy, visually appealing, and accessible. Yet the preconception that the masses found art music to be boring was so strong that a few studios adopted multiple strategies for their promotional campaigns, hoping not to deter individuals with more “lowbrow” musical tastes. As we saw in Chapter 2, RKO attempted to appeal to as wide a range of audience preferences as possible when promoting Lily Pons’s debut vehicle, *I Dream Too Much* (1935).

Many studios attempted to establish distinctive niches for their contracted singing celebrities within the burgeoning operatic market. RKO, for one, settled on a screwball/romantic comedy formula for Pons, while Paramount Pictures initially gravitated toward serious drama and star glamour for Gladys Swarthout. The publicity for each of Swarthout’s five films released between 1935 and 1939, for instance, drew attention to the singer’s “exotic” beauty, slender physique, non-temperamental nature, and superior fashion-sense.<sup>342</sup> *Screenland* reported in February 1936 that “in the realm of opera, concert work, and radio,” Swarthout “started a revolution by having a face and figure as lovely as her mezzo-soprano voice. In Hollywood she has upset the works. Her complete lack of temperament, her disarming graciousness have made

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<sup>341</sup> Publicity for *The King Steps Out*, *Screen Album* (1936): 47. See also, for example, Elza Schallert, “Bravo, bravo! Grace Moore,” *Modern Screen* 8, no. 5 (October 1934): 34, and Rob Wagner, “Grand Opera on the Screen?,” *Screenland* 20, no. 4 (February 1930): 28–29.

<sup>342</sup> For more on Swarthout as a fashion icon, see, for instance, *Screenplay* 20, no.141 (December 1936): 42.

her ‘tops’ with everyone.”<sup>343</sup> Yet the unexceptional performance of Swarthout’s movies, both at the box office and according to the critics’ reviews, suggests that focusing more on Swarthout’s person rather than her singing might not have been a very effective strategy.

By the late 1930s and early 1940s, “good music” had become a fixed part of Hollywood’s soundtrack. It co-existed alongside the torch songs and increasingly popular swing music that marked the soundscape of World War II in the United States. Many of the studios held contracts with opera singers and occasionally welcomed other figures from the art-music world such as conductor and pianist José Iturbi as novelties. Hollywood even began developing its own stable of operatic stars, including teen singers Deanna Durbin, Gloria Jean, Susanna Foster, Kathryn Grayson, and Jane Powell.<sup>344</sup>

Still, there was more at stake for “good music” in Hollywood than for popular music, due, in part, to the widely held bias in the studios that the public found the classics to be tedious. If a particular popular song did not thrill audiences, popular music’s *raison d’être* was not called into question. If moviegoers disliked a classical performance, however, it contributed to the sentiment that art music was a “yawn.” Producers, directors, and screenwriters therefore were essential to shaping “good music’s” filmic presentation via screenplays, framing within the plot, and cinematography. Publicity and sales departments, too, played an equally critical role—although sometimes at cross-purposes—in cultivating advance interest in these musical films.

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<sup>343</sup> James B. Fisher, “The Two Influences in Her Life,” *Screenland* (February 1936): 26.

<sup>344</sup> Other operatic teens included Betty Jaynes and Ann Blyth. I will discuss Deanna Durbin, Kathryn Grayson, and Jane Powell in more detail in Chapter 4.

### Teen Girls Become the New Operatic Ideal

In the midst of opera's Hollywood heyday, a teenage girl with a big voice changed the way the studios made operatic musicals. Fourteen-year-old singing sensation Deanna Durbin took the film industry by surprise, inspiring a new trend for movies starring young, operatic ingénues in family-friendly features.<sup>345</sup> Durbin first appeared opposite Judy Garland in MGM's *Every Sunday* (1935), a one-reel film about two girls with distinct musical styles—one popular, one operatic—who band together to help keep a civic orchestra performing for the public on Sunday afternoons (Figure 3.4).



Figure 3.4: Screenshot from *Every Sunday*, with Judy Garland on the left and Deanna Durbin on the right

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<sup>345</sup> Durbin, born Edna Mae Durbin, proved to be the most popular of these operatic adolescents, making twenty-one feature-length films between 1936 and 1948. For more on Durbin and adolescence, see Jeanine Basinger, *The Star Machine* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 256–96, Jennifer Fleegeer, *Mismatched Women: The Siren's Song Through the Machine* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 78–105, and Gaylyn Studlar, *Precocious Charms: Stars Performing Girlhood in Classical Hollywood Cinema* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2013), 91–132.

The studio used the short as a screen test for both girls, ultimately deciding to retain Garland and let Durbin's contract lapse.<sup>346</sup> Durbin, however, was picked up by Universal Pictures for *Three Smart Girls* (1936), a film about three sisters who set out to break up their wealthy father's engagement to a gold-digger and reunite their divorced parents. The film became a surprise smash hit, and Durbin became one of the biggest stars of the 1930s and 1940s—she was voted #7 out of the twenty top stars in 1938 according to *Modern Screen*—a cultural icon with top-grossing movies and one of the largest and most devoted fan clubs.<sup>347</sup> For a time, too, she was Hollywood's highest paid actress as well as the highest paid woman in the United States.<sup>348</sup> I will discuss Durbin and her early career with Universal at length in Chapter 4.

*Three Smart Girls* premiered only one year prior to the successive departure of Metropolitan divas from Hollywood to return to their careers on the opera stage. Grace Moore happily bade farewell to Columbia after her final appearance in *I'll Take Romance* (1937). Lily Pons followed suit once her third film for RKO, *Hitting a New High* (1937), was completed. Only Gladys Swarthout remained contracted to Paramount for *Romance in the Dark* (1938) and a non-singing role in *Ambush* (1939). Durbin and her studio laid the foundation for a new formula for operatic musicals with *Three Smart Girls*, one that would showcase teenaged singers with a relatively advanced vocal technique and no prior experience with staged opera performance. Perhaps most significantly, these new protagonists offered the studios more flexibility in regard to plot material and characterization. Operatic musicals no longer needed to stick to the

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<sup>346</sup> According to William K. Everson, Garland initially was considered for *Three Smart Girls*. When she proved unavailable, Universal contracted Durbin instead. See William K. Everson, "The Career of Deanna Durbin," *Films in Review* 27, no. 9 (November 1976): 515.

<sup>347</sup> See "Stars' Barometer," *Modern Screen* (February 1938): 74.

<sup>348</sup> Durbin's salary and bonuses from 1938 amounted to \$130,000 (\$2,190,000 today). See *Fortune Magazine* (October 1939): 66. By 1941, she was making \$400,000 (\$6,440,000) a year. See "Deanna Durbin Biography," <[http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0002052/bio?ref\\_=nm\\_ov\\_bio\\_sm](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0002052/bio?ref_=nm_ov_bio_sm)> (accessed 2 October 2016).

dominant—and repetitive—aspiring opera singer/established opera singer stories that had run their course by the late 1930s. The studios, too, could abandon the costly reproductions of staged opera excerpts in favor of less expensive domestic sets. Opera and semi-classical repertoire thus entered a variety of unprecedented filmic realms, with young girls singing at school, home, camp, or elsewhere in the local community.

The wave of films featuring such talented adolescent singers materialized from the synthesis of two significant, and concurrent, industry trends: operatic musicals and movies featuring adolescent protagonists. Child stars fascinated Hollywood—and, even more broadly, the United States—especially during the Great Depression. The United States’ vogue for adolescent performers initially had begun to flourish in the nineteenth century, when child players became increasingly popular as part of a longstanding theatrical tradition.<sup>349</sup> Carefully constructed innocence, cuteness, and precociousness greatly contributed to their public appeal.<sup>350</sup> A few of these performers who had started their careers on stage or in vaudeville made the move to silent film in the early twentieth century. The most popular young star, arguably, was the luminous Mary Pickford (Figure 3.5).<sup>351</sup>

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<sup>349</sup> In the musical world, one might think of the famous child players, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and his sister, Maria Anna (Nannerl). In the mid-nineteenth century, children became increasingly visible on the U.S. theatrical stage, due, in part, to the burgeoning interest in “emotional” plays based on literature by Charles Dickens or such American novels as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. See Diana Serra Cary, *Hollywood’s Children: An Inside Account of the Child Star Era* (Dallas, TX: Southern Methodist University Press, 1997), 8–10.

<sup>350</sup> Cary also notes that infant/child mortality rates affected the way the public responded to children, making them appear more precious in the spectator’s eyes. See Cary, *Hollywood’s Children*, 45.

<sup>351</sup> Other stage stars included, for example, Lotta Crabtree, Elsie Janis, and Lillian Dolliver.



**Figure 3.5: Screenshot of Mary Pickford in *Daddy Long-Legs* (1919)**

A number of child actors succeeded Pickford as Hollywood's reigning adolescent star during the film industry's transition from silent films to sound films, including Jackie Coogan, Baby Peggy, Jackie Cooper, and Shirley Temple.<sup>352</sup> Whereas such performers as Coogan, Baby Peggy, and Cooper primarily played dramatic roles, Temple cornered the box office in the mid-1930s with her cheery song and dance routines. *Little Miss Marker* put Temple on the map in 1934, and she became a number-one box office draw for four straight years as well as a top-ten box-office attraction for seven years according to an exhibitors' poll in *Motion Picture Herald*.<sup>353</sup>

Such youngsters, who typically started their careers before reaching the age of five, primed the movie-going public for the ensuing wave of films starring teenaged actors. Indeed, various young players undergoing what was commonly referred to as their "awkward years" emerged in the mid-1930s, notably Mickey Rooney, who soon became affixed to the *Andy Hardy* series (1937–58); Bonita Granville, who starred in the *Nancy Drew* series (1938–39); popular

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<sup>352</sup> *Fortune Magazine* indicated that there were about 1,900 minors registered with the Central Casting Corporation in 1939, who averaged eight days of work per year for an average daily wage of \$7.50 (\$128) apiece. See *Fortune Magazine* (October 1939): 66. Even as Pickford aged, she continued to play adolescents throughout her career; scholars thus commonly refer to her as a "child-woman."

<sup>353</sup> See Studlar, *Precocious Charms*, 56. *Little Miss Marker* tells the story of a young girl who is offered to a gang of mobsters as collateral for a gambling debt.

singer Judy Garland, who was well on her way to achieving legendary status by 1940; and, of course, Durbin.<sup>354</sup> Film studies scholar Gaylyn Studlar observes that a cultural fascination with teenagers developed mid-decade, allowing such young adults to assume an unprecedented superstardom. A heightened curiosity about what “youth” meant and an increased visibility of fourteen to seventeen-year-olds contributed to this fascination: by 1940 the teen demographic had swelled to more than nine million for the first time in U.S. history, and a visible youth culture had coalesced around swing music, jive talk, and ice cream parlors.<sup>355</sup>

Although swing and jive talk may have quintessentially marked the teen lifestyle from the perspective of popular culture, operatic voices, at least in Hollywood, also contributed to the adolescent soundscape. Following the release of *Three Smart Girls*, Durbin cemented the connection between operatic singing and youth over the course of two years and five pictures: *One Hundred Men and a Girl* (1937), *Mad About Music* (1938), *That Certain Age* (1938), *Three Smart Girls Grow Up* (1939), and *First Love* (1939). Various studios groomed their own teenaged singers in response to Durbin’s success, hoping to discover another “cash cow.”<sup>356</sup> Universal even signed the twelve-year-old Gloria Jean as a potential replacement for when Durbin grew too old to play adolescent characters or fell out of public favor. Gloria Jean began her career in 1939 with *The Under-Pup* and went on to make seventeen films for Universal until

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<sup>354</sup> Other teen actors from this period included Betty Grable, Jane Withers, and Anne Shirley. For more on adolescent actors, see Basinger, *The Star Machine*, Cary, *Hollywood’s Children*, and Studlar, *Precocious Charms*. See also primary accounts, including Sheilah Graham, “Hays Office Battles to Maintain Screen Purity: Kid Stars Making Hit in Hollywood,” *Los Angeles Times*, 7 February 1937, and Edwin Schallert, “Child Film Actors of Hollywood to Garner \$2,000,000 During Year,” *Los Angeles Times*, 28 March 1937.

<sup>355</sup> Studlar, *Precocious Charms*, 95.

<sup>356</sup> Even opera singer Beverly Sills auditioned for the movies as a child. Sills made one short, *Uncle Sol Solves It* (1938), but did not end up securing a studio contract.

Despite his admiration and affection for Durbin, producer Joe Pasternak also was aware of her profitability for the studio. He referred to her as a “cash cow” in *Fortune Magazine*. See *Fortune Magazine* (October 1939): 158. Hollywood, too, perceived of children as commodities to be overworked when they proved popular and discarded when their box office appeal faded or they grew too difficult to control.

1945, although she never equaled Durbin's popularity. Paramount Pictures, too, signed fourteen-year-olds Linda Ware and Susanna Foster. Ware appeared in one film opposite Bing Crosby, *The Star Maker* (1939), while Foster first appeared in the composer biopic, *The Great Victor Herbert* (1938), just as Gladys Swarthout completed her final singing role for the studio in *Romance in the Dark*. Foster made two more pictures for Paramount, *There's Magic in Music* (1941) and *Glamour Boy* (1941), before moving to Universal in 1943, where she starred in the acclaimed *Phantom of the Opera*. In total, Foster made ten films between 1938 and 1945, most of which were B-grade remakes of earlier operatic musicals. Betty Jaynes became Durbin's counterpart over on the MGM lot, first appearing in the Jeanette MacDonald/Nelson Eddy film *Sweethearts* (1938).<sup>357</sup> She then played opposite Garland in *Babes in Arms* (1939), where her operatic singing was juxtaposed to Garland's swinging style in the musical number "I Like Opera, I Like Swing."<sup>358</sup> Jaynes's film career did not take off, however, most likely because fellow MGM actress Kathryn Grayson established herself as a serious contender in 1941 with her debut in *Andy Hardy's Private Secretary*. Grayson became one of the most successful and famous operatic actresses in the 1940s, making twenty films between 1941 and 1956.

These singers' voices ranged in timbre, technical adeptness, fachs, and varying levels of perceived professionalism. For example, critics and fans remarked on Durbin and Jaynes' darker, full-bodied soprano voices that conveyed a sense of maturity and technical prowess. On the other hand, Gloria Jean's "coloratura" soprano perceptibly belied her youth. The singer/actress's light voice sounded fluty and occasionally wobbly rather than controlled. Her vocal agility and technical precision, too, were competent but not yet fully developed; for example, Gloria Jean's

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<sup>357</sup> For more on Betty Jaynes and the adolescent operatic voice, see, for example, Alice Hughes, "A Woman's New York," *Washington Post*, 30 December 1936.

<sup>358</sup> A backstage musical, *Babes in Arms* tells the story of a group of teenagers who set out to prove to their Vaudevillian parents that they are old enough, and talented enough, to enter the world of showbiz.

scalar runs tended toward choppiness rather than fluidity, and her sustained notes occasionally flattened. Foster's coloratura soprano also conveyed a girlish quality in her first few movies. However, the teenager's voice quickly showed signs of her increasingly advanced vocal training: controlled technique, pitch accuracy, and execution of artistic musical decisions regarding phrasing and emotional shading. Moreover, Paramount's publicity cashed in on Foster's remarkable vocal range, which enhanced the public's sense of her professionalism. A representative example from *Movie Play* in 1944 stated that "We have always been impressed by Susanna Foster, but we were practically bowled over by learning that she can sing higher than any living singer today. Think of it!"<sup>359</sup>

These teenage stars greatly changed the Hollywood scene, their films catering both to families and to younger audiences. Freed from various constraints imposed by working with professional opera stars, the studios now could focus on developing a variety of new scenarios in which their young protagonists could go about typical teenaged activities and still perform for their onscreen friends and families. Yet in this new era of the operatic musical, the adolescent singer's vocal talent needed to be rationalized within the narrative. As demonstrated by the incredulous reactions to Durbin's mature vocals in the press, audiences would not necessarily suspend their belief that an adolescent could possess an operatic voice without some kind of training. In *Three Smart Girls*, for example, Penny Craig is the daughter of wealthy parents, who can afford to secure lessons with famous European vocal coaches, whereas in *One Hundred Men and a Girl*, Patsy Cardwell receives training from her father's musician friends. A few years later in 1941, though, it became possible for such characters as Toodles Laverne in *There's Magic in Music* to claim vocal expertise by listening to the recordings of opera divas and imitating them without formal training, a nod, perhaps, to the influence of the music-appreciation movement. In

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<sup>359</sup> Promotional Material for Susanna Foster, *Movie Play* 1, no. 1 (Winter 1944): 69.

fact, references to music appreciation increasingly found their way into movie narratives in the 1940s. Within a few short years, Hollywood's operatic ideal emerged as a teenaged singer who performed for anyone in any location and who came from any class background, her voice the only apparent marker of her sonic "otherness."

### **Musical Film Production: Transitioning from the Great Depression to the Pre-War Years**

The American public's interest in musicals began to wane at the end of the 1930s, and attendance for these films dropped.<sup>360</sup> In response to diminishing revenue, studios such as MGM and Paramount sought to revive the genre, in part, by modifying the aging backstage-musical formula to focus instead on timely, dramatic narratives and star power.<sup>361</sup> Broader cultural concerns and changes to industry infrastructure helped shape the musical film's development as the United States began adapting to the ramifications of a Second World War.

Earlier in the decade, Hollywood musicals typically featured a romance between the male and female leads and/or followed a backstage "show within a show" narrative.<sup>362</sup> The latter became a particularly useful formula for imparting a sense of realism to an otherwise unrealistic genre. By constructing plots centered on the subject of show business, the studios could cast a protagonist's frequent bursts into song or dance as a "natural" side effect of their profession. In *Swing Time* (1936), for example, Ginger Rogers' characterization as a dance instructor adds a touch of realism to a scene featuring the song-and-tap routine, "Pick Yourself Up," during which she "instructs" entertainer Fred Astaire in the art of partnered dancing. Yet despite such attention

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<sup>360</sup> Allen L. Woll, *The Hollywood Musical Goes to War* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall Inc., 1983), 31.

<sup>361</sup> For more on the decline of musicals, see Barry Keith Grant, *New Approaches to Film Genre: Hollywood Film Musical* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 17.

<sup>362</sup> Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 200–71, and Jane Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1993), 42–47.

to verisimilitude, the backstage musical of the 1930s did not present the grim realities of the Great Depression either often or directly, establishing what film scholar Rick Altman refers to as “the illusionist and happy-go-lucky syntax of the genre.”<sup>363</sup> Historian Allen L. Woll similarly observes that “while the majority of film musicals of the 1930s accepted the real world in terms of form, they generally ignored it in terms of content.”<sup>364</sup>

However, the backstage formula and its various permutations began to take a toll on audiences as a well-worn plot device by the end of the 1930s.<sup>365</sup> According to *Variety*’s Denis Morrison, studios such as Universal, Fox, and MGM sought to recoup public interest by pointing the musical in a new direction, one in which an overarching plot served as a vital cinematic component rather than a means by which to tie a film’s musical numbers loosely together.<sup>366</sup> For Fox Studios executive Darryl Zanuck, musicals now needed to be “stoutly equipped with plot,” while MGM mogul Louis B. Mayer proposed that musicals required “quality music played and sung by the best artists obtainable, production value and spectacle, plus a dramatic believable story.”<sup>367</sup> Producer William Anthony McGuire further asserted that musicals should be grounded in reality, as audiences “insist on believing the stories they unfolded, if that’s possible.”<sup>368</sup> What is more, the studios looked to fresh personalities to add pizzazz to their new musical releases, including the young Deanna Durbin, Susanna Foster, and Judy Garland.

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<sup>363</sup> Altman, *The American Film Musical*, 211.

<sup>364</sup> Woll, *The Hollywood Musical Goes to War*, 29.

<sup>365</sup> Woll, *The Hollywood Musical Goes to War*, 31.

<sup>366</sup> Denis Morrison, “What is a Filmusical?,” *Variety*, 16 June 1937, in *Celluloid Symphonies: Texts and Contexts in Film Music History*, edited by Julie Hubbert (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011), 234–37.

<sup>367</sup> Morrison, “What is a Filmusical?,” 235.

<sup>368</sup> Morrison, “What is a Filmusical?,” 235.

In some cases, the studios sanctioned a turnover in personnel in order to assist with the production of the revamped musical film. Morrison stated, for example, that the “musical destinies” of Paramount fell to production executive William LeBaron and head of the music department, Boris Morros.<sup>369</sup> The Russian-born Morros professed a penchant for realism in the movies, observing that Hollywood often made “the mistake of trying to buy life instead of attempting to duplicate it.”<sup>370</sup> According to the music chief, the film industry should embrace the subtleties of real life rather than always try to present perfection. Morros, allegedly a former violin student of Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, also maintained that the “new generation knows more about music and is more sensitive. To get what I want I take part in story discussion and remain in close touch with the producer and director from the inception of a picture until the finish. My staff has many specialists and I try to assign to each man the sort of thing he can do best.”<sup>371</sup>

Yet even with revised formulas, fresh-faced stars, and new studio personnel, musical-film production dwindled to a new low in 1938. MGM announced that only one out of six motion pictures would be a musical, whereas Columbia completely abandoned the genre after Grace Moore’s departure.<sup>372</sup> Warner Bros. and Fox Studios, on the other hand, progressively focused on narrative realism to draw audiences back to the movie theater. As Fox’s Zanuck argued in the

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<sup>369</sup> Morrison, “What is a Filmusical?,” 237. While working at Paramount, Morros served as a spy for the KGB, eventually becoming a double-agent for U.S. intelligence.

<sup>370</sup> Thomas M. Pryor, “The ‘Little Bear’ with Big Ideas,” *New York Times*, 24 September 1939.

<sup>371</sup> Morrison, “What is a Filmusical?,” 236.

According to Pryor’s article in the *New York Times*, Morros considered himself somewhat of a highbrow, but one who could appreciate the “common audience denominator.” Morros oversaw the music for many films featuring “good music,” including *Champagne Waltz* (1936), *The Big Broadcast of 1938* (1938), *Romance in the Dark* (1938), and *Carnegie Hall* (1947). He also sought to obtain the services of Igor Stravinsky, Aaron Copland, and Arnold Schoenberg for Paramount. See Morrison, and Paul Harrison, “Hollywood News and Gossip,” *The China Press*, 20 March 1937.

<sup>372</sup> Woll, *The Hollywood Musical Goes to War*, 31.

*New York Times*, musicals needed a “timely or news interest.”<sup>373</sup> Both Warner and Fox therefore looked to current events when devising plots for their films, releasing a series of productions addressing contemporary topics ranging from sports to politics.<sup>374</sup>

Over the course of the next three years, darker realities began to underpin the musical film’s narratives, as news reports from Europe relayed woeful tidings of escalating military conflict.<sup>375</sup> According to film scholar Sheri Chinen Biesen, Hollywood began experimenting with hybrid genre movies, which “deviated from the upbeat song and dance conventions of musical comedies. They portrayed a grittier undercurrent of performers struggling behind the scenes in shady entanglements as dramatic musical and dance sequences invoked topical working-class themes.”<sup>376</sup> These pictures served as the antecedents to the film *noir* musical of the 1940s and 1950s, providing an “economical alternative to the big-budget musical productions during the rationing, blackouts, and other constraints imposed by World War II.”<sup>377</sup> Such films spun stories about the underbelly of American urban society and told tales of antiheroes and

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<sup>373</sup> “From the Studio Inkpot Genii: An Afghan Bodyguard,” *New York Times*, 25 April 1937.

<sup>374</sup> Woll, *The Hollywood Musical Goes to War*, 33.

<sup>375</sup> Woll, *The Hollywood Musical Goes to War*, 36. In *Lady Be Good* (1941), for example, a married songwriting team, Dixie and Eddie, seeks divorce only to find that they work better together rather than apart. Dixie sings Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II’s “The Last Time I Saw Paris” at a banquet held in the songwriting couple’s honor. The nostalgic song became more poignant considering that Paris had fallen just the previous year. The couple goes through a series of squabbles only to eventually reconcile at the end of the film. See also *Orchestra Wives* (1941), *Ziegfeld Girl* (1941), and *Blues in the Night* (1941). Although many of the films of the late 1930s did not directly address war, it bubbled to the surface through such means as the historical metaphor. In *Let Freedom Ring* (1939), for example, mob violence, dictatorship, and tyranny were denounced in a nineteenth-century Wild West setting. See Woll, *The Hollywood Musical Goes to War*, 34–35.

<sup>376</sup> Sheri Chinen Biesen, *Music in the Shadows: Noir Musical Films* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 8.

<sup>377</sup> Biesen, *Music in the Shadows*, 3. Film *noir* was coined in 1946 by French critics Nino Frank and Jean-Pierre Chartier, who recognized certain dark mystery films with lifelike visual style, complex narration, harsh verisimilitude, and criminal psychology. By 1955, French film scholars Raymonde Borde and Etienne Chaumeton concluded that *noir* also included “eroticization of violence,” “realistic shots,” “bizarre themes,” criminal women, and “nightmarish atmosphere.” See Biesen, *Music in the Shadows*, 4. Film *noir* is also distinguished by black and white photography, dark shadows, skewed camera angles, and characters from the underbelly of society.

“tough” women. James Cagney, for example, played a tough-guy in *The Roaring Twenties* (1939), a film that also featured a cast of World War I veteran gangsters, while *City for Conquest* (1940) told the story of a bunch of hoodlums who traverse New York City’s dance halls and East Side slums.<sup>378</sup>

By 1941, the year in which *There’s Magic in Music* was released, musical films openly embraced elements of melodrama, crime drama, and film *noir*. Sandwiched between the end of the Great Depression and the United States’ involvement in World War II, these movies offered new twists on the previous decade’s signature backstage formula, experimenting with plots inspired by current events, an increased sense of realism, hardened protagonists, and subtle (or sometimes overt) inflections of patriotism. Yet when fusing these various generic elements together, the studios encountered a set of new challenges related to production and promotion. Paramount Studios’ *There’s Magic in Music*—which is at once realistic and optimistic, hardened and sentimental, highbrow and populist, patriotic and globally sensitive—encapsulates some of the intricacies involved in making and marketing the hybridized musical, intricacies that, in this particular case, ultimately manifested in an internal debate over an appropriate movie title.

### ***There’s Magic in Music or The Hard-Boiled Canary?***

In early Fall 1939, composer Ann Ronell began brainstorming ideas for possible movie scenarios based on the National Music Camp (Interlochen). She secured the approval of the camp’s founder and director, Joseph E. Maddy, and visited Interlochen in September to collect material that could be used for potential movie scenarios.<sup>379</sup> Working in association with independent

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<sup>378</sup> Biesen, *Music in the Shadows*, 17.

<sup>379</sup> The National Music Camp (Interlochen) was founded by Joseph E. Maddy in 1928. See the organization’s website for more on its history, <http://www.interlochen.org/content/founding> (accessed 29 March 2016).

producer Lester Cowan and Universal Studios, Ronell then sketched out various plots inspired by the screen personalities of teenaged actors with box office appeal.<sup>380</sup> Ronell first envisioned the lead role for Universal's Deanna Durbin, but, when the actress proved unavailable, Ronell revised the story to suit MGM's popular duo, Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland. Her initial storyline revolved around a romance between two camp kids who compete for the place of first violin chair in the Interlochen orchestra.<sup>381</sup> Maddy, however, rejected Ronell's idea, believing that the adolescent romance and multiple "animal scares" might convince parents not to send their children to Interlochen.<sup>382</sup> When Rooney and Garland likewise proved impossible to "land" due to booked schedules, Ronell wrote to Maddy that she had to:

switch the story to feature Linda Ware—then Jackie Cooper—and so on through the list of all available young talent. The casting difficulties were and are rampant, as most box office names are signed with various studios who do not wish to lend them to another studio. I wrote many numbers to show the possibilities inherent in the camp's entertainment values.<sup>383</sup>

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<sup>380</sup> Ronell was married to Lester Cowan.

<sup>381</sup> Tighe E. Zimmers, *Tin Pan Alley Girl: A Biography of Ann Ronell* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2009), 50.

<sup>382</sup> Joseph Maddy, "There's Magic in Music—Film," c. May 1941, Interlochen Center for The Arts Records: 1927–2005, Box 38, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan (BHL).

<sup>383</sup> Letter from Ann Ronell to Joseph Maddy, 30 December 1939, Interlochen Center for The Arts Records: 1927–2005, Box 38, BHL. Teenaged soprano Linda Ware made her film debut in Paramount's *The Star Maker* (1939), which starred crooner Bing Crosby. Jackie Cooper began his career as a famous child star. Gloria Jean was also considered for the lead. When her debut vehicle, Universal's *The Under-Pup* (1939), proved "disappointing at the box office," however, Cooper and Susanna Foster were pursued as alternative options. See Letter from Lester Cowan to Joseph Maddy, 14 December 1939, Interlochen Center for The Arts Records: 1927–2005, Box 38, BHL.

Ronell also considered a role for a "new singing phenomenon," a nine-year-old Filipina girl with the "voice of a Lily Pons." I have been unable to find any further information on this young singer, however. Ronell appeared to be interested in devising a story that would showcase the talents of a diverse group of adolescents. She wrote to Maddy: "Tell me, Doctor Maddy, have you ever had any colored children at the camp, or is there any race distinction observed in your choice of students? Lester [Cowan] heard a seven-year-old Japanese child play the piano at the Hollywood Bowl with great success. Have you ever had any Chinese or Japanese children?" See Letter from Ann Ronell to Joseph Maddy, 30 December 1939, Interlochen Center for The Arts Records: 1927–2005, Box 38, BHL. Unfortunately, I could not locate Maddy's response.

Indeed, Ronell had worked out a complete musical score consisting of eight numbers—adapted classics, semi-classical pieces, and popular songs—for the movie that she felt would be “important to the camp.”<sup>384</sup>

By mid-December and after Ronell had written “umpteen” movie scenarios for various adolescent stars, she sold her contract with Maddy to Paramount Pictures, who purchased the exclusive rights to make a motion picture based on Interlochen. According to the composer’s agent, Ronell’s story possessed “terrific national exploitation possibilities” due to the camp’s name recognition and connection to multiple public schools across the country.<sup>385</sup> Paramount wasted little time green-lighting production. In January 1940, the studio tasked a screenwriting team with transforming Ronell’s project into a full-fledged screenplay, temporarily titled *Interlochen*.<sup>386</sup>

Two months later, the studio entered into what would become a yearlong debate over an appropriate title for the motion picture. Paramount’s executives decided that the working title, *Interlochen*, lacked box-office appeal and was too difficult for the average American to

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<sup>384</sup> Cable from Lester Cowan to Joseph Maddy, 22 November 1939, Interlochen Center for The Arts Records: 1927–2005, Box 38, BHL. Addressing Maddy, Cowan indicated that the film’s orchestral and choral music could be “selected later by yourself in consultation with [Ronell]. From a musical standpoint, I know we can do a wonderful job.”

<sup>385</sup> Cable from Frank Orsatti to William LeBaron, 13 December 1939, *There’s Magic in Music*—Legal 1939–1940, 210.f-3, Paramount Pictures Production Records, MHL.

There appears to have been some debate over who should receive billing credit for the story, script, and screenplay. In a letter addressed to Francis Langston, Andrew Stone proposed that Ann Ronell should be credited with the suggested locale of the movie rather than the idea for the story. According to Stone, Ronell “suggested was that Interlochen would furnish a good background for a story, and she has no story, no plot ideas, no characterizations, or anything, whatsoever, beyond this to offer.” Stone also stated that he devised the original story with minor input from fellow screenwriter Robert Lively. As of an interoffice communication of 17 July, the final screenwriting credits were: “Screen Play by Frederick Jackson, From a Story by Andrew L. Stone and Robert Lively, Based on an idea by Ann Ronell.” See Letter from Andrew Stone to Francis Langston, 17 July 1941, *There’s Magic in Music*—Billing 1940, 210.f-1, Paramount Pictures Production Records, MHL.

<sup>386</sup> The studio decided early in January, however, to cast Susanna Foster and Allan Jones in the leading roles. See Cable from Frank Orsatti to William LeBaron, 13 December 1939, *There’s Magic in Music*—Legal 1939–1940, 210.f-3, Paramount Pictures Production Records, MHL, and Story Purchase Authorization, 29 December 1939, *There’s Magic in Music*—Production 1939–1940, 210.f-4, Paramount Pictures Production Records, MHL.

pronounce.<sup>387</sup> They therefore requested a different one from the film's production unit. Most likely, the executives did not consider the music camp famous enough to warrant its own eponymous movie and wanted a title that would recall other recently successful musical films such as Samuel Goldwyn's *They Shall Have Music* (1939), a story about a troubled but talented boy who enlists violinist Jascha Heifetz's assistance to save a music school for poor children from financial ruin.

The movie's writer and director, Andrew Stone, on the other hand, disagreed with the executives, advising that the studio retain the camp's name within the title. A lifelong devotee of the classics, Stone argued that Interlochen was illustrious enough to spark public interest, estimating generously that "at least ten million people in this country know about Interlochen intimately, namely the high school students who enter the National Music School contests and their families."<sup>388</sup> Stone's studio communiqué indicates that, so far as he was concerned, *Interlochen* would garner the attention of both musicians and music lovers, a niche market that had been growing for the past decade. He was supported by executive Sam Frey, who believed that, from both marketing and cost perspectives, it would be advantageous to maintain some

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<sup>387</sup> Letter from Sam Frey to A.M. Botsford, 5 March 1940, *There's Magic in Music* Production File 1939–1941, 210.f-4, Paramount Pictures Production Records, MHL, and Thomas M. Pryor, "By Way of Report," *New York Times*, 23 March 1941.

Prior to the release of *There's Magic in Music*, various studios deliberated over film titles for movies featuring "good music." The title for MGM's *A Lady's Morals* (1930), for example, was believed to have contributed to the movie's lackluster reception; some audience members were disinclined to watch a film about a lady's dubious morals while others did not want to see a movie about a woman who had unbending morals. *Movie Classic's* Maude Lathem, too, argued that the title for Columbia's *One Night of Love* (1934) was "trite and silly," although it did not stop the film from becoming a blockbuster. See Maude Lathem, "The Heroine of a Hundred Romances—Grace Moore," *Movie Classic* 7, no. 3 (November 1934): 28–29. *That Girl from Paris* (1936), RKO's second film starring Lily Pons, was a remake based on *Street Girl* (1929), but studio and censorial concerns over the moral implications of a "street girl" resulted in the less scandalous title replacement. Even Universal had qualms about the interrogation mark in *Nice Girl?* (1941), believing that Deanna Durbin's fans might be upset by the suggestion that the actress might play a "bad" girl in her latest movie.

<sup>388</sup> Letter from Sam Frey to A.M. Botsford, 5 March 1940, *There's Magic in Music* Production File 1939–1941, 210.f-4, Paramount Pictures Production Records, MHL. Stone's movies often contained classical music. His two final films, *Song of Norway* (1970) and *The Great Waltz* (1972), were based on the lives of Edvard Grieg and Johann Strauss, respectively.

connection to the working title. Frey wrote to the film's producer that Stone's "point may be well taken ... All the publicity to date naturally has used *Interlochen* and will most likely continue to do so until we find a definite title, so that by retaining what we have now, we will be salvaging all the accumulated publicity."<sup>389</sup>

Despite potential name recognition and an ongoing publicity campaign promoting the movie's contracted musical prodigies and connections to the camp's musical community, *Interlochen* became *There's Magic in Music*, a title that pointed to the film's uplifting message rather than a specific musical institution. This new title, however, caused even more apprehension than its predecessor. Producer A.M. Botsford considered the replacement "bad" for two reasons: first, because the title "had the same sort of lilt" as that of the Heifetz film *They Shall Have Music*, and second, because the word "music" was "probably overdone as a word in former musical titles."<sup>390</sup> According to custom, Paramount therefore put out a call to studio personnel to see who could formulate the best title for the film, promising a cash award for the winning selection.<sup>391</sup> Lists upon lists of suggestions reveal that eager employees played on every conceivable title with the words "melody," "singing," "song," and "music" in it. One in particular, *A Singing Cinderella*, received positive attention by the executives but was soon discarded because, as Botsford put it, *A Singing Cinderella*:

definitely makes it a Susanna Foster starring picture—it puts all the emphasis on her, and even if this is true in the picture itself, I am wondering whether it does not bring the

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<sup>389</sup> Letter from Sam Frey to A.M. Botsford, 5 March 1940, *There's Magic in Music* Production File 1939–1941, 210.f-4, Paramount Pictures Production Records, MHL.

<sup>390</sup> Letter from A.M. Botsford to Russell Holman, 30 July 1940, *There's Magic in Music* Production File 1939–1941, 210.f-4, Paramount Pictures Production Records, MHL.

<sup>391</sup> According to an article printed in the *Washington Post*, Paramount tended to poll the studio's employees, and sometimes even the public, when there was difficulty selecting a good title. The article described Botsford as Paramount's "official namer of movies." The producer also solicited help for choosing an appropriate title for *The Great Victor Herbert* (1938). Cash awards typically ran about \$50 (\$845 today). See Frederick C. Othman, "A Title, a Title, Their Kingdom for a Title!," *Washington Post*, 8 September 1939.

selling of the picture down in importance. If Foster had the reputation of [Deanna] Durbin, it would be all right, but I think we should have a title fairly resounding and important in itself. Moreover, I do not think Toodles is a Cinderella, by any means.”<sup>392</sup>

At the time the producer wrote this letter, Durbin dominated the operatic corner of Hollywood alongside Jeanette MacDonald. Durbin had starred in six highly popular films with her seventh—her own Cinderella story, *It's a Date* (1941)—just about to be released a few days later. The actresses' name alone was enough to draw audiences to see the “latest Deanna Durbin picture” playing at their local theater. Foster, on the other hand, was essentially an unknown with only a minor role in the biopic *The Great Victor Herbert* (1939) to her credit, a film also produced and directed by Stone.

Botsford's remark comparing Toodles to Cinderella encapsulated a few of the complications surrounding Toodles' characterization. Certainly, Toodles was not the typical good girl portrayed by the Durbins or Garlands in contemporary film offerings. According to *There's Magic's* censorship records, the screenwriters conceived of Toodles as a rather worldly-wise and grown-up figure who resonated more with the hardened characters of World War II film *noir*—perhaps too much so. In a letter addressed to executive producer William LeBaron on 18 March 1940 regarding an early version of the screenplay, Botsford emphasized that the writers should not overdo the protagonist's hard-boiledness. Assessing the movie's opening burlesque scene, Botsford mused:

Of course, we need the strip-tease in order to have the raid and the flight of Toodles, but this will have to be handled in pretty good taste since even though Toodles is a “tuff,” the kind of people who want to see her and this fine musical picture may be affronted by the use of a child in these surroundings. Can you strip-tease to the aria from *Traviata*?<sup>393</sup>

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<sup>392</sup> Letter from A.M. Botsford to Andrew Stone, 18 March 1940, *There's Magic in Music* Production File 1939–1941, 210.f-4, Paramount Pictures Production Records, MHL.

<sup>393</sup> Letter from A.M. Botsford to William LeBaron, 18 March 1940, *There's Magic in Music* Production File 1939–1941, 210.f-4, Paramount Pictures Production Records, MHL. At this point in time, the musical selection for this scene called for “Sempre libera.”

Botsford stressed the importance of balancing Toodles' characterization with the demands of the drama. Although necessary to underscore "good music's" power to enrich lives, the young lead's morals could not be so questionable as to upset the film's target audience: music lovers from the middle and upper classes.

Joseph Breen, the head of the Los Angeles censorship office, also critiqued multiple scenes in which Toodles' actions might be considered distasteful. Writing to Paramount's head of censorship, Luigi Luraschi, on 13 April 1940 regarding the film's initial script, Breen urged:

that you do not show your 14-year-old star, Susanna Foster, connected in any way with a burlesque theater. We are sure that this business will cause widespread offense to audiences generally. We think you should eliminate making Susanna too hard-boiled and showing her smoking cigarettes at several points in this story. In this connection, note also ... the business of Susanna winking at the hotel clerk in Scene A-35, Page 14; Scene A-38, Page 17, this business of Susanna coming in to have her dress zipped up; Scene B-31, as to cigarettes and also as to her "hula" dance; ... Scene A-38, Page A-19: the nude painting is entirely unacceptable. Also, Toodles' remark "a sailor showed it to me on a post card" must be deleted.<sup>394</sup>

From this communiqué as well as various script drafts, it is clear that Toodles underwent a fairly extensive character makeover before the final product's release. The actions Breen repeatedly opposed in his letters to Paramount were excised from the script.

The film shoot for *There's Magic in Music* wrapped in July, by which time hundreds of potential titles had been rejected as unsatisfactory. As Botsford elaborated in a *Washington Post* article, choosing titles was a "chore" that everyone in the studio took a "whack at, from the office boy on up to the president."<sup>395</sup> The producer revealed that his job was to try to find movie titles that satisfied everybody at Paramount, an outcome that he described as "impossible." In particular, Botsford singled out the sales department as especially choosy, demanding titles with

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<sup>394</sup> Letter from Joseph Breen to Luigi Luraschi, 13 April 1940, *There's Magic in Music* Production File 1939–1941, 210.f-4, Paramount Pictures Production Records, MHL.

<sup>395</sup> See Othman, "A Title, a Title, Their Kingdom for a Title!"

“oomph” and “action.” The studio certainly seemed to be hard-pressed to find a suitable “action” title for their musical film. On 29 July, Botsford informed the studio’s upper echelons that it was “going to be next to impossible to get a really good box office title” for the movie.<sup>396</sup>

Instead of the idealistic *There’s Magic in Music*, Botsford recommended renaming the film *The Hard-Boiled Canary*, a suggestion that, in his opinion, was “getting too little thought and consideration”:

I notice here that it is the one title out of the scores that have been suggested for the picture that really gets a widespread favorable reaction. I admit that the title ignores [Allan] Jones and is a bit crass, but we are not going to create advance interest in this picture with a title that talks about charm and music, etc. The title must have some novelty and sock in it. [Publicity and advertising director, Robert H.] Gillham, for example, thinks he could do a lot of good stuff with the title *The Hard-Boiled Canary*.<sup>397</sup>

Botsford might not have considered this title to be an irregular choice since he was a producer who worked mostly on B-grade crime dramas, including *Murder with Pictures* (1936), *Hideaway Girl* (1936), and *The Accusing Finger* (1936). Still, the term “hard boiled” almost never was used in film titles, although the studios regularly employed it when describing certain storylines or characters, particularly those associated with crime dramas and, later, film *noir*.<sup>398</sup> “Canary,” too, further raised questions of genre, as it typically referred to, at least in a musical sense, a female performer who mostly sang popular songs.

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<sup>396</sup> Letter from A.M. Botsford to Y. Frank Freeman, William LeBaron, and Andrew Stone, 29 July 1940, *There’s Magic in Music* Production File 1939–1941, 210.f-4, Paramount Pictures Production Records, MHL.

<sup>397</sup> Letter from A.M. Botsford to Y. Frank Freeman, William LeBaron, and Andrew Stone, 29 July 1940, *There’s Magic in Music* Production File 1939–1941, 210.f-4, Paramount Pictures Production Records, MHL.

<sup>398</sup> For example, the adjective “hard boiled” was used to describe Jean Arthur’s character as the cynical secretary in the trailer for *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939). According to the American Film Institute’s online catalog, three comedies released between 1919 and 1940 used the term in the title: *Hard Boiled* (1919), *Hard-Boiled Haggerty* (1927), and *Hard Boiled* (1936). See the AFI Catalog, <http://www.afi.com/members/catalog/BasicSearch.aspx> (accessed 3 April 2016). Moreover, a JSTOR and Project Muse search of the term “hard boiled” in regard to film studies and music studies reveals that the term is most commonly associated with writings on film *noir* and crime dramas.

Perhaps responding to the implications of “hard boiled” as denoting a particular film category, Botsford’s colleagues vetoed the grittier title. Once again, the producer requested more suggestions from Paramount’s Eastern Production Manager:

I don’t get a very good reaction out here on the title *The Hard-Boiled Canary*. Mr. LeBaron is definitely against it and so is Andrew Stone. Mr. Freeman doesn’t think it is right, either, although he is not definitely against it . . . Very rarely are there titles that actually draw people in. In these cases I think one of the parts of the search should be for a title that is fairly appealing but whose main virtues are that it will not keep people out. I would judge there would be a certain number of people who would not care to see a picture called *The Hard-Boiled Canary* which features Susanna Foster, whom they don’t know. Whatever recollection of Foster they have would be that she and Jones were in a beautiful musical called *Victor Herbert*, and whatever draw there would be on *There’s Magic in Music* should be on the basis of the same kind of musical with, unfortunately, no kind of a name as on *Victor Herbert* to put on it. . .

After all, this is a musical picture. Are we to deny it is a musical picture in our title? . . . *The Hard-Boiled Canary*, to me, is the title of something that could be for Ann Sothern or Lucille Ball and runs the danger of keeping people away from the picture rather than attracting them to it.<sup>399</sup>

One reason Paramount’s executives could not agree on an appropriate title was because Foster was not a famous actress. Known as the “star studio,” Paramount plugged its movies according to which of its major celebrities was the headliner. Botsford’s reference to Ann Sothern and Lucille Ball presupposes that a movie called *The Hard-Boiled Canary* would only generate appeal if its leading lady was already known for playing hardened roles. This title, as Botsford pointed out, thus went against company policy by completely ignoring the better-known male lead, Allan Jones, an actor with an acceptable—albeit not impressive—list of film credentials.

Besides the turmoil over the title, Paramount Pictures itself was undergoing structural changes that might have affected the way the studio sought to handle the film. By the summer of 1940, the film industry’s finances had been negatively affected by World War II. Germany and Italy cut ties to American “propaganda” by banning Hollywood films, seeking instead to focus

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<sup>399</sup> Letter from A.M. Botsford to Russell Holman, 30 July 1940, *There’s Magic in Music* Production File 1939–1941, 210.f-4, Paramount Pictures Production Records, MHL.

on the production of their own motion pictures. In addition, the German occupation of France, Belgium, Holland, and Norway as well as the threat of an imminent attack on Great Britain—Paramount’s largest source of financial revenue from abroad—curtailed much of the American film industry’s foreign sales.<sup>400</sup> According to a *Wall Street Journal* article from June 1940, Paramount had lost 22% of its foreign revenue.<sup>401</sup> To recover profits, studio president Barney Balaban announced that Paramount would therefore abandon “B pictures in an effort to bolster its domestic revenues to replace foreign revenue lost due to the European war.”<sup>402</sup> The president’s goal was to entice “some of the 50% of the American population which never goes to the movies at all” by making “consistently better” movies than “the budget for B pictures usually allows.” The *Journal* also observed that Paramount’s “difficulty in recent years has been in its studios and it has comparatively few notable film successes,” a situation that allowed the studio to operate on fewer film rentals (i.e. it would have fewer foreign losses than its competitors) and that would “quickly reflect any real improvement in the quality of its film productions.”<sup>403</sup> As an 80-minute picture with a projected budget of \$534,000 and a final production cost of \$496,811.02—numbers on the top end of budgets for “B” pictures—*There’s Magic* may have been a transitional film that denoted Balaban’s anticipated era of “quality” films, in which case a superior title would prove vital for publicity purposes.<sup>404</sup>

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<sup>400</sup> “Movies Strengthen Home Front: Industry Adjusting Itself to Domestic Basis As War Developments Curtail European Markets,” *Wall Street Journal*, 24 June 1940.

<sup>401</sup> United Press, “Paramount Plans to Stop Making B Grade Pictures,” *Wall Street Journal*, 14 June 1940.

<sup>402</sup> United Press, “Paramount Plans to Stop Making B Grade Pictures.”

<sup>403</sup> “Movies Strengthen Home Front,” *Wall Street Journal*.

<sup>404</sup> See Budget, *There’s Magic in Music*—Costs 1940-1942, 210.f-2, Paramount Pictures Production Records, MHL. Today, \$534,000 is the equivalent value of \$9,020,000, while \$496,811.02 is the equivalent of \$8,390,000.

While the search for a compelling title continued, Paramount retained *There's Magic in Music* for three previews in September and October 1940 to great success. Members of the audience even expressed their admiration for the title, which, to them, perfectly captured the movie's message and content. As three individuals exclaimed: "There's Magic Music in 'There's Magic in Music'"; "Marvelous! Simply Marvelous ... There couldn't be a better title for this Great Picture"; and "Truly a great show. The name is grand and fits to a 'T.'"<sup>405</sup> Meanwhile, the studio's Home Office Production Manager commented on Paramount's indecision over the current title when forwarding the preview comments to the film's director:

The title baffles me. I hope to God it is settled one way or another before any further time passes. I have a distinct theory that the title of a picture should be selected before it goes into production and come hell or high water, it ought to be stuck to. No doubt you will disagree with me, but our record, in changing titles at the last minute, has been extremely bad.<sup>406</sup>

Despite this grim track record with the title switches, Paramount continued to waver over the final selection for the next few months. The studio, for reasons unknown, changed the title *There's Magic in Music* to *Magic in Music* in mid-October before finally settling on *The Hard-Boiled Canary* on 23 November 1940.

### **Reception: *The Hard-Boiled Canary* Lays an Egg**

Under the title *There's Magic in Music*, the film received overwhelmingly high praise at its three previews, held respectively in Poughkeepsie, NY, Inglewood, CA, and Huntington Park, CA.<sup>407</sup>

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<sup>405</sup> Preview Comments, Sneak Preview at Academy Theatre, Inglewood, 1 October 1940, and Preview Comments, Sneak Preview Poughkeepsie, c. 10 September 1940, *There's Magic in Music* 1940, Andrew L. Stone Papers, 1a.f-12, MHL.

<sup>406</sup> Letter from Hiller Innes to Andrew Stone, 13 September 1940, *There's Magic in Music* 1940, Andrew L. Stone Papers, 1a.f-12, MHL.

<sup>407</sup> Seventy-eight people filled out comment cards at the Poughkeepsie showing, one hundred twenty-two at the Inglewood preview, and thirty-two at the Huntington Park viewing. Poughkeepsie was a fairly large city—the

After the first showing in New York, the Home Office Production Manager informed the movie's director:

Let me tell you that I think your picture is swell. It is a grand piece of entertainment, and I have never attended a preview where the audience seemed any more appreciative than they did at the preview of your picture at Poughkeepsie. I don't believe there were more than two or three bad preview cards out of the entire lot—a percentage which I have never before seen equaled.<sup>408</sup>

As one previewer from Poughkeepsie announced: “This is one picture to which all the Hollywood superlatives may be truthfully applied. For sheer beauty, for good entertainment, and for exquisite music it is tops.”<sup>409</sup> A few viewers even claimed that they wanted to see the movie a second time when it officially premiered in theaters, one of whom enthusiastically professed that he or she could see the movie at least ten times.

The preview audiences singled out the music as the highlight of the motion picture. Even those amongst the minor contingent of viewers who openly admitted their aversion to either “good music” or musical films stated, for example: “Would not have gone under ordinary advance. However, really liked it. Music tonal qualities excellent;” and “I don't usually care for that type of picture, but this one was enjoyable.”<sup>410</sup> *There's Magic's* comic elements proved to be its secondary draw, potentially making the musical numbers more accessible for some moviegoers. As one individual stated: “For one who dislikes the classics, such as I, the picture

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population had grown to 40,478 by 1940—with a flourishing arts culture. The Bardavon 1869 Opera House (originally the Collingwood Opera House) was purchased by Paramount in 1923 and turned into a movie palace. See the Bardavon 1869 Opera House, [https://www.bardavon.org/subinfo.php?pid=AB\\_HI\\_BARDAVON](https://www.bardavon.org/subinfo.php?pid=AB_HI_BARDAVON) (accessed 10 April 2016). Inglewood, CA—population 30,114 in 1940—was a predominantly white neighborhood at the time. Huntington Park, CA had a population of 28,648 in 1940. It was a largely working-class community.

<sup>408</sup> Letter from Hiller Innes to Andrew Stone, 13 September 1940, *There's Magic in Music* 1940, Andrew L. Stone Papers, 1a.f-12, MHL.

<sup>409</sup> Preview Comment #13, Sneak Preview Poughkeepsie, c. 10 September 1940, *There's Magic in Music* 1940, Andrew L. Stone Papers, 1a.f-12, MHL.

<sup>410</sup> Preview Comment #61, Sneak Preview Poughkeepsie, c. 10 September 1940, and Preview Comment #7, Sneak Preview at Academy Theatre, Inglewood, 1 October 1940, *There's Magic in Music* 1940, Andrew L. Stone Papers, 1a.f-12, MHL.

was very good because of the comedy.”<sup>411</sup> Only one viewer from Inglewood specifically differentiated between classed perceptions of musical taste, commenting that the movie was “too high class for the low class.”<sup>412</sup>

*There’s Magic’s* comment cards also reveal a consensus regarding the target audience for the movie. The previewers—who appear to have been fairly diverse in age, gender, and class—believed that the movie would go over especially well with two primary groups: music lovers and adolescents.<sup>413</sup> One moviegoer specified: “I thought the picture was very good as it is. The singing and music was [*sic*] excellent. The picture should appeal to music lovers.”<sup>414</sup> Another requested: “As one interested in good music I am very well pleased. *More* pictures like this for me. More—More—More.”<sup>415</sup> *There’s Magic* likewise appealed to younger viewers, particularly because of its large cast of teenagers and its “clean” film content. One youthful attendee praised Paramount for offering a movie that differed from other contemporary releases: “I believe that this type of picture has a very bright future. At present many of the ‘movies’ are of the slapstick type or inspired from a literary masterpiece. I *do* hope that in behalf [*sic*] of many of my friends that this show and all its juvenile very talented characters will continue.”<sup>416</sup> Adults, too, agreed

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<sup>411</sup> Preview Comment #1, Sneak Preview Poughkeepsie, c. 10 September 1940, *There’s Magic in Music* 1940, Andrew L. Stone Papers, 1a.f-12, MHL.

<sup>412</sup> Despite the widespread praise for the music, the most common critique of the film was the weak story. As one audience member wrote: “*There’s Magic in Music* was an entertaining picture with superb music, although the story seemed none too new or convincing.” See Preview Comments, Sneak Preview at Academy Theatre, Inglewood, 1 October 1940, *There’s Magic in Music* 1940, Andrew L. Stone Papers, 1a.f-12, MHL.

<sup>413</sup> Some individuals gave indications of their age, class, and gender in their comments. Among these, for example, were a 14-year-old boy, composers, music teachers, and society ladies.

<sup>414</sup> Preview Comment #55, Sneak Preview Poughkeepsie, c. 10 September 1940, *There’s Magic in Music* 1940, Andrew L. Stone Papers, 1a.f-12, MHL.

<sup>415</sup> Preview Comment #69, Sneak Preview at Academy Theatre, Inglewood, 1 October 1940, *There’s Magic in Music* 1940, Andrew L. Stone Papers, 1a.f-12, MHL.

<sup>416</sup> Preview Comment #15, Sneak Preview Poughkeepsie, c. 10 September 1940, *There’s Magic in Music* 1940, Andrew L. Stone Papers, 1a.f-12, MHL.

that *There's Magic* held value for adolescents. One claimed that it “is an excellent picture, especially for children in their teens. It makes them realize how important music can be and *anyone* interested in music would never miss the opportunity of seeing such a picture.”<sup>417</sup> Even those who objected to the “mediocre” storyline professed appreciation for some element of the movie, whether it was the music, the talented cast, or the comedy.

Audiences reacted quite differently to its release as *The Hard-Boiled Canary*, however. The new title aimed at attracting a broader audience changed the film’s promotional angle and cultural framing, shaping audience expectations accordingly. Various musical organizations that had promised to help promote the picture threatened to withdraw their support in protest against the new title, which, as the *New York Times* explained, was found to be “objectionable for a film dealing with the Interlochen music camp for children in Michigan.”<sup>418</sup> In a similar vein, a Mr. K.G. Campbell from Vancouver wrote to Botsford in January 1941 to express his own and others’ “horror” at the title switch, which seemed to devalue the film’s merits.<sup>419</sup> In his reply, the producer explained that the studio chose the new title purely for business reasons:

We went over hundreds and hundreds of titles and they seemed static or too pretentious and with no particular mass appeal. Nowadays you have to get to the groundlings in order to get any business at all. Therefore, the Sales Department demanded that we change the title and they picked the title to which you and I both object. I am sorry this has to be so, but there seems to be no help for it.<sup>420</sup>

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<sup>417</sup> Preview Comment #25, Sneak Preview Poughkeepsie, c. 10 September 1940, *There's Magic in Music* 1940, Andrew L. Stone Papers, 1a.f-12, MHL.

<sup>418</sup> Thomas M. Pryor, “By Way of Report,” *New York Times*, 23 March 1941. See also “Trio of New Shows Listed,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, 1 May 1941, and Hedda Hopper, “Hedda Hopper’s Hollywood,” 27 March 1941.

<sup>419</sup> Letter from A.M. Botsford to Mr. K.G. Campbell, 9 January 1941, *There's Magic in Music* Production File 1939–1941, 210.f-4, Paramount Pictures Production Records, MHL.

<sup>420</sup> Letter from A.M. Botsford to Mr. K.G. Campbell, 9 January 1941, *There's Magic in Music* Production File 1939–1941, 210.f-4, Paramount Pictures Production Records, MHL.

The sales department's quest for titles with "oomph" as well as its perceptions of the masses' taste seemingly guided this decision. Circulating ideas of highbrow music's limited appeal—clearly cultivated, in part, by Hollywood's own publicists—complicated a marketing strategy for a film focused on an uplifting message and featuring numerous sequences of classical performances, even though *There's Magic* received highly positive feedback from its preview audiences; similar musical films ranked among some of the most popular movies of the previous seven years; and the music appreciation movement currently was in full swing.

It is also possible that the sales department favored promoting a more "realistic," perhaps even borderline sensationalist, narrative to draw the masses. As Hitler gained more control over Europe, Hollywood began producing films that dealt with, in some way or another, World War II. Although some movies such as *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (1939) operated as blatant calls for the United States to enter the war, many more films offered subtler propaganda, promoting what cultural historian David Welky refers to as "Americanism."<sup>421</sup> These types of films plugged such "American" ideals as democracy, free enterprise, individualism, and a common national identity.<sup>422</sup> *There's Magic in Music/The Hard-Boiled Canary* might be considered one of these films because it promotes the American "way of life" and contains a scene in which the camera follows the Interlochen students marching into camp to John Philip Sousa's "Stars and Stripes Forever" before zooming out to include the American flag in the shot.

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<sup>421</sup> David Welky, *The Moguls and the Dictators: Hollywood and the Coming of World War II* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 2008), 59. For more on Hollywood, Americanism, and film genres during World War II, see Wheeler Winston Dixon, "Introduction" to *American Cinema of the 1940s: Themes and Variations*, edited by Wheeler Winston Dixon (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 3–11, and Thomas Doherty, *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 85–121.

<sup>422</sup> Welky, *The Moguls and the Dictators*, 5. A few examples of these movies would include director Frank Capra's *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) and *Meet John Doe* (1941). *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* tells the story of a naïve young man appointed to fill a vacant seat in the United States Senate, who tackles political corruption and confronts big business. In *Meet John Doe*, a homeless man agrees to assume the identity of an unemployed "John Doe" (a fictional person created by a fired reporter), who wrote to a newspaper editor threatening suicide in protest of social ills. "Doe" starts a whole political movement.

In fact, a few individuals from the previews interpreted this scene specifically in the context of the war, although in two particular ways. On the one hand, some viewers were upset by the marching scene, which they perceived as flagrant propaganda. One moviegoer remarked: “Patriotic march of Jones and kids ending in shot of flag was very, very crudely done and very jingoistic.”<sup>423</sup> Another argued: “I thought that the close up of the Flag was unnecessary and a little on the ‘cheap’ side. The American public will become tied up with such obvious attempts both in pictures and on the radio. A more distant shot of the cabin and flag would have seemed in better taste.”<sup>424</sup> A second group, however, interpreted the marching scene as fostering “Americanism” in more nationalist terms. One person stated, for example: “Thank God, that in this country the camps are devoted to a venture of this sort, rather than one of a military nature.”<sup>425</sup> Another praised the filmmakers’ patriotic flair—“A wonderful picture for everyone to see. The ‘Stars and Stripes Forever’ is an inspiring scene.”—while a third moviegoer saw the entire film as less politically engaged than its contemporary releases: “An excellent picture. We should have more of this type and less propaganda.”<sup>426</sup>

By switching the title, however, Paramount’s sales department obfuscated what Rick Altman refers to as the “pragmatic dimension” of genre, or the ways in which moviegoers

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<sup>423</sup> Preview Comment #75, Sneak Preview Poughkeepsie, c. 10 September 1940, *There’s Magic in Music* 1940, Andrew L. Stone Papers, 1a.f-12, MHL.

<sup>424</sup> Preview Comment #57, Sneak Preview Poughkeepsie, c. 10 September 1940, *There’s Magic in Music* 1940, Andrew L. Stone Papers, 1a.f-12, MHL.

<sup>425</sup> Preview Comment #34, Sneak Preview Poughkeepsie, c. 10 September 1940, *There’s Magic in Music* 1940, Andrew L. Stone Papers, 1a.f-12, MHL.

<sup>426</sup> Preview Comment #54, Sneak Preview Poughkeepsie, c. 10 September 1940, and Mailed-in Preview Comment #25, Sneak Preview at Academy Theatre, Inglewood, 1 October 1940, *There’s Magic in Music* 1940, Andrew L. Stone Papers, 1a.f-12, MHL.

engage with, respond to, and understand genre.<sup>427</sup> Certainly according to box-office statistics—presumably affected, in part, by certain “class” audience members boycotting the film—the “groundlings” whom the advertisers had targeted specifically with the new title did not see *The Hard-Boiled Canary* as delivering on its promises of thrills and grit, being presented instead with a movie about talented musical children and the uplifting power of “good music.” *Variety* reported that the film “did very poor” in Denver during its first week and brought in only \$2,500 during its second week; Kansas City canceled the film’s engagement at one of its theaters after only six days, while ticket sales for San Francisco remained “sub-par” at \$10,000.<sup>428</sup> In comparison, the new Deanna Durbin picture *Nice Girl?* (1941) accrued at least double the numbers of *Canary*.

In addition to the disappointing figures at the box office, the critics’ responses were mixed. The *Hollywood Reporter* praised the talents of Susanna Foster, claiming that the young lead was a proficient actress who was “on her way to becoming a star of real magnitude.”<sup>429</sup> Other trade journals reported on the film’s extensive use of art music. Both *Variety* and *Motion Picture Herald* provided lists of *Canary*’s “wide range” of musical numbers, from the classics to the newly composed pieces by Ann Ronell.<sup>430</sup> Although some critics were impressed by Foster’s vocal ability and the quality of the musical sequences, many journalists found fault with the movie’s narrative. One such critique appeared in the 26 February 1941 issue of *Variety*: “Addicts

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<sup>427</sup> Rick Altman, “A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre,” in *Film Genre Reader III*, edited by Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 27–41.

<sup>428</sup> “‘Chad’–‘Handsome’ Nice \$9,000 in So-So Denver,” *Variety*, 12 February 1941, “‘Gone’ Wham—\$20,000, Denver; ‘VA.’ \$12,500,” *Variety*, 19 February 1941, “‘Night’ 8G; ‘Tobacco’ \$17,300, in Mild K.C.,” *Variety*, 12 March 1941, “Frisco So-So, ‘Doe’ Sturdy \$21,000, ‘Fantasia’ \$14,000, ‘Street’ \$11,000,” *Variety*, 19 March 1941, and “‘Wolf’ Tops Frisco with \$18,000; ‘Eve’ Swell 15G, ‘Bishop’ NG 8G,” *Variety*, 26 March 1941. As of 2015, \$2,500 equals \$40,200 whereas \$10,000 equals \$161,000.

<sup>429</sup> Review of *The Hard-Boiled Canary*, *Hollywood Reporter*, 20 February 1941.

<sup>430</sup> Review of *The Hard-Boiled Canary*, *Variety*, 20 February 1941. See also Review of *The Hard-Boiled Canary*, *Motion Picture Herald*, 1 March 1941.

of the better type of music in the classical range will give this one a moderate play, but will have to sit through the tedious, mediocre story.”<sup>431</sup>

Twelve days after the movie’s release on 7 March, *Variety* informed its readers that Paramount was withdrawing the film. According to the trade paper, the film’s title contributed to the movie’s poor performance at the box office:

It was originally called *There’s Magic In Music*, [the] whole idea having been based on a kids’ music camp in Michigan. At first projected along serious lines, it was subsequently “hardened” a bit and the title of *The Hard-Boiled Canary* tacked on. Music societies and organizations protested, Paramount deciding a few days ago that it would be advisable to turn back to the original title and tie in with national music week in May. However, no changes will be made in the film except the title.<sup>432</sup>

Joseph Maddy further suggested that Paramount changed the title back because the film’s male lead, Allan Jones, had protested the studio giving Susanna Foster lead billing over himself.<sup>433</sup> Still, re-releasing the movie as *There’s Magic in Music* did not improve the film’s standing at the box office, despite a few favorable reviews that purported, as Richard L. Coe did for *The Washington Post*, that “there’s something in *There’s Magic in Music* to please everyone, if not all of the time, some of the time.”<sup>434</sup> The trade journals and film magazines seldom mentioned the movie after March, and the few reports of the weekly box-office numbers remained similar to the motion picture’s original release. Evidently, the sales department’s desire to make the film edgier for greater appeal backfired, alienating the originally targeted public to whom the studio had been advertising over the course of the previous year.

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<sup>431</sup> Review of *The Hard-Boiled Canary*, *Variety*, 26 February 1941.

<sup>432</sup> “Par withdraws its ‘Hard-Boiled Canary,’” *Variety*, 19 March 1941. National Music Week began in the Spring of 1924, inspired by a series of local music weeks celebrated in nearly 150 cities around the United States. See “National Music Week: Otto H. Kahn Heads Committee for Celebration Next Spring,” *New York Times*, 2 July 1923.

<sup>433</sup> Joseph Maddy, “*There’s Magic in Music*—Film,” c. May 1941, Interlochen Center for The Arts Records: 1927–2005, Box 38, BHL. Maddy was pleased with the title switch back to the “much better” *There’s Magic in Music*.

<sup>434</sup> Richard L. Coe, “*There’s Magic in Music Aims to Please All*,” *Washington Post*, 23 July 1941.

## The Promotional Campaign

According to the promotional materials for *There's Magic in Music*, Paramount had marketed their product to a particular demographic from the beginning of production. As early as 6 February 1940, the studio had closely connected their film with the Interlochen Music Camp and its director, Dr. Joseph E. Maddy, as well as the cast's impressive list of adolescent musical prodigies.<sup>435</sup> The studio's initial press release from March 1940 stated that Paramount was conducting a national campaign to "make America conscious of Interlochen."<sup>436</sup> Their film, then advertised under the title *Interlochen*, was going to "get off to a sensational start" by bringing hundreds of delegates from the Music Educators' National Conference to the studio to observe a demonstration of music recording on a sound stage with the film's two singing stars, Allan Jones and Susanna Foster. In Paramount's generous estimation, 15,000 visitors would travel to Los Angeles for the convention, many of whom had studied at Interlochen. The press release suggests that Paramount marketed *There's Magic* to the oft-used studio categorization of "music lovers" from the beginning of production, a group of individuals that might readily buy into the film's uplift narrative. Indeed, contemporary articles printed in the *Music Educator's Journal* demonstrate that many teachers were excited about the prospect of Paramount's "Day in Hollywood" as well as the potential press coverage for music camps similar to Interlochen. One such article proclaimed: "The importance of the promised feature film, from the standpoint of all music educators, is obvious. It will also serve to draw attention to the importance of an

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<sup>435</sup> See, for example, Douglas W. Churchill, "Screen News Here and in Hollywood," *New York Times*, 6 February 1940, Isabel Morse Jones, "The Week's High Note in Music," *Los Angeles Times*, 28 July 1940, and Louella O. Parsons, "Close-Ups and Long-Shots of the Motion Picture Scene," *Washington Post*, 13 June 1940.

<sup>436</sup> Pressbook for *There's Magic in Music*, 1940–41, Paramount Pictures Press Sheets, MHL.

institution which probably more than a few in our field have been prone to take too much for granted.”<sup>437</sup>

Besides collaborating with the Music Educators’ conference, Paramount sought to increase their film’s prestige by establishing a publicity connection with the Metropolitan Opera in New York.<sup>438</sup> As the head of Paramount’s Story Department, Richard Halliday, wrote to director Andrew Stone, a tie-in with the Met would be advantageous because the institution reached millions around the country via the radio and press: “At this time the Met is receiving important radio time every Saturday for three and four hours and every Sunday for its half-hour audition period, besides a good deal of free newspaper attention and national mail lists.”<sup>439</sup> Aware that the Met was currently attempting to raise a million dollars, Paramount proposed donating \$25,000 in return for a few of the “big names” to provide their services for the grand finale of *There’s Magic*, an operatic mash-up of *Carmen* and *Faust*.<sup>440</sup> Among the celebrities on the studio’s list were conductors Leopold Stokowski and Walter Damrosch (both not associated with the Met), soprano Rosa Ponselle, and baritone Lawrence Tibbett.<sup>441</sup> The Metropolitan

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<sup>437</sup> Edward B. Birge, Russell V. Morgan, and Richard W. Grant, “National Music Camp Feature Film,” *Music Educator’s Journal* 25, no. 5 (March 1940): 13. See also Edward B. Birge, Russell V. Morgan, and Richard W. Grant, “M.E.N.C. at Hollywood,” *Music Educator’s Journal* 25, no. 5 (March 1940): 12–13, and, for more on film music and education, see Bruno David Ussher, “Film Music and School Music,” *Music Educator’s Journal* 26, no. 4 (February 1940): 18–19.

<sup>438</sup> A.M. Botsford to Russell Holman, 19 March 1940, *There’s Magic in Music* Production File 1939–1941, 210.f-4, Paramount Pictures Production Records, MHL. The idea was proposed by Edward Schellhorn, who suggested that the studio “could derive all sorts of benefits” from a tie-up; he proposed selecting a few voices from the Sunday audition hour to use in the picture in addition to the possibility of shooting some of the scenes in the opera house. Schellhorn also stated that “Perhaps we could make an arrangement whereby Paramount could photograph actual scenes from various operas to be used in the picture.” See Letter from Richard Halliday to Andrew Stone, 11 March 1940, *There’s Magic in Music* Production File 1939–1941, 210.f-4, Paramount Pictures Production Records, MHL.

<sup>439</sup> Letter from Richard Halliday to Andrew Stone, 11 March 1940, *There’s Magic in Music* Production File 1939–1941, 210.f-4, Paramount Pictures Production Records, MHL.

<sup>440</sup> Letter from A.M. Botsford to Andrew Stone, 26 March 1940, *There’s Magic in Music* Production File 1939–1941, 210.f-4, Paramount Pictures Production Records, MHL. \$25,000 is the equivalent to \$402,000 today.

<sup>441</sup> *There’s Magic in Music* Script, 12 March 1940, Paramount Pictures Scripts, MHL.

agreed that Paramount could use the institution's name in exchange for the donation, but stated that it "would be impossible for the Met" to ask their contracted singers "to work gratis."<sup>442</sup> The proposal apparently fell through.<sup>443</sup> In the end, Met singers Richard Bonelli and Irra Pettina as well as music critic Deems Taylor appeared in the film.

Besides the publicity connections with these societies and musical institutions, Paramount's pressbook for the film's re-release as *There's Magic in Music* indicates that the studio remained consistent in its promotional campaign from the start of production, hoping to capitalize on the music-appreciation angle throughout the film's production period.<sup>444</sup> The studio announced that the heads of three national music organizations—The National Music Council, the National Bureau for the Advancement of Music, and the National Music Camp (Interlochen)—all endorsed the film. *Parents' Magazine*, too, awarded the film a medal for "Picture of the Month for Family Audiences" in their May 1941 issue.<sup>445</sup> As with similar musical films, the pressbook's suggestions for film distribution included targeting specific audience

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<sup>442</sup> See Letter from Bill Murray to Jim Geller, 25 March 1940, *There's Magic in Music* Production File 1939–1941, 210.f-4, Paramount Pictures Production Records, MHL.

<sup>443</sup> See entry for "*There's Magic in Music*," in the AFI Catalog, <http://www.afi.com/members/catalog/DetailView.aspx?s=&Movie=26956> (accessed 30 April 2016).

<sup>444</sup> Pressbook for *There's Magic in Music*, 1940–41, Paramount Pictures Press Sheets, Special Collections, MHL.

<sup>445</sup> *Parents' Magazine* reviewed the latest movie releases in each issue, offering guidance as to whether or not a film was appropriate for three categories of viewers: adults, young folk (ages 12 to 16), and children (ages 8 to 12). According to *Parents' Magazine*, the "Movie-of-the-Month" medal was supposed to "encourage the production of motion pictures suitable for whole-family audiences." See "Movie of the Month," *Parents' Magazine* 16, no. 5 (May 1941): 69.

Interestingly enough, *Parents' Magazine* offered a positive review of the film when it was originally released: "The music and the background of this film are exceptional. It tells the story of a young singer who supports herself in cheap shows until her voice is accidentally discovered by a young man whose father has a summer camp for aspiring high school musicians. The famous music camp at Interlochen provides the locale and the scenes of student life, the amazing music created by the young people, the freshness and humor of the situations are delightful. Several famous opera stars appear during contest scenes and the 'scrambled' opera with which the film ends is most amusing and splendidly sung. Adults & Youth—Good. Children—If interested." See Review of *The Hard-Boiled Canary*, *Parents' Magazine* 12, no. 3 (March 1941): 50.

demographics. In particular, the publicists recommended advertising to music schools and teachers; music and radio stores; record shops; dancing schools; and, oddly enough, night clubs.

At the same time, the pressbook reveals that the publicity department maintained a bias against promoting art music without appealing to the supposed predilections of the masses: popular music and love stories. One plant article, for example, was titled “Famous Opera Stars Seen in Film Musical,” but discussed instead how *There’s Magic* combined swing music with operatic classics in a popular style. Another prepared column similarly claimed: “Very cleverly, several popular operatic arias were given a popularization treatment, so that, although the music itself remains familiar, nevertheless, as performed, it sounds a good deal like modern swing. This is exactly in the spirit of the highly amusing story, which bounces along with verve and sparkle.” In actuality, *There’s Magic* did not blend “good music” with swing; only Ann Ronell’s “Fireflies on Parade,” which featured a small dance orchestra and choir of voices, could be loosely considered as such. Humorously enough, the revamped pressbook recommended that theater owners promote the movie by way of the message underpinning the title, *There’s Magic in Music*: “The Title opens the way for you to a number of unusual co-operations which can do a great job of getting the title over to your public.” Unfortunately for Paramount, no amount of magic could salvage the film’s standing at the box office after it had been disguised as a *Hard-Boiled Canary*.

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A.M. Botsford’s interview with *The Washington Post* in 1939 neatly encapsulated the importance of naming a film correctly:

A lot of people claim that a title means very little. They point out that there was a picture with a terrible name called *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*. That title means

absolutely nothing, yet the picture was a whale of a success. On the other side of the fence is an excellent picture we made a while back called *Café Society*. It was a good show. Everybody that went enjoyed it. Only not enough people saw it. Some of our executives are afraid they stayed away because they weren't interested in *Café Society*. That's probably true, though at the time we selected that title, we believed it to be a real inspiration. It just goes to show that we're always wracking our brains for names and if the picture is a fizzle we get blamed, while if it's a success everybody says the title doesn't matter.<sup>446</sup>

Paramount's debate over what to call *There's Magic in Music/The Hard-Boiled Canary* highlights competing ideas held by studio personnel about how best to handle and promote a film featuring a narrative about the uplifting power of classical music during a transitional period in Hollywood filmmaking. The film industry took its cue from widely circulating, and often contradictory, ideas about "good music's" cultural cachet, disseminated, in part, by the leaders of the music-appreciation movement. Even as the classics were being heralded as accessible to all Americans, the gap between musics coded as highbrow or lowbrow began to widen discursively. This tension affected the production of operatic musicals in two ways. First, studios sought to cash in on the popularity of the classics, producing musical films that showcased highlights of the art music canon. Second, marketing and sales departments were influenced by classed perceptions of musical preference when promoting the studio's products, which could affect a film's outcome at the box office.

Furthermore, the film industry's infrastructure began to shift in response to World War II, affecting how the studios were run. For its part, Paramount sought to focus on making quality pictures with higher budgets to attract more Americans to the movie theater, increasing domestic profits to offset lost European revenue. Only a few months after *There's Magic's* release, too, a

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<sup>446</sup> See Othman, "A Title, a Title, Their Kingdom for a Title!" After *There's Magic in Music* fizzled at the box office as *The Hard-Boiled Canary*, Paramount saw a shift in studio personnel who worked on the film. Botsford moved to Twentieth-Century Fox as the director of advertising and publicity; Andrew Stone went on to become an independent producer and director, founding Andrew Stone Productions in 1943; and Susanna Foster only made one more film for Paramount, *Glamour Boy* (1941), before switching to Universal Pictures.

government ruling on the issue of “block booking” upset the major studios’—RKO, Loew’s (MGM), Twentieth-Century Fox, Warner Bros., and Paramount—control over exhibition and distribution. “Block booking” refers to a practice enforced by the larger studios that required independent theater owners to purchase the rights to show all of the major pictures of a given studio on a blind basis and a year in advance.<sup>447</sup> In September 1941, the Department of Justice decreed that the studios could only sell blocks of no more than five films and that they had to offer a trade showing of the films before they were sold to exhibitors.<sup>448</sup>

The uncertainty of American involvement in World War II also ushered Hollywood into a new era of filmmaking during a time of global crisis. The film industry, or at least a part of it, joined the war effort with such films as *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (1939), *The Man I Married* (1940), and *Foreign Correspondent* (1940). Indeed, the 1940s would see the rise of the propaganda film, comedy duos such as Bud Abbott and Lou Costello, film *noir*, and the show-stopping musical extravaganzas of the *Canteen* pictures. Even the lighthearted musical typically associated with the Great Depression responded to the war, favoring realism and drama over escapism and fantasy.

Understood within this context, *There’s Magic in Music* marks the transition between operatic musicals produced during the Great Depression and those made during World War II. This transition can be seen most clearly by a shift in who was cast in the leading roles. By the end of the 1930s, the Metropolitan Opera singers who had ventured west from New York in pursuit of Hollywood fame returned to their careers on the stage, and a new generation of

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<sup>447</sup> “Charge Consent Decree Freezes Film Monopoly: Independents’ Protection Lacking,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 17 November 1940.

<sup>448</sup> See “Film Consent Decree Presented to Court,” *Wall Street Journal*, 15 November 1940.

operatic actresses took their place.<sup>449</sup> Responding to the age and experience of these adolescent singers—Deanna Durbin, Susanna Foster, and Gloria Jean—filmmakers devised new characters for their young protagonists as well as a variety of novel scenarios in which their stars might logically be expected to perform. In other words, fresh personalities helped shape film formulas. Whereas their predecessors from the Met had starred in musical films based on opera-singer narratives with fully-staged opera sequences, this trio of teen actresses played ingénues who performed either at home, school, camp, or in other community settings. These young women represented the ideal American girl-next-door, especially during wartime.

Paramount's indecision over a film title also speaks to broader industry and national concerns during a period of uncertainty and change. What was the future of the musical film? And what role, if any, would "good music" serve in wartime musicals? As one of the new hybrid musicals, *There's Magic in Music* built on preexisting ideas while also hinting at changes to come. In one scene, for example, Finnish refugee Heimo Haitto explains to Toodles that he came to Interlochen for the opportunities he could not access in his homeland.<sup>450</sup> Indeed, the United States would curate its image as a cultural refuge wherein "good music" could flourish, untouched as it was by bombing raids or military occupation.<sup>451</sup> Situating *There's Magic in Music* within a transitional period of Hollywood filmmaking, at the crossroads of the Great Depression and World War II, therefore allows us to investigate how classed perceptions of musical taste informed the film industry's presentation and marketing of art music in the tumultuous pre-war years. Although Depression-era notions of what constituted so-called high or

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<sup>449</sup> This excludes Risë Stevens, who made *The Chocolate Soldier* with MGM in 1941.

<sup>450</sup> At the time the script was being written, the Soviet Union had just invaded Finland, thereby initiating the Winter War.

<sup>451</sup> See Annegret Fauser, *Sounds of War: Music in the United States during World War II* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 4, 135–38.

low forms of musical preference guided Paramount's marketing strategies, *There's Magic in Music's* narrative pointed to the more universalist, and simultaneously democratic, understanding of "good music" that would underpin the musical films of World War II.

## CHAPTER 4: OPERATIC VOCALITY TO THE 1940S: DEANNA DURBIN, KATHRYN GRAYSON, AND JANE POWELL

Put *Three Smart Girls* right down on your list of pictures not to miss—it sparkles, it scintillates, and best of all, it amuses. You have little idea what a honey of a comedy this one is until you see it . . . First and foremost is Deanna Durbin, radio favorite, who plays Penny, the youngest. A talented little girl of 14, Deanna has all the *savoir faire* of a grown woman and moreover sings beautifully, introducing two delightful new songs, “My Heart Is Singing” and “Someone to Care for Me.”<sup>452</sup>

Aside from this final sentence, Louella Parsons’ *Los Angeles Examiner* review for Universal Pictures’ *Three Smart Girls* (1936) contained no other information regarding Durbin’s voice or the film’s music. At first, Parsons’ omission seems somewhat odd, especially when considering that Durbin’s biggest claim to fame at the time was her “fully matured” operatic voice.<sup>453</sup> Indeed, Durbin had begun performing regularly on comedian Eddie Cantor’s Sunday night comedy and music program, *Texaco Town*, while shooting *Three Smart Girls*.<sup>454</sup> Multiple newspapers heralded her overnight success, reporting that Durbin received thousands of fan letters after her first appearance on Cantor’s show on 20 September 1936. Many such fans, however, could not believe that Durbin was a teenager, due to her advanced lyric soprano.<sup>455</sup> Cantor even introduced Durbin’s second performance on his program by announcing that “last week little Deanna

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<sup>452</sup> Louella O. Parsons, “‘Three Smart Girls’ in Sparkling Comedy,” *Los Angeles Examiner*, 3 December 1936.

<sup>453</sup> See, for example, “Deanna Durbin, Latest Hollywood Discovery Billed As Sensation,” *The China Press*, 24 March 1937.

<sup>454</sup> “Deanna Durbin, Latest Hollywood Discovery Billed As Sensation,” *The China Press*. Durbin reportedly earned up to \$1,000 (\$17,100 today) a week for her appearances.

<sup>455</sup> See, for example, “Deanna Durbin, Latest Hollywood Discovery Billed As Sensation,” *The China Press*, “Deanna Durbin Skyrockets to Film Stardom: Vocal Prodigy Becomes Sensation; Slated for Opera,” *The China Press*, 21 February 1937, and “Deanna Durbin Is Newest Star Developed By Comedian Cantor,” *Washington Post*, 8 November 1936.

Durbin sang ‘Il bacio,’ and thousands who heard her refused to believe that this child with the operatic voice is only thirteen years old. You can take my word for it, it’s true. Deanna’s barely thirteen and pretty as a picture.”<sup>456</sup> The press likewise responded to the public’s incredulity, claiming that specialists had examined Durbin’s throat and pronounced it fully developed.<sup>457</sup> It seems probable, however, that listeners were not reacting to Durbin’s voice alone. Her chosen repertoire could only be performed well with serious vocal training and years of experience. Durbin’s voice, in combination with this classical repertoire—then associated with an “older” audience—thus marked the young singer as mature beyond her years.

It is therefore curious that Parsons neglected to mention Durbin’s performance of one of her signature songs, “Il bacio,” in her first full-length film. A vocal showpiece composed by Luigi Arditi in 1860, “Il bacio” belonged to the operatic singer’s repertoire and had been recorded by such prima donnas as Lucrezia Bori and Adelina Patti.<sup>458</sup> It is possible that Parsons perceived “Il bacio” as well-worn territory, and so did not consider it necessary to reference a song that already would have been familiar to Durbin’s fans. By the time *Three Smart Girls* premiered on 20 December 1936, Durbin had performed “Il bacio” at least twice on Cantor’s

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<sup>456</sup> See Eddie Cantor, “Texaco Town 27 September 1936 with Eddie Cantor and Deanna Durbin,” uploaded by danny sharples, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=msE34REUOhA&index=15&list=PLoarO3KzonTHLI\\_C-6n8-oba0Kv5vWA6u](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=msE34REUOhA&index=15&list=PLoarO3KzonTHLI_C-6n8-oba0Kv5vWA6u) (accessed 15 October 2016). In reality, Durbin was only a little more than two months shy of turning fifteen. Durbin sang “A Heart That’s Free,” which Jeanette MacDonald performed in *San Francisco* (1936). Durbin also sang this in her second film for Universal, *One Hundred Men and a Girl* (1937). In 1950, operatic actress Jane Powell performed “A Heart That’s Free” in *Two Weeks with Love*.

<sup>457</sup> See, for example, “Deanna Durbin Is Newest Star Developed By Comedian Cantor,” *Washington Post*, 8 November 1936, “Deanna Durbin Skyrockets to Film Stardom: Vocal Prodigy Becomes Sensation; Slated for Opera,” *The China Press*, 21 February 1937, and Paul Harrison, “Hollywood News and Gossip,” *The China Press*, 19 November 1936. Durbin auditioned for the role of Snow White in Walt Disney’s *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), but her voice was deemed too mature. See the entry for “*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*” in the AFI Catalog, <http://www.afi.com/members/catalog/DetailView.aspx?s=&Movie=5865> (accessed 30 April 2016). For more on Durbin and “sonic womanliness,” see Jennifer Fleeger, *Mismatched Women: The Siren’s Song Through the Machine* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 78–105, and Gaylyn Studlar, *Precocious Charms: Stars Performing Girlhood in Classical Hollywood Cinema* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2013), 91–131.

<sup>458</sup> Arditi composed operas and various vocal works that became part of the concert singer’s wheelhouse.

program and once in her MGM short *Every Sunday*, which was released on 28 November 1936. On the other hand, Parsons' description of *Three Smart Girls* as a comedy rather than a musical provides insight as to why the columnist focused on the movie's narrative over its music. It appears that she saw generic differences between Durbin's vehicle and other contemporary films featuring musical sequences: the idea for *Three Smart Girls* revolved around the film's story rather than its songs.

This emphasis on narrative became a signature element of Durbin's eighteen feature-length films, which—with the exception of *Christmas Holiday* (1944)—typically included four or five musical numbers. Two of the men responsible for this increased focus on plot in movies featuring operatic actresses were producer Joe Pasternak and director Henry Koster, both of whom worked on Durbin's early films. Whereas music served as the primary attraction for films featuring opera singers in the 1930s, Pasternak and Koster believed that, in addition to the talents of the star, the screenplay itself should draw audiences to the theater. Rather than making musicals, then, the two friends saw themselves as creators of appealing light comedies that happened to contain musical numbers. They cast Durbin in a series of films that framed the young actress as a democratic American girl-next-door, whose operatic voice charms all listeners, regardless of class, educational background, or musical preference.

After launching Durbin as one of the most popular movie stars of the late 1930s, Pasternak changed studios from Universal to MGM, taking his magical movie-making formula with him. There he shaped the careers of two other young operatic singers, Kathryn Grayson and Jane Powell. But Pasternak's formula for integrating "good music" into appealing narratives underwent a few revisions in the 1940s. With the onset of World War II, both Hollywood and music were conscripted into fighting the Axis powers. Classical music's green card, so to speak,

was exchanged for U.S. citizenship, and the process of Americanizing an overwhelmingly European repertoire took place both on stage and in the movies. Within war narratives, the operatic singer came to embody the wholesome American “good girl,” whose trained voice reminded soldiers of home, peace, and the American values for which they were fighting. Certainly these musicians offered an alternative to such spunky pin-up girls as Betty Grable, who sang popular songs and tap-danced their way into the hearts of the men overseas. “Good music,” in effect, equated to “good girl” in movies depicting heroines of working or middle-class origins, echoing the role of the “emotional nurturer” that female classical musicians filled during their United Service Organizations (USO) tours for military servicemen during World War II.<sup>459</sup> Critics even limited their use of words such as “highbrow” or “longhair” in favor of more generalized descriptions of the female operatic voice as “lovely” or “impressive.”

Even so, the economic boom of the postwar period brought a reorientation of “good music” as elite music. Within film narratives, operatic protagonists assumed wealthier stations in life, and opera—or operatic singing—signified cultural refinement and sophisticated tastes to which middlebrow audiences could aspire. At the same time, Hollywood strove for greater musical variety in its products, and operatic actresses began to perform a more strategic ratio of “highbrow” to “lowbrow” musical numbers in their movies. Indeed, the film industry shifted toward its singers performing more concert pieces, popular tunes, and traditional songs—in an operatic style—rather than operatic arias, promoting a more fluid understanding of what “opera” meant after World War II. In the later 1940s, then, these singer/actresses’ vocality, more so than their repertoire, marked them as operatic.

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<sup>459</sup> See Annegret Fauser, *Sounds of War: Music in the United States during World War II* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 39.

In order to trace these shifts in film production and audience reception, I first discuss Deanna Durbin's early career at Universal and her films made with Joe Pasternak and Henry Koster. Using primary sources—archival documents, interviews, and autobiographical materials—I show how Pasternak and Koster conceptualized film narratives for Durbin that both showcased her vocal abilities and established her persona as a wholesome and democratic American adolescent. To do so, I focus on Durbin's first two films, *Three Smart Girls* (1936) and *One Hundred Men and a Girl* (1937) before turning to *First Love* (1939), the first of her “grown-up” pictures. I then shift to an analysis of Kathryn Grayson's *Thousands Cheer* (1943) to show how Hollywood used operatic actresses and “good music” for propaganda purposes during World War II. Lastly, I analyze the various incarnations of the script for Jane Powell's *Luxury Liner* (1948). These documents reveal how MGM screenwriters approached, on the one hand, the characterization of operatic actresses in the postwar period and, on the other, the process of integrating musical numbers into their stories. The overarching narrative of the chapter traces the transition from opera as a genre defined by a canonic repertoire to a musical style invoked by a singer's vocality.

### **One Smart Girl and Two Smart Men**

Fourteen-year-old Deanna Durbin began her illustrious career as a radio singer. She first performed on local Los Angeles programs, appearing as a guest on three KLBK broadcasts of the famous Los Angeles Breakfast Club (a businessmen's “pep group”) in 1935. Durbin then worked her way up to performing on national networks. She even sang “One Night of Love,” which Grace Moore made famous in her eponymous blockbuster, on the *Shell Chateau Hour's* variety

program in November 1935.<sup>460</sup> In performing such songs associated with famous divas, Durbin anchored her lineage within the operatic tradition.

Sometime between January and March 1936, Durbin signed a six-month movie contract with MGM, which was perhaps the most prestigious movie studio in Hollywood at the time. MGM did not offer Durbin any assignments, however, until her “screen test,” a short film called *Every Sunday* (1936) in which she performed “Il bacio.” The studio decided to let Durbin’s contract lapse and instead keep her co-star, Judy Garland. According to legend, MGM mogul Louis B. Mayer watched the short and told his staff to “get rid of the fat one”; unable to determine which girl Mayer meant, the staff let Durbin go. Mayer, however, simply may have decided that the studio did not need another operatic singer on the studio’s payroll, especially since popular co-stars Jeanette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy reigned as “Hollywood’s Sweethearts” at the time. Dismissed from MGM, Durbin quickly moved to Universal Pictures, where she teamed up with two European émigrés, Joe Pasternak and Henry Koster, to star in their first American-made film, *Three Smart Girls* (1936).<sup>461</sup>

*Three Smart Girls*, similar to the majority of Universal’s movies during this period, began life as a B-picture. The studio considered it a rather negligible film that needed to be made to fulfill a one-movie deal with an unwanted director named Henry Koster. Koster, a German émigré of Jewish descent, recently had fled Europe with his friend Joe Pasternak, a Hungarian-

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<sup>460</sup> Durbin performed this song on the program’s 28 November 1935 evening broadcast. See Studlar, *Precocious Charms*, 104–05.

<sup>461</sup> Durbin continued her radio work while under contract to MGM, performing on local Los Angeles programs like *Young Stars Over KFAC Tonight* and *Ben Alexander’s Talent Parade* in May 1936. See Studlar, *Precocious Charms*, 104–05. Durbin also kept singing on the radio while at Universal, appearing on *Texaco Town with Eddie Cantor* almost weekly between the fall of 1936 and late 1938, when she became too busy with film work to continue regular radio appearances. Durbin still continued to make occasional appearances on such programs as the *LUX Radio Theatre*, *Gulf Screen Guild Theatre*, the *Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy Show*, *Command Performance*, and *The Jack Benny Grape Nuts Flakes Show*. See Studlar, *Precocious Charms*, 110, 113. Durbin recorded extensively for Decca while under contract to Universal, recording both music from her films and other concert, operatic, popular, and traditional repertoire.

born film producer who had worked for Universal's German unit prior to Hitler's appointment as Chancellor in January 1933.<sup>462</sup> When Universal's president, Carl Laemmle, ordered Pasternak to return to the United States to make movies in Hollywood, the producer only agreed to do so if the studio offered Koster a job as well. Universal accepted Pasternak's terms. Shortly thereafter, however, Laemmle was quietly replaced by Charles R. Rogers, who became the vice president in charge of studio production. Under this new management, Universal deemed Koster's contract void.

At the time, Universal teetered on the brink on bankruptcy. It had scraped by in the early 1930s on such low-budget monster films as *Frankenstein* (1931), *Dracula* (1931), and *The Mummy* (1932), turning actors like Lon Chaney and Boris Karloff into the stuff of nightmares. Despite their legendary status today, such horror films did not sustain the studio's expenses. In an attempt to accrue more profits, Universal's management acquired a chain of movie theaters and sought to produce more quality pictures similar to the lavish *Show Boat*, a film adaptation of Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II's 1927 musical that premiered on 17 May 1936.<sup>463</sup> But the effects of the Great Depression proved too much to handle, and the studio could not staunch its bleeding pocketbook.

With the threat of financial ruin looming over their heads, Universal's new management had little interest in honoring the contracts of two European émigrés—it could barely afford to

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<sup>462</sup> Pasternak worked for Universal's German production unit in the 1920s. He moved operations to Budapest in May 1933 because of Nazi interference in filmmaking and escalating anti-Jewish propaganda. For more about his early career, see Helmut G. Asper and Jan-Christopher Horak, "Three Smart Guys: How a Few Penniless German Émigrés Saved Universal Studios," *Film History* 11, no. 2 (1999): 136–53, and Joe Pasternak, *Easy the Hard Way* (New York: Putnam, 1956).

<sup>463</sup> Actress Irene Dunne played the role of Magnolia in *Show Boat*. She was born into a musical family—her mother was a concert pianist and music teacher—and won a scholarship to the Chicago Musical College where she studied voice. Dunne aspired to be an opera singer, but, when things did not work out as planned, she became involved in light opera and musical theater. By the 1930s, she had made her way to Hollywood. Dunne starred in a few singing roles, for example, *Roberta* (1935) and *Show Boat* (1936), but became known for her screwball comedy and dramatic roles. For more on *Show Boat*, see Todd R. Decker, *Show Boat: Performing Race in an American Musical* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

retain its American staff. Koster and Pasternak contested the studio's decision, both unable to return to Germany due to their Jewish heritage.<sup>464</sup> Universal proved more amenable to retaining Pasternak's services since he had worked for the company in Europe. Eventually, the duo negotiated a one-picture deal for Koster. Universal provided the director with stiff terms, however, forbidding him to cast any well-known actors and insisting that he use the studio's contract players.<sup>465</sup> For his one film, Koster decided to make a comedy in which three girls reunite their divorced parents. The studio approved his idea and assigned Koster a screenwriter, Adele Comandini, to help him develop the screenplay.<sup>466</sup>

Once the script had been completed and most of the casting decisions made, Koster and Pasternak still needed to find someone to play the role of Penny Craig, the youngest of the three girls. Durbin's agent, Jack Sherill, contacted Pasternak and suggested that they consider the young singer for the part. Pasternak and Koster agreed to test Durbin for their film after listening to her perform on a local radio show.<sup>467</sup> The teenager's wholesomeness and charm won Koster over immediately, but, as he recalled in an interview, it took some convincing for Durbin to agree to star in *Three Smart Girls*: "I went to her and said, 'You got the part.' She started crying

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<sup>464</sup> Koster remembered the horrifying prospect of losing his contract: "This is really terrible for someone who comes here, who knows he can't go back to Europe anymore. I couldn't; Hitler had taken over. I didn't have a place to go. It's a terrible thing for anybody to come from Europe to Hollywood and be sent back. If you got a contract to Hollywood and came back after six months, you couldn't get a job in Europe either anymore. They'd say, 'If the Americans don't want him, we don't want him either.'" See Henry Koster, *A Directors Guild of America Oral History: Henry Koster*, interviewed by Irene Kahn Atkins (Metuchen, NJ, and London: The Directors Guild of America and Scarecrow Press, 1987), 55.

<sup>465</sup> Koster, *A Directors Guild of America Oral History*, 48. At the time, Charles Winninger, who played Durbin's father in *Three Smart Girls*, and Ray Milland, who played her onscreen sister's love interest, were both stock characters in Hollywood. Winninger became increasingly popular following his appearance as the Captain in *Show Boat* (1936), while Milland skyrocketed to success after playing in both *Three Smart Girls* and *The Jungle Princess* (1936).

<sup>466</sup> Koster, *A Directors Guild of America Oral History*, 48–49.

<sup>467</sup> According to his interview, Koster remembered hearing Durbin on Eddie Cantor's *Texaco Town* radio program. See Koster, *A Directors Guild of America Oral History*, 50. However, Durbin did not appear on Cantor's show until September 1936.

instead of being happy. She said, ‘I told you I don’t like movies and I don’t want to be in them. I want to be an opera singer.’ I told her she could sing in the picture, and finally I convinced her.”<sup>468</sup> Notably, *Three Smart Girls* did not include any musical sequences originally. Rather, the film’s emphasis, as Louella Parsons observed in her review, was on the story. This might explain why Durbin did not want to take part in the film and why *Three Smart Girls* only contained three musical numbers—barring any cuts—instead of the four or five that became standard in the rest of her movies.

Impressed by Durbin’s personality and vocal talent, Koster and Pasternak decided to showcase the young singer in *Three Smart Girls*, convincing Universal to sign Durbin to a picture contract in June 1936.<sup>469</sup> Comandini was asked to “tear the script apart” and rewrite the story with Durbin as the principal player.<sup>470</sup> Koster and Pasternak also convinced Universal to grant them a higher budget to make a quality A-picture production. In part, censor Joseph Breen’s approval of the script and its “refreshing innocence” swayed the studio’s opinion favorably, while the rushes of Durbin’s first scenes highlighted her star potential.<sup>471</sup> According to multiple sources, the initial budget for *Three Smart Girls* was set somewhere between \$100,000

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<sup>468</sup> Koster, *A Directors Guild of America Oral History*, 51.

<sup>469</sup> See, for example, “News of the Screen,” *New York Times*, 1 July 1936, and “Picture Contracts Approved: Court Aids Film Girls,” *Los Angeles Times*, 3 July 1936.

<sup>470</sup> See *Fortune Magazine* (October 1939): 158, and “Deanna Durbin, Latest Hollywood Discovery Billed as Sensation,” *The China Press*, 24 March 1937. Asper and Horak provide a slightly different account, according to which Koster seemingly had been working on a story in Europe with a title of *Three Smart Girls*. After discovering Durbin in early June, Koster and Pasternak spent the summer working on a script that would highlight her talents.

<sup>471</sup> Studio boss Charles R. Rogers acquiesced to Pasternak’s request for a higher budget after receiving positive feedback from Breen and seeing Durbin’s rushes, raising the budget from \$260,000 to \$326,000 (\$4,450,000 and \$5,570,000 today). See Asper and Horak, 140, and Tom Kennedy, “He’s Her Boss! Meet Joe Pasternak, Guiding Genius of Deanna Durbin’s Screen Career,” *Screenland* 38, no. 5 (March 1939): 34.

and \$150,000.<sup>472</sup> The film went into production on 10 September 1936, and Universal raised the film's budget to \$261,750 by 21 September.<sup>473</sup> Over the course of the film shoot, which wrapped on 22 October, the budget continued to increase steadily.<sup>474</sup> Universal's weekly status reports attribute the film's ballooning budget to Koster's slow directing pace and the set designer's "influence" on quality sets and props. In the end, the film cost a substantial \$300,000, and Universal's production manager, M.F. Murphy, urgently recommended to the studio's executives that, should Koster continue to work at Universal, the director needed to be kept strictly on schedule to avoid financial overages in the future.<sup>475</sup>

## Musical Troubles

During the film shoot, Koster and Pasternak encountered unexpected trouble when it came to incorporating Durbin's musical numbers into the film's narrative. Pasternak believed that musical films should first and foremost comprise compelling stories and high-quality acting, integrating musical interludes into the plot rather than constructing the plot around the music. He had learned to incorporate vocal numbers seamlessly into movie narratives from German

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<sup>472</sup> *Fortune Magazine* indicates that the initial budget for *Three Smart Girls* amounted to a "measly" \$100,000 (\$1,710,000 today). See *Fortune Magazine* (October 1939): 67. *The Sun* corroborated this account. See Jim Tully, "Fifteen and Famous: She's Hollywood's 'Modern Jenny Lind,'" *The Sun*, 28 November 1937. \$150,000 equates to \$2,570,000 today.

<sup>473</sup> See Weekly Status Report for *Three Smart Girls* from M.F. Murphy to William Koenig, 21 September 1936, Universal Collection, University of Southern California Cinematic Arts Library (USC).

<sup>474</sup> By 12 October, the estimated budget had increased to \$275,000 (\$4,700,000 today) and production manager M.F. Murphy stated that the 35-day shoot was too long for "a subject like this." The weekly report for 26 October estimated the final outcome at approximately \$285,000 (\$4,870,000) for a 38-day film shoot and 93 minutes of dialogue. By 2 November, the studio estimated \$287,000 (\$4,910,000) with a balance of \$6,000 (\$103,000) remaining for the musical score. See Weekly Status Reports for *Three Smart Girls* from M.F. Murphy to William Koenig, Universal Collection, USC.

<sup>475</sup> In comparison, Paramount Pictures' *The Jungle Princess*—an 85-minute feature-length film—also had an estimated \$300,000 (\$5,130,000) budget. See "*The Jungle Princess*" entry from *Imdb.com*, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0027830/> (accessed 19 December 2016). Universal's 94-minute movie, *My Man Godfrey*, on the other hand, had an estimated budget of \$656,000 (\$11,200,000). See "*My Man Godfrey*" entry from *Imdb.com*, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0028010/> (accessed 19 December 2016).

productions such as *The Congress Dances* (1930) and from his own experience working on musicals in pre-Nazi Germany, ensuring that each number contributed to, or furthered, the plot in some way.<sup>476</sup> Moreover, Pasternak's trademark focus on humor and charm derived from a personal response to the volatile postwar state of Germany in the 1920s and 1930s. As he said:

In Berlin I formed whatever philosophy of making pictures I have. The world was sad, disordered, insane. Some people thought it their duty (these people always speak of conscience and integrity and so on) to tell their stories about this world. That is their right. I was as troubled as they, but I thought, and still think, I can help more by making people laugh, by giving them a moment of lightness and delight, of sweetness and charm, in a world that has always been wrong. No doubt the world is full of stinkers and misery and ugliness and hatred. I decided my pictures would show clean-looking people; they would be full of fun, filled with the joy of life, fun, lovemaking, singing and dancing.<sup>477</sup>

In Germany, then, Pasternak and Koster became known for their comedies starring actresses Dolly Haas and Franziska Gaal, who both played similar characters to Durbin, plucky yet “natural” girls.

Pasternak sought to apply his filmmaking philosophy and techniques to *Three Smart Girls*. When Pasternak suggested that they shoot Durbin's songs without rationalizing any instrumental accompaniment through visual cues, however, Universal balked.<sup>478</sup> The American film industry—at least according to the rhetoric of the time—still relied on visual verisimilitude, a hangover from the early days of sound film when it was assumed that audiences would not

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<sup>476</sup> Asper and Horak, “Three Smart Guys,” 136. As they point out: “The specific kind of light comedy with musical interludes that brought them fame in America had already been their trademark in Europe. Their films in Germany and Austria/Hungary were never more than slight and wispy entertainments, floating on plots as thin as a drop of oil on water and fuelled by an ensemble of comic performances where the parts were always greater than the whole.”

<sup>477</sup> Asper and Horak, “Three Smart Guys,” 136.

<sup>478</sup> In *One Night of Love*, for example, Grace Moore could only sing with non-diegetic accompaniment if the camera included shots of instrumentalists “playing” as well.

accept the presence of musical accompaniment if they could not see an instrument or other musical source on the screen.<sup>479</sup> As Pasternak recalled in his autobiography:

Other problems involved integrating music into our story. For example, when someone played a piano and Deanna started to sing, we had an orchestra come in behind her. It was an old, proved device to us, as I have said, for René Clair had used it in his films and we had all proved in countless pictures in Europe that no one minds . . . But some of the production people still said it was wrong. “Couldn’t we have a band passing under her window?” they said. “Where does the music come from?” “That would be a coincidence,” I insisted. “The music comes from the heart, so everybody hears it.”<sup>480</sup>

Despite Universal’s initial resistance to Pasternak’s innovative method of musical integration, he prevailed, and Durbin performed “from the heart” without any visible accompaniment. As Penny Craig, Durbin first entertains her two onscreen sisters with “My Heart is Singing” while the trio sail on a Swiss lake (Figure 4.1).



**Figure 4.1:** Screenshot from *Three Smart Girls*

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<sup>479</sup> See, for example, Rudolph Arnheim, *Film* (London: Faber and Faber, 1933), and Julie Hubbert, “All Singing, Dancing, and Talking (1926–1934)” in *Celluloid Symphonies*, edited by Hubbert (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011), 125.

<sup>480</sup> Pasternak, *Easy the Hard Way*, 170.

She then charms her estranged father with “Someone to Care for Me” before bedtime, upstaging an earlier performance by her father’s vampy fiancée (Figure 4.2).<sup>481</sup>



**Figure 4.2:** Screenshot from *Three Smart Girls*

Lastly, a runaway Penny, picked up by policemen and taken to a precinct station downtown, attempts to convince all those present that she was a foreign opera singer by performing the song that made her famous on Eddie Cantor’s radio show, “Il bacio” (Figure 4.3).

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<sup>481</sup> “My Heart is Singing” and “Someone to Care for Me” were both studio-commissioned songs by Hollywood songwriters Bronislau Kaper and Walter Jurmann with lyrics by Gus Kahn. Originally a famous songwriting team from Germany, Kaper and Jurmann wrote multiple songs for movies featuring operatic singers, including, for example, *A Night at the Opera* (1935) and *San Francisco* (1936). Kahn wrote “One Night of Love” for Grace Moore.



**Figure 4.3:** Screenshot from *Three Smart Girls*

In each scenario, Durbin’s performances are integrated into the narrative and without visible orchestral accompaniment.

This approach to shooting musical numbers gradually became more common by the end of the 1930s. Mid-decade, however, it remained a rather innovative aspect of Durbin’s movies. Many, if not most, musicals produced at this time followed a backstage formula that posited a “natural” explanation as to why men and women occasionally would burst into song: characters regularly sang for rehearsals or live performances. This “show within a show” narrative thus necessitated, for reality’s sake, that the camera also include shots of an accompanying band or orchestra to engender a more natural feel. Film scholar Jane Feuer estimates that the distinction between onstage and offstage musical numbers began to break down with the Fred Astaire/Ginger Rogers pictures made for RKO in the mid to late 1930s.<sup>482</sup>

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<sup>482</sup> Jane Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 25.

In addition to budgetary concerns and controversial filmmaking techniques, Pasternak and Koster encountered yet another obstacle: Hollywood's skepticism about the appeal of "good music." Durbin's vocality remained operatic in each of her films, regardless of the repertoire she performed. For a time, too, she was the only adolescent star to sing operatic and semi-classical repertoire. Her many radio and film performances included, for example: "Ave Maria" (the two versions by Charles Gounod and Franz Schubert), "Giannina Mia" from the Rudolf Friml/Otto Harbach operetta *The Firefly*, "Italian Street Song" from Victor Herbert's operetta *Naughty Marietta*, "Je veux vivre" from *Roméo et Juliette*, "Les filles de Cadiz" (Léo Delibes), "Libiamo ne lieti calici" from *La traviata*, and "Un bel dì" (in English) from *Madama Butterfly*. She also sang such popular songs, show tunes, and traditional favorites as "Annie Laurie," "Ciribiribin"—which Grace Moore performed in *One Night of Love* (1934)—"Smoke Gets in Your Eyes" from *Roberta*, and "Summertime" from *Porgy and Bess*.<sup>483</sup>

Significantly, Pasternak asserted that Durbin's vocality erased all differences between highbrow and lowbrow musics. In regard to *Three Smart Girls*, he said: "How the American audiences would take it, we didn't know. Around the lot the general feeling was that the music was too 'highbrow.' But we felt Deanna sang so simply, so beautifully, that she wiped out all distinction between 'popular' and 'serious' music, which is as it should be."<sup>484</sup> Pasternak's claim proves particularly intriguing when considering that Durbin sang two popular songs against one art song in her first feature film, suggesting that, at least according to studio personnel, Durbin's vocality rather than chosen repertoire had marked the music as highbrow.

Indeed, Durbin navigated tricky vocal passages with an ease that revealed her talent and classical training. Yet unlike many contemporary artists of more mature years, she tended to

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<sup>483</sup> Studlar, *Precocious Charms*, 110.

<sup>484</sup> Pasternak, *Easy the Hard Way*, 171.

follow the music as written rather than indulging in moments of showmanship or virtuosity. Her held notes never trespassed into overindulgence, she avoided emotional shows of *portamento*, and her vibrato remained tightly controlled throughout her performances except when sustaining pitches or traversing her upper register. Durbin's full, warm timbre and smooth execution of difficult passages increased her perceived vocal maturity, while, as Pasternak observed, her "simple" performance aesthetic simultaneously pointed to her youth. This synthesis of maturity and youth established by her vocality seemingly enabled Durbin to sing "so beautifully" that she "wiped out all distinction" between the popular and the classical.

According to Koster, studio executives anticipated that *Three Smart Girls* would do poorly at the box office and therefore requested a private viewing before releasing it to the public. High-powered studio personnel—vice president and chief of production Charles R. Rogers, assistant director Vaughn Paul, production chief William Koenig, head of the scenario department Jerry Sackheim—and other people who, as Koster stated, "were supposed to like comedy" attended the viewing.<sup>485</sup> Instead of focusing on the film, however, the audience discussed football and the daily horse races.<sup>486</sup> Koster recollected that Rogers asked his staff to comment on the film when the picture was over: "And you know they don't like to answer. They are afraid they'll lose their jobs if they say something wrong. So they said, 'Well, it's one of those picture,' and another one said, 'Oh, I think if you handled it with a few changes, you can at least release it.' These were the talks that went on. And then one of them said, 'Nobody's going to laugh at the kind of gags that he has in there.'<sup>487</sup> In the end, the staff found *Three Smart Girls*

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<sup>485</sup> Koster, *A Directors Guild of America Oral History*, 54.

<sup>486</sup> Koster, *A Directors Guild of America Oral History*, 54.

<sup>487</sup> Koster, *A Directors Guild of America Oral History*, 54.

too European—code for sophisticated comedy situations, witty dialogue, and complex side stories—for American audiences.

Aware that his future hung in the balance, Koster requested that the studio show *Three Smart Girls* at a public preview before disregarding it completely. Rogers consented, and the movie played at the Pantages Theater in Hollywood to great audience and critical acclaim. As Koster remembered: “The people howled and howled and applauded and roared. It was everything I wanted. The executives were sitting with us, up in the balcony. They were quite surprised that people liked that stuff.”<sup>488</sup> Indeed, the press reported rave reviews of the film upon its release. As a critic for the *Motion Picture Herald* observed: “Reviewed at the Roxy Theatre, New York, where a midday audience of capacity proportions indicated by laughter, by tears, and by prolonged applause such satisfaction as is manifested perhaps half a dozen times annually in the best cinema years.”<sup>489</sup> Censor Joseph Breen even conveyed his approval of the film in a report to Will H. Hays: “*Three Smart Girls* (Univ.) proved to be a surprisingly good little picture. It introduces some of Universal’s hitherto unknown talent.”<sup>490</sup> *Three Smart Girls* became a smash hit at the box office, grossing over \$1,635,800.<sup>491</sup> It also received three Academy Award nominations for Best Picture, Best Sound, and Best Original Story.

### ***One Hundred Men and a Girl* (1937)**

Universal quickly arranged for Koster and Pasternak to develop an idea for a second Durbin picture. Koster proposed the story for *One Hundred Men and a Girl*, a film in which Durbin

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<sup>488</sup> Koster, *A Directors Guild of America Oral History*, 55.

<sup>489</sup> William R. Weaver, review of *Three Smart Girls*, *Motion Picture Herald*, 30 January 1937.

<sup>490</sup> Report from Joseph Breen to Will H. Hays, 30 November 1936, Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration Records, MHL.

<sup>491</sup> Asper and Horak, “Three Smart Guys,” 135. \$1,635,800 amounts to \$26,000,000 today.

played the role of a precocious adolescent who charms a wealthy patron into sponsoring a civic orchestra comprised of unemployed musicians.<sup>492</sup> *One Hundred Men* established Durbin's "type," the "Little Miss Fix-It" character who solved adult problems through childish ploys and a song or five. It also constructed a new ideal for operatic singers, one defined by youth and a democratic American girl-next-door attitude rather than operatic pedigree. Such ingénues did not confine themselves to performing onstage, nor did they always aspire to be opera singers. Rather, they performed for anyone in any location, whether at home, for music-appreciation class, or in other community venues.

Although eager to promote a young star who would help save the studio from bankruptcy, Universal expressed concern that *One Hundred Men and a Girl* might not go over well with the public for two particular reasons. First, the movie tapped into Depression-era concerns over unemployment.<sup>493</sup> As Pasternak stated: "*One Hundred Men and a Girl* was the story of the enterprising girl whose father is an unemployed musician. The story itself can only be understood in terms of the mid-Thirties when this country was still suffering the effects of the depression and solvent symphony organizations were few and very far between."<sup>494</sup> Studio executives objected to the socially relevant plot, arguing that Universal—which itself was experiencing dire financial straits—should not tell stories that hit too close to home. In their opinion, such films would not make any money.

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<sup>492</sup> Henry Koster claimed credit for the idea, while the original story was written by Hans Kraly—who wrote Grace Moore's *A Lady's Morals*—with F. Hugh Herbert. Rewrites and later versions of the script were written by James Mulhauser, Charles Kenyon, Bruce Manning, and Felix Jackson. The film went into production on 14 May 1937 and wrapped on 23 July.

<sup>493</sup> Unemployment had dropped from 23.6% in 1932 to 16.9% in 1936, and the government established the Federal Music Project in 1935.

<sup>494</sup> Pasternak, *Easy the Hard Way*, 185.

Second, the executives balked at Koster's suggestion that they hire renowned conductor Leopold Stokowski to play himself in the film and lead a professional orchestra.<sup>495</sup> Pasternak recalled the studio's horror:

What's this with a symphony orchestra? Long-hair music? Did we realize this was box office murder? ... It was not going to be easy, we were told. In the first place, maybe [Stokowski] wouldn't want to "demean himself"; the highbrow critics always wrote about film music the way the drama critics had once treated the infant motion picture, as less than the dust beneath a true artist's chariot wheels. That Stokowski himself would be difficult, we were warned.<sup>496</sup>

Stokowski, it turns out, was delighted to appear in *One Hundred Men* and further the cause of the classics. Pasternak admitted, moreover, that he had ulterior motives for pursuing the use of highbrow music in the films. He wanted to prove to his European friends that Americans also appreciated quality "of the highest sort."<sup>497</sup>

Koster similarly recounted the studio's reaction to his suggestion:

They all looked at me like I was a nut. "That's longhair music," somebody said. "Nobody in America listens to that kind of music. You mean Wagner and Beethoven? You can't sell that here. They've tried it." I said, "That's funny. Yesterday I went to a concert in a place called the Hollywood Bowl, and they had 18,000 people there. They cheered when the conductor finished his Beethoven symphony." "Oh, these are just a few people. They want to impress with their knowledge of music. They don't really like it." I got very upset, and I said, "Either that, or I don't want to make this picture. I'm not interested in dance music."<sup>498</sup>

Koster's love of "good music" dated back to his childhood in Germany, and he reportedly selected the classical music performed in his films. His grandfather was an opera singer, while his grandmother and mother were pianists. Koster's mother took him to the opera twice a week and established a family routine where she would play piano and sing opera arias for him.

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<sup>495</sup> Koster, *A Directors Guild of America Oral History*, 62.

<sup>496</sup> Pasternak, *Easy the Hard Way*, 185.

<sup>497</sup> See Pasternak, *Easy the Hard Way*, 186.

<sup>498</sup> Koster, *A Directors Guild of America Oral History*, 63. The studio recommended that Koster ask Benny Goodman to play the role instead of Stokowski. See Asper and Horak, "Three Smart Guys," 144.

Famous opera singers, too, rented out guest rooms in the Kosters' Berlin apartment and entertained the family with renditions of their performances late into the night.<sup>499</sup> In fact, Koster's motivation to make a movie with Stokowski stemmed from his personal admiration for the conductor, which developed long before the director's emigration to the United States: "I was so impressed with that man. He not only was a great musician, he was a great technician of music recording."<sup>500</sup>

Seemingly, the studio considered the success of *Three Smart Girls* to be a sign that movies with "good music" might actually appeal to the public.<sup>501</sup> It is also possible that Rogers paid attention to other contemporary films featuring "good music" that were doing well at the box office. Lily Pons's *That Girl from Paris* (RKO) premiered in January 1937 to financial success, while Grace Moore's *When You're In Love* (Columbia) received generally positive press upon its release one month later, in February. Universal's executives eventually agreed to contract Stokowski if the conductor agreed to a reasonable fee, musing that perhaps there was "something in the idea" after all.<sup>502</sup> As one of the most famous conductors and figureheads of classical music in the United States at the time, Stokowski's name easily could be used for exploitation purposes.

Certainly, Universal's publicity department devised a spectacular promotional campaign that cast *One Hundred Men and a Girl* as the first of its kind to bring a "big name" conductor

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<sup>499</sup> Koster, *A Directors Guild of America Oral History*, 6–8.

<sup>500</sup> Koster, *A Directors Guild of America Oral History*, 63.

<sup>501</sup> Koster, *A Directors Guild of America Oral History*, 63. Gladys Swarthout's *Champagne Waltz* also came out in February 1937.

<sup>502</sup> Koster, *A Directors Guild of America Oral History*, 63. *One Hundred Men and a Girl* became the first of Stokowski's three film roles. The other feature-length films were *Fantasia* (1940) and *Carnegie Hall* (1947). For more on Walt Disney's development of *Fantasia*, see Mark Clague, "Playing in 'Toon: Walt Disney's *Fantasia* (1940) and the Imagineering of Classical Music," *American Music* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 91–109.

and the celebrated Philadelphia Orchestra to the screen. The studio particularly focused on advertising the film's use of multi-channel tracking—a significant achievement for the time—to record the film's various musical sequences, which included symphonic excerpts by Berlioz, Liszt, Tchaikovsky, and Wagner as well as Durbin's performances of Verdi's "Libiamo ne lieti calici" from *La traviata* and the "Alleluja" from Mozart's motet, "Exsultate, jubilate" (K.165).<sup>503</sup> As the program for *One Hundred Men and a Girl* stated: "The method of recording the symphonic selections is one devised by Stokowski and worked out in collaboration with Universal's sound department and RCA engineers at the RCA laboratories at Camden, New Jersey. Known as the 'multiple channel' system, it is the greatest single step forward in music recording since sound first came to the screen."<sup>504</sup> *Variety* similarly noted that "Universal spared no effort in this regard, having utilized the new nine channel RCA ultra violet recording system in Philadelphia. So fine is the recording that every minute strain is recorded and reproduced for its full symphonic value."<sup>505</sup>

Although multi-track recording had been introduced in the movies in January 1931, it reached new heights with RCA's ultraviolet recording system in 1936, which allowed for improved sound definition and reduced distortion.<sup>506</sup> Advances in recording technology therefore

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<sup>503</sup> Durbin also sang two popular numbers, "A Heart That's Free" and "It's Raining Sunbeams." Frederick Hollander and Sam Coslow wrote the music and lyrics for "It's Raining Sunbeams." Alfred G. Robyn and Thomas Railey wrote the music and lyrics for "A Heart That's Free." These songs were approved for use in the film by the censors on 4 June 1937.

<sup>504</sup> See Pantages Theater Program for *One Hundred Men and a Girl*, c. 10 September 1937, Universal Collection, USC. See also, for example, "Deanna Durbin, Great Singing Star, in *100 Men and a Girl* at the Fox," *Atlanta Constitution*, 17 October 1937, "Leopold Stokowski Scores Hit with Studio Staff and in Film," *Washington Post*, 12 September 1937, and Frank Daugherty, "Chromos in Hollywood: Still Photography Goes Colorful," *New York Times*, 19 September 1937.

<sup>505</sup> Review of *One Hundred Men and a Girl*, *Variety*, 3 September 1937.

<sup>506</sup> For more on multi-track recording in the early 1930s, see Hubbert, "All Singing, Dancing, and Talking (1926–1934)," 123–24. For more on RCA's ultraviolet recording system, see Raymond Fielding, *A Technological History of Motion Pictures and Television* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), 206–07.

proved vital to the reception of “good music” on the screen. It could even help nuance the narrative, as in a scene where Durbin performs “Libiamo” while Stokowski leads the orchestra of unemployed musicians in a concert (Figure 4.4).



**Figure 4.4:** Screenshot of Stokowski in *One Hundred Men and a Girl*

When she looks back at Adolphe Menjou—who plays her trombonist father—and the camera cuts from Durbin’s smiling face to Menjou’s animated performance, the trombone line becomes much more prominent (Figures 4.5 and 4.6).



**Figure 4.5:** Screenshot from *One Hundred Men and a Girl*



**Figure 4.6:** Screenshot from *One Hundred Men and a Girl*

The sound engineers clearly took advantage of the multi-track channel system to make the trombone noticeably audible in the mix. At Stokowski's request, they even recorded the film's musical numbers in the Philadelphia Academy of Music in order to exploit the hall's superior acoustics. The actual shooting of the scenes took place afterwards on Universal's studio lot.<sup>507</sup>

Koster explained how he filmed these extended musical scenes later in an interview. He first studied the various musical scores to decide when and where he wanted particular shots to occur: "I can read music, and I made the shots from the music. I said, 'Here I want the close-up of the clarinets. Here I want a long shot of the bass fiddles. Here is a close-up of the conductor.' I had it all cut before we started shooting, and when we shot, I went according to the cue sheet."<sup>508</sup>

Unlike other directors who typically shot what is called a "master scene," Koster used a different approach:

I didn't do that "master scene, middle, long shot, close shot." That used to be the technique at the time, and then they would get in the cutting room and use what they wanted. I didn't like that too much, because I exhausted my actors in the long shot, and then they'd have to do it over in the other shots. By that time they'd lose their pep. I did only the pieces I wanted to use. Of course I did shoot more than I needed, to be able to change it around if I wanted to. That also saved money, because sometimes a piece of

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<sup>507</sup> Koster, *A Directors Guild of America Oral History*, 67.

<sup>508</sup> Koster, *A Directors Guild of America Oral History*, 68.

music would last between six and ten minutes, and I had to shoot two days. So the first day I did only the shots where I had the longer shots marked in my music, and the next day I got just the people back that I needed for the close-ups.<sup>509</sup>

Koster pieced together a continuous musical sequence featuring a variety of angles and shots, a method that alleviated the potential tediousness of long, static shots often associated with films showcasing “good music.” As a critic for *Variety* reported:

Deanna Durbin whose comet streaked across the film sky a year ago in Universal’s *Three Smart Girls*, is a bright, luminous star in her second picture, *One Hundred Men and a Girl*, which is something new in entertainment, and a box office attraction way up among the leaders of the early season. Its originality rests on a firm and strong foundation, craftsmanship which has captured popular values from Wagner, Tschaikowski, Liszt, Mozart and Verdi. This new film, produced by Joe Pasternak and directed by Henry Koster, opens new vistas and reveals means of winning greater picture audiences.

... Much of the distinctive nature of the film, marking it as a harbinger of substantial attractions which merge classic music and popular priced film entertainment, lies in the vastly improved mechanical skill of tone reproduction. This has been so adroitly and expertly contrived, in combination with camera shots of various instrumental sections, that the effect is startling. Orchestra numbers are from *Lohengrin*, Tschaikowski’s “Fifth Symphony,” and Liszt’s “Hungarian Rhapsody,” all familiar works. Miss Durbin, to Stokowski accompaniment, sings Mozart’s “Exultate” and the aria “Libiamo ne” from *Traviata* ... This one is socko. It augurs much for Miss Durbin’s future. She’s arrived.<sup>510</sup>

Indeed, the film’s advanced technical features enhanced the movie’s accessibility for some viewers. According to the *Hollywood Reporter*, *One Hundred Men* featured symphonic renditions “played as music has never before been played for camera and sound. It opens pictures to a field that has, heretofore, been considered too highbrow even to imagine, much less attempt ... *One Hundred Men and a Girl* will enrich every branch of this industry and certainly must be classified as an outstanding hit.”<sup>511</sup>

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<sup>509</sup> Koster, *A Directors Guild of America Oral History*, 68. A “master scene” is one in which the entire musical sequence is shot at once from one vantage point.

<sup>510</sup> Review of *One Hundred Men and a Girl*, *Variety*, 8 September 1937.

<sup>511</sup> Review of *One Hundred Men and a Girl*, *Hollywood Reporter*, 3 September 1937.

For many other critics, Pasternak and Koster's focus on plot, comedy, and innovative presentation of musical numbers made Durbin's films successful. *Variety* concluded that "Beautiful' is the word for *One Hundred Men and a Girl*. Smartly balanced in every phase of production, setting a new high for the more somber type of music and refreshing in the lightness of its comedy. The picture, with proper exploitation, cannot help but be a box office winner in any spot."<sup>512</sup> Durbin and Stokowski certainly proved a winning combination (Figure 4.7).



**Figure 4.7:** Screenshot of Durbin and Stokowski in *One Hundred Men and a Girl*

William R. Weaver of the *Motion Picture Herald* summed up the film critics' general response:

Previewed for the press at the Warner Theatre in Beverly Hills, Cal. There had been a deal of advance talk about the picture. This gathering of newspaper, magazine, trade journal, foreign, domestic and generously assorted correspondents, fagged of eye, ear, nerve and vocabulary by a rash of some 19 previews within a 10-day period, were more or less dubious as to whether 1) any picture could be as good as this one was said to be, and 2) any follow-up on *Three Smart Girls* could be better than a bad second. The picture, to use a phrase showmen love, killed both doubts.<sup>513</sup>

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<sup>512</sup> Review of *One Hundred Men and a Girl*, *Variety*, 3 September 1937.

<sup>513</sup> William R. Weaver, review of *One Hundred Men and a Girl*, *Motion Picture Herald*, 11 September 1937.

True to Weaver's prediction, *One Hundred Men and a Girl* grossed a staggering \$2,270,200 at the box office.<sup>514</sup> It also received Academy Award nominations for Best Picture, Film Editing, Sound Recording, and Original Story, winning the award for Best Musical Score. As Koster pointedly wrote to executive Nate Blumberg: "Good music is not a novelty or a recent discovery or a freak that is to be tried on what your sales force calls the masses. Good music has been reaching the people in one form or another for many years and the people have been devouring it."<sup>515</sup>

### **Durbin Establishes the American Girl-Next-Door with the Operatic Voice**

Durbin continued to delight the public with her velvety operatic voice and plucky "Miss Fix-It" characters. Because her winning formula rested on her youthful innocence and charm, however, Universal painstakingly curated Durbin's transition to adulthood onscreen. Three years after her debut in *Three Smart Girls*, Durbin appeared in her first "grown-up" picture, *First Love* (1939). The studio calculatedly hinted to the public through advance publicity that this movie would show Durbin in a new light. She would still maintain her wholesomeness, but she also would

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<sup>514</sup> \$2,270,200 amounts to \$37,500,000 today. The preliminary budget for *One Hundred Men and a Girl* was estimated at \$597,400 (\$9,860,000). Koster received \$12,500 (\$206,000), Pasternak, \$17,250 (\$285,000), and Durbin, \$19,500 (\$322,000). See Weekly Status Report from M. F. Murphy to Val Paul, J.P. Normanly, and R.W. Miller, 26 April 1937, Universal Collection, USC. According to this report, the script was entirely rewritten one week before going into production. By 1 June, the script again changed "drastically" and the budget increased to approximately \$630,000 (\$10,400,000) for a 40-day shoot. See Weekly Status Report from M.F. Murphy to Val Paul, J.P. Normanly, and R.W. Miller, 1 June 1937, Universal Collection, USC. The 21 June report states that the dialogue was being "constantly rewritten." The 3 July report noted that the film encountered multiple setbacks, including an injury Stokowski acquired when stepping out of his automobile that caused "such pain he was unable to work on Thursday, necessitating a switch in program and the carrying of some expensive actors." The film wrapped after fifty-nine days of shooting, with a final budget of \$753,000 (\$12,400,000). According to the Weekly Status Report from M.F. Murphy to Val Paul, J.P. Normanly, and R.W. Miller, 4 December 1937, Durbin received a bonus of \$10,000 (\$165,000) and an additional "reallocation" of her salary for an extra \$2,841.74 (\$46,900). See also Asper and Horak, "Three Smart Guys," 135. The film was nominated for five Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Editing, Sound Original Story, and Musical Score. It won an Oscar for Best Score.

<sup>515</sup> Henry Koster quoted in Asper and Horak, "Three Smart Guys," 144.

share her first onscreen kiss with the—likewise wholesome—University of Southern California student, Robert Stack.

A Cinderella story, *First Love* starred Durbin as Constance Harding, an orphaned child raised at an all-girl boarding school paid for by her wealthy relatives, the Clintons. Upon graduation, she leaves for the Clintons' Park Avenue residence, where she is treated condescendingly by her two cousins, Barbara, a snobby socialite, and Walter, a lazy oaf. Resolving to make good of her situation, Connie makes friends with the servants, charming them with her cheeriness, good heart, and beautiful voice. When the British butler professes a penchant for “high art,” for example, Connie dazzles with a rendition of “Amapola.”<sup>516</sup> Connie soon falls for the socially prominent Ted Drake. When the Drakes invite the Clintons to a ball, Connie is forbidden from attending the party. The servants rush to Connie's aid, providing her with a ball gown and delaying the Clintons from making it to the Drake's before midnight. There Connie performs an adaptation of Johann Strauss II waltzes, “Spring in My Heart,” having mistaken the conductor's introduction for an old and fat opera singer as an introduction for herself. Ted falls in love with the unknown girl, and the two dance until midnight. When Barbara discovers that Connie attended the ball, she falsely tells Connie that Ted pretended to fall for her as a joke.

A heartbroken Connie returns to her boarding school to pursue a career as a music teacher. At the suggestion of the school's headmistress—who paints a stark future of loneliness for her former pupil—Connie performs an English version of “Un bel di” from *Madama Butterfly* at a teacher's conference. Her goal is to acquire letters of support necessary for an application to attend the Teacher's Conservatory of Music on scholarship. The headmistress had

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<sup>516</sup> “Amapola” is a song written by Cádiz-born composer José María Lacalle García (later known as Joseph M. Lacalle) in 1924. It was performed by opera singers and dance bands alike in the 1930s.

recommended that Connie perform “something effective” instead of the “Spring Song” Connie proposed, stating that it would make the old maids cry as they reflect on Butterfly’s line “One fine day, he’ll come back to me.” Old maids, the headmistress claims, are only happy when they cry. As Connie sings onstage in the school’s performance hall, she discovers that the teachers are, indeed, crying into their handkerchiefs, and her impending spinsterhood sinks in. On the final lyric of the aria, “For he shall return, he shall,” Connie, in tears herself, sees that Ted has walked into the room and runs toward him. Unlike Pinkerton with poor Cio-Cio-San, Ted returns to take Connie away from her fate.

By the time *First Love* premiered, Henry Koster and Joe Pasternak clearly had established a new formula for musicals featuring operatic singing. The *Motion Picture Herald*’s William R. Weaver stated that Durbin performed “four songs, each in its proper place and with the accustomed pertinency to narrative, and the emotions of an adolescent in love are dealt with realistically and with no phony underscoring. It’s a solid picture.”<sup>517</sup> The *New York Times* also claimed that, despite Durbin’s operatic vocality:

Certainly there is nothing highbrow about Deanna and her vocal selections, which this time include a sentimental number called ‘Home, Sweet Home,’ that sounds as if it has the makings of a hit. The most pretentious item is an Englished version of Puccini’s ‘Un bel dì,’ ending prettily with a romantic crisis when Prince Charming walks in tactfully on the correct note to save Deanna from a life of school-marmish spinsterhood.<sup>518</sup>

According to this critic, the most “pretentious” elements of opera were its theatrical setting and consumer base, not necessarily the performer or his/her voice.

By 1939, the only remaining operatic singers in Hollywood were adolescent stars like Durbin. Grace Moore, Lily Pons, and Gladys Swarthout had all returned to the stage, and only

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<sup>517</sup> William R. Weaver, review of *First Love*, 4 November 1939.

<sup>518</sup> Review of *First Love*, *New York Times*, 9 November 1939.

Jeanette MacDonald remained an operatic star in her films.<sup>519</sup> Durbin assumed an ideal position for many critics, one in which she could perform the classics without being highbrow. Durbin's professional status as an actress and her age allowed her to avoid any of the elitist associations famously ascribed to opera singers. What is more, the characters she played onscreen added to her "of the people" persona. Regardless of her characters' financial brackets, Durbin embodied the fresh-faced American girl-next-door. She played the daughter of wealthy parents in *Three Smart Girls* (1936), *Mad About Music* (1938), *That Certain Age* (1938), and *Three Smart Girls Grow Up* (1938); the daughter of an impoverished musician in *One Hundred Men and a Girl* (1937); and a poor relation in *First Love* (1939). In each of these narratives, Durbin played young, innocent, plucky girls full of "can-do" spirit who get along best with "regular" people, for example, unemployed musicians, policemen, and servants.

Toward the end of the 1930s, Durbin's characters became more mature yet even less financially secure as the news from Europe increasingly presented tidings of war. Released on 24 March 1939, *Three Smart Girls Grow Up*—a sequel to her first picture in which she resumed the role of Penny Craig—marked the end of Durbin's adolescent stage. Noting the changing of the times, Weaver's review for the *Motion Picture Herald* expressed:

The picture is tangible proof of the widely accented truism that "There is nothing the matter with the motion picture business that a good motion picture can't cure." Adolf Hitler was acquiring the remainder and residue of Czechoslovakia and downtown Los Angeles was visibly ablaze off there to the left, both matters of moment to the great of Hollywood who turned out to witness the official preview, but within the Pantages Theatre the great and the great unwashed who had paid their way in forgot these and other irksome realities completely for 83 magnificent minutes of 100% "escapist" entertainment. ~*Previewed at the Pantages Theatre, Hollywood, where it entertained a professional, press, and public audience utterly.*<sup>520</sup>

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<sup>519</sup> MacDonald went on to make five more films for MGM between 1940 and 1942, but her popularity began to decline at this point.

<sup>520</sup> William R. Weaver, review of *Three Smart Girls Grow Up*, *Motion Picture Herald*, 25 March 1939.

Perhaps because audiences saw Durbin's films as opportunities for escaping the horrors of war, the actress only made three films that directly addressed World War II in their narratives: *Nice Girl?* (1941), *The Amazing Mrs. Holliday* (1943), and *Hers To Hold* (1943). *Christmas Holiday* (1944)—perceived by critics and fans alike as an anomaly within Durbin's oeuvre—briefly touched upon the war with an opening in which a soldier visits the brothel where Durbin's character works; he does not play a central role in the film's flashback story, however, primarily serving as the character who hears Durbin's sad tale of love gone wrong.

Moreover, Durbin came to represent everything perceived good about the United States that the servicemen were fighting for abroad. Fan letters from servicemen printed in *Deanna's Diary*, the primary publication of Durbin's fan club, reveal how much they appreciated Durbin's movies and singing. One Private Richard Alvado, for example, described how *It's a Date* (1940) encapsulated the essence of the American way of life:

I am a medical soldier in the South Seas war. The other night, with a makeshift screen and seats of mounds of white coral, we saw *It's a Date* against a tropical sky. The vision seemed to blend with your beautiful "Ave Maria." We are fighting a war, and we believe it is for the preservation of all that is represented in the picture. It is worth it all.<sup>521</sup>

Yet Durbin's all-American appeal even transcended national borders, as soldiers in the British army looked to her as the embodiment of traditional values. Lieutenant Colonel J. Singleman from England expressed in a fan letter:

You epitomize everything that is missing from my present existence; sincerity, tenderness, music, and laughter. When I tell you that I am a tank driving instructor in the British Army, perhaps you can imagine how—after a day of struggling with one of those filthy lumbering beasts through seas of mud—it is just a little piece of Heaven to be able to visit the garrison cinema, see you and feel the sweetness and peace which surrounds you.<sup>522</sup>

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<sup>521</sup> Fan letter from Richard Alvado to Deanna Durbin, *Deanna's Diary* 5, no. 2/3 (1942).

<sup>522</sup> Fan letter from J. Singleman to Deanna Durbin, *Deanna's Diary* 5, no. 2/3 (1942).

Four English soldiers stationed “somewhere in Syria” further commented how Durbin’s mellow operatic soprano filled their nostalgic reminiscences of home:

We have an old battered gramophone here in the camp, and a few of your popular records, and when we play them of a night in our tent and the liquid notes of your golden voice float through the olive trees of this strange land, the noise of the camp is hushed as the boys all stop to listen to your wonderful voice. And many a heart is stirred, and many eyes are dimmed with tears, as they think of their former homes when they listened to your voice in happier surroundings.<sup>523</sup>

Indeed, Durbin was so closely connected to her persona as the wholesome American girl-next-door that the first of her two films deviating from the actress’ standard narratives in terms of settings and characterization, *Spring Parade* (1940), a film drawing on the genre of operetta, received critical backlash for casting Durbin against type.<sup>524</sup> Here she played a goodhearted peasant girl from Hungary, which may have been a nod to Pasternak’s own Hungarian roots.<sup>525</sup>

As one *Variety* critic stated:

In seven pictures turned out in four years, Universal and producer Joseph Pasternak have established Deanna Durbin as the typical American girl. In maintaining that line and policy, Miss Durbin clicked in each successive picture for substantial and consistent b.o. [box office] rating and returns. Pretty, charming, personable and vivacious—and displaying vocal abilities of unusual caliber—the sub-deb star is mirrored in the minds of audiences, old and young, as the daughter, sister, sweethearts, or close friend that everyone would like to have. In *Spring Parade*, producer Pasternak tends to destroy this illusion by going off on a new tangent projecting her into the role of a peasant girl in a Vienna background. The result is way under par compared to previous Durbin starrers.<sup>526</sup>

Besides expressing disappointment that Durbin was not playing her usual role, this critic appeared disturbed by the film’s nineteenth-century Viennese setting. The Austrian location was

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<sup>523</sup> Fan letter to Deanna Durbin, *Deanna’s Diary* 5, no. 2/3 (1942).

<sup>524</sup> With its nineteenth-century Viennese setting and fantastical tale of peasants, soldiers, and royalty, *Spring Parade* played more on operetta than grand opera. It did not use any pre-existing operetta songs, however, but featured new tunes by Gus Kahn. The other of Durbin’s “against type” films was *Christmas Holiday* (1944), a *noir* production in which Durbin played a good girl-turned-brothel hostess after her wastrel husband commits murder.

<sup>525</sup> Hungary joined the Axis powers in November 1940, only two months after the premiere of *Spring Parade*.

<sup>526</sup> Review of *Spring Parade*, *Variety*, 2 October 1940.

deemed to be in poor taste, especially when considering that Hitler had taken control of the country two years earlier in 1938:

With the potent Durbin name for marquee dressing, picture will hit profitable biz in keys and subsequents. However, it will not measure up to biz of her other films. Two factors militate against the b.o. side. First is transition of the star from her American girl groove; but more important will likely be audience reaction against the display of pre-war Viennese gayety and the grim consciousness of what has actually happened to the people and country in recent years under the iron fist of dictatorship. In view of current events, the audience values, consciously or otherwise, cannot be discounted.<sup>527</sup>

Following her portrayal of a peasant girl in *Spring Parade*, Durbin once again personified quintessential Americanness, perhaps even more so than when she first started in the movies. In *Nice Girl?* (1942), for example, Durbin literally embodied the average Jane, playing the role of Jane Dana, a small-town girl who dreams of adventure in the city and discovers that urbane sophistication is not all it is made out to be. When a city slicker tries to woo the wholesome Jane, she returns to her hometown and her handsome, car-fixing boyfriend (played by Robert Stack), who does his bit by enlisting in the military. In the rest of her wartime films, Durbin played a variety of democratic roles, including a department store hat-check girl (*It Started with Eve*, 1942), a schoolteacher turned guardian of Chinese orphans (*The Amazing Mrs. Holliday*, 1943), a grown-up Penny Craig who works at a plane-manufacturing plant (*Hers to Hold*, 1943), and a Midwestern gal who moonlights as a housemaid (*His Butler's Sister*, 1943).<sup>528</sup>

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<sup>527</sup> Review of *Spring Parade*, *Variety*, 2 October 1940. See also William R. Weaver, review of *Spring Parade*, *Motion Picture Herald*, 28 September 1940: "Previewed at the Pantages Theatre, Hollywood, to a mixed audience which manifested complete satisfaction in applause."

<sup>528</sup> Universal's decision to cast Durbin as a guardian of Chinese orphans undoubtedly tapped into the pro-China movement occurring in the United States in 1943. Indeed, publicity stills often showed Durbin with the Chinese children from the film, positioning Durbin as supportive of the United States' ally. For more on American and Chinese relations, see, for example, Wesley M. Bagby, *The Eagle-Dragon Alliance: America's Relations with China in World War II* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 1992), Fauser, *Sounds of War*, 101–03, and Rana Mitter, *Forgotten Ally: China's World War II, 1937–1945* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013).

Durbin became the model for subsequent operatic singers in the cinema, and her early films launched a vogue for movies featuring adolescent operatic singers, including Susanna Foster, Gloria Jean, Kathryn Grayson, and, later, Jane Powell. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, too, Hollywood increasingly cast opera as democratized, a feat made possible through technological advances in sound recording, the roles that operatic actresses played, and the settings in which they performed. This push toward democratization culminated during World War II, both as “good music” underwent a process of Americanization and as Hollywood depicted its operatic singers as the wholesome American girl—to quote *Variety*’s critic, “the daughter, sister, sweetheart, or close friend”—for whom the men were fighting overseas.

### **Kathryn Grayson, World War II, and *Thousands Cheer* (1943)**

Kathryn Grayson loved “good music,” having been raised on recordings of opera. As she later stated in an interview: “Good music makes everybody happy. It can be very uplifting, it elevates the spirits.”<sup>529</sup> Grayson studied voice with Frances Marshall of the Chicago Civic Opera as a child before her family moved from their St. Louis home to Los Angeles. At the age of fifteen and after a label executive heard her performing in church, Grayson signed a contract with RCA Red-Seal Records.<sup>530</sup> She aspired to be an opera singer and was even preparing to debut at the Metropolitan Opera with *Lucia di Lammermoor* when MGM executive Sam Katz offered Grayson a studio contract in 1940. Katz sought to groom the singer as a rival to Universal’s

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<sup>529</sup> Kathryn Grayson quoted in “*Movies Were Always Magical*”: *Interviews with 19 Actors, Directors, and Producers from the Hollywood of the 1930s through the 1950s*, edited by Leo Verswijver (Jefferson, NC, and London: McFarland, 2003), 59.

<sup>530</sup> “Kathryn Grayson,” TCM, <http://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/person/75667%7C92691/Kathryn-Grayson/> (accessed 19 October 2016).

superstar Deanna Durbin and talked Grayson into pursuing a movie career instead.<sup>531</sup> Reflecting back on her uncertainty about choosing the movies over opera, Grayson recalled having told MGM mogul Louis B. Mayer that she wanted to do “great stories with great music.”<sup>532</sup> In response to Grayson’s request, Mayer replied: “If you’re an opera singer, you’ll be an opera singer to the public, and they will think you’re highbrow and won’t pay any attention to you. If you’re a motion picture star internationally, people will know you and you will be a star the rest of your life.”<sup>533</sup> Mayer seemingly based his assessment of the careers of opera singers on Grace Moore, Lily Pons, and Gladys Swarthout, each of whom had made their way to Hollywood yet could not transcend their reputations as professional prima donnas. No doubt he looked to the success of Durbin as the model to emulate.

Grayson agreed to remain with the studio and began playing teenaged girls in her first two films, *Andy Hardy’s Private Secretary* (1941) and *The Vanishing Virginian* (1942), before quickly moving on to play more mature roles. She began working with Joe Pasternak on *The Vanishing Virginian*, after the producer left Universal. Pasternak would shape Grayson’s career just as he had with Durbin’s. For the rest of the films Grayson made with the producer, she played the American girl-next-door and performed “good music” as well as a variety of popular styles. As Grayson later remembered: “They were wonderful to me in that Unit. Mr. Pasternak and Mr. Mayer believed that there should be something for everybody in the films we did. We

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<sup>531</sup> “Kathryn Grayson,” TCM.

<sup>532</sup> Dan Van Neste, “Kathryn Grayson: The Girl with the Golden Voice,” *Films of the Golden Age* no. 27 (Winter 2001/02): 85.

<sup>533</sup> Van Neste, “Kathryn Grayson: The Girl with the Golden Voice,” 85. Despite Mayer’s claims that opera singers were too highbrow for the public, MGM contracted Metropolitan Opera star Risë Stevens in her screen debut in *The Chocolate Soldier* in 1941. The film—and Stevens herself—received positive reviews as well as three Academy Award nominations. Danish tenor Lauritz Melchior, too, appeared in five MGM films between 1945 and 1953. Clearly, audiences *did* pay attention to opera singers, or the studio would not have hired them to star in expensive films.

included classical selections, show tunes, pop tunes of the day, and even an oldie now and then.”<sup>534</sup> Underpinning this focus on musical variety was the idea that such films would be more likely to appeal to a greater number of individuals and, consequently, accrue a greater financial return for the studio.

Grayson’s ascent to stardom began just prior to the United States’ entry into World War II. Following in Durbin’s footsteps, Grayson assumed the role of a wholesome American gal, supporting the troops and boosting morale with unflagging energy and an operatic voice.<sup>535</sup> In 1943, for example, Grayson starred in her fourth picture, *Thousands Cheer*, a wartime narrative about a colonel’s daughter who steers a brash, working-class draftee toward fulfilling his military duty. The story and screenplay were written by Paul Jarrico and Richard Collins, both of whom wrote the screenplay for MGM’s pro-Soviet *Song of Russia* the following year and, consequently, were later blacklisted by the House Un-American Activities Committee.<sup>536</sup> Their story for *Thousands Cheer*, although not as directly anti-German as *Song of Russia*, served as a reminder that all Americans needed to work together for the good of the country. Indeed, various story outlines and script drafts show that “good music,” frequently referred to as “culture,” played a central role in *Thousands Cheer*. “Culture” united individuals from diverse class

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<sup>534</sup> Mike Hughes, “Kathryn Grayson: MGM’s First Lady of Song,” *Hollywood Studio Magazine* 17, no. 10 (October 1984): 30–35.

<sup>535</sup> Grayson did not become one of the studio’s pin-up girls during the war. See “Kathryn Grayson: Actress and singer described as ‘the most beautiful woman in the history of movies,’” *The Independent*, 21 February 2010, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/kathryn-grayson-actress-and-singer-described-as-the-most-beautiful-woman-in-the-history-of-movies-1906517.html> (accessed 19 December 2016).

<sup>536</sup> Collins was a member of the Communist party in the 1930s.

The doomed *Song of Russia* (1944) tapped into the real-life account of the Nazis’ destruction of Tchaikovsky’s former home turned museum. See, for example, Maurice Hindus, “Russians Are Savage in Hate of Germans,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 9 February 1943. In the film, Manhattan Philharmonic Orchestra conductor John Meredith tours Russia and meets a peasant girl and talented pianist, Nadya, in Tschaiakowskoye, the hometown of Tchaikovsky. The two fall in love and get married, just as the Nazis invade Russia. Returning from a tour, John discovers that Nadya’s village has been bombed, and he pledges to fight alongside the Russians. He is persuaded by Nadya’s brother-in-law to return instead to America where he and Nadya can spread the word about Russia’s plight.

backgrounds and perspectives against those who threatened to destroy it: the Germans, the Italians, and the Japanese.

Such a focus on “culture” matched the burgeoning musical and artistic scenes that flourished in the United States during the war. With Europe’s cultural institutions being forcibly shut down or destroyed as Hitler advanced across Europe, the United States positioned itself as the guardian of Western intellectual and artistic thought. The influx of scientists, artists, and thinkers emigrating from Europe to the United States heightened the American cultural climate. Many of these individuals—who included, for example, scientist Albert Einstein, artist Marc Chagall, pianist Arthur Rubenstein, and composers Arnold Schoenberg, Béla Bartók, and Darius Milhaud—embedded themselves into existing cultural networks in such large Eastern cities as New York, or, as with Joe Pasternak and Henry Koster, forged new connections with the film industry and musical communities on the West Coast. These émigrés took on a variety of roles in the United States that perpetuated cultural activities they had pursued in Europe, from teaching at American universities to performing in American orchestras. To varying degrees, such individuals not only cultivated or renewed interest in art in the United States, but they also created new works, forged out of adverse circumstances, that enriched American cultural life.<sup>537</sup>

At the same time, European musical exports, including opera and concert repertoire, underwent a process of Americanization. As musicologist Annegret Fauser argues, the United States saw the need to democratize opera at the onset of its involvement in World War II. Fauser points out that:

This process of appropriation consisted of two closely interrelated steps: the dissolving of any previous national signification into a universalist rhetoric of world heritage, crowned with the establishment of the United States as the sole and rightful heir to this art; and the

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<sup>537</sup> For more on musical émigrés in the United States, see, for example, Fauser, *Sounds of War*, 178–223.

identification of native traditions that could serve as distinctive national signifiers in the stylistic framework of international neoclassicism.<sup>538</sup>

The operatic stage in particular needed to rely on specific strategies of transfer, especially since the repertoire performed at the time consisted almost exclusively of European—and notably Axis—composers such as Rossini, Verdi, Puccini, and Wagner.<sup>539</sup> Opera could be cast as American via its performance in “appropriate” contexts and if sung by American artists. As Fauser indicates, theatrical stagings of opera “could be appropriated specifically for American musical life through translation and performance practice,” locating opera’s national character “as much on the production side of things as in the work itself.”<sup>540</sup> Seemingly, opera on the stage was catching up to its screened counterpart. The press even pointed to English translations—a tradition dating back to the nineteenth century in the United States—American singers, and up-to-date staging as essential for turning opera into an American art form, which Hollywood had claimed already when it brought opera to the cinema in the 1930s.<sup>541</sup> In 1940s Hollywood, opera assumed an even more fluid character, marked by the vocality of the singer.

An early film synopsis for *Thousands Cheer* from 5 March 1942, titled *Private Miss Jones*, demonstrates that “good music” served at the heart of Grayson’s morale-boosting production. The story opens at Carnegie Hall where Arturo Toscanini conducts Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony before cutting to a sequence in which Kathryn Jones (Grayson) sings an aria.<sup>542</sup> Her father is a colonel in the Army. When he is stationed at a training camp of undisclosed

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<sup>538</sup> Fauser, *Sounds of War*, 161.

<sup>539</sup> Fauser, *Sounds of War*, 161.

<sup>540</sup> Fauser, *Sounds of War*, 161–62.

<sup>541</sup> Fauser, *Sounds of War*, 163.

<sup>542</sup> At this point, the screenwriters did not specify a particular aria, but Grayson performed “Sempre libera” from *La traviata* in the filmed version. It is also possible that MGM, by using Grayson’s first name for her onscreen character, the studio was beginning to brand the actress as a particular “type.”

location, Jones accompanies him. There she encounters her love interest, Private Eddie Marsh (Gene Kelly), a “rather fresh character with his pockets full of fraternity pins, [who] plays on her sympathy for his impecunious state and is fairly successful in monopolizing her attention.”

Kathryn persuades the camp officials into allowing her to put on a big show for the men before they are deployed. She convinces Leopold Stokowski to conduct, and the concert is a success.

The final scene takes place at a concert for a government agency at Carnegie Hall, where Kathryn sings a “military air that is being broadcast to all fighting units wherever they may be at that moment.”<sup>543</sup>

By 27 April 1942, the framework for the movie took shape, with Jarrico and Collins’s outline revealing “behind the scenes” details as to how a few of the classical numbers were to be integrated into the narrative. In one scene, for example, Kathryn and an Arts and Receptions officer listen to a band on the radio while discussing possibilities for better camp-entertainment programs. In another scene where Kathryn and Eddie are on a date at the beach, Kathryn tells him about her previous concertizing with Stokowski. Eddie, a circus aerialist, does not quite understand the appeal of “highbrow” music, so Kathryn demonstrates how the orchestra works by singing and acting out the roles of various instruments. Eddie falls in love. At one point, this scene was imagined as taking place in an ocean setting, although it later transpired at a circus instead:

As Stokowski springs to the watery podium, hands upraised, hair shining in the moonlight, the great orchestra, now made whole, follows him as one man. The music swells and withdraws as if controlled by the tide. Then Stokowski quiets them, turning his head expectantly. Clear and powerful Kathryn’s first notes come over. [SHOT OF] KATHRYN AND EDDY. She sings superbly—better than at Carnegie Hall. Her voice covers the beach and the ocean, rises to the treetops in the background, envelops the whole night. Eddy looks at her transformed, eyes wide, his bitterness draining away, his face softening perceptibly. The magic of her voice captures him completely. SERIES OF

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<sup>543</sup> Synopsis by Kenneth MacKenna of the story “Private Miss Jones” by Joe Pasternak, 5 March 1942, *Thousands Cheer*, Turner/MGM Scripts, 3021.f-T-1157, MHL.

SHOTS—ORCHESTRA, STOKOWSKI, EDDY AND KATHRYN. [FOCUS ON] KATHRYN AND EDDY as Kathryn finishes her song. The orchestra continues. Kathryn looks at Eddy flushed and excited with her singing. Eddy looks at her with wonderment. Without a word, without need for words, they draw together. They kiss, passionately, tenderly, completely.<sup>544</sup>

Eddie is thrown into the guardhouse when Colonel Jones discovers that the Private took his daughter out on a date—and without an army pass. The General then overhears a “love scene” between his daughter and Eddie, during which Kathryn tries to garner interest in a Stokowski concert to little enthusiasm. The eavesdropping Colonel grows upset when Kathryn lies and reports back that all the boys at the camp “are thrilled” about Stokowski and his orchestra. The Colonel refuses to bring Stokowski to camp and forbids Kathryn from seeing Eddie. Kathryn bets her father that Stokowski will go over well with the camp and agrees to send Eddie away if the conductor does not. Only a few hundred men show up to the concert. News travels quickly that every member of the orchestra is female, however, and the men come running “in search of culture.” Kathryn sings an (unspecified) aria. In a plot device meant to encourage American men to “do their duty,” Kathryn tries to convince Eddie to leave the army so that they can elope. Eddie, now a reformed soldier thanks to Kathryn’s influence and exposure to “good music,” eventually concludes that desertion is wrong. Kathryn agrees with his decision. At the train station as the men are leaving for war, Stokowski leads an army band. The final scene concludes at Carnegie Hall with Stokowski conducting and Kathryn singing “a song for America at war.”<sup>545</sup>

Between 4 May and 21 August 1942, the screenwriters added new characterizations.

Kathryn was identified as a lovely girl of nineteen, “ingenuous, impulsive and altogether

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<sup>544</sup> In the filmed version, this sequence takes place at the circus, and Grayson sings “Let There Be Music,” with lyrics by E.Y. Harburg and music by Earl K. Brent. Temporary complete screenplay (PRIVATE MISS JONES) by Paul Jarrico and Robert Collins, 1 August 1942, *Thousands Cheer*, Turner/MGM Scripts, 3021.f-T-1160, MHL.

<sup>545</sup> Step Outline (PRIVATE MISS JONES) by Paul Jarrico and Robert Collins, 27 April 1942, *Thousands Cheer*, Turner/MGM Scripts, 3021.f-T-1158, MHL.

charming.”<sup>546</sup> Eddie, on the other hand, became a tough guy, “an independent, casual cynical, unsentimental and uncultured, [with a] destructive sense of humor and hatred of authority and a respect for the rights of men like himself.”<sup>547</sup> Eddie’s hard-boiled, working-class identity made his ultimate redemption through exposure to “culture” and the love of the American girl-next-door even more powerful. Conductor-pianist José Iturbi replaced Stokowski’s character on 17 August, possibly because Stokowski was too busy with his new job conducting the NBC Symphony Orchestra to appear in another film at this time. The screenwriters also suggested that, at the camp concert, Grayson should sing a “happy, rousing number, completely different from the number we heard at Carnegie Hall; perhaps the number is of the kind which requires a shouting chorus by the audience after every verse by the soloist. At any rate, the effect must be one of great audience participation.”<sup>548</sup> Most likely, this type of participatory song was intended to enhance the message of camaraderie propagandized by *Thousands Cheer*. It also might have been a concession that Grayson needed to perform something besides classical repertoire in the movie, increasing the musical variety that operatic singers were expected to perform onscreen in the 1940s.

By 29 August, the final musical sequence at Carnegie Hall became envisioned, not only as a number meant to inspire the American troops and people, but also to show a sign of solidarity with the Allied nations. Adding another famous musical figure, Deems Taylor, to the cast, the screenwriters sketched out the scene:

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<sup>546</sup> Temporary complete screenplay (PRIVATE MISS JONES) by Paul Jarrico and Robert Collins, 5 May 1942, *Thousands Cheer*, Turner/MGM Scripts, 3021.f-T-1159, MHL.

<sup>547</sup> Temporary complete screenplay (PRIVATE MISS JONES) by Paul Jarrico and Robert Collins, 5 May 1942, *Thousands Cheer*, Turner/MGM Scripts, 3021.f-T-1159, MHL.

<sup>548</sup> Temporary complete screenplay (PRIVATE MISS JONES) by Paul Jarrico and Robert Collins, 5 May 1942, *Thousands Cheer*, Turner/MGM Scripts, 3021.f-T-1159, MHL. In the filmed version, this participatory sequence seems to have turned into a scene in which Kathryn sings “Three Letters in the Mail Box” to the troops at a soda shop. When the men walk her home, they all sing “I Dug a Ditch.”

At Carnegie Hall, they have Deems Taylor at a microphone in the Broadcasting booth: “...This is Deems Taylor. You are about to hear the United Nations Victory song composed by the gifted modern Russian composer: Dmitri Shostakovich. The music will be sung by Miss Kathryn Jones supported by a massed Chinese, American, Russian and British choir.”

Close Shot—Russian Announcer—He is making substantially the same announcement in Russian.

Camera pans to: A Chinese. He is announcing the broadcast in Chinese.

Camera pans to: A South American then a British Announcer, speaking in typical BBC tones: “...and through the facilities of the Canadian Broadcasting Company, the BBC and by short wave to Australia, New Zealand and all parts of the British Commonwealth. The song is dedicated and is being broadcast to the fighting men of the United Nations wherever they may be.”

Kathryn sings and the camera covers her and the American chorus, then pans left to the Soviet Choir, then left to the Chinese Choir, left to the British chorus. [This last part was crossed out.]

The singing fills the hall, every continent. It is a song of hope for Eddy, Colonel Jones, the Rinaldos [Eddie’s aerialist family], and all the good people like them. It is a song of victory for all men of good will and as it reaches its climax, we fade out.<sup>549</sup>

Although Deems Taylor and the other radio announcers were not included in the filmed version of this scene, the rest of the musical framing remained intact. In a virginal white gown covering her chest and shoulders and with a “victory roll” up-do, Grayson stands in front of the United Nations Choir and MGM Orchestra, which are conducted by Iturbi (Figures 4.8 and 4.9).

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<sup>549</sup> Temporary complete screenplay (PRIVATE MISS JONES) by Paul Jarrico and Robert Collins, 29 August 1942, *Thousands Cheer*, Turner/MGM Scripts, 3021.f-T-1160, MHL.



Figure 4.8: Screenshot of Kathryn Grayson in *Thousands Cheer*



Figure 4.9: Screenshot of the United Nations Choir in *Thousands Cheer*

The choir is flanked by flags emblazoned with “V” for victory, while a collage of the flags of the United Nations provides a colorful—if slightly Facist-looking—backdrop to the concert hall

stage. Grayson leads the choir with an operatic soprano solo positioned in the upper range of her vocal register and performed with ample vibrato:

[Grayson]

Listen, listen, here comes the new parade  
Listen, listen, to voices unafraid

[Chorus]

Many lands joining one new throng,

[Grayson]

Many tongues singing one new song

[All]

Make way for that day called tomorrow,

Make way for a world that is new

Fight on for that dawn of tomorrow

Together we'll all see it through

United Nations on the march with flags unfurled

Together fight for victory, a free new world

[Russians in native language]

Heroes on forward march

Looking bravely ahead

[Chinese in native language]

For tomorrow's bright glory forward attack

[Spanish in native language]

The day of freedom.

[British]

Free men free as Kingdom Come

[Entire Chorus]

Free hearts beating thru each drum

[Grayson]

Listen to the voices of the new born world

[Chorus]

Marching onward

[Grayson]

United!

[Chorus]

United, to fight the fight for right and liberty.

[All]

Make way for that day called tomorrow,

Make way for a world that is new

Fight on for that dawn of tomorrow

Together we'll all see it through

[Grayson solo]  
United Nations on the march with flags unfurled  
[All]  
Together fight for victory, a free new world  
Together fight for victory, a free new world.<sup>550</sup>

As the Russians begin to sing, the camera cuts away from the full chorus to show the Russian contingent on the right of the stage. From there, the camera cuts left to the Chinese singers, who are “othered” by the orchestral accompaniment with a short reference to a pentatonic “Oriental” motive. Representatives from Central and South America, shown next, also are marked as “other” with a Mariachi-like arrangement. The orchestration returns as before when the camera pans down to the British.



Figure 4.10: Screenshots of the Chinese and Russian choir members in *Thousands Cheer*

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<sup>550</sup> I have transcribed these lyrics from the film as well as a printed copy of the lyrics approved by the censors. The filmed version differs somewhat from the printed version. The Chinese singers were given much more of a solo role in the original submitted text. The English lyrics are credited to E.Y. Harburg and musical development to Herbert Stothart. See “The United Nations” lyrics by Dmitri Shostakovich, *Thousands Cheer* (1943), Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration Records, MHL.



Figure 4.11: Screenshot of the Central and South American choir members in *Thousands Cheer*



Figure 4.12: Screenshot of the British choir members in *Thousands Cheer*

In effect, *Thousands Cheer* visually and sonically identified the four major Allied Countries, otherwise referred to as the “Four Policemen,” in this sequence of shots: the United States, the Soviet Union, China, and the United Kingdom. The film singled out the United States’ “good neighbors,” Central and South America, as well. Arguably, Grayson represents the United States as the leader of the Allied Nations, her soprano voice soaring over the male choir to hold the moviegoer’s attention. At the conclusion of the musical finale—described by some critics as

“thunderous”—the orchestra plays Beethoven’s famous four-note motive from the Fifth Symphony, indicating that the United Nations would bring about victory.<sup>551</sup>

“The United Nations” originated as a theme song written by Dmitri Shostakovich for a Russian film, *Counterplan* (1932), which was based on life in a Leningrad turbine factory. The film’s directors had asked the composer for something that would serve as a mass song for the working classes. Shostakovich wrote the rousing “Song of the Counterplan.”<sup>552</sup> The tune made its way to the West, where the composer’s melody was published in 1942 as “The United Nations” with a new English text written by the leftist musical theater composer/lyricist, Harold J. Rome.<sup>553</sup> It was intended to be a World War II anthem for the Allied forces, which had banded together in January 1942 as the United Nations.<sup>554</sup> The formation of the United Nations renewed hope that the Axis powers could be defeated, positioning the prototype for the UN as a significant symbolic entity between 1942 and 1945 in wartime society. References to the United Nations frequently appeared in commercial advertising, literature, and, as demonstrated by *Thousands Cheer*, entertainment venues.<sup>555</sup>

*Thousands Cheer* remained in production for another nine months following the addition of the United Nations Orchestra finale. According to censor records, MGM began working on a

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<sup>551</sup> Beethoven’s motive became a musical code for “victory” during World War II. It was regularly used by the BBC on radio programs. It also appeared in other song or song-and-dance numbers in *Thousands Cheer*, for example, the dance sequence in which Gene Kelly “shoots” a “The enemy is listening!” poster with a picture of Adolf Hitler.

<sup>552</sup> For more on *Counterplan* and “The Song of the Counterplan,” see Malcolm Hamrick Brown, ed., *A Shostakovich Casebook* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005), 215, note b, and Laurel E. Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 71–72.

<sup>553</sup> Harold J. Rome wrote many leftist shows during the Great Depression, including, among others, *Pins and Needles* and *Sing Out the News*. Kurt Weill also wrote “The Song of the Free” with lyrics by poet Archibald MacLeish as an anthem for the United Nations in 1942.

<sup>554</sup> See Brown, *A Shostakovich Casebook*, 215, note b.

<sup>555</sup> Dan Plesch, *America, Hitler and the UN: How the Allies Won World War II and Forged Peace* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 52–53.

star-studded revue sequence meant to showcase multiple MGM stars in January 1943.<sup>556</sup> Some of these listed on the film credits, included: Mickey Rooney, Judy Garland, Red Skelton, Eleanor Powell, Lucille Ball, Frank Morgan, Lena Horne, Donna Reed, Margaret O'Brien, June Allyson, the Kay Kyser Band, Benny Carter and His Band, and the Bob Crosby Orchestra. As the censor records indicate, the production may have been held up, in part, by the suggestiveness of some of the comedy routines, which the censors demanded be cleaned up, as well as film retakes.<sup>557</sup>

By 30 April 1943, MGM changed the title from *Private Miss Jones* to *As Thousands Cheer*. Reportedly, MGM did not want audiences to assume that the film was just another war picture.<sup>558</sup> Even so, *As Thousands Cheer* soon became *Thousands Cheer*, most likely because the former title clashed with Irving Berlin's eponymous stage revue from 1933. In the movie's trailer, MGM advertised *Thousands Cheer* as "The Greatest Musical Romance in the Modern History of Motion Pictures"—at least before cutting to "Presenting the Mightiest Assemblage of Famous Names Ever Gathered for One Spectacular Extravaganza."<sup>559</sup> This reference to the star-

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<sup>556</sup> It is possible that MGM sought to concretize its support of the United States that came under fire with the controversial release of *Tennessee Johnson* (1943), a story based on the life of President Andrew Johnson that portrayed Blacks and abolitionists in a negative light. As the *Atlanta Daily World* quoted an unidentified source: "If I were charged with the responsibility of softening up American for an invasion by Fascist ideas, I would certainly encourage movies like *Tennessee Johnson*... as crafty a job of misrepresentation as any Dixie demagogue could ask for... Damned few will remember enough out of their history books to argue with you; and those who do, after taking the trouble to read up on the facts—well, you can call them Communists, as an MGM vice-President (Howard Dietz) actually did in advance, in an unprecedented 1808-word letter to movie critics a few days before the picture opened." See "MGM Film Gets Mixed Reviews," *Atlanta Daily World*, 22 January 1943. See also "Coast Leader Speaks Against Release of Controversial *Tennessee Johnson*," *Philadelphia Tribune*, 16 January 1943.

<sup>557</sup> Censorship communications between Joseph Breen, Louis B. Mayer, and Howard Block, 18 January to 29 April 1943, Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration Records Records, MHL.

<sup>558</sup> *Hollywood Reporter*, 30 April 1943, referenced in "Note," entry for *Thousands Cheer* in the AFI Online Catalog, <http://www.afi.com/members/catalog/DetailView.aspx?s=&Movie=721> (accessed 14 November 2016).

<sup>559</sup> Trailer for *Thousands Cheer*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MP6pNMEcO9s>, uploaded by "victor creed" on 25 February 2013 (accessed 21 October 2016).

studded cast clearly indicated that MGM's new release was one of Hollywood's splashy productions, which were usually held together by thin plots and full of propaganda.<sup>560</sup>

Reviews of *Thousands Cheer* describe the film as containing a little something for everybody's tastes. As Donald Kirkley of *The Sun* summarized: "*Thousands Cheer* is the most diverting cinemusical MGM has turned out in quite a while and a splendid example of cinema showmanship. The studio catches the audience coming and going, it has plenty of swing and plenty of classical stuff; it has Kay Kyser and José Iturbi, Kathryn Grayson and Judy Garland, John Boles and Mickey Rooney."<sup>561</sup> *The Atlanta Constitution* briefly noted: "José Iturbi renders two piano solos and conducts the symphony orchestra. For swing fans, Kay Kyser and his orchestra 'jive' a few tunes."<sup>562</sup>

Although critics commented on Grayson's voice in generalized terms as "delightful," "lovely," and "unusual," most did not refer to it as highbrow. To all appearances, "highbrow" music had become assimilated into the American musical landscape and accepted alongside other musical styles. On the other hand, it may simply have been considered un-American to critique an artist who was performing for the troops and the country. Either way, Grayson's operatic vocality, which she maintained regardless of the repertoire she performed, did not deter the critics. *Variety*'s 15 September 1943 review positioned Grayson's singing as consummate in all styles performed during the movie: "Miss Grayson's personal charm and her superlative sopranoing further her along the road to becoming Metro's No. 1 diva as she handles the sundry vocal assignments ... There is considerable showmanship to the idea of Miss Grayson singing

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<sup>560</sup> For more on star-studded musicals, see, for example, Julie Hubbert, "Carpet, Wallpaper, and Earmuffs (1935–1959), in *Celluloid Symphonies*, edited by Hubbert (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011), 183, and Allen L. Woll, *The Hollywood Musical Goes to War* (Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1983), 49–52.

<sup>561</sup> Donald Kirkley, review of *Thousands Cheer*, *The Sun*, 31 December 1943.

<sup>562</sup> "Musicals, Comedies, Drama Vary New Year's Theater Bills," *Atlanta Constitution*, 30 December 1943.

‘Daybreak’ as her father’s favorite. This follows an opening patriotic medley, which leads into an operatic aria as part of the legitimate longhair concert.”<sup>563</sup>

Seemingly, the wartime call to band together in the face of adversity also applied to musical repertoires. While popular songs such as “Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy” could be used to entertain audiences as well as to galvanize them into action, “good music,” with its uplifting qualities and ability to enrich the soul, could serve as a reminder of the greatest cultural achievements made by mankind and, thereby, American cultural progress. The United States’ democratization of classical repertoire seemingly muffled, at least for a time, the division between highbrow and lowbrow musics. Operatic sopranos similar to Deanna Durbin and Kathryn Grayson, who embodied the American girl-next-door, eased these classed distinctions with their “lovely” voices. The refinement and sophistication associated with “good music,” in effect, mapped onto the image of the wholesome “good girl” during the war, the kind that every young man fighting overseas wanted to return to and that represented the best of home.

### **Postwar Musicals: Operatic Singing Becomes Highbrow Once Again**

In the immediate postwar period, operatic singers performed significantly fewer opera arias and sang more show tunes and popular songs, blurring the lines between genres. With a few exceptions, Deanna Durbin and Kathryn Grayson tended to maintain their operatic technique, regardless of musical style. Grayson’s vocal range, for example, ensured that her numbers would be performed in higher keys and/or include a vocalise, and she performed her assigned repertoire with her trademark vibrato.<sup>564</sup> Jane Powell, on the other hand, changed her vocal production

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<sup>563</sup> Review of *Thousands Cheer*, *Variety*, 15 September 1943.

<sup>564</sup> Grayson’s pronounced vibrato recalled that of other notable coloratura soprano’s, particularly—to my ear—Lily Pons: tight and almost trill-like.

depending on the genre of the song she performed. In *Luxury Liner* (1948), for example, Powell sang “Obéissons quand leur voix appelle” from Jules Massenet’s *Manon* in an operatic manner, while she sang “Oceana Roll” in a vaudevillian style in *Two Weeks with Love* (1950).<sup>565</sup> Yet as Hollywood pushed for more musical variety in films produced during the later 1940s, the characterizations of its postwar operatic protagonists helped realign opera’s associations with the elite and moneyed classes. In part, World War II’s framing of “good music” as democratic shifted back to “good music” as highbrow during the postwar economic boom.

With the rise of the middle class and suburbanization, the United States entered a period of increased wealth for many of its citizens. Soldiers returning home from war, for example, were provided multiple benefits through the G.I. Bill of 1944, including low-interest loans for homes, farms, or businesses; tuition and living expenses to attend college or vocational school; and up to one year of unemployment compensation. Millions of returning soldiers opted for education, and veterans accounted for 49% of college admissions in 1947.<sup>566</sup> By 1956, almost 50% of 16 million veterans had participated in an education or vocational training program. The government’s Vocational Administration offered approximately 2.4 million home loans during this period as well. Wages, too, increased as American businesses expanded into the international market, making it possible for a greater number of middle-class families to live comfortably on a single paycheck. And although many women who had entered the workforce during the war left when the American soldiers returned home from abroad, they once again began entering the labor population in steadily increasing numbers by the end of the 1940s, contributing to their

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<sup>565</sup> As with Grayson, Powell’s vibrato also was tight and almost trill-like. Powell’s soprano, too, could sound shrill on occasion, particularly in her upper register. Moreover, when performing more “popular” styles of music, Powell sometimes seemed to force the vocality typically associated with the genre.

<sup>566</sup> “History and Timeline” of the G.I. Bill, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, <http://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/history.asp> (accessed 20 October 2016).

family's improved quality of life.<sup>567</sup>

During the same postwar recovery period in which the United States saw the proliferation of an educated and more financially secure family unit, the nation simultaneously saw a dramatically re-gendered society. Rosie the Riveter had become June Cleaver. By the 1950s, commercial advertisements, television shows, and magazines depicted stay-at-home mothers devoted to cooking, cleaning, and childcare. Fathers, on the other hand, drove to work in their affordable cars early in the morning to return home later in the evening as a model husband, just disciplinarian, and family provider.

Between 1945 and 1950, the identities Hollywood created for operatic protagonists increasingly reverted to upper-middle and upper class characters, seemingly mirroring the nation's economic growth in the immediate postwar years.<sup>568</sup> Although Kathryn Grayson was cast as a singer/actress hopeful in *Anchors Aweigh* (1945) and a music-appreciation teacher in *It Happened in Brooklyn* (1947), she also played an aspiring opera singer from a well-to-do family in both *Two Sisters from Boston* (1946) and *That Midnight Kiss* (1949); a governor's daughter in *The Kissing Bandit* (1948); and a famous opera diva in *The Toast of New Orleans* (1950). Jane

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<sup>567</sup> Labor-force participation rates of women (all races) between 1940 and 1950 show that married women of all ages came to 21.7% (with husbands present) and 52.5% (with absent husbands). By 1947, the number decreased to 20%, before increasing to 23.8% in 1950. See Claudia D. Goldin, "The Role of World War II in the Rise of Women's Employment," *American Economic Review* 81, no. 4 (September 1991): 742. In 1945, more than 35% of women worked, half of which left at the end of the decade. See Daron Acemoglu, David Autor, and David Lyle, "Women, War, and Wages: The Effect of Female Labor Supply on the Wage Structure at mid-Century," The National Bureau of Economic Research, <http://www.nber.org/digest/nov02/w9013.html> (accessed 20 October 2016). See also "Women and Work After World War II," <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/tupperware-work/> (accessed 20 October 2016). Both marriage and divorce rates skyrocketed between 1946 and 1948. Marriage rates reached an unprecedented high of 2,300,000 per year, while divorce rates reached an equally unprecedented 600,000. See the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, "100 Years of Marriage and Divorce Statistics United States, 1867–1967," *Vital and Health Statistics-Series 21*, no. 24 (December 1973): 7–8, [https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/series/sr\\_21/sr21\\_024.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/series/sr_21/sr21_024.pdf) (accessed 19 December 2015).

<sup>568</sup> Deanna Durbin, who retired from the screen in 1948, remained the exception. She continued to play more democratic roles after the war. She most likely was too connected to her girl-next-door type in the public's mind at this point for Universal to change her characterization. Durbin played a murder-mystery fan in *Lady on a Train* (1945), an aspiring actress in *Because of Him* (1946), a small-town girl in *I'll Be Yours* (1946), a disc jockey in *Something in the Wind* (1947), the daughter of a maintenance man (both characters are immigrants) in *Up in Central Park* (1948), and a White House telephone operator in *For the Love of Mary* (1948).

Powell, for her part, assumed such roles as the daughter of a United States Representative to Mexico in *Holiday to Mexico* (1946); the daughter of a cruise ship captain in *Luxury Liner* (1948); and the daughter of a celebrated actress in *Nancy Goes to Rio* (1950). In effect, these wealthier protagonists refashioned opera as elite music, once again a musical taste to which the flourishing middle classes could aspire as they followed the American Dream.

### **Jane Powell and *Luxury Liner* (1948)**

Sixteen-year-old Jane Powell signed an MGM contract in 1945.<sup>569</sup> Her ascent to stardom began with her first MGM picture, *Holiday in Mexico* (1946), a tale about an ambassador's daughter who hopes to secure Xavier Cugat and José Iturbi's respective services for a garden party she is organizing on behalf of her father for various foreign diplomats. Producer Joe Pasternak guided Powell's career at MGM. The producer clearly saw the young actress as a new Deanna Durbin. Powell, for example, starred in a few films that directly pointed to Durbin's earlier hits. The title of *Three Daring Daughters* (1946) recalled Durbin's *Three Smart Girls* (1936), while *Nancy Goes to Rio* (1950) was a nearly identical remake of Durbin's *It's a Date* (1940). And like Durbin, Powell continued to play adolescent roles into her early twenties.

Powell later claimed in her autobiography that she did not want to be typecast as an operatic singer, preferring instead to perform more popular numbers. Because of her high soprano range and operatic vocality, however, MGM deemed that she was more suited to a classical repertoire. Studio executives assigned her to study with Arthur Rosenstein, MGM's

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<sup>569</sup> Powell first appeared in *Song of the Open Road* (1944), a tale about a young girl who, tired of being managed by her stage mother, runs away to join the U.S. Crops Corps. Powell then appeared in the independently produced *Delightfully Dangerous* (1945), in which she played a teen girl who dreams of singing with Morton Gould and his orchestra.

voice coach for operatic and classical singers.<sup>570</sup> Powell recalled that she learned “most of the typical soprano songs,” including “Il bacio,” “Indian Love Call,” and “Donkey Serenade.”<sup>571</sup> Unlike fellow operatic actresses Durbin, Kathryn Grayson, and Jeanette MacDonald, Powell claimed in her autobiography that opera—by which she most likely meant, staged opera—was not to her taste, although she “loved the arias, particularly Puccini’s because he was so romantic.”<sup>572</sup> At MGM’s behest, however, Powell regularly sang compositions from the operatic canon, studio-commissioned showpieces, and vocal arrangements of nineteenth-century classical works alongside popular tunes in her 1940s films. As a result, Powell’s later performances of more popular musical styles—and her eventual move toward such films as *Three Sailors and a Girl* (1953)—arguably sounded forced, as if Powell was trying too hard to “put on” a certain vocal style associated with the genre of repertoire performed.

At the beginning of her career, however, film narratives as well as her vocalicity marked Powell as a performer of “good music.” In four out of the six films she starred in between 1946 and 1950, the young actress appeared opposite a famous celebrity from the classical world, notably conductor/pianist José Iturbi and Wagnerian tenor Lauritz Melchior, whose stage career was drawing to a close. Moreover, she frequently played the role of a talented ingénue intent on meeting these renowned artists in the hopes that they would listen to her sing. Production files for *Luxury Liner* (1948), for example, provide excellent insight into the process behind constructing such a narrative. It first began as a father-daughter story that developed into a dramatic tale tapping into World War II themes, before ultimately turning into a musical comedy

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<sup>570</sup> Jane Powell, *The Girl Next Door and How She Grew* (San Francisco: Untreed Reads Publishing, 1988), 94.

<sup>571</sup> Powell, *The Girl Next Door*, 23.

<sup>572</sup> Powell, *The Girl Next Door*, 23.

about an aspiring singer who stows away on her father's luxury liner in order to meet a renowned opera singer.

*Luxury Liner* originated as the provocatively titled story, *Daddy is a Wolf*.<sup>573</sup> According to an early film synopsis from June 1945, writer Ferenc Molnár attributed the basic idea to Pasternak, although the producer was not acknowledged either in the later incarnations of the script or in the film's credits.<sup>574</sup> Molnár briefly outlined the story: "Because of her great love for her deceased mother, a young girl doesn't want her father to marry again, and so she encourages him to date many women but marry none, thru which he acquires reputation as wolf. Finally, however, she arranges father's marriage with her voice teacher, whom she loves dearly."<sup>575</sup> Molnár's plot revolved around four central characters: the young girl, her businessman father, her music teacher, and an opera singer. On the front page of his synopsis, Molnár informed MGM that:

You will find in this script that the little girl's—Angie Willard's—age was not definitely fixed by me. The determination of her age is left to the studio as it will depend primarily on the following: 1) The age and personality of the player to be cast in the part. 2) The exact development of the character by the script writer, and whether the girl is to speak her lines in a more or less childish fashion.<sup>576</sup>

It is clear from this excerpt that the story was not conceived with Jane Powell in mind. As an aside, Molnár further noted that "the singer, Lucia d'Ampezzo need not necessarily be Italian. With a few minor verbal changes, she could as easily be French, Spanish, Viennese, Czecho-

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<sup>573</sup> In the 1940s, referring to a man as a "wolf" indicated that he was a womanizer.

<sup>574</sup> Like Pasternak, Molnár was a Hungarian who came to the United States prior to the war in Europe. He wrote stories for a few musicals featuring operatic singers, including *The Chocolate Soldier* (1941, uncredited) with Risé Stevens and *I'll Be Yours* (1947) with Deanna Durbin.

<sup>575</sup> "Daddy is a Wolf," by Ferenc Molnár, undated (copied 15 June 1945), *Luxury Liner*, Turner/MGM Scripts, 1782.f-L-1476, MHL.

<sup>576</sup> "Daddy is a Wolf," by Ferenc Molnár, undated (copied 15 June 1945), *Luxury Liner*, Turner/MGM Scripts, 1782.f-L-1476, MHL.

Slovak, South American, etc. In fact, she need not be foreign at all.”<sup>577</sup> Essentially, Molnár suggested that whoever took over development of the screenplay could use old stereotypes of opera singers to flesh out the characterization of the prima donna. According to Molnár, opera singers, regardless of nationality, were all the same.

Indeed, by 24 May 1946, the temperamental prima donna character had become Russian, most likely because Marina Koshetz, a Moscow-born opera singer, had been selected to play the part.<sup>578</sup> After moving to the United States as a teenager, Koshetz played a few minor parts in Hollywood movies before focusing on her operatic career in the 1940s. Yet to at least some moviegoers unfamiliar with Koshetz and her association with opera, her character’s Russian nationality may have framed her role as an aggressive and temperamental diva to be less comical and more “villainous,” especially as relations between the United States and the Soviet Union increasingly grew strained following the cessation of World War II. Certainly by the time the film premiered in 1948, the two countries were locked into what would be a very long Cold War. One film critic for *The Sun*, for example, described Koshetz as “a newcomer, who left us very cold.”<sup>579</sup>

A reader’s report dated 14 June 1945 stated that Molnár’s story had potential, although the plot was “trite” and the characterizations were not very good.<sup>580</sup> MGM considered the basic idea enough to go on, however, and turned the story over to writer Emily Kimbrough for further

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<sup>577</sup> “Daddy is a Wolf,” by Ferenc Molnár, undated (copied 15 June 1945), *Luxury Liner*, Turner/MGM Scripts, 1782.f-L-1476, MHL.

<sup>578</sup> Film Treatment by Emily Kimbrough, 5 December 1945, *Luxury Liner*, Turner/MGM Scripts, 1782.f-L-1477, MHL. Marina Koshetz was the daughter of famous opera singer Nina Koshetz, who performed at European and American opera houses before settling in Los Angeles to teach voice lessons. See Myrna Oliver, “Marina Koshetz; Opera and Movie Star,” *Los Angeles Times*, 9 January 2001.

<sup>579</sup> Review for *Luxury Liner*, *The Sun*, 9 October 1948.

<sup>580</sup> Synopsis of “Daddy is a Wolf” by Crandall Brown, 14 June 1945, *Luxury Liner*, Turner/MGM Scripts, 1782.f-L-1476, MHL.

development. By 5 December 1945, Kimbrough's film treatment included a scene in which the music teacher prepares her pupil for a role in an operetta, demonstrating that the film most likely would be a musical featuring semi-classical or classical repertoire.<sup>581</sup> Kimbrough also characterized the young girl as a teenager of fourteen or fifteen years old and her father as "the most famous Broadway producer in the United States."<sup>582</sup> It is possible that Kimbrough had Powell in mind for the young girl's role, as the teenaged actress was filming *Holiday in Mexico* at this time.

Four months later, between 30 April and 28 May 1946, Kimbrough developed a tale in which a Broadway producer's daughter is expelled from her boarding school and gets into further mischief while on vacation in the mountains. Alarmed at her wild behavior—and in a very gendered move—the girl's father calls her former teacher (who had resigned in protest of her student's expulsion) to straighten out his daughter's behavior. Meanwhile, the daughter mistakes an older man's interest in her as a charming youngster for something more serious and imagines herself in love with him. When the girl's father finally comes to take care of things himself, he falls in love with the teacher.<sup>583</sup> Kimbrough seemingly dramatized a theme explored in two Deanna Durbin films, *That Certain Age* (1938) and *It's a Date* (1940). In both films, a teenaged girl falls for an older man who merely considers her a delightful young lady. In *That Certain Age*, alarmed parents intervene in their daughter's adolescent infatuation. In *It's a Date*,

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<sup>581</sup> Film Treatment by Emily Kimbrough, 5 December 1945, *Luxury Liner*, Turner/MGM Scripts, 1782.f-L-1477, MHL.

<sup>582</sup> Film Treatment by Emily Kimbrough, 30 April through 4 June 1946, *Luxury Liner*, Turner/MGM Scripts, 1782.f-L-1478, MHL.

<sup>583</sup> Outline by Joe Pasternak, 28 May 1946, *Luxury Liner*, Turner/MGM Scripts, 1782.f-L-1479, MHL.

the mother falls for the same man, and, unbeknownst to both mother and daughter, a rivalry for his affections ensues.<sup>584</sup>

Writer Richard Connell took over the screenplay in August 1946. Connell had worked on a variety of films featuring operatic singers—Deanna Durbin in *Nice Girl?* (1941) and Kathryn Grayson in *Rio Rita* (1942)—as well as popular entertainers, including, for example, Judy Garland, Van Johnson, and Esther Williams.<sup>585</sup> His outlines from 21 August through 29 August indicate that the revamped story now took place on a cruise ship. In the newly titled *Ship Ahoy!*, Connell characterized the father as a former military captain turned luxury cruise-ship captain.<sup>586</sup> Because the Captain had divorced his wife, Laura, early in their marriage, he had not seen his daughter Angela since she was a baby.<sup>587</sup> A wealthy man interested in Laura takes her and her daughter on a cruise to Paris, so that Angela can study with a famous voice teacher. Once onboard, the trio discovers that the captain of the cruise ship is Laura’s ex-husband. After a series of madcap adventures, the once-broken family reunites.

By November 1946, Connell and fellow screenplay writer Gladys Lehman fleshed out the plot and characterizations even more thoroughly, although their story took a turn for the dramatic.<sup>588</sup> In an outline titled *Maiden Voyage*, teenaged Angela Bradford escapes from her boarding school and stows away on a luxury liner operated by her father, Captain Jeremy Bradford, so that she can spend more time with him. Captain Bradford’s love interest became

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<sup>584</sup> Jane Powell actually ended up starring in a remake of *It’s a Date* in 1950, MGM’s *Nancy Goes to Rio*.

<sup>585</sup> Connell also is credited with the story for one of director Frank Capra’s populist films, *Meet John Doe* (1941).

<sup>586</sup> Connell suggested Walter Pidgeon as the Captain. Pidgeon had played Jane Powell’s father in *Holiday in Mexico* (1946).

<sup>587</sup> Connell indicated as “Laura” as Greer Garson, while “Angela” was indicated as Jane Powell.

<sup>588</sup> Lehman was a prolific screenwriter from the 1920s through the 1940s. She also worked on *Nice Girl?* (1941), *Rio Rita* (1942), *Presenting Lily Mars* (1943), *Two Girls and a Sailor* (1944), *Thrill of a Romance* (1944), and *Her Highness and the Bellboy* (1945) with Connell.

Laura, a woman with a past. According to various outlines, Laura was an Englishwoman who had fallen for an American soldier at her country estate during the war. After following him to the United States and discovering that he was married, the brokenhearted Laura returns to England on Captain Bradford's cruise ship, where the two meet and fall in love.<sup>589</sup>

For a time, the writers played around with a host of ideas involving a backstory between Laura and the Captain. One involved a romance between the two when the Captain was stationed in England during World War II; the lovers lost track of each other after the war ended, only to meet again onboard the luxury liner. At one point, the narrative even began with this romantic backstory. Other sketches show that recurring flashbacks to the lovers' past occasionally punctuated the main narrative. Eventually, these lengthy background details were cut from the final film version, perhaps because the emotional wartime love affair bogged down an otherwise light-hearted tale with all too real reminders of the recent past. By the end of April 1947, Laura and a widowed Captain Bradford meet as new acquaintances onboard the ship.<sup>590</sup> However, Laura—no longer English—became characterized as a wealthy woman who, having fallen for a possessive millionaire, decides to take a trip to Rio de Janeiro in order to ascertain whether or not she should marry him.

With a significant portion of the screenplay now excised, Connell and Lehman turned their attention to expanding the more comedic plotlines related to the movie's diverse musical cast. Spanish-born conductor Xavier Cugat (playing himself) and his orchestra added Latin-flavored numbers to the movie's soundtrack, including original songs "Cugat's Nougats," "Con Maracas," "My Shawl," "Night Must Fall," and the popular international hit, "The Peanut

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<sup>589</sup> Outline for "Maiden Voyage" by Richard Connell and Gladys Lehman, 14 November 1946 through 15 November 1946, *Luxury Liner*, Turner/MGM Scripts, 1783.f-L-14811, MHL.

<sup>590</sup> Temporary complete screenplay by Gladys Lehman and Richard Connell, 18 April 1947 through 29 April 1947, *Luxury Liner*, Turner/MGM Scripts, 1785.f-L-1491, MHL.

Vendor.”<sup>591</sup> As the film’s classical representatives, Danish tenor Lauritz Melchior joined the cruise as the Swedish Wagnerian tenor, Olaf Eriksen, while Marina Koshetz played his soprano nemesis, the temperamental Russian diva, Zita Romanka. The Pied Pipers, a popular quartet, were added at a later date.<sup>592</sup> They played a minor role in the film as onboard entertainment, singing the hit “Yes! We Have No Bananas” as well as a Swedish drinking song, “Helan Går” with Melchior.<sup>593</sup>

When expanding the film’s musical themes, Connell and Lehman exploited a now well-worn trope in musicals featuring operatic singers. They cast Powell as Polly Bradford, a young girl who dreams of being an opera star. A spoiled yet likable girl, Polly decides to run away from her posh boarding school to spend more time with her beloved father—at least that is the explanation she gives him when she is caught as a stowaway on his ship. In truth, Polly only partially wants more family time. Her ulterior motive is to meet Olaf Eriksen, one of her favorite opera singers whom she heard would be onboard. To Olaf’s dismay, Polly chases him around the ship in the hopes of singing for the renowned tenor. When she finally catches up with him, the longsuffering Olaf discovers that Polly is not a bad singer after all. Polly, for her part, professes her adoration for Olaf—and consequently “good music”—sighing: “You’re *my* Sinatra.”<sup>594</sup>

Once again, stereotypes of opera singers served for comedic effect. In one version of the screenplay from January 1947, Connell and Lehman played on the legendary bulk of the opera

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<sup>591</sup> “The Peanut Vendor” was written by Cuban composer Moisés Simons c. 1927. It became a popular international hit.

<sup>592</sup> Complete OK screenplay by Gladys Lehman and Richard Connell, 11 June 1947 through 24 July 1947, *Luxury Liner*, Turner/MGM Scripts, 1785.f-L-1496, MHL.

<sup>593</sup> A novelty song from the 1922 Broadway revue *Make It Snappy*, “Yes! We Have No Bananas” was written by Frank Silver and Irving Cohn.

<sup>594</sup> Temporary complete screenplay by Gladys Lehman and Richard Connell, 18 April 1947 through 29 April 1947, *Luxury Liner*, Turner/MGM Scripts, 1785.f-L-1491, MHL.

singer to construct a gag, as the writers for *One Night of Love* had done over a decade earlier in 1934:

IN MELCHIOR'S STATEROOM: Melchior has left his door open for Polly. Denis sees him go in. Melchior is autographing a picture as she enters. To discourage Polly's expressed and ardent desire to sing with him, he has taken not a picture of himself alone, but one with Hilga Grampel—a tremendous woman. He says that Hilga is the last person who sang with him. Polly gulps—she knows she'll have to grow a bit and put on more weight—but she is certain she can do that.

COCKTAIL PARTY: At party find Polly eating steadily at hors d'oeuvres. She offers some to Melchior, telling him that she is going to gain a pound a day!<sup>595</sup>

By the end of February 1947, Connell and Lehman had sketched out this stateroom scene in further detail. Polly looks around the room for a picture of Olaf. He hands her one. Polly looks at the photo, which shows Olaf in a "Tristan" costume and a woman "nearly as tall as Olaf and much fatter as 'Isolde.'"

*Polly:* She's rather—err—plump, isn't she?"

*Olaf:* Hilga? Why, we call her "Kleinchen." That means "little one."

*Polly:* Little? Her?

*Olaf:* Yes, for grand opera.

*Polly:* Do they have to be that big?

*Olaf:* Oh, yes. Or bigger.

[...]

*Polly:* I'll eat and eat and eat.

*Olaf:* [Gesturing to the picture of Hilga] That's how she got that way.<sup>596</sup>

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<sup>595</sup> Outline by Richard Connell and Gladys Lehman, 9 January 1947 through 10 January 1947, *Luxury Liner*, Turner/MGM Scripts, 1783.f-L-1484, MHL. It is possible that the screenwriters initially considered having Melchior play himself, thus the reference to his character as "Melchior." Moreover, this sequence calls to mind a scene in *Three Smart Girls Grow Up* (1939). At a buffet, Penny Craig (Deanna Durbin) piles her plate high with food, telling her uncle that she is starving. Her uncle replies: "I thought all artists starved for their art." Penny corrects him: "Not great opera singers. If you think that, take a look at the next one you see."

Another scene from this version of the script shows that Connell and Lehman conceived of a sort of hybrid classical/popular song for Powell to sing, seemingly with the intent to appeal to a range of musical preferences. The sequence takes place in the ship's dining room, where Polly wants to sing opera for Olaf. When she asks if the pianist can play the popular tune he was performing like an operatic aria, he plays it "straight": "Polly sings the song straight for a while, then begins to put in operatic flourishes. The pianist gets the idea—and the number becomes a popular song—sung in operatic style."<sup>597</sup> After the number, Olaf praises Polly: "Brava! Bravissima! You don't need to be fat, Miss Bradford!" Rather than swinging a classic, as in various past musicals, Connell and Lehman instead proposed the opposite: "straightening" a pop tune. Seemingly, the writers conceived of the "operatic style" as connected primarily to the voice, focusing here on Polly/Powell's vocal timbre and vocalizations or cadenza-like sections. In other words, the writers largely located the cues for what made a pop song operatic in the performer's vocality.

In the film, the "fat" scenes were excised, and Cugat replaced the pianist. Polly, spotting Olaf eating small sausages and drinking beer, asks "Laura to ask her father to ask Cugat" to ask Polly to sing. When Cugat invites Polly to sing, she "hesitates" at first, playing the stereotypical grand diva who needs encouragement to perform (Figure 4.13).

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<sup>596</sup> The screenwriters excised this sequence by 2 April 1947. Temporary complete screenplay by Richard Connell and Gladys Lehman, 16 January 1947 through 27 February 1947, *Luxury Liner*, Turner/MGM Scripts, 1783.f-L-1486, MHL.

<sup>597</sup> The screenwriters excised this sequence by 2 April 1947. Temporary complete screenplay by Richard Connell and Gladys Lehman, 16 January 1947 through 27 February 1947, *Luxury Liner*, Turner/MGM Scripts, 1783.f-L-1486, MHL.



**Figure 4.13: Screenshot of Polly hesitating to perform in *Luxury Liner***

Her plan backfires, however, when Cugat says he will not ask her to sing if she is not prepared. Polly quickly agrees to sing and inquires if Cugat can play “*Tristan, Lohengrin, Tannhäuser, or Faust.*” Cugat says no, offering to play “The Peanut Vendor” for Polly instead.

*Polly:* But that isn’t opera! Señor, don’t you know any “good music”?

*Cugat:* Señorita, you can sing whatever you like, but what I’m going to play is “The Peanut Vendor.”

Cugat strikes up the band, and Polly puts on a show for Olaf (Figure 4.14).



**Figure 4.14: Screenshot of Polly performing “The Peanut Vendor” for Olaf in *Luxury Liner***

In an altered version of the aforementioned pianist’s scene, she “straightens” the Latin-tinged song with operatic flourishes and vocalizing (Figure 4.15).



**Figure 4.15:** Screenshot of Polly as the grand diva in *Luxury Liner*

At one point, Polly even performs a cadenza from Johann Strauss II's "Voices of Spring" waltz, which had made its appearance in various operatic movies by this time. Afterward, Olaf congratulates her on her "beautiful voice."

Having abandoned the Captain and Laura's backstory in wartime England, the screenwriters devised a new opening that clearly cast Powell—in the guise of Polly Bradford—as one of the film's central players and a performer of "good music." Connell and Lehman introduce Polly at her boarding school, where the students are putting on an all-girls theatrical production. The script first indicated that the production was to be a play, "The Stolen Gypsy Bride," before it became an operetta, "Love in Spring."<sup>598</sup> This new sequence allowed the audience to hear Powell sing much earlier in the film, performing her first operatic number "Spring Came Back to Vienna," a song especially written for *Luxury Liner* by Janice Torre, Fred Spielman, and Fritz Rotter.<sup>599</sup> Captain Bradford, home for a few days, attends his daughter's show. He then surprises Polly with tickets to attend *Aida*, starring the great Olaf Eriksen and Zita

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<sup>598</sup> The play was mentioned in April 1947 and the operetta in June 1947. Presumably, the writers considered it more realistic that an all-girls school should put on an operetta rather than a grand opera.

<sup>599</sup> According to *The Billboard*, "Spring Came Back to Vienna" was a "song success featured in *Luxury Liner*, a soon-to-be released multi-million-dollar picture production." See "Vienna Smiles Again," *The Billboard*, 20 March 1948.

Romanka.<sup>600</sup> They—and by extension the viewer—see the singers perform the duet from the Act III finale (Figure 4.16).



**Figure 4.16: Screenshot of Olaf and Zita in *Aida***

By 2 April 1947, Connell and Lehman established the basic framework for the final version, integrating more musical numbers into the plot.<sup>601</sup> These sequences, in particular, showcased the operatic voices of Melchior and Powell. The writers added a scene in which Polly, attempting to maneuver Olaf into hearing her sing, machinates a moment when she can “trap” Olaf in his stateroom. As punishment for stowing away on the cruise ship instead of obeying her father and staying in school, Polly is tasked with scrubbing the ship’s many corridors. She encounters Olaf trying to enter his stateroom and professes her admiration for him. Shortly thereafter, Polly encounters Laura crying in the stateroom next door and goes in to comfort her. Laura is appalled that a child has been punished with hard labor and pays Polly’s passage. Happily ensconced in Laura’s stateroom, Polly overhears Olaf warming up the

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<sup>600</sup> Temporary complete screenplay by Richard Connell and Gladys Lehman, 18 April 1947 through 29 April 1947, *Luxury Liner*, Turner/MGM Scripts, 1785.f-L-1491, MHL

In the film, this scene was introduced by a close up of a poster advertising the Gotham Opera Company presenting Olaf Eriksen and Zita Romanka in *Aida* at the Knickerbocker Opera House, which then segued to a staged production of the Finale from Act III. Complete OK screenplay by Gladys Lehman and Richard Connell, 11 June 1947 through 24 July 1947, *Luxury Liner*, Turner/MGM Scripts, 1785.f-L-1496, MHL.

<sup>601</sup> Temporary complete screenplay by Richard Connell and Gladys Lehman, 1 April 1947 through 2 April 1947, *Luxury Liner*, Turner/MGM Scripts, 1784.f-L-1489, MHL.

following morning. Once he finishes, Polly sings the “Gavotte and Scene” from *Manon*, thinking that Olaf will overhear her. When she hears clapping, she rushes to Olaf’s stateroom where an appreciative maid informs her that the tenor left for breakfast without hearing her performance. At the end of the film and after Polly wins Olaf over, the pair sings a duet at the ship’s benefit concert, reprising “Spring Came Back to Vienna.”

Melchior, for his part, was provided with plenty of opportunities in which to sing. Initially, he was assigned a “Spanish Song,” to allow him a grand moment of his own, but this number seemingly was replaced with “Siegfried’s Liebeslied” from Wagner’s *Die Walküre*.<sup>602</sup> As Olaf, he also performed “Torna a Sorrento” during a rehearsal for the ship’s benefit concert. In this same scene, he entered into a singing contest with Zita Romanka, where the two rivals—unwilling to let the other use the lounge as a rehearsal space—consequently performed a mash-up of “Lohengrin’s Abschied” from Wagner’s *Lohengrin* and a traditional Russian song, “Ya Večer Mlada” (“Last Night I Drank Too Much”). This sequence recalls the layering of *Carmen* and *Faust* in *There’s Magic in Music* (1941), where the Manhattan Opera Company and the Interlochen Camp “battle” onstage in an operatic throw-down.

Such script drafts show the development of *Luxury Liner* from a Deanna Durbin-esque tale of adolescence, to a story focused more on an adult romance, to a musical comedy starring an operatic singer. In addition, the film’s main characters became more upper class over the course of the screenwriting process. Captain Bradford, for example, underwent many professions, including a Broadway producer, a military captain, and, ultimately, a luxury cruise ship captain. Even the setting of a luxury liner suggests wealth and the idle rich, a lavish pastime enjoyed before the onset of World War II—and a common fantasy setting for 1930s movies—

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<sup>602</sup> Temporary complete screenplay by Richard Connell and Gladys Lehman, 1 April 1947 through 2 April 1947, *Luxury Liner*, Turner/MGM Scripts, 1784.f-L-1490, MHL.

that once again became possible following the cessation of the military conflict. Both classical and popular repertoire provided the film's soundtrack, yet Powell's operatic vocality, performance of mostly classical repertoire, and onscreen characterization served to frame "good music" and its performers once again as elite. What is more, the film's two opera singers, Olaf Eriksen and Zita Romanka, are paying passengers, while Xavier Cugat and the Pied Pipers are employed as shipboard entertainment.

Richard L. Coe underscored this filmic and musical reorientation in his review for the *Washington Post*:

The customary musical tidbits are all there, stuffed like hard candy into a Christmas stocking. The Met opera's Melchior sings an *Aida* duet with Nina Koshetz's daughter, he does the "Spring Song" from *Die Walkuere* [*sic*], Jane sings the *Manon* "Gavotte" and "The Peanut Vendor," Miss Koshetz takes over a Cole Porter number and Cugat, who seems to work round the clock for Metro, picks up some royalty checks for a few of his own ditties.

The story is one of those things about a poor little rich girl who just hates being cooped up in boarding school. Her father's only a sea captain, but it doesn't stop him from sending Jane to one of those chandeliered joints which makes Foxcroft tuition look like bubble gum money. She stows away on daddy's massive steamer, bound from Gotham to Rio. Before Havana heaves in sight, which is as far as *Luxury Liner* gets, Jane has fixed up a bride for papa, a singing career for herself and, just to make sure she's normal, has hooked a patient young man for her few idle moments.<sup>603</sup>

Coe acknowledged that the plots of musicals by the mid-1940s were "supposed to be insane," but they were also supposed to be "spontaneous, light, and carefree," which *Luxury Liner*, in his opinion, failed to be. Coe claimed that because the film genre itself was illogical:

It is senseless, therefore, to marvel that even a school for backward girls would put on so idiotic a play as the one Jane appears in for her first scene, that every cabin you see on the floating palaces of progress boasts a baby grand, and that both the table *d'hote* and the *à la carte* restaurants of the sea monster are the size of the Palace Theater.

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<sup>603</sup> Richard L. Coe, "Luxury Liner Docks at Palace," *Washington Post*, 27 September 1948. Foxcroft is a girls boarding and college preparatory school in Middleburg, VA, which was founded in 1914. Today, the school's boarding tuition costs upwards of \$51,900 per year.

The musical numbers are played by those mammoth symphonies of which Bill Gold was taking note in *District Line* sometime back. But, surely, there is nothing exceptional in having Jane or Marina sit down at stateroom pianos, allow themselves a few dazzling arpeggios and wind up accompanied by bursts of sound emitted from several hundred unseen instruments. This, like nonsensical plots, is part of the musical film pattern and the public very likely would want its money back if all it got were a soprano-cum-piano.<sup>604</sup>

A critic for *The Sun* similarly pointed to the film's luxurious elements, noting that "it presents an array of handsome, elegantly dressed men and beautiful, glamorized women, who are highly decorative and prepared to smile for the camera at a moment's notice."<sup>605</sup> Mae Tinee from the *Chicago Daily Tribune* likewise commented: "The scene is a luxury liner, which provides an excellent opportunity for opulence in background, and no expense has been spared on the women's costumes. Frances Gifford, Marina Koshetz, and Jane Powell are colorfully and smartly bedecked, and even George Brent, as the ship's captain, wears some uniforms that seem to be anything but regulation."<sup>606</sup>

### ***Luxury Liner's* Musical Selections and Film Reception**

Archival documents dated 12 October and 15 October 1948 suggest that a little over a month after the premiere of *Luxury Liner* in the United States, MGM aired two international radio broadcasts promoting the film and its music.<sup>607</sup> Although I could not confirm that these broadcasts actually took place, the materials—labeled "International broadcast music from Studio International Department"—reveal decisions made by studio personnel in regard to the

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<sup>604</sup> Richard L. Coe, "*Luxury Liner* Docks at Palace." Bill Gold was a columnist who wrote a regular column called "The District Line" for the *Washington Post*.

<sup>605</sup> Review of *Luxury Liner*, *The Sun*, 9 October 1948.

<sup>606</sup> Mae Tinee, "*Luxury Liner* Follows Film Course That Is Well Charted," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 10 September 1948.

<sup>607</sup> *Luxury Liner* premiered in the United States on 9 September 1948.

selection process for *Luxury Liner*'s music. Two broadcast scripts suggest that the musical numbers were chosen specifically so that all musical preferences, from high to low, would be met.<sup>608</sup> Moreover, the descriptions of the movie's more serious musical sequences claimed that the classics reached new depths of artistry and widespread appeal because of their novel presentation in the film.

These musical numbers included four operatic arias: the finale of Act III from *Aida*, "Siegfried's Liebeslied" from Wagner's *Die Walküre*, "Lohengrin's Abschied" from Wagner's *Lohengrin*, and "Scene and Gavotte" from Massenet's *Manon*. According to the broadcast, Melchior and Koshetz's duet offered the apex of operatic singing:

Finale of Act III from Giuseppe Verdi's opera *Aida* with Marina Koshetz singing the role of "Aida" and Lauritz Melchior that of "Radames." *Aida* is often referred to as the zenith of the older Italian operas and this duet is probably one of the production's best-known melodies other than the "Celeste Aida" solo. Melchior and Koshetz in their spectacular voicing of the great Verdi score sing with all the gusto and verve written into the finale scene and lift the music to its highest possible point of expression. The orchestra under the capable baton of George Stoll furnishes accompaniment extraordinary.<sup>609</sup>

Novelty served as part of the appeal for Melchior's *Liebeslied* (Figure 4.17).



**Figure 4.17: Screenshot of Olaf singing the "Liebeslied"**

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<sup>608</sup> International broadcast music from Studio International Department (Bernie Sebastian), 12 October 1948, *Luxury Liner*, Turner/MGM Scripts, 1768.f-L-1503, MHL.

<sup>609</sup> International broadcast music from Studio International Department (Bernie Sebastian), 15 October 1948, *Luxury Liner*, Turner/MGM Scripts, 1768.f-L-1503, MHL.

In part, the studio pointed to the accompanying orchestration and setting within the movie as particularly appealing to audiences:

“Siegmond’s Liebeslied” from Richard Wagner’s *Die Walküre* as sung by the world’s greatest Wagnerian heroic tenor, Lauritz Melchior. The rendition in concert form sounds almost like a different aria without the full orchestral accompaniment as is usually heard. Melchior, very much at ease with the Wagnerian aria, takes the liberty of singing the “Liebeslied” for one of the maids aboard the *Luxury Liner*, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer’s Technicolor voyage of merriment and romance ... The accompaniment was skillfully arranged and conducted by Georgie Stoll.<sup>610</sup>

In presenting Powell’s solo aria from *Manon* to listeners, on the other hand, the studio emphasized gendered differences between Melchior’s “masculine” presentation of Wagner and Powell’s “feminine” presentation of Massenet (Figure 4.18):

“Scene and Gavotte” from the Massenet opera *Manon* sung by the lovely Jane Powell in an attempt to impress Lauritz Melchior who she hopes will give her the chance of an audition. Miss Powell is in excellent voice and knows her material well. The “Gavotte,” one of the simplest sounding melodies, is in reality one of the most difficult to vocalize. This shortened version of the “Scene and Gavotte” from *Manon* was especially chosen as a contrast aria to Melchior’s solo for “Siegmond’s Liebeslied” [from] *Die Walküre*. The “Gavotte” has the light and airy charm of femininity befitting Jane Powell while the “Liebeslied” has all the robust manliness of Lauritz Melchior. This is music everyone will enjoy while cruising aboard the *Luxury Liner*.<sup>611</sup>



**Figure 4.18: Screenshot of Polly’s “feminine” performance of *Manon***

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<sup>610</sup> International broadcast music from Studio International Department (Bernie Sebastian), 12 October 1948, *Luxury Liner*, Turner/MGM Scripts, 1768.f-L-1503, MHL.

<sup>611</sup> International broadcast music from Studio International Department (Bernie Sebastian), 12 October 1948, *Luxury Liner*, Turner/MGM Scripts, 1768.f-L-1503, MHL.

Wagner's music underscored the "robust manliness" of Melchior, whose displays of masculinity onscreen included drinking quaffs of beer and offering grandfatherly advice to Powell. Austro-German music maintained a solid connection to virile masculinity in American musical discourses, especially when compared to the supposedly "lighter," feminine French or Italian fare.

Among the more "middling" of *Luxury Liner's* musical offerings were "Alouette" and "Spring Came Back to Vienna." A French-Canadian children's song, "Alouette" served as one of the film's more accessible offerings with "international" appeal:

The perennial group-singing favorite is given a very novel treatment in *Luxury Liner*. Jane Powell, after being discovered as a stowaway, is sent below deck to work in the galley. There she runs into a motley array of friends ... When the job of peeling potatoes becomes the boring job it can be, Janie decides to do something about it. After enlisting the vocal help of the entire kitchen crew, she proceeds with the "Alouette" number in a most inviting international way. Language verses are sung in French, Spanish, Chinese, and English. The "Alouette" number, compiled and arranged by Leo Arnaud, is an unusual novelty number with a definite lift in its unique presentation.<sup>612</sup>

As with "The United Nations" sequence in *Thousands Cheer*, MGM visually and sonically marked the various "international" verses. A French-Canadian song, however, "Alouette's" French verses and choruses operated as a sort of musical "control" (Figure 4.19).

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<sup>612</sup> International broadcast music from Studio International Department (Bernie Sebastian), 15 October 1948, *Luxury Liner*, Turner/MGM Scripts, 1768.f-L-1503, MHL.



**Figure 4.19: Screenshot of the French “control”**

The Chinese verse, sung by a Chinese cook, received an “Oriental” treatment, with Arnaud’s arrangement highlighting pentatonic scales and shimmering brass accompaniment. Onscreen, Powell “played” brass pots with a wooden spoon while the cook sang (Figure 4.20).



**Figure 4.20: Screenshot of the Chinese cook’s verse**

The Spanish verse also drew on stereotyping signifiers. Latin-American rhythmic patterns anchored the accompaniment and provided a syncopated dance beat. Placing a bowl of fruit on her head, Powell danced and sang in a patter-style then-associated with Brazilian entertainer Carmen Miranda (Figure 4.21).



**Figure 4.21: Screenshot of dancing *à la* Carmen Miranda**

One of the English verses was sung in a syncopated “jazzy”—in other words, American—manner, while the other became vaguely Scottish, as Arnaud highlighted a musical drone performed by the culinary-minded singers and arranged for pipes to play a countermelody in a Scotch snap rhythm. For this verse, one of the cooks sang in a vaguely British accent as one of the housekeepers danced a jig (Figure 4.22).



**Figure 4.22: Screenshot of a “highland” jig**

Similarly to “Alouette,” the description for “Spring Came Back to Vienna,” the film’s pseudo-operetta number, pointed to the song’s “easy listening” qualities. Although positioned as

semi-classical within *Luxury Liner*'s narrative, the broadcast framed "Spring Came Back to Vienna" as more of a popular song, possessing a catchy waltz tune that anyone could sing easily:

"There will be waltzes and laughter and love ever after, for spring came back to Vienna" ... The city of romance and light-hearted gayety, out of which has come thousands of songs, now has a song written in her honor by Fritz Rotter, Janice Torre and Fred Spielman. Jane Powell, with a voice as beautiful as the song, paints a lyrical picture that would make most any one's imagination drift into the "I'd like to be there" realm. The waltz tempo is simple, melodic, and easy to listen to, with orchestral and choral arrangements well worth note.<sup>613</sup>

As stated elsewhere—and frequently—in the broadcast, music director Georgie Stoll's orchestral arrangements for the film's various musical numbers proved more delightful because they were "unobtrusive" and "understated." The studio therefore underscored Stoll's arrangements as drawing on more popular musical tendencies rather than the stereotyped bombastic sounds of the opera's orchestra—an ironic perception since such orchestras frequently adjust their dynamics to allow the singers to be heard without the assistance of amplification. Moreover, the lack of orchestral accompaniment aided the diegesis of the film's musical scenes by not "requiring" the camera to show an orchestra.

Appealing to popular tastes, the studio heralded "Helan Går" and "The Peanut Vendor" as two particularly noteworthy songs. MGM underscored their "unusual" treatments within the film's narrative. In regard to "Helan Går," the studio played up the comical effects of combining "good music" with pop:

Scandanavian drinking song meaning "Bottoms Up" is sung by Lauritz Melchior in a most unusual arrangement with the Pied Pipers. The first verse and chorus is sung as Melchior has sung it many times in his native Norway. But when the Pied Pipers move in for a close harmony treatment on [the] second chorus, the melody is strictly on the up beat, and Lauritz Melchior, not to be out-done, joins in with rather hilarious results. The

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<sup>613</sup> International broadcast music from Studio International Department (Bernie Sebastian), 15 October 1948, *Luxury Liner*, Turner/MGM Scripts, 1768.f-L-1503, MHL.

spirit of the song suggests a merry mood, one that might prevail aboard a *Luxury Liner*. The arrangement and compilation of “Helan Går” is by George Stoll.<sup>614</sup>

“The Peanut Vendor,” by contrast, was presented as a successful merging of operatic and popular musical characteristics:

It’s Jane Powell lending a new and extraordinary treatment to the Simons perennial, a beautiful example of Miss Powell’s versatility of voice. Sings popular ballads, novelty and operatic arias with equal ease and ability. “The Peanut Vendor,” a Latin-American favorite of many years standing, is revitalized by a most unusual treatment. The arrangement varies from strict Latin rhythm to an almost operatic theme. This is only one of the diversified forms of musical entertainment afforded aboard the *Luxury Liner*, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer’s Technicolorful voyage on the high seas of merriment, music, and romance.<sup>615</sup>

As *Variety* likewise observed, *Luxury Liner* was “shrewdly studded with talent equally proficient in jamming the classics and classicizing the jive.”<sup>616</sup> The statement that a Latin-American song was revitalized by an operatic treatment, however, belies an imperialist undercurrent. In effect, the studio posited that “The Peanut Vendor”—here seemingly cast as an old standard that had lost its novelty—could only be resuscitated through its union with a historically white, elite music.

Similarly to *Variety*, Bosley Crowther’s less-than-flattering review for the *New York Times* suggested that the only thing keeping *Luxury Liner* afloat was the singers’ “advantage of range and variety”:

Miss Powell unlimbers her nice soprano voice on such assorted airs as “Alouette” and “The Peanut Vendor,” while Mr. Melchior puts his bellows to work on anything from a snatch of *Aida*, to a Scandinavian drinking song. The latter is highly appropriate, for you’d think from the way he drinks beer in great quaffs all the way through the picture that he was posing for a brewery ad. Miss Koshetz, a sort of blonde Miranda, does better

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<sup>614</sup> International broadcast music from Studio International Department (Bernie Sebastian), 15 October 1948, *Luxury Liner*, Turner/MGM Scripts, 1768.f-L-1503, MHL.

<sup>615</sup> International broadcast music from Studio International Department (Bernie Sebastian), 15 October 1948, *Luxury Liner*, Turner/MGM Scripts, 1768.f-L-1503, MHL.

<sup>616</sup> “Trade Show: *Luxury Liner*,” *Variety*, 17 September 1948.

with a song than with her lines. The happiest moment in the picture is her rendering (and tearing) of “I’ve Got You Under My Skin.”<sup>617</sup>

Although a few critics bemoaned *Luxury Liner*’s by now all-too-familiar formula made famous by Joe Pasternak with Deanna Durbin—a plucky adolescent charms all with her voice and fixes adult problems—most stated that the film was entertaining enough. As the *Hollywood Reporter* claimed, *Luxury Liner* was “blithe, escapist nonsense—a warm and friendly show, designed to amuse a wide section of the film-going public. The musical numbers are varied so as to offer something for every member of the family. The upshot of the Pasternak potpourri is a certain ticket seller on Main Street as well as with the main stream.”<sup>618</sup> Certainly, Pasternak and MGM sought an all-inclusive approach to the postwar musical, aiming to appeal to diverse preferences. Yet the borders between genres became increasingly blurred as singers intermingled arias, concert pieces, popular tunes, and traditional songs in the same film. As such, a singer’s vocality—more so than repertoire or musical accompaniment—became the key marker of what would be considered “operatic” in the postwar era.

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The 1950s saw many changes affecting film production. Movie theater attendance dropped from 90 million viewers in 1946 to 60 million in 1950, setting the studios on a mad dash to recover lost profits.<sup>619</sup> In part, the newly affordable television severely cut into film sales. As Julie Hubbert notes, the majority of Americans in the mid-1950s United States owned a TV set and

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<sup>617</sup> Bosley Crowther, “The Screen In Review: Array of Musical Talent Aboard *Luxury Liner*,” *New York Times*, 10 September 1948.

<sup>618</sup> “Humor, Songs Sell New MGM Musical,” *Hollywood Reporter*, 17 September 1948.

<sup>619</sup> Hubbert, “Carpet, Wallpaper, and Earmuffs (1935–1959),” in *Celluloid Symphonies*, 186.

were using it as their primary source of entertainment.<sup>620</sup> Even movie stars began abandoning the cinema for the lights of television, including such entertainers as Lucille Ball, Bud Abbott and Lou Costello, and Donna Reed.

Moreover, the studio system began to crumble. As early as the mid-1940s, actors sought—and won—freedom from their restrictive, long-term studio contracts so that they might exert more control over their careers and salaries. Olivia de Havilland, for example, took Warner Bros. to court in 1943, protesting the studio’s enforcement of “tack on” terms. At the time, the studios could extend a player’s contract if they had been suspended or on loan to another studio. In de Havilland’s case, Warner sought to keep her under contract for an additional seven years. In 1944, however, the California court of appeals sided with the actress, freeing her—as well as the rest of the studios’ contract players—from what formerly had been considered her contractual obligation. This ruling limited the authority of the studios to bind actors to lengthy contracts and proved to be one of the first blows aimed at the studio system.<sup>621</sup> A few years later in 1949, another serious strike occurred: the federal government required the studios to divest their exhibition holdings and rights to film distribution.<sup>622</sup> The studio system, which had lasted for more than two decades, began grinding to a halt.

At the same time, operatic musicals began declining in popularity. Deanna Durbin retired from the movies in 1948 and moved to France, aware that the stories she had been given in the postwar period lacked their former ingenuity and quality. Kathryn Grayson, for her part, continued to play aspiring singers opposite Hollywood’s newest singing discovery, the operatic

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<sup>620</sup> Hubbert, “Carpet, Wallpaper, and Earmuffs (1935–1959),” in *Celluloid Symphonies*, 186.

<sup>621</sup> For more on this ruling, see, for example, Thomas J. Stipanowich, “Olivia de Havilland: The Actress Who Took On the Studio System and Won,” *Los Angeles Times*, 30 October 2016.

<sup>622</sup> Hubbert, “Carpet, Wallpaper, and Earmuffs (1935–1959),” in *Celluloid Symphonies*, 187.

tenor Mario Lanza, in *That Midnight Kiss* (1949) and *The Toast of New Orleans* (1950). After the lackluster *Grounds for Marriage* (1951), however, Grayson appeared in adaptations of Broadway musicals (*Show Boat*, 1951, and *Kiss Me Kate*, 1953) and operettas (*The Desert Song*, 1953, and *The Vagabond King*, 1956). On the one hand, the shift to direct adaptations of Broadway shows signified an attempt on the part of the studios to recapture lost ground to television. On the other, it also reflected a desire to beat musical theater at its own game. Broadway productions, in effect, came to stand in for grand opera, offering the closest native interpretation of the genre that the United States had to offer.

Jane Powell, too, transitioned from her adolescent roles to appear as more mature characters. She segued into playing popular entertainers (*Royal Wedding*, 1951, and *Hit the Deck*, 1955), “average” American girls (*Rich, Young, and Pretty*, 1951, and *Small Town Girl*, 1953), and the female lead in film musicals (*Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, 1954). By mid-decade and as the film industry turned its attention to such adaptations of Broadway shows as *Oklahoma!* (1955) and *South Pacific* (1958), however, the operatic girl-next-door had quietly disappeared from Hollywood.

## CODA

In the mid-1930s, Hollywood introduced such Metropolitan Opera celebrities as Grace Moore, Lily Pons, and Gladys Swarthout to the American popular public. These luminaries regaled moviegoers with their stunning voices and narratives of aspiring or established opera divas in musical films. Films akin to Moore's international hit *One Night of Love* (1934) routinely presented snapshots of opera productions for those who did not regularly (if ever) patronize live opera. Each of these snapshots featured famous singers; familiar arias; appropriate stagings, scenery, and costumes; and even shots of rapt audiences. Indeed, opera enjoyed newfound heights in sound film for approximately four years (1934–38). However, various circumstances—from market oversaturation to censorship issues—contributed to the opera divas' ultimate return to the stage.

Yet some studio personnel seemed to have stumbled upon a way around Hollywood's opera dilemma. In 1936, Universal Pictures' teenaged singer/actress, Deanna Durbin, made unexpected headlines for her appearance in *Three Smart Girls*, effectively laying the foundation for a new formula for operatic musicals that showcased teenaged discoveries with a relatively advanced vocal technique and no prior experience with a professional opera company. Most significantly, these new adolescent protagonists—notably Durbin, Susanna Foster, and Gloria Jean, who were later joined by Kathryn Grayson and Jane Powell—offered the studios more flexibility in regard to plot material and characterization. Films no longer needed to stick to the dominant aspiring opera singer/established opera singer stories that had run their course by the

late 1930s. The studios, too, could abandon the costly reproductions of staged opera excerpts in favor of less expensive domestic sets. Opera thus entered unprecedented filmic realms, with young girls singing at school, home, camp, or elsewhere in the local community. Importantly, too, the visual cues that may have distinguished an aria from other musical numbers were erased, and Hollywood's narratives featuring adolescent girls refashioned the screen's operatic singer as the iconic (white, typically middle-class) American girl-next-door.

By separating opera from its traditional visual cues (i.e., costumes and staging) and relocating it to alternate performance spaces, Hollywood further engendered a more fluid understanding of what the term "opera" meant. In *Luxury Liner* (1948), for instance, Jane Powell performed "Obéissons quand leur voix appelle" from *Manon* to prominent piano accompaniment (with "snuck-in" orchestral support) in a cruise ship stateroom. Such locational shifts cast opera as less of a European theatrical art performed in elite venues and more of a domesticized—yet still white—mode of vocality that could be sung by talented individuals anywhere. Moreover, adolescents executed well-loved arias alongside art songs and studio showpieces in a range of environments, blurring the lines between genres. Unless introduced as such within the film narrative or aurally recognized by moviegoers themselves, an opera aria could very much sound like an "Il bacio" (and vice versa). Hollywood's re-envisioning of opera's presentation in the films thus highlighted an artist's vocality as the key stylistic marker of the genre. In other words, the sound of the operatic voice prompts listeners to think "opera," even more strongly than the genre of the composition being sung.

In the 1950s and as the studio system heaved its final few breaths, opera seemingly vanished from Hollywood's limelight—at least for a time. Although female operatic voices could be heard in the film adaptations of such Broadway productions as *Oklahoma!* (1955) and

*Carousel* (1956)—Shirley Jones (Laurey in *Oklahoma!* and Julie Jordan in *Carousel*) and Claramae Turner (Nettie Fowler in *Carousel*) come to mind—they no longer sounded the hits of the operatic canon that had become familiar to moviegoers over the course of the 1930s and 1940s with any regularity. Still, while opera singers no longer flocked to the silver screen, they instead turned their eyes toward the increasingly popular medium of television. Together with family programs such as *I Love Lucy* (1951–57) and *Leave It to Beaver* (1957–63), shows similar to *The Voice of Firestone* (1949–63) and *NBC Television Opera Theatre* (1950–64) aired for well over a decade and received primetime Emmy Award nominations.<sup>623</sup> Moreover, opera singers maintained their visibility in popular culture, appearing on such well-liked variety programs as *The Ed Sullivan Show* (1948–71) alongside pop artists and other such celebrities.

Networks such as NBC even attempted what Hollywood—in contrast to the European film industry—had staunchly opposed from its inception: screened versions of full-length opera productions. NBC, for example, commissioned new operas to be made for television, the first of which was Gian Carlo Menotti's *Amahl and the Night Visitors*. Menotti's idea for the plot came from a painting at the Metropolitan Museum in New York City, "The Adoration of the Magi." It was no small feat; the production was written, cast, and produced in less than seven weeks.<sup>624</sup> It was originally intended as a Christmas special, but, due to delays, premiered a week later on 30 December 1951. Such operas were created with the aim to bring new works to a popular public. Yet the tremendous time and expense it took to manufacture such productions for a one-time showing undoubtedly contributed to their rarity and ultimate demise.

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<sup>623</sup> *The Voice of Firestone* received one Emmy for "Best Music Series" in 1956 and won for the Peabody Award for ABC that same year. *NBC Television Opera* was nominated for five Emmys: "Best Public Service Series" and "Best Direction" in 1957, "Outstanding Program Achievements in the Fields of Variety and Music" in 1962, and "Outstanding Achievement in Composing Original Music" and "Outstanding Program Achievement in the Field of Music" in 1963.

<sup>624</sup> Jennifer Barnes, *Television Opera: The Fall of Opera Commissioned for Television* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2003), 17.

Meanwhile, filmed adaptations of opera were becoming more and more common in Europe. This trend emerged in the late 1940s in such countries as France, Italy, and the United Kingdom. The French production company, Codo Cinéma, for example, released a 98-minute movie titled *Le Barbier de Séville* (Gioachino Rossini, *Il barbiere di Siviglia*) in 1948. That same year, the BBC released a version of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* as a television film, and the Italia Film production company premiered Ruggero Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*, which was one of the first filmed operas to be shot partially in outdoor settings. Such filmed adaptations increased in number over the next few decades, varying from either abridged versions shot as feature films (i.e., with varied settings, locations, costumes, and intricate camera work) or filmed versions of live theatrical productions.

Over the course of the 1950s and 1960s, television grew more affordable—at least for some families—and became a staple in the American home. The Metropolitan Opera began broadcasting live performances on PBS in 1977, opening *Live from the Metropolitan Opera* with Puccini's *La bohème* featuring Luciano Pavarotti and Renata Scottò. More than four million people tuned in to watch the performance.<sup>625</sup> In 1980, the Met switched over to airing previously recorded productions, later changing the program's title to *The Metropolitan Opera Presents* to reflect its non-live status. Opera's move from national networks such as CBS and NBC to PBS arguably illustrates the genre's changing status and presence in American popular culture. As an independently operated, non-profit organization, PBS's focus on educational and cultural programming—rather than shows meant primarily for entertainment—highlights the perception, and even valorization, of opera as high art. Cast as a valued part of education and culture, opera

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<sup>625</sup> "Our Story," The Metropolitan Opera Official Website, May 2015, <http://www.metopera.org/About/The-Met/> (accessed 28 November 2016).

was solidly marked as something to be appreciated outside of the mainstream, a niche musical preference for “sophisticated” tastes.

As early as December 2006, larger movie-theater chains—AMC Theatres, Cinemark, and Regal Entertainment—began offering the public the opportunity to experience season productions from the Met in high-definition and surround sound. Peter Gelb’s appointment as the Met’s general manager earlier that summer saw the opera company pointed in a new direction. As part of its newfound marketing campaign, the institution highlighted its goal to attract new patrons, stating that under Gelb’s leadership:

the Met has been elevating its theatrical standards by significantly increasing the number of new productions, staged by the most imaginative directors working in theater and opera, and has launched a series of initiatives to broaden its reach internationally. These efforts to win new audiences prominently include the successful *Live in HD* series of high-definition performance transmissions to movie theaters around the world, as well as opening the house to the general public for free dress rehearsals. To revitalize its repertoire, the Met regularly presents modern masterpieces alongside the classics.<sup>626</sup>

Importantly, the democratic movie theater was constructed as a crucial space in which to renew public interest in the musical art. The series has grown from its initial six transmissions to ten as of the 2014–15 season. Today, *Live in HD* can be experienced in what the Met proudly proclaims as more than 2,000 theatres in seventy countries spanning six continents. As part of an education initiative, too, the Met has partnered with the New York City Department of Education and the Metropolitan Opera Guild to develop a nationwide program for students to attend the *Live in HD* performances for free in their public schools.<sup>627</sup>

Besides experiencing live performances from national institutions, Americans can also watch productions from a few major European opera companies. The Royal Opera House in

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<sup>626</sup> “Our Story,” *About*, The Metropolitan Opera Official Website, May 2015, <http://www.metopera.org/About/The-Met/> (accessed 28 November 2016).

<sup>627</sup> “HD Live in Schools,” The Metropolitan Opera Official Website, <http://www.metopera.org/Discover/Education/HD-Live-in-Schools/> (accessed 28 November 2016).

London, for example, broadcasts “live” performances to major cities across the United States. Their 2016–17 season boasted visually stunning renditions of opera staples: Bellini’s *Norma*, Mozart’s *Così fan tutte*, Offenbach’s *Les Contes d’Hoffman*, Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly*, and Verdi’s *Il trovatore* and *Otello*.

Even though the film industry increased opera’s popularity with the public for over twenty years (1930–50), it also left its mark on female opera singers. Hollywood’s beauty standards continue to inform the public’s expectations for slender singers on the screen, especially now with such programs as *Live in HD* that show every(body) in magnified and often unforgiving ways. Indeed, many divas, from Maria Callas to Deborah Voigt, have experienced the sharp effects of the cinema’s aesthetic ideals. In the 1950s, for example, the Metropolitan Opera asked soprano Maria Callas to go on a reducing diet before assuming the stage.<sup>628</sup> She slimmed down from 200 pounds to the slight Audrey Hepburn-like physique that she maintained for the rest of her career, creating a furor both in the press and the opera world for her drastic physical makeover. Demonstrating just how obsessive the public can be about opera divas and weight, rumors spread about the methods that Callas used to shed pounds, which ranged from portion control to the more extreme use of tapeworms.

More recently, in 2004, American soprano Deborah Voigt was fired from a production at the London Royal Opera House for not being slender enough to wear a little black dress “required” for her role in Richard Strauss’ *Ariadne auf Naxos*. This action sparked another media firestorm, one that snowballed when the Wagnerian soprano decided to undergo gastric bypass

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<sup>628</sup> Serena Guarracino, “It’s Not Over ‘Til the Fat Lady Sings”: *The Weight of the Opera Diva*, 195. For more on Callas, see, for example, Anne Edwards, *Maria Callas: An Intimate Biography* (New York: St. Martin’s 2001), Stelios Galatopoulos, *Maria Callas: Sacred Monster* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), Michel Grover-Friedlander, “The Afterlife of Maria Callas’s Voice,” *Musical Quarterly* 88, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 35–62, George Jellinek, *Callas: Portrait of a Prima Donna* (New York: Dover 1986), Joseph Kerman, *Opera and the Morbidity of Music* (New York: New York Review Books, 2008), and Jürgen Kesting, *Maria Callas* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993).

surgery in order to slim down. Critics today are still quick to marvel at how many pounds Voigt lost and point out that she now wears an American size 12. Voigt herself, however, stresses the inherent sexism in the media, observing that the (overwhelmingly male) critics tend to focus on women's bodies rather than men's in their commentaries on the musical arts. In one interview, Voigt reflected back on her "little black dress" incident, stating: "I once read a review pointing out how overweight I was, but they said that the tenor had shoulders like a linebacker. They did not also say that he had a stomach like a nine-months-pregnant woman."<sup>629</sup>

Just two years ago in 2014, five male British critics attacked one of the singers at the Glyndebourne Festival in the United Kingdom for not being svelte enough to play Octavian in Richard Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier*. They found the opera to be quite good overall, but determined that Tara Erraught's body detracted from their enjoyment of the performance. Andrew Clark, for example, wrote in the *Financial Times* that "Tara Erraught's Octavian is a chubby bundle of puppy-fat."<sup>630</sup> The *Guardian*'s Andrew Clements noted: "It's hard to imagine this stocky Octavian as this willowy woman's plausible lover."<sup>631</sup> Clements' comment invokes the invalid yet pervasive idea that only beautiful, *thin* people can ever be attracted to one another. *The Independent*'s Michael Church, meanwhile, deemed that "This Octavian (Tara Erraught) has the demeanor of a scullery-maid," while Rupert Christiansen of *The Telegraph* stated, "Tara

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<sup>629</sup> Charlotte Higgins, "The Fat Lady Slims," *The Guardian*, 26 September 2006, <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2006/sep/26/classicalmusicandopera.healthandwellbeing> (accessed 22 June 2015).

<sup>630</sup> Andrew Clark, "Der Rosenkavalier, Glyndebourne, East Sussex, UK – review," *Financial Times*, 19 May 2014, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/d135e9dc-dce3-11e3-b73c-00144feabdc0.html> (accessed 22 June 2015).

<sup>631</sup> Andrew Clement, "Der Rosenkavalier and Glyndebourne," *The Times*, 19 May 2014, [http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/arts/music/classical/article4093158.ece?CMP=OTH-gnws-standard-2014\\_05\\_18](http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/arts/music/classical/article4093158.ece?CMP=OTH-gnws-standard-2014_05_18) (accessed 22 June 2015).

Erraught is dumpy of stature.”<sup>632</sup> Richard Morrison of the London *Times* summarized that Erraught was “unbelievable, unsightly and unappealing.”<sup>633</sup> All of these critics, only a few of which praised the mezzo-soprano for her singing, zeroed in on what they believed to be the more important element of the performance: Erraught’s body and looks.<sup>634</sup> Echoing Elza Schallert’s *Chicago Tribune* article about the movies’ influence on opera in the 1930s, journalist Charlotte Higgins observed that some members of the public, like these scathing critics, are so used to the “realism” of the movies that they believe opera should only accept those singers who are just right “for a part dramatically and physically.”<sup>635</sup>

Two (female) opera singers responded to the comments made by the aforementioned British critics. One asked: “What on Earth does your body size have to do with how well you can sing?”<sup>636</sup> Another queried: “How have we arrived at a point where opera is no longer about singing but about the physiques and looks of the singer, specifically the female singers?”<sup>637</sup> However, these questions certainly are not new. As I have shown, questions such as this emerged

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<sup>632</sup> Michael Church, “Der Rosenkavalier, Glyndebourne Opera Review: Perversely Cast,” *The Independent*, 19 May 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/classical/reviews/der-rosenkavalier-glyndebourne-opera-review-perversely-cast-9395750.html> (accessed 22 June 2015), and Rupert Christiansen, “Glyndebourne 2014 Der Rosenkavalier Review,” *The Telegraph*, 18 May 2014, [http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/classicalconcertreviews/10839018/Glyndebourne-2014-Der-Rosenkavalier-review.html#disqus\\_thread](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/classicalconcertreviews/10839018/Glyndebourne-2014-Der-Rosenkavalier-review.html#disqus_thread) (accessed 22 June 2015).

<sup>633</sup> Richard Morrison, “Der Rosenkavalier at Glyndebourne,” *The Times*, 19 May 2014, [http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/arts/music/classical/article4093158.ece?CMP=OTH-gnws-standard-2014\\_05\\_18](http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/arts/music/classical/article4093158.ece?CMP=OTH-gnws-standard-2014_05_18) (accessed 22 June 2014).

<sup>634</sup> Anastasia Tsioulcas, “In 2014, the Classical World Still Can’t Stop Fat-Shaming Women,” *NPR*, 20 May 2014, <http://www.npr.org/sections/deceptivecadence/2014/05/20/314007632/in-2014-the-classical-world-still-cant-stop-fat-shaming-women> (accessed 22 June 2015).

<sup>635</sup> Charlotte Higgins, “The Fat Lady Slims,” *The Guardian*, 26 September 2006, <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2006/sep/26/classicalmusicandopera.healthandwellbeing> (accessed 22 June 2015).

<sup>636</sup> “Glyndebourne Opera Critics Spark ‘Sexism’ Row,” *BBC News*, 22 May 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-27500461> (accessed 22 June 2015).

<sup>637</sup> “Glyndebourne Opera Critics Spark ‘Sexism’ Row,” *BBC News*, 22 May 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-27500461> (accessed 22 June 2015).

when Hollywood first brought opera to the silver screen in the 1930s. In establishing a visual standard for divas in screenplays, in the press, and with the promotion of slender singers on celluloid, Hollywood effected a visual reconfiguration of the sonic that still exists today, wherein the body rather than the voice has become a primary means through which one can “appreciate” theatrical productions of opera.

What mostly remains of opera in the movies are the various disembodied voices either woven diegetically into the film or underpinning the action taking place on the screen.<sup>638</sup> Moreover, many of these voices are women’s voices, calling to mind the alluring sounds of the sirens that Odysseus longed to hear—and not necessarily to see—in Homer’s *Odyssey*. In *Philadelphia* (1993), for example, Maria Callas’s voice drives a scene in which Andrew Beckett (Tom Hanks), a gay lawyer suffering from AIDS, plays the diva’s recording of “La mamma morta” from Umberto Giordano’s *Andrea Chénier* for his legal representative, Joe Miller (Denzel Washington).<sup>639</sup> Beckett, fired from his firm because his colleagues are afraid of contracting the disease, has entrusted the homophobic small-town lawyer to see Beckett’s case to trial. In this particular scene, Beckett puts on Callas’s record and asks Miller: “Do you mind this music? Do you like opera?” Miller shakes his head, stating: “I am not that familiar with opera.” Replying that it is his favorite, Beckett proceeds, in Walter Damrosch style, to offer contextualizing information about the aria, first naming the important “players”—“It’s Maria Callas. It’s *Andrea Chénier*. Umberto Giordano.”—and then what the aria is about—“This is Maddalena, saying how during the French Revolution, the mob set fire to her house. Her mother

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<sup>638</sup> For more on opera as film soundtrack, see, for example, Marcia J. Citron, *Opera on Screen* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), Marcia J. Citron, *When Opera Meets Film* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), and Jeongwon Joe, *Opera as Soundtrack* (Farnham, Surrey, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013).

<sup>639</sup> For more on *Philadelphia*, see, for example, Paul Robinson, “The Opera Queen: A Voice from the Closet,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 6, no. 3 (November 1994): 283–91.

died saving her ‘chipmunk.’” Beckett then establishes the aria’s emotional thrust for Miller’s benefit (as well as for the moviegoer): “Do you hear the heartache in her voice? Can you feel it, Joe?”—Miller nods—“Now in come the strings, and it changes everything. It fills with a hope. And now it’ll change again. Listen.” As the aria unfolds, Beckett translates the lyrics for Miller. Callas’s voice affects both men deeply. Beckett is driven to tears, while Miller is visibly moved by the diva’s sung tale of sorrow, pain, and, ultimately, “the voice of love.”

Perhaps another of the most powerful of these filmed operatic episodes comes from *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), a movie about two men who become friends during their lengthy imprisonment.<sup>640</sup> Andy Dufresne (Tim Robbins), wrongly convicted of his wife’s murder, discovers a crate of records in the prison warden’s office while a guard is otherwise occupied. He puts on a record, which begins to play “Che soave zeffiretto” from Mozart’s *Le nozze di Figaro*. Andy locks all of the doors to the office so that the guards cannot stop him from broadcasting the sopranos’ duet throughout the prison compound by using a microphone connected to the facility-wide loudspeakers. Various shots of the prisoners reveal that the women’s voices draw inmates to their grimy windows, stop the men from their laborious work, and halt their exercises in the prison’s dirt enclosure. All men stare at the speakers from whence the voices emanate. Through a voiceover, Andy’s friend, Red (Morgan Freeman), informs the viewer that:

I have no idea to this day what those two Italian ladies were singing about. Truth is, I don’t want to know. Some things are best left unsaid. I like to think they were singing about something so beautiful it can’t be expressed in words, that makes your heart ache because of it. I tell you those voices soared, higher and farther than anybody in a grey place dares to dream. It was like some beautiful bird flapped into our cage and made those walls dissolve away. And for the briefest of moments, every man in Shawshank felt free.

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<sup>640</sup> For more on the *Shawshank Redemption*, see, for example, Luis Gómez Romero, “Countess Almaviva and the Carceral Redemption: Introducing a Musical Utopia into the Prison Walls,” *Utopian Studies* 21, no. 2 (2010): 274–92.

Red's thoughts encapsulate some of the key features of what opera represents in American culture today: a type of vocality disassociated from its original theatrical trappings. Oftentimes, the librettist's text is not deemed necessary for "understanding" the content of the music. Rather, the singer's voices—note Red's specific use of the word, "voices," rather than the more general category of "music"—convey the "true" meaning of the text: the women sing about something "so beautiful it can't be expressed in words." If Red had known that the Countess Almaviva and Susanna's duet was about their plan to expose the Count's rampant infidelity, it surely would have soured the inmate's experience. Moreover, Red's voiceover resonates with the rhetoric used during the music-appreciation movement during the early twentieth century in regard to the inherent capacity of "good music" to uplift the masses, wherein "Che soave zeffiretto" enables the prisoners to transcend their current abject state and finally feel "free."

In more recent movie history, operatic vocality has become increasingly associated with an educated, sophisticated type of villain in action films—one that is typically European, incredibly wealthy, and extremely powerful. In effect, the trope of opera as a cultivated music for the rich and erudite underscores the type of characters with which they are visibly associated.<sup>641</sup> Blockbusters such as *Quantum of Solace* (2008), *Jack Ryan: Shadow Recruit* (2014), and *Spectre* (2015), for example, each features a cast of opera-loving villains. In *Quantum of Solace*, James Bond (Daniel Craig) attempts to disrupt the nefarious deeds of a power-hungry faction, whose elite members meet at a modern production of Giacomo Puccini's *Tosca* in Bregenz, Austria. In *Jack Ryan*, British actor Kenneth Branagh plays Russian mastermind Viktor Cherevin, who, in

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<sup>641</sup> A fascinating example comes from *Hannibal* (2001), starring British actor Anthony Hopkins. Hopkins reprised his role as Dr. Hannibal Lecter from *Silence of the Lambs* for this movie, once again playing the intelligent yet psychopathic killer. *Hannibal* featured a scene in which Lecter attends an outdoor opera in Florence, Italy. The aria used for the film, "Vide Cor Meum," was newly composed by Patrick Cassidy and based on Dante's sonnet "A ciascun'alma presa" from *La Vita Nuova*. Although not part of the operatic canon, a YouTube search of opera scenes from the movies includes this aria amongst the results.

one scene, revels in his superior intelligence while listening to Giulio Caccini's "Amarilli, mia bella." Although it is a madrigal instead of an operatic aria, "Amarilli," I would argue, sonically resonates with moviegoers as "opera" due to soprano Cecilia Bartoli's vocalicity. The selection of a madrigal effectively recalls Hollywood's earlier practices of assigning operatic singers a variety of classical pieces to perform, which, at least to some viewers, were understood as part of the operatic repertoire. In *Spectre*, Christoph Waltz's psychopathic villain, Franz Oberhauser (aka Ernst Stavro Blofeld), also is associated with opera, as both Donizetti's "Una furtiva lagrima" and Verdi's "Libiamo ne lieti calici" are used in the film to sonically mark Blofeld's presence.

Music critic Alex Ross argues that Hollywood's tendency to "associate classical music with murderous insanity is a curious neurosis of the American pop-cultural psyche."<sup>642</sup> According to Ross, this filmic trope, on the one hand, is rooted firmly in the equation of Richard Wagner with Adolf Hitler and, on the other, stems from age-old anxieties about "masculine identity and the supposedly feminizing influence of what Theodore Roosevelt called 'overcivilized' European culture."<sup>643</sup> It is true that these movies often take place in Europe and that the villains associated with opera are, quite commonly, European characters played by white European actors. I would argue, however, that opera simultaneously becomes an intrinsic feature of American culture when one considers that the movies portraying and perpetuating such tropes are American-made and intended for a (primarily) American audience.

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<sup>642</sup> Alex Ross, "Finally, a Non-Embarrassing Classical-Music Scene in a Blockbuster Movie," *The New Yorker*, 11 August 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/finally-a-non-embarrassing-classical-music-scene-in-a-blockbuster-movie> (accessed 28 November 2016).

<sup>643</sup> Ross, "Finally, a Non-Embarrassing Classical-Music Scene in a Blockbuster Movie," *The New Yorker*, 11 August 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/finally-a-non-embarrassing-classical-music-scene-in-a-blockbuster-movie> (accessed 28 November 2016).

When I first began this project, the inclusion of staged opera sequences or diegetic sequences of operatic productions were few and far between. Period films or such television programs as *Downton Abbey* (2010–15) provide a few notable exceptions.<sup>644</sup> One of the rare examples from a non-period film comes from *Pretty Woman* (1990), in which the wealthy Edward Lewis (Richard Gere) takes call girl Vivian Ward (Julia Roberts) to see *La traviata*, Verdi's opera about the doomed love affair between a famed courtesan, Violetta Valéry, and the upper-class Alfredo Germont. Before the curtain rises, Ward asks Lewis: "You said that this is in Italian. So how am I gonna know what they're saying?" Lewis replies: "Believe me, you'll understand. The music is very powerful ... People's reactions to opera the first time they see it is very dramatic. People either love it or they hate it. If they love it, they'll always love it. If they don't, they may learn to appreciate it. But it will never become part of their soul." The camera shows a montage of three brief opera scenes: the scene where Violetta considers whether Alfredo could be her one true love, the scene where Violetta asks Alfredo to love her as much as she loves him, and the finale where Violetta dies from consumption. Ward, without benefit of subtitles, is visibly touched by the opera, succumbing to tears at the end of the production when courtesan Violetta dies in her lover's arms. Presumably, Ward sees her own life reflected in Verdi's opera. Yet opera, too, clearly has "become part of her soul," suggesting that Ward's

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<sup>644</sup> Another opera scene from *The Fifth Element* (1997) imagines opera both in the future and in space. Taxi-driver Korben Dallas (Bruce Willis) attends the Diva Plavalaguna's performance. A *slim* blue alien who looks like a creature from *Star Wars*, the diva opens with "Il dolce suono mi colpi" from Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* before segueing into a display of—futuristic—operatic virtuosity. "The Diva Dance," which was written for the film by Eric Serra, melds an—occasionally technologically-mediated—operatic voice with a techno beat and synthesized sounds. The hardened Korben visibly is touched by the diva's voice, as are the rest of the "elite" members of the audience.

innate “heart of gold,” as *NPR*’s Bruce Scott put it, can ultimately overcome her profession and class status.<sup>645</sup>

Over the past few years, however, Hollywood has seen a slight increase in the number of films featuring theatrical excerpts of opera, perhaps inspired by the *Tosca* scene in *Quantum of Solace*. *Mission: Impossible—Rogue Nation* (2015), for example, similarly included an action-packed opera sequence. In this scene, Benji Dunn (Simon Pegg), the—British, of course—tech whiz of the Impossible Mission Force is lured to the Vienna State Opera’s performance of Puccini’s *Turandot* by American spy Ethan Hunt (Tom Cruise). Hunt sent the opera-loving techie a free ticket, hoping that Dunn could not resist. Dunn, indeed, takes the bait and becomes involved in Hunt’s scheme to prevent the assassination of the Austrian Chancellor, all of which takes place to the strains of “Nessun dorma.”

As of this past year, the disembodied operatic voice made its way back into corporeal form with the premiere of *Florence Foster Jenkins* (2016), a biopic based on the life of the eponymous opera aficionado, wealthy socialite, and aspiring diva. Although Jenkins’ touching story undoubtedly was selected for its rich comedic potential—famously, Jenkins could not sing in tune and financed her own performances—it also brought a number of operatic arias back to the silver screen with a vengeance, including, among others, Mozart’s “The Queen of the Night” aria from *Die Zauberflöte*, Delibes’s “Bell Song” from *Lakmé*, and Wagner’s “Ride of the Valkyries” from *Die Walküre*. Still, the producers did not harken back to tropes of opera divas as *One Night of Love*’s critics had with their “fat and forty” jokes. For one scene, in which Jenkins (Meryl Streep) attends a performance at Carnegie Hall, the filmmakers chose to showcase Lily Pons as Jenkins’ musical inspiration, casting glamorous Russian singer Aida Garifullina in the

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<sup>645</sup> Bruce Scott, “Verdi’s *La Traviata*: The Original *Pretty Woman*,” *NPR*, 12 February 2010, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=123568408> (accessed 29 March 2017).

role of the “diminutive diva.” Situated on the iconic Carnegie stage, Garifullina performs one of Pons’s favored arias, the “Bell Song”—although she is dressed in a stunning golden evening gown rather than one of Pons’s infamous navel-baring costumes.<sup>646</sup>

Perhaps we might interpret this as a sign that opera and its singers have come full circle in Hollywood. Grace Moore kicked off the opera craze in the 1930s with her performances of arias from *Carmen* and *Madama Butterfly* in *One Night of Love* (1934), thrilling viewers with staged excerpts of opera productions and convincing the public that one did not have to be Brünnhilde to possess a golden voice. Lily Pons then took to the screen and convinced the censors that opera’s visuals needed to be policed, as they could be too titillating or racially suggestive. With opera stripped of its costumes and stagings—and firmly entrenched as a white musical tradition—Hollywood cast opera as a mode of singing suitable for American girls-next-door and domestic spaces, a perception that the studios cultivated even more fiercely during World War II when “good music” both was conscripted into the military and used for boosting the country’s morale. Although studio-groomed stars still represented the modern American opera singer in the postwar period, their onscreen status as wealthy young women reoriented opera as an elitist and aspirational musical taste. Opera then seemed to disappear from Hollywood musical films as the film genre receded to the background of cinematic output in the 1960s, only to be resurrected as a formless specter later in the century. The disembodied voices heard most frequently in the movies today serve as ghost-like glimmers of a time in which opera once was framed as the new, and decidedly populist, American musical ideal for all people to enjoy.

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<sup>646</sup> Notably, Garifullina performed the “Bell Song” in a significantly lower key signature and at a much slower tempo than Pons ever did.

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