

Melina Esse. Singing Sappho: Improvisation and Authority in Nineteenth-Century Italian Opera

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Melina Esse. *Singing Sappho: Improvisation and Authority in Nineteenth-Century Italian Opera*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021. Pp. 199. ISBN 9780226741772.

The collaborative relationship between composer and female singer in the changing landscape of nineteenth-century opera is the focus of Melina Esse's engaging study, which seeks to present an alternative to the entrenched myth of male operatic authorship. Esse rejects the idea of the "work concept," a system of evaluation solidified in the nineteenth century which based the merits of an artwork—in this case, opera—on its ability to remain fixed within time and resistant to adaptation and variation (11). Esse, instead, argues in favour of a more fluid and osmotic process of creation between composer and performer that takes its cues from the art of improvisation, in vogue in Italy in the eighteenth century and still very much present within its cultural consciousness, as she demonstrates, in the nineteenth.

In chapter 1, "History's Muse: The Spectacle of Poetic Improvisation," Esse argues that the dual roles inhabited by a female performer as both muse and creator within the world of opera originated in the practices of improvisation. This artform, in which successful *improvisatrici* acquired unprecedented levels of fame and artistic validation as female performers, directly inspired works of literature and opera, including Madame de Staël's wildly popular *Corinne, ou L'Italie*. Although improvisation legitimated a space for women as creators, it also complicated *this* space, Esse insists, by conferring on the *improvisatrice* two conflicting roles. She was at once an autonomous creator and a storehouse of memory. Spurred by genius to craft verses on the spot, the *improvisatrice* was also reliant on the time afforded her by the rhythm and meter of the musical accompaniment into which she often set her verses, to draw upon a mental catalogue of tropes and literary references needed to carry her performance. Both creator and vessel, the *improvisatrice* becomes in Esse's study the embodiment of opera's ambivalence toward female creation, a figure who will be evoked time and time again, both directly and indirectly.

In her second chapter, "Corinna's Crown: Improvisation and Authority in Rossini's *Il viaggio a Reims*," Esse examines the collaborative space occupied by performer and composer in her analysis of Rossini's opera, which takes inspiration from Staël's *Corinne*. *Il viaggio a Reims*, Esse argues, owed its success not simply to Rossini's composition but to the ornamentation and improvisation worked into each individual performance by the singers themselves. Although it has been

commonly argued that the nineteenth century moved toward the textualization of the operatic score, fixing through publication the composer's original music as the definitive version, Esse convincingly demonstrates that textualization also worked in favour of singers' unique contributions through the publication of alternative scores that highlighted their creative interventions.

In chapter 3, "Divinely Inspired: Incantation and the Making of Melody in Bellini's *Norma*," Esse explores how Bellini's opera embeds practices of improvisation in the composition of its central aria "Casta Diva." In chapter 4, "Saffo's Lyre: Improvising Operatic Authorship," Esse closely examines opera's appropriation of the poet Sappho, who was viewed in the nineteenth century as the archetypal improviser. The figure of the ancient Greek poet enjoyed considerable popularity in the nineteenth century and was evoked in multiple operas. Esse reads the recurring presence of Sappho in nineteenth-century opera as the paradoxical attempt to capture the poet's improvisational skills and spontaneous voice through an act of textualization.

Having referenced Sappho throughout her study, Esse reads the singer Pauline Viardot as a Sapphic figure in her final chapter, "A Sapphic Orpheus: Pauline Viardot and the Sexual Politics of Operatic Collaboration." Esse argues that Viardot's collaborative relationship with Hector Berlioz and Charles Gounod upends the idea of the opera as solely the work of a composer's genius and demonstrates the improviser's vital role within the process of operatic creation. Nonetheless, as Esse shows, Viardot's close working relationship with Berlioz and Gounod brought with it accusations of impropriety. This was in keeping with the nineteenth-century perception of Sappho as a courtesan.

The setup of Esse's project is a difficult one. Tracing the practices of collaboration between performer and composer requires that the scholar retrieve what is ultimately irretrievable: the performances in which are enacted the singers' contributions to the operatic score. To resurrect her singers' centuries-old voices, Esse adeptly interprets references in letters and accounts but also convincingly reads between the lines—or staffs, as it were—of the operatic scores whose pages punctuate the study in both manuscript and printed form. Esse persuasively repositions women within nineteenth-century opera as innovative performers and agents of creation. However, for the scholar, acknowledging female operatic authorship also means acknowledging the ways in which male composers exploited the image and practices of the *improvvisatrice* to strengthen their own artistic authority. Esse's study therefore illuminates the paradox of women's interventions in nineteenth-century opera as being both a testament to female creative achievement

and the means by which the myth of male genius and authorship was solidified. Non-specialists might have occasional difficulty digesting the technical language that Esse employs in her close readings of operatic scores. In addition, despite Italy being its principal focus, the study culminates with a look at French opera, rather than Italian opera. This decision slightly attenuates a central tenet of Esse's argument: the enduring impact of Italian practices of improvisation on Italian opera. Nonetheless, through her penetrating look at nineteenth-century opera's ambivalence toward gender and authorship, Esse traces new and nuanced lines of inquiry that could offer intriguing suggestions for analyses of female collaboration and authorship in other fields.

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