

Introduction

Singer, thing of evil, stupid and wicked slave of the voice, of that instrument which was not invented by the human intellect, but begotten of the body, and which, instead of moving the soul, merely stirs up the dregs of our nature!

VERNON LEE,
"A Wicked Voice," 1890

IN 1803 AN ARTICLE WAS PUBLISHED in the Venetian newspaper *Il quotidiano veneto* that described the vocal apparatus. It recommended tonics to soothe the throat and detailed the cartilaginous structure of the larynx before concluding with a riposte to centuries of European music theory. "Father [Marin] Mersenne and Father [Athanasius] Kircher said that if one could imagine an instrument that was at once a wind instrument and a stringed one, it would be the most perfect of all." The anonymous author went on to say that, although these seventeenth-century French and German intellectuals claimed to have "discovered" the idea of this "perfect" instrument, "nature [had] spared them the labor. This amazing instrument is as old as the world; and we all possess it in the human voice."¹ For the author, such an amazing instrument was not something that needed to be discovered, nor did it need to be invented or theorized, least of all by Italy's northern neighbors. The Italian writer, and implicitly his readers too, knew what the French and the Germans had missed: the human voice was primordial, universal, and natural.

That an Italian, writing in a Venice recently handed off from Napoleon's France to the Austrian Habsburgs, would stake a claim to privileged knowledge about the voice is no small point—or so this book claims. In the chapters that follow I sketch out a historical narrative of how and why Italian

ideas about the voice transformed during the second half of the eighteenth century. Specifically, I contend that Italian writers, composers, and singers responded to increasingly pressing questions about the possibilities and limitations of song by rebranding the singing voice as a tool for civilizing humanity and, by extension, for creating modern political subjects. Broadly, I make a series of interconnected arguments about late eighteenth-century Italy through reading its cultural forms as negotiating and naturalizing what we nowadays call *voice*.

In so doing I draw from the transdisciplinary field of twenty-first-century voice studies the premise that we can regard *voice* both as denoting culturally situated sets of practices and as a quasi-transhistorical, if vexed, category.² The interlocutors in this book sometimes wrote about voice qua voice (*la voce*), like the Venetian author quoted above. At other times they referred to song or singing (*il canto*), to vocal accents or inflections (*accenti, inflessioni*), or just to the sound (*il suono*) of speech, poetry, or vocal music. Yet since my focus is on the historical processes through which voice accumulated certain associations, my object is less the terms people used than the stories they spun around them. For I maintain that it was primarily through stories that Settecento Italians created and engaged with the network of discourses and practices I gather here under the category of *voice*.

This, then, is what voice studies affords historical musicology: a provocation, an incitement even, to interrogate how we write histories of embodied practices. What kinds of questions can we ask, and what kinds of histories can we uncover, if we approach the past with an attention to things we now interpret as *voice*, even if they were not yet so-called? Prying open the past through voice is not tantamount to imposing tenets of philosophical voice studies, which have been inflected by poststructuralism and psychoanalysis, onto historical material that long predated them. Rather, by virtue of its capaciousness and multiplicity of meanings, the category *voice* highlights both the distance of the past from the present and the potential continuities between temporally distant ways of thinking.³

Both distance and continuity are necessary here because the historically situated myth at the heart of this book, the myth whose beginnings I trace in these chapters, is one that still underwrites vernacular notions of the human voice. In the common view, our voices are presumed, both figuratively and literally, to “naturally” express our feelings, our creativity, our political agency, even our deepest inner selves. Voices thereby seem to render sonorous not only our essentialized bodies but the very building blocks of the modern, Western,

liberal subject.⁴ A central project of voice studies scholarship, philosophical and otherwise, has been to expose these assumptions as ideologies, and culturally contingent ones at that, rather than ratifying them as natural truths.⁵

More recently, however, musicological work has turned away from “demystifying” voice toward making space for pluralities in how, why, and to whom voices have “belonged” (to borrow James Q. Davies’s formulation).⁶ In (re)turning to myth, my aim is neither to reinscribe essentializing beliefs about the voice nor to tear them down. What I want instead is to uncover the kinds of cultural work those beliefs have performed. To that end, I reinterpret Lacanian philosopher Mladen Dolar’s notion of “a voice and nothing more” as an invitation to think historically. If, as Dolar argues, the inherent lack of meaning in the singing voice is precisely what makes it seem capable of “cur[ing] the wound inflicted by culture,” then the stories told about singing voices in a particular time and place might lead us back to the cultural wounds they were supposed to be stanching.⁷

Put another way, voices are sites where bodies of ideology have been buried. In this book I exhume some of those ideological bodies by unearthing the contingencies of making, hearing, and mediating vocal sounds in late eighteenth-century Italy. Ultimately, such contingencies tell an origin story, if not the only one, for the ur-ideology of voice in modern Anglo-European civilization.

My approach here is twofold. First, I make a set of claims about late Settecento music, literature, and society by interrogating how emerging myths about the voice assuaged Italian cultural anxieties. Second, I make a case for seeking out traces of voice across an expanded archive: in musical scores, yes, and in reviews, treatises, and musical paratexts like opera prefaces, but also in poetry, novels, translations, and their respective editorial apparatuses, particularly when concerned with song or singers, ancient and modern; and, not least, in seemingly unrelated but coeval writings on topics like coffee, colonialism, and motherhood. Reading a wide swath of sources as archives of voice grants us access to histories that have eluded the traditional music-historical record, as I have argued elsewhere.⁸ But it also requires adding a dash of imagination to even the most rigorously historicist methodology. If I do sometimes venture into the speculative or the spectral in my search for traces of voice, I do so in sympathy with my Settecento interlocutors, who themselves made recourse to stories, myths, and poetic language in order to link together disparate ideas and tether abstract ideologies to material bodies.

THE VOICE PROBLEM

The material bodies that most needed ideological rebranding, in the view of Settecento intellectuals, were the ones that belonged to singers, the sources of Italy's much-beloved and much-maligned voices. In a recent monograph on opera in mid-eighteenth-century Parma, Margaret Butler summarizes the typical backstory of so-called reform opera: this genre "resulted when mid-century critics of Italian opera seria, frustrated with the domination of solo singers and the bad behavior of inattentive and unruly audiences, advocated for a return to dramatic unity."⁹ I quote her gloss because it neatly sums up the major Italian anxieties about voices and those who listened to them. And, as we will see, these anxieties were not limited to opera seria. Similar critiques were launched at the voices connected with popular and nonprofessional traditions as well, including those of street singers, poetic improvisers, and domestic amateurs.¹⁰

At first glance the critiques seem to point to straightforward musical and dramatic issues. As attested by oft-cited reform treatises by Francesco Algarotti (1755), Antonio Planelli (1772), and others, the root cause of serious opera's decline was singers' self-aggrandizing desire to show off their voices. Much like awe-inspiring stage machinery and lavish costumes, opera singers' voices, especially those of the castrati, were understood as material components of operatic spectacle. As what Bonnie Gordon calls "instrumentalized matter," opera's voices were sonic counterparts to its visual effects, serving up astonishing proof of nature made marvelous through technology and invention.¹¹ Beholden to serving that sonic-vocal spectacle, composers and librettists supposedly enabled singers' alleged abuses to the extent that the balance of expressive elements became lopsided (as Planelli, for one, insisted). Arias grew ever longer, with fewer words and more melismas, as showcases for singers' attention-seeking warbling. As the common critique went, singers' voices distracted from the poetry and the plot alike with virtuosic but empty display, and were thus accused of pleasing the ear and inspiring wonder without ever touching the heart. Audience members, in turn, were either obsessed by these flashy voices or utterly disinterested, but they were certainly not morally edified by the operatic experience.¹² Yet notwithstanding reformist critics' complaints, most operagoers clearly enjoyed the sonic spectacle; singers and their voices were the stars of Italian operatic culture for a reason.¹³ All told, the operatic singing voice was caught between a public hungry for virtuosity and intellectuals anxious to remake opera into a more literate genre.

Singers were not the sole culprits, however. Many writers also accused the wildly successful poet laureate Pietro Metastasio, whose libretti had long defined the genre of opera seria, of being complicit in these spectacular voices' reign. His uniform poetic style constrained the composer and the drama, some argued, and so left the way open for singers' musical transgressions to take center stage. For instance, although the Neapolitan intellectual Saverio Mattei worshiped Metastasio, he worried that the poet's unsurpassable skill had made it impossible for anyone else to write a decent opera libretto.¹⁴ The reform-minded composer Niccolò Jommelli blamed Metastasio more directly, as he felt he could not innovate musically within the conventions of Metastasian-style poetry. When requesting a libretto from his collaborator Gaetano Martinelli, the composer asked for something un-Metastasian in form because "if the poet is so keen to sing, very little indeed is left to the poor composer."¹⁵ Along similar lines, reformist literati like Ranieri de' Calzabigi and Matteo Borsa praised the universalizing maxims of Metastasio's opera libretti for their literary merit but declared the verses too rigid, too impersonal, to support genuinely expressive music.¹⁶ Poetry and music had failed sung drama by not providing a united front, permitting voices to operate as sonic-bodily spectacles, unmoored from meaning, reason, and the nobler passions.

This was by no means the first or last time that people fretted over musical-vocal sound becoming detached from semantic content. Such fears have shadowed the voice since at least the Greeks; take Homer's sirens, for instance.¹⁷ Essays by Carolyn Abbate and Michel de Certeau, among others, have approached the ostensible capacity of the sounding voice to exceed or subordinate language as, not a failure or problem, but a powerful refusal to submit to hermeneutics.¹⁸ It is tempting to extend such a reading backward to mid-to-late eighteenth-century voices—that is, to suggest that Enlightenment intellectuals were so disgruntled by the vocal-stylistic excesses of singers because they could not interpret them. Yet interpret them they did, and by the end of the narrative traced in this book, the sounds of the voice became a story all on their own.

Anxieties over what kind of work voices were supposed to perform reveal that the problem was not simply about changing musical tastes. In fact, as the following chapters will show, aesthetic debates surrounding the flashy voices of opera seria were rooted in far deeper concerns, especially ones about Italy's political status as a landform carved up by foreign powers and the diminishing authority abroad of Italian literature and philosophy. This was because, as Nelson Moe has claimed, it was around midcentury that Italian intellectuals

began earnestly seeking “reconnection with the mainstream of European civilization” after decades of isolation, just when “civilized” Europe decided that Italy was a cultural backwater, and no more than a “pawn” in their own high-stakes political negotiations. Italy had little to offer besides music and ruins.¹⁹ So it was particularly distressing that Italy’s astonishing voices, shaped by surgeon’s knives and *solfeggi* at home and then sent to theaters and courts and churches across the world, now increasingly grated against the enlightened literary-theatrical views promulgated by those at the center of European civilization. What these enlightened thinkers, and their Italian admirers like the members of the Milanese Accademia dei Pugni, wanted from music, literature, and theater was verisimilar feeling—not astonishing spectacle.²⁰ If Italy wished to rejoin European civilization, its voices would have to be reformed.

NATURALIZING VOICE

One narrative about how Enlightenment thought naturalized the voice into a symbol for the feeling subject is anchored by Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Essay on the Origin of Languages* (written circa 1755; published posthumously in 1781). In Rousseau’s conception of the primordial past, gestures and “inarticulate sounds” sufficed for communication because primitive humans were concerned solely with survival.²¹ Emotions only evolved after “man” first took himself “out of himself” and “transported” his consciousness, via “imagination,” into someone else’s body—what Rousseau characterized as the genesis of pity.²² This individual, consistent yet imaginatively mobile consciousness was, for Rousseau, “the self.”²³ The self forged “social affections” with other selves by signaling their mutual humanity, which was dependent on their capacity for feeling emotions (in eighteenth-century parlance, this was known as their “sensibility”). The way selves signaled their capacity for feeling, and thus their mutual humanity, was through their voices: “man alone sings.” Because “passion makes the vocal organs speak,” Rousseau argued, “voice proclaims a sensitive being [*un être sensible*].”²⁴ In theorizing the primordial origins of human society, Rousseau positioned the voice as natural proof of a feeling subject. He was not the first to think about voice and song in this way, as others have pointed out (and about which more in chapter 1), but his version is the best known, thanks in large part to Derrida’s extended (if flawed) reading of the *Essay* in *Of Grammatology*.²⁵

What is important about Rousseau's tale for my purposes is less whether he invented the notion of primordial song and more about the role that he assigned to Italy within his larger views on music, language, and society. In the *Essay* Rousseau lamented that the modern gap between vocal sounds and feelings was irreparable; the progressive complexity of rational human language and civilization forever precluded a return to expressing feeling directly through vocal inflections. Of course, he kept hoping for such a return anyway.²⁶ Within Europe, the best hope seemed to lay in the land of the midday sun: Rousseau had simultaneously fetishized and infantilized the Italians for their purportedly "songlike" language in his *Letter on French Music* (1753) after attempting to translate that songishness into French in his *intermède Le devin du village* (1752).²⁷ By presenting the Italian language as less removed from that long-lost originary song, he insinuated that the people who spoke or sang Italian, even in his own time, were themselves less removed from primitivity than, say, the highly rational, civilized French.²⁸ Rousseau's construction of voice vis-à-vis society thus points to one of the central tensions that undergirds the narrative of this book. An affinity for song was what made Italy special in the eyes and ears of civilized Europe, but it was also what marked Italians as less civilized and therefore implicitly justified their continuing political subjugation.

Reforming voice, then, was a double process. Writers and musicians alike sought to re-naturalize Italy's voices by domesticating and civilizing certain vocal practices. Yet because those practices were connected with singing bodies that troubled Enlightenment ideologies of domesticity and civilization by being "unnatural"—namely, the bodies of women and castrated men—such attempts to naturalize voice also reinscribed the discourses that marked voice as *needing* to be domesticated and civilized. That paradoxical double process manifested in microcosm the contradictions inherent to Enlightenment constructs of subjectivity writ large.

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The other point of rehearsing Rousseau's theory of voice is to emphasize that an ideologically motivated origin story, whether his or anyone else's, did not metamorphose into a naturalized truth through polemical essays alone. The protagonist of such stories—the singing voice—also performed important labor, however difficult it might be to pin down so many centuries later. But where can we seek out the traces of that labor?

As Robert O. Gjerdingen notes in his study of eighteenth-century composition pedagogy (and as hinted by my opening gambit), unlike the French and the Germans, the Italians in this period rarely theorized outright about music in writing. The labor of music making was cultural and social, and training primarily carried out *viva voce*, leaving behind only remnants of practice as evidentiary traces.²⁹ For Gjerdingen's composition-oriented study, the material remains of practice lay in *zibaldoni*, or student notebooks, filled with exercises like *partimenti* and *solfeggi*, without many straightforward acts of theorizing until much later. The situation with published singing treatises is similar in that they were few and far between in Italy during the mid-to-late eighteenth century. Those that were published were mostly published and sold elsewhere—in Vienna, Paris, London—and tell us more about the commodification of Italianate singing pedagogy than about the nuances of practice, which Italian singing teachers insisted could only be learned through one-on-one instruction.³⁰ By the second quarter of the nineteenth century, when Italianate practices of voice were being theorized widely and explicitly, the resulting texts reflected not the initiation, but the *culmination* of notions of voice that had been coalescing in Italy for decades.

One place to look for early traces is, unsurprisingly, in opera scores and their attendant texts—libretti, reviews, prefaces, and so forth. Indeed, there are several well-established opera reform narratives that implicate shifts in vocal practices, even if only as “solutions” to musical-dramatic “problems.” For instance, Gluck and Calzabigi's *Orfeo ed Euridice*, which premiered in Vienna in 1762, has long been read as a concerted aesthetic return to the “ancients,” meant to ratify both the Greeks and the Seicento Tuscans as progenitors of opera. By reintroducing into Italianate opera a simpler, more declamatory vocal style, the Viennese reforms ostensibly prohibited the sounds of singers' voices from intervening between the poetic-musical message and its reception by an audience, successfully placing singers under the authority of composer and librettist. But that is not how things unfolded in Italy. As Daniel Heartz, Martha Feldman, Alessandra Martina, and Ellen Lockhart have demonstrated, Enlightenment-era Italians were by no means immune to reformist strains, yet they dealt with them differently than did their neighbors beyond the Alps.³¹

Another common but incomplete narrative about the voice in opera reform originated closer to home on the Italian peninsula, and is in fact an essential precursor to the Gluckian tale: the tremendous success story of opera buffa. The genre rose from its humble origins in the intermezzo

through Piccinni's *La buona figliuola* to Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro* and *Don Giovanni* (though the latter two are not technically *opere buffe*).³² Characteristic musical elements of *buffa* style, including speechlike declamation, songlike melodies, simple accompaniment, and rapid emotional shifts, were presumably what inspired Rousseau to praise Italian music above French in the first place. And, as Pierpaolo Polzonetti has shown, *opera buffa* in this period had quite a bit to say about Italian political concerns, though they were often filtered through representations of Italy's others.³³ My intention is not to retread these established narratives, although Italian remakes of *Orfeo ed Euridice* and productions of certain comic operas do appear in my own version; by weaving them in alongside many now lesser-known but no less important Italian serious operas, I attempt to trace shifts in the singing voice across various genres and forms. Simply, I am drawing out a narrative about the voice, not opera itself.

What the works I focus on have in common, notwithstanding their various forms and genres, is that they all spotlight confrontations between vocal sound and its mediation. Here I take inspiration from Shane Butler in *The Ancient Phonograph*, in particular how he reads ancient poetry not as a mere "tool" for the "transmission" of language but as a sonic-vocal medium in its own right.³⁴ With the music I take up here, I consider how vocal sound and expressivity were constructed by, and (re)presented through, the conventions they made audible. More specifically, I think about how the affordances of generic conventions—and the breaking of them—affected how the elements of music, words, and performance staged the voice and its limitations. Foundational to such an approach is Abbate's classic 1995 essay "Opera; or, the Envoicing of Women," in which opera is a dynamic genre that confers agency on different entities at different times via the interplay between score, libretto, and the immediacy of vocal performance.³⁵ I adapt Abbate's premise somewhat, however, in that I do not necessarily equate the singing voice on stage with (the projection of) agency. Rather, I attempt to think about what spectators in specific contexts—Venice's Teatro San Benedetto in 1776, a salon in a private Milanese home in 1794—might have interpreted as coming from a character, from the performer, or from the musico-poetic script, as based on a constellation of local factors. In so doing, I draw on Feldman's work on the social and metatheatrical making of operatic meaning—as in, for example, her argument that the frictions between fixity and variability in aria performance were essential to the Settecento experience of serious opera.³⁶ I also take cues from studies by Mauro Calcagno, Emily Wilbourne,

and Melina Esse, each of whom has read the slippage among various operatic elements in different contexts as representing notions of voice, identity, or agency (in the Seicento and Ottocento, respectively).³⁷

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But, of course, scores can only tell us so much. Even autograph manuscripts are not perfectly preserved remains of voices and voicings: they are highly mediated traces of listenings both real and imagined.³⁸ In scores, as well as in reviews and other texts, people inscribed voices as they thought they heard them, or as they wanted to hear them. This requires some reading between the lines for clues to embodied sonic-vocal practices like ornamentation and expressive inflection, as well as a critical attention to how any “evidence” about vocal sound, especially timbre, has been remediated from acoustic reality into notated music and words.³⁹

In this respect my approach owes much to work on sound in the prephonographic and (post)colonial archive. As Ana María Ochoa Gautier writes, in dialogue with Gary Tomlinson, the “acoustic dimensions” of such archives “are not presented to us as discrete, transcribed works.” Sounds, vocal and nonvocal, were “dispersed into different types of written inscriptions that transduce different audile techniques into specific legible sound objects of expressive culture.”⁴⁰ In this book, those “sound objects of expressive culture” are not only musical works but also novels, poems, translations, essays, and much more. I wish to stress here that, despite recent arguments that locate Italy in the Global South, I am not claiming that eighteenth-century Italy was a land of colonized peoples, not least because it lacked the racial and ethnic power dynamics that characterized colonial contexts outside of Europe.⁴¹ I do, however, show in chapter 3 that discourses of colonialism and imperialism inflected Italy’s sense of its own Europeanness, and implicitly its whiteness, in ways that contributed to the nascent link between voice and subjectivity. Just as late eighteenth-century Italy provides fertile ground for excavating the remains of historical voices, it also facilitates a critical study of “universal” and “enlightened” (i.e., white, male, literate, able-bodied, Eurocentric) constructs of subjectivity as negotiated through those voices.

In thus reading voice as, variously, a concept, a set of sonic practices, and textual remains, I make recourse to two broad subcategories. First, *voice* is a set of culturally oriented and historically determined practices of sound

making, language use, and literary production. Second, *voice* is a metonym or other discursive representation of agency, authenticity, identity, and/or authority; this subcategory is also culturally constructed, but often in such a way as to obscure that constructedness for ideological purposes.⁴² A central contention of this study is that some iterations of sonic-musical-literary practices of voice reflected and even effected the ways in which voice has been ideologically constructed in and as discourse. But in order to reconnect practices with ideology in a historically and culturally situated way, we need to figure out how that intervening discursive labor was being carried out. This is where the book's title, "the lyric myth of voice," comes in.

THE LYRIC SONG

I argue that late Settecento ideas about the voice converged at the nexus of myth and song. In making this argument I take a page from the philosophy of Neapolitan historiographer Giambattista Vico, whose treatise *La scienza nuova* (1725; rev. 1730, 1744) stakes a claim for the foundational nature of both myth and song in the formation of cultural knowledge.⁴³ Giuseppe Mazzotta has glossed Vico's understanding of mythology as a "science capable of giving voice to silence," a "grammar" of "memory and history" in one. As for song, in the Vichian framework it is not set in opposition to philosophy, history, or myth (as in Platonic thought), but as prior to them: song subtends "all forms of knowledge" within a given culture.⁴⁴ In the *Scienza nuova* Vico promulgated his own theory of primordial song, a decade-plus before Rousseau, in which song was at once the "violent" expression of strong passions and the frame that "moderated" those passions—simultaneously a naturalizing and a civilizing force.⁴⁵ Significantly, as Tomlinson has argued, Vico's notion of song "represented the profound distance" between his own present and the primitive past; in the philosophies of Rousseau, Herder, and other mid-to-late eighteenth-century writers, however, originary song instead became "presentist" and "sentimental," evidence of continuities between past and present.⁴⁶ As we will see in chapter 1, it was in both estranging and presentist-sentimental form that Vichian notions of song and civilization diffused through late Settecento culture, and through which Vico's own focus on song shifted into a preoccupation with the voices that sing.

As evidence for the extended influence of Vichian notions of myth and song throughout this period, take the words of Italian poet and novelist Ugo

Foscolo. Living in political exile in England in 1822, Foscolo published an essay defending allegories to skeptical non-Italian readers. Writing in English, Foscolo argued that allegories, when used well, enabled artists to contribute to “the improvement and perfection of social life.”⁴⁷ He took this stance partly in response to Germaine de Staël’s criticism of Italian neoclassical literature (and opera) in her 1815 essay “The Spirit of Translation,” especially to her urging Italian writers to translate northern works instead of continuing to “sift the ashes of the past” for inspiration.⁴⁸ Contra de Staël, Foscolo maintained that allegory was not a limit to the imagination, but the most immediate means of activating it:

Ridiculous as allegories may appear to metaphysical critics, they have been, nevertheless, the finest and most useful materials for artists to work from; and the disrepute into which they have now fallen has arisen from the injudicious use that has been made of them, [. . .] for every allegory is, in truth, only an abstract idea personified, which, by thus acting more rapidly and easily on our senses and our imagination, takes a readier hold of the mind.⁴⁹

Foscolo’s last point resonates with Vico’s claim of eighty-some years prior that “the most sublime labor of song is to give sense and passions to things without sense.”⁵⁰ Whether in song, poetry, or myth, symbolism corralled abstract concepts into figures and stories, making them readily accessible—and therefore capable of shaping the social through the aesthetic.

In the same essay Foscolo himself gave shape to a set of abstractions by invoking a particular myth of song. For him, artistic originality and emotional authenticity were symbolized by what he called “the Lyric song,” which “in [ancient] Greece was the spontaneous effusion of genius and the passions.”⁵¹ The word *lyric* (Italian: *lirico*), derived from the Greek *lyra*, denotes poetry declaimed or sung to the accompaniment of a lyre. By the eighteenth century, *lyric* had extended to include most poetry intended for musical setting, and by the time Foscolo was writing his defense, it had become even more than that. His notion of ancient lyric song as a “spontaneous effusion” reveals the influence of late Settecento practices of voice. Foscolo was drawing on the myth of an originary vocal-emotional and poetic-musical unity that had long been personified in the figure of the ancient poet-singer—but had more recently been transferred to some of the real singers who embodied those myths on stage.

For literati and musicians in the last decades of the eighteenth century, the archetypal figure of the lyric poet-singer emblemized both a utopian song-

world and the fantasy of a voice that unified all the elements of lyric. However “ridiculous” such myths might have seemed to “metaphysical critics,” the lyric poet-singer encapsulated for late Settecento Italians the otherwise abstract sense of what was missing, not only from the virtuosic voices of opera seria, but from modern Italian culture in general.

Through the heuristic of *lyric*, then, I bring together the people, practices, and texts that collectively made manifest the origins of the ideology of voice-as-subjectivity—that is, the lyric myth of voice. Lyric has multiple meanings here. It refers to the aforementioned archaic Greek genre of musical poetry (i.e., song), and its eighteenth-century iterations. At the same time, it connotes the late eighteenth-century literary lyric mode, which is typically defined not by generic or formal features but by salient aspects of mood and method. In Italy, the broadening of *lyric* from musico-poetic genre to literary mode has been linked to its usage in a 1792 novel by Alessandro Verri, whom we’ll meet in chapter 3. The new literary lyric mode was characterized by representations of vivid emotion, expressive immediacy, and, above all, aestheticized subjectivity.⁵² Yet those lyric signatures had originated in practices and discourses of voice, both poetic and musical, long before they solidified into novelistic prose.

As mode and as genre, lyric shares many of the contradictions I have laid out thus far as characteristic of both the myth of primordial song and the double process of reforming voice. For one thing: Was lyric created by a spontaneous, unmediated effusion of subjectivity? Or was it a scripted performance, a set of artistic calculations intended to convincingly imitate feeling and conjure subjectivity? As with the singing voice, the answers are murky. Around the same time that Foscolo defended allegory, Hegel—possibly one of those at whom Foscolo’s defense was aimed—theorized lyric as fundamentally about “inwardness,” with its “final aim the self-expression of subjective life.”⁵³ Taking a similar (but more Foscolian) line in his 1821 “Defence of Poetry,” Percy Bysshe Shelley compared the lyric poet to “a nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds.”⁵⁴ Shelley and Hegel each smoothed over the performative aspect of lyric self-expression by defining it as inherently solipsistic. And yet, the poet who sings to himself can only be recognized as a poet if their songs are (over)heard. Even in the archaic Greece so idealized by authors like Foscolo, lyric had never been the unmediated, impassioned effusion of the moment. As Leslie Kurke notes, lyric in that period was a genre for fostering collective sociability and public edification: it was meant to be heard, not merely “overheard,”

however personal or emotionally intimate the poetry might have seemed. The archaic lyric poet-singer figure was a persona, a role, an archetypal representative of the community, not the unique, individual, inward-looking subject of Romantic lyric.⁵⁵

Nevertheless, as Jonathan Culler declares in his monumental *Theory of the Lyric*, there is something transhistorical about lyric, from Sappho to Petrarch to Wordsworth to today. The commonality lies in lyric's foundational tension between its "formal elements," comprised of the conventions that determine meaning and performance practice, and the contingent elements of immediacy and subjectivity, however they were understood in a given historical context.⁵⁶ Lyric is produced by the frictions between script and that which appears to exceed scripting. It is thus to a certain extent always self-reflexively concerned with the relationships between poetry or song, subjectivity, and voice.⁵⁷

These lyric frictions are brought to the fore in live performance. While the singers discussed in this book were experimenting with vocal inflections, timbres, and embellishments as ways to project expressive immediacy, theatrical reformers in places like London and Paris were theorizing about how actors could most convincingly portray "natural" emotions onstage. Denis Diderot famously took the line that actors had to truly feel that which they meant to project, adumbrating Foscolo's fantasy of ancient lyric song.⁵⁸ But then, curiously, Diderot did an about-face on the point. By the 1770s, when he wrote the essay *Paradox of the Actor*, Diderot believed that an actor who felt what he portrayed might be authentic, but could only give a "fine moment," not a "fine performance," because the instability of genuine feeling would disrupt the unity of the actor's portrayal. Any such break would expose, indeed highlight, the artificiality of performance, because the perception of unity was foundational to an audience's acceptance of a character as a stable, consistent "I"—that is, as a self or subject. (The theatrical equation of subjectivity with unity is also a hallmark of lyric theory, on which more in chapter 2.)⁵⁹ A great performance required that an actor feel nothing at all, Diderot argued, so that they could calculate how best to present a unified character. Still, if one thought about this paradox too much, the great actor's performance became "terrifying," as one realized that the actor had managed to pass off the artificial as natural.⁶⁰

When it came to reforming voice, both in sound and in writing, the historical interlocutors in this book grappled with that lyric paradox by turning to figures and situations in which vocal performance was already implicated

as a central concern. The lyric figure, so important to the birth of opera, but since edged out by the epic-heroic figures of Metastasian opera seria, allowed for song, voice, and performance to be staged self-reflexively.⁶¹ Lyric figures kept the voice center stage while testing its sonic, textual, and expressive limits.

LYRIC FIGURES

For late eighteenth-century Italians the lyric figure primarily materialized through two quasi-historical, quasi-mythical characters: Orpheus, the mythological progenitor of lyric, and Sappho, the archaic author of its swan song. Take, for instance, the entry on *lirico* in the Italian edition of Diderot and D'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* (as the *Dizionario di belle lettere*, 1795). By way of defining *lyric*, Jean-François Marmontel declared that moderns like Malherbe and Rousseau were only "pretending" to be poets, while the ancient lyric poets, including Orpheus and Sappho, had had an "authentic character" because they "actually sang to the harmonies of the lyre."⁶² On stage and on the page, indexing these lyric figures served as a shorthand for musical, vocal, and emotional authenticity, such that their songs seemed as spontaneous effusions of feeling. Once that authenticity had been established, the rest of the performance or text could play with the lyric tensions that in other contexts had to remain hidden. The paradox became a feature, not a bug. And as such, it continued to furnish space for music-theatrical experimentation well into the nineteenth century: as Esse has shown in her recent monograph *Singing Sappho*, the Sappho-esque *improvvisatrice* figure became in the Ottocento an operatic vehicle for composers and singers to navigate issues of authenticity, spontaneity, and authorship.⁶³

For late Settecento Italians, however, Orpheus and Sappho represented a genealogy of the lyric myth of voice, as well as what that myth might mean for Italy. One version of the Orpheus story limns this genealogy through the lyre itself. After Orpheus was torn to pieces at the hands of the Maenads, his severed head murmured along without a body; his lyre also continued to sound of its own accord and floated away from his bodily remains to eventually land on the shores of Lesbos, transferring its power to the young Sappho.⁶⁴ Sappho became at once Orpheus's heir and his double: the mutilation and scattering of Orpheus's physical corpus was echoed by the mutilation and scattering of Sappho's poetic corpus (on which see chapter 4).

Arrestingly, both poets were believed to have continued singing in fragmentary form long after their literal deaths. These lyric figures thus offered Italians two variations of a mythical allegory—one that resonated with the concept of “Italy”—in which the dispersed self or subject nevertheless sings on, its spectral voice vouchsafing a foundational unity beneath the fractured physical surface.

The five central chapters of this book loosely follow the lyre’s trajectory from Orpheus to Sappho, though they trace a set of imbricated narratives rather than a single grand one. These narratives include transitions from poetic presentations of voice to musical ones; from the emblematic Italian voice as heroic to sentimental; from the castrated male singer as Orpheus to the female singer as Sappho; from voice as a set of specific poetic or musical practices, like prosody and ornamentation, to voice as timbre or embodied sound “itself”; and from writing voices as repositories of histories to hearing voices as histories in and of themselves.

Chapter 1 begins in the 1760s, when the translator Melchiorre Cesarotti adapted and applied Vichian historiography to (supposedly) ancient Gaelic poetry in order to make voice, more than song, the quintessential parameter of feeling in literature. Before long, Cesarotti’s Gaelic bard metamorphosed into an Orphic figure on the operatic stage, infusing the Greek poet-singer myth with new strains of vocal sensibility. Chapter 2 follows three castrato singers from the 1770s to the early 1790s as they attempted to remake opera (and assure their own survival) through their vocal performances of that new Orphic sensibility, reimagining acting, aria form, and ornamentation along the way. After the primarily literary and operatic focus of the first two chapters, the latter three broaden out into cultural history. Chapter 3 considers how critiques of the Orphic figure of voice in the 1780s and 1790s raised questions about Italian identity vis-à-vis Europeanness, modernity, and empire: such questions included ones about the political and economic stakes of Orphic sensibility; the role of voice in creating intimate publics; and the racialized, classed, and gendered modes of difference pointed up by the notion of “civilizing song.” Chapter 4 turns from Orpheus to Sappho by tracing the twin archaeological and confessional imaginations of the 1780s, showing how writers and composers treated Sappho’s “sublime” lyrics as fragments of her voice and, as such, remains of her subjectivity. This chapter and the next mark a crucial point in the ideological suturing of voice to subjectivity, revealing it as dependent on gendered myths about the relationships between body, voice, and self. Chapter 5 argues that these myths became

audible in the 1790s, for perhaps the first time, as they were projected onto the vocal timbres of opera singer Luigia Todi—with far-reaching aesthetic, political, and cultural effects. Throughout the book, these two figures, the Orphic and the Sapphic, emerge from between the lines of history as symbolic repositories for all kinds of fantasies and anxieties, lending form, flesh, and sound to the lyric myth of voice.