

## Famous voices in the XVII-th century Italy

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**Abstract:** *The aim is to present famous voices from the Italic Peninsula, to evaluate their importance in the History of the vocal music looking through the eyes of the singers from the XVII-th century and their new attitude towards the vocal art, materialised in an expressive interpretation, based on vivid, colourful word utterance - bona pronuntia and coloratio – and on embodying the meaning and feelings they contain. Starting with the XVI-th century until the beginning of the XIX-th, the concept of singer appears in constant evolution, being musicians with complete formation in the music theory, scoring, harmony, composition, instrumental and vocal practice. Illustrious voices of that time are evoked in this study and notions of style and vocal technique development across the century are also approached.*

**Key-words:** *the history of vocal music; singers, vocal technique; voice.*

### 1. Introduction

Voice is one of the greatest gifts God made to mankind, very handy, but so difficult to master, to mould, in order to best express what torments the human being. The present study, concentrated on the diachronic exploration of some accessible, nowadays sources, bearing the print of the time they represent, or of utmost importance, with a degree of objectivity due to the used sources - such approach does no less than to offer credibility to the contribution – is determined by the desire to clarify an important subject concerning the vocal art, the singers of the XVII-th century, because musically speaking this century brings along the passing from polyphonic writing to the accompanied melody, singing becoming an art of performance, therefore expression, intention and communication, everything wrapped in the just rendering of the message of the musical work, an interpretation based on assimilating the play's content, thus the necessity to develop the vocal style and technique, called, starting with the XIXth century, *bel canto*. “The Italians were considered the brightest singers. The Italian model for singing and the Italian singing schools after the year 1600, became little by little compulsory for the entire Europe. The motive was the popularity and spreading at large scale of the Italian opera.”<sup>2</sup> The French philosopher and sociologist Emile Durkheim (+1917), considered to be the founder of the French school of sociology, asserts that “present time does not mean anything by itself; it is nothing but the prolonging of the past, which cannot be separated without losing most of its entire signification”<sup>3</sup> We consider that for the future singers it is useful to be able to take a look at the past, to know and recognise their ancestors, being aware of the fact that information is one of the modalities to acquire knowledge, identifying a school of singing being made by highlighting some virtuous.

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<sup>2</sup> Ardelean, Nicoleta and Ioan. 2016. *Bel canto, origini și devenire până în secolul al XVIII-lea*. Bucharest: Editura Muzicală, p. 34.

<sup>3</sup> Durkheim, Émile. 1972. *Evoluția pedagogiei în Franța*, Bucharest: Editura Didactică și Pedagogică.

## 2. Objectives

Involving students in examining the historic sources, utilizing the theoretic researches and identifying, classifying and evaluating instruments.

## 3. Famous singers

At the beginning of the XVII-th century the singer has to discover new means to exercise their expressive qualities and to find new ways to render different emotions and dramatic situations, because the sacred style, learned before, did not allow music to sound with emotional value or illustrative sense. Nevertheless singers are attracted towards the opera performance, cantata or oratorio because they offer challenges with much more profound artistic issues than the sacred music. They were expected to have a beautiful sounding voice, to be educated aesthetically speaking and to be determined in formation, according to the new vocal methods.<sup>4</sup> Across the century virtuosity becomes the main quality of any singer, for all voices equally, for bass and soprano, they having to display a remarkable dexterity. In this chapter we shall outline a few of the most important voices of the XVII-th century, some of the future pedagogues and/or composers with decisive part in the history of Opera as a genre, here we mention three of the most important members of the Fiorentina Camerata, Emilio de' Cavalieri, Giulio Caccini, Jacopo Peri, excellent singers. We highlight, even if briefly, the importance of educators and schools, less numerous in the XVI-th century and the beginning of the XVII-th, because even the most beautiful diamond-the artist- does not shine until having been polished by a maestro, the vocal educator being expected to prove professional competences as well as distinguished human qualities. It is important to clarify the limits of such research, for those who seek advice about singing in the XVII-th century there are many general notions, but less specific ones. It is certain that that singing did not use intense sonorities, it was more articulate and less vibrant, but we do not know, for example, how many singers used vibrato and how many did not, and how extensive was their pitch either. This is the limit of the musical interpretation treaties in general,<sup>5</sup> because a singing treaty, a book or an article, no matter how well written they might be, cannot replace the direct guidance from the maestro's classroom. Giovanni Battista Mancini underlined the fact that a singer's successful career depended greatly on the teacher's behaviour and method, which had to take into account the talent and abilities the singer possessed.<sup>6</sup>

**Emilio de' Cavalieri** (1550-1602), among others singer and vocal educator, Vittoriei Archilei's mentor, one of the famous female voices of the century. **Giulio Caccini** also known as Romano (1550-1618), cantor, Italian composer and vocal trainer, activated at the end of the XVI th century and the beginning of the XVII-th, guided in the vocal art, among others, his own children, Pompeo, Francesca and Settimia. **Jacopo Peri**, also called Zazzerino (1561-1633), with a beautiful tenor voice, activated in Florence, at one of the most influential families in Italy, the Medici.

**Francesco Rasi** (1574-1621), tenor, studied with Giulio Caccini, being protagonist in the first performances of the operas Euridice de Jacopo Peri, Il rapimento di Cefalo de Giulio Caccini, Orfeo de Claudio Monteverdi and Dafne de Marco da Gagliano.<sup>7</sup> Among the first tenors of the XVIIth century is also **Giovanni Domenico Puliaschi** (cca. 1580-1622), one of

<sup>4</sup> Goldschmidt, Hugo. 1890. *Die italienische Gesangsmethode des 17. Jahrhunderts*, Breslau: Schlesische Buchdruckerei, pp. 42 - 43.

<sup>5</sup> Baird, Julianne. 2012. "The Bel canto Singing Style". In *A performer's guide to seventeenth-century music*. Edited by Stewart Carter, revised and expanded by Jeffery Kite-Powell, 31 - 43. Bloomington: Indiana University press, p. 41.

<sup>6</sup> Mancini, Giovanni Battista. 1774. *Pensieri, e riflessioni pratiche sopra il canto figurato di Giambattista Mancini, maestro di canto della corte imperiale, e Accademico Filarmonico*, Vienna: Ghelen, p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> *The Grove Book of Opera Singers*. 2008. Editor Laura Macy. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

the first cantors who activates outside the church area. With an exceptional vocal pitch,<sup>8</sup> he was, together with Giulio Caccini and Francesco Rasi, among the most appreciated tenors.

**Francesca Caccini**, known as Cecchina (1587-1641), soprano of international fame, the first female opera composer, sang in the Italian but also in the French region, at the royal court. **Settimia Caccini** (1591-1638), was, as well as her sister, a famous singer of the epoch, with an angelic, graceful voice. **Adriana Basile** (cca.1580-cca.1640), female singer who activated in the same period as Francesca Caccini, Monteverdi considering that her voice was more talented than Francesca's. She had two daughters, Leonora and Caterina, who under her direct guidance, become singers.<sup>9</sup> **Vittoria Archilei** or La Romanina<sup>10</sup> (cca 1582-1620), one of the well known singers from the beginning of the XVII-th century,<sup>11</sup> for whom many composers of the time wrote arias. For a while she shared the stage and the public's praises, in Florence, together with Francesca and Settimia Caccini, Giulio Caccini's daughters. **Leonora Baroni** (1611-1670), Adriane Basile's daughter, with artistic activity in Italy and France, a singer who perfectly mastered her art, with an enviable vocal technique, surpassed her mother in fame. The French violin player André Maugars (+1645) in the work *Response faite à un curieux sur le sentiment de la musique en Italie, écrite à Rome, le 1er octobre 1639*, rendered in Pierre de Saint-Glas's volume, describes her as being an excellent musician, who composes her own songs, with a broad voice and a sharp vocal technique, enchanting the audience with her performances. „Elle n'a pas besoin de mandier l'aide d'un Thuorbe, ou d'une Viole, sans l'un desquels son chant seroit imparfait; car elle-mesme touche tous les deux Instrumens parfaitement.”<sup>12</sup> We also remember the no less famous singers, mentioned also by Théophile Lemaire and Henri Lavoix, **Anna Maria Manarini**, who played in Paris opera Xerse by Francesco Cavalli, but who also shone in Italy, **Margarita Pia** from Florence, **Giulia Romana** and **Antonia Caratti**. Of utmost importance for the singing history are, in the XVIIth century, the castrati in the art of the lyric performance, “kings of virtuosity”,<sup>13</sup> who create this special art of bel canto and who lift the Italian school of singing on the first place in the world. At the beginning of the century their participation in the opera performances and variety shows at the aristocracy courts were simple additional engagements,<sup>14</sup> but shortly after this becomes the main concern. It is estimated that approximately 120 castrati cantors were active in Rome only, at that time. Pietro della Valle enumerates a few as being of first rank: **Loreto Vittori**<sup>15</sup> (1600-1670) “the greatest singer of the first part of the XVII th century”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Solerti, Angelo. 1905. *Musica, Ballo e Drammatica alla corte Medicea dal 1600 al 1637. Notizie Tratte da un Diario, con Appendice di Testi Inediti e Rari*. Florence: R. Bemporad & figlio, Editori. Reprint by Forgotten Books. 2018. p. 152.

<sup>9</sup> „Leonora's mother, Adriana, was also a famous singer and the teacher of her daughter.” „Forty Italian poets made a book of verses in her honor: “Applausi Poetici alle Glorie della Signora Baroni.” But this was not all. John Milton attended an operatic performance at the Barberini palace in 1639 and straightway indited a Latin sonnet “Ad Leonoram Romae Canentem.” Henderson, William James. 1921. *Early History of Singing*. New York: Longmans, Green and Co., p. 187, 188.

<sup>10</sup> Signora Baroni was not an opera singer, but, like her famous elder contemporary, Vittoria Archilei, a virtuosa di musica da camera, a chamber singer. Some of the French courtiers did not greatly admire her art at first, but her majesty the Queen put the seal of her approbation on it and silenced all opposition. The prima donna was accorded access to the queen's apartments at all hours and the royal hand bestowed upon her “ten thousand francs to dress herself in the French style, a collar of pearls, earrings and a warrant for several thousand crowns' worth of jewels and a warrant for an allowance of a thousand crowns.” Henderson, William James, *op.cit.*, p. 190

<sup>11</sup> Lemaire, Théophile; Lavoix, Henri. 1881. *Le Chant, ses principes, son histoire*. Paris: Heugel et fils, p. 303.

<sup>12</sup> Saint-Glas, Pierre de. 1672. *Divers traitez d'histoire, de morale, et d'éloquence*; VI. Discours de la musique d'Italie et des opéra. Paris, p. 171.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 278.

<sup>14</sup> Berglund Lars. 2016. “Angels or Sirens? Questions of Performance and Reception in Roman Churc Music around 1650”. In *Performativity and Performance in Baroque Rome*. Edited by Peter Gillgren, Mårten Snickare. pp. 99 - 113. New York: Routledge Publishing, p. 106.

<sup>15</sup> „So great was his popularity in Rome that the people broke into the Palace of the Jesuits at one of his appearances and literally chased out nobles and Cardinals. When people could not get in to his representations they crowded around the palace to try to catch a few echoes through the windows.” Henderson, William James. *op.cit.*, p. 141.

<sup>16</sup> Lemaire, Théophile; Lavoix, Henri. *op.cit.*, p. 309.

and **Marco Antonio Pasqualini**, with the stage name Malagigi (1614-1691).<sup>17</sup> In other works there are also mentioned other famous castrati from the beginning of the XVII-th century: **Ferdinando Grapuccioli** or Rapuccioli, (+1644), **Francesco Ravani**, **Guidobaldo Boretti** (1596-1646),<sup>18</sup> **Giovanni Luca Conforti** (1560-1608) and **Girolamo Rosini** (1581-1644).<sup>19</sup> **Baldassare Ferri** (1610-1680),<sup>20</sup> castrato singer, had one of the most beautiful, flexible and harmonious voices “of all the voices ever heard”,<sup>21</sup> the singer succeeding, based on an excellent vocal technique, in conquering the public’s heart, seduced by the singing perfection. **Giovanni Francesco Grossi** (1653-1697), one of the greatest Italian castrato singer, also known as Siface. **Francesco Antonio Pistocchi** (1659-1726), surnamed Pistocchino, famous singer from the XVII-th century, and no less remarkable teacher from the XVIII-th century, managed to change worthless voices, for example Antonio Bernacchi, and turn them not into mediocre but into exceptional ones. **Matteo Sassano** (1667-1737), another famous castrato, known as Matteuccio or the nightingale of Naples, kept his vocal qualities till the end of his life, at old age singing at church, he had such a clear and pure voice that the listeners, without seeing him, thought they admire the voice of a young person. **Gaetano Orsini** (1667-1750), begins his artistic career at the end of the XVII-th century.

#### 4. Conclusions

In the XVII-th century, when opera, cantata and oratorio appear, major changes happen in the vocal art, the dramatic expressiveness and the virtuos element being only two of them, successive series of exceptional singers having to learn that the term of interpretation, defined today as a rendering through adequate means of the musical opera content, actually expresses a true recomposing of the musical and literary text, based on at least four essential elements: recognising the concepts on the basis of their composition; the authentic rendering (which implies a meticulous preparation and a certainty of vocal and emotional resources); creative imagination (realised through vocal and gestural expressiveness); harmony in interpretation and that performance in singing is always the result of concentration, never of hazard and it requires the activation of the lyrical artist’s capacities of physical and mental effort. This study is meant, last but not least, to be a token of honouring and treasuring those who made it possible for the art of singing to develop until nowadays.

#### 5. References

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<sup>17</sup> Saint-Glas, de Pierre. *op.cit.*, p. 169.

<sup>18</sup> Rome, ARSI, fondo Chiesa del Gesù, 2009, apud Berglund Lars. 2016. “Angels or Sirens? Questions of Performance and Reception in Roman Church Music around 1650”. In *Performativity and Performance in Baroque Rome*. Edited by Peter Gillgren, Mårten Snickare. p. 99-113. New York: Routledge Publishing, pp. 106 - 107.

<sup>19</sup> Lemaire, Théophile; Lavoix, Henri. *op.cit.*, p. 309.

<sup>20</sup> „Enthusiasm followed him everywhere. Sonnets by the hundred were written about him. People covered his carriage with flowers if he sang but a single song. He was a handsome man, with a beautiful soprano voice, marvellous in its liquid translucence and its flexibility.” Henderson, William James. *op.cit.*, p. 143.

<sup>21</sup> Mancini, Giovanni Battista. *op.cit.*, p. 11.

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