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Anna Maria Strada del Pò, Handel's Prima Donna:
Portrait of an Uncommon Voice

PhD Theses

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1. RESEARCH BACKGROUND

George Frideric Handel's longest continuous collaboration with a leading singer took place between 1729 and 1737 with Anna Maria Strada del Pò (according to my research, her places and dates of birth and death are: Bergamo, 1703 – Naples, 20 July 1775), who 'seems to have pleased him most'. Charles Burney considered her as an artist 'formed by the composer himself'. I have chosen to investigate Strada's vocal activities in connection with the music written for her not only by Handel, but also by Antonio Vivaldi, Leonardo Leo, Leonardo Vinci, Domenico Sarro and others. This singer has become a research focus neither in Handel research nor in the field of eighteenth-century vocality until now. Her neglect by modern musicology, besides the scarcity of surviving period descriptions of her singing and private life, is mainly due to the popularity of her star-contemporaries, Francesca Cuzzoni and Faustina Bordoni, and of *castrati* such as Senesino, Farinelli and Carestini. Nevertheless, very important remarks have been made about her singing by writers including Ellen T. Harris ('Das Verhältnis von Lautstärke und Stimmlage im Barockgesang', In: *Aufführungspraxis der Händel-Oper*, 1988/1989; 'Singing', *Grove Music Online*), Reinhard Strohm (*The Operas of Antonio Vivaldi*, 2008; 'Vivaldi's career as an opera producer', in: *Essays on Handel and Italian Opera*, 1985), Rodolfo Celletti (*Storia del belcanto*, 1983), Winton Dean (*Handel's Operas, 1726–1741*, 2006), J. Merrill Knapp (Preface to the HHA Edition of *Flavio, rè de' Longobardi*, 1993), Panja Mücke ('Zur Entstehung und den ersten Aufführungen von Alexander's Feast', in: *Die Macht der Musik: Interdisziplinäre Studien zu Georg Friedrich Händels Alexander's Feast*, 2010) and Donald Burrows (*Handel*, 2012; 'Handels oratorio performances', in: *The Cambridge Companion to Handel*, 1997).

One of the main difficulties of this research was the non-Handelian part of Strada's repertoire, the majority of which consists of unedited musical materials dispersed in various archives throughout Europe. A considerable part of it is lost; however, these are mainly scores of revivals and not of original roles. For this reason, between 2013 and 2015 I visited several archives from Naples to London: the *British Library* (London); the *Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg Carl von Ossietzky*; the *Archivio di Stato di Venezia*, the *Biblioteca del Conservatorio di Musica Benedetto Marcello*, the *Biblioteca della Fondazione Giorgio Cini* and the *Biblioteca nazionale Marciana* in Venice; the *Archivio di Stato di Napoli*, the *Biblioteca del Conservatorio di San Pietro a Majella* and *Biblioteca nazionale Vittorio Emanuele III* in Naples; and the *Archiv der Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde* in Vienna. I could not consult every single manuscript of Strada's performances (e.g. those which are preserved in Bologna, Turin or Bruxelles), but, due to the trend of digitisation, I was able to reach important materials via the internet, for instance from the Archives of Munich and Dresden, and to inform myself from recordings using the sources I did not have the opportunity to look at. Therefore, around ninety percent of the surviving part of Strada's repertoire reached me in various ways, which enabled this work to be born.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

My research has aimed at a three-dimensional reconstruction of Strada's vocal art and development, conjugated with the course of her life. Therefore, besides following her vocal progress, this thesis is framed chronologically as a monograph. I decided not to separate the musical part from the social, geographical, cultural and personal stages of Strada's life. In so doing, I aimed to show the whole person as far as possible, which I think was inseparable from her being as an artist. More importantly, I discuss vocal technical issues in greater detail than usual, and embedded in the analyses of selected arias. In this way a well-rounded vocal profile can be achieved and effectively transmitted to the reader, considering that the subject is a singer of the pre-recording era.

The librettist Paolo Rolli remarked that Strada had a penetrating and delightful voice and stated that Handel thought 'she sings better than the two previous ones', meaning that the special skills of the two former divas – Francesca Cuzzoni's expressiveness and Faustina Bordoni's dramatism and vocal agility – became one in her. The musical material written for Strada shows an increase in lyric movements connected with demanding coloratura and a weightier dramatism. This indicates an exceptional voice production entirely *di petto* – as described by Pier Francesco Tosi (1723) and Giambattista Mancini (1774). This type of full-bodied singing was in fact the main characteristic of the castrato style and became essential to nineteenth-century *bel canto*.

Strada's comprehensive range and flexibility, as well as her twofold lyric-dramatic talent, were most probably due to an uncommon, innate ability. She may have been a so called natural soprano (or, to use a Romantic expression, an early *soprano sfogato* or *voce assoluta*), who, having a strong upper register, sang with a chest-like voice production in the head range as well, powerfully and sonorously. Some evidence of that in her repertoire – as Ellen T. Harris has pointed out – is that, in the arias written especially for her, high notes as dynamic and musical climaxes are often textually and rhythmically accented, which was contrary to the general practice of the era and to Handel's way of composing for Cuzzoni and La Francesina (Élisabeth Duparc), the sopranos preceding and, succeeding Strada, respectively. Harris also evaluates the correlation between vibrato and *di petto* singing, which was practiced by Strada: 'as singers began pulling the chest voice up into the head register, pitch vibrato would have appeared naturally. Because vibrato is most frequently associated with women's voices, it may not be coincidental that the use of chest voice throughout the range is first attributed by Tosi to female sopranos'.

My conclusions about Strada's singing and sound features rest on three main pillars: (a) the musical sources, which focus on the original roles and arias created especially for her; (b) the surviving descriptions of her singing, and the period treatises, completed (c) with my own practical experiences as a classical singer. The musical material *per se* can easily be misleading when it comes to the quality of singing, without the opinions of listeners who heard her voice back then, verifying that Strada's skills met all the technical, acoustic, musical and expressive requirements these works imposed. Only after this foundation has been laid can the compositions – coupled with contemporary accounts of her singing – be interpreted

as a sort of eighteenth-century ‘sound recordings’, preserving traces of Strada’s vocal personality. This is the method used by Charles Burney, for example: in the case of the soprano castrato Valeriano Pellegrini (1663–1746) he suggest certain abilities that the score might indicate concerning Mirtillo’s first aria, *Fato crudo, Amor severo* in *Il pastor fido* (1712), but in the end he classifies the singer according to the general quality of his singing, meaning that the requirements of the aria could have been accomplished by Valeriano but neither easily, nor excellently (the singer was nearly fifty years of age at that time).

Since Strada’s beauty of voice and manner of singing always caused admiration, and never received a negative review even from malicious critics – she was rather criticised for her ‘frightful mouths’ and unfavourable looks – one can conclude that the ideal audible parameters of the arias inspired by and dedicated to her did reflect her actual vocal characteristics.

3. RESEARCH RESULTS

Strada, later Handel’s faithful soprano, started her career under Vivaldi in Venice as a singer with an agile, high voice and with a very wide range. During the 1720s in Naples, besides complex and variable coloratura arias, a richness of Andante movements was becoming significant in her repertoire, gradually changing the shape of her vocal profile. Later, from 1729 onward, she was found singing for Handel in London, who took a keen interest in shifting and expanding his *prima donna*’s spheres of action. In this process of transformation, Strada embodied both Cuzzoni’s and Faustina’s former roles – uniting their diverse abilities – as well as presenting castrato arias in Italian *pasticcis*, going in a sense beyond her own gender. Rodolfo Celletti noted that Handel continued to apply the way of composing he used for Cuzzoni in the case of Strada too, but expanded it with more energy and with versatile types of melodies in the high register, due to Strada’s improving skills. He also discovered in Strada’s arias similar patterns to Faustina’s style, especially birdsong imitations. Strada indeed was capable of that kind of pathetic expression Cuzzoni had, but her unlimited, wide-ranging voice – spanning a-c^{'''} – demanded longer phrases, which required a weightier and more sonorous projection as well as a greater measure and higher level of coloraturas. Handel consciously emphasised her lyric talents: she was the *prima donna* who agreed to sing a whole role – that of Cleofide (*Poro*, 1731) – without an Allegro *bravura* aria, thus bringing one of the greatest successes to Handel as well as to herself. Nevertheless, the regular occurrence of Faustina’s arias in Strada’s Cuzzonian roles in revivals refers to their similar vocal functioning, despite their different *tessiture*. It shows that there were not only elements but some general aspects in Faustina’s style with which Strada was familiar: most probably a powerful and energetic voice production was that feature which inspired the formation of castrato-type virtuoso arias with trills (for the gorgeousness of which she was celebrated), triplets, long roulades, sustained notes and leaps. Moreover, Strada was the leading soprano of Handel’s first English oratorios and, unlike Senesino and Bertolli, her pronunciation was not criticised. The uniquely symbiotic relationship of mutual inspiration between Strada and Handel reached its culmination in the affecting musical description of Alcina’s fallen

character, an extraordinary role in every respect. This determinant moment in opera history demonstrates a ‘prototype’ of the rare kind of soprano *sfogato*, an early *voce assoluta*, in all its splendour.

The term *soprano sfogato* stems from the nineteenth century and was used to describe voices of an extended range, strong stamina and great projection, able to fill large houses on the one hand, and possessed of agility and a fine, silvery ringing vocal quality on the other. *Sfogati* executed coloraturas markedly and with full bodily support, just as *castrati* did. Vented, unlimited voices like that of Matilde Kyntherland Cascelli were defined as possessors of ‘an extraordinary soprano *sfogato* voice, clear, supple, vibrant and extending from high D to B flat below the staff, uniting the whole soul in song, and gesture’. This voice type flourished in the *bel canto* era of Gioachino Rossini, Vincenzo Bellini and Gaetano Donizetti, and was applied to sopranos like Giuditta Pasta, Maria Malibran and Giulia Grisi. The essence of *soprano sfogato* was to sing high notes with the chest, but it did not exclude the ability to produce head notes with softness and delicacy. Moreover, the ability ‘to take the same notes in different registers to vary the color for purposes of expression’ was one of its great effects, as was recorded about Malibran, and Pasta before her. The journalist Thomas Cox called Grisi’s full and rich tone her ‘peculiarity’, while the art critic Henry Chorley claimed that her ‘voice was poured forth with [...] fullness and brilliancy’. Stendhal paralleled Pasta’s voice with that of the great castrato masters of the late eighteenth-century ‘golden era’, Gasparo Pacchiarotti, Girolamo Crescentini and Luigi Marchesi, acclaiming her as their successor in his book *La vie de Rossini* (1824). The *British Journal* in 1832 described this voice type as similar to that of the *castrati*. Looking at Strada’s roles through this lens, one has to recognise that parts like that of Adelaide (Handel: *Lotario* 1729), Partenope (Handel: *Partenope* 1730), Elmira (Handel: *Sosarme* 1732), Alcina (Handel: *Alcina* 1732), Tuscelda (Handel: *Arminio* 1736), Aspasia (Leo: *Zenobia* 1725), Ermione (Vinci: *Astianatte* 1725) or Deidamia (Leo: *Achille in Sciro* 1740) correspond to the *sfogato* skill-set and way of singing, taking the differences of Baroque and Romantic musical styles, singing technique and orchestral environment into account.

The reference to a continuation of the castrato voice production and its aesthetic is not by mere chance. In my opinion, the overall technique for the ideal vocal sound (a strong and masculine voice projection in the female range, and of greater volume than the ordinary), adumbrated by *castrati*, was reached and became generally available in the first half of the nineteenth century. *Castrati* flourished until the late 1700s and were the most distinguished and appreciated teachers. Their artificially altered bodies enabled superb breath control (due to their extended lung-capacity), so that together with the support of a male body they could project a pure and feminine voice. (They did not use the powerless, disembodied and not resonant *falseto* – i.e. a voice production without closing the vocal folds, only the edges of which vibrate by the air blasted through them – a common technique of countertenors.) Naomi Adele André suggests that the castrato legacy (their singing style, technique and *bel canto* principles) was passed on to other, non-castrated treble voices – tenors and women singers – reaching its peak throughout the

eighteenth century in the schools of Francesco Antonio Pistocchi in Bologna and Niccolò Porpora in Naples. Through formal vocal instruction, castrato singing defined operatic voice production from the mid-1600s until the nineteenth century. André notices, however, a very important shift between the late seventeenth century, as represented by Tosi, and the 1730s, when Mancini received his training from Leonardo Leo at Naples (1728–30) and from the castrato Antonio Bernacchi, Pistocchi's former pupil at Bologna (early 1730s): 'While Mancini adapts the same terminology that Tosi uses (*voce di petto*, *voce di testa* / *falsetto*), he very strongly emphasizes the importance of blending the registers. Mancini's ideal *bel canto* voice has a consistent core throughout the range, not just an evenness between the break.' This blended voice, identified by Rodolfo Celletti as the *voce mista* (in the Romantic, *bel canto* sense of the term), provides power and fullness to the upper notes, essential to high sopranos such as Strada was. That a greater quantity of vocal emission was well appreciated in the eighteenth century – which was one of the main reasons *castrati* were celebrated, namely that they sang louder than their female and non-castrated male colleagues – is proved in that this was one of Farinelli's special abilities, for which he was most admired.

The fact that Strada's way of singing with her louder and vented high notes was praised by her contemporaries reveals that hers was an ideal way of singing. She might have been among the pioneers who united the split parts of female singing: femininity and the powerful soprano range represented by *castrati*.

Her character was also refreshingly different from most of her colleagues: she seems to have been free from egoism, and her choices made without any unprofessional biases. She was the one who did not leave Handel for the rival company, the Opera of the Nobility in June 1733, and waited for a year after the Second Academy's collapse, until June 1738, to see if she could work with the composer again. She hardly ever sang a substitute aria in an original role; even in revivals and *pasticcis* she learned new material, whereas other singers travelled from production to production, forcing their favourite numbers into whatever kind of opera they appeared in, often regardless of the dramatic context.

The present dissertation also contains a portfolio recorded with the harpsichordist Fanni Edöcs in Budapest in 2015, which, unfortunately, had to be made under very limited circumstances. These are neither studio nor professional recordings, and they are unmastered ones, as I have edited them myself at home. Despite the resulting disadvantages and risks, I still consider it essential for this thesis to include an audible result of my research over the last four years, not least because Strada's singing has not yet been properly interpreted, either in musicology or in performance practice. My vocal technique and artistic accomplishment was growing and maturing parallel to and in interaction with the writing of this study, and I am glad that this topic occurred to me at a time (in 2011) when I was searching for historical evidence of an authentic manner of singing Baroque repertoire without vocal limitations.

The recorded portfolio consists of Strada's thirteen arias, a *recitativo secco* and an *accompagnato*, selected from her original roles and spanning from her debut years until the end of her London period (1720–37). There is no recording of mine,

however, from her last professional years in Italy (1739–41). There are two reasons for this: since her vocal abilities seem to have begun to diminish somewhat, the later arias do not add anything new to her vocal profile; and the sources are incomplete, most of them being lost. The selection and balance of the repertory presented here follows the course of Strada's career as well as that of the thesis. The *da capo* embellishments and other ornaments and cadenzas are completely the products of my own creativity and sense of style; they reflect my relationship to those arias, and do not attempt to reconstruct Strada's own embellishments (all the more so because none of them survives). Rather, I tried to transmit an attitude, a certain way of thinking about performance, and to present it as a living, flexible and creative entity, not as a museum. Through Strada's example I hope also to promote my conviction that a good and healthy vocal technique is equally suitable to any of the classical musical repertoires; the style is what is different, and the proportions of certain tools and their execution (e.g. vibrato, *portamento*, *rubato*, appoggiaturas and other ornaments, etc.) have been the changing elements throughout the centuries. Strada's way of singing – which was the inverse of the standard Baroque, as far as melodic structure, accentuation, and proportion of high and low notes are concerned – is one of the best proofs that artists with diverse vocal styles were able to operate successfully in the same era. This may teach us not to treat Baroque singing as uniform, without individual style patterns, but rather to let the characteristics of certain periods shine through in a unique and unrepeatable union with the performer's individual vocal attributes and personal features.

4. LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

‘Successor to the “Rival Queens”’: The London Engagement of Handel’s Faithful Soprano, Anna Maria Strada del Pò’, in: *Händel-Jahrbuch* 62 (2016).

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Budapest Music Center, 14 June 2014.

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Handel and His Eighteenth-Century Performers, Handel Institute Conference
The Foundling Museum London, 22 November 2015.

A barokk éneklés és a XIX. századi bel canto kapcsolata
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