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IF THERE'S NO "FAT LADY," WHEN IS THE OPERA OVER? AN EXPLORATION
OF CHANGING PHYSICAL IMAGE STANDARDS IN PRESENT-DAY OPERA

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of Arts and Humanities

University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Emily L. Stephenson

August 2012

Advisor: Sarah Morelli, PhD

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Title: If there's no "fat lady," when is the opera over? An examination of changing physical image standards in present-day opera

Advisor: Sarah Morelli, PhD

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Abstract

Though present-day American society generally assumes opera is one of the few remaining entertainment fields where talent matters more than physical appearance, as the 2004 firing of Deborah Voigt demonstrates, present-day opera singers are increasingly being held to stricter image standards. In 2004, Covent Garden dismissed Voigt from their production of *Ariadne auf Naxos*, in which Voigt was supposed to reprise her critically acclaimed interpretation of the title role. According to Voigt, Covent Garden's casting director Peter Katona felt that she was too large to fit into the black dress the new production required of the character.¹ Voigt's removal from the production and consequent media attention made opera's new image standards public. My ethnographic and archival research concludes that present-day opera singers are expected to fit much more stringent physical standards. Though popular publications like *Classical Singer*, *Time*, and *Newsweek* have published articles exploring the new standards, little published academic work has explored this topic. As both a singer and an ethnomusicologist, I have spent several years observing and interviewing singers at various stages. This thesis explores evidence supporting the focus on image within opera and examines how this emphasis impacts various facets of the opera community.

¹ Catharine Milner, "Royal Opera Sacks Diva Who Was 'too Fat For Dress'," *Telegraph* (London), March 7, 2004. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1456228/Royal-Opera-sacks-diva-who-was-too-fat-for-dress.html> (accessed February 2, 2011).

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

One of the most common classical music stereotypes is that of the “fat opera singer.” As of this writing, typing “opera singer” into a Google image search pulls up approximately 41,900,000 images.² Many of these show pictures and cartoons of overweight men and women singing. This stereotype relates to many factors within opera and the larger society in which opera has existed, including but not limited to the belief that larger physical size leads to larger vocal size and the relationship between physical size and wealth. Within present-day, image-conscious Western society, this stereotype relates to an assumption held by some that for opera singers their physical image is less important than their vocal talent. However, my field research among opera students, performers, and opera professionals based in and around the city of Denver, as well as other singers from around the United States, suggest that opera is image-conscious and perhaps increasingly so.³ This field research reveals that opera singers dress themselves, discuss, and maintain their physical appearance in specific ways. Casting directors and competition judges look for specific physical attributes in singers in addition to their vocal talent. Further, opera audiences express a good deal of interest in a singer’s physical appearance.

² Google Image Search performed by Author, April 21, 2012.

³ Throughout this thesis, the term “opera professionals” will refer to non-singer members of the opera community, such as directors, producers, casting professionals, agents, managers and coaches.

I explored issues of physical image in present-day opera over the course of approximately two years of fieldwork. My research concludes that for present-day opera singers how they look is as important as how they sing. Evidence of this trend exists throughout the opera community. Most singers now have anecdotal or personal experience demonstrating the importance of their physical appearance. Though producers and casting directors have tended to downplay the role of a singer's image in casting or not admit its importance at all, they are becoming more vocal about image playing a role in how productions are cast.⁴ My examination of current casting practices also suggests that image is an integral element, as is marketing and publicity for individual singers, individual productions, and opera companies. There is also increasing written material on the role of image in opera, authored by those writing and responding to articles in popular publications as well as Internet forums.

In this first chapter, I will briefly discuss my methodology and fieldwork, examine related existing scholarship, and explore trends within Western popular entertainment that contribute to this trend. In my second chapter I will present evidence from within the opera community that demonstrates image's importance and discuss where singers encounter pressure to maintain and/or modify their image. In my third chapter, I will explore how singers are reacting to this trend. In my fourth chapter I will examine the impact of this trend on singers and the opera community. In my final chapter, I will draw conclusions, analyze my research, and present areas for further study.

⁴ Steven Blier, "The Fit Lady Sings," *Opera News* 66: no. 1 (July 2001): 14.

Fieldwork, Methodology, and an Introduction to the Opera Community

My primary fieldwork consisted of formal interviews with singers, informal conversations with a combination of singers, opera professionals, and audience members, as well as observations of classes, rehearsals, and performances. I supplemented this fieldwork with review of published material on the subject, as well as online discussions of the issue by the opera community and audiences. The fieldwork was performed predominantly in the Denver, Colorado area, though I interviewed and was in contact with singers from around the country. My work focused on singers who currently or in the past aspired to work primarily in opera.⁵ However, several singers I interviewed expressed a desire to also do musical theater work and most singers expected to use their voice in other mediums throughout their career.

It is important to note that during my fieldwork I was also pursuing a Masters of Music in Vocal Performance and was participating in opera performances at the academic and regional level. Because of this insider status, I had different access to the community than a non-singer would. In my concluding chapter, as part of my analysis of my fieldwork I will discuss this factor of my work as it relates to other ethnomusicological scholarship. As I will also discuss in the concluding chapter, my insider status was both a benefit and a hindrance. Generally, I found singers more willing to discuss the topic of image in opera outside of a formal interview setting, and consequently fewer formal interviews were performed than I had originally intended. In these informal

⁵ One can be a singer in a variety of different fields, including but not limited to opera, musical theater, concert work, chamber music, and teaching.

conversations, those involved were generally aware of my area of research, and many took place while I and other singers were taking breaks at rehearsals or performances.

Throughout the work, I refer to all singers I spoke with anonymously; however it is necessary to reveal some potentially identifying demographic information, such as gender, voice type, age range, and current career level, is necessary in order to discuss the topic fully. I assigned numbers to singers who were formally interviewed, and their complete fach, demographic, and educational information can be found in Appendix A. Fachs are a system of categorizing voice part based on range and vocal quality. The five general fachs, from highest to lowest, are soprano, mezzo-soprano, tenor, baritone, and bass. Each of these general categories breaks into subsections based on vocal qualities, types of characters, and in some cases even perceived physical requirements of singers within these fachs. A summary of the subsets of each fach can be found in Appendix B. Of the singers that I interviewed, Singers 2, 3, 5, 7, 10, and 11 were sopranos, Singers 1 and 9 were mezzo-sopranos, Singer 8 was a tenor, and Singer 4 was a baritone. Their ages ranged from late teens to late twenties, and their performing experience ranged from educational to professional performances.

My intention with this thesis is to discuss the role image plays in present-day opera, not to make value judgments about the phenomenon itself. However, the vocabulary used to describe image is generally charged with associations. At various points in presenting and discussing my research, people expressed concern that the language used was offensive, particularly when discussing issues of weight. In this writing, I have endeavored to use direct quotes or use as neutral language as possible in

describing a particular singer's physical image. It is, however, interesting to note that the singers themselves were generally comfortable with using a variety of terms to discuss how they viewed themselves, other singers, and the community as a whole. The population that seemed the most offended by some of this language was that outside of the opera community.

I also found throughout my fieldwork and in presenting my research that many opera outsiders were surprised and even shocked by some of the norms within the opera community. A standard educational practice within the opera community is to provide public feedback to a singer about their performance. This feedback occurs in competitions, masterclasses, and even in some academic classroom settings.⁶ Singers receive comments and suggestions on how they can improve their performances, including suggestions for dramatic changes, suggestions regarding vocal techniques, or suggestions pertaining to their physical image. As singers advance in their career, reviews of their performances are published online and in periodicals. Singers become accustomed to receiving highly individualized feedback, which again often occurs in public settings. Though this appeared to be somewhat difficult for non-community members to process, my focus in this thesis is the type of feedback received and not the practice of receiving this type of feedback publicly.

I also found it problematic to define the word "image." Though I initially assumed image concerns in present-day opera were limited to weight, the issue of image in opera is much more complex. Opera insiders use the term "image" in a variety of

⁶ Masterclasses are public workshops where singers perform for an opera professional or singer and receives limited feedback about their performance.

different contexts. Some use the term to refer to intangible qualities, like appearing confident, mature, or experienced. Others use image to refer to how they dress, wear their hair, and present themselves. Still others use the term to refer to their weight, height, and age. Further, one's image can refer to perceptions about appearance like beauty and health. In my fieldwork, I encountered all of these possible definitions in various combinations. Regardless of the definition, all singers seemed to acknowledge that image was becoming an increasingly integral part of their career. Most singers I spoke with were actively working on creating or maintaining a specific image for their opera career. For most singers, their ideal image comprised a variety of different factors and was often in direct opposition to some of the stereotypes of opera singers. Though physical image concerns will comprise the bulk of my discussion, it is also important to include discussion of non-physical factors, as singers rarely separate the two in discussing issues of image in present-day opera.

Existing Scholarship

Both within ethnomusicological scholarship and other disciplines, little published scholarship deals directly with opera's focus on physical image. There are a few articles that examine racial issues in opera, such as Wallace McClain Cheatham's article "Black Male Singers at the Metropolitan Opera" in *The Black Perspective in Music*.⁷ Though this article is a thorough discussion of why there are so few black singers in major

⁷ Wallace McClain Cheatham, "Black Male Singers at the Metropolitan Opera, *The Black Perspective in Music* 16: no. 1 (Spring, 1988): 3-20.

houses, the article is somewhat outdated. Published in 1988, the article discusses singers who were active in the 1950's. There have been few similar articles published within the last 20 years, though my research suggests that opera's focus on image has become more pronounced in the last three decades.⁸

While there is limited scholarship on issues of image within opera, some studies have been performed linking physical appearance and performance more generally. Joel Wapnick, Alice Ann Darrow, Jolan Kovacs Mazza, and Lucinda Dalrymple published a series of studies in the *Journal of Research in Music Education* which all demonstrated that when listeners see an attractive person perform as well as hear them, listeners rate them more favorably. They studied the issue first among singers.⁹ Six female and eight male singers created an audiovisual clip of approximately 90 seconds of a classical selection. The singers were then rated by 82 adults who received either an audiovisual clip or an audio clip. The listeners judged the singers on vocal performance and physical attractiveness if they saw an audiovisual clip. The study found that for male singers, attractive males were ranked higher than their less attractive counterparts on the audiovisual clips.¹⁰ Interestingly, attractive female performers were ranked more highly than less attractive female performers in both their audio and audiovisual performances. The study notes that results among singers of higher caliber may differ. The authors also

⁸ Though not yet published, scholar Naomi André is currently co-editing an essay collection examining representations of Blackness in opera.

⁹ Joel Wapnick, Alice Ann Darrow, Jolan Kovacs, and Lucinda Dalrymple, "Effects of Physical Attractiveness on Evaluation of Vocal Performance," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 45, no. 3 (Autumn, 1997): 470-479.

¹⁰ Ibid, 477.

note that it was difficult to define what specifically made a singer be perceived as attractive, and also notes that dress and confidence may have made an impact on perceptions of attractiveness.¹¹ Regardless, this study provides some evidence to support the thesis that audiences respond more favorably to attractive performers.

Wapnick, Kovacs Mazza, and Darrow performed a similar study on violin performance evaluation.¹² The methodology was similar to the vocal study, in which twelve violinists were rated by 72 adults. As in the first study, some of the listeners received audiovisual clips, while some received only audio clips. In this study, they asked their listeners to rate appropriateness of dress and stage behavior in addition to musical performance.¹³ This study again found that more attractive performers, in this instance male and female, were rated higher for musical performance in both audio and audiovisual performances. They attribute this to the possibility that more attractive musicians receive more encouragement as they progress in their training than less attractive musicians, leading them to play better as adults.¹⁴ This study also found that performers who received high rankings on stage performance and dress were rated higher musically in their audiovisual performance than they were ranked musically in their

¹¹ Wapnick et al, Vocal Performance Study, 477.

¹² Wapnick, Kovacs Mazza, and Darrow, "Effects of Performer Attractiveness, Stage Behavior, and Dress on Violin Performance Education," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 46: no. 4 (Winter, 1998): 510-521.

¹³ Ibid, 513.

¹⁴ Wapnick et al, "Effects of Performer Attractiveness, Stage Behavior, and Dress on Violin Performance Education," 518.

audio-only performance.¹⁵ This demonstrates that non-musical factors can have an impact on the reception of musical performances. Their third study on the issue, “Effects of Performer Attractiveness, Stage Behavior, and Dress on Evaluation of Children’s Piano Performances” yielded similar results.¹⁶ These studies, though not conclusive, demonstrate that there is at least some link between a performer’s appearance onstage and audience reception to them.

Scholarly articles from other disciplines, though not directly related to my topic, were also helpful in exploring this issue. I consulted a variety of studies which supported my hypothesis that there is an image focus in present-day Western society, which I will later discuss as it relates to Western opera’s recent focus on image. It should be noted that the study of physical beauty and its role in Western society is somewhat complex, and has been studied within a variety of disciplines, including but not limited to anthropology, biology, advertising, and other fields. One study that I found of particular use was Anthony Synnott’s two-part article “Truth and Goodness, Mirrors and Masks -- Parts I and II: A Sociology of Beauty and the Face.”¹⁷ This article provided a useful history and a compilation of other studies that supported the importance of physical image within Western society, particularly the importance and benefit of beauty. Studies about body image in the field of dance were also helpful. Wendy Oliver’s article “Body

¹⁵ Wapnick et al, *Violin Performance Study*, 519.

¹⁶ Wapnick et al, “Effects of Performer Attractiveness, Stage Behavior, and Dress on Evaluation of Children’s Piano Performances,” *Journal of Research in Music Education* 48: no. 4 (Winter, 2000): 323-335.

¹⁷ Anthony Synnott, “Truth and Goodness, Mirrors and Masks -- Part I: A Sociology of Beauty and the Face,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 40, No. 4 (December, 1989): 607-636.

Image in the Dance Class” both outlines the ideal body image for men and women in Western culture, and then further examines the ideal body image within the dance world and how students can negatively internalize these expectations.¹⁸ Further, the article summarizes other studies in the area of dance. This study demonstrated a direct link between a dancer’s body composition and their career, as well as existing negative consequences within the dance world.

I also consulted studies in order to examine the importance of image in Western society. In addition to the summaries found within Wapnick et al’s work supporting the hypothesis that physically attractive individuals have a variety of advantages, I examined other studies across a variety of disciplines demonstrating that in Western culture, “attractive” individuals have many advantages, including being considered more sexually desirable and having an easier time achieving both employment and promotions. M. J. Tovee, D. S. Maisey, J. L. Emery and P. L. Cornelissen’s study “Visual Cues to Female Physical Attractiveness” indicated that females were more desirable when they were within a healthy Body Mass Index (BMI), and had an easier time attracting sexual partners.¹⁹ Debra Umberson and Michael Hughes’s article “The Impact of Physical Attractiveness on Achievement and Psychological Well-Being” indicated that physical attractiveness leads to higher achievement in a variety of settings as well as an overall

¹⁸ Wendy Oliver, "Body Image in the Dance Class," *JOPERD: The Journal Of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance* 79, no. 5 (May 2008): 18-41. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed April 18, 2012).

¹⁹ M. J. Tovee, D. S. Maisey, J. L. Emery and P. L. Cornelissen, “Visual Cues to Female Physical Attractiveness,” *Proceedings: Biological Sciences* 266: No. 1415 (Jan. 22, 1999): 211-218.

improved state of mental health.²⁰ W. Benoy Joseph's study "The Credibility of Physically Attractive Communicators: A Review" found that attractive individuals were considered more credible than their non-attractive counterparts, and also more effectively sold products than non-attractive individuals.²¹

Though I did not necessarily find consensus as to what specifically made someone physically attractive, generally accepted norms include having an appearance of youth, being within a limited weight range, and possessing easily identifiable European or "exotic" features. Additionally, men are expected to be muscular and keep their hair relatively short. Women should be of a lower weight and toned, though not overly muscular, and have hourglass-like proportions. Though there are a variety of counter-movements that attempt to challenge these standards, these counter-movements underscore the prominence of these standards within present-day Western culture.

The issue of image in opera also receives significant attention in non-academic publications and forums. Specific articles and publications will be discussed in more detail in the second chapter, as these articles are part of the body of proof that demonstrates opera's image focus. There are several music-focused magazines that include articles discussing the issue, including but not limited to *Opera News* and *Classical Singer*, as well as occasional discussion in music education journals. Non-music-centric publications also discuss the issue with some frequency in editorials,

²⁰ Debra Umberson and Michael Hughes, "The Impact of Physical Attractiveness on Achievement and Psychological Well-Being." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 50: no. 3 (September 1987): 227-236.

²¹ W. Benoy Joseph, "The Credibility of Physically Attractive Communicators: A Review," *Journal of Advertising* 11: no. 3 (1982): 15-24.

features, and reviews. The issue is also discussed in a variety of forums on the Internet, including but not limited to blog posts and question-and-answer forums. Articles found in magazines and Internet forums, though often written by experts in music, performance, and medical fields, generally neither cite other studies or articles on the issue, nor do they include much beyond anecdotal evidence. However, *Classical Singer* contributor Michelle Latour compiled surveys regarding image issues among singers, the results of which she discussed over the course of a four part series, “Does Size Matter?,” in the magazine in 2011.²² It is my hope that other scholars will explore image issues not only in opera, but also as they impact other genres of Western classical music.

Trends in the Western Entertainment Industry that Contribute to Opera’s Image

Focus

Present-day opera productions are in direct competition for ticket sales and audiences with musical theater, television, movies, and other music genres, and have been struggling to attract and maintain audiences. Beginning in the mid-twentieth century, opera professionals began to express concern that opera was no longer attracting the audiences it once had.²³ A variety of suggestions were made as to why this was

²² Michele Latour, “Does Size Matter?,” *Classical Singer* October 2011, November 2011, January 2012, and March 2012 issues (complete citations in bibliography).

²³ For example, Kenneth Wright’s article “Television and Opera” in the Autumn 1956 issue of *Tempo*. *Daedalus*’s Fall 1986 issue was entitled “The Future of Opera” and was devoted to the issue. Additionally, Norman Platt’s article “Future for Opera? Singing in the Dark? Norman Platt on the Opera Problem” in *The Musical Times*, Vol. 135, No. 1815 (May, 1994), pp. 279-281.

happening, including but not limited to opera being perceived as “elitist and boring,” lack of quality productions, lack of quality singers, lack of funding, and lack of education among the audience.²⁴ Opera companies continue to struggle with both financial matters and attracting audiences. Some have attributed this to current-day audiences being different than previous generations of opera audiences, though others have argued that opera still speaks to audiences in the same way. Current-day audiences primarily differ from previous audiences in their differing definitions of vocal beauty and their visual expectations of performers.

Within the Western entertainment industry, image plays a crucial role. The appearance of actors and popular musicians is highly scrutinized both when they are performing and when they are not. Tabloids and celebrity magazines report on suspected weight gain and loss, plastic surgery, acne, clothing, accessories, and other facets of an entertainer’s image. Often, fitting within accepted beauty standards is a prerequisite for success within the entertainment industry, sometimes to the extent that talent becomes secondary. However, there are exceptions to these beauty standards. These include older performers who achieved success while they were younger, overweight actors and musicians, and others who are not considered conventionally attractive. Within dramatic art forms like television, movies, and theater, non-attractive but talented individuals are often relegated to character roles, and even when they are cast in leading roles, their physical “flaws” are often discussed within the course of the drama.

²⁴ David Harewood, “The Future of Opera,” *Daedalus* 115: no. 4 (Fall, 1986): 17.

As opera coach Steven Blier has observed, present-day audiences are accustomed to and relate better to the visually realistic portrayal of characters in movies and television.²⁵ For example, if a plot calls for a blond, tan, physically fit man in his twenties, audiences expect an actor who looks blond, physically fit, and in his twenties. Further, as scholar Kenneth A. Wright has noted, it is commonly believed that current-day audiences will react negatively to actors who do not look the part.²⁶ There is much anecdotal evidence that supports this theory. For example in 2012, Suzanne Collins' commercially successful young adult book *The Hunger Games* was adapted to a movie with actress Jennifer Lawrence in the leading role of Katniss. Fans of the book initially reacted negatively to Lawrence using a variety of forums, including social media and by commenting on articles announcing the casting. They felt she was "too old, too blonde, too pale, too pretty to do the gritty warrior girl justice."²⁷

Lawrence ultimately received critical and popular acclaim for her portrayal, but this was a risk for the production team, who maintained throughout that they had made the right casting decision. Lawrence dyed her hair brown for the role, and critics felt her acting skills helped her carry the role off, but many reviews still felt she was not skinny enough to portray the character, who was close to starvation for much of the book. This type of reaction demonstrates a potential reaction of fans when casting does not meet

²⁵ Blier, 15.

²⁶ Kenneth A. Wright, "Television and Opera," *Tempo* New Series: 45 (Autumn 1957): 10.

²⁷ EW Staff, "This Week's Cover: First look at Jennifer Lawrence as Katniss in 'The Hunger Games' – EXCLUSIVE," <http://popwatch.ew.com/2011/05/18/the-hunger-games-jennifer-lawrence-first-look-exclusive/> (accessed January 15, 2012).

their expectations. Though this reaction does not seem to have had a major impact on the success of this particular adaptation, reactions like this could potentially cause a production to fail.

Similar types of image-related pressure exist on popular musicians.²⁸ Though this pressure is usually not related to the visual interpretation of a character, many genres of popular music have some sort of visual expectation of performers within that genre. These expectations may be limited to expectations of dress, but can also include other facets of image, including hair, makeup, and even in some cases race. In more mainstream genres of popular music, performers may also be expected to fit within present-day standards of beauty. Non-conventionally attractive performers who are considered exceptionally talented, particularly in less pop-oriented genres, can find mainstream success. However, they often face scrutiny for their appearance, sometimes to the point that over the course of their career they work to fit within standard beauty norms.

An example of a popular music star striving to fit within standard beauty norms is Adele, a commercially successful pop singer who was overweight at the start of her career and was criticized for her weight by fashion designer Karl Lagerfeld. Responding in *People* magazine to the criticism, she said:

“I’ve never wanted to look like models on the cover of magazines. I represent the majority of women and I’m very proud of that. I’d lose weight if I was an actress and had to play a role where you’re supposed to be 40 pounds lighter, but weight has nothing to do with my career. Even when I was signing [a contract], most of

²⁸ For the purposes of this thesis, the term “popular musicians” will encompass non-classical forms of music, including but not limited to pop, rock, R&B, etc.

the industry knew if anyone ever dared say [lose weight] to me, they wouldn't be working with me.”²⁹

However, at the time of this writing, Adele is actively working to lose weight. Though she has cited both her recent vocal surgery and health as the reason for this change, it is interesting to note that this will likely ultimately cause her physique to be closer to the accepted beauty norms that she had initially spoken against.

The form of popular entertainment that combines the image standards for both actors and popular musicians is musical theater, a genre that combines dramatic and vocal talent. In this way, musical theater is similar to opera. However, musical theater is in many ways more accessible to mainstream American audiences than opera. Musical theater within the United States is almost exclusively performed in English, and given the relative newness of the art form as well as the frequency of successful new works the subject matter is often more contemporary. Within musical theater a singer's physical image is extremely important, even beginning at the collegiate level. I witnessed one university program in which all the performers are taken for what is essentially a makeover before they are allowed to perform for agents and casting directors. I also witnessed a woman who wanted to be in that program audition unsuccessfully several times, and who only was admitted to the program after losing weight and changing her hair and dress.

For those who sing in musical theater, this type of pressure continues into their professional careers. Audition postings for musicals are extremely specific in listing the

²⁹ Jocelyn Vena, “Adele Addresses Her Weight, Karl Lagerfeld Apologizes,” *MTV.com*, <http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1678832/adele-weight-karl-lagerfeld.jhtml> (accessed April 11, 2012).

desired physical traits for the characters. For example, below is the list of characters and their descriptions in a recent audition posting for Colorado's Arvada Center's production of *Legally Blonde*.³⁰ In addition to providing basic information like gender and voice part, the casting panel lists specific physical characteristics for many of the characters, including age range and even more specific qualifications such as asking for a "Caucasian...blonde...pretty-face[d]" lead. Clearly, a vocally appropriate individual would not be cast unless they fit these characteristics as well.

ARVADA CENTER – LEGALLY BLONDE Character Breakdown:

- Elle Woods– Female, to play early 20's, Caucasian. The quintessential California blonde who follows her ex-boyfriend to Harvard Law School and realizes that she has more to offer than just a pretty face and a bubbly personality. Gb2-G5 (Soprano belt).
- Brooke Wyndam – Female, to play late 20's - early 30's. An exercise video star who is also a former sorority girl. Must be in top physical condition. A3-G5 (Alto/Soprano).
- Emmett Forrest– Male, to play mid-late 20's. A smart and sensitive law student who takes Elle under his wing. B2-E5 (Alto).
- Enid– Female, to play 20's. A mousy, intellectual law student. G3-G5 (Soprano belt).
- Margot– Female, to play early 20's, Caucasian. A pretty and funny California sorority girl. G#3-F5 (Soprano belt).
- Paulette – Female, to play early –mid 20's. A brash and funny hair stylist who is friends with Elle and longs to find a man for herself. A3-A5 (Soprano belt).
- Pilar– Female, to play early 20's non- Caucasian. A pretty and funny California sorority girl. G#3-F5 (Soprano belt).
- Professor Callahan– Male, to play 40's - 50's. A pompous and manipulative law professor at Harvard. A2-F#4 (Baritone).
- Serena– Female, to play early 20's, Caucasian. A pretty and funny California sorority girl. G#3-F5 (Soprano belt)
- Vivienne Kensington– Female, to play early – mid 20's. A smart and savvy Harvard law student who initially dismisses Elle, but grows to be her friend. A3-F5 (Soprano belt)

³⁰ "Arvada Center-*Legally Blonde* Character Breakdown," *The Arvada Center Announces Auditions for the musical, Legally Blonde, Colorado Theatre Guild*, <http://www.coloradotheatreguild.org/default.asp> (accessed March 21, 2012).

- Warner Huntington III– Male, to play early 20’s. A good-looking, but pompous guy who breaks Elle’s heart. Eb3-Ab4 (Tenor)
- Elle’s dad – Male. Elle’s rich golfer father. D3-E#4 (Baritone)
- Elle’s Mom– Female. Elle’s socialite, country-clubbing mother. C4-E5 (Alto).
- Kyle– Male, to play 30’s - 40’s. A great looking, in shape employee for UPS, Self-assured and not the brightest bulb.
- Leilani– Female. B3-Eb5 (Alto).
- Manager– Female. G3-C5 (Alto).

Often, this type of specific character description is related to creating visually authentic representations of the characters. In the case of *Legally Blonde*, much of the drama is centered on the character’s looks. Elle in particular is blonde and pretty, which is supposed to be in contrast to the “mousy” woman her boyfriend leaves her for. Brooke is a fitness instructor, and consequently needs to be physically fit. Based on the character descriptions, the director also seems to feel there also needs to be a visible distinction between the older and younger characters. Casting with this type of physical specificity in mind allows the production team to enhance the drama through visual means. It is important to note that an actor’s actual physical traits, particularly his or her age, is less important than what he or she looks like onstage. Conceivably, a brunette woman in her forties could still play Elle if she dyed her hair and looked younger onstage. This production of *Legally Blonde* further demonstrates how production teams must cater to present-day audiences’ preconceived physical depictions of characters. Before *Legally Blonde* became a musical, it was a commercially successful movie starring Reese Witherspoon in the leading role. Producers of the musical likely rely on fans of the movie as their main audience.

In contrast, opera has historically cast based upon voice type and quality, rather than on physical traits. One striking example is a 1989 Met production of Wagner's *Die Walküre*. Black soprano Jessye Norman and White heldentenor Gary Lake portray twins Sieglinde and Siegmund. Another example is the title character in Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*, a young Asian girl, who is often portrayed by older, white singers. However, recent casting has shifted to more closely follow the realism-oriented casting practices typical of television, film, and theater. Covent Garden recently premiered a production of an opera based on the life of American socialite Anna Nicole Smith, who was famous for her voluptuous figure. They cast singer Eva-Maria Westbroek, whose figure is similar to Smith's (see Figures 1 and 2). As Blier notes, casting directors seem to be casting based on the belief that audiences want singers who "honor roles visually as well as vocally."³¹

Figure 1.
Photo of Anna Nicole Smith³²



³¹ Blier, 14.

³² "Archive for the Anna Nicole Smith Category," *PerezHilton.com*, <http://perez Hilton.com/category/anna-nicole-smith/page/2/#.T4-CjIH3Ab0> (accessed March 1, 2012).

Figure 2.
Photo of Eva-Maria Westbroek as Anna Nicole Smith³³



³³ “Seen and Heard UK Opera Review: Turnage, Anna Nicole,” *Seen and Heard*, <http://www.musicweb-international.com/SandH/2011/Jan-Jun11/turnage1702.htm> , (accessed March 1, 2012).

In addition to their expectation of visually realistic character portrayal in dramatic genres and physical attractive performers in both dramatic and popular music, present-day Western society has many different interpretations of vocal beauty. Operatic productions combine many different art forms, but a major component of opera has been the use of beautiful operatic voices. Though writing styles for the voice have varied throughout opera's history (showcasing different vocal qualities in different historical periods), the root of opera has been to showcase voices that are considered beautiful. Operatic voices should have a similar sounding tone throughout their range, have a free, non-forced vibrato (slight variation of pitch resulting from the free oscillation of the vocal cords), and be powerful enough to be heard over a full orchestra (the size of which can vary). Skilled operatic singers also know how to modify languages so that they can both be understood as well as sung beautifully. Opera singers also work out their breathing so that phrases make musical and dramatic sense and are fully supported throughout.

Mezzo-soprano Elina Garanca's performance of the aria "Una Voce Poco Fa," from Rossini's *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* nicely demonstrates these desired vocal qualities. The particular performance I analyzed is available on YouTube.³⁴ Garanca's performance shows an even tone throughout the wide range of the aria. Her vibrato sounds free and unmanufactured. Each note within the aria is clearly audible, which can be particularly difficult within the melismatic sections towards the end of the aria. The

³⁴ Elina Garanca, "Una Voce Poco Fa," *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, Youtube video, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=od368OEUZ_8. (accessed March 3, 2012). It should be noted that Garanca has several commercial recordings of this aria as well. However, in order to make a better comparison to Jenkins' performance later in this paper, I am analyzing a video of her performance available on youtube.

text is also clearly understandable. This is assisted by Rossini's writing, where text is sung in an easy-to-understand range before being repeated in higher tessituras. This performance exemplifies what many consider to be beautiful operatic singing.

In contrast, most non-operatic singers sound quite different, whether they are performing pop, rock, musical theater, or jazz. These voices are often evaluated by different qualifications than classically trained voices, but in order to draw comparisons with operatic voices, I will analyze popular voices within classical parameters. One of the major differences is amplification. The majority of non-operatic vocal genres use amplification technology in order to ensure the singer is heard, allowing for less powerful voices to become successful within these genres. Vibrato is also less frequently used, and the use of straight-tone is more common. Evenness of tone is not required, and often non-operatic singers use a breathier, less supported sound in their higher range. Scratchiness, or hoarseness, is acceptable and even desirable within many genres outside of opera and clear enunciation of the text is not as important within non-operatic styles. Many non-operatic singers do not pronounce final consonants, and often add sounds into words such as a "chu" sound between words like "don't you," creating the word "donchu." It is also important to note that many commercial recordings of non-operatic voices utilize autotune technology to correct vocal flaws and tuning. Though a hotly debated technology, it is widely used. Some performers even use an auto-tuned pre-recorded track in live performances.

Though flawed by classical standards, current-day audiences react positively to popular vocal performances and often describe these types of voices as beautiful, such as

popular singer Adele's. Her vocal qualities can be analyzed in her live performance of her hit "Someone Like You" at the iTunes 2011 Festival.³⁵ Overall, her voice has a bit of a raw quality and sounds somewhat scratchy at times, such as in her opening phrase beginning at :31. Her use of vibrato is somewhat inconsistent. She performs almost exclusively with a microphone. Her voice is also much richer in her lower range, and in the higher range there is an almost forced belt sound, and then in the extremes of her high range it becomes almost breathy. Using operatic standards her diction would be considered somewhat sloppy, such as at :40 when she says "thatchu" instead of "that you." Her final consonants are also sometimes difficult to hear, such as in the phrase "married now" at 00:46. It is difficult to hear the final "d" in married. Although by classical standards one can find many flaws, Adele is an incredibly popular present-day singer and her fans love her voice. The comments posted to the video of this performance on Youtube attest to this, such as commenter Wunderbarlife's statement, "Adele you're so beautiful just the way you are, don't ever change!! you are such an amazing singer."³⁶ Though listeners who prefer classically trained voices might not enjoy Adele's performances, for many popular music fans, voices like Adele's are considered beautiful.

Further complicating the issue of vocal beauty in operatic versus non-operatic voices is the genre of "popera." Popera, which originated in the latter half of the twentieth century, is a genre in which classical-sounding voices sing classical-sounding

³⁵ Adele, "Someone Like You," iTunes Festival 2011, Youtube video, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ew-9r_6MABg&feature=related (accessed March 4, 2012)

³⁶ Adele youtube video comments.

repertoire. However, unlike opera singers, who primarily perform opera roles and art songs from a variety of time periods, many popera performers perform primarily recently-written songs in Italian that have some orchestration, though they do perform some operatic arias and art songs. Further, many popera singers have not performed in fully-staged operatic productions. Vocally, popera singers more closely resemble non-operatic singers than opera singers. Popera singers almost exclusively perform with a microphone. Though they use vibrato, the use of vibrato is intermittent. Vocal quality tends to be inconsistent throughout their range. Their diction is also not always as accurate as that of a classical singer.

As of this writing, popera singer Katherine Jenkins is very popular, with a large following of fans who enjoy her original songs and performances of opera arias. Differences between popera and opera voices can be found by contrasting her recording of “Una Voce Poco Fa” with the previously analyzed Garanca recording. In this televised performance from the Classical Brit Awards from 2009, Jenkins is amplified through the use of a microphone.³⁷ Her lower range sounds incredibly dark and uses a very wide vibrato, as seen in the opening portion of the recording, whereas her upper range sounds thin, unsupported and uses no vibrato, as heard in the melismatic passages at 2:50. Her melismas also lack accuracy, and she often skips entire melodic passages altogether, as exemplified at 2:48, when she skips many of the notes in the descending melismas, heard in their entirety at 2:25 of the Garnaca recording. She sounds like she is out of air at the end of her phrases, which all cut off abruptly. The highest note in the

³⁷ Katherine Jenkins, “Una Voce Poco Fa,” Youtube video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BWmNdGQCITo>, (accessed March 3, 2012).

piece, at 4:14, sounds shrill and forced. She is also flat throughout much of the recording. However, though again flawed by classical standards, this type of singing is incredibly popular, as evidenced by the commercial success of Jenkins and other singers in the genre.

The differing definitions of vocal beauty among present-day audiences can make it difficult for opera companies to attract audiences simply on the vocal talent of singers. This in combination with the visual expectations of the popular art forms opera is in competition with has helped to create an environment where opera could and has become more focused on the physical image of singers.

Conclusion

Existing scholarship in both music and non-musical fields suggests that there is a link between a person's physical appearance and the reception of his or her performance. This is supported within present-day Western entertainment, where a performer's image can directly impact audience reception. The link between image and audience reception, when combined with shifting and expanding definitions of vocal beauty within present-day Western society, have led to an environment that supports opera's emphasis on the physical as well as vocal characteristics of singers. In the next chapter, I examine changes within the opera world that also have supported a focus on singers' images.

CHAPTER TWO: EVIDENCE OF IMAGE'S IMPORTANCE IN PRESENT-DAY

OPERA

Given that opera, like all music, exists within a broader society, cultural factors like the emphasis on physical image in present-day entertainment genres and changing definitions of vocal beauty will, as my research demonstrates, impact musical performance and reception. The cultural shifts outlined in the previous chapter have created an environment that contributes to the image focus within present-day opera. However, factors within the present-day opera community also contribute to this focus. In this chapter, I explore changes within the present-day opera scene and I provide evidence from within the opera community to support my assertion that image has become an integral part of present-day opera. I also discuss the types of educational and performance experiences where opera singers encounter image-related pressure.

Though some opera outsiders have reacted to opera's image emphasis with surprise and disapproval, it is interesting to note that historically the industry has not been entirely image-blind. Opera has its roots in the Baroque period. Metastasio, one of the primary librettists of the period, expressed in his writings a preference for attractive singers.³⁸ In the Romantic period, Verdi reportedly blamed the initial poor reception of *La Traviata* on the physical appearance of the soprano who first performed the role of

³⁸ Pietro Metastasio, "Metastasio's Letter to Hasse October 20, 1749," in Patrick Smith's *The Tenth Muse: The Historical Study of the Opera Libretto* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1970), 403.

Violetta, Fanny Salvini-Donatelli. He felt that she was too overweight and too old to accurately portray a character who was young and dying of consumption, and felt that the audience reacted negatively to this.³⁹ In the twentieth century, soprano Maria Callas also received criticism regarding her weight at the start of her career.⁴⁰ However, though these and other exceptions occur throughout opera's history, until relatively recently opera has largely tended to ignore the physical appearance of singers provided they possess an adequate voice. Singers who possessed a desirable voice could be cast regardless of their weight, age, race, or any other factors of their physical appearance.

An increase in film and broadcast operatic productions and a decrease in the acceptance of previous physical size stereotypes of opera singers have contributed to the heightened image-pressure in present-day opera. The most common stereotype of an opera singer is a white, overweight woman in a Viking helmet. Though some associate this visual with Wagner, as his costumes frequently included these types of helmets, many associate this visual with all opera singers.⁴¹ This stems from the long held belief that singing opera requires one to be overweight. Many singers I encountered in my fieldwork who were not overweight reported that others were surprised they were pursuing opera given their size. Some members of the opera community and opera

³⁹ "Inside the Production: The Contemporary Nature of *La Traviata*," *Pacific Opera Victoria*, <http://pov.bc.ca/trav-prod.html> (accessed April 13, 2012).

⁴⁰ Emily Stephenson, "Does The Voice Matter: An Exploration of Maria Callas's Fame" (paper for History of Opera Graduate Seminar, Winter 2010).

⁴¹ Wagner costumed many of his main characters in winged and horned helmets, which present-day audiences have assumed are Viking helmets. Additionally, as previously stated Wagnerian operas require some of the largest voices, which due to misconceptions about the link between vocal and physical size can result in the use of casting overweight singers.

outsiders believe that the act of opera singing requires singers to consume excess calories.⁴² Some also believe proper resonance necessitates excess weight, or that fat is needed around the vocal mechanism in order to allow it to function.⁴³ Generally, there is an assumption that the larger the voice, the larger a person has to be.⁴⁴ Descriptions of some fachs often include physical specifications for these voices, such as singer Tiana Malone's indication that soubrettes, the smallest soprano voice, should have a "delicate physical appearance" or her indication that Wagnerian singers, often the largest voices, are also often the "largest.... in physical size."⁴⁵ Despite the persistence of such descriptions, the mythology of vocal size being related to physical size has been scientifically proven to be unfounded.⁴⁶

In addition to the disproval of the myth that big voices require big bodies, many present-day singers are actively disproving this myth by staying within a limited weight range while still possessing large vocal instruments. The increase of physically smaller singers who still possess large vocal instruments allows casting directors to consider a

⁴² Stephen Juan, "Why are opera singers fat," *The Register* June 23, 2006, http://www.theregister.co.uk/2006/06/23/the_odd_body_opera_singers/ (accessed February 7, 2011).

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Blier, 14.

⁴⁵ Tiana Malone, "What the Fach? A beginner's guide to the German Fach system," *La Scena Musicale* 16: no. 6 (March 18, 2011), http://www.scena.org/lsm/sm16-6/sm16-6_fach_en.html (accessed April 4, 2012).

⁴⁶ Robert Schmerling, "Do Big Voices Need Big Bodies?" *Plan for Your Health: Harvard Medical School Commentaries: Medical Myths*, <http://www.planforyourhealth.com/living-healthy/harvard-medical-school-commentaries/medical-myths/commentary/Commentary/commentarya/single/show-commentary/do-big-voices-need-big-bodies/> (accessed February 5, 2011).

singer's physical image without compromising vocal talent, which contributes to changing image standards within the opera community. A good example is Annalena Persson, a Wagnerian soprano (see Figure 3). The Wagnerian fachs are considered to be among the largest voice types and according to stereotypes would require the largest singers. However, Persson would not be considered overweight by most standards, and in fact is frequently costumed in ways that showcase her body. As a review of her 2010 performance of the title female in *Tristan und Isolde* stated, "And for once we could watch a singer whose slim, tall figure and beauty made a truly credible Isolde."⁴⁷ Many members of the next generation of great opera singers are also proving that being overweight is not necessary, allowing casting directors to favor physically smaller singers without sacrificing vocal talent.

Even though there are many singers who demonstrate that being overweight is not a prerequisite for opera, as well as no scientific evidence supporting the link, some members of the opera community still believe that being overweight is a requirement for success. I occasionally observed some singers justify eating junk food or large portions because as one soprano told me, "big voices means big girls!"⁴⁸ They seemed to believe that given their chosen profession as well as their fach, they did not have to worry about fitting within any standards for physical image. I heard other singers justify being overweight because they felt that it was appropriate for their career. Although these

⁴⁷ Bernard Jacobson, "Review: Seattle Opera's 'Tristan und Isolde' presented masterfully as an opera of the mind," *The Seattle Times* August 2, 2010, http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/thearts/2012512726_opera03.html?prmid=head_main (accessed February 8, 2011).

⁴⁸ Informal discussion with soprano, fall 2009.

singers echo the long-held belief that physical mass is a necessity to be a great opera singer, this is now a minority viewpoint. It seems that most members of the opera community no longer place a link between physical size and vocal size.

Figure 3.
Annalena Persson in staging rehearsal (Persson is in the forefront of the picture)⁴⁹



Of the singers I interviewed, most felt that there was no link between vocal and physical size. Singer 10 told me “[Physical] size is not indicative of vocal size.”⁵⁰

Further, many singers felt that being overweight could actually negatively impact their

⁴⁹ Rozaryl Lynch, “Photo of Annalena Persson in a staging rehearsal, with Stephen Milling and Margaret Jane Wray,” *Seattle Opera Blog* July 27, 2010, <http://www.seattleoperablog.com/2010/07/education-intern-at-tristan-rehearsal.html> (accessed March 2, 2011).

⁵⁰ Singer 10, interview by author, Denver, CO, Winter 2010.

singing. In addition to feeling that being overweight was not necessary for an operatic voice, Singer 6 felt that being overweight could actually be a hindrance because singing required energy and one needed to be “healthy.”⁵¹ She believed that “health-wise, it is important to not be too obese. If you can’t walk up the stairs, you can’t sing.”⁵² She also believed one needed “energy to embody a character.”⁵³ Singer 9 stated that for a singer, one’s “body is [one’s] tool,” and also felt that “all sizes can make music.”⁵⁴ These singers felt that not only was there no requirement for excess physical mass for opera singers, but that having a healthy body weight was actually beneficial to their singing voice.

Additionally, Singer 4 echoed that all physical sizes could have good voices, and cited his current academic program as evidence.⁵⁵ He too had seen anecdotal evidence indicating that physical size and vocal size did not have a link. Singer 2 stated that overweight opera singers were a “stereotype” that was becoming less true over time.⁵⁶ She went on to say that people were “surprising us,” and proving that physical size was not necessary.⁵⁷ Singer 7 felt that while there were some physical attributes that were

⁵¹ Singer 6, interview by author, Denver, CO, Winter 2010.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Singer 9, interview by author, Denver, CO, Winter 2010.

⁵⁵ Singer 4, interview by the author, Denver, CO, Winter 2010.

⁵⁶ Singer 2, interview by author, Denver, CO, Winter 2011.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

required to be a good singer, they were not as “rigid” as being overweight. She felt there were always exceptions to the stereotype.⁵⁸

In addition to the decreasing prevalence of the fat opera singer stereotype, present-day productions attempt to reach audiences through visual as well as acoustic mediums. There is an increasing focus on a singer’s dramatic abilities and stage movement.⁵⁹ More and more training programs are including acting classes, stage movement workshops, and individual acting coachings as part of their curricula. Current-day stagings are also becoming more active than previous productions, and singers must have the stamina to move onstage as well as sing through the show. There is also an increasing presence of broadcast and film opera productions, which place the audience at a closer vantage point than traditional stage productions. The closer vantage point can also lead to a heightened awareness of a singer’s physical image.

In addition to the vantage point of the audience, film opera has many differences from stage opera.⁶⁰ The genre of film opera has existed since approximately 1915.⁶¹ Two different types of film operas have emerged, those that tape a stage production with little or no modifications, and productions created specifically for the film medium. Within both types of film opera, Italian film productions generally used the same singers for the vocal and visual track, whereas German, British, and American film productions

⁵⁸ Singer 7, interview by author, Denver, CO, Winter 2010.

⁵⁹ Wright, 10.

⁶⁰ Marcia Citron, “A Night at the Opera: Zeffirelli’s *Otello* and the Genre of Film Opera,” *The Musical Quarterly* 78: no. 4 (Winter 1994): 701.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 700.

often used younger, more attractive singers lip-syncing to a vocal track recorded by an older, more experienced singer.⁶² In the mid-twentieth century, there was some hope that film opera would become a popular phenomenon that would help revive older works as well as create a forum for new works.⁶³ Benjamin Britten and Gian Carlo Menotti even composed operas, one and two respectively, specifically for television that were successful when they premiered. However, the genre has never really become a popular form of opera, though as recently as this writing new film opera productions are being created.

More successful than film opera currently are broadcasts of live productions. Peter Gelb, the general manager of the Metropolitan Opera (Met), began broadcasting live telecasts of Met productions in high definition (HD) to movie theaters around the world in 2006.⁶⁴ Because HD cameras create incredibly detailed images, the format created even more visual challenges. When the technology was first introduced, there was concern within the television and movie industry as to how this would magnify physical flaws such as wrinkles or blemishes. These same concerns exist for opera broadcasts. The clarity of HD cameras can create particular challenges when older singers are portraying younger characters. There also has been some criticism that HD broadcasts have skewed Met casting towards more attractive singers who may not be

⁶² Wright, 10.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Alex Ross, "The Critics: Musical Events-House of Style," *The New Yorker* 86: no. 6 (March 29, 2010): 90.

vocally suitable for the roles they portray.⁶⁵ However, as a whole the broadcasts have been well received, and in some locations even sell out.

The issue of image-focus in present-day opera has an increasing presence in print media and online forums. Descriptions of image are now included in discussions and reviews of singers, performances, and productions. There are also increasing discussions and encouragement of singers eating healthy diets and working out, the end result of which can also lead to singers becoming thinner. Further, there are increasing discussions about how a singer's image can directly impact their career. Opera singers encounter the issue beginning in the early stages of their training, and pressure on their image continues throughout their education and career.

Print and Internet media address the issue of image in opera both directly and indirectly. Articles that address the issue directly explicitly make a link between a singer's physical image and their career. Indirect articles discuss topics like healthy lifestyles, exercise, and diet for singers, the end result of which can lead to thinner, more conventionally attractive singers. There are only a few publications that deal specifically with opera. For American opera singers, perhaps the most authoritative publication is *Classical Singer*, which publishes ten issues annually and is primarily marketed to singers. The magazine, a collection of interviews with current singers or other opera professionals, columns in which singers can ask advice from teachers, other singers, doctors, etc, and articles on topics related to singing, has from its first issues in 1988 contained references to physical image in opera. However, beginning in the early twenty-first century the topic became a regular feature. As discussed in the previous

⁶⁵ Ross, 90.

chapter, in late 2011 and early 2012 issues Michelle Latour discussed her findings from a survey she conducted on singers and body image.⁶⁶ This type of article and others like it address the issue of image in opera directly draws an explicit connection between a singer's physical image and their career. The October 2011 issue also includes the article "The End of 'The End of the Great Big American Voice'?" in which contributor Olivia Giovetti examines why there are fewer larger voices in present-day opera.⁶⁷ Critics have often blamed the present-day lack of large voices on the preference for slim singers. This article addresses the issue of image in opera indirectly.

While *Classical Singer* is marketed specifically to singers, the American magazine *Opera News*, marketed primarily to opera aficionados, features a few articles that discuss image in opera directly, such as coach and pianist Steven Blier's "The Fit Lady Sings," from the July 2001 issue.⁶⁸ However, there are significantly more articles that address this issue indirectly. For example, over recent years descriptions of singers have more frequently included discussion of a singer's looks, particularly if that singer is considered physically attractive, like the reviews of soprano Anna Netrebko that frequently describe her as a "Russian beauty."⁶⁹ There have also been more elements of physical image mentioned in its reviews of new productions. In February 2011 critic George Danskar reviewed New Orleans Opera's November 2010 production of *Die*

⁶⁶ Latour "Does Size Matter" series.

⁶⁷ Olivia Giovetti, "The End of 'The End of the Great Big American Voice,'" *Classical Singer* (October 2011): 14-16. Voices are commonly described in terms of size.

⁶⁸ Blier. Coaches work with singers on diction and interpretation.

⁶⁹ David Shengold, "Wild Thing," *Opera News* (November 2003): 20-22, 24.

Zauberflöte and mentioned the “trio of attractive, young singers” playing Tamino, Pamina, and Papageno.⁷⁰ The magazine also occasionally conducts polls of its readers about topics in image. They ran a reader poll after Deborah Voigt’s removal from Covent Garden’s production of *Ariadne* in March 2004.⁷¹ Voigt, who had been slated to play the title role, was allegedly removed for being too overweight to look attractive in the “little black dress” the production called for her character to wear.⁷²

The issue of image-focus in present-day opera also has an increasing Internet presence. Opera blogs like *Operagasm* are becoming more prominent.⁷³ *Operagasm* runs similarly to a magazine, with both regular and guest contributors. Readers can submit comments on each post, which occasionally sparks discussion between commentators. The editors also update the associated Facebook page frequently, and readers can comment on articles via that forum. As with print media, there are articles that deal with the topic of image in opera directly and indirectly. However, again articles that discuss the issue indirectly are more common. For example, a posting on August 23,

⁷⁰ George Danskar, “In Review: North America, *Die Zauberflöte*,” *Opera News*, February 2001.

⁷¹ “READER RESPONSES: Deborah Voigt Royal Opera at Covent Garden The Little Black Dress,” *Opera News*, March 2004, http://www.operanews.com/Opera_News_Magazine/2004/3/Features/READER_RESPONSES_Deborah_VoigtRoyal_Opera_at_Covent_GardenThe_Little_Black_Dress.html (accessed February 2, 2011).

⁷² Catharine Milner, “Royal Opera Sacks Diva Who Was 'too Fat For Dress',” *Telegraph* (London), March 7, 2004. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1456228/Royal-Opera-sacks-diva-who-was-too-fat-for-dress.html> (accessed February 2, 2011).

⁷³ *Operagasm*, <http://www.operagasm.com> (accessed January 16, 2010).

2011 advised singers as to what is appropriate audition and performance attire.⁷⁴ Other articles discuss the best workout techniques for singers. Additionally, on weekends when generally no new articles are posted, the editors post a series called “For your viewing pleasure,” in which they post pictures of attractive opera singers, who are generally male.⁷⁵

Other blogs also attest to the new image-orientation in the opera community. Mezzo-soprano Cynthia Sadler writes a blog entitled *The Next 100 Pounds*, where she writes about her weight loss and maintenance of that loss as well as her career.⁷⁶ Sadler, who began the blog when she was overweight, has been actively working on losing weight and living a “healthier” lifestyle.⁷⁷ During the course of her weight loss and to the time of this writing she blogged about her lifestyle changes and career. Further evidence is the blog *Barihunks.com*.⁷⁸ The site’s mission statement reads, “This site is dedicated to any hunk who sings in the bass/baritone range. Singers must be professional, semi-professional, or serious students with real potential.”⁷⁹ The site features pictures and

⁷⁴ Christie Connelly, “AUDITION ATTIRE: TIPS FOR LOOKING YOUR BEST AT THE BIG AUDITION!,” August 23, 2011, <http://operagasm.com/2011/08/audition-attire-tips-for-looking-your-best-this-audition-season/> (accessed October 10, 2011).

⁷⁵ The predominance of male singers featured in this column is likely due to the entirely straight, female editorial staff and the presumption of a mainly straight female and gay male audience.

⁷⁶ Cynthia Sadler, *The Next Hundred Pounds*, <http://100lbs.typepad.com/> (accessed March 3, 2010).

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ *Barihunks*, <http://barihunks.blogspot.com/> (accessed March 3, 2010).

⁷⁹ Ibid.

videos of singers the editors feel fit this description, as well as some biographical information, recordings and/or upcoming performance details.

Further, the topic of image in current-day opera frequently appears in publications not limited to opera or even classical music. Media outlets like *The New York Times* and CBS to the time of this writing cover Voigt's weight loss and changing image standards in opera.⁸⁰ Sadler's weight loss received similar, though less extensive, news coverage.⁸¹ These mainstream media articles both discuss singers' methods for weight loss and maintenance and examine changing standards in the opera world, presumably to explain to non-opera readers why the stereotype of overweight opera singers is no longer holding true. The issue has also been discussed in non-opera-centric blogs, other publications, and online forums like ask.com.

Many of the singers I interviewed spoke of and image-focus in present-day opera. Singer 9 believed that image was important in present-day opera, and said that for current singers "the skinnier the better."⁸² Singer 8 felt that opera's image standards were moving towards musical theater's standards, which as seen in the *Legally Blonde* example in the first chapter can be very specific.⁸³ Singer 7 felt that opera was becoming somewhat "mass produced," and said that singers now needed to be "pleasant to look at

⁸⁰ One example being Daniel Schorn's "Deborah Voigt: Off the Scales," an article which corresponds with *60 Minutes* segment on the soprano and her gastric bypass in February of 2009. *CBS News*, http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-18560_162-1245332.html (accessed February 4, 2010).

⁸¹ *The New York Times Well Blog* has written several articles and done several video segments on her.

⁸² Singer 9, interview.

⁸³ Singer 8, interview by author, Winter 2010.

and to hear.”⁸⁴ Singer 4 also felt that opera was currently extremely image-focused and felt that for some schools and opera companies, image was more important than others, citing schools he had seen where “the singers look good and sound the same.”⁸⁵

In addition to these formal interviews general observation of singers confirmed this trend. On several occasions, I observed singers discussing how they were adjusting to image standards in opera. The members of one group of singers I observed were all making adjustments to their own personal image by working out and dressing in specific ways.⁸⁶ These singers reported working out for reasons of both health (particularly weight loss and maintenance) and image, as working out tends to help one keep a physique that meets present-day standards of attractiveness. Several singers discussed how they dressed when they were performing, with many indicating they had a specific wardrobe for performances or auditions. Further, many also felt that they needed to be dressed semi-professionally at all times. On several occasions I also observed singers who had lost weight or were losing weight be praised by their colleagues and teachers.

Singers first encounter image-related pressure in their undergraduate training. I did not speak to anyone or observe any singers who encountered image related pressure in operatic training prior to entering college, though several singers indicated encountering image-related pressure in theater or musical theater settings prior to college. Teachers might be hesitant to comment on image to younger singers because opera voices take longer to mature and most opera singers generally experience success later

⁸⁴ Singer 7, interview.

⁸⁵ Singer 4, interview.

⁸⁶ Conversation with several singers, Denver, CO, Fall 2010.

than pop singers or musical theater singers. Further, teachers may be waiting until students have chosen to specialize in specific vocal fields, which generally does not occur until undergraduate programs and can occur even later. However, it should be noted that I did not work with any singers who had operatic success or even much operatic experience prior to entering college. Though operatic voices tend to mature in a singer's mid-twenties or later, it is likely that singers who had opera experiences and/or success prior to entering an undergraduate program would encounter image-related pressure earlier.

Such pressure at the educational level seems to be both targeted and general, and is experienced both publicly and privately. I use the terms "targeted" and "general" to distinguish between feedback about a specific singer (targeted) and general discussion about the topic. General image discussion occurs in class settings like workshops or masterclasses. This can include lectures on appropriate dress for auditions and performances, and general conversation about how one's appearance can influence casting and career opportunities. These topics are being increasingly incorporated into educational experiences for singers, and often lead to targeted discussion. I observed one class where singers were asked to perform for the professor and their classmates in what they considered appropriate audition attire.⁸⁷ The class was then allowed to comment on what the singer had chosen to wear. Comments ranged from discussion of color to whether or not a cut was flattering for that individual. The class also weighed in on whether or not the outfit reflected the character the singer was portraying. For example, mezzos performing "pants roles" were generally encouraged not to wear dresses at

⁸⁷ College voice major workshop, spring 2006.

auditions.⁸⁸ At times, the discussion would then to a broader discussion than the singer's outfit to other facets of their appearance. One singer was advised that her haircut made her look "too young," and she was told to get a shorter haircut to make her appear older.⁸⁹ The singer made changes to her haircut and received positive feedback from both the class and the professor.

Public targeted feedback seems to be increasing, and can be both positive and negative. Those providing feedback comment on whether a particular outfit is flattering or distracting, and sometimes also give comment on about hairstyle and body type. I observed one singer be told that while her performance of an aria was "beautiful...but you'll need to lose some weight if you want to sing the role professionally."⁹⁰ Throughout my fieldwork I also observed several singers be told how nice their performance was because they both looked and sounded like that particular professor's ideal of the character.

Students seem to receive the most targeted, private feedback from their studio teacher.⁹¹ One soprano told me her studio teacher had pulled her aside after a jury to tell her she was "shaped funny" and should either learn to dress better for her shape or lose

⁸⁸ Pants roles are when women portray male characters.

⁸⁹ College Voice Major Workshop, Spring 2006.

⁹⁰ College Voice Major Workshop, Fall 2008.

⁹¹ The majority of college vocal programs include a studio lesson requirement, where a student is placed with a private teacher and takes weekly private lessons.

weight.⁹² Singer 11 was also told by her studio teacher that she should lose weight.⁹³ Targeted feedback from studio teachers is not limited to weight, though many singers reported either being talked to or having friends who were talked to about the subject. Singer 6 felt that several past studio teachers had belittled her because of her height and her age.⁹⁴ Singer 9 reported being approached by her studio teacher about changing her clothing and not wearing her piercings.⁹⁵ Other singers also reported being encouraged to change the way they dressed, how they wore their hair, how they wore makeup (for women), and their facial hair (for men).

Other teachers within a vocal program also may provide targeted feedback. Though this feedback occurs predominantly publicly in classroom settings, occasionally students reported being approached by non-studio teachers privately about their appearance. One student reported that a faculty member would often approach students outside his or her own studio about how they could change their appearance.⁹⁶ Often, students made the changes suggested by the teacher, which ranged from hairstyle to weight loss. The students who reported following this teacher's suggestions found that they were more likely to get cast in school productions and picked for outside performance opportunities. However, they did not necessarily believe that these

⁹² Conversation with soprano, Spring 2010. Essentially, a jury is a short performance for the voice faculty that is graded in place of a written final for studio lessons.

⁹³ Singer 11, interview by author, Denver, CO, Fall 2010.

⁹⁴ Singer 6, interview.

⁹⁵ Singer 9, interview.

⁹⁶ Conversation with several singers, Fall 2010.

increased opportunities were entirely related to their new image. Some students believed that this was due to their demonstrating to the faculty that they were more serious about their opera career and thus worthy of additional singing opportunities. Others felt that changes to their image also coincided with positive vocal changes. Though these other factors may also have been at work, it seems likely their image played at least a minor role in these increased opportunities.

Though the above pressures are increasing, pressure on singers at the educational level is arguably less than at later points in a singer's career. Many schools choose to not make image a major focus of their program, as evidenced by their casting. One production I witnessed had cast several overweight singers as their romantic leads, which is becoming rare in professional productions. Racially-specific roles also present casting challenges. Many schools choose to ignore these challenges and instead cast vocally appropriate singers in these roles regardless of their race. I attended one production of *The Magic Flute* where white singers were cast as Monastatos, who is specifically described as being a Moor. Some schools choose to not discuss issues of image other than appropriate audition attire. This can be for several reasons, including a belief that at the educational level all talented singers should be given opportunities or because this type of feedback can be problematic for younger singers to process appropriately. Teachers at one institution I observed emphasized to their singers that overweight singers no longer had a place in the present-day opera community. In response to this pressure, several singers developed eating disorders. However, even with consequences as drastic as this, image pressure on young singers is increasing.

Singers in the early stages of their career also experience image-related pressure while participating in competitions. Competitions exist at a variety of levels, and through connections made at competitions singers can find employment and other opportunities.⁹⁷ Generally, as singers become more established they participate in fewer competitions. According to journalist Roberta Hershenson, “judges deny being influenced by any other factors other than voice, potential, and achievement level, but a singer’s excessive weight or annoying mannerisms are sure to be distracting.”⁹⁸ Many singers even report seeing commentary about their image on the comment sheets provided by judges at many competitions. One mezzo-soprano I spoke with sang for a panel of judges, all three of which commented on how distracting her outfit was. Interestingly, she did not advance to the next round, though I was unable to determine what, if any, role her outfit played in her ranking. Another singer reported seeing on one comment sheet that the judge would have preferred if her dress had completely covered her knees.⁹⁹ Some competitions, like the Met National Council Auditions, even provide makeovers for their finalists that include coaching on dress and hairstyle.¹⁰⁰

Competitions seem to focus less on a singer’s physical attributes and more on how they present themselves. Judges are less willing to discuss how a singer’s physical attributes impact their judging. While there were numerous anecdotal accounts of how a

⁹⁷ Roberta Hershenson, “A Singer’s Diary: Judging the Competition,” *Opera News* 64: no. 8 (February 2000): 17.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Conversation with several singers, Spring 2009.

¹⁰⁰ Hershenson, 16.

singer's dress, hairstyle, or piercings had in some way impacted a singer's performance in a competition, and many singers reported having judges comment on these facets of their appearance on their comment sheets, I could not find any evidence that judgment of singers' physical bodies impacted competitions. In the competitions I observed, physical size did not seem to impact the rankings, as singers with a range of body types and weights were named as winners. However, those who advanced to the finals were all appropriately dressed. In fact, I observed a higher percentage of overweight singers in competition final rounds than in performances. This suggests that while there is some image pressure on singers in competitions, the pressure is not as intense here as in other areas of career preparation.

Throughout one's career, a singer's peers can also place enormous pressure on a singer to modify his or her image. I observed one group of student singers where dieting and dress had become almost a competition. There is a stereotype in conservatories and music schools that one can easily identify voice majors because they are always dressed up and wearing makeup, in contrast to the other students, whose dress is typically quite casual in comparison. In my observation, this stereotype generally held true. Singers would encourage each other to dress up by commenting on how great someone looked when they did and asking if everything was "okay" if they did not. Singers would work out and diet in groups as well. Often, singers in groups ate healthier foods than when they were by themselves. A music student working as a waiter told me about a singer who regularly came to the restaurant. The singer ate salads when she was at the restaurant with her opera friends, but a pizza when she was by herself. Weight loss,

particularly if one is or was somewhat overweight, is commented on and praised by both peers and teachers. Dieting and working out can be a group activity in many social groups, but it is noteworthy that in a music school these activities do not seem to be as integral to the social structure outside of the voice department.

Singers' marketing packages include highly visual elements, including promotional photographs and websites. The importance of these elements has contributed to an increased image-related pressure. Singers start to prepare these promotional materials in their undergraduate training. They often purchase headshots, which are photos from their shoulders up, and other promotional photos including headshots and full body shots. The value placed on these photos by the opera community also contributes to the pressure on an individual singer to maintain a particular image. One opera program I observed provided resources for students to receive coaching on their hair, makeup, and dress prior to getting their photos taken. These photos allow audition panels to decide if a singer fits their visual interpretation of the role. Given that many auditions now require singers to disclose their height and weight, some singers are including this information on their headshot as well.

As singers leave the academic setting and enter the professional world, there are a variety of educational and performance opportunities that are designed to help bridge the gap to the professional world, and in these contexts like at the university level, image is becoming an increasing part of singers' training. Young artist programs (YAPs) are one of the most common steps between graduate training and professional career. YAPs, which often operate under an established opera house, auditions and accepts singers they

believe have a future as an opera singer and provide them with additional training and performance opportunities. In these programs, like at the university level, image is becoming an increasing part of the training. Singers at the prestigious YAP affiliated with Chicago Lyric Opera are expected to eat a “proper diet” and work out regularly.¹⁰¹ Other performance opportunities designed to help take a singer into the professional world also incorporate a singer’s image. The organization Opera on Tap, which has been establishing chapters throughout the US, presents singers performing opera arias, ensembles, and occasionally full productions in bars in an attempt to broaden opera’s audience. In its marketing materials, there is frequent focus on the sex appeal of both opera plots and opera singers.¹⁰²

Singers advancing in their career increasingly participate in fully staged productions, which also leads to increasing exposure to image standards. While singers at the academic level participate in some productions, as previously stated academic casting standards are less stringent than professional productions. As they move into semi-professional and professional productions, the pool of singers auditioning is larger and it is easier to find a vocally suitable singer who also fits a production team’s visual expectations for a role. This aspect of present-day opera will be discussed in more detail in the fourth chapter of this thesis.

Sometimes image-related pressure comes after the casting process is complete. In 2010, soprano Daniela Dessi was cast as the title character in Franco Zeffirelli’s production of *La Traviata*. Zeffirelli allegedly felt Dessi was too old and too fat to

¹⁰¹ William Murray, *Fortissimo* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2005), 29.

¹⁰² Opera on Tap, <http://www.operaontap.org/colorado/> (accessed February 7, 2011).

accurately portray the role and commented on her age and weight throughout the rehearsal process in front of the other cast and crew members, privately, and to the press.¹⁰³ Dessi ultimately quit the production, threatening legal action against the well-known director. In response to Dessi's reaction, Zeffirelli stated that he wanted his *Traviata* to be "an opera for young people with young people."¹⁰⁴ He also offered her a different role that he felt was more age appropriate role, which she declined. Prior to this incident, Zeffirelli had asked soprano Katia Ricciarelli, who was cast as Desdemona in his film production of *Otello*, to lose weight and stay out of the sun so she would be paler and thinner.¹⁰⁵ While Zeffirelli may be more outspoken than some, more directors now seem to feel that they may comment on the appearance of their singers and how it relates to the characters they play.

Costuming also puts image-related pressure on singers. The Voigt incident, where Voigt was allegedly removed from a production because the production team did not feel she would look good in the costumes, demonstrated that the costuming of a production can allow the production team to cast singers that they feel will look best in those costumes. Even singers who are considered attractive may feel this pressure from the production team, knowing that they are going to be costumed a specific way. Baritone Nathan Gunn is frequently costumed to go shirtless and soprano Natalie Dessay is

¹⁰³ This feedback is almost identical to the feedback the original Violetta received.

¹⁰⁴ Nick Pisa, "It's not over till... singer quits opera after Zeffirelli calls her a 'fat lady'," *Daily Mail Online* (January 10, 2010), <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1241649/Singer-Daniela-Dessi-quits-opera-Franco-Zeffirelli-calls-fat-lady.html> (accessed January 9, 2011).

¹⁰⁵ Citron, 702.

frequently costumed in form-fitting, sleeveless attire. I met one baritone who was preparing for a production that would require him to take his shirt off. Though he was not overweight, he was working out in order to appear more physically fit onstage.

The opera audience also seems to expect that physical image will be considered in casting. When asked specifically, many operagoers I spoke with felt that a singer's image should not matter if he or she had a good voice. However, in casual conversation many seemed to prefer singers who looked the part they were playing, or who at least were attractive. I talked to a woman who had attended a production of *Madame Butterfly* where the title role was double cast. She and those who she attended with hoped that the younger, skinnier soprano would be performing on the night they saw it. Instead, the older, overweight soprano took the stage. She said it was "comical" to watch the older, overweight woman portray someone described as a beautiful teenager.¹⁰⁶ Other audience members I spoke with had similar stories. Most seemed to find it comical when non-conventionally attractive singers were cast in romantic leads, and further did not like when romantic couples were not matched physically. Audiences seem to prefer singers who are attractive, and many seem to prefer singers who visually fit their expectations for the role.

As we have seen, opera singers are now encountering image pressure from their teachers, peers, media, audiences, casting panels, and production staff. Though there are disagreements on the extent to which image can impact a singer's career, in today's opera climate it is difficult to claim a singer's image has no bearing on their professional career.

¹⁰⁶ Conversation with piano player, Fall 2011.

In the next chapter, I will explore the different ways singers are adapting and reacting to this trend.

CHAPTER THREE: HOW SINGERS ARE REACTING

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, image-related pressure exists on singers throughout their careers. In my research I encountered that many aspiring singers who were not aware of opera's focus on image until entering undergraduate study or later in their careers. As such, they had not worked to develop their image in the same way they worked on their technique and repertoire.¹⁰⁷ In working to further their careers, singers I interviewed had to focus on their image in ways they might not have anticipated, such as preparing a wardrobe specifically for auditions and maintaining a specific weight. Generally, the various facets of image divide into two broad categories: changeable and non-changeable. Changeable facets include things like dress, persona, hair and presumably weight. Non-changeable facets include one's height, race, and age. In this chapter I explore how singers are reacting physically and emotionally to pressure to alter or maintain their image.

It is interesting to note that for image facets that are changeable, women experience more image-related pressure than men. In my fieldwork, I spoke with more women than men who had received direct comments on their weight, hair, and other facets of their image than men. That being said, there are arguably more aspects of women's image that can be changed and one finds more differing standards for women

¹⁰⁷ As previously stated, the singers I worked with did not try to pursue an opera career prior to the undergraduate level.

than for men. For example, while men typically keep their hair short, women are expected to have short or long hair depending on their fach and the types of roles they perform, which will be discussed later in this chapter. Dress expectations also change for women depending on the roles they are performing or auditioning for. Women also are expected to wear some form of makeup for auditions or recitals, while men are generally only expected to wear makeup for a fully staged performance. Many male and female singers I spoke with acknowledged the different types of image-related pressure experienced by each gender. However, many felt that men were beginning to experience the increased pressure women reported experiencing.

Singers doing crossover work in musical theater or other more popular genres were more accustomed to maintaining a specific image. This is likely due to the already intensive pressure on physical image within these fields, as discussed in my first chapter. When asked if he felt that image was important in opera right now, Singer 8, who did both musical theater and opera work, responded that “in musical theater, image is more important. Musical theater leads are getting more attractive.”¹⁰⁸ Musical theater performers I spoke with also seemed more accustomed to their look dictating which parts they sang. I spoke with one Black mezzo, primarily a musical theater singer, who only performed music sung by black characters in her auditions.¹⁰⁹ Singer 8 considered

¹⁰⁸ Singer 8, interview.

¹⁰⁹ Informal discussion with mezzo-soprano by the author.

himself a bigger guy, which he was comfortable with as he noted that, “for supporting and character roles, you can be a bigger guy.”¹¹⁰

One of the primary changeable facets the present-day opera community has focused on is how a singer dresses. Singers follow a specific dress code for auditions and recitals, and many also dress up for casual occasions. The Denver Lyric Opera Guild has a compilation of many of these dress standards included in their audition hints.¹¹¹ For women, this generally includes wearing a dress or skirt. The only occasion where it is generally accepted for women to wear pants is if they are portraying “pants roles.” With skirts and dresses, the hemline should be at least at the knee, and more conservative singers and audition panels express a preference for hems below the knee. There seems to be a preference for higher cut shirts and blouses, presumably so minimal cleavage is showing. Looser fits are also generally preferred, because tighter fits allow audiences and audition panels to see one’s breathing. Semi-formal or formal attire is preferred over casual attire for both genders. Men are expected to at least wear dress pants and a collared shirt; most expect men to wear a tie and some even expect a full suit. For both genders, darker colors and small patterns or no pattern is preferred.¹¹² These standards create a dress code that overall ensures that a singer’s clothing does not distract from his or her performance.

¹¹⁰ Singer 8, interview.

¹¹¹ Denver Lyric Opera Guild, “Audition Hints,” <http://denverlyricoperaguild.org/competition/audition-hints> (accessed February 2, 2011).

¹¹² Ibid.

These dress standards become more or less rigid depending on the situation, but most singers try to adhere to these standards in most performance settings, including classes, recitals, auditions, and masterclasses. It should be noted that there is generally a difference in how a singer dresses for auditions and educational settings versus how they dress for recitals. Recital attire is usually more formal, with men wearing suits or tuxes and women wearing formal dresses. Recital attire for men and women can be flashier than audition attire. For recitals it is more acceptable for brighter colors, more jewelry, and/or more revealing clothing.

Some singers express frustration at these standards and some openly do not adhere to them, but audition panels tend to prefer singers who dress this way. There are anecdotes of outstanding singers who were so vocally talented they won auditions or competitions regardless of how they presented themselves, but in my fieldwork I saw no examples of singers who had not adhered to these dress standards winning auditions or competitions. Based on this research, dressing appropriately seems to be just as important as a singer singing well, and singers who do not adhere to these standards often receive verbal or written comments from both their peers and other opera professionals.

It is rare to see singers dressed casually for performances. In one program I observed, singers who dressed casually for weekly performance classes were often reprimanded by faculty. Other students also would comment both to the offending student and informally to one another about how inappropriate the singer in question had been dressed. For more prestigious performances, one would almost never see a singer dressed casually. And when singers are dressed casually, there is often some sort of

indication to the audience as to why. At Opera on Tap Colorado, for example, the singers often perform in jeans and other casual attire. When the organizers address the audience, they explain that the purpose of Opera on Tap is to change perceptions of opera and its singers. To further emphasize how casual the occasion is, audience members and the performers are encouraged to buy drinks at the bar and no programs are passed out to the audience.

Another changeable facet is haircut and color and for men, facial hair. Singers keep their hair in very specific ways. Generally, women are encouraged by the opera community to wear their hair longer, unless they are primarily performing pants roles, at which point shorter haircuts may be encouraged. Regardless of length, hair should be kept out of their faces so that one can see their facial expressions. In academic settings teachers often advise younger students to pin their bangs away from their face or avoid bangs entirely, as hair in one's face can create shadows and hide facial expression, which are important to conveying the dramatic intentions of an aria. While these choices may seem minor, many singers even choose specific hairstyles depending on their fach. In casual conversations I often heard female singers say things like, "oh, I'd love short hair, but I'm a soprano!" Shorter hair is usually more acceptable for mezzo-sopranos given the number of male roles they can portray. Men keep their hair on the shorter side, presumably to maintain a length more acceptable for their gender. Men also make conscious decisions about their facial hair, depending on the role they are auditioning for or portraying. Being clean-shaven gives the perception that a singer is younger, whereas facial hair can indicate age or in some cases poverty. Singer 8 told me the choice to

shave or not shave was almost entirely contingent upon what role he was playing.¹¹³

Both genders tend to keep their hair in natural colors, though many are willing to dye their hair for a specific role or show.

Singers keep the rest of their appearance relatively conservative. While tattoos and piercings, though not the norm, are somewhat common among other classical musicians, opera singers tend to avoid them. Singers who do have tattoos or non-ear piercings almost always have some way of hiding or minimizing them for auditions and professional settings. I met many singers whose tattoos were small, and could be easily covered with makeup. I also met many singers who had tattoos were in areas that are not generally exposed, particularly in wearing conservative audition attire. For singers with piercings, they either remove the piercings or use clear rings.

Makeup can be an important tool depending on the venue of a performance or audition, as sometimes lighting can wash out one's features and make facial expressions difficult to read. Female singers generally wear conservative makeup for auditions and performances. Female singers often use makeup to help emphasize their eyes, cheeks, and lips. However, this makeup is usually in specific colors and applied in certain ways. Singers often avoid lining the inside of their eyes because it can make their eyes appear smaller. Singers also seem to avoid very bright or very dark colors. While makeup can be an enhancement, it can also be a distraction, and many singers are weary of anything that would distract an audience from their performance. Men generally only use makeup when in a staged production, but I did meet a few men who used foundation during auditions and other performances to hide blemishes.

¹¹³ Singer 8, interview.

As previously discussed, many singers discuss non-physical aspects of their image like their persona when discussing how their personal image impacts their operatic career. Singers also work to project a specific persona when they are auditioning or performing. The ideal persona seems to be confident and professional. Singer 6 wanted “to appear professional and like the picture of preparedness. I want to look like I put effort into my appearance and don’t want to look like I just rolled out of bed.”¹¹⁴ She strove never to appear sloppy, and always dressed nicely even if she was not performing or auditioning. While her clothing choices related to changeable facets of her image, it is somewhat difficult to describe exactly how one appears professional and prepared. Singer 5’s ideal persona was to appear “healthy, confident, and professional. [I want to look] pretty, appealing, and appropriate. I am trying not to look too young and to be taken seriously.”¹¹⁵ It is interesting that while an appearance of youth is incorporated into standards of conventional attractiveness, Singer 5 indicated that being too young could also be a detriment. Singer 3 wanted to appear “put together and modest.”¹¹⁶ In addition to appearing professional and confident, Singer 2 also wanted to appear versatile.¹¹⁷ She felt that by having presenting herself “neutrally,” an audition panel

¹¹⁴ Singer 6, interview.

¹¹⁵ Singer 5, interview by author, Denver, CO, Winter 2010.

¹¹⁶ Singer 3, interview by author, Denver, CO, Winter 2011.

¹¹⁷ Singer 2, interview by author, Denver, CO, Winter 2011.

could see her in multiple roles, increasing the likelihood of getting cast. Singer 1 also expressed wanting to appear confident.¹¹⁸

Singers attempted to create their ideal persona in a variety of ways. Many teachers advise students to practice both how they walk into an audition and how they introduce themselves to a panel.¹¹⁹ Walking too quickly, speaking too quietly or quickly, and making certain facial expressions can alert an audience or panel that the singer is nervous. Singers practiced walking slowly and also practiced walking lightly so as to not “stomp” when they walked into an audition.¹²⁰ They practiced speaking slowly and loudly. Singers also tried to smile when they walked into a panel and project that they were comfortable and happy to be there. It was not uncommon for the expression “fake it” to be used when students expressed how nervous they were. Though interviewees found it was difficult to describe how one achieves most of these qualities, I observed a definite consensus when a singer would perfect their walk or verbal introduction.

A facet of image that is both changeable and non-changeable is a person’s size, which includes both their weight as well as their physical build. Individuals have limited to no control over their actual frame, meaning that no matter what one weighs, they may have a petite, average, or large build. Interestingly, I met no singers who were concerned about their physical build. Some women with smaller frames briefly mentioned that being petite was helpful for their fach, but concerns were generally limited to singers’

¹¹⁸ Singer 1, interview by the author, Denver, CO, Winter, 2011.

¹¹⁹ Generally singers introduce themselves and what they will be singing at the start of an audition or competition.

¹²⁰ Collegiate Voice Performance Seminar. Fall 2007.

weight. While for many non-singers, discussing one's weight can be uncomfortable, singers appear to be becoming more open to both discussing weight's role in opera as well as giving and receiving feedback on weight. Most singers that I observed were actively working on maintaining their current weight or losing weight. It is interesting to note, however, that while many singers I spoke to were working out or eating a specific diet, they reported that these lifestyle modifications were not solely or even primarily motivated by weight loss or maintenance. Many singers said they felt their bodies were their instruments, and taking care of their bodies resulted in optimal singing. There was also a desire for optimal health so that one had the stamina and athleticism required of many opera staging.

I spoke with one baritone who had been overweight in college and had been advised by a teacher that he would need to lose weight if he wanted a career. He began working out regularly and eating a healthier diet, and consequently lost weight. When we last spoke, he was working on maintaining his current weight. Another soprano I spoke with had similar experiences in college. Singers whose voices were in fachs that have typically focused less on image were also aware of their physical size and its relative impact on their career. Singer 8 was less concerned because "tenors can be bigger guys." Given that tenors are often the hardest voice types to cast, Singer 8 was aware that he could be a desirable casting choice regardless of his size. He also stated that supporting characters could be "bigger" as well.¹²¹ This supports the idea that for non-romantic roles, image is less important.

¹²¹ Singer 8, interview.

Other singers spoke of maintaining their weight. Singer 11 reported that she was actively working on maintaining a smaller size, as did Singer 10.¹²² While these singers were not necessarily concerned with weight loss, they were aware that their smaller physical size was a desirable asset within their field. Singer 7 was “not currently concerned about my body image because I’m lucky right now,” but was also aware that her smaller size was desirable.¹²³ Other singers were also aware that their current body type was desirable. Singer 6 worked out regularly, but was naturally thin. She had observed in costume fittings that some costume departments preferred fitting smaller girls.¹²⁴ In her most recent costume fitting, the woman costuming her had expressed relief that she was not as large as the previous singers the woman had worked with. Singer 5 also worked out regularly. She was concerned about her health and maintaining a healthy weight, but also noted that working out allowed for better stamina. She also acknowledged that it was helpful for her opera career stating “everyone is looking at you.”¹²⁵ Singer 4 stated that, “many opera singers struggle with their weight. A lot of them make excuses. Your body does change as you get older. I don’t want to be fat, but I don’t want to be a body builder. I also want to be healthy.”¹²⁶ Singer 2 was also

¹²² Singers 10, interview; Singer 11, interview.

¹²³ Singer 7, interview.

¹²⁴ Singer 6, interview.

¹²⁵ Singer 5, interview.

¹²⁶ Singer 4, interview.

working on maintaining her physical image and felt it was important to work out and eat healthily.¹²⁷ Singer 1 also was working out, and cited wanting to be healthy.¹²⁸

Singers I spoke with in casual conversations also discussed their weight both as a facet of their overall health and as important to their opera career. I met many singers who were willing to openly discuss their weight loss and/or what they were doing to maintain their current weight. Generally, singers appear to be actively working out in some way, and making healthy eating choices. There is also much discussion about how to work out and eat healthily while traveling for one's career. Many suggested that part of the weight issue in opera could be attributed to the somewhat nomadic lifestyle of an opera singer. This issue is discussed in online forums and articles suggesting ways in which opera professionals can maintain a healthy lifestyle while traveling. Overall, weight loss or maintenance was not an individual decision. Most of these singers said that someone, whether it be a teacher, coach, or mentor, had suggested that losing weight would be beneficial to their career.

Professional singers also report losing weight or maintaining weight for their opera careers. American soprano Renee Fleming lost weight at the beginning of her career at the suggestion of her management.¹²⁹ Other prominent singers have also lost weight or maintained a specific size, such as Voigt and Sadler's previously mentioned weight loss. Singers address not wanting to gain weight in interviews. As with aspiring

¹²⁷ Singer 2, interview.

¹²⁸ Singer 1, interview.

¹²⁹ Renee Fleming, *The Inner Voice: The Making of a Singer*, (London: Viking, 2004), 198.

singers, prominent singers attribute this to wanting to be healthy and have the stamina for present-day stagings as well as to looking attractive onstage.

Another facet of image that is generally unchangeable is a singer's age, about which many singers expressed concerns. Though one can alter how old one appears somewhat through makeup and surgery, surgery is not a good option for singers given how it can impede facial expression and movement. Makeup can only alter one's age slightly. Singers were concerned about age at both ends of the spectrum. As previously discussed, Singer 7 was concerned about appearing too young to be taken seriously and dressed herself to appear older and more mature.¹³⁰ Many younger singers expressed concern that being too young could negatively impact them because their youth could imply vocal immaturity and inexperience. Conversely, other singers were concerned about appearing too old. Singer 6 had been told by teachers and coaches that she was "too old" to begin an opera career.¹³¹ This seemed to be a somewhat common concern, and many singers seemed to try to begin careers in their twenties. Many competitions and young artists programs, generally geared at singers beginning their careers, have an age cutoff. The oldest cutoff I found was 36, and most competitions and YAP's have age cutoffs at around age 30. This prevents older singers from using these types of opportunities to further their careers. The expectation seems to be that singers who will be successful have begun their careers in their twenties. Singers who begin their training later than this are often directly questioned about their plans. I met one woman in her late 30's who was getting her undergraduate degree so she could teach, though she did have

¹³⁰ Singer 7, interview.

¹³¹ Singer 6, interview.

some aspirations of performing. She acknowledged that beginning an opera career would be more difficult for her given her age.

Older singers also face difficulty when they portray characters that are described as younger, particularly in operas that require larger-voiced fachs. As the Dessi/Zerferelli incident demonstrated, older singers can face intense scrutiny when cast as younger characters. The Met's HD Broadcasts also present challenges regarding age. A 2009 broadcast of Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier* featured Christine Schäfer in the ingénue role of Sophie. Particularly under the clarity of the HD cameras, Schäfer looked significantly older than Fleming, who was cast as the middle-aged Marschellin. These specific incidents highlight challenges faced by older singers when they are cast in younger roles. While they may be vocally appropriate for the roles, in the present-day opera world there seems to be a preference for singers who look the appropriate age, leading older singers to be cast as older characters.

Another non-changeable facet of image is a singer's race. Though opera has historically been dominated by white singers, opera is becoming increasingly more racially diverse. Race can be a complex issue in opera because several operas, including *Otello*, *Carmen*, *Madama Butterfly* and *Die Zauberflöte*, include characters whose race is specifically designated and/or racially driven conflicts central to the plot. It should be noted that my fieldwork was performed with mainly white singers. The only non-white singer I interviewed formally identified as being of Indian descent. She expressed some concerns about how her race could impact casting, and worried she might not be cast in any role that was part of a family unless the other singers cast in the family had similar

skin tones. She was also concerned that she may not be considered for other roles based on her skin tone.

White singers rarely express similar concerns about the impact of their race on casting. In fact, as previously demonstrated it is fairly common for white singers to be cast in non-white roles. This can sometimes result in re-working of the original show. In an academic production of *Die Zauberflöte*, for example, some of the dialogue and supertitles were actually altered to downplay the racial slurs present in the score. More often, however, when white singers are cast in non-white roles they are put in hair and makeup to make them appear to be the race of the character they are portraying. Dark eyeliner and dark makeup is often used when white singers are portraying Asian characters, such as the characters in *The Mikado* or *Madame Butterfly*. An extreme example of using makeup to change the race of a white singer was a 1989 Met production of *Aida*. White soprano Aprile Mollo played the title character, who is described as being “dark-skinned.” She was put in makeup that almost resembled blackface, and appeared to have a much darker skin tone in the production than her normal color (compare Figures 4 and 5).

Figure 4, Aprille Millo



Figure 5

Millo as Aida¹³²



¹³²Millo as Aida,
http://www.muzon.com/index.php?mact=mutube&title=Criminal+Minds+02+Apr+2012&title2=Aprile+Millo%3A+Verdi+-+Aida%2C+'Ritorna+vincitor!'+&v=2IqcKoOXXq8&feature=youtube_gdata_player.
(accessed April 6, 2012).

I have not found any examples of non-white singers being made up to appear to be a different race. I also observed several concerts and productions where black singers consciously pick repertoire based on the race of the character who sings it. Further, while singers wanted to be given equal opportunity to perform all roles regardless of the character's race, some non-white singers seemed to want preference when it came to casting roles for which they were the character's race.

Another facet of image that is virtually unchangeable is a singer's height. While height can be altered somewhat with shoes, many singers avoid heels above 2-3" because of how they alter one's posture, and some avoid heels altogether. In general, women are concerned about being too tall, while men are concerned about being too short. Singer 6, who said she was 5'11 ½", was concerned about being cast as a romantic lead because most men cast in leading roles were generally shorter, and she thought it "looked bad onstage."¹³³ She felt her height would lead her to be cast in non-romantic roles or as matronly characters. Other female singers expressed similar concerns. Women were also concerned about being too short, however, because their short stature could also prevent them from being cast in romantic roles. I met one soprano who felt that her height made her look more like someone's child rather than someone's love interest onstage, and felt that that might hinder her opportunities. Men were less open in expressing concerns about their height, but several commented that it was awkward when they were cast in a romantic role opposite a woman much taller than themselves.

Most singers I spoke to stated that they were willing to make at least minor changes to their appearance for their opera career, primarily discussing temporary

¹³³ Singer 6, interview.

changes to hair. Singer 10 had dyed her hair red to portray Anne of Green Gables, and was willing to make other minor, non-permanent changes.¹³⁴ Other singers were also willing to make minor, non-permanent changes. Singer 8 was willing to make minor changes for a role, but wanted to know how the change would further the drama and did not want to make any permanent changes.¹³⁵ Singers 7, 1, and 6 were both also willing to make minor changes, but would not do anything “drastic.”¹³⁶ Drastic changes seemed to include things like tattoos, piercings, and extreme physical changes. However, Singer 6 did note that she might be willing to make drastic changes if she was offered additional money. Singer 5 agreed that she would not make any “drastic” changes, such as a tattoo, but would be willing to consider minor changes if she agreed with the change.¹³⁷ For her, it was important to trust her judgment. The motivation for making physical changes was important for many singers. Singer 8 felt that it would be important for any minor changes in appearance to be related to the character.¹³⁸ Other singers stressed that changes to their appearance would probably be contingent upon whether or not they agreed with the suggested change, and whether the change was for a specific role or to further their career.

Though most singers made minor changes, some singers made drastic changes to enhance their opera career. One tenor I spoke with had concerns about facial hair making

¹³⁴ Singer 10, interview.

¹³⁵ Singer 8, interview.

¹³⁶ Singer 7, 1, and 6, interviews.

¹³⁷ Singer 5, interview.

¹³⁸ Singer 8, interview.

him appear older, and opted to have his facial hair permanently removed via laser. Voigt opted for weight loss surgery, which carries more risks than traditional weight loss via diet and exercise. Another singer had overhauled her appearance, changing her mode of dress and public personality drastically in order to appear more compatible with the opera community. While extreme changes are not the norm, they are increasing as image-related pressure increases. In my next chapter I will explore how the pressure on singers' images and their reactions to this pressure is impacting singers, their careers, and the opera community.

CHAPTER FOUR: IMPACTS ON SINGERS AND THE OPERA COMMUNITY

In the previous chapters, I provided evidence to support that a singer's physical image now plays a prominent role in his or her career and also demonstrated that the majority of opera singers are aware of new image standards and are actively conforming to them. While vocal talent alone can allow a singer some initial success, particularly in the academic and competition circuit, to succeed past this level and achieve an opera career, singers now must have both vocal talent and a physical appearance that is acceptable within these new standards. In this chapter, I will explore the impact this focus on a singer's physical image has on individual singers as well as the larger opera community.

Many operatic characters have at least a minimal description of their appearance, whether that description is found within the characters' dialogue or if one has been included in notes with the score. Some of these descriptions are even implied, such as a character's age being implied by his or her relationship to other characters or their race being implied by the geographic region of the opera. Many of these descriptions are quite vague, such as the chorus in the first act describing as the title character in Puccini's opera *Turandot* as "la bella Turandot," meaning "the beautiful Turandot."¹³⁹ It is quite common for romantic leads to be described as physically attractive.

¹³⁹ Giacomo Puccini, *Turandot*, (Milan: Casi Ricordi, 1926), 35.

In addition to cues within the works themselves about how the characters should look, production teams may have their own interpretation of how specific characters should look, or how specific characters will be costumed. Voigt's firing from Covent Garden, for example, was not just because she was overweight, but because they felt she would not look good in the black dress they wanted her character to wear. Further, casting panels may be considering how singers will look as a group onstage. I saw one set of callbacks for an undergraduate level production where there they were casting a group of children and their teacher. The production team had the singers called back for these roles perform in a variety of configurations, and also had the singers stand in specific arrangements. This was likely to both hear how the different singers sounded together as well as see how they looked together onstage. Ultimately, the three singers who looked the youngest and were the shortest were cast as children, while two singers who were taller and looked older were double-cast in the role of the teacher. Similar considerations are likely made for singers who are being considered to be cast in a group of characters that are family, or to see how romantic couples look together.

Though the preference now seems to be for singers who suit the roles visually as well as vocally, this is easier to do within some fachs than others. As Blier notes, it is easier to cast based on visual standards among lighter, lyric voices, particularly those common to Mozart and modern opera roles.¹⁴⁰ This is likely due to both the abundance of these voice types, as well as the age of many of the singers in these fachs. The lighter, lyric voices are arguably the most common within opera. Therefore, casting panels auditioning these roles presumably have many vocally qualified singers at their disposal,

¹⁴⁰ Blier, 16.

and can afford to make decisions based on physical as well as vocal qualities. These voice types are even more common among younger singers. While some singers maintain a lighter voice throughout their career, many singers experience vocal changes as they age that result in moving to larger-voiced fachs. In a singer's vocal education, it is common for singers to be told to put larger-voiced repertoire away for several years until their voices grow into it. These singers perform lighter-voiced roles until their voices are appropriate for other roles. Consequently, audition panels looking cast lighter-voiced roles have both singers who are actually these fachs and those temporarily in these fachs to cast from. As there are proportionately more younger singers within the lighter fachs, and many of the present-day standards of beauty are related to youth, casting panels have better odds that they will find a vocally suitable singer for a lighter fach who also fits their desired look for the character.

In contrast, larger voices are less common. Singers who possess larger voices often reach their vocal prime later than lighter voice types, leading to proportionately more older singers in these fachs. Given the fewer singers within these fachs as well as the older average age of these singers, casting panels may not be able to find vocally appropriate singers who also possess their desired physical characteristics. Consequently, in harder to cast repertoire, a singer's image seems to matter less.¹⁴¹ For example in romantic and early twentieth century works, which tend to require larger voices, larger singers still remain somewhat acceptable.¹⁴² While there are some singers within the larger fachs who would also be considered conventionally attractive, in many instances

¹⁴¹ Blier, 16.

¹⁴² Ibid, 15.

casting panels may be forced to compromise either their visual or vocal expectations while casting.

As stated previously, many audition panels ask singers to provide head shots and divulge their height and weight. Though some have indicated that this information is to assist in costuming a production, it is hard to deny that this information also has the potential to be used to assist panels in casting singers that fit their visual conceptualization of the role. Some opera auditions are now even asking for singers that fit specific physical characterizations. The SoBe Institute of the Arts in Miami Beach, Florida, recently posted an audition announcement for the role of Ophelia in a new production of *Hamlet*. They only wanted to hear singers younger than 34, who were between 5'4"-5'9," and under 140 pounds. Audition notices with this type of specificity are becoming more common. As seen in the second chapter, image-based casting is occurring beginning at the undergraduate level and continues into a singer's professional career.

Additionally, teachers and coaches are attempting to predict what roles a singer may perform later in his or her career based on a singer's physical appearance, and they are choosing repertoire based on these assumptions.¹⁴³ In the course of my fieldwork, I was told about several overweight singers who were being guided to sing character roles or minor leads even when they were more vocally appropriate for romantic leads. Conversely, conventionally attractive singers were being guided to sing repertoire that they may not be vocally appropriate for based on the assumption that they would be

¹⁴³ Blier, 14.

asked to sing romantic leads based on their appearance. Thus, the vocal education for many singers is now being directly impacted by their appearance.

The focus on image in opera has also impacted how productions and individual singers are marketed. Image is also playing a role in how many singers are marketing themselves. Particularly with the emergence of websites for individual singers, photos have become an increasingly important marketing tool. In addition to headshots, many singers also have a variety of professional photos that they use as part of their marketing packages.¹⁴⁴ These shots often feature the singer in a variety of locations, and include various poses. They also often include both close-ups and full body shots. Interestingly, in non-headshot photos, many singers seem to be more casual and less conservative in their attire than would be acceptable within an audition setting. There are photos of them in formal recital dresses; however, frequently, female singers wear brighter colors, more jewelry, and lower cut tops. Men's full body photos are arguably less "sexy" but often feature more casual attire than would be acceptable within an audition setting.

As Blier has observed, marketing for opera has become an increasingly visual campaign, in which image-driven marketing is used when marketing specific productions and even entire opera companies.¹⁴⁵ Production shots have always been used to market specific productions. However, in recent years, these shots have become more focused on "attractive" images, sometimes to the point of visually downplaying the leading singers in the marketing. English National Opera recently featured overweight soprano Jane Eaglen in a production, but the marketing materials featured a post-weight loss

¹⁴⁴ Madison, William V. "Solo Strategy," *Opera News* 73:7 (January 2009): 28.

¹⁴⁵ Blier, 16.

Maria Callas.¹⁴⁶ The Met HD Series is also marketed this way. Many of the recent seasons have included a variety of prominent singers. However, the most featured singer in many of the marketing materials is soprano Anna Netrebko, who is known for both her vocal and physical beauty, though she was only featured in one production per season.

Some of the Met productions do not even feature the singers themselves in their marketing. In the marketing materials for the 2009-2010's season broadcast of *Aida*, it was more common to see photos and video footage of the dancers, stage, and supernumeraries than it was to see close-ups of the overweight lead singers. The primary marketing poster featured a wide shot of the entire stage with the entire cast visible (see figure 9). In contrast, the poster for the 2008-2009 season broadcast of *Lucia di Lammermoor* featured a close-up shot of Netrebko, who was singing the title role (see figure 10). Marketing practices seem to indicate that it has become an accepted norm to focus on "pretty" singers in such ad campaigns.¹⁴⁷

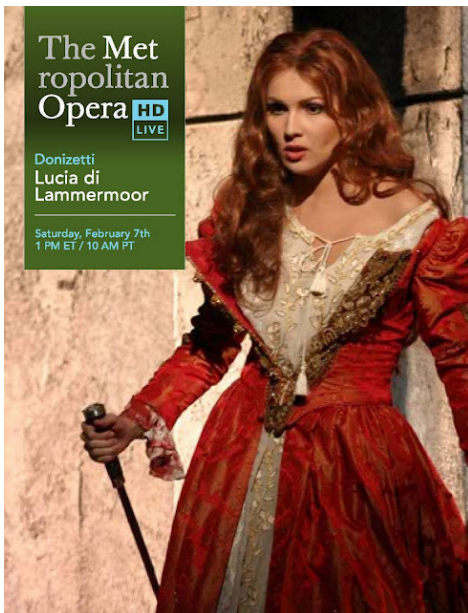
¹⁴⁶ Michael White, "Do sexy opera singers sound the swansong for the fat lady?," *Telegraph* August 17, 2009, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/opera/6041399/Do-sexy-opera-singers-sound-the-swansong-for-the-fat-lady.html> (accessed March 30, 2012).

¹⁴⁷ Blier, 16.

Figure 9¹⁴⁸



Figure 7¹⁴⁹



¹⁴⁸ Advertising Poster of Met Opera's *Aida*, <http://movies.msn.com/movies/movie/the-metropolitan-opera-aida/> (accessed April 7, 2012).

¹⁴⁹ Advertising Poster of Met Opera's *Lucia di Lammermoor*, <http://anna-netrebko.blogspot.com/2008/11/metropolitan-opera-hd-live-lucia-di.html> (accessed April 7, 2012).

A singer's physical image seems to have the most impact on their career when they are auditioning for fully staged productions. As previously stated, in competitions and concert settings, a singer's physical image seems to matter less. As one judge stated "I never had a winner who suffered because of the way they looked or dressed."¹⁵⁰ I observed the performance of an overweight mezzo-soprano who was named one of the Metropolitan Opera Competition Finalists in 2012. Her weight certainly did not impact her performance. Interestingly, though, image can have an impact on singers who are not among the top vocalists in a given competition, even when they are not auditioning for fully staged productions. It almost appeared as though not possessing an adequate voice opened a gateway to receiving criticism on other aspects of one's performance, such as their physical appearance and presentation. Great singers can succeed outside of fully staged operatic productions regardless of their physical image. However, singers who want to succeed specifically in operatic productions seemed to fare better when they fit within present-day conventions of attractiveness and further fared better when they fit what a production team wanted the character to look like. In observing singers leaving the academic level and embarking on professional careers, those who had the highest level of success in winning roles were those who would be considered physically attractive in addition to being vocally talented.

Image-driven casting has many potential negative impacts. However, though image-driven casting and marketing continues to impact many singers as they advance in their careers, some prominent singers have been relatively unaffected. Tenor Placido Domingo has been somewhat overweight and is 71 at the time of this writing. However,

¹⁵⁰ Hershenson, 17.

his weight and age have not inhibited his success and he continues to have a successful performing career. Younger singers soprano Jane Eaglen and tenor Ben Heppner are also overweight, but have also been cast in leading roles in major houses. While these singers continue to be cast in leading roles, reviews and audience reactions to their performances frequently comment on their appearance. One audience member I talked to recalled seeing Ben Heppner in a performance of Wagner's Ring Cycle, and described the audience as being visibly and audibly shocked at Heppner's size. I have not encountered any discussion of Eaglen where her weight is not at least mentioned, if not the focal point. At the time of this writing these singers are still overweight and continue to be cast, though Eaglen is performing less frequently and seems to be focusing more on teaching. Regardless, for these three singers, their image does not seem to have been detrimental to their careers.

In addition to some singer's careers remaining relatively unaffected by present-day image standards in opera, these standards are actually having a positive impact on some singers. Many physically attractive singers who are also vocally strong are applauded for both their looks and their voice. Reviews of Renee Fleming, Natalie Dessay, Anna Netrebko, Juan Diego Florez, and Nathan Gunn, among others, all mention their physical appearance in a positive way. All these singers are also frequently costumed in ways that showcase their physical appearance. For gala performances, Fleming is frequently costumed by high-end fashion designers. Gunn is often shirtless. Both Netrebko and Dessay frequently wear revealing gowns.

Physically attractive singers can also have their image lead to increased exposure and marketing. As previously stated, marketing for productions tends to favor attractive singers, leading to a higher presence of their photos in marketing materials. Sites like *barihunks* and recurring features like Operagasm’s “For your viewing pleasure” allow attractive singers to be featured and promoted more than their less attractive counterparts. This leads to more of the opera-consuming public being familiar with them, and can then lead to demand for their casting. Collaborations with other arts, like the Met’s collaborations with high-end fashion designers, also seem to favor more attractive singers. Being physically attractive can be an advantage that leads to more opportunities for exposure, which can be crucial in trying to establish a career.

Based on my research, singers seem to be reacting in one of three ways to these trends. Some singers react negatively, some positively, and some respond fairly neutrally but still comply with the standards. Some singers expressed frustration that operatic casting was becoming so image-driven. Singer 6 felt that directors had a responsibility to cast on factors beyond a singer’s appearance, and that opera should only be about the music.¹⁵¹ Singer 9 did not agree with the importance of image in present-day operatic performances, and felt “it should be about the music.”¹⁵² Singer 4 expressed a concern that “[the image-focus] can lead to singers without the goods being cast.”¹⁵³ Others had concern about the use of physical image in marketing. Singer 10 felt that it was

¹⁵¹ Singer 6, interview.

¹⁵² Singer 9, interview.

¹⁵³ Singer 4, interview.

“unethical” for singers to use beauty and sexuality to market themselves and said, “it should be about the voice, not the cleavage.”¹⁵⁴

In contrast to these negative reactions, other singers see the positive potential in image-focused marketing and casting. Some singers spoke of the potential to reach audiences through the physical image of singers. Singer 3 felt that “singers want to appeal to the masses, and [the image-focus within present-day opera] is a way to attract audiences who value appearance. It’s a tool to recruit fans.”¹⁵⁵ Singer 2 felt that the image-focus “was a saving factor. People need to see that the stereotypes about fat opera singers are not true. And most of the roles within opera call for a physically appealing singer.”¹⁵⁶ Singer 8 felt that it was “normal for singers to market themselves based on what they looked like. There’s an influence of popular media on how opera is marketed.”¹⁵⁷

Many singers expressed a desire for balance between image and vocal talent. Singer 3 was “fine” with singers using beauty and sexuality in marketing materials, provided there the singer was “talented and taking care of their voice.”¹⁵⁸ Singer 1 felt that using beauty and sexuality in marketing materials,

“helped to reach a broader audience, especially those familiar with popular music, but you have to tread carefully. Image is associated with a character, and how

¹⁵⁴ Singer 10, interview.

¹⁵⁵ Singer 3, interview.

¹⁵⁶ Singer 2, interview.

¹⁵⁷ Singer 8, interview.

¹⁵⁸ Singer 3, interview.

you want to represent a character, but it's important to still have the right voice for that character.”¹⁵⁹

Singer 5 felt “within a certain extent, it's not a problem. It's important to stay classy and not go to far with using sexuality to market yourself.”¹⁶⁰ Singer 6 felt that it was important for singers “to use every tool that we have, whether that's curly hair or red lipstick or whatever, but directors shouldn't cast based on this, it should be about the music.” Most singers did not seem opposed to casting based on image provided vocal talent was of at least equal importance. In fact, as seen in the previous chapter, many singers are willing and/or have already made changes to their image, and therefore are actively supporting this trend.

Interestingly, the group that seemed to be the most opposed to casting and marketing based on physical characteristics seemed to be opera audiences and those with no affiliation with opera whatsoever. In the course of my fieldwork, I met many individuals who had never seen or listened to opera, but felt that it was incredibly unfair for opera singers to be judged based on their appearance in addition to their voice. Many also cited the stereotype that opera singers “had” to be overweight. Many of the opera audience members that I interacted with were also opposed to casting based on physical characteristics. Their concerns were primarily related to the casting of attractive, vocally inappropriate singers over singers who were vocally but not visually suitable for a specific productions interpretation. There are also concerns that the focus on physically attractive singers will cause there to be fewer large voices in the opera field.

¹⁵⁹ Singer 1, interview.

¹⁶⁰ Singer 5, interview.

Opera audiences, professionals, and singers have expressed some concern that extreme physical changes will cause voices to be negatively impacted, particularly by extreme weight loss. Maria Callas is often cited as a cautionary tale. She lost a significant amount of weight, which helped propel her career, but her voice became dramatically worse after this. Some critics also feel that Deborah Voigt's voice is not as good as it was pre-gastric bypass.

In my own analysis of Voigt pre and post-surgery, I did not hear a significant decrease in the quality of her voice. However, it should be noted that it is somewhat difficult to do a comparative analysis of Voigt, particularly given that for any singer the voice may vary from performance to performance. Further, the sound quality of live performances may differ drastically from studio recordings. Further complicating the matter is that Voigt made significantly more commercial recordings prior to her surgery than she did after, and she has not recorded any of the same works pre- and post-surgery. In order to attempt a comparative analysis of her voice pre and post surgery, I listened to several of the available recordings both through Naxos and Youtube. Pre-surgery, Voigt had a large dramatic soprano voice, powerful enough to carry over a Wagnerian-sized orchestra. The voice sounded rich and full throughout her range, with an even, free vibrato. The voice sounds supported throughout. In the recordings that I listened to, I heard many of these similar qualities in her post-weight loss recordings. I actually could not tell a significant difference between Voigt's voice pre and post-weight loss, though there are some subtle changes in the later recordings.

While there are reviewers who feel Voigt's voice has diminished in quality, many critics describe her voice in similar language as used in reviews pre-surgery. Reviews of her pre-surgery performance 2001-2003 performances as the Empress in *Die Frau Ohne Schatten* at the Metropolitan Opera, for example, stated that her voice "gleams brilliantly from bottom to shining top" and also described it as having "unfailingly lustrous tone, endless stamina and fine expressive restraint."¹⁶¹ Reviews of her post-surgery performance of the title character in *Salome* in 2007 spoke of her performance in similar terms. Reviewer Tim Smith stated:

"She sounded radiant, too, her voice confidently riding the orchestral crest and penetrating to the musical heart of the matter. In almost all cases, top notes were not just secure, but gleaming, while intimate moments in the opera inspired beautifully shaded phrasing."¹⁶²

While extreme weight loss does not appear to necessarily cause vocal issues, both Voigt and soprano Indra Thomas have both noted that the weight loss led to changes in vocal technique. Voigt has described vocal adjustments she has had to make to compensate for the lack of mass she had been singing against.¹⁶³ Her previous weight created pressure that her diaphragm had to work against in order to inhale, and after her weight loss that pressure would not be there. Indra Thomas had a less invasive weight loss surgery (sleeve gastrectomy, commonly known as stomach stapling) in 2009, and also reported having to make slight adjustments to her technique. However, neither

¹⁶¹ Robert Levine, *Classics Today*, November 19, 2003; *Financial Times*, Dec 17, 2003.

¹⁶² Baltimore Sun, January 20, 2007 [Tim Smith] Voigt sizzles in a hot 'Salome.'

¹⁶³ David Mermelstein, "A Voice of Silver and Steel," *Wall Street Journal* <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703493504576007342124963856.html> (accessed April 4, 2012).

singer has publicly acknowledged that the surgery had any negative impact on her voice. Thomas even noted a positive change, that she had an easier time singing through her passagio (the place where the vocal register shifts).¹⁶⁴ Both singers reported the surgery having a positive impact on their career. Thomas noted that she felt more comfortable onstage.¹⁶⁵ Voigt has made similar comments, and also noted that she was being cast in more romantic leads, such as Tosca.¹⁶⁶

A singer who loses weight through lifestyle changes rather than surgical means likely has a different experience of how weight loss impacts his or her voice. This is likely related to the length of time one loses weight with surgery as opposed to lifestyle changes. Surgery generally leads to rapid weight loss results, whereas lifestyle changes cause singers to lose weight more gradually. Singers who lose weight gradually would be able to make any necessary technique adjustments over time, whereas singers who lose a significant amount of weight quickly would have to adjust faster. Even though Thomas chose to lose weight via surgery, she also spoke of wanting time for her body to adjust to its new size. She stated,

“Because of what I do for a living, I have to go down very, very slowly, because I have to retrain my body and my muscles to work for me, because that's what I use to sing with. This surgery takes you down slowly. With bypass surgery, people go down very fast. For an opera singer, that could be devastating to your system.”¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁴ John Fleming, “Opera star Indra Thomas, like Deborah Voigt, loses pounds after weight-loss surgery,” *Tampa Bay Times*, March 11, 2012.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Anthony Tommasini, “With Surgery, Soprano Sheds a Brünnhilde Body,” *New York Times*, March 27, 2005.

¹⁶⁷ Fleming, John.

Though my own research suggests that extreme weight loss via surgery does not necessarily negatively impact the voice, these types of concerns remain. Each singer will likely have a different experience. It is also important to remember that a variety of factors can lead to perceived and actual vocal change. Callas, for example, had a voice that was not considered to be of the same caliber as her colleagues, but became famous by capitalizing on the skills she did have, maneuvering into high society, and creating a persona that the public notice. It appears that the public complaints about her voice increased after her weight loss because she became more famous after her weight loss, but there was not necessarily a significant vocal change. In Voigt's case, after her weight loss she began tackling roles that she had not previously performed, and these roles may have highlighted different vocal qualities. It is also important to remember that voices change with age. Further, Wapnick et al's research implies that one's physical appearance may compromise the ability of an audience or reviewer to listen with an objective ear.¹⁶⁸ Given the negative reactions of some critics and audience members to the idea of singers having to conform to any sort of image standards, it may not be possible for some to listen objectively to singers post-weight loss.

Weight loss is perhaps the most dramatic potential change a singer would make for his or her career. While plastic surgery could assist in making a singer appear younger or more conventionally attractive, I did not encounter any singers who had these types of surgical procedures. This is likely due to both financial strains as well as the way surgery to the face and neck could inhibit singing. For example Botox injections, which reduce the appearance of fine lines and wrinkles, create some facial paralysis. Any

¹⁶⁸ Wapnick et al's three previously cited studies.

facial paralysis could hinder singing by both making enunciation difficult and impeding dramatic expression through facial expression.

Given that most singers who have made any sort of significant change to their appearance have not had their voices impacted significantly, as well as the abundance of vocally talented singers who are considered conventionally attractive, my research concludes that the assumption of audiences and critics that opera's image focus will ruin voices or eliminate quality voices seems to be mostly unfounded. However, the image focus has the potential to negatively impact opera, and in some ways already has. Indeed, as discussed previously some singers are being guided to repertoire based on their physical appearance. If this repertoire is not appropriate for their voice, their performance could be subpar, and could even be vocally damaging over time. This trend also can and has led to singers being cast primarily based on their looks, rather than their voice. While they may look good onstage, common complaints about singers that only look the part rather than sound the part include complaints about vocal quality as well as vocal size. Meanwhile, vocally strong singers who do not fit within the new image standards (including those who chose to not conform as well as those who for whatever reason cannot conform) are less able to have a sustainable operatic career. Vocally talented singers are also leaving the opera field because of these image standards. One former music graduate student told me about several graduate students within her program who left the school due to the frequency and severity of comments about their physical image. Other singers have also left the opera field when they were told they needed to make drastic changes to their appearance if they wanted a career.

Even within the pool of talented singers that fit within present-day opera's image standards, realistic casting can still become problematic. Many opera characters, particularly romantic leads, are described as being young, often as young as teenagers. However, particularly in the larger fachs voices can take until a singer is in their mid-thirties or even later to mature. Though a casting panel could likely find an attractive singer to sing the part, it is unlikely that they could find a singer that looked the actual age of the character. It sometimes can be difficult to find a singer who is or looks like the actual race of the character, particularly in roles that call for non-white singers, such as *Aida*, the Japanese characters in *Madame Butterfly*, and the Arabic characters in *Death of Klinghoffer*. Further, as there are increasing new operas being written that are based on current and relatively recent events such as *Nixon in China* and *Anna Nicole Smith*, audiences will likely have a preconceived notion of what characters look like, creating further difficulties in casting.

The new focus on image has the potential to impact the opera community negatively in various ways, including vocal damage from rapid weight loss or inappropriate repertoire and the loss of great voices either due to exclusion based on image standards or singers leaving the field due to these standards. However, there is not enough evidence to conclude that weight loss leads to vocal detriment. There is also not enough evidence to conclude that a majority of singers are being guided to inappropriate repertoire. Further, there remain many talented singers within the opera field, so while some singers are leaving, that does not seem to have created a lack of talent in opera. In

my final chapter, I will draw conclusions, offer areas for future research, and analyze my research methodology and how that may have impacted my findings.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS, AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH, RELATED ETHNOMUSICOLOGICAL WORK, AND REFLECTIONS ON FIELDWORK

Conclusions

Though concerns have been raised about the already occurring and potential consequences of opera's new focus on physical image, it seems likely that this trend will continue. This is largely due to the willingness of singers to fit within new image standards. In addition to a willingness to follow industry dress codes for auditions, recitals, and other performances, my fieldwork indicates that singers are further willing to keep their hair, makeup, and other facets of their presentation within the desired conservative standards. Further, singers are actively maintaining lower weights and formerly overweight singers are striving to lose weight. This has led to an increasing number of singers in all fachs who fit within Western standards of conventional attractiveness, allowing casting panels to choose singers who fit their visual as well as vocal expectations for various roles. The abundance of singers who are willing to adapt to new standards, as well as the growing absence of singers not willing to comply, allows opera to increasingly implement these standards on the casting process.

There also seems to be a positive reaction to productions in which casting is based on vocal and visual qualities. Reviewers do not seem to enjoy when vocal talent is

sacrificed for visual reasons, such as critic Alex Ross's reaction to the casting of Elina Garanca as Carmen at the Met in 2009. Of her performance, he said,

“Although Elina Garanca made for a visually captivating Carmen, seducing the males not only with her figure but with her darting eyes, the grain of her voice—creamy, precise, a touch small, finely projected—was wrong for the part, which needs an edgier, smokier timbre.”¹⁶⁹

While he did not think she was a bad singer, he felt that her voice was not suitable for the role. Other critics have similar reactions when they feel vocal quality has been sacrificed for visual purposes. However, reviewers seem to go out of their way to acknowledge when a production's cast meets their visual and vocal expectations of a role. Much of the post-surgery reviews of Voigt acknowledge her new figure favorably. Reviews of other attractive singers, such as reviews of Persson, Gunn, Dessay, Diego Florez, also speak favorably of their physical image. A review of Voigt in *Salome* in 2006, for example, described her as “Dressed in red wig and flowing gown, she has never looked so lithe and graceful.”¹⁷⁰ This particular review goes on to discuss her “velvety glorious voice, soaring thrillingly at all the key moments.”¹⁷¹

Evidence suggests audiences also react positively to productions in which the roles are cast in visually realistic ways. In addition to Wapnick et al's work that demonstrated that being physically attractive can cause an adjudicator to react more favorably to a performance, anecdotal evidence suggests that audiences prefer when

¹⁶⁹ Ross.

¹⁷⁰ Robert Hilferty, “Deborah Voigt Shimmies, Thrills in ‘Salome’ at Chicago Lyric,” *Bloomberg News* October 23, 2006, <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=aHZ48QuZotbM>, accessed April 4, 2012.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

singers meet visual expectations for the role. Though most audience members I interacted with stressed that they wanted to hear singers with good voices, many also seemed to enjoy a performance more when the singer was presented in a visually realistic way.

As examined in chapter 4, there are some negative consequences of the image-focus that are already occurring, in addition to some potentially negative consequences. These include but are not limited to the exclusion of great operatic voices, the potential negative impact on voices when students are guided to repertoire only based on their physical qualities rather than their vocal qualities, and more dramatic consequences, such as the potential for singers to develop eating disorders while striving to meet opera's new image standards. However, there are potential positive consequences to this new image focus as well. Image-focused casting may help to attract present-day audiences. Present-day audiences seem to enjoy this type of casting, which may increase regular opera attendance. Another positive potential outcome is a decrease in health problems linked with obesity among opera singers. As the trend continues, there will likely be additional positive and negative consequences for the opera community that warrant further study.

Areas for Future Research

As stated in the beginning of this project, Western opera's image focus remains a relatively unstudied area. However, as this trend seems likely to continue, there are a variety of areas that warrant additional study. For example, though science does not

support the link between physical weight and vocal size, and though there are singers who have demonstrated that their voice is not hindered by their physical size, an authoritative study demonstrating whether or not there is any link between physical size and operatic vocal traits has to my knowledge not been undertaken and would be useful. This could be accomplished by studying both the vocal quality and composition of vocal mechanism in singers of different body compositions in the same fachs to see what, if any, links exist.

It would also be valuable to study the actual effects of weight loss on the voice. Though I did not encounter any in my research, it is possible that some singers may have vocal difficulties related to weight loss. However, most singers seem to lose weight without major vocal problems and with only minor adjustments to their technique. It would be useful to the opera community at large to study what actual impacts on the voice occur from weight loss, what other factors alleviate or contribute to the level of impact weight loss can have, and the safest way for opera singers to lose weight without facing major vocal consequences. This could be accomplished by researchers gathering a group of singers who are actively trying to lose weight, preferably a group that is losing weight through different methods. The singers should journal their activities and food intake and their vocal cords should be examined through the use of laryngoscopy several times throughout their weight loss process. This could allow a clearer picture as to what impact, if any, weight loss has on the voice.

It would also be interesting to determine if there are any actual links between vocal size and physical size. The careers of specific singers suggest there is no link

between the two, such as Wagnerian singer Annalena Persson who is physically smaller and still possesses a large instrument. However, there is also anecdotal evidence that demonstrates there may be some link, such as the number of larger singers in larger-voiced fachs. There is currently no definitive answer as to whether or not a link actually exists. An examination of this possible link could be accomplished by studying the larynx and whether there are any actual links to laryngeal structure and physical structure. My hypothesis is that there is no actual link between the two, and the prevalence of larger singers in larger fachs can be attributed to lingering stereotypes, however, it would be useful to have definitive proof of whether or not an actual link exists.

As this trend persists, it would also be important to study whether or not singers are developing eating disorders or experiencing other negative mental health consequences. In other fields where image is emphasized, such as dance and movie and television acting, there is both anecdotal and scientific evidence to suggest that there is a higher prevalence of eating disorders. Further, operatic training begins at the collegiate level, where there is also a statistically higher prevalence of eating disorders. It would be valuable to try to measure and track the prevalence of eating disorders within opera currently. However, it would be difficult to study, as those suffering eating disorders generally do not make them public. Further, this type of study has the potential to negatively contribute to someone's mental health and would need to be undertaken in collaboration with mental health professionals. In addition to academic study of eating disorders within opera, it would be important to educate voice teachers, coaches, and other opera professionals about the warning signs of eating disorders so they can monitor

their students and be aware if any student was developing an eating disorder.

Given that weight is the biggest shift and one of the most easily studied, it seems likely that many future studies will and should focus on weight. However, it would also be valuable to track the experiences of non-white opera singers. The emphasis on realistic casting has the potential to further limit opportunities for minority opera singers, though it may also lead to a call for minority singers in roles that are specifically described as Asian, Black, Arab, etc. Though my fieldwork did not occur in an ethnically diverse community, it would be useful to examine the casting within major opera houses to see when and where minority singers are included. It would be also valuable to examine if the emphasis on realistic casting results in a decrease in white singers cast the roles of characters described as minorities.

Related Ethnomusicological Work

I performed this project as the advisee of an ethnomusicologist, and would consider this work to be ethnomusicological in nature. However, by some of the previous assumptions within ethnomusicology, one could contest that my work does not fit within the discipline. For example, one definition of ethnomusicology defines it as the study of a musical tradition of a cultural other. But, as Bruno Nettl acknowledges in the first chapter of the 2005 updated edition of his book *The Study of Ethnomusicology* (originally published in 1983), it “is difficult to find a single, simple definition, to which most people

in this field would subscribe.”¹⁷² Generally, ethnomusicological work seems to focus on music and its cultural context and include fieldwork. Although my project privileges analysis of cultural issues over musical analysis, musical analysis is necessary in order to explore if and how operatic voices are changing due to this trend, and to analyze vocal trends in present-day culture to attempt to understand present-day conceptions of vocal beauty.

Though much ethnomusicological work has been performed on non-Western traditions, there are important ethnomusicological projects studying Western culture. Perhaps the most famous example is Henry Kingsbury’s ethnography of a Western conservatory, *Of Music, Talent, and Performance: A Conservatory Cultural System*.¹⁷³ In 1988, Kingsbury performed fieldwork in a conservatory and wrote about his observations in language that previously had been reserved for describing non-Western musicians. Nettl also published a book on Western conservatories, *Heartland Excursions*.¹⁷⁴ My project joins the relatively new and small subsection of ethnomusicology beginning to explore cultural issues within Western music. As previously stated, throughout my period of fieldwork my MM studies and my performance activities gave me an insider status within the opera community.

¹⁷² Bruno Nettl, “Defining Ethnomusicology,” *The Study of Ethnomusicology* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 4.

¹⁷³ Henry Kingsbury, *Music, Talent, and Performance: A Conservatory Cultural System* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988).

¹⁷⁴ Nettl, *Heartland Excursions* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1995).

Reflections on Fieldwork

My interest in the topic for this thesis was both personal and practical. In my singing career, my physical image has directly impacted my experiences. At the suggestion of several teachers, prior to my senior year of college I lost a significant amount of weight, changed my hairstyle, and changed how I dressed. During my last year of college, I was cast in more roles than I had in the previous three years of my education combined, and I was also for the first time asked to perform for the college's donors. In my post-collegiate career, I have both won and lost parts based on my appearance. Having observed other singers have similar experiences, I was curious for some time to learn more about the role image plays for present-day singers.

From a practical perspective, I was drawn to this research because it could be performed in a completely accessible community with limited or no travel, important aspects given the financial and time constraints I was facing as I undertook my final project within this degree. My insider status also gave me increased access to the community, as I was already regularly attending rehearsals and participating in performances. Further, it is a cultural norm for singers to observe the rehearsals of other singers both for educational purposes and when one is unable to attend the actual performance. I was able to use my contacts within the community to connect with those who would become informants for my project. It was also advantageous that as a singer I was familiar with cultural norms and vocabulary used within the community.

In her article "Culture Bearer and Tradition Bearer," Mellonee Burnim discusses how her insider status impacted her studies within the Black churches she studied.

Burnim's experiences suggest that one's personal characteristics, such as gender and race, can impact one's fieldwork experience.¹⁷⁵ In Burnim's work, her shared race as well as her understanding of the gospel traditions she was studying granted her insider status even though she was a visitor within the congregation.¹⁷⁶ In my research, my insider status was granted given that I was already actively performing and/or studying with many of my informants. However, like Burnim, in some ways I was also a cultural outsider. In Burnim's case, her religion and role as researcher separated her culturally from the community in which she was working. In my case, my social status among the community lent me outsider status. Particularly in my graduate training, though the majority of my educational experiences were with voice majors, the majority of my friends were non-voice majors. During the early portion of my fieldwork, I rarely socialized with any of the voice majors and knew few of them on a personal level.

Being on the fringe of the social community of opera singers I worked with was somewhat difficult, particularly at the beginning of my fieldwork. While many singers expressed interest in my work, it was difficult to get singers to commit to interviewing with me. In fact, I had 65 singers sign up to do interviews, but only 11 singers actually responded to my request to schedule time to speak with them. I believe that had I been better known and had a higher social status in the beginning of my work, more singers would have set aside the time to interview with me. Initially, I also had difficulty discussing the issue in casual conversation.

¹⁷⁵ Mellonee Burnim, "Culture Bearer and Tradition Bearer: An Ethnomusicologist's Research on Gospel Music," *Ethnomusicology* 29: no. 3 (Autumn 1985): 432-447.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 435.

My social status within the opera community shifted towards the end of my fieldwork, and consequently I had a higher social status and became better known in the community. I believe this was due to me being cast in more academic and community productions. These roles led to increased opportunities to interact with singers and increased respect within the community. Though this shift did not lead to more formal interviews, this led to increasing conversation of the topic in informal settings. I was also asked to write about the issue in the blog *Operagasm*, and many singers who read my article emailed me to discuss their experiences and their opinions and spoke about the topic more freely. My participation in non-academic productions also shifted my social status and increased the contacts with whom I could discuss the issue. While my social status initially hindered the work I could do, ultimately my social status allowed me increased access within the community.

Interestingly, the topic of image in opera often was discussed without my prompting the subject. To this writing, my Facebook friends continue to address the issue in posts. The subject is brought up frequently when singers socialize. The topic is in some ways addressed when non-singers socialize. Many of my non-singer friends frequently comment on singers being dressed up in all situations, or wonder what it would be like for their image to directly impact their career. While I found these discussions fascinating and useful for my research, I did feel awkward at times about documenting my discussions with my friends and colleagues, especially those who were not entirely aware of my project. At times, it felt like there was no real line between my fieldwork and the rest of my life. My closest friends were very aware of my work, and

we often discussed whether some of our interactions would be useful to report in my final project and if they would be comfortable with that. I made every effort to not incorporate anything I was specifically asked not to, and in groups of people I was less familiar with, I felt that I needed to let them know of my research and get permission to use those discussions in my final project.

I found the issue of permission to be somewhat problematic throughout my process. I discussed the project and obtained permission from Professor Kenneth Cox, the voice department chair at the University of Denver, prior to beginning my research, as my work was initially predominantly performed within the DU voice community. My intended project was then submitted and approved through the University of Denver's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB process insured that I had appropriate consent forms for my interviewees, a plan in place for protecting the identities of my subjects, and a plan in place should participation in my study cause anyone to experience mental health issues related to the discussion. Anyone who participated in a formal interview gave verbal consent and signed a consent form. Protecting the identities of my informants remains somewhat problematic, as revealing some necessary demographic information such as gender, voice part, and age range is integral to discussion of this issue. This risk was outlined in the consent form, and explained verbally prior to interviews. I did not encounter any formal interviewees who had concerns about this potential issue. In fact, issues of permission were not problematic with my formally interviewed singers. I also obtained permission when I was observing a non-public rehearsal specifically for the purpose of observing issues of image. Given that it is fairly

common for rehearsals to be observed by singers, opera professionals, and guests, I do not believe my presence at a rehearsal impacted the rehearsal process.

While issues of permission were not problematic when I was in situations explicitly to collect data for my thesis, permission became problematic in other settings. I should emphasize that I do not believe that I behaved unethically at any point during my investigation, nor do I believe I violated the terms of my IRB Protocol. However, my insider status within the community at many points led to unexpected discussion and observation of issues related to my thesis work. Sometimes, this was during participation in my own classes or observation of rehearsals and masterclasses for my vocal education, rather than for my thesis. At other times, the issue came up during discussions with friends and colleagues not initially or intentionally related to my work. If I realized in the moment that this discussion could prove useful to my thesis, I tried to ensure that informal discussions were included in my thesis only if those who participated in the original conversation were notified and were comfortable with its inclusion. However, I am certain that I did not obtain explicit permission to report every informal discussion included in this study.

Further, for my observations of rehearsals and performances, particularly when I was participating in a performance, permission was again problematic. If it was a rehearsal I was participating in, I tried to ensure that everyone was aware of my dual roles as singer and researcher. For performances, though, particularly with the Met broadcasts and other professional performances, I did not obtain permission to report my observations. In fact, I questioned whether permission was necessary. Most

performances, including masterclasses, are open to the public and expect to receive public reviews of some kind. I believe that many of these issues of permission were directly related to my insider status. If I had performed fieldwork in a community where I was not an insider, there would have been a much clearer separation between fieldwork and my social life. I also believe my awareness of my role as an outsider would have led me to be more vigilant about obtaining permission. While I believe all my fieldwork was performed ethically, if I were to undertake this type of study again I would have a more outlined plan for obtaining permission.

In addition to changing my approach for obtaining permission from my informants, I would also change my approach for interviews. While I believe I was able to obtain information about image in opera from a variety of sources, I regret that so few formal interviews were conducted. I was so discouraged by the initial difficulty in scheduling interviews that I stopped trying to schedule them. However, as my social status shifted and I came in contact with more singers, I believe I could have successfully conducted additional formal interviews.

In retrospect, I also would like to have approached my interviews in different ways. The questions I used to conduct my formal interviews can be found in Appendix C. The questions that I asked got singers to discuss the issue, and informed me about their experiences, but they did not lead to any sort of extended response from my informants. I feel that some of my questions were too specific, and somewhat leading, particularly the later questions. In this way, it was helpful to have informal discussions to flesh out my research and see how singers discuss the issue in the “real” world.

These issues with interviews, insider status, and permission aside, overall I feel that my work was a good initial study into the issue of image in present-day opera. I discovered conclusive evidence to show that for present-day singers, their image has a direct impact on their careers; I found that given the attitude of present-day singers about the subject, the trend will likely continue; and I believe that I have also identified several areas for future study, given that this trend may be opera's new reality.

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APPENDIX A
LIST OF FORMALLY INTERVIEWED SINGERS

- Singer 1 Lyric mezzo-soprano. Early 20's. 5 years private study. Currently in latter half of undergraduate training. Has opera chorus, musical theater lead, recital, and choral experience
- Singer 2: Lyric soprano. Early 20's. 5 years private study. Currently in latter half of undergraduate training. Has minor opera roles and choral experience in academic settings, musical theater leads in youth theater.
- Singer 3: Soprano. Late teens. First half of undergraduate training. Roles in youth theater, academic settings, choral and church singing.
- Singer 4: Baritone. Mid 20's. 15 years private study. Latter half of undergraduate training. Roles in academic settings, choral work, pop groups.
- Singer 5: Soprano. Late teens. First half of undergrad. 8 years private study. Roles in academic settings and choral singing.
- Singer 6: Large Lyric Soprano (used to be mezzo¹⁷⁷). Studying 13 years. Graduate training. Performed in professional opera chorus, academic leads, musical theater and choral work.
- Singer 7: Coloratura Soprano. Early 20's. 3 ½ years private study. End of undergraduate training. Roles in academic settings, choral and musical theater work

¹⁷⁷ Fach changes are not uncommon, particularly when young mezzo-sopranos are later moved to larger voiced soprano fachs.

- Singer 8: Tenor. Late Teens. Early part of undergraduate training. Roles and choral work in community theater, minor roles in academic settings, leads in musical theater.
- Singer 9: Mezzo-soprano. Early 20's. 3 ½ years private study. End of undergraduate training. Opera chorus experience in academic settings, choral, jazz, North Indian classical.
- Singer 10: Lyric Soprano. Late teens. First half of undergraduate training. Roles and choral work in academic settings, community theater.
- Singer 11: Light Lyric Soprano. Mid-20's. 10 years private study. End of graduate training. Roles in semi-professional, apprentice, and academic settings.

APPENDIX B LIST OF ALL FACHS¹⁷⁸

Soprano Fachs:

- Lyric Coloratura: Flexible, bright voice capable of florid passages, has extended top register. Roles include Juliette from Gounod's *Romeo et Juliette*, Marie from Donizetti's *La Fille du Regiment*, and Cunegunde from Bernstein's *Candide*.
- Dramatic Coloratura: Rarest voice type. Flexible and powerful with the rich colors of a lyric soprano and the extended upper range and flexibility of a coloratura. Roles include The Queen of the Night from Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, Lucia from Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*, and Violetta from Verdi's *La Traviata*.
- Soubrette: Sweet, younger-sounding voice. Generally plays the ingénue. Roles often require strong actress, coquettish persona, and small physique. Roles include Ännchen from Weber's *Der Freischütz*, Adele from Johann Strauss's *Die Fledermaus*, and Susanna from Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro*.
- Lyric: Rich, full voice with ability to sustain long, lyric passages. Fewer high notes and florid passages than coloraturas. Roles include The Countess from Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro*, Rosalinda from Johann Strauss's *Die Fledermaus*, and Mimì from Puccini's *La Bohème*.
- Spinto: Steel quality with dramatic intensity, voice capable of cutting through large orchestra. Roles include Leonora from Verdi's *Il Trovatore*, Tosca in Puccini's *Tosca*, and Agathe from Weber's *Der Freischütz*.
- Dramatic : large, dynamic voice with big sound, drama, and staying power. Roles include Aida from Verdi's *Aida* and The Marshallin from Richard Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier*.
- Wagnerian: Largest soprano voice type with strong middle and low registers, must be able to carry above large orchestra and sustain long lines. Stereotypes dictate that these singers would be the physically largest. Roles include Brünnhilde from Wagner's *Die Walkyrie*, Isolde from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, and Salome from R. Strauss's *Salome*.

Mezzo-Soprano Fachs

- Lyric: Rich, smooth voice with impeccable legato lines. Requires medium sized voice with limited flexibility, as there are few florid passages. Often physically smaller. Often performs pants roles. Roles

¹⁷⁸ Summarized from Tiana Malone, "What the Fach? A beginner's guide to the German Fach system," *La Scena Musicale* 16: no. 6 (March 18, 2011), http://www.scena.org/lsm/sm16-6/sm16-6_fach_en.html (accessed April 4, 2012).

include Siebel from Gounod's *Faust*, Sesto from Handel's *Giulio Cesare*, and Dido from Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*.

- Lyric Coloratura: Warm lower register and agile higher register. Roles often demand florid passages in higher registers and sustained lower passages. Often plays younger, more feminine mezzo roles. Roles include Rosina from Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*, Cenerentola from Rossini's *La Cenerentola*, and Caesar from Handel's *Giulio Cesare*.
- Dramatic Mezzo: Large, rich, powerful voice with strong middle and low register and powerful high register, capable of carrying over large orchestra. Fewer florid passages. Often plays older women mothers, witches, and villains. Roles include the Witch from Humperdink's *Hansel und Gretel*, Brangäne from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, and Azucena from Verdi's *Il Trovatore*.
- Contralto: Lowest female voice part, very rare. Dark, heavy tone and color. Often plays witches, castrati roles, or villains. Roles include Ruth from Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Pirates of Penzance*, Mother Goose in Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress*, and Cornelia in Handel's *Giulio Cesare*.

Tenor Fachs:

- Countertenor: Male alto voice, often used in early music as replacement for castrati.¹⁷⁹ Sounds vary from light falsetto to lyric-mezzo soprano-like quality. Roles include Orfeo from Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice*, Cesare from Handel's *Giulio Cesare*, and Oberon from Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.
- Lyric Comic: Tenor with good acting abilities and ability to create distinct voices for different characters. Often sung by younger singers. This voice type specializes in smaller, comic roles. Roles include Monostatos from Mozart's *The Magic Flute* and Beppo from Leoncavallo's *I Pagliacci*.
- Dramatic Comic: Non-romantic opera leads. Often villains, fathers, or older brothers. Voice must cut through orchestra, and singer must have strong acting abilities. Roles include Herod from R. Strauss's *Salome* and Mime from Wagner's *Die Walküre*.
- Lyric: Light, sweet tone with excellent legato. Often romantic lead. Roles include Tamino in Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, Tom Rakewell from Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress*, and Nemorino from Donizetti's *L'elisir d'amore*.
- Spinto/Light Dramatic: Heavy, lyric quality with ability to carry over large orchestras. Distinctive squeal sound present in the voice. Often

¹⁷⁹ Castrati were men castrated before puberty to preserve a high vocal sound. Though popular in earlier periods of opera, the practice fell out of fashion and was made illegal by the end of the nineteenth century.

romantic leads. Roles include Werther in Massenet's *Werther* and Don José in Bizet's *Carmen*.

- Full Dramatic: Largest tenor voice type. Stereotypically the physically largest singers. Strong middle and low register with ability to sustain long lines and carry over large orchestra. Roles include Tristan from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, Otello from Verdi's *Otello*, and Siegfried from Wagner's *Siegfried*.

Baritone/Bass Fachs

- Lyric Baritone: light, sweet tone with excellent legato and flexibility. Good pitch range. Roles include Guiliermo from Mozart's *Così fan tutte*, Count Almaviva from Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro*, Don Giovanni from Mozart's *Don Giovanni*.
- Comic Baritone; similar vocal qualities to lyric baritone with strong acting abilities. Often plays comic roles, sidekicks, or servants. Roles include Leporello from Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, Figaro from Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*, and Major Stanley from Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Pirates of Penzance*.
- Dramatic/Verdi Baritone: Rich, warm sound with ability to carry over large orchestra. Roles include Scarpia from Puccini's *Tosca*, Escamillo from Bizet's *Carmen*, and Rigoletto from Verdi's *Rigoletto*.
- Heroic Baritone: Similar in sound to dramatic baritone, must be able to carry over large orchestra. Stereotypically physically largest singers. Roles include Wotan from Wagner's *Die Walküre*, Hans Sachs from Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, and Amfortas from Wagner's *Parsifal*.
- Bass Baritone: Often lower melodic lines than baritone but must still possess higher notes. Often cast in Mozart roles. Roles include Papageno from Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, Figaro from Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro*, and Mephistopheles from Gounod's *Faust*.
- Dramatic Comic Bass: Darker, powerful sound. Often plays comic roles that have florid passages. Roles include Don Bartolo from Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* and Ferrando from Verdi's *Il Trovatore*.
- Basso Profundo: Lowest male voice type. Rich, full, and solid sound that resonates. Roles include Sarastro from Mozart's *The Magic Flute* and Marke from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*.

APPENDIX C

Thesis Interview Questionnaire-Current Singer

1. What is your name, age, and voice part?
2. How long have you been singing semi-professionally/professionally?
3. In what capacity have you performed professionally/semi-professionally (opera chorus, comprimario role, lead role, cover, etc)?
4. Do you do any other singing besides operatic? (musical theater, church gig, etc)
5. As a singer, is image something you are concerned about?
 - 5a. If yes
 - What specifically are you concerned about?
 - What is your ideal image to project?
 - What are you doing to create/maintain the image you'd like to project?
 - 5b. If no
 - Why not?
6. As a singer, is body image specifically something you are concerned about?
 - 6a. If yes
 - Why are you concerned?
 - What are your concerns?
 - Do you actively work on your physical health/shape? What do you do?
 - 6b. If no
 - Why not?
7. Do you feel that image is important in opera right now?
 - 7a. If yes-
 - How do you see it as important?
 - Do you agree with this? Why or why not?
 - Do you feel that it's always been this important?
 - WHY do you think image is important in modern opera?
 - 7b. If no-
 - Why not?
8. What is your reaction to singers like Anna Netrebko, Natalie Dessay, Renee Fleming using their beauty and sexuality to market themselves?
9. Do you believe that a good singer requires certain external physical attributes to produce a good sound?
 - 9a. If yes-

- What are those attributes?
 - Do they change by fach?
- 9b. If no-
 - Why not?

- 10. Have you ever changed your appearance/would you ever change your appearance to further your singing career?
 - 10a. If yes-
 - What changes have you/would you be willing to make?
 - 10b. If no-
 - Why not?

- 11. Has a teacher, coach, director, competition judge, etc ever suggested that you change something about your appearance?
 - 11a. If yes-
 - What did they ask you to change?
 - Did you make the change?
 - What was your reaction?
 - What kind of impact did the change have/does it still have an impact?
 - 11b. If no-
 - What do you feel your reaction would be?

- 12. Have you seen a shift or a change in emphasis regarding image in opera?