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"Changing the Score: Arias, Prima donnas, and the Authority of Performance" by Hilary Poriss

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Hilary Poriss, *Changing the Score: Arias, Prima Donnas, and the Authority of Performance*. AMS Studies in Music. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. ISBN 978-0-1953-86714.

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This marvelous book exuberantly explores an exuberant aspect of nineteenth-century opera that is rarely discussed today, but that was ubiquitous in the first half of the century, the practice of replacing an aria (or other piece) in an opera with another or inserting an aria into an opera in a place where none existed. We of course are aware that composers themselves wrote such arias for their own operas, but these are not the subject of the book. Instead, it deals with “numbers written by composers for insertion into operas that were not their own” and, more commonly, “arias that singers selected from preexisting works and which they dropped, often without change to music or poetry, into new operatic contexts” (10). The book concentrates on the period 1800-1850, “decades during which the practice inched slowly toward extinction” (5), that is, as the operas of Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, and their contemporaries gave way to Verdi, extending this time-frame in both directions on appropriate occasions. It represents the culmination of many years of labor, beginning with Poriss’s doctoral dissertation¹ and including several published articles.

The author asks, “Into which operas did singers typically introduce new numbers? In what way did inserted numbers conform, both dramatically and musically, to their new environments, and how important was it that they do so? What artistic, economic, and social factors motivated nineteenth-century singers to make these types of alterations? And how were aria insertions received by critics, spectators, and composers?” (5). Most of all, the book “examines aria insertion as a creative endeavor through which the nineteenth century’s most famous and powerful singers—especially the prima donnas—actively asserted their own authorial voices” (4). It probably will come as no surprise that singers exerted powerful influence on opera during this period, both in the creation of the work and in its transmission through performance.

“The evidence drawn on for this study is varied, including librettos, newspaper reviews, epistolary sources, anecdotal and biographical material, theatrical documents such as contracts, posters, and box-office receipts, printed and manuscript scores, and other assorted archival records” (9).

¹ Hilary Poriss, “Artistic License: Aria Interpolation and the Italian Operatic World, 1815-1850” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2000).

Librettos are especially important; the primary documents that show precisely what pieces were performed in a specific production.

The book is divided into an introduction (from which the above passages are drawn) and six chapters, examining the issues from different perspectives. Chapter 1, “A Discourse of Change,” discusses the way aria insertions were regarded, both pro and con: “Over the course of the nineteenth century, the suitability and value of these pieces became a matter of discussion throughout the world of Italian opera, and traces of these conversations surface in a variety of documents including contracts, letters, treatises, newspaper reviews, and anecdotal accounts” (15). Composers and impresarios struggled against the caprices of prima donnas, but often had to yield. Perhaps surprisingly, critical opinion was divided, some critics appreciating the vocal and dramatic skill that singers brought to their insertion arias, others, increasingly as the century wore on, championing the opera as an integral work of art. A brief excursus (25-28) discusses practical reasons for insertions—similarity of an aria with one in a different opera that would make the former sound incongruous, the sudden replacement of an opera with another without sufficient rehearsal time, benefit performances in which the singer is the focus rather than the opera—while noting that such reasons account for only a small minority of occurrences.

Chapter 2, “Selecting a ‘Perfect’ Entrance: Carolina Ungher and *Marino Faliero*,” leaves the general discussion to examine one particular locus for an insertion aria: Act I of Donizetti’s opera of 1835 and its connection with one of the leading singers of the era. The role of the heroine Elena lacks a “cavatina,” that is, an aria marking her entrance in Act I (as the term is usually used in the early nineteenth century). While not unique in the repertory (Poriss notes a similar lack in Rossini’s *Otello*), the absence of such an aria was unusual and also not to the liking of leading sopranos, who understandably felt that without the aria the dramatic impact of the character (and the audience’s appreciation of their vocal prowess) would be diminished. Ungher, not the original Elena, was the first to create an entrance aria, by interpolating an aria from another opera by Donizetti. She tried three different arias in three different productions before settling on the second. Poriss sensitively delves into the dramatic benefits and problems of these insertions as well as exploring why Ungher might have rejected her first choice in favor of her second, particularly the issue of suitability to her voice.² This chapter is a bracing antidote to the idea that an insertion aria was simply a singer’s favorite, which she unthinkingly imposed on a composer and his work.

Of course, singers did carry around favorite arias (*arie di baule*), but chapter 3, “Making Their Way Through the World: Italian One-Hit Wonders,”³ “seek[s] to problematize the concept of the trunk aria” by “introduc[ing] a second model that played an equally powerful role [...]: the ‘favorite

² Poriss notes the technical difficulty and high tessitura of the first substitution, “Io talor più nol rammento,” from *Sancia di Castiglia*, as did a critic of the time (52), and the much greater simplicity of the definitive choice, “Ah! quando in regio talamo,” from *Ugo, conte di Parigi*. She also notes (55), however, that the difficult cabaletta to “Io talor” was similar in style to that of Elena’s third-act aria, which leaves the question of why Ungher could negotiate the latter, but not the former.

³ This chapter largely reproduces Poriss’s previously published article of the same title: *19th-Century Music*, 24 (2001), 197-224.

insertion.’ Favorite insertions [... were] performed as substitutes and/or interpolations by a host of different singers in an assortment of operatic contexts” (66). Poriss approaches this topic from three directions. She first follows a specific singer, Giuditta Pasta, and her sixteen insertion arias, finding a variety of reasons behind her choices: a particularly popular aria inserted into benefit performances, the tradition of the powerful entrance already discussed in chapter 2, an opera that is itself a pasticcio, arias especially suited to her voice, and arias made famous by other singers. This last category leads to a discussion of seven arias “selected because their texts appear in ten or more librettos” (77). The third approach is through the most frequently found such aria, “Il soave e bel contento” from Giovanni Pacini’s *Niobe*, with an analysis attempting to discover why this particular aria should have been so popular (much of the aria is reproduced in piano-vocal reduction). Especially interesting is Poriss’s observation that this repertory of arias, many of which come from operas that otherwise were quickly forgotten, constitutes a sort of canon, at the same time as some operas as a whole are forming a canon, with the irony that “Along with the canonization of operatic works came the conviction that they should be performed according to the author’s design—that is, without aria insertions” (98).

Thus, “extreme tampering with any one score on a regular basis became more the exception than the rule. Increasingly throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, singers tended to perform insertion arias at specific moments in an opera, rather than randomly throughout the work” (102). Chapters 4 and 5 then treat two such specific moments, the finale to Bellini’s *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* and the lesson scene in Rossini’s *Il barbiere di Siviglia*. The author’s purpose is not simply to flesh out with more detail these two well-known scenes but rather to explore their implications in depth.

The replacement of Bellini’s finale with the comparable scene (and much of the same text) from Nicola Vaccai’s *Giulietta e Romeo*, and its association with Maria Malibran, is well known. As Poriss points out (106), calling on the work of Michael Collins and Claudio Toscani, the substitution did not originate with Malibran, but with Santina Ferlotti at a benefit performance in Florence less than a year after the opera’s premiere (Venice, 11 March 1830).⁴ Malibran first took up the role of Romeo in fall 1832, using Vaccai’s setting of the finale⁵ as well as making other alterations in Bellini’s score. Critical opinion about the substitution was divided; Poriss is surely correct to suggest that the ringing defense of Bellini’s ending by mezzo-soprano Giuseppina Ronzi de Begnis in a letter to Francesco Florimo dated 1834 is an unreliable source, given Florimo’s penchant for fakery and distortion to burnish Bellini’s reputation (113).⁶ Performances between 1833 and 1857 favored Vaccai almost two to one (104).

⁴

I do not understand why Poriss criticizes Collins for writing that Malibran ““must cede precedence regarding the substitution””: “how she would do this, or why, is unclear” (106). Surely Collins is simply stating the obvious, that someone else did it first.

⁵

Vaccai’s opera did not in fact end with this scene (the death of Romeo, followed quickly by Giulietta’s), but is followed by an aria for Giulietta; this aria was not used in Bellini’s opera (117, fn 50).

⁶

The author might have exercised similar caution with regard to Bellini’s letter to Florimo concerning soprano Adelaide Tosi (21), equally unattested with an autograph. See Bellini, *Epistolario*, ed., Luisa Cambi (Milan: Mondadori, 1943), 74-5. Cambi verified Florimo’s transcriptions of Bellini’s letters with the autographs when they were available and notes this fact. Here, the source of the letter is Florimo.

These observations lead to an exploration of the magnetic power Malibran held over opera in the ensuing decades and to Poriss's most original contribution to the discussion of this substitution. Malibran's formidable reputation as a singer, which only increased after her death, challenged other singers to emulate her. She led an unconventional life, including dressing as a man, as she did in the trouser role of Romeo. Many stories surrounded her early death, for example, refusing medical attention after her horseback-riding accident (and thus in effect committing suicide) and her supposed singing duel with Maria Caradori-Allan at her final concert, in a duet that she always interpolated into *Capuleti* and that was said to have precipitated her death.⁷ Her posthumous reputation thus served to identify her with the character of Romeo and so helped to perpetuate the use of the conclusion "alla Malibran."

As for the singing lesson in *Barbiere*, this became the locus of ever-expanding insertions, "mini-concerts." As Poriss shows, when the Count (disguised as a music teacher) asks Rosina, "Che vuol cantare?" he practically asks the singer to choose something to her liking, and so many, many Rosinas did, beginning with Geltrude Righetti-Giorgi, the original Rosina, in the earliest revivals of the opera. The growth of this intervention was aided by the fact that *Barbiere* remained a very popular, frequently performed opera. And grow it did, particularly after c. 1860, when singers, beginning with Adelina Patti, frequently sang two or three pieces in this place. Also, "more than was the case with any other opera, prima donnas brazenly disregarded stylistic consistency when selecting their substitute arias for Rossini's music lesson, often introducing arias that were wholly—even comically—incompatible with the texture of Rossini's score" (137). This scene is then, an exception to the common practice of aria insertion: it lasted longer (Poriss notes instances as late as the 1990s), grew in size to include more than one number, and was stylistically incongruous. The loss of Rossini's original aria, "Contro il cor," was significant, since the aria contributed to the dramatic action of the opera. Nevertheless, Poriss concludes, "The lesson scene is one of the few moments in the repertory in which prima donnas might still introduce arias of their own choice without fear of reprimand. [...] [W]ould it be possible for a mezzo-soprano to recapture the excitement that was generated by the mini-concerts around the turn of the century?" although the idea is "unrealistic because in today's world of tight schedules and union fees, a mini-concert would prove extravagant, if not downright prohibitive" (168).

Chapter 6, "An Insertion Aria Speaks," discusses a short story, "Memoirs of a Song," published in London in 1849. (The story itself is printed in the appendix.) The story is told in the first person by the aria itself, which describes its composition and its transmission by three singers of different types: Giulia, a capricious prima donna, possessing a fine voice but no feeling; Lisa, who possesses feeling but insufficient talent; and Xanthi, the ideal. The composer, Stefano, wrote the aria out of his desperate love for Giulia and kills himself early in the story when she rejects him for Lord Vane.

I found this chapter the least satisfying of the book. The attempt to connect the aria to James Webster's "ideology of the aesthetic" (176-8) is undercut by the conclusion that "it is not, after all, a true

⁷ Poriss here calls on the observation of Suzanne Aspden that "narratives [that] pit two singers [...] against one another [served] as a means to condemn, and thus contain, the threat of powerful women" (132), but I do not see its applicability to Malibran. Aspden is referring to eighteenth-century England, and nobody contained Malibran.

representative of the ideology of the aesthetic” (178), which raises the question of why try to connect it at all. The suggestion that the shallow Giulia is in part a representation of Giulia Grisi (180ff) seems unfair to Grisi, whose skills and sensitivity were praised by Bellini⁸ (the suggestion of Angelica Catalani as the model seems more apt). Linking Lisa to Susan Rutherford’s idea of the drawing-room singer—“According to Rutherford, these singers are domestic women who receive music educations that serve to contain the seductive ‘supernatural vocalising’ that is characteristic of the public virtuosa” (183)—seems off: Lisa’s problem, despite rigorous training, is that her “voice is incapable of pleasing her auditors, for it is hard and inflexible” (183). The connection of the story to Heather Hadlock’s analyses of the women in E.-T.-A. Hoffmann (171-2) is also unconvincing. “‘How,’ [Hadlock] asks, ‘do these stories about female singers contrive to contain and manage the singing woman’s authority?’” But then this story “contrive[s] to contain and manage” the aria, not the women (172). Still, the story is amusing, and it certainly speaks to the subject of the book. I am glad to have it.

Considering the mission of *Performance Practice Review*, it seems desirable to comment on the usefulness of this book for performance today. As Poriss notes on many occasions, our view of opera as an integral work, a view that developed in the course of the period under discussion, has militated against continuing or reviving the practice of aria insertion. She also mentions the experience of Cecilia Bartoli (187-8), whose replacement of Susanna’s arias in *Le nozze di Figaro* with ones that Mozart wrote for that purpose was greeted with loud denunciations from several critics, as if she had desecrated a masterpiece. Insertions have continued to be made in a small number of operas in recent times: *Barbiere*, *La figlia del reggimento*,⁹ *Die Fledermaus* (187), but certainly the practice will never return to that of the early nineteenth century, just as conditions in the opera house will never return, as the author acknowledges. Besides, one of these conditions was the opportunity to hear many such operas on a regular basis, whereas today, notwithstanding an increase in the last sixty years or so, we hear relatively few performances of operas from the *bel canto* repertory and so would prefer to experience them in their integral form, before they are subject to the kind of tinkering this book describes. (*Il barbiere di Siviglia* again might be regarded as an exception.)

So Poriss’s plea for greater openness toward the idea of aria insertion—“What I have attempted to suggest [...] is that a composer’s authority is not the only authority worth reasserting” (188)—is well-taken, but unlikely to be heeded. The irony here, I might add (Poriss does not discuss this issue), is that at the same time we insist on integral performances of critical editions of our operas, we are given many productions that take these operas far from their original conceptions. The role of directors in today’s

⁸ See Bellini, *Epistolario*, 501, letter of 26 or 27 January 1835 to Florimo (the autograph of this letter survives).

⁹ On February 6, 2010, Kiri Te Kanawa “entered at the beginning of Act II [of *La Fille du régiment*] and sang the tune of the orchestral prelude, then a sultry rendition of Ginastera’s “Canción al Arbol del Olvido” [...].” Vivien Schweitzer, “Donizetti Returns, Offering Plenty of Chemistry and Nine High C’s,” *The New York Times*, February 8, 2010, C5.

opera house, then, is comparable to that of the singers in 1800 to 1850: they shape an opera to their own wills, with or without the blessing of the audience. I am not certain that we are the better for it.¹⁰

However, another plea might have more success: “at a time when one of the central tasks of Italian opera scholars is the piecing together of critical editions [...], identifying [the] favorite insertions [...] provides an interesting and economical way of getting at those pieces that had the strongest impact on nineteenth-century audiences [...]” (99). As has been done with the finale of *Capuleti*, the compact disc medium allows recordings to include both the original work and insertions and could give the listener the choice of which arias to hear where, provided editions (in full score) of the insertions were available to the performers.

Concerning the book’s physical presentation: Praise is due for footnotes rather than the increasingly unavoidable endnotes. The bibliography is impressive, the index extensive, although it does not pick up everything, particularly items in footnotes. There are five illustrations, half- to full-page, of nineteenth-century sopranos; these are nice to have if not, strictly speaking, necessary to the text. The seventeen musical examples, ranging from four to fifty-seven measures, are generous in quantity, but printed rather small (and sometimes blurry in my review copy). The texts are too small for these aging eyes to read without a magnifying glass, and the measure numbers, in a light italic font, are especially difficult. I would have gladly sacrificed the illustrations for larger examples. I would also have liked tables of contents for the illustrations and examples.

It is evidently the publisher’s house-style not to include the original text of translated quotations if the translation comes from a previously published source. My preference would have been to include the original for all translations. Why this can be important is illustrated by the following from *Lettre sur le mechanisme de l’opéra italien* of 1756:

It happens rather often that the virtuosi—the principal male and the principal female singer—who determine the fashion of their colleagues, present the composer, the impresario, and the public with arias which they have sung with success in other operas; they compel the composer to adjust these at once to their present roles, in order, as they say, to assure the opera’s success (68-9).

The translation, by Robert Freeman, was evidently made from a German translation of the original French,¹¹ so the English is twice-removed from the original. In fact, the French says something quite a bit different:

¹⁰ On the other hand, a production of Verdi’s *Ernani* I witnessed in Catania (May 2009), which the director assured us followed Verdi’s desires scrupulously, insofar as they could be divined, was stiff and dramatically unconvincing.

¹¹ Robert Freeman, “Farinello and His Repertory,” *Studies in Renaissance and Baroque Music in Honor of Arthur Mendel*, ed., Robert Marshall (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1974), 321-2. Freeman identifies his sources as Robert Haas, “Josse de Villeneuves Brief über den Mechanismus der italienischen Oper von 1756,” *Zeitschrift für Musikwissenschaft* 7 (1924), 129-63; the passage is on p. 144.

Il arrive même assez souvent que les *Virtuosi*, c'est-à-dire, le premier Acteur & la première [sic] Actrice qui donnent le ton à l'exclusion de leurs camarades, du Compositeur, de l'Entrepreneur & du Public, apportent des Airs qu'ils ont chantés dans d'autres Opéra [sic] avec applaudissement, & forcent le Maître de Chapelle de les placer contre vent & marée dans leurs rôles, pour assurer, disent-ils, le succès de la Pièce [sic].¹²

(It happens quite often that the virtuosi, that is, the principal male singer and the principal female singer, who set the tone *to the exclusion of their colleagues, the composer, the impresario and the public*, carry with them arias that they have sung to applause in other operas and force the conductor to insert them, come hell or high water [literally, against wind and tide], into their roles, to assure, they say, the opera's success.)

As a consequence, Poriss's query, "But what does the author mean when he writes that these singers 'determine the fashion of their colleagues'?" (69), and subsequent discussion lose their point.¹³

Precisely because I am so enthusiastic about this book, I regret having to report a large number of minor errors of various sorts that mar the text, as the following sampling illustrates:

- (1) Mistranscription of Italian texts, e.g., three errors in a quotation from Radiciotti (138, fn 9): "quella scene" instead of "quella scena," "Pauline Garcia" instead of "Paolina Garcia," "valser" instead of "valzer" (twice).¹⁴
- (2) Questionable translations. Sometimes these are looser than is necessary, but without serious harm: "solo fra quelle tombe, in una delle quali [...]" translated as "alone at the tomb in which" (108) instead of "alone among the tombs, in one of which." However, "pupilla" (137) as "student" instead of "ward" and "tutore" as "tutor" (144) instead of "guardian" distort the relationship between Rosina and Bartolo.
- (3) Mistaken Italian capitalization: "Il Turco in Italia" (7) instead of "Il turco."
- (4) Grammatical errors:
 - a. a dangling participle: "Having traced 'Il soave e bel contento' through a variety of contexts, an answer begins to emerge [...]" (85).
 - b. missing commas: "Prendi per me sei libero" needs a comma after "Prendi" for the Italian to make sense (102).

¹² *Lettre sur le mécanisme ...*, 46. The title page gives the place of publication as Naples, but Daniel Hertz (cited 69 fn10) demonstrates that the likely place was Paris. As Poriss notes, Hertz also ascribes the authorship not to Josse de Villeneuve, but to Ranieri Calzabigi. The mistranslation is already in the German.

¹³ In the article cited in fn 3 above, Poriss does not discuss the phrase "determine the fashion of their colleagues," and so the mistranslation is less harmful.

¹⁴ Giuseppe Radiciotti, *Gioacchino Rossini: vita documentata, opere ed influenza su l'arte* (Tivoli: Arti grafiche Majella di A. Chicca, 1927-9), 1: 232. The mistaken Italian in the first of these alerted me to the mistranscription, as did similar mistakes in other quotations.

- c. commas where none belong: “Donizetti [...] expressed his opinion in an angry letter to his friend, Gaetano Melzi [...]” (22).
 - d. two instances of the egregious “one of the only” (52, 136).¹⁵
- (5) Typographical errors: “confident” (20, fn 19) for “confidant,” “Giochino” (89) for “Gioachino.”
- (6) Miscellaneous:
- a. Poriss is usually meticulous in identifying the source of an insertion aria or noting “source unknown.” However, “Al pensier m’appare ognora” (102, fn 6) is not identified and is apparently not in the index. The author might also have alerted the reader that “Io talor più nol rammento” (ibid.) is one of the arias Carolina Ungher interpolated into *Marino Faliero* (discussed 50-5).¹⁶
 - b. 109, fn 29 gives a modern Italian translation of a German quotation from the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*. Why not the German original?
 - c. “Je suis Titania” (160-1) and “the Polonaise from ‘Mignone’ ” (165, fn 78) are the same piece.

Of slightly greater substance: There is a wrong date for Verdi’s *Macbeth*: 1845 (23) instead of 1847. The discussion of Pasta’s insertions (71) mistakes the number of productions listed in the chart (73-4): it is 24 or 25, not “slightly more than thirty.”¹⁷ The discussion of Robert Freeman’s article on Farinelli is confusing: “[Freeman] was able to locate only fourteen arias that Farinelli performed in more than one opera [...] He introduced only four of these pieces into more than one opera and never sang the same aria in more than two operas” (68).¹⁸

The reader will say that I am picking at the tiniest of nits here, and so I am. I would not have thought to mention most of these were it not for their sheer quantity. I counted well over sixty, affecting more than 25% of pages. This goes beyond the inevitable glitches to which we are all subject, myself definitely included.

¹⁵ The *New York Times* has finally come to reject “one of the only” for the nonsense it is (see *New York Times Online*, After Deadline, December 22, 2009: “A careful reader has pointed out another ‘one of the ...’ expression to watch out for: ‘one of the only [plural noun].’ [...] ‘One of the only’ is colloquial, vague and illogical. Better to say ‘one of the few,’ or to use a specific number, with ‘only’ as an adverb: ‘one of only three ...’”).

¹⁶ In an earlier study, Poriss identified “Al pensier” as from *Marino Faliero* (“A Madwoman’s Choice: Aria Substitution in *Lucia di Lammermoor*,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 13 (2001), 3, fn 8). However, it is not in the early Ricordi edition of this opera, and I take the absence of this identification here as a silent correction. The two footnotes are otherwise nearly identical, which probably accounts for the absence of a cross-reference for “Io talor.”

¹⁷ The author has double-counted the duplicates in the chart. The number depends on whether the production of *Otello* “Milan, La Scala, carnival 1832” (74) is the same as “Milan, La Scala, 1832” (73). Also, “[...] many of [these productions] were clustered around the early part of her career” (71): however, thirteen are from 1816 (her debut year) to 1825, twelve from 1826 to 1833; Pasta’s stage career ended in 1835.

¹⁸ See Freeman, “Farinello and his Repertory,” 316. His chart of the fourteen arias shows eight used in two operas and six in three. This does not invalidate the main point, that Farinelli made very limited use of *arie di baule*.

The author is ultimately responsible for the correctness of her text, but I think the publisher bears some responsibility here, too. This is, after all, a major university press, publishing under the imprint of musicology's professional society, and a higher standard is in order than that displayed here. Thorough copyediting, by someone competent in Italian as well as English, should have caught most of these errors.

I do not want to end this review negatively. The book is thorough, full of material difficult to come by, accessibly written, free of jargon, and with interesting, provocative ideas. Poriss provides ample data, but also looks searchingly at that data. The small errors mentioned above should not drive away potential readers, who will derive from this study a much-enriched picture of Italian operatic life of the nineteenth century.

The reader should be aware that I have known Hilary Poriss for many years. When she was a graduate student, she worked for my wife, Patricia Brauner, who receives an acknowledgement in the book.