JUDIT ZSOVÁR

ANNA MARIA STRADA DEL PÒ, 
HANDEL’S PRIMA DONNA

PHD THESIS

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ANNA MARIA STRADA DEL PÒ, HANDEL’S PRIMA DONNA: PORTRAIT OF AN UNCOMMON VOICE

JUDIT ZSOVÁR

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Prelude

In the second act of Karel Čapek’s comedy, *The Makropulos Case* (Prague, 1922), – and likewise in Leoš Janaček’s opera of the same title (world première in Brno, 1926) – Vítek, the clerk, congratulates the 337-year-old prima donna, Emilia Marty/Elina Makropulos, after her fabulous performance that night and compares her to Anna Maria Strada del Pò, referring to history books which recorded her superb vocal artistry:

*Emilia:* Were you in the theatre? Did you like any performance?

*Vítek:* I should just think I did. Why, it was as good as Strada.

*Emilia:* Have you heard Strada sing? Let me tell you that Strada had no voice—she just made whistling noises.

*Vítek:* Why, Strada died a hundred years ago.

*Emilia:* So much the worse. You ought to have heard her. Strada! What do you mean by talking about Strada?

*Vítek:* I’m sorry, madam, but I—of course, I’ve never heard her. Only according to what the history books say—

*Emilia:* Let me tell you that the history-books are full of lies. I’ll tell you something: Strada made whistling noises and Corrona had a plum in her throat. Agujari was a goose and Faustina breathed like a pair of bellows. So much for your history-books.¹

Emilia denigrates Strada’s voice, together that of two other singers in Janaček’s opera, and of three exceptional ones in Čapek’s original play: Corona Schröter, a Kammersängerin in Weimar, friend of Goethe and Schiller, whose strength lay in her pure vocal sound; Lucrezia Agujari who, according to Leopold Mozart, possessed an extraordinary agility and a range of three and a half octaves up to c‴, and had a beautiful voice with mellowness and sweetness, as testified by Fanny Burney; and the mezzo-soprano Faustina Bordoni, the most celebrated female singer of the Baroque era, with a big and penetrating voice.² Emilia’s mockeries address these singers’ main vocal characteristics, by asserting their opposites.


Among George Frideric Handel’s leading singers, Strada was the soprano with whom he had the longest period of continuous collaboration (1729–37) as well as the one who ‘seems to have pleased him most’. Charles Burney considered her as an artist formed by the composer himself. I have chosen to investigate her 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 not become a research focus – neither in Handel research nor in the field of eighteenth-century vocality – until now. This neglect of her 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 were made about her singing for example by 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). However, as suggested by the mention of her in The Makropulos Case, Strada during the nineteenth century must have still been remembered as a great musician with a strong voice production. That Čapek as playwright of the Vinohrady Theatre chose Strada’s art to make a compliment to a 337-year-old singer, who in her career brought every segment of her art to perfection, refers to her long-lasting and wide-spread appreciation within professional circles.

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

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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 and Giambattista Mancini. This type of full body singing was in fact the main characteristic of the castrato style and become 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 for this 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. 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 her vocal personality. This is the method used by Charles Burney, for example. In the case of the soprano castrato Valeriano Pellegrini (1663–1746) he suggests certain abilities that the score might indicate concerning

7 Considering the repertoire of her early, Venetian years, especially the arias Vivaldi wrote for her, one can assume that Strada’s upper vocal range naturally tended to have a solid and bright sound from the very beginning of her career.
Mirtillo’s first aria, *Fato crudo, Amor severo* in *Il pastor fido* (1712),⁹ but in the end he classifies the singer according to the general quality of 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):

The first air for a soprano, lets us know what kind of voice the Cavalier Valeriano possessed of; and the pathetic style of the first part of his song, as well as the agility necessary to the execution of the second, seem to imply abilities in that performer, of no mean kind. This air and many other airs in the opera, are only accompanied by a violoncello, in the old cantata style; but Handel always contrives to make this single accompaniment interesting without overwhelming the voice-part, or depriving it of attention. […] Valeriano was only of second class;¹⁰

Since Strada’s beauty of voice and manner of singing always drew admiration, and never received a negative review even from malicious critics – she was rather criticised for her ‘frightfull mouths’ and unfavourable looks¹¹ – one can conclude that the ideal audible parameters of the arias inspired by and dedicated to her did reflect her actual vocal characteristics.

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. Also, in contrast with the typical structure of musicians’ biographies, especially of singers, that I have encountered so far, 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 am discussing vocal technical issues in greater detail than usual, and embedded in the analyses of selected arias. My conviction is that in this way a well-rounded vocal profile can be achieved and effectively transmitted to the reader, since the subject is a singer of the pre-recording era.

The present dissertation also contains a portfolio recorded with Fanni Edőcs harpsichordist in Budapest in 2015 (App. A), which, unfortunately, had to be made under very limited circumstances. These are neither studio, nor professional recordings; and they

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¹¹ Mrs Pendarves’s letter to her sister, Anne Granville, 29 or 30 November 1729. *George Frideric Handel: Collected Documents Volume 2*, 320.
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 (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 that: as 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 relations 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 piece. Through Strada’s example I also hope 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 successfully operate 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 individual vocal attributes and personal features.

12 Two recordings dedicated to Strada’s repertoire were released in the last few years: Karina Gauvin’s *Prima Donna* (ATMA Classique, 4 September 2012) and *Anna Maria Strada: La favorita di Händel* by María Espada (Musiepoca, 1 July 2015). Apart from the latter’s silvery ringing vocal substance and darker colour, in many aspects these two recording do not correspond to my research results about Strada’s vocal art and manner of singing.
Chapter One: Early Years

Anna Maria Strada was born in 1703, and died in Naples on 20\textsuperscript{th} July 1775. Jean-Benjamin de la Borde, in his list of the ‘celebrated female singers for the theatre’, notes her as a native of Bergamo.\footnote{Jean-Benjamin de la Borde, \textit{Essai sur la Musique Ancienne et Moderne}, vol. iii (Paris: Onfroy, 1780), 325.} Her father might have been the bass Giuseppe Maria Strada, who was a member of the chapel choir of Santa Maria Maggiore in Bergamo between 1709 and 1711.\footnote{I am very grateful to Anita Sikora, who drew my attention to Giuseppe Strada and suggested the possibility of him being Anna Maria’s father. See K. J. Kutsch, Leo Riemens, Hansjörg Rost, \textit{Grosses Sängerlexikon}, vol. vi (K. G. Saur: Munich, 2003), 4562.} Giuseppe sang in Milan (\textit{Muzio Scevola} and Giovanni Pagliardi’s \textit{Numa Pompilio} 1690), Parma (\textit{Furo Camillo} by Giacomo Perti 1697), Casale Monferrato (\textit{Il gran Pompeo} 1704), Verona (Francesco Pollarolo’s \textit{Venceslao}, 1708), Ferrara (\textit{Partenope} by Antonio Caldara 1709), Novara (1711) and Brescia (Tomaso Albinoni’s \textit{I rivali generosi} 1715). Besides, he received a monthly grant of three \textit{doppie} from the Court of Mantova from the 1\textsuperscript{st} February 1696 onwards.\footnote{Paola Besutti, \textit{La Corte Musicale da Ferdinando Carlo Gonzaga Ultimo Duca di Mantova} (Mantova: 1989), 82.} Anna Strada surely received her first musical instructions from her father, and it may be a feasible hypothesis that later, in her mid-teens, she either spent a couple of years of training in Bologna – the centre where the modern singing method developed, becoming the chief market of opera management by the mid-century – or rather was taught by someone coming from there.\footnote{John Rosselli, \textit{Singers of Italian Opera: The History of a Profession} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 42.} It is also very likely that Strada additionally received instrumental training on the harpsichord, a possibility which is supported by the fact that in 1731, when she was singing for Handel, an instrument built in 1729 by the harpsichord maker Burckhard Tschudi, a good friend of the composer, became her property (see ch. 3).\footnote{William Dale, \textit{Tschudi the Harpsichord Maker} (London: Constable and Company, 1913), 32–34.} She probably could accompany herself, fulfilling one of a ‘Singer’s Principal Qualifications’, as set by Pier Francesco Tosi.\footnote{Pier Francesco Tosi, \textit{Opinioni de’ cantori antichi e moderni} (Bologna: Volpe, 1723; Eng. trans. by John Ernest Galliard as \textit{Observations on the Florid Song or, Sentiments on the ancient and modern Singers} (London: Wilcox, 1743), VI.§16, VII.§14.}

The modern singing school was founded and run by the castrato Francesco Antonio Pistocchi, the ‘father of modern good taste’, from 1701–2 onwards, after he returned to Bologna from Germany;\footnote{Anne Schnoebelen, ‘Pistocchi, Francesco Antonio Mamiliano [‘Il Pistocchino’]’, \textit{Grove Music Online}, ed. L. Macy. Accessed 11 November 2014; John H. Roberts, ‘Handel and the Shepherds of Ansbach’, in:} another such school was run by the composer Niccolò Porpora,
from 1712 in Naples. It could be that one of Pistocchi’s castrato pupils later became Strada’s teacher either in Bologna or in Lombardy: in Bergamo or Milan. Probably the master’s connections must have been helpful for the young soprano to get an appointment as virtuosa da camera at the court of Count Girolamo Colloredo-Waldsee, the new governor of Milan and patron of arts, in 1720. Arriving there, Strada was discovered by Antonio Vivaldi, who engaged her for the 1720/21 season at the Teatro Sant’Angelo in Venice.

The Bolognese contralto Antonia Merighi, one of Strada’s regular fellow singers, supposedly belonged to the circle of Pistocchi, and was strongly influenced by his pupils, Antonio Bernacchi and the tenor Annibale Pio Fabri, with whom she regularly performed. Very intriguing is the fact that she used to sing with Strada in the same company in Venice; after that, Merighi was engaged in Naples, and when she left the city in 1724 Strada was appointed there. Later, from 1729 onwards, they found themselves in the same troupe again, this time in Handel’s Second Academy in London, also with Bernacchi. On both occasions when Strada was engaged in Naples and London, she seems to have appeared from out of nowhere. Logically, somebody must have recommended her; in the absence of documents, only hypotheses, based on the practice of the opera business, remain. If, Strada was trained either in Bologna or by somebody from the Bolognese school, she could have known Merighi and Bernacchi too, from her teens: Merighi was around thirteen, Bernacchi eighteen years her elder. Following the logic that Bernacchi, being Pistocchi’s pupil, carried on to teach his methods and later founded a school himself, and that he most probably gave some lessons to Merighi and even inspired the style of Farinelli, it seems very likely that Bernacchi himself might have been Strada’s teacher for a while at least. Strada’s assumed father, Giuseppe, sang together with Bernacchi – for example in the production of Pollarolo’s Venceslao (Verona 1708; with the young Diana Vico as well) – and therefore knew him personally, which makes this supposition feasible. During Strada’s possible training years (c. 1717–20), Bernacchi appeared in several operas

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in Northern Italy (for example, in Milan in 1719, in Reggio nell’Emilia in 1718–19 and in Venice between 1717 and 1719), and there is no reason why Strada could not travel to him regularly to receive singing lessons. Bernacchi may have passed on to her the idea of instrumental-type coloraturas, Lombard rhythm, *arpeggiato* elements, *volatine*, various turn-figures etc.: his inheritance from Pistocchi.\(^\text{12}\) Either he or Merighi could have proposed Strada not only in Naples and for Handel, but earlier too, for Count Colloredo in Milan or even for Lucca and Livorno, where Strada was active in 1722 and early 1724. Since Merighi stood in the service of Violante Beatrice, the Grand Princess of Tuscany, as a link to Strada she could mention her name concerning the productions in the two Tuscan cities.

### Venice

The Republic of Venice, due to successive wars against the Ottoman Empire, became weakened economically by the early eighteenth century. In addition, although it did not participate in the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–14), its negative impact reached the city, including its cultural life, by the breaking down of tourism.\(^\text{13}\) Contrarily to the political and economic decline, the sumptuousness of the entertainments, plays and operas remained continuous, serving to gloss over the real state of the Venetian Republic. In the 1720s then, as Eleanor Selfridge-Field remarks, ‘a generation of Europeans, impeded by war since the turn of the century, now came to Venice expecting to find the legendary splendours of earlier times. Instead they encountered an escalation of ceremony and its symbols’.\(^\text{14}\) The actor, playwright and theatre historian Luigi Riccoboni frequently commented on this paradox, for example that ‘no Sovereign ever spent so much upon these Representations as the Venetians have done’.\(^\text{15}\) Besides, his remark about the frequency of performances and the speed of the artists’ fluctuation was that ‘One may easily judge how much Operas are in Fashion at Venice, when he is told that at certain seasons they play

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\(^\text{14}\) Ibid., 350.

every day, and in six Theatres at the same time’. 16 The French writer and traveller, Charles de Brosses, took notice of the same:

Each theatre is running two operas a winter, sometimes three, so we expect to have approximately eight during our stay. Every year the pieces and the singers are different ones. No one wants to see an opera, or a ballet, stage set, or actor he has already seen the year before, unless it is a great opera by Vinci or some very famous voice. 17

An individual or company undertakes to produce an opera for carnival season. They [the directors] send for singers and dancers from various Italian cities, who, arriving from different directions, find themselves united in a cast without ever having seen or met each other. They call from Naples or Bologna, where the best musical schools are, a maestro di cappella. He arrives about a month prior to December 26 when the spectacle is to begin. They designate the drama that has been chosen for him; he composes 25 or 26 arias with orchestral accompaniment and the opera is complete since the recitative costs too much trouble to notate. He gives the arias one by one, as soon as they are written to the singers, who learn them with ease, since most are great musicians. 18

Naturally, the visual part of a theatrical performance was of pronounced importance all over Italy, often in a way sumptuous beyond measure, which may have overshadowed the brilliance of the music, rather than supporting it. The technical side of the shows frequently evoked amazement and led to detailed descriptions, though these visual effects could easily break the continuity of the drama. Riccoboni testifies this in his writing about his experiences of European theatres:

It were to be wished that we could give an exact Detail of all the Machines which the skilful Architects contrived on that occasion; and of all the wonderful Representations of that kind that have been executed in Venice, Rome, Naples, Florence, and other cities in Italy. As to the Decorations and the Machinery it may be safely affirmed, that no Theatre in Europe comes up to the Magnificence of the Venetian Opera; [...] In the Shepherd of Amphise, which was presented twenty Years after upon the Theatre of St.

16 Ibid., 74.
17 ‘A chaque théatre on exécute deux opéras par hiver, quelquefois trois; si bien que nous comptions en avoir environ huit pendant notre séjour. Ce sont chaque année des opéras nouveaux et de nouveaux chanteurs. On ne veut revoir, ni une pièce, ni une ballet, ni une décorations, ni un acteur, que l’on a déjà vu une autre année, à moins que se ne soit quelque excellent opéra de Vinci, ou quelque voix bien fameuse.’ Romain Colomb, ed., Le President de Brosses en Italie, vol. ii (Paris: 1858), 358.
John Chrysostome, the Palace of Apollo was seen to descend of very fine and grand Architecture, and built of Christals of different Colours which were always playing; the Lights which were placed behind these Christals were disposed in such a Manner, that so great a Flux of Rays played from the Machine, that the Eyes of the Spectators could scarcely support its Brightness.\(^{19}\)

Furthermore, an oil painting on canvas, named *Teatro* (by Alessandro Piazza from 1702), depicts such a spectacle. It probably shows the interior of Teatro Sant’Angelo with expensive costumes and scenery including the appearance of elephants on stage. According to Bruno Forment’s research, the conditions as shown in the picture might be an idealized performance rather than a real one, but it still sheds light on the luxurious environment of opera and the habits of the Venetian audience at the same time.\(^{20}\) Considering expenditure, the running of opera houses was understandably unprofitable most of the time:\(^{21}\)

Three Livres of Venetian Money gains Admittance into the Hall of the Opera, thirty Sols a Seat in the Pit, and the Boxes are in Proportion. If we compare these poor Receivings with the Expenses that are necessary for supporting the Magnificence of these Shows, we may easily account for the Losses which the Undertakers of the Opera sustain; it being impossible that for the four Months, during which these Entertainments last, the Receiving should equal the Outgiving; for the Venetian Opera begins at soonest in the Middle of November, and continues only to the last Day of the Carnival.\(^{22}\)

Despite such lavishness or just because of it, the attitude of the Venetians frequently caused indignation. The bad morals of the audience – including fights breaking out in the pit from time to time, due to the custom of impresarios who let the vacant places filled by *gondolier* – particularly shocked foreigners, who were accustomed to the elite conditions of court performances. Riccoboni considered the spectators as impetuous people:

The Spectators in almost All the Cities of Italy are restless and noisy, even before the Play begins. In their Applauses they are violent; and when they would distinguish a favourite Poet or Actor, they cry as loud as they can Viva-Viva. But if they have a Mind to damn the one, or hiss the other, they bawl out Va dentro, and very often they

\(^{19}\) Riccoboni, *An Historical and Critical Account*, 75. The opera referred to is Carlo Francesco Pollarolo’s *Il pastore d’Anfriso*, 1695.


\(^{22}\) Riccoboni, *An Historical and Critical Account*, 82.
make the poor Actor feel a further Proof of their Indignation by pelting him with Apples, and loading him with a great deal of Abuse. 23

Their Office on this Occasion is to applaud the Actors by clapping their Hands and shouting like Madmen. I won’t express . . . what Terms they use, when they congratulate the Women. 24

Benedetto Marcello, the author of the famous satirical pamphlet Il teatro alla moda (1720), and the greatest connoisseur of Venetian operatic life, portrayed the audience’s habits similarly:

Every night the impresario will hand out free tickets to his doctor, lawyer, pharmacist, barber, carpenter, and their business partners; also to his friends with their families. Thus the theater will never look empty. For the same reason he will ask all singers, the conductor, the instrumentalists, the bear, and the extras likewise to bring along each night five or six friends who will be admitted without tickets. 25

They [Members of Society] will buy their tickets “on approval” and they will leave every night after fifteen minutes [and redeem their tickets]. Thus they can see the entire opera within twelve evenings. They will go to the comedy because it costs less than the opera; and if they should go to the latter they will pay no attention, not even during a first night, except perhaps during a few bars of the prima donna’s aria, or during the scene with the lightning or thunderstorm. They will court Virtuosi of either sex because thus they hope to obtain some free tickets. 26

The disinterest of the public concerning recitatives was recorded by De Brosses and Josse de Villeneuve, the finance minister to Charles de Lorrain in Tuscany, besides Marcello. Within the framework of formal vocal instruction, the declamatory style of recitative played an important role, as Giambattista Mancini reports. Like every good

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23 Ibid., 53.
24 Francois Maximilien Misson writes, in his New Voyage to Italy (London, 1714), about gondolieri by whom the vacant places were filled up. See Reinhard Pauly, ‘Benedetto Marcello’s Satire on Early 18th-Century Opera’, The Musical Quarterly 34/2 (April, 1948), 222–233: 225.
26 Anderanno all’Opera col Pegno, posponendo ogni sera un quarto d’ora, e così vedranno tutta l’Opera in dodici sere. Frequenteranno Comedie per manco spesa e non baderanno all’Opera ne pure la prima sera, tolto che a qualche mezz’Aria della Prima Donna, alla Scena dell’Orso, ai Lampi, alle Saette, etc. Faranno la Corte a’ Virtuosi dell’uno e dell’altro sesso, per entrarg seco loro senza Biglietto, etc. etc. etc. etc.’ Marcello, Il teatro alla moda, Alle Maschere; ibid., 104.
work, it required time, and the short notice of the Venetian productions greatly limited the possibilities for learning and interpreting recitatives appropriately:

“Is it surprising” Tartini said to me one day, “that most of the time our recitatives are worthless, since the composer works only in a hurry on the declamation?” As for me, I forgive them, now that the audience is so much in the habit of not listening to recitative.  

As for the recitatives, they [the singers] do not take the trouble to study them, a fleeting glance suffices; they are content to repeat only what the prompter reads loudly to them, and the harpsichord keeps them in the key. They hold five or six rehearsals and in less than a month the opera appears on stage.

Venetian opera houses of the early eighteenth century – with a general audience capacity of 1400 persons – were differentiated by rank depending on which noble family owned them. This was a question of prestige and wealth rather than the quality of performances. The top ranking houses like San Giovanni Grisostomo – where star singers made their appearance – and San Samuele, together with SS. Giovanni e Paolo belonged to the Grimani clan, the most influential family of the city. The second row of the pyramid consisted of the Teatro San Cassiano, owned by the Tron family, Teatro di San Moisè, of the Giustinianis, and Teatro Sant’Angelo, owned by the Marcello and Cappello families. Composers such as Vivaldi, Francesco Gasparini and Tomaso Albinoni were congenial with the latter two theatres. As far as the number of works per season was concerned, S. Moisè gave the most, followed closely by Sant’Angelo and S. G. Grisostomo.

Although it lacked sumptuous stage machines, costumes and scenery, and whilst the more expensive and complex stage sets were reused in several productions, ‘people like

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27 “Faut-il s’étonner” me disait un jour Tartini, “si la plupart du temps le récitatif de nos opéras ne vaut rien, lorsque le musicien donne tout son soin à la composition des airs, et broche à la hâte tout ce qui est de déclamation?” Pour moi, je les excuse, aujourd’hui que les spectateurs ont si bien pris l’habitude de ne pas écouter le récitatif.” Colomb, ed., Le President de Brosses en Italie, vol. ii, 360; see Enrico Fubini, Music & Culture in Eighteenth-Century Europe (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 206.
28 Villeneuve, Lettre sur le mecanisme de l’opéra italien, 1756, cited by Henri Bedarida in Melanges de Musicologie; see Markstrom, The Operas of Leonardo Vinci, 61.
29 ‘The Theatres at Venice commonly contain four and twenty, and sometimes thirty Boxes in a Row; but these Boxes can hold no more than six Persons, so that admitting they were all full, they would contain no more than fourteen hundred Persons in all.’ Riccoboni, An Historical and Critical Account, 56.
33 Selfridge-Field, A New Chronology of Venetian Opera, 350.
to go to Sant’Angelo because it is cheap, but the operas are decadent’ asserted Giovan Battista Casotti, a visitor in 1713. Indeed, the tickets cost a third of the price of that of S. G. Grisostomo, and even the costumes and scenery were of modest financial conditions, but they were chosen in good taste and sometimes received appreciation from the audience. Michael Talbot states that Sant’Angelo actually presented a high artistic quality, which made it competitive with the most famous Venetian houses. Not only that: as Reinhard Strohm observes, ‘Sant’Angelo specialised in discovering, nurturing and retaining (for as long as its resources permitted) new talent and inaugurating new trends’. In this regard, it was a perfect match for Vivaldi, as he was very much interested in taking up unknown voices, helping to start the careers of young singers – of which Strada is one of the best examples, besides Merighi, Anna Girò or Margherita Giacomazzi – and himself was looking for manifold and innovative ways of composing.

Also, the field of plot subjects came likewise under debate among theatres: there was a rivalry between S. G. Grisostomo with its classical themes and Sant’Angelo and S. Moisè, which offered all the more ironical and fantastical ones. Besides, there was another war at that time evoked by the changing singing style, that between the taste of the ‘Ancients’ and ‘Moderns’. 

The new singing style

A major shift in the style of singing at the turn of the seventeenth century, i.e. the confrontation of the stile antico and stile moderno, takes an important place in such fundamental treatises as those of Tosi and Mancini. The elaboration of the technique for blending the chest and head registers opened up new perspectives towards a higher level of virtuosity, encompassing the whole range of the human voice. This expansion of vocal technical possibilities engrossed the attention of performers and composers alike, throwing off the balance of coloratura display and melodic cantabile expression. As a result, the latter was oppressed by the former to some extent, generating a sore spot for Tosi and others:

36 ‘In the period of the contract [i.e., late in 1714] Sant’Angelo was still charging only one lira and eleven soldi (a quarter ducat) for nightly entry to the theatre, as compared with the three lire and six soldi at San Giovanni Grisostomo...’ Ibid., 1; Talbot, ‘A Venetian Operatic Contract of 1714’, 26–27.
The Taste of the Ancients was a Mixture of the Lively and the Cantabile the Variety of which could not fail giving Delight; but the Moderns are so pre-possessed with Taste in Mode, that, rather than comply with the former, they are contented to lose the greatest Part of its Beauty. The Study of the Pathetick was the Darling of the former; and Application to the most difficult Divisions is the only Drift of the latter. Those perform’d with more Judgment; and These execute with greater Boldness. But since I have presum’d to compare the most celebrated Singers in both Stiles, pardon me if I conclude with saying, that the Moderns are arrived at the highest Degree of Perfection in singing to the Ear; and that the Ancients are inimitable in singing to the Heart.

Contemporary visitors to Venice also frequently reported on it. Riccoboni made complaints of decadence in expression for the sake of virtuosity:

[...] Italian Taste of Music is now changed. In short, at present it is all a Whim; Strength is sought instead of beautiful Simplicity; and Harshness and Singularity is substituted instead of the Expression and Truth which distinguished the former Manner. The surprising Capacity of their Singers, it is true, begets Admiration, but moves no Passion; and Judges say justly, that it is unreasonable to force a Voice to execute what is too much even for a Violin or a Hautboy. This is the true Reason why the Italian Music falls so far short of Perfection in Expression and Truth; [...] The new Manner however has got such Footing in Italy, that even Masters in the Art are obliged to conform to the general Taste, contrary to their better Judgement, to deviate from the Simplicity and Greatness of the ancient Manner, both in vocal and instrumental Performances.

Singers of the seventeenth century – relying on Giulio Caccini’s testimonial treatise and other descriptions of the castrato training system in Naples and elsewhere in Italy – considered the natural, chest voice as beautifully ringing and sonorous; therefore the essence of their study was to strengthen this register, the notes of which fall mainly in the first octave. Until the late eighteenth century, authors of singing treatises used the terms

41 ‘Il gusto de’ chiamati Antichi era un misto di gajo, e di cantabile de’ cui varietà non potea far di meno di dilettare; L’odierno è tanto preoccupato del suo, che purchè s’allontano dall’altro si contenta di perdere la maggior parte della sua vaghezza; Lo studio del Patetico era la più cara occupazione de’ primi; E l’applicazione de’ Passaggi più difficili è l’unica meta de’ secondi. Quegli operavano con più fondamento; E questi eseguiscono con più bravura. Ma giacchè il mio ardire è giunto fino alla comparazione de’ Cantanti più celebri dell’uno, e dell’altro stile, gli si perdoni anche la temerità di conchiuderla dicendo, Che i Moderni sono inarrivabili per cantare all’udito, e che gli Antichi erano inimitabili per cantare al cuore.’ Tosi, Opinioni, VII.§22; Observations, 109–110.
42 Saskia Maria Woyke, Faustina Bordoni. Biographie – Vokalprofil - Rezeption (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2010), 138–150.
43 Riccoboni, An Historical and Critical Account, 78–79.
'head voice' and *falsetto* (*voce finta*) interchangeably, although they are produced by different techniques.\textsuperscript{45} However, male singers, especially *castrati*, could use both, and this may be the reason for this obscure terminology.\textsuperscript{46}

The weaker upper range was not generally recognised, although several singers – whether *castrati* or not – applied it as a further tool of virtuosity displayed in an extended vocal range. ‘The falsetto voice cannot give rise to the nobility of good singing’, Caccini claimed in his *Le nuove musiche* (1602). He said: ‘Let him choose a pitch at which he is able to sing in a full and natural voice, avoiding the *falsetto*, and at which he does not have to “cheat” or at least use force.’\textsuperscript{47} Likewise, Ludovico Zacconi (1592), discussing another essential factor in the beauty of vocal sound, described the perfect balance of richness and shine, the *chiaroscuro* effect:

> Among all voices, one must choose [...] the chest voices, and particularly those which have the above-mentioned delightful biting quality which pierces a little, but does not offend; and one must leave aside the dull voices and those which are simply head voices, because the dull ones cannot be heard among the others, and the head ones are overbearing.\textsuperscript{48}

*Falsetto* singing did not generate a particular pedagogical literature, indicating that there was no explicit support or encouragement for its use.\textsuperscript{49} By the end of the century, however, simultaneously with the revolutionary improvement of the instruments, the need to gain a wider range through the union of the chest with the *falsetto* or head range became urgent on the part of singers. A technical solution to bring high notes close to equality in power

\textsuperscript{46} The modern definition of falsetto is a voice production in which the vocalis muscles (for simplicity’s sake the thyro-arytenoids) are inactive and lengthened greatly by the action of the crico-thyroid muscles which are at their nearly maximum contraction. The sound is produced by the air blowing over the very thin edges of the thyro-arytenoids and the pitch is controlled mostly by a regulation of the breath flow. If, at any time, the thyro-arytenoids begin to resist this extreme lengthening of themselves and provide some resistance to the action of the crico-thyroids, the vocal mechanism begins to move into head voice. The sound of the falsetto voice is weak in overtones and produces no singer’s formant. This is because the very thin edges of the lengthened vocal folds, which do not display any tension in opposition to the stretching action of the thyro-arytenoids, are easily blown open by the breath and offer little resistance to the breath flow. The sound of the head voice, however, is richer in overtones and has the potential to produce a substantial singer’s formant. In other words, it has a “ring”. [...] It is possible to move gracefully between the falsetto and the head voice. If the male singer can gradually increase the activity of the thyro-arytenoids in resistance to the stretching action of the crico-thyroids the tone will change from the flute-like quality of the falsetto to the ringing sound of the head voice and the singer will also experience the increase in subglottal pressure.” Lloyd W. Hanson, *Head voice and falsetto*. Accessed 15 October 2015. [http://chanteur.net/contribu/index.htm#http://chanteur.net/contribu/cLHfalse.htm](http://chanteur.net/contribu/index.htm#http://chanteur.net/contribu/cLHfalse.htm)
\textsuperscript{49} Stark, *Bel Canto*, 36.
with lower tones became the predominant issue. Tosi, who was in his heyday around 1690, already stated in his *Opinioni* (1723):\(^{50}\)

A diligent Master, knowing that a *Soprano*, without the *Falsetto*, is constrained to sing within the narrow Compass of a few Notes, ought not only to endeavour to help him to it, but also to leave no Means untried, so to unite the feigned and the natural Voice, that they may not be distinguished; for if they do not perfectly unite, the Voice will be of divers Registers, and must consequently lose its Beauty.\(^{51}\)

Mancini even gave some detailed personal insight into his singing studies at the end of his treatise, *Pensieri e riflessioni pratiche / Practical reflections* (1774). He emphasised the importance of *solfeggi* befitting the young singers’ age and abilities, to strengthen the voice through them gradually in order to gain a great stamina, and also drew attention to further vocal exercises concerning a clear intonation, precise rhythm, declamation according to the dramatic situation of a certain scene on stage:

> I was a pupil of Leonardo Leo for two years, and was then at the tender age of fourteen years. This great man wrote a new *solfeggio* for each pupil every third day, but he was very careful in writing one suitable to the age and talent of each.\(^{52}\)

The above mentioned teachers have written the recitative splendidly and scientifically. Even though the student is young, he can master this kind of declamation and appear on the stage. The studying of madrigals is more than a necessity for young students, because these insure intonation, and accustom the chest to stand the work and they also refine the ear in well-mastered rhythm.\(^{53}\)

*Solfeggi* in the castrato era did not mean merely vocalising on vowels and studying difficult scales and passages; they also helped the singers to understand the structure of

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50 Rosselli, *Singers of Italian Opera*, 104.
53 ‘Gli anzi detti Maestri hanno scritto egregiamente il recitativo, nè si può proporre esercizion di maggior utile alla giovinità di questo, perché son scritti scientificamente; se lo scolare si perfeziona con questo studio, potrà comparire la prima volta in Teatro quantunque giovane d’età, perfetto nel genere della declamatione, e se egli avrà fatto profitto, allora potrà assicurare, che reciterà anche bene. Lo studio de’ Madrigali è piuchè necessario alla giovinità dell’arte nostra, perché un tale esercizio assoda l’intonazione, avvezza il petto alla fatica, e raffine l’orecchio, acciò non vacilli nel tempo.’ Mancini, *Pensieri, e riflessioni*, 182; *Practical reflections*, 187.
composition, as well as music theory and the system of modulations, which—especially in a world with no fixed tuning for non-keyboard instruments—were necessary tools for creating their own ornaments in the da capo parts of the arias they sang. This was a measure of artistic quality and played a great role of the audience’s appreciation.

Naomi Adele André writes that the castrato legacy—their singing style, techniques and bel canto principles—was passed on to other noncastrated treble voices—tenors and women singers—reaching its peak throughout the eighteenth century, via the schools which Pistocchi and Tosi ran in Bologna. Through formal vocal instruction, castrato singing defined operatic voice production from the mid-1600s until the nineteenth century. She notices, however, a very important shift between the late seventeenth century, as represented by Tosi, and the 1700s, when Mancini received his training from Leonardo Leo in Naples (1728-30) and from the castrato Antonio Bernacchi, Pistocchi’s former pupil (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 Strada was taught according to the principles of the Pistocchi school is all the more possible because of the impression her early repertoire makes. It shows the quality of a clarion-sounding, well-tuned, strong, high and precise soprano voice as well as of melodic and rhythmic agility; all are necessities for a satisfactory performance of the pieces in question. The Bolognese school’s novelty lay in the full, rich, rounded sound and strength of the upper notes, reached by blending the attributes of the chest voice production into the head register. I dare say that Strada’s existence as a singer hung on this latter phenomenon. Nevertheless, the real question is how could eunuchs, this group of singers with altered physical mechanism, establish vocal pedagogy not only of a long-term impact but also applicable to noncastrated voices as well? The key to the enigma might lie in the

58 André, Voicing Gender, 43.
focus on breathing and unifying registers, the presumable result of which was a relaxed larynx long before García’s anatomically-based method prescribed the use of a low-positioned one in the 1840s. Castrati had an undescended larynx with a width and consistency matching that of a boy, and a size like that of a small woman. This structure was supported by a thoracic cavity like that of a large man and was surrounded by an adult male body providing mature resonance and timbre for the voice. Due to their systematic training of extended years, including strict breathing-exercises, the muscles around the rib cage became developed and offered unlimited potential for voice projection.61 Their practical experiences made it possible to explain and teach breathing technique with insight and consciousness, while their body served as a living, exaggerated example of artificially controlled, deep and natural breath.62 Thus, the benefits of the position of inhaling became to some extent transmittable to the singing or exhaling phrase, opening the way for a free and strong voice production and sustained tone. In this way, after inhaling, the singer could begin a phrase with parted ribs part, sunk diaphragm, expanded lungs and with a low-positioned and flexible larynx. Doing so, the voice could more easily remain agile, sonorous and controllable in the later parts of a phrase, due to the security given by this well-founded support.

Strada’s close connections to the Bolognese singing school would also very much conform with the situation which evolved around her Venetian debut season in 1720, when Benedetto Marcello wrote and published his satirical essay about the current operatic life of the city, a pamphlet called Il teatro alla moda, focusing on the new singing style delivered in Venice by Bolognese singers. Otherwise, being a new singer, the appearance of Strada’s name seems rather to be a coincidence. Besides, her character might have been contradictory to those caricatured in Il teatro: she was supposedly free from excessive egoism, neither she lacked intelligence.

The 1720/21 season at Sant’Angelo
In consideration of the above it is no surprise that Marcello’s Il teatro deals with the productions, management and singers of Sant’Angelo and S. Moisè, engaged in the 1720/21 season as the embodiment of the new manner. Its frontispiece contains Strada’s surname, anagrams of Vivaldi, Giovanni Orsatti, impresario of S. Moisè, and furthermore that of the Sant’Angelo’s co-manager, impresario Modotto, Giovanni Palazzi, librettist of

61 André, Voicing Gender, 30‒31.
62 ‘Chi sa ben respirare e sibilare, saprà ben cantare.’ (He who knows how to breathe and pronounce well, knows how to sing well). A quote ascribed to the castrato and teacher Gasparo Pacchierotti (1740-1821). See Stark, Bel Canto, 91.
the first staged opera of the season, Vivaldi’s *La verità in cimento*, and members of the cast arrived from and trained in Bologna. According to Selfridge-Field and Strohm, this group of Bolognese singers, representatives of the *bravura* singing style, together with the composer and librettist Giuseppe Maria Buini at S. Moisè – are reflected in the pamphlet by its use of a strong Bolognese dialect in the conversations between the *prima donna* and her *mamma* – and were thus the main target of Marcello, whose family co-owned Sant’Angelo.

Composers and vocalists seem indeed to have been coming in a large number from Naples and Bologna to Venice in the 1720s, as Villeneuve mentions it, too. Among the Bolognese members of the company at S. Moisè there were Caterina Borghi, Cecilia Belisani and Caterina Cantelli who all participated in Buini’s operas *Il Filindo* (1720) and *Cleofile* (1721) at San Moisè. In 1721 Buini married Belisani, with whom he collaborated very frequently in Venice (*La caduta di Gelone* 1719, *Armida delusa* 1720). From the Sant’Angelo cast Marcello mentioned the names of Chiara Orlandi and Antonia Laurenti, who shared the stage with Strada in all of the operas in which she appeared in Venice (*La verità in cimento* 1720; *Filippo rè di Macedonia, Antigona* and *Il pastor fido* in 1721). Merighi, the most illustrious member of the company, was likewise Bolognese.

*Il Teatro alla moda*’s frontispiece suggests furthermore a business relationship between Vivaldi and the impresario of Sant’Angelo, Modotto, and also with that of San Moisè, Giovanni Orsatti. Beyond its general description of the practice of Venetian, and in a broader sense of the Italian operatic life, *Il teatro* speaks about particular productions of autumn 1720 at Sant’Angelo and San Moisè, namely of *La verità in cimento* (RV 739) by Vivaldi and of Buini’s *Il Filindo*, as is indicated by the publication date of December that

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66 Marcello’s *Il teatro* was not unique in its topic, though. It is interesting that Buini himself produced several *opera buffa* libretti about the singer, her mother and the manager, all speaking and singing in Bolognese dialect, like *Chi non fa non falla* (1732) as well as *La Zanina maga per amore* (1742). Edward J. Dent pointed out that ‘the Venetians seem to have enjoyed seeing the main plot turn on the absurdities of a prima donna and her admirers’ as opposed to the Neapolitan comic opera. Some *divertimenti comici* from earlier also deal with the figures of *opera seria*: Francesco Passarini’s *La figlia che canta*, the main topic of which is the necessity of protection for a young lady who wants to become a professional singer, was introduced during the Carnival 1719 in Venice with the music by Carlo Francesco Pollarolo, ergo prior to *Il Teatro*. See Edward J. Dent, ‘Giuseppe Maria Buini’, in: *Sammelbände der Internationalen Musikgesellschaft* XIII/2 (January–March, 1912), 329–326: 331; Francesco Passarini, *La figlia che canta*. Printed libretto (Venice: 1719).
According to Strohm, Marcello’s work could have harmfully affected Vivaldi’s activity in Sant’Angelo as well as in Venice more generally. After his Mantuan years he began to reappear as an opera composer in the city; already in 1721 he had little to do in the carnival season, and thereafter he disappeared entirely from Venice for four years. Since Strada might have been some kind of protégée of him, and as her patron was from Milan, the damage that befell Vivaldi’s reputation most probably impacted her career as well, for she did not return to Venice any more.

Strada stood as *virtuosa di camera* in the service of Count Girolamo Colloredo-Waldsee, the Governor of Milan since summer 1720. Colloredo himself was also quite fresh in his position; he became governor in spring 1719. Vivaldi might have got to know the soprano through his new Venetian patron, Johann Baptist of Colloredo-Waldsee, the imperial ambassador to Venice between 1715 and 1726, who was presumably related to the Milanese Count. The composer must have heard Strada in Giuseppe Vignati’s *Aquilio in Siracusa* written as part of the annual birthday celebration of the Holy Roman Empress Elisabetta Cristina di Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel, wife of Charles VI, and performed at the Teatro Regio Ducale in Milan on 27th August 1720. This possibility is underlined by the fact that the *seconda donna*, Anna Maria Lodovica d’Ambreville, was one of Vivaldi’s singers. She took part in two of his operas in Mantua the previous year: *Teuzzone* and *Tito Manlio*. Strada was given the *terza donna* role, but she had three arias and such fellow singers as the excellent tenor Francesco Borosini and the castrato Carlo Scalzi. That passionate, fierce and warrior-like heroic role type, which emerged regularly during her career and seemed to befit her personal and vocal features alike, found Strada at her debut playing princess Merope, who rejects the tyrant’s proposal because she loves the Roman soldier Aquilio, and does not bow to blackmail even with her brother’s execution.

Strada’s voice must have given a very strong impression, considering that Vivaldi hired this seventeen-year-old soprano straightaway for his *La verità in cimento*, premièred on 26th October 1720 at Sant’Angelo. Though it is uncertain what kind of relations connected Vivaldi to the theatre in the 1720/21 season, it is well known that he regularly worked not only as a composer but also as an impresario at Venetian opera houses in the previous decade. He used to be the impresario at Sant’Angelo together with his father,

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between 1713 and 1715. Very likely he was involved into the run of this particular season of 1720/21, managing his own operas financially as well as artistically, just as he did in 1716/17 and at S. Moisè in 1716, 1717/18 as musical director.\textsuperscript{74} In the case of \textit{La verità}, therefore, Vivaldi might have functioned as kind of a producer, his duties including choosing the libretto on the one hand, hiring the cast and coordinating the succession of the performances on the other, meaning that he controlled and composed all the meanwhile inserted numbers, refreshing arias according to the singers’ wishes and revisions to gain the audience’s higher interest and pleasure.\textsuperscript{75} According to the \textit{avvisì}, the première was successful:

The same Saturday evening went staged for the first time at the S. Angelo Theatre the opera entitled \textit{La verità in cimento}, which has been succeeded with universal applause, and was followed by another performance at the S. Moisè.\textsuperscript{76}

The summary of the plot is as follows: Sultan Mamud switched the sons of his wife Rustena and of his favourite concubine Damira, born on the same day. In consequence, Damira’s son Melindo is going to be his successor to the throne. In the midst of the preparations for Melindo’s marriage with princess Rosane (played by Strada), Mamud repents and reveals that the actual heir is Zelim, Rustena’s son. Zelim is in love with Rosane, who, therefore, has to decide between her emotions and ambitions of becoming queen.

Since operas, especially in Venice, were staged at short notice, (generally within one or two months including the compositional process), the first rehearsals were frequently held at the composer’s house. Vivaldi, who until 1722 lived in a house next to Sant’Angelo, seems to have held auditions and coached singers directly at home.\textsuperscript{77} In light of these circumstances it is easy to imagine how the voice of the young Strada could serve as a guideline for him to accommodate his compositional methods to a yet unknown dimension of vocal art – that of a high female soprano – as well as its dramatic context. There must have been an inspiration back and forth, for nothing could better build up, enlarge and deepen Strada’s vocal, musical and dramatic consciousness, teaching her the appropriate and well balanced use of her skills as tools of expression, than a composer with personal insight. There was enough working time available to make progress together, during which

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 30–31.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 289.
\textsuperscript{76} ‘Nella sera detto stesso sabbato andò in scena per la prima volta nel Teatro à S. Angelo l’Opera intitolata \textit{La Verità in Cimento}, che riesce d’universale sodisfazione continuandosi pure à recitare l’altra nel Teatro à S. Moisè.’ Francesco Alvisi da Bologna, \textit{Avvisi di Venezia}, 2 November 1720.
they could get acquainted with each other’s musical habits, reactions and way of thinking – and become inspired by it.

The creation of Rosane’s role reflects not only on Strada’s unusually high tessitura but her great stamina, too. Though she was a debutant, at least in Venice, and therefore she must have had the rank of the seconda or terza donna, Strada sang no less than five arias—while the other soprano, Chiara Orlandi as Rustena had four, and the contralto Merighi as Damira three. The musico-dramatic versatility and ambiguity of Rosane’s almost cynical character might be an indicator of vocal complexity. Assuming that Strada executed her part with an excellent vocal quality – by right of the fact that her vocal performance never received a negative critique in her entire career (moreover, its brilliancy always came in for praise) – one can take certain marks of the composition as hinting at attributes of a fresh sound and a naturally well-set chiaroscuro technique: a bright and silvery voice production highlighted by panther agility, and fierce passion enabled to be loosed by precise intonation.

Even Strada’s recitatives were set remarkably high, resting many times on e” (Ex. 1.1) – especially striking when considering that the contemporary Venetian tuning for opera performances was higher than elsewhere, most probably a’=440 Hz.78

Example 1.1: Excerpt from Act I scene 3 recitative of Vivaldi’s La verità in cimento

Strada’s first aria of the première setting, Solo quella guancia bella (I/3; A major, Allegro, C; Track 1) refers to a high and vented voice, the freedom of which lies in a rather wide range. Vivaldi’s stirring and shamelessly bold way of composing does not show any limitation in the use of sixth- and octave leaps, hitting a” through them regularly – eleven times, to be exact – including da capo (Ex. 1.2). This also shows that her range went even beyond this, and most probably she displayed it at the cadenzas or via ornaments of the recurring section.

78 The ‘Chorton’ for sacred music used to be even higher, around 445–460 Hz = a’, i.e. almost a semitone higher than our modern one. Mary Cyr, Performing Baroque Music (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1992), 62–64; Bruce Haynes, A History of Performing Pitch: The Story of “A” (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2002), 163–164.
Example 1.2: Vocal part (A and B1 sections) of *Solo quella guancia bella* from Vivaldi’s *La verità in cimento*, bb. 13‒34.

The rushed interpretation which the aria requires, i.e. the rapidity of singing fifth-chains, sixth and octave leaps combined with coloratura patterns – besides the pronunciation of the text – makes it clear that Strada’s strongest vocal attributes in her youth were agility, flexibility and high notes executed with ease and securely with a precise intonation. It makes me think that these abilities showed themselves with such an elemental obviousness at the beginning of her training that the logical and only right choice of her master must have been to prepare her to be a high lyric coloratura soprano. In this way, Strada’s singing drew the attention of Vivaldi, who had not composed for a specifically high female soprano before. It must have meant a new challenge for him as he began to develop his compositional technique for this type of voice, being inspired by Strada, who therefore became ab initio an artist generating creativity in composers with whomever she collaborated.\(^79\) Although the aria has a *parlante* aspect, leaps and especially coloraturas towards the end of the A section and during the whole B part go beyond this. The horse-like flouncing-bouncing melody and its playful upbeat rhythm reveal the youth of the performer and the unsteady character of Rosane at the same time: the princess is fond of Melindo whom she thinks to be the legitimate heir of Sultan Mamud’s kingdom, and in this sense her infatuation expressed in words and music is corresponding. On the other hand, the voice part can be considered way too wriggling at a fast tempo to make the exclusiveness of her solid love credible.

The counterpart of this first aria is *Tu sei sol dell’alma mia* (II/8), a unison movement with the violins and *senza basso* in the manner of the Neapolitan galant style. Terzini prepare the zigzagging leaps which usually end in ascending *volentine semplici* and, in the A2 section, with tritone leaps interlinked with each other chromatically (Ex. 1.3). This aria

was an addition on Strada’s behalf as its text does not appear in the printed libretto. The music is in stark contrast with the verse, indicating the uncertainty of Rosane’s fidelity right after both Melindo and she have learned that Zelim is actually the royal heir, not her fiancé.

Example 1.3: Vocal part (A section) of *Tu sei sol dell’alma mia* from *La verità in cimento*, bb. 9–35.

There is a substitution aria of *Solo quella, Con più dilettio* (G major, Allegro, 2/4), which must have been written in a rush between two performing nights. It seems to be supported by the fact that, although it occupies two violin parts in imitative concerto style, it rather lacks real melodic invention and applies the most common coloratura patterns mechanically. However, it did no harm to its real goal, i.e. to offer Strada the chance to display more and variable virtuoso elements (Ex. 1.4). Though the tessitura of this aria is a third lower than that of *Solo quella*, a great freedom had been provided for Strada to introduce any kind of coloratura passages, *volatine* and embellishments in the *da capo* – whatever she pleased – harmonically quite independently, due to the pause for the violins and violas in bars 27–33 and 58–63, and also to the silence of the basses in bars 34–45 and 65–72. In addition, she could also show her skill for *messa di voce* to some extent in the middle section (Ex. 1.5), which has the simple delicacy of modulation to the parallel minor – a fine act of colouring an aria written in a major key, praised by De Brosses.

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80 Ibid., 299.
81 ‘Une autre variété nait de la manière dont ils emploient les modulations. Ils ne composent guère dans le mode mineur; presque tous leurs airs sont écrits dans le mode majeur; mais ils y entremêlent, sans qu’on s’y attende, des phrases mineures qui surprennent et saisissent l’oreille jusqu’au point d’affecter le cœur.’ (There is another variety in the way they are applying modulations. One hardly ever composes in the minor key for all the arias are written in the major key here; they are, however, imperceptibly mixed: the minor phrases surprise and catch the ear up to the point that they affect the heart). Colomb, ed., *Le President de Brosses en Italie*, vol. ii, 380.
Example 1.4: Vocal part (A section) of *Con più diletto* from Vivaldi’s *La verità in cimento*, bb. 19–75.

Example 1.5: Vocal part (B section) of *Con più diletto* from Vivaldi’s *La verità in cimento*, bb. 97–115.

De Brosses states that minor-key arias were very rare in Venice. In this light it is very intriguing that the part of Rosane includes two such arias: *Amato ben sei la mia speranza* (I/12; C minor, Andante, 2/4) and *Con cento, e cento baci* (III/7; C minor, Allegro, C). *Amato ben* (Ex. 1.6), although it was first used in Vivaldi’s *La Candace* (RV 704, performed at the carnival season in Mantua the same year) as *Ingannno tu sei la mia speranza* – but not yet heard in Venice – is in fact the second movement of the violin concerto *Il sospetto* (‘Suspicion’, RV 199). The concerto, also dated 1720, is the first of a group of three pieces; the other two are *L’inquietudine* (‘Anxiety’, RV 234) and *Il riposo* (‘Rest’, RV 270). The typical cantilena set of a Vivaldian slow concerto movement leaves no doubt that the instrumental version is actually the original, which has been converted into a da capo aria form with a two-part A section (A1+A2), in which the vocal units are divided by orchestral ritornelli.

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Example 1.6: Vocal part (A1 section) of Amato ben from Vivaldi’s La verità in cimento, bb. 22–39.

The simple melody and the *mezzo carattere* style of the text setting in *Amato ben* conceal the high tessitura of the aria. The g”-s have to be reached by the singer through fifths, and the a♭”-s through sixth leaps, requiring *portamenti*, and on the top of that the sound is meant to be rather soft – at least for the text’s sake: ‘my dear beloved, you are my hope’ – so it definitely must not be fiercely loud as would be the case at an Allegro tempo marking and with another text. In Andante, the legato has to be flexibly strong and constant but never hard nor harsh or sharp, which requires a high-level breath control as well as flexible bodily support.

In *Con cento, e cento baci* (Ex. 1.7) the same vocal technique just discussed is turned upside down, as it is built up to emphasize top notes, mainly g” – placed on main beats and accented syllables – by hitting them several times. Jumping up from an octave or a fifth below meant that the head tones were reached from notes falling in the territory of the chest register.

Example 1.7: Vocal part (A1 section) of *Con cento, e cento baci* from La verità in cimento, bb. 7–24.

As octave leaps regularly occur in Rosane’s part, not surprisingly, *Addio caro, tu ben sai* (II/2; B♭ major, Allegro, C) also contains two such occasions in the A section by hitting g” and a” in succession, and further accented g” notes reached by sixth leaps (Ex. 1.8). Once, the melody rides as high even as b♭”.

An embarrassingly large amount of such examples can be found in Strada’s repertoire, making it inevitable to conclude that her
registers were perfectly blended from her debutante years onwards. It follows that her *portamento* together with the *cantar di sbalzo* technique must have been flawless, too.

Example 1.8: Vocal part (excerpts from section A) of *Addio caro, tu ben sai* from *La verità in cimento*, bb. 8–18 and 26–34.

Following the performance series of *La verità*, Strada immediately had to begin preparations for the next production, *Filippo rè di Macedonia* (premiered at Sant’Angelo on 27th December 1720). Although its music is lost, one aria of Vivaldi – to whom the third act is attributed, while the first and second are to Giuseppe Boniventi –, sung by Strada, seems to survive in two different sources. The text proved to be helpful for the aria’s identification, since it is almost entirely the same as one of the verses of Domenico Lalli’s libretto. *Scherza di fronda in fronda* (RV 663), a cantata of Vivaldi’s authorship, is preserved in the *Sächsische Landesbibliothek*, Dresden (MUS. 1-J-7, 3, pp. 57–64) as a single manuscript copy by Johann Gottfried Grundig, the Hofkapelle’s copyist. The other

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84 Sixth and seventh leaps are beyond measure. Arias in Strada’s early repertoire (as far as it is available) containing octave or greater leaps are: Vivaldi, *La verità* – Solo quella (6; and 2 ninth leaps), Con più diiletto (4), Tu sei sol (11), Con cento e cento baci (2); Vivaldi, *Filippio* – Scherza di fronda (7); Porpora, *Semiramide regina dell’Assiria* – Se d’Aquilon (10); Sarro, *Tito Sempronio Gracco* – Vorrei morire (5), Straniera donzella (1st setting; 5), Pria di lasciarmi (2); Leo, *Zenobia in Palmira* – Tuoi ch’io parta (22), Al suo amato (1), Quando irato il Ciel s’oscura (8); Vinci, *Astianatte* – Al patrocino lido (2), Piangi pur (6), Quel perfido (7), Tortorella se rimira (2).

85 *Portamento*, not in its Romantic sense as an audible glide – for which there were two other words in use during the Baroque era, *scivolo* and *strascino*, (slur and drag) – but as putting forth of the voice, as it occurs in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century treatises, meaning that the two distant notes were equal in strength and quality and were joined together without a break and with expression (for a detailed discussion see Ch. 5). See Tosi, *Observations*, 29, 53, and 178–179; Mancini, *Pensieri, e riflessioni*, 87, 91–93; Mancini, *Practical reflections*, 108 and 111–113.

86 The text of the aria from *Filippo rè di Macedonia* (III/3): Scherza di fronda in fronda / Incerto l’alettelto / Or corre su la sponda / Del chiaro ruscelletto. / Ma palpitante il core / Ha sempre per timore / Perchè fra duri lacci / Non resti il piè ristretto. The text of the cantata: Scherza di fronda in fronda / Incerto l’alettelto / Or corre su la sponda / Del chiaro ruscelletto. / Tutto l’aletta e gode / Ma teme che di frode / Non resti il piè ristretto. (The little bird hops gaily but warily / from leaf to leaf; / now it runs on the bank / of the clear-running brooklet. / But its heart always flutters / from fear / that its foot may be caught / in a cruel snare.) Translation by Michael Talbot, *The Chamber Cantatas of Antonio Vivaldi* (Rochester: Boydell Press, 2006), 72.

87 Ibid., 128.

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(Ex. 1.9) is in a large aria collection found by Francesco Degrada in the Bibliothèque Nationale at Paris (Vm⁷ 7694) with the superscription ‘Aria del Signor Orlandini’. Degrada, who discovered the similarity of the aria’s text in Filippo, assumes that Scherza di fronda in fronda is Vivaldi’s composition, although the related style of Vivaldi and Orlandini is rather confusing. The attribution to Orlandini appears to be unsafe in any case, because sixteen arias are of on disputed authorship; of these, at least six are by Leonardo Vinci, Domenico Sarro, Gasparini and Francesco Mancini, and from operas performed throughout Italy in the 1720s.⁸⁸

Example 1.9: A1 section of the vocal part of Scherza di fronda in fronda (operatic version) by Vivaldi

The original key of the aria is an important question. The cantata is, naturally, lower, in E♭ major, and its vocal part is slightly simpler than the Parisian operatic version in F major (Ex. 1.10).

Example 1.10: Vocal part (end of section A and B section) of Scherza di fronda in fronda (cantata version) by Vivaldi, bb. 26–45.

According to Michael Talbot, the aria with an orchestral accompaniment (two violins and bass) from Filippo was converted to a continuo aria. In the autograph manuscript of Vivaldi’s chamber concerto RV 103, on the verso of its last folio, a bass sketch for this movement can be found, in B♭ major. The complication caused by the key can be resolved by the assumption that this reshaping of the bass served as an exercise for a student of the composer.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Ibid., 128–129.
⁸⁹ Ibid., 129–131.
What Strada sang, was most probably the F major version (in the Parisian manuscript). With her later repertoire in mind, this aria assumes a special importance among the works she performed in her early years, foreshadowing some essential features of her mature vocal profile. Besides the triplets and galant demisemiquaver rhythms, which require fine technical work, the aria shows signs of an extension of Strada’s range downwards. The vocal part reaches c’ from d” above through triplets in the da capo and through a fifth fall in the middle section, where there is also an octave leap down from d” to d’. One can observe throughout the whole movement a much more extended and accented use of lower tessitura, i.e. notes from the upper part of the first octave (f’ and above), besides that the high register is continually present. The absolute range of the movement covers nearly two octaves, from a” to c’. In addition, almost every phrase initiates from below, and bending up, it reaches the octave in less than a bar. My personal suspicion is that Vivaldi, getting used to Strada’s voice by the time of their third collaboration, took notice of its tendency to change; in doing so, he took advantage of new perspectives and wrote an aria in which he displayed these multi-coloured skills, and at the same time gave his singer further opportunity to train and strengthen her middle and lower range – in other words, her chest register.

Strada played the role of Princess Orinda, Olimpia, Filippo’s daughter’s closest friend and in love with the prime minister Antigono, who has romantic affections towards the Macedonian Queen Euridice. The empress is attracted to Demetrio, but for the sake of her kingdom she is interested in marrying Antigono, and therefore she feigns love for him. Orinda warns Antigono about being misled (II/10) and indeed he learns the truth. Scherza di fronda in fronda (III/3) is sung by her in a mentally severe situation: she has to console and calm her rival, the queen. Antigono, in the meantime, is charged for treason and is almost killed; fortunately, in the last moment Filippo grants him amnesty.

Orlandini’s Antigona, a setting of Benedetto Pasqualigo’s libretto with which he obtained his first critical success in Venice, was premièred in the carnival of 1718 at Teatro San Cassiano, with Diana Vico in the title role. Three years later Strada sang Giocasta in this opera, together with Merighi as Antigona. At S. Cassiano, Giocasta’s character was embodied by Antonia Cavazzi, a contralto. Likewise, it was sung by Teresa Peruzzi detta La Denzia, also a contralto, in 1724 at the same theatre. The Sant’Angelo revival 1721 could be connected to Orlandini’s involvement in that season. The texts of all these libretti are identical, as far as Giocasta’s numbers are concerned, which points to the possibility that the arias were transposed upwards, maybe altered but without substitution. This seems
all the more likely for at Sant’Angelo there were only given concert performances, presumably serving as a rushed substitution for the poorly received Filippo.

No score of the 1721 version survives; nevertheless, the British Library holds one of its revised versions, performed in Bologna in June 1727, entitled La fedeltà coronata, with Bernacchi (Osmene), Farinelli (Ceraste) and Merighi (Antigona). Giocasta was given a soprano voice this time, that of Teresa Conti. The text and its proportioning differ from that of the Venetian productions: there are three acts instead of five.\(^90\) However, the compositional style of Giocasta’s part is suspiciously similar to that of Scherza di fronda in fronda from Filippo: there is a saliently frequent use of certain rhythmic patterns of the galant style, especially of demisemiquavers and, moreover, sixty-fourth notes, together with semiquaver triplets and dotted rhythms.

Strada’s last opera in Venice was Il pastor fido from Carlo Luigi Pietragrua, premièred at Sant’Angelo on 11\(^{th}\) February 1721.\(^91\) That was a very busy carnival season for her as she appeared in no less than three productions during those few weeks. The avvisi define Il pastor fido as tragicomedia pastorale and claim that it was successful.\(^92\) Strada embodied Dorinda as seconda donna, but she was the first soprano, since the prima donna was Merighi. Pietragrua likewise displays her high tessitura and agility. The aria Fuggi pur (II/2; G major, 3/8; Ex. 1.11) applies dance-like triple metre containing not only coloraturas but also a comparatively long sustained note, probably inspired by Strada’s superb messa di voce. Dal tuo stral (IV/3; Ex. 1.12) is a dance movement, too, that of a gigue. Its triplet-rhythms seem to have suited her throat very well, and it could have provided an easy motion for her voice, so that she could naturally execute accented a” tones several times.

Example 1.11: Vocal part (excerpt from section A) of Fuggi pur from Pietragrua’s Il pastor fido, bb. 28–66.

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\(^90\) Selfridge-Field, \textit{A New Chronology of Venetian Opera}, 340–341 and 357–358; Benedetto Pasqualigo, \textit{Antigona}. Printed libretti (Venezia: Marino Rossetti, 1718, 1721, and 1724); Giuseppe Maria Orlandini, \textit{Antigona}. Musical manuscript (1727), GB-Lbl Add. 16066.

\(^91\) The score is preserved in \textit{A-Wgm}.

\(^92\) ‘...e martedì sera andò ancora in Scena à qutto di S. Angelo l’intitolato Il Pastor Fido Tragicomedia Pastorale, che riesce pure di sodisfazione.’ (… and Tuesday evening another one has been staged at S. Angelo entitled Il Pastor Fido, pastoral tragicomedy, likewise with satisfaction.) \textit{Avvisi di Venezia}, 15 February 1720.
Example 1.12: Vocal part (excerpt) of *Dal tuo stral* from *Il pastor fido*, bb. 70–84.

Financial relations in the world of eighteenth-century opera were widely disproportioned. As the whole system was focused on singers, especially leading ones – firstly to *castrati*, and secondly to leading women –, they earned the most; the composer less than half of it, and the librettist even less. Singers received free lodgings, travel expenses, and costumes in addition, not to mention the special gifts, jewels, flowers, sonnets, etc. that were given to them by noble patrons and admirers. The ‘thousands of scudi’ mentioned in *Il teatro* as singers’ wages is not a hyperbole: a star *prima donna* like Faustina Bordoni earned at S. G. Grisostomo in the season 1724/25 1200 zecchini (equal to 4,258 ducats), Antonia Merighi 1,900 ducats, and Rosaura Mazzanti’s salary at Sant’Angelo in the same season was 12,750 lire (ca 2,056 ducats). Contrarily, a composer’s fee for an opera score was usually 200 ducats; in the case of a whole season with 3–4 works it meant 600–800 ducats. A *seconda* or *terza donna*’s pay per season was about 600 ducats, or 150–200 ducats per production. As Strada sang in four operas at Sant’Angelo in 1720/21, I am suggesting that her wages might have been around 700 ducats, considering her rank and debutant status.

Besides her fellow singers at the Sant’Angelo company, Strada must have had opportunities to hear some of the most famous female voices of her era: those of the mezzo-soprano Faustina Bordoni, the lyric soprano Francesca Cuzzoni and the contralto Diana Vico, who were all prominent members of the high circles of operatic society. They appeared together in Francesco Pollarolo’s *Lucio Papirio dittatore*, premièred on 26th December 1720, and in Orlandini’s *Nerone*, run from 11th February 1721. Sitting there in

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93 ‘Servirà l’Impresario a pochissimo prezzo, riflettendo alle molte migliaia di Scudi, che gli costano i Virtuosi dell’Opera, che però si contenterà di Paga inferiore al più infimo di quelli, purché non gli venga fatto torto dall’Orso e dalle Comparse.’ (He should lend his services to the impresario for very little and consider the thousands of scudi that have to be paid to the famous singers. For that reason he should be satisfied with less pay than the least of them...); Benedetto Marcello, *Il teatro alla moda*. A compositori di musica; Benedetto Marcello, ‘*Il Teatro Alla Moda – Part I*’, translated and annotated by Reinhard G. Pauly, *The Musical Quarterly* 34/3 (Jul., 1948), 371–403: 384.

94 A scudo might have been 12 lire at that time; the worth of a gold ducat (zecchino) was around 22 lire in 1717. See Michael Talbot, ‘A Venetian Operatic Contract of 1714’, 60–61.

one of the performances, could Strada ever have imagined that four years later she would have sung together with Vico and been paired with Farinelli, and that in nine years she would have been in one person the successor to the rival queens Cuzzoni and Faustina in London under Handel, and been called a better one than the two together?

**Milan, Livorno, and Lucca**

For the next birthday celebration of the Empress a *dramma pastorale*, *La Silvia*, a *pasticcio* of Vivaldi’s earlier operas, was performed on 26th August 1721 at the Teatro Regio Ducale in Milan. The mythological plot focuses on Numitore, King of Alba’s bloodline. Silvia, his daughter, in spite of being forced to become a Vestal virgin, conceived by Mars – who disguised himself as the shepherd Tirsi – with the twins Romulus and Remus, founders of Rome. Strada embodied another nymph, named Nerina, a follower of Silvia, who fell in love with Niso. Later, upon seeing him embracing Silvia, she becomes furiously jealous (III/4, *Furie terribili*). Unfortunately the score of this aria is lost; it would have been very informative to see what kinds of coloraturas were given to Strada by Vivaldi after a year of collaboration. In the end it turns out that Niso is none else but Silvia’s brother believed dead, Egisto.

The surviving part of Strada’s role has some very intriguing aspects. In her second aria, *Mio ben, s’io ti credessi* (I/14, C minor, 2/4), Nerina is suspicious towards her beloved, because earlier that day Echo told her that Niso will betray her before sundown. This was the first time Vivaldi used ‘Lombardic’ rhythm in his oeuvre:96 the pattern of two demisemiquavers followed by a dotted quaver, connected to accented chromatic high notes (such as a♭˝, g˝, f♯˝) and together with the text, serves as a tool for the expression of irony – it is the sharp dagger of anger and doubt caused by painful thoughts of jealous suspicion. This was one of the two arias written entirely by Vivaldi’s own hand in the manuscript; *La Silvia* namely contains many arias from his earlier operas, and mainly it was the task of the copyist to prepare the score. According to Strohm, these arias might have been part of an early draft for *La Silvia*.97 It is remarkable, however, that Strada did not sing any of her earlier Vivaldian arias in a work where many numbers were taken from *La verità*. Nevertheless, she hardly ever repeated her earlier arias when it was up to her. Throughout her whole career, in similar situations she regularly showed a preference for learning yet unknown movements over recycling her repertoire.

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Strohm has also suggested that *Pronto servir* (II/11; B♭ major, 2/4), suited to the text in its declamatory nature, gives a large space for acting, especially with gestures. Its unusual four-part, *non-da-capo* form also refers to a focus on acting.\(^98\) Nerina does not settle for less than true love: after she learns that the beloved of Silvia, Tirsi, is still alive, she is not completely happy, because a true lover would not hurt his beloved as Tirsi torments Silvia. In this context it seems that Strada might have been convincing not only as a singer but also as an actress. By this time Vivaldi must have known her quality of performance well. The thought that the composer who later chose an artist like Anna Girò (small in stature like Strada, by the way) as his first and supreme *prima donna* – a singer who inspired him primarily through her sincere and touching way of acting –, entrusted to Strada an aria in which she had limited vocal but all the more visual opportunities, is a meaningful one.

In Act II scene 4 Nerina, feeling compassion for Silvia, comforts her by singing *Nel suo carcere ristretto* (Ex. 1.13), an aria in D major from *Teuzzone* (RV 736, Mantua in 1718) originally performed by the soprano castrato Gasparo Geri/Gieri embodying Cino, a male character. It also occurred as a tenor aria with the same text in *Eurilla e Alcindo* (*Serenata a tre* RV 690) and directly inspired the 3rd movement of the *Autumn concerto* (RV 283, F major) of 1720; moreover, it relates to the D major flute concerto, *Il Gardellino* (RV 428, before 1724).\(^99\) It is a *simile* aria using the picture of an imprisoned nightingale – who is not willing to sing about affections but rather producing lamenting songs of a freedom lost – as a metaphor.\(^100\) Both its text and musical character are marked by the theme of *caccia d’amore* (chase of love), the result of which is a mixture of agony and lively motives of birdsong. The rhythm is based on dotted quarters and half notes while the melody is coloured a few times with chromatics. The most remarkable element of it, from the vocal technical point of view, is when the voice imitates the nightingale’s motive (bb. 15–16 and 30–31) of snapping from a dotted quaver up to a fifth semiquaver – well prepared for the singer compositionally through repeated notes. Firstly these jumps occur on a′–e″, then on d″–e″ in Teuzzone, supposedly in Strada’s case on d″–a″, keeping in unison with the violins. This would be a clear and significant hint of Strada’s technique of high notes, since there is not much time to place the semiquaver fifth above each preceding note, and as the a″ notes must be exact, clear and ringing, sung with strength and with ease. The insertion

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of this aria into La Silvia indicates that Strada sang a” notes in bar 30 and 31 (at least in the da capo), showing her free, agile and energetic head register.

Example 1.13: Vocal part (A section) of Nel suo carcere ristretto by Vivaldi, bb.10–35.

In 1722 (see Table 1.1) Strada appeared as Dalinda in Sarro’s Ginevra principessa di Scozia and as Costanza in an anonymous Griselda in Livorno. There is no data available from 1723, however she could have been active in the same area, because the next year she sang two roles in Lucca: Sabina in a pasticcio, Lucio Papirio, as well as Eduige in the Rodelinda of a local composer, Giovanni Antonio Canuti di Lucca. How she got there from Milan is uncertain but the libretti from those years show that she still enjoyed the protection of Count Colloredo, though she was not his virtuosa da camera any more. There is no other noble patron known from her early Italian years, or any impresario until late spring 1724 when she became engaged to the Teatro San Bartolomeo in Naples. Nevertheless, there must have been some impresario(s) working in the background, arranging Strada’s Tuscan contracts as well as her appointment to Naples, even if she bore the recommendation and blessing of Count Colloredo or some other influential person of noble rank. I would also risk the statement that after the splendid years of 1720 and 1721 in Venice and Milan, where she had a dashing start of a career, the period between 1722 and 1724 seems to be in a sense an enforced path of stagnation, having no first rank composer who could write arias and roles specifically for her, nor such a working environment she used to have in an opera metropolis like Venice. Luckily for Strada, she still had some fine colleagues, among them the tenor Francesco Guicciardi, who was likewise engaged to Naples in 1724.

101 Antonio Salvi, Ginevra principessa di Scozia. Printed libretto for Teatro S. Sebastiano in Livorno (Firenze: Anton Maria Albizzini, 1722); Antonio Salvi, Lucio Papirio dittatore. Printed libretto (Lucca: Domenico Cuffietti, 1724); Antonio Salvi, Rodelinda. Printed libretto (Lucca: Domenico Cuffietti, 1724).
102 La Sig. Anna Maria Strada, sotto la Protezione di S. E. Colloredo Gover. di Milano. Salvi, Ginevra principessa di Scozia (1722).
Table 1.1: Roles of Strada’s early years, 1720–1724

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Composer</th>
<th>Opera</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>Première</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Cast</th>
<th>Sources consulted</th>
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<tr>
<td>Giuseppe Vignati</td>
<td>Aquilio in Siracusa</td>
<td>Regio Ducale, Milan</td>
<td>26 Aug. 1720</td>
<td>Merope</td>
<td>Borosmi, Mercelli, Orsini, D’Ambreville, Scalzi</td>
<td>lost</td>
</tr>
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<td>Antonio Vivaldi</td>
<td>La verità in cimento</td>
<td>Sant’Angelo, Venice</td>
<td>26 Oct. 1720</td>
<td>Rosane</td>
<td>Barbieri, Orlandi, Merighi, Albertini, Laurenti</td>
<td>D-Mb Mus.ms. 1120</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vivaldi and Giuseppe Bononcini</td>
<td>Filippo rì di Macedonia</td>
<td>Sant’Angelo, Venice</td>
<td>27 Dec. 1720</td>
<td>Ortinda</td>
<td>Merighi, Orlandi, Albertini, Laurenti, Barbieri</td>
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<tr>
<td>Giuseppe Maria Orlandini</td>
<td>L’Antigona</td>
<td>Sant’Angelo, Venice</td>
<td>15 Jan. 1721</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carlo Luigi Pietraguas</td>
<td>Il pastor fido</td>
<td>Sant’Angelo, Venice</td>
<td>11 Feb. 1721</td>
<td>Dorinda</td>
<td>Albertini, Merighi, Barbieri, Orlandi, Laurenti</td>
<td>Score in A-Wgm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vivaldi</td>
<td>La Silvia</td>
<td>Regio Ducale, Milan</td>
<td>28 Aug. 1721</td>
<td>Nerina</td>
<td>Gualandi, Minelli, Fabri, Bombaciardi, Montanari</td>
<td>lost, aria reconstructions, (^{105})D-B N.Mus.ms. 125, 99v-101v, (Teuzzone)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domenico Sarro</td>
<td>Ginevra principessa di Scozia</td>
<td>S. Sebastiano, Livorno</td>
<td>April 1722</td>
<td>Dalinda</td>
<td>Guicciardi, Guglielmimi, Mengoni, Maria Caterina Negri, Mei, Pietro Baratti</td>
<td>lost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anonymous</td>
<td>Griselda</td>
<td>S. Sebastiano, Livorno</td>
<td>Spring 1722</td>
<td>Costanza</td>
<td>Guicciardi, Guglielmimi, Mengoni, Maria Caterina Negri, Mei, Baratti</td>
<td>lost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anonymous /diverse authors</td>
<td>Lucio Papirio</td>
<td>Lucca</td>
<td>Carnival 1724</td>
<td>Sabina</td>
<td>Agostino Galli, Zani, Santini, Baratti, Pacini, Drejer</td>
<td>lost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giovanni Antonio Canuti di Lucca</td>
<td>Rodelinda</td>
<td>Lucca</td>
<td>Carnival 1724</td>
<td>Eduige</td>
<td>Santini, Baratti, Galli, Drejer, Pacini, Zani</td>
<td>lost</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sarro’s Ginevra was not a new work, performed for the first time at S. Bartolomeo Naples in 1720. The role Strada sang two years later, that of Dalinda, was created originally by Anna Vicenza Dotti, a Bolognese contralto, who joined Handel’s Royal Academy at London in 1724. One can assume, therefore, that the arias were transposed one or two tones higher for the soprano.\(^{106}\) Even in this case, the speech range or chest register had to be used primarily, and this meant a very good practice for Strada to consolidate her lower notes. The aria S’en corre l’agnelletta (II/8; see Ex. 1.14) for instance, even in its transposed form – from F minor up to G minor – regularly reaches d’, and the vocal part almost entirely dwells in the first octave, which is still an extremely low tessitura for a soprano, not to mention a high coloratura one.

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\(^{106}\) She used to be the seconda donna to Cuzzoni in London, and embodied Irene in Tamerlano (1724) and Eduige in Rodelinda (1725). Winton Dean, ‘Dotti, Anna Vicenza’, Grove Music Online, ed. by L. Macy. Accessed 9 November 2014.

The other Livorno opera, the *Griselda* of unknown authors – in which her character, Costanza, is going to marry her father while she is being separated from the man she loves, and her mother is forced to be her slave – was presumably a *pasticcio*, in which Strada may have sung some of her earlier arias, likely some among them the Venetian ones.

In *Lucio Papirio dittatore* the fundamental conflict of love and duty reflects itself in Strada’s role, that of Sabina – sister of Quinto Fabio but also betrothed to Lucio’s son, Claudio Papirio. Cuzzoni played the same role under the name of Rutilia, in Venice from 26th December 1720 onwards. Strada might have witnessed one of the performances, as she herself was present in Venice at that time: *Filippo rè di Macedonia* by Boniventi and Vivaldi was premièred on 27th December 1720. However, Strada’s Sabina role gained much more importance in the drama than that of Rutilia, who in her arias always reflects others’ emotions or gives counsel to someone else. As a matter of fact, the ethos of this character had been changed. 107 Sabina’s arias are always in first person: she sings of her personal feelings and the effects of the situation she is in. Though the music is lost, the poetry of these closed numbers is of high artistic value.

The role of Eduige in *Rodelinda*, however, through its bitter passion, jealousy and manipulative nature represents another category of dramatic expression.

Concerning the characters Strada embodied in her early years and the energetic factor of most of the arias written for her – showing an agile and strong coloratura soprano voice executing accented high notes regularly – one can feel prompted to follow the logic that it may to some extent reflect her personality. Naturally, an artist specialized for the stage is able to represent qualities and manners which are not his or her own, but certainly not all the time. The fierce passion Strada showed from her debut onwards, gaining more and more ground during her career, might have been her private characteristic too. On the other hand, most of the figures she played have deeper and more complex moral aspects. They have to make serious decisions, showing compassion and respect, and yet to follow the truth; they have to meet the requirements of position and still not to lose the happiness of the heart; they need to hope against hope that their beloved ones survive. After these first

couple of years, Strada was growing out of the rank of seconda donna – her vocal as well as dramatic skills called for challenges of a higher level. Fortunately, she did not have to wait long. Political and musical changes simultaneously made a place for her: the great success of a production at San Bartolomeo in Naples gave cause for exchanges in its cast in the spring of 1724.
Chapter Two: First Maturity

From the spring of 1724 Strada was engaged at the Teatro San Bartolomeo in Naples, after a significant part of the house’s ensemble had been changed. The changing of the complete cast in every few years seems to have been a practice of opera management at that time, especially in Naples, where it became a tradition to hire new singers from the spring season onwards.¹ The other important reason for contracting a new cast was the enormous success of Pietro Metastasio’s Didone abbandonata, set to music by Domenico Sarro and premièred on 1st February. According to Kurt Sven Markstrom, somebody from the Teatro San Cassiano Venice might have witnessed one of the performances and could have been impressed to such an extent that he brought the production, (i.e. the poet Metastasio, the cast including the soprano Marianna Benti-Bulgarelli detta ‘La Romanina’² and the contralto castrato Niccolò Grimaldi detto Nicolini³, along with the intermezzo and its performers, the comic duo, Corrado and Santa Marchesina) to Venice. There it was premièred the next year with the music of Albinoni.⁴

Thus, they left and were replaced by the young soprano castrato Carlo Broschi detto Farinello, engaged for the first time at S. Bartolomeo,⁵ and the contralto Diana Vico,⁶ specialized in trouser roles. Later on, in the autumn a further contralto, Vittoria Tesi,⁷ arrived in place of her great rival Antonia Merighi, Strada’s former and later colleague who also left after Didone and became engaged for the next season at S. Giovanni Grisostomo in Venice.⁸

We may well ask how Strada had been found. Again, personal relations may have played a role. First of all, her protector was Girolamo Colloredo, the governor of

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⁶ Vico, probably around thirteen years Strada’s elder, stood in the service of the Elector of Bavaria (Munich) from 1720. One of her most important appearances was the role of Ottone in Vivaldi’s Ottone in villa, (1713). As a member of the King’s Theatre Company in London (1714–16) she sang Rinaldo in the 1714–15 revival of Handel’s opera, as well as Dardano in Amadigi (1715). Winton Dean, ‘Vico, Diana’, Grove Music Online ed. L. Macy. Accessed 17 March 2013.
⁸ Wiel, I teatri veneziani del settecento, 71–76.
Milan. He held this office from 1719 until shortly before his death in late 1725, which occurred on the return journey to the Austrian capital, from where he should have left for Italy to assume the role of the viceroy of Naples. It seems evident that he recommended his singer previously.9

Furthermore, Merighi and the contralto Antonia Laurenti detta La Coralli had worked together with Strada in Venice at Sant’Angelo (1720–21). If a singer could have had a say in the decision at the level of suggestion at least, it is likely that Merighi could have proposed her name in Naples. Further factors might have been Strada’s youth, on the one hand, and the reputation she already had mainly due to her Venetian collaboration with Vivaldi, on the other. Hence, she became the leading soprano in Naples and partner of the rising star Farinelli. Finally, after more than two years of pseudo-stagnancy and second-rank engagements, she was part of an excellent company again, similarly to her début years in Venice and Milan. But this one was even more prestigious.

Naples, the operatic capital of Europe

Significant changes happened around that time in Neapolitan operatic life. First of all, the role of the S. Bartolomeo shifted. The theatre had been opened in 1621 and initially presented mainly Neapolitan works. It was destroyed by fire in 1681 and rebuilt quickly in 1682. From 1654 onwards it generally offered opere in musica, besides the new theatre in the Real Palazzo, which opened its doors in December 1652. Naturally, the latter had the priority, as far as important royal spectacles were concerned. Later on, however, in the autumn 1724, after S. Bartolomeo was newly renovated, it took the leading role in the operatic life of the aristocracy as well.10 Besides, there were other theatres offering opera performances: for instance the Teatro dei Fiorentini, which had given up presenting spoken dramas and kept focusing on musical ones from 1706 onwards. In 1709 then, after staging a comic opera in Neapolitan dialect, a novelty which brought surprisingly great success, the Fiorentini specialized itself on the genre and the heroic opera was left almost entirely to S. Bartolomeo.11 Leonardo Vinci, for instance, made his debut at the Fiorentini in 1719 as opera composer with a commedia per musica, Lo cecato fauzo, earning tremendous applause.12 Noblemen visited both theatres, though mostly S. Bartolomeo. Furthermore,

10 Markstrom, The Operas of Leonardo Vinci, 84; Croce, I Teatri di Napoli, 253.
there were two new theatres inaugurated in 1724, in order to perform comic operas: the Della Pace and the Nuovo.\textsuperscript{13}

By mid-century, Naples became the ‘capital of the world’s music’ due to its ‘best schools of music’, as De Brosses stated.\textsuperscript{14} Music and musical education gained wide popularity and became deeply rooted in the society. Large families destined their sons to be priests, instrumental players and singers – in that order. Naples had four excellent conservatories: S. Maria di Loreto, S. Maria della Pietà dei Turchini, Poveri di Gesù Cristo and S. Onofrio a Capuana, all founded in the sixteenth century and generally with ‘two music masters, the senior being selected from among the most celebrated composers and giving three lessons a week’.\textsuperscript{15}

The presence and significant influence of renowned composers in Neapolitan musical life and especially in the field of opera began with the arrival of Alessandro Scarlatti in 1684, when he received the title of \textit{Maestro di Cappella} from the viceroy of Naples; this was probably due to the influence of his sister, who was not only an opera singer but also a nobleman’s mistress. Scarlatti’s reputation, however, was already established earlier in Rome. Though he was absent from Naples between 1702 and 1708, after his return he held the title again until his death in 1725. In the period Scarlatti was away from Naples, a new generation of composers trained in the conservatories arose: among them were Domenico Sarro, Francesco Mancini and Niccolò Porpora, not to mention Leonardo Vinci, who was in the heyday of his life and career in the mid-1720s onwards and spread his fame outside Naples, mainly in Rome.\textsuperscript{16} Music was not only exported to other parts of Italy and beyond, but young musicians also started to arrive, with the support of the Austrian court. Composers who later become famous also visited the city in order to study in private, as did Johann Adolph Hasse; he lived in Naples from 1722 till the end of the decade.\textsuperscript{17}

Traditional historiography has identified the musical style of Naples in the 1720s as the beginning of a new era, that of the ‘galant style’ or even ‘pre-classical style’. The concept of a specific ‘Neapolitan school’ in musical composition, however, has been relativized more recently by researchers such as Helmut Hucke, Daniel Heartz, Francesco Degrada and Reinhard Strohm, who agree that stylistic innovation in that period was achieved

\textsuperscript{14} Robinson, \textit{Naples and Neapolitan Opera}, 13.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 13; Josse de Villeneuve, \textit{Lettre sur le mecanisme de l’opéra italien} (Naples: 1756), 106.
\textsuperscript{16} Robinson, \textit{Naples and Neapolitan Opera}, 25.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 23.
elsewhere in Italy, too. The typical features of this modern compositional manner lie partly in the handling of the instruments: the violins frequently play unison while the violas col basso play at the octave, or providing a solely harmonic accompaniment pulsating in quavers, crochets or semiquavers. Colla parte sections are also usual for the violins while the basses are pausing. But more attention should be paid to innovation in singing styles, and in composition for the voice. As for the voice parts, besides the significance of prolonged passages the importance of cadenzas is prominent. Michael F. Robinson writes that by the second decade of the eighteenth century cadenzas were not merely stretched and embellished cadence points as was common in the seventeenth century, and as Johann Joachim Quantz stated – on the basis of observations made by Tosi in his Opinion de’ cantori, that between 1710 and 1716 a new custom had been established: especially in the case of final cadenzas the whole musical process in the orchestra halted, so that during its pause singers could ‘execute passages of I know not how many bars together: they’ll have echoes on the same passages and swellings of a prodigious length, and then, with a chuckle in the throat, exactly like that of a nightingale, they’ll conclude with cadences of an equal length, and all this in the same breath’.

The question of the official titles of Maestro di Cappella and Vice-Maestro used to be a matter of competition. It meant the directorship of the Real Cappella, the most prestigious musical institution in Naples, which had been founded by the Spaniards during the Spanish occupation in the fifteenth century and constructed after the model of the Aragonese court. Sarro, who worked as Vice-Maestro until 1707 and was dismissed for political reasons, gained a gesture of reprieve in 1720 when he was promised his former position’s succession with a salary of twenty-two ducats a month. Then, on October 22

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20 Benedetto Marcello, Il teatro alla moda (Venice: 1720), 17.


1725, Scarlatti died; Mancini was reappointed to his earlier Maestro position, Sarro became Vice-Maestro again, while Vinci together with Leo became so-called ‘Pro Vice-Maestri’. Vocalists as well as instrumentalists were employed at the Real Cappella for royal musical service, including the new impresario-duo of S. Bartolomeo, Nicola Galtieri and Aurelio del Pò (1698–1773), who were signed up to a four-year contract in September 1721 after the elderly Nicola Serino had died that year. Since the running of the theatre was necessarily costly, and since, in spite of different sources of financial support, the budget of another applicant, Salvatore Caputo, was too large to deliver, finally these candidates, both former conservatorists of Neapolitan churches, were chosen. The two were related: Nicola was the maternal uncle of Aurelio’s father, Andrea del Pò, a painter and stage designer who himself also used to be the impresario of S. Bartolomeo. He rented the House for the first time in 1693–94, then again from 1705 until 1708.

The Galtieri–Del Pò couple achieved notable results within a short time: among other things, they were the first to accomplish a collaboration of the House with Pietro Metastasio – connected to the production of Feo’s Siface in May 1723 – and with further librettists like Pietro Pariati, Agostino Piovene, Bernardo Saddumene, Antonio Salvi, Silvio Stampiglia, Nino Zanelli and Apostolo Zeno. Likewise, they could enlist the best composers of the ‘Neapolitan school’; the music of Leo, Porpora, Sarro, Alessandro Scarlatti and Vinci was heard during the years of their activity, not to mention the greatest star singers of those days, among them Faustina Bordoni, Merighi, Benti-Bulgarelli, Tesi, Vico, Farinelli, Grimaldi and Annibale Pio Fabri. This must have meant a glorious period in the life of the S. Bartolomeo and of the Neapolitan musical culture alike. Not surprisingly, when the contract came to an end in September 1725, they terminated it with a huge deficit.

According to Benedetto Croce, Aurelio del Pò, for instance, owed Strada an amount of 2000 ducats – most probably the total sum of her fees from 1724 onwards – which he could compensate only by marrying her that year (he was twenty-seven, Strada twenty-two years old). Regardless of this, we may assume they were already in a relationship; otherwise, how would it be imaginable that Strada could let these debts grow and sing without payment for years? On the other hand, why did Aurelio not pay the wages even of Strada? Presumably he and Nicola could pay the other members of the company, at their own expense at least, but they withheld that of Strada, as she was to be part of their family

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25 Croce, I Teatri di Napoli, 348.
soon anyway. It must have been a good marriage; they seem to have clung together for the rest of their lives in every respect. Certainly, Aurelio remained passionately interested in Strada’s career not only from an artistic and financial but from a moral aspect as well, as some incidents that happened in London during the 1730s would come to show.

Although Del Pò and Galtieri were originally supposed to leave by October 1725, and be succeeded by the next impresario, Angelo Carasale – who was in the viceroy Cardinal D’Althann’s favour – as Croce states, the libretti of S. Bartolomeo’s performances up to the carnival season of 1726 show names of Galtieri and Del Pò as dedicators. In fact, Carasale worked at the Teatro Nuovo eretto di sopra Toledo in the carnival of 1726. It follows that Aurelio and Strada left the theatre together afterwards, and that Carasale took over S. Bartolomeo after Easter, beginning with the run of Hasse’s Sesostrate (from 13th May). Strada was not the only singer whose contract was terminated: basically the whole company was replaced.

Interestingly enough, there is no information either about Strada or Aurelio for the next three years, until Handel engaged her for the Second Royal Academy in London. Neither have I found any libretto from those years with her name, nor any production wherein she could have participated. One logical explanation suggests itself: that of childbirth. By the time of the London engagement in 1729 Strada had enough time even for two pregnancies.

Table 2.1: Strada’s Neapolitan repertoire, 1724–1726

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Composer</th>
<th>Opera</th>
<th>Première</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Cast</th>
<th>Sources consulted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Niccolò Porpora</td>
<td>Semiramide regina dell’Assiria</td>
<td>19 May 1724</td>
<td>Zomira</td>
<td>Vico, Gucciardi, Farinelli</td>
<td>lost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leonardo Vinci</td>
<td>Eraclea</td>
<td>1 October 1724</td>
<td>Flavia</td>
<td>Tesi, Vico, Gucciardi, Farinelli</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leonardo Leo / Vinci</td>
<td>Turno Aricino</td>
<td>3 December 1724</td>
<td>Livia</td>
<td>Tesi, Vico, Gucciardi, Farinelli</td>
<td>only Leo’s contributions survive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domenico Sarro</td>
<td>Tito Sempronio Gracco</td>
<td>January 1725</td>
<td>Emminia</td>
<td>Tesi, Vico, Gucciardi, Farinelli</td>
<td>I-Nc Rari 7.2.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leo</td>
<td>Zenobia in Palmira</td>
<td>13 May 1725</td>
<td>Aspasia</td>
<td>Tesi, Vico, Farinelli, Francesco Costanzi</td>
<td>I-Nc Rari 7.3.9.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giovanni Porta</td>
<td>Amore e fortuna</td>
<td>1 October 1725</td>
<td>Ormonda</td>
<td>Tesi, Vico, Farinelli, Costanzi</td>
<td>lost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Porta</td>
<td>La Lucinda fedele</td>
<td>Carnival 1726</td>
<td>Erenice</td>
<td>Tesi, Vico, Farinelli, Pertici</td>
<td>lost</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

27 Holmes, Opera Observed, 106–109.
28 Turno Aricino was a pasticcio by Vinci and Leo, completed by arias of Porta, Scarlatti, Lotti, Porpora, Capelli, Vivaldi and others. The Avvisi di Napoli stated that ‘the performers have been permitted to place in this opera diverse arias to their satisfaction’. Strada might have sung numbers new to her, or perhaps she repeated airs from Porpora’s Semiramide and Vinci’s Eraclea, although this is less likely. The only Vivaldi aria in the pasticcio was Se fide quanto belle (RV 749.32), for a mezzo-soprano; thus Strada does not seem to have performed anything from her Venetian repertoire. Markstrom, The Operas of Leonardo Vinci, 97; Strohm, Italienische Opernarien, vol. ii, 284.
Strada on the stage

Strada’s first opera in Naples (Table 2.1) was \textit{Semiramide regina dell’Assiria}, by Porpora. The opera is lost but one aria written for and sung by her, \textit{Se d’aquilon} (V5; G major, Allegro, C), survived because Porpora reused it for his \textit{Siface} (Viriate, I/2), performed in Milan and at S. Giovanni Grisostomo Venice simultaneously during the carnival season of 1726, from 26\textsuperscript{th} December 1725 onwards. This aria was sung again by Strada in London, in one of Handel’s Italian \textit{pasticci}, \textit{Ormisda} in 1730. It is very informative that whereas in Milan \textit{Se d’Aquilon} was performed by Marianna Lorenzani Conti – at the Lombard pitch (i.e. a whole tone higher than in Naples) –, in Venice it was omitted by Marianna Benti-Bulgarelli as Viriate and was substituted by the aria \textit{Non lascia il ben che brama}. Benti evidently was not a virtuoso singer and her range went only up to a‴, while \textit{Se d’Aquilon} has a very high tessitura and requires g″ and a″ too frequently; moreover, these notes are placed on accented beats, and therefore they call for a powerful voice production. As far as Lorenzani is concerned, Jean-Benjamin de la Borde described her as an ‘excellente et célèbre musicienne’ while he only notes Benti’s beauty and fine acting skills.

The case of \textit{Se d’Aquilon} serves to classify Strada’s vocal calibre (Ex. 2.1). Marked with the characteristics of a castrato aria, it musters arpeggiation, coloratura patterns, descending \textit{volatine semplice}, syncopation, accented g″ (thirty-one times) and a″ (six times) notes, trills, repeated notes (\textit{note ribattute}) and violin idioms (in the B section); all of this above a continuous drumming bass accompaniment. The aria displays an increasing limitlessness and freedom of the vocal toolbox.

Example 2.1: Vocal part of \textit{Se d’Aquilon} by Porpora
In *Semiramide regina dell’Assiria* the aria belongs to Zomira, the Bactrian princess who is a captive in Babylon together with her beloved, Idaspe.\(^{29}\) The text of the recitative introducing the aria in the fifth scene of Act I makes clear how deeply she loves Idaspe, and that his loss would ruin her forever: ‘Idaspe, Idaspe, you alone are a sweet support to my afflicted soul; you, dear subject of all my thoughts. Being far from you, I am deprived and diminished, descending from the golden throne. Without my beloved Idaspe I do not want to live’.\(^ {30}\) After such words one would expect everything but the type of aria described above: perhaps a lamenting, pathetic number in a minor key and with an afflicting melody would be appropriate. Instead, a *simile* aria with strong images of disaster is that which comes:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{If Aquilo in his rage plucks} & \quad / \text{the beloved plant,} & \quad / \text{the dear grapevine} & \quad / \text{languidly falls to the soil.} & \quad / \text{The darling trunk bereaved,} & \quad / \text{has nobody to sustain her,} & \quad / \text{whom the river does not revive,} & \quad / \text{neither nourishes the sun.} \quad \text{\textsuperscript{31}}
\end{align*}
\]

This anomalous situation deeply effects the consideration of Zomira’s character, whom the audience would expect to be the typically helpless, victimized and fragile young second woman of the opera. *Se d’Aquilon* being her very first aria turns it all upside down and gives the strongest impression of power, generated by a mixture of bravery and fright: she fights to escape from hopelessness, which might remain if she lost the one who means everything to her.

For Strada, who must have been very receptive to adopting not only certain elements but the general voice production of the *castrato* singing method, these years must have meant a vital period of learning, having the young Farinelli as her stage partner. As Naomi Adele André has suggested about early Romantic Italian opera, but referring to the same phenomenon:

\[^{29}\text{In the end, however, she falls in love with Nino, Semiramide’s son (played by Farinelli). Francesco Silvani (much altered), *Semiramide Regina dell’Assiria*. Printed libretto. (Naples: Francesco Ricciardo, 1724).}\]

\[^{30}\text{‘Idaspe, Idaspe, ah solo De l'afflitta alma mia dolce sostegno. Tù il caro oggetto sei Di tutti I pensier miei. Lunge da te, di me son priva e poco, Mi cal d’aurato soglio. Senza Idaspe mio ben, viver non voglio.’ Ibid., 11.}\]

\[^{31}\text{‘Se d’Aquilon lo sdegno / Tronca la pianta amata, / La vita innamorata, / L’alma non la ravviva. / Del caro tronco priva / Non há, chi la sostenta / Il rio non la ravviva, / Non l’alimenta il sol.’ Ibid., 11. Aquilo stands for the North Wind in the Roman mythology.}\]
In addition to formal teaching situations, the castrati’s presence in opera gave other singers an opportunity to “learn by example” [...] several of the female singers who were the first interpreters of primo ottocento opera also had the benefit of singing onstage with, and learning formally or informally from their castrati colleagues. [...] Frequently these women sang the prima donna characters that were romantically paired with the heroic roles assigned to the castrati in the plot. This meant that these women had to blend their voices with the castrati’s, coordinate complementing embellishments, and decide where they both would breathe for the numbers where they sang together.\textsuperscript{32}

Strada must have noticed the obvious difference in quality when comparing Carlo Broschi to the former castrati she had encountered. Most probably it was also very helpful that they were of a similar age (Farinelli was nineteen in 1724, Strada two years his elder) and that both were in their early careers – already with some reputation behind them, but still in the process of maturing. Moreover, this was the very time when Farinelli – after Faustina emerged as a star with the new manner of bravura singing by 1720 –, with the help of his master, Porpora, acquired a greater measure of virtuosity in the execution of passaggi, wide leaps and a higher level of rhythmic variety, so as to compete with her.\textsuperscript{33} Strada, I suppose, had enough self-assurance to work with him in a relaxed atmosphere, and, doing so, she could get as close as professionally possible to observe and learn from this extraordinary living example of rich and bright voice production, perfect messa di voce, incredible breath control as well as use of chest and support.\textsuperscript{34}

The perfect art of holding the breath, and retaking it with such cleanness, so as to not allow anyone to know when he was breathing, started and ended with him. The perfect intonation, the unfolding, the extending and expanding of the voice, his portamento, the perfect union of registers, the sparkling agility, and perfect trill were all in him in the same degree of perfection.\textsuperscript{35}

Four times they played a lover couple: in Semiramide as Zomira and Nino (singing the duet Mio bel sole, Idolo mio III/10), in Eraclea as Flavia and Damiro, in Zenobia as Aspasia and Decio, and as Ermione and Oreste in Astianatte. Because both were sopranos, in the case of duets they had the same unusually high tessitura, and only when singing at

\textsuperscript{33} Desler, \textit{Il novello Orfeo}. Farinelli, 103–104.  
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 27 and 30.  
the same time was Farinelli’s part written a third lower. Even then, the vocal lines crossed each other several times, as is the case in *Spera si ma solo amore* (*Zenobia in Palmira* III/8; B♭ major, Larghetto, 6/8; Ex. 2.2) – the only duet between Strada and Farinelli that survives, mainly because the castrato was always avoiding singing *non-solo* vocal numbers: 

Example 2.2: Duet *Spera si ma solo amore* (excerpt) from Leo’s *Zenobia in Palmira*, bb. 22–35.

They might have discussed these topics, too, so that Strada could gain an insight into Farinelli’s thoughts about the application of certain vocal techniques – what kind of images emerged on the screen of his mind and how they could help him; and Strada’s intelligence enabled her to transform and accommodate them to her own female body and personal approach. Moreover, Farinelli could show her some tricks by informally teaching her special exercises he learned from Porpora, for example, besides which Strada could have

taken some lessons from the composer himself during the preparation period of the production of *Semiramide*, Porpora’s own opera.\textsuperscript{37}

Taking one of Porpora’s *solfeggi* for Farinelli as an example (Ex. 2.3), one can see how he sets the octave of the middle range as default and how he focuses right after that on the strengthening of *passaggio*-notes between the chest and head register as well as on the agility of the middle ones through *terzini* which later reach the head range too. Trills are frequent; sixth, seventh and octave leaps are placed mostly in the midst of legato-phrases. It does not lack for high sustained notes or dotted rhythms either. In general, the whole piece is about creating an even voice production: binding the registers, making the naturally softer high tones powerful, the otherwise graver chest notes flexible, and preserving the legato and the unity of the sound regardless of the distance between the subsequent notes of the melody. Whoever could sing this exercise properly, he or she had practically everything an excellent singer has to have. Presuming that Strada trained herself through *solfeggi* similar to this one, it is not surprising that her voice was acclaimed to be superb everywhere she went.

In the question of acting, however, Strada might have been much more accomplished and natural than Farinelli, who, though having an advantageous appearance, lacked passion on the one hand and did not use any gesture for the expression on the other; according to the statements of Quantz and Charles Burney, he simply stood motionless like a statue.\textsuperscript{38} Strada, at the same time, was reported in London to have a ‘good manner’, which might refer to an effective way of acting, but her small figure was out of the ordinary. This latter, I think, was only a problem to the British audience, not to the Italian one.

Further opportunities came to Strada for vocal development with the opening event of the year 1725, Domenico Sarro’s *Tito Sempronio Gracco*. By good fortune, Quantz witnessed one of the performances and committed a short description to paper:

\begin{quote}
On January 13 I therefore travelled from Rome to Naples, where I immediately heard an opera composed by Sarri, almost in the style of Vinci. Farinelli, who was then
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{37}Porpora, besides *castrati*, also had female pupils, such as Regina Mingotti, Rosa Maddalena Cardina, Catterina Gabrielli or Maria Giovanna Gasperini, provided to him by the conservatories. Reinhard Strohm, ‘Vivaldi’s career as an opera producer’, in: *Essays on Handel and Italian Opera* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 122–163: 138; Dan H. Marek, Giovanni Battista Rubini and the Bel Canto Tenors: *History and Technique* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2013), ch. 5: Opera Seria in Evolution.

approaching his famous perfection, Strada, who later became more famous in England, and Tesi, were brilliant in this opera. The others were only fair.\footnote{Im Jahre 1725. wurden, weil es ein Jubeljahr war, in Rom keine Opern aufgeführt. Ich reiste deswegen am 13. Januar von Rom ab nach Neapolis; wo ich gleich eine Oper zu hören bekam, welche Sarri, fasi im Geschmacke des Vinci in Musik gebracht hatte. Der, seinen berühmten Vollkommenheiten damals sich immer mehr nähernende Farinello; die, nachher in England berühmter gewordene Strada; und die Tesi brillierten in dieser Oper: Die übrigen Sänger und Sängerinnen waren mittelmäßig.' Quantz, ‘Herrn Johann Joachim Quantzens Lebenslauf’, 197–250: 226–227.}

Strada played a prima donna role for the first time, since the contralti Vico (in the role of Mario) and Tesi (as Climene) both sang travesti. The musical material of Erminia’s role in Tito Sempronio Gracco indicates the appearance of new features in Strada’s singing. Her entrance aria, Se veglia, se dorme l’amante suo core (I/2; Ex. 2.4; Track 2; App. B1) is an energetic piece with a singular melody in Andante.\footnote{‘Se veglia, se dorme / L’amante suo/mio core / Contenere forme / Languisce d’amore / Sospira per te. // Il sogno m’appresta / Quel bene che spero / Poi l’alba mi desta / E scorgo che vero [il sogno] non è. // Se veglia, se dorme...’ (Awake or dreaming / His/my loving heart / Holding its form / Is languishing for love, / Sighing for you. // Dream prepares me / For the good I am hoping for / Then morning awakes me / And I behold that it is not true. // Awake...).} The violins play colla parte, while the rest of the orchestra moves in quaver notes of drumming bass. The aria is in D minor, alternating excitingly between the modal and tonal colour of the key, twisting chromatically through elaborated diminished rhythmic patterns with demisemiquaver notes on one hand, and large syncopated legato lines combined with wider leaps on the other. Exactly these large legato phrases signify a novelty in the vocal style of Strada, showing a higher technical level and a stronger voice production which cannot be found in her early repertoire. The ambivalent meaning of the text predicts the conclusion of the plot: Erminia declares her true love to Mario, but in the B section the seeds of ambiguity are sown, referring to what she prepares herself for in dreams, that may not be found in daylight. The initial melody, which sounds natural on violins, is obviously not at all comfortable for a human voice. It is no highway, rather a serpentine path. Though well built up, ascending gradually (bb. 12–15), the melody is technically complicated: not only because of repeated up-and-down movements, sixth-leaps, dotted rhythms and a coloraturas, which are placed vocally as best possible, but also by reaching a powerful b♭” and descending immediately a ninth to conclude the phrase (bb. 14–15), a structure that needs conscious planning of dosing support and perfect breath control. So does the rest of the aria (Ex. 2.5). Fascinating long coloraturas occur two times at the words ‘languisce d’amore sospira per te’ in both parts of the A section (A1, A2), as a motivic answer to the second half of the opening ritornello. For the first time (upbeat to b.18 to b.25) heavily chromatic second-chains appear, while for the second time (upbeat to b.42 to b.47) this process is disturbed by
fourth and seventh leaps, adding a vocally unexpected jump up to $b^\flat$ again. The latter happens on the rhythmically syncopated word ‘sospira’ (‘sigh’).

Example 2.4: Introductory ritornello to Se veglia, se dorme from Sarro’s Tito Sempronio Gracco, bb. 1–15.

Example 2.5: Vocal part (A section) of Se veglia, se dorme from Sarro’s Tito Sempronio Gracco, bb. 12–49.
Giving an answer of equal rank to Rosanno’s (Farinelli) aria dedicated to *terzini, Ninfa amante* (I/9, B♭ major, 3/8, Andante), Strada’s *Vorreire morire* in scene 10 (G major, C) is centred on descending and ascending violin idioms in *Vivace assai* (Ex. 2.6).

Example 2.6: Vocal part (excerpts) of *Vorreire morire* from *Tito Sempronio Gracco*, bb. 3–9 and 15–19.

An interesting case emerges with *Straniera Donzella* (II/5; E major, 2/4, Allegro; Ex. 2.7) – a *simile* aria which says that Erminia does not return to her former lover but keeps the new one. Of this a second version can be found at the end of the second act in the copyist’s manuscript: a substitution of the original aria with the same text and key – also by Sarro – but with a clearly different concept.\(^1\) Probably it served as musical refreshment during the succession of performances. Nevertheless, it is one of the rare occasions when Strada had a substitute aria in an original role. The first E major version has a light, galant, dance-like character in 2/4 – beaten in 4/8 – which gives an easy and graceful frame to the number. Playful dotted semiquavers, octave leaps and syncopation-chains interlaced with chromatics, spice up the simple dance-base of the piece. Its range is quite wide, yet high notes do not explicitly occur. Surprisingly, the melody reaches e’ fouteen times in the A section. The generally lower tessitura of this movement speaks of a fortification of Strada’s chest register, even if this aria was substituted in the course of *Tito Sempronio*’s run.

\(^1\) *Straniera Donzella* / Che in piaggia novella / Contenta soggiorna / Al Lido non torna / Che schiva lasciò. // Le sembra si bella / La sponda seconda / Che sdegnà la prima / Nè amore, nè stima / Più avere non può. // Straniera...’ (The foreign rainbow wrasse/damsel / Sojourning on a new coast / With satisfaction / Does not return to the seashore, / Timidly leaving it. // The second shore / Seems so beautiful to her / That the first one despised / Can have neither love, nor honour / Anymore. // The foreign...); * the word *donzella* has a double definition in Italian: it means not only *Coris julis*, the Mediterranean rainbow wrasse, an extremely colourful and luminous species of fish, alternatively known as *donzella pavonina*, or peacock fish, but also dams / maiden / young lady. Sarro, *Tito Sempronio Gracco*, ff. 115r–118r.
Example 2.7: Vocal part (A1 section) of Straniera donzella (first version) from Sarro’s Tito Sempronio Gracco, bb. 15–34.

Example 2.8: Vocal part (A1 section) of Straniera donzella (substitute version) from Sarro’s Tito Sempronio Gracco, bb. 15–34.

As soon as 1721, c’ notes had been written for Strada by Vivaldi in Filippo rè di Macedonia, in the aria Scherza di fronda in fronda, discussed in the previous chapter. But that was rather exceptional then. In Naples, however, lower notes began to regularly occur in her repertoire. In addition, we have to take into account the pitch-difference of the Venetian and Neapolitan tuning: compared to the Baroque standard of a’ = 415 Hz the tuning was a semitone lower in Naples – just like in France, 392 Hz (modern g’) – while it was around 440 Hz in Venice. Thus, there was a whole tone’s difference between the Neapolitan and Venetian tuning. In light of the above, I maintain that there was an enlargement of Strada’s vocal range.

The substitute version (E major, C; Ex. 2.8) turns to a high tessitura and a bravura character, though it retains something of the original leggero style and keeps some traces of chromaticism as well. Thus, this aria is more grandiose, and its virtuosity is exaggerated by the oboes added to the orchestration. This insertion may affirm that Strada’s voice sounded the best in the range between b’ and g♯₂, where other sopranos had their vulnerable passaggi.

The rhythmic variety of Saetta si bella (II/10; B♭ major, C, Andante; Ex. 2.9) reflects another side of Strada’s kaleidoscopic skill set. The voice part is a dense combination of syncopated arpeggiation with semiquavers, of dotted patterns with trills and demisemiquaver notes, of appoggiaturas and of sustained notes for messe di voce.
During this Neapolitan era, this kind of chiselled, galant Andante aria, in which the vocal line and verse genuinely fit each other by blurring the differentiation between the principal and ornamental notes of the melody – demisemiquaver grace notes became an essential part of the vocal line, appoggiaturas and acciaccaturas likewise, in the form of syncopation – started to multiply in Strada’s repertoire.\textsuperscript{42} This signals a very important process concerning her vocal profile as well as artistic personality. As for brilliance, therefore, Quantz might well have been right.

In fact, the \textit{Avvisi di Napoli} asserted that the work met ‘universal satisfaction’, although this warm response was due not only to the dazzling vocal virtuosity transmitted by first-class performers. The spectacular elements, the costumes and scenery – the costly proposition of the impresario – also played a very important role in carrying the show to success:

On Thursday evening took place for the first time the opera entitled \textit{Tito Sempronio Gracco} at the San Bartolomeo Theatre, which succeeded with universal satisfaction due to the music by the celebrated Maestro di Cappella Domenico Sarro; also because of the famous costumes of the performers as well as the up-to-date, fashionable scenery, elaborated with perfection, for which no expense has been spared by our impresari. His Princely Serene Highness was present to listen to it together with all the nobility.\textsuperscript{43}


\textsuperscript{43} Giovedì a sera si diè principio alla recita della nuova Opera al Teatro di S. Bartolomeo, intitolata Tito Sempronio Gracco, quale riusci di universal compiacimento, sì per la Musica, ch’è del celebre Maestro di Cappella Domenico Sarro, sì anche per li famosi Abiti de’rappresentanti, come per le nuove vaghissime Vedute, per far le quali con tutta perfezione, non risparmiano spesa questi Impresai, e vi si portò ad ascoltarla detto Eminentissimo Principe con tutta questa Nobiltà.’ \textit{Avvisi di Napoli}. Num. 5. Naples, 23 January 1725. Preserved at the Biblioteca nazionale Vittorio Emanuele III in Naples.
The appreciation of the clothes is not by chance, as it occurs regularly in the avvisi when a theatrical evening comes under discussion. On the other hand, the expression of ‘famous costumes’ – ‘famosi Abiti’ – and description of the new scenery implies that particular care has been taken with this production; the impresari, Galtieri and Del Pò, surely took this side of the productions seriously, considering their background painting and stage design. It must also be noted in passing that the description of the première evening of Semiramide regina dell’Assiria, Strada’s debut in Naples, is especially detailed and remarkable, not least because the quality of the singers is highlighted as being the best possible:

On Saturday evening the new opera, titled Semiramide, was performed for the first time at the San Bartolomeo Theatre, which succeeded with general satisfaction both for the composition in verse done by a noted man of virtue, and for the music coming from the illustrious Niccolò Porpora, Maestro di Cappella to the Serene Highness of Darmstadt, and above all for the company who performed it, the best one could wish for. To see furthermore the changes of scene all brand new, admirable in every respect, not only for the painting, but also for the architecture, all designed by the celebrated architect, engineer and academician of Milan, Giovanni Battista Oliviero, enriched by several dancers by the choreographer Sebastiano Scio, Maestro di Balli of Serene Elector Palatino. In all these good taste of our impresari was manifested, who did this on their own for the satisfaction of the public. On Sunday evening His Highness the Eminent Viceroy was also present to listen to it.44

The conception of a performance, the costumes and scenery influence a singer’s imagination of the drama and of the role he or she creates. Contrary to the lavishness of the costumes, scenery and stage machinery at the first-rank opera houses in Venice, what we see here is a lack of extraordinary machines and exotic animals on stage, but there are artistically painted, ‘well constructed stage sets’ and fair costumes instead. The focus fell on the planning of the scenery, a kind of directing action in service of the drama, and on clothes which, through their richness and beauty, can magnify the essential features of a

44 ‘Sabato a sera andò per la prima volta in scena nel Teatro di S. Bartolomeo la nuova Opera in Musica intitolata Semiramide, quale riuscì di universal compiacimento così per la composizione delle parole, che sono di un celebre virtuoso, come per la Musica, ch’è del rinomato Niccolò Porpora virtuoso del Serenissimo Principe Darmstadt, e più d’ogn’altro per la compagnia, che la rappresentata, non potendo desiderarsi migliore, vedendovi anco le vedute delle mutanze delle Scene tutte nuove; ammirando si in ciascheduna di esse non solo la dipintura, ma anche per l’architettura, il tutto ideato dal celebre Architetto Gio: Battista Oliviero, Architetto, Ingegnere, & Accademico di Milano, come anco avendola arrechita di molte figure di balli; il virtuose di assi Sebastiano Scio Maestro di Balli del Serenissimo Elettor Palatino; dal che si manifesta il buon gusto di questi Impresarj, che non abbandono ad altro, che a dar sodisfazione a questo Pubblico; e Domenica a sera vi si portò ad ascoltarla Sua Em. il Signor Vicerè.’ Avvisi di Napoli. Num. 22. Naples, 23 May 1724.
certain character. Reading between the lines, one can surmise that these reports bespeak fine taste.

Similarly to the previous productions, the dramatic strength of text and music could show itself within a proper visual environment in the following opera of the season 1724–25, *Zenobia in Palmira* by Leonardo Leo. The plot should not be confused with the popular and frequently set libretto of Zenobia, by Metastasio (1738, first performed 1740) with completely different characters and story. The present one does not deal with the wife of Radamisto from the 1st century AD (which can be read in *Annals*, Book XII by Tacitus) but concerns Zenobia, the Palmyran Queen, a different person who lived in the 3rd century BC and was married to Odenato.

The date of the Neapolitan première fell on 13th May (the birthday of Maria Theresia, then eight years old). Interestingly, almost at the same time, on 9th May, *L’amore eroico*, a *dramma per musica* based on the same plot, started its run at S. Samuele in Venice. Though the score by Francesco Brusa seems to have been lost, according to the British impresario Owen Swiney its musical quality was unacceptably low. A detailed description

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45 ‘E la sera detto Eminentissimo Signore si portò ad ascoltare l’Opera in musica, intitolata Zenobia in Palmira, che per la prima volta si recitò nel Teatro di S. Bartolomeo, quale riusci di universal applauso, così per la musica, ch’è del celebre Maestro di Cappella Leonardo Leo, come per gli Rappresentanti, e famosi Abiti, e nuove, e ben architettate Vedute.’ (In the abovementioned evening, [13th May 1725] His Highness went to listen to the opera entitled Zenobia in Palmira, which was represented for the first time at the S. Bartolomeo Theatre, and attained general applause due to the music by the celebrated Maestro di Cappella Leonardo Leo, as well as to the performers, together with the famous costumes and the newly and well constructed stage sets.) *Avvisi di Napoli*. Num. 21, Naples, 15 May 1725.


of its compositional errors can be found in Johann Mattheson’s *Critica Musica*. Swiney praises, however, the Bolognese contralto Santa Marchesini, who played Zenobia.49

**Becoming the leading soprano**

This special situation, that the main female character (in the drama) was not a soprano but a contralto, occurred – presumably on behalf of Vittoria Tesi – in the majority of the *opere serie* in which Strada participated in Naples, as it did in the case of *Zenobia in Palmira*. It follows that Strada took the leading soprano role, namely that of Aspasia, while Tesi – whose fame had already spread throughout Europe – was heard as Zenobia.50 The brightest star of this cast-constellation, Farinelli (as Decio) made the triangle complete.51 To sing such a challenging role as that of Aspasia, surrounded by top-quality colleagues, gave an exceptional scope for Strada to develop, refine and deepen her vocal and dramatic abilities.

The two leading female figures, Zenobia and Aspasia, are not only princesses, but strong and passionate warrior women. In addition, both of them have to face a moral conflict throughout the opera in both a personal and political respect.52 Zenobia, the princess of Assiria, is confronted with difficulty in reconciling her Amazon identity with her love for a man who is as strong and as confident as she is. It seems hard for her to make herself dependent on a king and a leader just as herself, and yet also simply on a man who is worthy of her heart, on someone whom she looks up to and honours.

This noble person is Odenato, the king of Palmyra (played by Diana Vico), who, in spite of the fact that he has never seen Zenobia before, admires her for her heroism and fearlessness according to reports he has been given. For this reason, Odenato refuses the offer coming from Sapore, the Persian King, to take his daughter, Princess Aspasia, in marriage. Sapore, feeling himself affronted, decides to send his general, Farnace, together with Aspasia to take revenge on Odenato. In the battle, Odenato is supported by Decio, the Roman general, who actually loves Aspasia. Odenato gets into a dangerous situation, which would cost him his life, when a mysterious Assirian commander wearing a closed helmet (i.e. Zenobia), saves him and gives him a jewel of gold. Thus, Assiria becomes a federate to Odenato’s empire too. Zenobia, disguising herself as her own captain, then

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50 The singer called ‘La Fiorentina’, was one of the most famous female contraltos of her age. The role of Andromaca by Leonardo Vinci was inspired by her solid yet expressively sensitive voice. Markstrom, *The Operas of Leonardo Vinci*, 124.


enters Palmyra as victor together with Odenato and Decio, as well as with the defeated and captivated Farnace and Aspasia.

The libretto, by Apostolo Zeno in collaboration with Pietro Pariati, was set to music for the first time by Fortunato Chelleri in Barcelona in 1709 and was also staged in Milan the next year.\footnote{Sadie ed., \textit{Companion to Baroque Music}, 83.} Then, in 1725, the work seems to have fallen into two different versions of the plot. \textit{L’amore eroico}, performed in Venice, represents the version of Pariati and emphasises Zenobia as the warrior queen, which is understandable considering the enthusiasm of the Venetians for that kind of figure.\footnote{Daniel E. Freeman, ”La guerriera amante”. \textit{Representations of Amazons and Warrior Queens in Venetian Baroque Opera}, \textit{The Musical Quarterly} 80/3 (Autumn, 1996): 431–460.}

In Naples at the same time, probably a local librettist reworked the libretto of \textit{Zenobia} for the vigorous and energetic musical style of Leonardo Leo, and adjusted the story more to the rules of \textit{opera seria}, as far as the hierarchy of the characters was concerned. Zenobia, the real warrior queen in the physical sense, remains contralto as voice type, but as a soprano, Aspasia has to dominate; the librettist accordingly accentuates the immense mental power with which Aspasia fights till the end to reach her goal. In this sense, she becomes another warrior queen of the opera. Zenobia, in the meantime, turns into a more sensitive and fragile figure. A typical example is the end of Act I when in \textit{L’amore eroico} Zenobia reveals that she was the one who saved Odenato’s life in a battle previously and reminds him to what she has sworn; she presents herself as a warrior only and not as a lover until Odenato proves that he can win the physical fight against her.\footnote{‘Tutto, Odenato, / Da Zenobia guerriera, / Ma nulla da Zenobia / Effeminata amante.... Sappi, che in petto ho un core, / Che Marte vincer deve, e non amore.’ Pariati, \textit{L’amore eroico} I/8, 18–19.} In the case of \textit{Zenobia in Palmira} however, Zenobia asks Odenato to tell her that he loves her. The order of their arias concluding the first act is switched from that of \textit{L’amore eroico} and their texts completely changed from the warrior to the amorous: Odenato’s aria (\textit{T’adoro} instead of \textit{Qual inacuto Cacciatore}) comes first, which can be interpreted as the mental paraphrase of the conquest. Zenobia’s aria immediately after that begins (instead of \textit{Vesta usbergo, cinga Spada}) as \textit{Benchè lieto il cor già sia combattuta} (‘Thus happy, this heart is already conquered’), contrasting with the conception of the Venetian piece.

It is important to note that while in the Venetian production the biggest name was that of Carestini as Odenato, in Naples Farinelli shaped the role of Decio. In this way the musical emphasis of the drama was transposed to the Decio–Aspasia couple. It is obvious from the very fact that he sang the first aria of the opera even though his character did not appear until the fourth scene of Act I in the libretto; in the meantime, the story of the opera is essentially about Zenobia. The number of arias per character clearly shows this equality
of the four: Aspasia and Decio have five arias each, Zenobia six (five plus an arioso), and so does Odenato. Considering this, the case of Zenobia in Palmira is especially intense, as the troubles in the plot are doubled by the two couples of almost equal importance. However, Aspasia would have been given five arias in total, while Decio just four, as the libretto shows.\(^{56}\) That was balanced later by Leo, who reworked and extended Decio’s (Farinelli’s) role. He got the very first aria of the work (\textit{Qual con l’aura} I/2) and took another one (\textit{Lieto parto amato / Tamerò sì ben mio} II/2) which originally belonged to Aspasia. Moreover, it was not only composed for Farinelli with an altered text, but was also reworked and turned into a more grandiose additional aria; the interpolation in the manuscript – possibly in the author’s own hand – is clearly visible and is commented upon with a posterior pencil note as well.\(^{57}\)

In compensation, Strada was given an additional \textit{aria di bravura}, \textit{Quando irato il Ciel s’oscura} – in place of Zenobia’s \textit{Oh Dio perché s’oscura}. This aria is set at a crucial place in a dramatic sense, in the 11\(^{th}\) scene of Act II, right before the greatest conflict of the drama, Zenobia’s confession to Odenato about her ‘giurata fede’, her oath not to marry without being conquered by her beloved in single combat. Thus, both Strada and Farinelli finally ended up with five arias each.

The opening scene of the drama presents a newly written dialogue between Odenato and Decio. Their conversation is about the ladies they love, highlighting Aspasia in particular. Decio’s first words are that he burns for her. In the second scene – which corresponds to the first scene of \textit{L’amore eroico}, enriched with Decio and Tullo, his servant – Zenobia appears with Farnace who realises the Roman general’s ardent love for his beloved one (the aforementioned first aria of Decio, \textit{Qual con l’aura}). Farnace’s revenge aria in the third scene (\textit{Sento già che nel furore}), with a rewritten text, seems to have a double meaning: he wants to take vengeance not only on Odenato for political reasons but also on Decio for personal ones, which calls the Persian Princess to mind again. In I/4–5 the first arias of Zenobia and then of Odenato are taking place. Odenato must answer Aspasia’s call, which arouses Zenobia’s jealousy. We can see therefore a strictly and consciously built-up dramaturgy. By the time she finally enters in I/6, the audience has already experienced passionate discussions about her all along; one knows almost everything about Aspasia and how the others relate to her.

As soon as Zenobia learns the king’s love for her, she suggests him to open the golden gem. Odenato looks for the first time at the portrait of his beloved and the scales fall from his eyes, realising that the Assirian captain is in fact Zenobia. (Later, the queen accepts

\(^{56}\) Among them took places his famous \textit{Qual farfalla} in the second Act (scene 7), as well as \textit{Son qual nave in ria procella} with extreme leaps.

\(^{57}\) Leonardo Leo, \textit{Zenobia in Palmira}. Musical manuscript (Naples: 1725), I-Nc Rari 7.3.9, ff. 66v–68r.
Odenato’s affections and agrees to marry him on the understanding that he has to overcome her in single combat, since she made a vow earlier to take nobody in marriage except the one who is able to fight her. The text of his aria has been reworked:

Colomba che mira / Dipinto un Ruscello / Non può mai con quello / La sete ammorzar. / Ne un cor che sospira / Mai può dal pensiere / Con finto piacere / Le brame appagar.

The dove, which admires / A painted brook / In this way can never / Extinguish its thirst. / Nor can a heart that sighs / Ever with the thoughts / Of false pleasures / Appease its desires.

The word ‘appagar’ means to appease, to calm. Right after Odenato’s aria another chamber opens to our view (I/6) with the anguished princess herself therein. Aspasia’s entrance aria is in fact a short, one-part number. The first word of the text is ‘placar’, which is the synonym of ‘appease’ (also ‘placate’), meaning to calm down. This concurrence inevitably generates an association with the previous scene and contrasts the dramatic situations which Odenato and Aspasia are in:

Placar ti dovresti / Destino severo; / E sempre più fiero / Tormenti il mio cor.

Calm yourself / Severe fate; / You, who ever more proudly / Torment my heart.

This was a conscious strategic choice of the librettist for the Neapolitan production, because the lyrics of Placarti dovresti do not appear in the Venetian libretto. Moreover, originally there is a long scene with recitatives, culminating in an aria (Vuoi, ch’io parta). Leo’s score is full of recitative corrections and aria displacements: in the case of this scene it is clearly visible that the fogli of Placarti were inserted additionally. The composer’s first idea was to turn one sentence of the recitative into an aria (Lascia, ch’io giusti ancora; B♭ major, C, Larghetto e amoroso) in the middle of scene 7, Aspasia and Decio’s conversation, but it was cut off and the more characteristic Placarti replaced it. In this way, an augmented focus fell on the princess alone, whose both sides, the social and the personal, became portrayed at the same time.

The introductory ritornello in C major is a magnificent French-style march. This rich sound, based on vertical movements – and later, when the singer enters, on the variety of

58 Pariati, L’amore eroico.
59 Leo, Zenobia in Palmira. I-Nc Rari 7.3.9, f. 30v.
harmonies – and the choice of the key together with the dotted rhythms create the royal atmosphere, serving as a symbol of Aspasia’s noble rank.\textsuperscript{60}

Example 2.10: Placarti dovresti from Leo’s Zenobia in Palmira

\begin{center}
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{example_2.10.png}
\end{center}

\textsuperscript{60} The C major key has been connected during the centuries to the meaning of something fierce and grit but also noble, heroic, pompous and pure at the same time – to something that has majesty and grandeur in it. Mary Cyr, Performing Baroque Music (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1992), 32; see Marc-Antoine Charpentier, Règles de composition (Paris: 1690); Jean Rousseau, Méthode claire, certaine et facile pour apprendre à chanter la Musique (Paris: 1691); Johann Mattheson, Das Neu-eröffnete Orchestre (Hamburg: 1713); Jean-Philippe Rameau, Traité de l’harmonie réduite à ses principes naturels (Paris: 1722); Quantz, Versuch einer Anweisung (Berlin: 1752); Jean-Benjamin de la Borde, Essai sur la Musique Ancienne et Moderne III (Paris: Onfroy, 1780).
The vocal part of *Placarti dovresti* (Ex. 2.10; Track 3) brings out Aspasia’s royal status, but also her personal emotions, struggles and doubts. In contrast to the orchestral ritornello it is based on horizontal legato lines, but leaps play an important role as well. This diversity clearly refers to the conflict between her social and personal situations. Vocally, the aria focuses on the display of *messa di voce* as well as generous portamento singing. Without beautifully-executed sustained notes the number would lose its meaning. *Messa di voce* or ‘placement of the voice’ was considered as a proof of an accomplished vocal technique because it required a high level breath control as well as a perfect positioning of the voice to change the volume of the note without any change of intonation and timbre. Mancini discussed it as a gift of nature, one of the most effective tools in singing and of a great beauty linked to ‘real true artists’ only. He brought up the most famous example, that of Farinelli, Strada’s actual stage partner. *Messa di voce*, besides that by its length it was to display the ability to control the breath, and through its swelling of *crescendo* and *decrescendo*, was also, as Naomi Adele André maintains, ‘a way to make the sound stand out and resonate through the opera house. Additionally it showcased a remarkable technique; to achieve the elasticity needed to increase and decrease the volume, the note had to be placed securely on the breath; otherwise the tone would collapse, disappear in the soft sections and become harsh or shrill in the loud sections.’ Through *Placarti dovresti* Strada’s blended registers, great volume, stamina, breath control, stable support and most likely her beautiful timbre has been proclaimed.

This first closed number of Aspasia has the great importance of introducing singer and character at the same time. Besides proving Strada’s established technical-musical qualities, it also refers to a voice not of a light soprano. The orchestra does not help the voice with unison – moreover, the first sustained note has to be strong enough to dominate even when the first violins reach c‴; the whole melody structure, starting with a long c” lasting more than two-bars (bb. 8–10), followed by a g” (b. 10), is at once a technical difficulty to solve. Right after that comes a seventh leap comes. Continuing, there is still no time to rest because the next breath has to be taken in such a way that it can provide enough support to reach a””, dipping into an f#””, which – being an altered note – has to be

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61 ‘Messa di voce chiamasi quell’atto, in cui il Professore dà a ciascuna nota di valore la sua graduazione, mettendovi al principio poca voce, e poi con proporzione rinforzandola sino al più forte, ritirandola finalmente colla medesima graduazione, che adoprò nel salire’; ‘Messa di voce, is that art in which the singer gives to any sustained note its graduation, starting it with almost a thread of voice and then reinforcing it proportionately to the greatest power in which it can be developed, and then takes it back with the same graduation that has been used in going from soft to loud.’ Mancini, *Pensieri, e riflessioni pratiche*, 99; *Practical Reflections*, ix. Messa di voce, 117–118.


64 André, *Voicing Gender*, 40.
well tuned, especially because at the end of the same bar (b. 15) it changes again into f" natural on the appoggiatura. This chromatic wiggling on words ‘fiero tormenti’, which has to be shown dramatically through the slight accentuation of these two notes, takes away additional support from the singer. Again, there is not much time to breathe at the end of the phrase (b. 17), and, moreover, the culmination of the first part is still coming: the wildest chromatic writing in bar 18, aggravated with dotted rhythms, is not only very hard to tune but to top it all it is placed on passaggi. It travels to a full-bar d" (b. 19) which has to be intense enough to involve the surprise jump to the sixteenth a" note in bar 20 organically. The second half of the aria deals with sixth (bb. 23–24, 26) and seventh leaps (bb. 33–34) as well as with an extended chromatic legato line on ‘tormenti’ again (bb. 27–30).

A new feature of vocal quality, a new colour emerged here which did not appear in Strada’s earlier repertoire. I would suggest that this was a milestone in her vocal development and career. By this time she has already shown everything of a fine soprano’s qualities: flexibility, agility in coloraturas, leaps, trills and divisions. From the very beginning, the arias sung by her show us a free voice, which can easily reach high notes like a” with prevalence. In the spring of 1725, at the age of twenty-two a new stage of vocal maturity has arrived for her. In view of her repertory, her voice became stabilized at that time; its volume was extended and became thicker and more sonorous without losing its brightness. Placarti dovresti can be considered as a flash of the future Alcina. Aspasia’s temper does not fall too far from the enchanter queen’s either.

This way, both the libretto structure and music gives to Aspasia’s situation a very dramatic description. Farnace is released and free to return to Persia; he asks Aspasia to go with him. He represents the innate wish of the king’s daughter to meet social requirements and thus achieve acceptance by her father. Aspasia, however, has fallen some time ago for Decio, the Roman General in Persia, who devotes his legions to defending Palmyra, and therefore becomes the princess’s enemy. We can thus see a captive noblewoman who is torn between her task and the desire of her heart.

It is very important to see that opera seria – similarly to the spoken theatre of the era, particularly in the tragedies of Pierre Corneille – functioned as a reminder for the nobility. Mirroring society and giving high quality entertainment is just the first layer. It is all about the high responsibility they had as persons of rank. To face the fact over and over again that every decision they make, every affection that inspires them to make a decision in their lives is never theirs alone, for the future of their nation and the lives of people under them hang on their destiny. Duty and love – representing mind and emotion – are
constantly in conflict, struggling with one another inside of the characters, as is especially displayed in Metastasian libretti.\textsuperscript{65} Being torn between the two, the protagonists are in search for the better decision, weighing up which value should have priority and which one has to be sacrificed along with its inherent beauties, yet deep down continually lies the overwhelming faith that in an ideal world these two could never oppose each other. On the contrary, duty should intensify true love and vice versa. To strengthen belief in the existence of a solution which can be found to establish or re-establish complete harmony in life, as well as to unite the social and private sides of it, is the very \textit{ars poetica} of \textit{opera seria}. Likewise, for a performer to catch the essence of this duality and to find a way to true expression meant the greatest artistic accomplishment. For Strada specifically, the role of Aspasia was probably the first experience of a character of which musical elaboration was deeply rooted in its high dramatism.

This very first impression of Aspasia has a substantial psychological significance for she is presented as \textit{donna fragile}, so the audience could have an insight into her weaknesses. Everything authentic in her character is based here, a feature which has to be recalled from time to time because just in the next moment when the music changes into recitative she awakes from her dream of being feminine and proves herself to be a \textit{regina}, a \textit{donna forte}. The pride of the princess emerges as an additional factor one has to reckon with and her pique guides her to take revenge by any means.

When her two suitors, Decio and later Farnace appear, Aspasia goes at them furiously. She holds back her love until she gets full vengeance on Odenato and finally rules Palmyra. Since Decio wants her to stay, while Farnace wishes her to return to Persia with him, she offers her affections to the one who fulfils her political desires (I/8). Herewith, Aspasia makes her private life depended upon her social status, just like Zenobia in the Venetian version of the plot:

\begin{quote}
\end{quote}

Do you want me to leave? I will leave. (to Farnace) / Do you want me to stay? I will stay. (to Decio) / But revenge is what I am expecting from you. / Do you want love? Do you want affection? / I know that you are closing flames in your breast. / I know that you boast fidelity in your heart.

At this point of the work Aspasia is on stage ever since she entered for the first time in I/6. After Placarti dovresti there were recitative dialogues with Farnace and Decio together but no aria. As the next aria is also sung by Aspasia, she rules the stage during a substantial eleven-minute long scene. Vuoi ch’io parta (I/8; D major, C, Larghetto e cantabile / Presto; App. B2), a bravura number, contrasting with the preceding cantabile, also does not have a simple da capo form: the A section is made up of two contrasting materials alternating with each other. Two completely diverse musical characters can be heard: for the first part of the text – ‘Vuoi, ch’io parta? Partirò. / Vuoi ch’io resti? Resterò’ – there is a syllabic aria parlante episode in D major, Larghetto e cantabile (bb. 1–5, 13–16). Then, it is suddenly interrupted by the Presto section (bb. 6–13, 17–27) – ‘Ma vendetta, io vò da tè’. Virtuoso violin idioms occur on the word ‘vendetta’, reaching a four times within three bars (Ex. 2.11).

Example 2.11: Vocal part (A2 section) of Vuoi ch’io parta? from Leo’s Zenobia in Palmira, bb. 14–25.

In the first measure of the introductory ritornello (Ex. 2.12), the violins show the different themes by creating interference rhythmically: the dotted semiquavers and ornamental demisemiquavers against the semiquaver-triplets may represent Aspasia’s unbalanced and undecided feelings towards the two men (which one is to leave and which one to stay) versus the only thing she surely wants: to take revenge.

Strohm interprets the different aria-types of opera seria defined on the basis of theoretical works from 1714 to 1789: of Martello, Marcello, Tosi, Riva, De Brosses, Algarotti, Goldoni, Hiller, Burney and Brown. Strohm, Italienische Opernarien, vol. i, 239–245.
Example 2.12: Introductory ritornello to *Vuoi ch’io parta?* from Leo’s *Zenobia in Palmira*, bb. 1–4.

The vocal part and the bass are stuck together in a complimentary fashion, while motivically they are the loan translation of each other. The prevalent dotted octave-leap motif on a–A in the bass is recurrent in the soprano part on aʺ–a’ both in the *Largo* (bb. 15–16) and in the *Presto* section (b. 16, 23), making the artistic ‘patchwork’ coherent. This frequent occurrence of aʺ, many times on metrical accents connected with large leaps, is very informative about how flexible and agile Strada’s voice was, how surely and easily could it move in the upper register, wherein she felt comfortable and secure.

As far as the further numbers of Strada are concerned, *Al suo amato verde prato* (II/4), an *aria di mezzo carattere*, has a pastoral melody in B♭ major, *Allegro*, also with a high tessitura (b♭′–gʺ). Aspasia appears again as *donna fragile* in this *simile* aria: her metaphor is the image of a lamb that needs its shepherd to guide it to its favoured green field. *Quando irato il Ciel s’oscura* (II/11, C; Ex. 2.13; Track 4; App. B3) is the aforementioned later-added aria in E♭ major, with a wide range and with the enumeration of variable and masterfully enlaced technical show-off patterns (violin idioms, *cantar di sbalzo*, *stile di basso* and trills), including bird-song imitation. The text of this one is missing from the Neapolitan libretto. That is why I think it presumably was brought forth at a very late phase of the compositional process and maybe at Strada’s special request. It is a *simile* aria picturing the increasing frustrations in Aspasia’s soul as storm, thunder and lightning, which she hopes will pass and be replaced by serenity.
Example 2.13: Vocal part of Quando irato il Ciel s’oscura from Leo’s Zenobia in Palmira, bb. 9–55.

Example 2.14: Quando irato il Ciel s’oscura from Leo’s Zenobia in Palmira, bb. 12–34.

This was the most difficult and concerto-like movement sung by Strada until then, and its powerful orchestration (Ex. 2.14), with chords and repeated notes in the violins, indicates that her voice gained greater volume and stamina than before. The stops both for the soprano and the orchestra in bars 16 and 32, after a climax in the voice part and a virtuoso ascending scale in the violins (i.e. lightning), and the sotto voce and piano indications after them (when the tempest calms down), may also refer to possible places for the audience to applaud, according to Italian custom. 67

67 'Descriptions such as that of the competition between Farinelli and the trumpet player in Adelaide suggest that 18th-century opera audiences applauded immediately following a particularly noteworthy performance element rather than waiting for the end of an aria or even a section. On the spoken stage, too, 18th-century audiences were known to applaud elegant poses or well-executed transitions between passions of actors even in the middle of important monologues.' Desler, ‘Il novello Orfeo’. Farinelli, 208.
Da questo amore (III/3; Alla breve A major) celebrates the lieto fine after the Persian Princess has made her decision to send Farnace as well as her political motives away and to put her emotions towards Decio in the first place. Larghetto e amoroso in A major is associated with love and tenderness. A little lower, a more comfortable tessitura than before could bring out a smooth yet bright timbre, a tone of the solution when all troubles are released at last (Ex. 2.15). Besides rejoicing dotted rhythms framed in large legato phrases, plenty of messe di voce as well as trills occur. This role seems to fulfil Tosi’s utopian ideal of a style such as the ancients found valuable – as a ‘Mixture of the Lively and Cantabile, the Variety of which could not fail to give delight’.

Example 2.15: Vocal part (A1 section) of Da questo amore from Leo’s Zenobia in Palmira, bb. 9–29.

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Here, in *Zenobia*, Strada had the opportunity to present the whole range of her skills for the character of a queen – singing *cantabile* when pretending to be *fragile* while using her feminine wiles to control and manipulate the men around her, also showing off her agility through coloraturas to demonstrate her mental strength.

Between her appearance in two productions of Giovanni Porta, as Ormonda in *Amore e fortuna*, and as Erenice in *La Lucinda fedele* (her last one in Naples), Strada played Ermione in Vinci’s *Astianatte*, one of the stormiest and most unsettling dramas she ever participated in. It was premièred on 2nd December 1725 with the regular cast. Vittoria Tesi had the privilege to play Andromaca, who has to choose between true love to her murdered husband, Hector, or to save her son Astianatte’s life through an unwilling marriage with Pirro (Diana Vico *en travesti*). Bringing the masculine colour of her voice into relief – in contrast to her earlier role of Eraclea –, Vinci let display her splendid acting gifts as well. Indeed, *Astianatte* is one of his works (besides the also notable *Silla dittatore, Didone abbandonata* and *Artaserse*) through which he deserved Quantz’s appreciation that ‘he was lively, rich in invention, agreeable, natural, and often very happy in expression’.

This very intense dramatism comes from the drama Antonio Salvi’s libretto is based on, Jean Racine’s *Andromaque*. Salvi, a Florentine court poet, often used the French *tragédie lyrique* as model for his *drammi per musica*. Although *Astianatte* was his only libretto of *opera seria* set by Vinci, Handel, for instance, regularly chose his libretti to set to music.

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70 ‘Jeri mattina per il Compleanos del nostro Augustissimo Padrone..., e la sera detto Em. Sig. si portò ad ascoltar la nuova Opera in Musica al Teatro di S. Bartolomeo intitolata: Amore, e Fortuna, e riusci di piena soddisfazione cosí detto Eminentissimo Principe, come di tutta la Nobiltá, e Re di Firenze, e di tutte le genti, che vi si portarono ad ascoltarla, cosí per la Musica, essendo del rinomato Giovanni Porta Maestro di Cappella Veneziano, fatto qui venire a posta da questi Impresari, e per le Scene ideate, e dipinte dal celebre Gio: Battista Olivieri Accademico di Milano, e parimente per li ricchi e vaghi abiti.’ *Avvisi di Napoli*. Num. 41, Naples, 2 October 1725.

71 From 1st October, the Emperor’s birthday onwards.

72 Carnival of 1726.


74 Quantz gives a detailed description of Tesi’s abilities apropos of Sarro’s *Tito Sempronio Gracco* in January 1725: ‘Tesi was gifted by nature with a strong and masculine contralto voice... (and) sang on several occasions the kind of arias which are usually composed for bassos. By now she had acquired, in addition to the magnificent serious tone in her dinging, a pleasant softness. The range of her voice was extremely wide... The display of virtuosity was not her strong point. She seemed to be born to impress the audience with her acting’. Markstrom, *The Operas of Leonardo Vinci*, 124–125; see Quantz, ‘Herrn Johann Joachim Quantzens Lebenslauf’, in: Marpurg, *Historisch-Kritische Beyträße*, vol. 1.

75 Johann Joachim Quantz, *On playing the flute*, 327.


77 Markstrom, *The Operas of Leonardo Vinci*, 125.

78 *Rodelinda* (1725), *Scipione* (Paolo Rolli, after an original by Salvi, 1726), *Lotario* (1729), *Sosarme* (1732), *Ariodante* (1735), *Arminio* (1737) and *Berenice* (1737). All productions are directly connected to Strada as well; except *Scipione* and *Rodelinda*, which she sang in important revisions in 1730 and 1731, respectively (see ch. 4).
I believe one of his reasons was the strong dramatic power Salvi represented. The conventional forced happy end, however, demolishes the tragic dénouement of the complex and outstanding conflicts between the characters which can be seen in Racine.

The plot takes place in the aftermath of the Trojan War. Andromaque’s and Hector’s young son, Astyanax escaped death only because Ulysses unknowingly killed another child in his place. His life is henceforward in danger because he is a legitimate heir to the Trojan throne, who, growing up, could possibly try to avenge it one day. Orestes, the Greek Ambassador, arrives at the court of Pyrrhus to convince him either to put the child to death or let the Spartan Princess Hermione return home with him. Orestes hopes that Pyrrhus will refuse to hurt Astyanax because of Andromaque, whom he wants to marry, therefore he will give up on the Spartan Princess. The latter is Orestes’s real goal, for he loves Hermione. As regards her, she only wishes to be married to the Epirian King. Pyrrhus, however, decides to let the son die if her mother does not want him to marry. Andromaque intends to secure grace for Astyanax, begging Hermione to plead her cause with Pyrrhus, but she meets pride and detachment. As there is no other solution left, she decides to marry the king and thus save her son, but to commit suicide right after the ceremony, remaining Hector’s faithful spouse. In Racine, it turns out this way. Also, Hermione asks Orestes to avenge her scorn of Pyrrhus by killing him. Although she soon regrets her words, it is too late. Pyrrhus dies, though not at Orestes’s hand, after he recognises Astyanax as King of Troy, fulfilling the greatest fear of the Greeks. Hermione follows him to death. Orestes loses his sanity and, in a vision, Furies come over him.

Salvi, naturally adjusting to the traditions of opera seria, changed the tragic end into happiness: at last, Ermione falls for Oreste (sung by Farinelli) and Andromaca for Pirro, who is wounded by Oreste but survives. Though both the ladies are initially set against each other, in the end when Ermione wants to save the imprisoned Oreste, Andromaca intervenes with Pirro to spare his life and the two couples are united. Despite Salvi’s adjustments, the dramatic forces of the original idea are so powerful that they survive all the extenuation of the Italian version.

Extreme solutions characterise the compositional working-out of the music too. In the case of the revenge aria Quel perfido (II/12; B♭ major, 2/4, Presto; Ex. 2.16) the difficulty of execution is of the highest level. Hectically waving ascending volatine appear together.

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79 Racine’s play is based on Euripides’ drama and on the third book of Aeneid of Virgil. This was his third play, written at the age of twenty-seven in 1667, and served the establishment of his reputation as a playwright.

with various violin idioms in diverse directions, broken by sweeping syncopated sixth and seventh leaps, and applying a wide range up to B♭2.  

Example 2.16: Vocal part of Quel perfido from vonci’s Astianatte, bb. 41–56.

Ermione is hysterically angry and momentarily vengeful, because Pirro has called off their marriage at the last moment, since Andromaca changed her mind about marrying him for her son’s sake. In the meantime, Ermione has already promised herself to Oreste once he has assassinated Pirro, yet the very fact of the renunciation offends her pride as well as it humiliates her political and noble status. Hence, being a passionate Spartan Princess she behaves like a raving lunatic. Further musical symptoms of her mania are evident: the nature of the melody is unpredictable from time to time; rhythmically unaccented beats become accented, complicated by salti di terza, grace notes and appoggiaturas, all under Presto tempo indication, in the noble and magnificent B♭ major key. Contrarily, the B section is a modulation-switchback: starting in G minor, crossing C minor – F major – C minor – F minor until the arrival in E♭ major. Vinci let Strada’s vocal power show itself during the coloratura passages by joining the violins to the rest of the strings to give harmonic support.

Tortorella se rimira (III/5; F major, 3/8, Andante; Ex. 2.17), Ermione’s last aria, takes place when it has become already clear that Pirro has survived Oreste’s attack and has only been wounded. Ermione asks for Pirro’s mercy to spare the life of Oreste as a compensation for the insults to her honour, but Pirro seems to remain immovable. Vinci uses a melody-centred, elementary accompaniment without any obbligato instrument or elements of counterpoint, in which the first violins support the voice – following a strong tendency by the 1720s to make full-bodied orchestral ritornelli an integral part of the

81 ‘Quel perfido o morte / O altera consorte / In pena si avrà.’ (That traitor either death / Or a haughty bride / Will receive as his punishment.) Leonardo Vinci, Astianatte. Musical manuscript (Naples: 1725), ff. 128v–131v.
82 Cyr, Performing Baroque Music, 34.
83 ‘Tortorella se rimira / Presa al laccio la compagna / Infelice allor si lagna / E riposo mai non ha. // A non sol mesta sospira / Ma d’intorno ognor s’aggira / Per riporla in libertà. // Tortorella se rimira...’ (The dove when sees / Its mate in a snare, / Unhappily complains / And never rests. // Not only he is sighing sadly, / But also pivots on her always / To set her free. // The dove...) Vinci, Astianatte, ff. 150r–154v.
84 Salvi, Astianatte, 53–54.
aria. The rate of harmonic change is slow, and therefore the bass moves in repeated quavers of drumming bass.

Example 2.17: Tortorella se rimira from Vinci’s Astianatte, bb. 53–105.

The aria has a slow gigue character, Andante in F major. Its text is written in ottonari lines, with a predominantly trochaic accentuation, the latter of which the music goes against. The voice part does not leave the c” centreline until bar 60. Then, in section A2, the vocal line becomes thrown about both up- and downwards on the essential lines of the text ‘Infelice allor si lagna / E riposo mai non ha.’ (Thus, unhappily complains / And never has rest.; bb. 61–64, 83–86, 92–101), symbolizing the insanity of this hopeless situation and preparing, the musical process for the upcoming determining element, i.e. repeated notes or hammering to express ‘riposo mai non ha’ (bb. 74–82). The B part is dominated by broken chords.

*Tortorella se rimira* in the meantime is an *aria di mezzo carattere* in which a playful major dance melody is mixed up with alien virtuoso patterns, and thus giving an unusual and multiple musical definition of craze or delirium, slightly similar to the *Larghetto* in Orlando’s mad scene (*Vaghe pupille*) by Handel. The vocal challenge is to introduce the smooth cantabile and the diverse coloratura phrases with perfect execution and yet without breaking the timbre or losing the surrealism of the musical character.

Strada must have been in the right place at the right time in Naples during these important years of maturation. She had the unique opportunity to grow up as a singer, and to become a leading soprano by the side of Farinelli, and also to work with such great singer-actresses as Vittoria Tesi and Diana Vico. The productions in which she participated

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were all of the highest rank, including costumes and scenery as well as the clever activity of the *impresari*. One of the latter became her companion in life. A succession of operas – by Leo, Sarro, Vinci and Porpora – represented musical materials sensibly adjusted to her skills, yet new challenges were always offered to her: a variety of roles she could fit in as well as opportunities to develop her vocal and dramatic performance. Nevertheless, there was a third dimension Strada had not yet met, i.e. a different, more coherent musical way of thinking, a 360-degrees way of setting a drama, elevating the music to a masterpiece. By the end of this period, Strada stood on the verge of artistic consummation, was on her way to becoming a ‘Friend to the Pathetic and the Expressive’ but also of the divisions of taste; to accomplish ‘the Art of the highest degree of Perfection’,\(^7\) she still needed to encounter Handel. And to have a mate to accompany him on this journey towards a deeper and yet unknown musicality, Handel perhaps needed to meet her.

\(^7\) Tosi, *Observations*, 110.
Chapter Three: Successor to the ‘Rival Queens’

The collapse of the company of Handel’s Royal Academy of Music in 1728 had much to do with a lack of money, though rivalry between the prima donnas Francesca Cuzzoni and Faustina Bordoni doubtless hastened its demise. (Handel’s clash with the Academy’s aristocratic patrons over the castrato primo uomo Senesino, with whom the composer had a testy relationship, also played a part.) The singers having been dismissed, the Academy reorganized itself during the 1728/29 season; an alliance between Handel and the Swiss impresario John Jacob Heidegger, which would last five years, marked a fresh start. Though no documentary proof has been found, Burney’s description sheds light on different stages of the process: ‘For finding the theatre abandoned by the singers, and unsupported by its former patrons, he entered into an engagement with Heidegger, who was then in possession of the opera-house, to carry on the musical drama at their own risk’. 

For this reason, Heidegger set out Italy on 16th June, but could not hire any singers during the summer; therefore there was no Italian opera company in London the following season. He returned in early November, after hearing Farinelli sing in Domenico Lalli’s Nicomede in Munich. Paolo Rolli, his former librettist, being a friend of Senesino was understandably very critical, and wrote detailed letters to him in Venice, unfolding the chain of events: in early November 1728 ‘The man [Heidegger] returned from his travels, very full of Farinello and extremely enthusiastic about him. The supporters of the two prima donnas here are still eyeing each other suspiciously and each party wishes to have its own way, so much so that to set up the opera again they have decided to have both of them. The man, my good friend, did not want this [...] They thought about [whom to have as] Impresario, but it seems that the man is refusing to do it, and it is my opinion that the Academy will survive, because that body is not yet dissolved’. An agreement with the Royal Academy, leading to the establishment of the Second Academy, indeed followed on

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2 The scandal on the ninth performance of Bononcini’s Astianatte on 6th June 1728 and led to a snap end of the season as well as of the First Academy.
18th January 1729: the subscribers ‘permit Hydeger & Hendle to carry on Operas without disturbance for 5 years & to lend them for that time our Scenes machines clothes instruments furniture etc.’ On 25th January 1729 Rolli informed Senesino again that Heidegger had returned from Italy and had not found any singers, mainly because he desired to get the two preceding leading ladies back, and that he also approached Farinelli without success. Unlike Heidegger, Handel needed new voices to inspire him to compose from a fresh angle, and was loath to carry on the painful collaboration with the two leading ladies, especially with Faustina:

He said that there was a need for variety, and returned to the old system of changing the singers, so as to be able to compose new works for new performers. He easily found support for his new project in the Court and had it accepted – they do not want Faustina – you were quite well considered – they want Farinello, and Cuzzona, if she does not stay in Vienna, and they want whoever can come. [...] So tell Faustina that her darling Handel is coming to Italy, but not for her. [...] Poor dear! I am sorry for her. Those who sacrifice their friends to cosy up in cowardly fashion to their enemies deserve to be so treated (and I mean everybody).  

Accordingly, Handel went back to Italy, and this return after almost two decades made him entirely discover the new style in singing – which he had already experienced through Faustina’s art – and a different manner of composing at the same time. His encounter with the Neapolitan galant style prompted him to collect scores of Porpora, Vinci, Pergolesi and Hasse – the main provider of inserted numbers to his pasticci during the early 1730s – as well as Metastasio’s *drammi per musica*, and to bring them with him to England. He left London for Venice on 26th January / 4th February 1729 first to engage

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Farinelli, who refused even to see him, in spite of his calling on him three times. According to a letter of Lady Sarah Cowper to Earl Cowper (early January 1730), he tried to hire Cuzzoni again, which she refused. Handel then went on a longer trip, travelling at least through Bologna (end of March) and Rome (April). He presumably met Antonio Bernacchi and Antonia Merighi – who were connected to the Teatro San Bartolomeo in Naples – in Parma while staying in Bologna, as Owen Swiney, the Academy’s agent in Venice and Bologna, a former theatre and opera manager in London, reported:

Handel set out yesterday for Rome. Though His journey was something late for forming a company, fit for London next year, yet by Bernachi’s, Carestini’s & the Merighi’s discharge from their engagements at Naples, he will have a good chance of making a very good one. He tells me that He has engaged one Madame Somis, of Turin: I have heard a very good Character, of her Voice & manner of Singing. […] if he gets either Carestini or Bernachi, who (by the by) is the very best Singer in the world, with the Merighi or some other good Woman, he will make a formidable company

The afore-named singers left Naples in the midst of the 1728/29 season because of a scandal that had exploded between Bernacchi and Giovanni Carestini. The viceroy of Naples, Cardinal d’Althann, engaged Bernacchi out of his enthusiasm over the castrato’s way of singing. Nevertheless, Bernacchi made two conditions: on the one hand he wanted Merighi to stay but on the other hand Carestini, his own former pupil, to leave the company. While the viceroy was making an attempt to fulfil the requirement of his favourite singer and remove Carestini, all three singers appeared in Hasse’s *L’Ulderica* at the Teatro San Bartolomeo during the carnival season of 1729. In the meantime, the admirers of Carestini drove d’Althann into a corner and forced him to keep the castrato in Naples. Bernacchi became so angry that he abruptly left for Parma, taking Merighi with

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12 ‘Si spacciò la volontà Regale, e disse che L’Handel partirebbe in breve per Italia in cerca di Cantanti. Per consenso un anime fu concesso l’uso degli abiti e scene dell’Accad[emi]a per cinque anni a i due Progettisti. Oggi appunto L’Handel parte e dieci giorni fa L’Haym mandò Lettere circolari in Italia per annunciare a’virtuosi e virtuose q[u]e[st]o nuovo Progetto, e La venuta dell’Handel. Il Farinello è di primo Predicamento’; ‘The Royal wishes were made known, and it was said that Handel would leave for Italy very soon to look for singers. It was unanimously agreed to allow the two organisers the use of the Academy’s costumes and scenery for five years. In fact Handel is leaving today, and ten days ago Haym sent circular letters to Italy to announce the new plans to the male and female singers, and that Handel was coming. Farinello is the primary consideration …’ Rolli’s letter to Senesino in Venice, 4 February 1729. *George Frideric Handel: Collected Documents Volume 2*, 271–272.

13 Ibid., 335.


him, and in doing so, caused the Neapolitan season to be aborted.\textsuperscript{16} Supposedly, Handel wanted to hear Carestini, and, if possible, to engage him, rather than Bernacchi. He travelled to Naples in April, which is mentioned by Rolli together with Handel’s plan to visit Siena on his return. Rolli also gave an interim report on the nascent cast in mid-May:

Hendel’s new company is this: the women Stradina and Somis, Carestini, Balino, Fabbri, with his wife (if they need a third woman), and an Italian/German bass.

Handel has written that Carestini emulated Bernacchi.\textsuperscript{17}

This makes clear that Handel engaged the 26-year-old Strada as first woman, putting another soprano, Cristina Antonia Somis (b. 1704) back to the second place, and that he was torn between Carestini and Bernacchi. Interestingly enough, Merighi is not mentioned here. How Handel met Strada is, after all, a mystery. We only know that the Academy’s secretary and librettist Nicola Haym sent announcement letters to opera houses and to professional singers in Italy,\textsuperscript{18} but as Strada was not a member of the San Bartolomeo company since 1726, the best possible way to become aware of such a call could perhaps have been through her husband Aurelio del Pò’s connections. The question arises, if she sang at that time at all, where then if not at the vice-royal opera? If the last two years were missed on the grounds of pregnancy, as I suspect, Strada may at the end of 1728 have been on her way back to the stage, preparing herself for the next season.\textsuperscript{19} If so, she presumably had some short but regular appearances at the vice-royal court, at private concerts or in short \textit{serenatas}. These cases, however, are seldom documented and there is no such description about her available from that period. I suggest therefore that Merighi, who collaborated with Strada in Venice in 1720 and who might have met her and heard her singing in Naples at the Palazzo Reale in the second half of the decade, might have mentioned her name and availability to Handel.\textsuperscript{20} Even Bernacchi himself could have recommended Strada. In any case, she must have made such a deep impression on the composer that in the end he withdrew the contract already fixed with Somis\textsuperscript{21} and rather

\textsuperscript{16} Strohm, ‘Handel’s Pasticci’, 171.
\textsuperscript{18} See note 13.
\textsuperscript{19} Between 1726 and 1729 nothing is known about Strada. Probably she became pregnant since her name is missing from any libretto of that period.
\textsuperscript{20} They appeared together in Vivaldi’s \textit{La verità in cimento} as well as in \textit{Filippo rè di Macedonia}, his collaboration with Giuseppe Boniventi.
\textsuperscript{21} Maria Cristina Antonia Somis, from Turin, was an excellent singer and the daughter of the violinist Francesco Lorenzo Somis. Later she made a great career as a concert singer and teacher in Paris, after marrying the French painter Charles Vanloo in 1733. That Handel could not hire her in 1739 might have
engaged two contraltos beside Strada: Merighi and Francesca Bertolli, who was singing in Bologna at that time.\(^{22}\)

An additional fact has to be taken into account: the intermezzo specialist Celeste Resse, a mezzo-soprano who sang at San Bartolomeo, mostly in Hasse’s operatic interludes, joined the Royal Academy in London later in 1732 as Celeste Gismondi or La Celestina, after she married a certain Mr. Hempson, friend of the British consul in Naples.\(^{23}\) Handel might have known or got in touch with the consul, Mr. Hempson or another Englishman in Naples who could possibly inform him about the singers there; otherwise Gismondi might have applied directly to Handel’s company in 1729.

As for a prima donna, Handel was looking for someone to fill the vacuum left by the two ‘rival queens’. The lyric soprano Cuzzoni, as an exemplar of the pathetic cantabile style (stile antico) contrasted with the dramatic virtuoso mezzo-soprano Faustina, who specialised in the modern, bravura singing. Both got star billing together in London between 1726 and 1728 (and beforehand in Italy), complementing one another and demonstrating the fullness of the female voice as two sides of the same coin. Pier Francesco Tosi pondered in his famous treatise: ‘What a beautiful Mixture would it be, if the Excellence of these two angelick Creatures could be united in one single Person!’\(^{24}\) Strada fulfilled Handel’s wishes: she was perfect raw material; her supreme versatility was a tabula rasa on which Handel could project his musical, vocal, dramatic and artistic priorities.\(^{25}\) Thankfully, she lacked the overbearing egotism of her predecessors. What is more, she was much less expensive.\(^{26}\)

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\(^{22}\) Dean, *Handel’s Operas 1726–1741*, 126.


\(^{26}\) Strada, as a prima donna, earned £600 with a benefit performance, around a third or fourth of Faustina and Cuzzoni’s annual income. See Judith Milhous and Robert D. Hume, ‘Opera Salaries in Eighteenth-Century London’, *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 46/1 (Spring 1993), 26–83: 35–36; Judith Milhous and Robert D. Hume, ‘Handel’s Opera Finances in 1732–33’, *The Musical Times*, 125/1692 (Feb.,
First impressions in London

By the end of May 1729 Handel engaged a troupe of seven new singers, a company according to Swiney far exceeding the previous one as well as any other. Burney confirmed that Handel had fulfilled his mission: ‘These new performers gave birth to new ideas and a new style, particularly in divisions, which by writing for nearly the same singers during six or eight years, Handel often repeated’. On 2nd July 1729 the *Daily Journal* heralded the final results, listing the singers as follows: the castrato Antonio Bernacchi, Antonia Merighi contralto, Strada herself, the tenor Annibale Pio Fabri with his wife Francesca Bertolli, another contralto and Johann Gottfried Riemschneider, a bass from Hamburg. The announcement highlighted not only Strada’s excellent vocal quality but also her high personal standing (as opposed to the ‘rival sirens’): ‘Signora Strada, who hath a very fine Treble Voice, a Person of singular Merit’. Meanwhile, Mrs Pendarves (née Mary Delany), a loyal supporter and a long-lasting friend of Handel, gave a more detailed summary:

[...] Bernachi. he has a vast compass[,] his voice mellow and clear but not quite so sweet as Senesino, his manner better; his Person not so good for he has a Belly as big as the spanish fryers. Fabri has a Tenor voice, sweet, clear and firm but not strong enough I doubt for the Stage, he sings like a Gentleman, without making faces, and his manner is particularly agreeable; he is the greatest master of Musick that ever Sung upon the Stage. [...] La Strada is the first woman, her voice is without exception fine, her Manner to perfection, but her Person very bad and she makes frightfull mouths. La Merighi is the next to her, her voice is not extraordinarily good or Bad, she is tall and has a very graceful Person, with a tolerable Face[,] she seems to be a woman about forty, she sings easily and agreably. the last is Bertoldi, she has neither voice, Ear nor Manner to recommend her. but she is a Perfect Beauty. quite a Cleopatra. that sort of Complexion with regular showish features, fine teeth, and when she sings has a smile

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30. See also Jean Jaques Zamboni’s letter to Count Manteuffel, 8/19 July 1729. ‘Signora Trada qui a une excellente et triple voix at personne d’un merite Singulier’; ‘Signora Trada who has an excellent voice with a wide compass, and is a woman of unusual merit’. Ibid., 300.
about her mouth which is extram pretty, and I believe has Practis’d to sing before a
glass for she has nevren any distortion in her Face.  

It is notable that criticism of Strada’s voice is absent here or anywhere else. On the
counter, its tone, richness, colour, intonation and agility are praised more highly than
Faustina’s or Cuzzoni’s. Her acting skills (‘manner’) were considered accomplished, but
clearly her grimaces left much to be desired.

From Mrs Pendarves’s descriptions of Merighi and Bernacchi, ‘person’ in this context
may be interpreted as physical beauty and stage decorum according to English taste.
Charles Burney on Carestini confirms this assumption: ‘Carestini’s person was tall,
beautiful, and majestic. He was a very animated and intelligent actor’. He affirms too that
‘Strada’s personal charms did not assist her much in conciliating parties, or disposing the
eye to augment the pleasures of the ear; for she had so little in a Venus in her appearance,
that she was usually called the “Pig”’. Bernacchi’s appearance was likened to the Spanish
Friar, the role of Friar Dominic in John Dryden’s play of 1681: tall, large and ungainly –
hardly the figure of a primo uomo lover. Though ‘esteem’d the best Singer in Italy’, the
lumbering 44-year-old castrato found less favour with English audiences than in 1716–17,
when he first appeared on the London stage. Conversely, Strada was very well received:
‘Bernachi the most famous of the Men is not approv’d of[;] he is certainly a good singer
but does not suit the English ears. La Strada and the rest are very well lik’d’. Likewise,
Paolo Rolli, Handel’s former librettist, stated that ‘Strada pleases a good deal’.

According to Edward J. Dent, the London audience visited the theatre not for the works but
for the singers, or more precisely for Strada (Bernacchi was a poor substitute for Senesino,
whom Handel was forced to re-engage for this reason in 1730).

Presumably, Strada failed to conform to the English standard of beauty. Although she
possessed a resplendent voice and acted exquisitely, her face looked unattractive while she
sang. Furthermore, it seems that she was short – not an advantage among Europe’s tallest
people at the time – and must have looked even smaller and ludicrous when amorously

31 Mrs Pendarves to her sister, Anne Granville, 29 or 30 November 1729. Ibid., 320.
33 Ibid, 342.
34 Daily Journal and Daily Courant, 2 July 1729. George Frideric Handel: Collected Documents Volume 2,
299.
35 Among others as Goffredo in the revival of Handel’s Rinaldo in 1717.
36 Mrs Pendarves’s letter to her sister, Anne Granville, 6 December 1729. George Frideric Handel: Collected
Documents Volume 2, 324–325.
37 Rolli to Riva, 11 December 1729. Ibid., 331–332.
38 Edward J. Dent, Handel (New York: A. A. Wyn, 1948), PDF format produced by Stan Goodman, ch. 5,
62.
coupled with a ca. six-foot-tall (183 cm) castrato (but so did other ladies of average height of 4 feet 9–11 inches – ca 145–150 cm – as caricatures by John Vanderbank, Anton Maria Zanetti, Marco Ricci and other artists amply demonstrate). Faustina was of similarly small stature, but her face was considered beautiful and her figure symmetrical (although a French traveller found that ‘her face and looks are very ordinary’). Cuzzoni, by contrast, was plainly ‘ugly and ill-made’. Strada’s appearance is preserved in two images: one, a caricature, is attributed either to the Venetian count Zanetti, who dedicated the bulk of his works (mostly drawings) to singers and the opera world, or more probably to the Italian painter and set designer Marco Ricci, who in the 1720s likewise caricatured cast members of Venetian opera houses. The other is a painting by Johannes Verelst made in 1732.

The caricature (Fig. 1) shows Strada as she appeared on stage, and emphasises her small size: her face and nose turn skywards. Presumably she is looking at her castrato partner. Such a countenance allows her little dignity but probably underscores the situation’s absurdity. Although the date of the drawing is unknown, my theory is that it may have been made in Venice in 1720–21, in connection with one of the productions of *La verità in cimento* or *Filippo rè di Macedonia*, a co-production by Vivaldi and Giuseppe Boniventi, performed at the Teatro Sant’Angelo, where Ricci worked as a set designer in those years. (Ricci died in 1730, excluding Strada’s London period; Zanetti, on the other hand, was out of Venice even in 1720/21 and did not visit England during Strada’s engagement there.)

Of the two aforementioned operas, *La verità in cimento* was the one in which Strada and the castrato Girolamo Albertini had several scenes together. The caricature hints at what may have been behind Strada’s nickname, the ‘Pig’, later on, given the upward turn of her nostrils.

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41 ‘… her professional perfections were enhanced by a beautiful face, a symmetric figure, though of small stature.’ Burney on Faustina. Burney, *A General History of Music*, vol. iv, 308; ‘sa figure et sa beauté sont des plus mediocres.’ George Frideric Handel: *Collected Documents Volume 2*, 230 and 233.


Pigs were synonymous with female ugliness going back to the middle ages. In the second half of the seventeenth century, the porcine-faced woman became widespread in British popular culture, thanks to a ballad from 1639, the fable of the Dutch lady Tannakin Skinker. By the eighteenth century, similar stories emerged and were taken as fact in England. A lady of great fortune who sneered at the lower social classes was cursed by bearing a child with the head of a sow. Hence ‘pig’ became a synonym for ugliness in high-ranking or famous people. Handel himself was also illustrated hog-headed: his friend, the painter and set designer Joseph Goupy, depicted him engaged in gluttony.

It is possible that Verelst’s oil painting on canvas (1732; Fig. 2) greatly idealises Strada: she is portrayed (at the age of twenty-nine) as suspiciously young and compares favourably with her predecessor, Faustina. Still, nothing indicates ugliness. Her body corresponds to contemporary as well as timeless notions of beauty and health: round breasts bestride an implausibly slim waist.

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47 Josephy Goupy: *The Harmonious Boar.* Painting, after 1743; *The Charming Brute.* Engraved version of the former, 1754.
49 Devendra Singh, Peter Renn and Adrian Singh, ‘Did the perils of abdominal obesity affect depiction of feminine beauty in the sixteenth to eighteenth century British literature? Exploring the health and beauty
Verelst represents Strada plainly clothed, off stage as a professional musician, sitting at the harpsichord, holding a page of music. Interestingly, the aria is Si, caro, si, an additional song sung by Strada in the revival of *Rinaldo* in 1731. The usual practice of using a musical piece to identify a person on a painting here becomes extraordinary, for Faustina was the original performer of *Si, caro, si*, which was very well known from the performance series of *Admeto* (1727), as Henry Carey mocked in his satirical poem *Blundrella: or, the Impertinent*: ‘That Song […] which the Faustina / Sings when she hangs on Senesino […] ’Tis that which makes the Boxes clatter’. Nevertheless, this piece might have been Strada’s first real popular success in London. Headed by ‘Sung by Sig. Strada’, the sheet is an exact copy of the aria’s printed version, published by John Walsh in *The additional favourite songs in the opera of Rinaldo* (1731), and more importantly, in the reprint edition (1731) of the third book of *Apollo’s Feast* (p. 94), where Faustina’s name (printed in the first edition, 1729) was replaced by Strada’s. That this song was linked with Strada, can be demonstrated by an epigram, *A Dialogue between two Projectors*, published in the *Bee* on 24th March and in the *Craftsman* on 7th April 1733, soon after the première of the oratorio *Deborah* with Strada in the title role. In this satirical discourse, Handel’s policy in respect to the ticket prices is used as a political simile for the prime minister Robert Walpole’s new Excise Bill, and his first answer is ‘— si, caro, si’.  

Returning to the painting, the background’s simplicity in colours contrasts with the fireworks-like play of light and shadow, the *chiaroscuro* expression of the white, silvery shining clear-cut dress, annexed with fine lace as ornamentation. Strada’s large eyes rule the whole picture with an effervescent countenance. Her dynamic posture expresses activity; she communicates natural genuineness with all the movements of her body. The keyword may be self-consciousness, the intensity of which is almost tangible in both works of art.

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51 Handel denied admission to subscribers and raised ticket prices from half a guinea to a whole one, because he had to light the house and pay a large number of performers he never needed for an opera performance. At the same time, Walpole introduced his idea of a Tobacco Excise Bill in Parliament. See Thomas McGee, *The Politics of Opera in Handel’s Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 137–139; *George Frideric Handel: Collected Documents Volume 2*, 606 and 611.
The appearance of the harpsichord with black natural keys is also meaningful. It might possibly refer to the instrument which was built in 1729 by the Swiss harpsichord maker Burckhard Tschudi, a good friend of Handel, although that is a double harpsichord and a replica of the only one made by Hermann Tabel. On the back of the name board there is an inscription with the following words: ‘Questo cimbalò è del° Sig° Anna Strada 1731,
London’. According to William Dale, it belonged to Handel, on which he must have accompanied Strada in rehearsals and at her benefit performance(s) of the revival of *Giulio Cesare* on 21st (and 31st) March 1730. Furthermore, 1731 was the year she gained popularity in London; the harpsichord might have been Handel’s personal gift to his protégée on that occasion. Strada even took it with her to Italy in 1738 when she left the British Isles. The harpsichord in Verelst’s picture is therefore emblematic – even if Tschudi’s instrument would not have fitted because of limits on space, since the focus had to remain on the singer – and functions undoubtedly as a status symbol of Strada’s established success, supported by the position of the sheet music of *Si, caro, si*, with which she is pointing towards and is touching the keyboard. Apart from that, it can also imply the singer’s possible training in harpsichord playing, which would make it understandable why Handel gave her a keyboard and not something else.

Concerning Strada’s ‘frightful mouths’, it is not clear whether these were technical in nature and caused by the generation of coloraturas – a laziness of certain muscles or even of the larynx, the action of which might have been substituted by the easier movements of the lips – or were due to physical incapacities becoming ingrained after a certain point. Similar criticisms do not occur except once, in a letter of Thomas Gray of 11th June 1736, mentioning Gioacchino Conti’s square-shaped mouth and that ‘this is hardly minded when Strada stands by him’. This comparison with the young yet already popular castrato refers to a general and ungainly grimace during singing, rather than to one caused by maladroit technique. Most probably they both lacked what Faustina possessed, a perfect ‘flexibility of muscles and features’.

Mrs Pendarves, at the same time, describes the tenor Annibale Pio Fabri as singing completely without faces, but with a voice too weak for the theatre. Despite the agility and wide range Handelian roles demanded, his easier voice production enabled him to keep his facial muscles calm. Mrs Pendarves seems to have been charmed by the face of Francesca Bertolli, who was apparently accepted because she was easy on the eye. Although considered as a mediocre singer with an ‘unmeaning voice’, and later by Burney, as a ‘singer of limited abilities and of small importance in a drama’, Handel gave her the most roles besides Senesino and Strada. Could it be then, that those who were able to

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maintain an agreeable mien could do so because their role required no difficult technical-musical tasks? In other words, has anyone ever seen a highly dramatic coloratura aria being sung with a totally relaxed face? In the case of such long and complex passages written for leading singers, the mouth must certainly have opened at some point, and its width and length changed depending on the register. To draw a parallel with modern singers, Cecilia Bartoli or Vivica Genaux would be good examples of making needless grimaces in contrast with the necessary and minimal changes of Sandrine Piau, and more especially Joyce DiDonato, who sings with an outstandingly controlled face. However, a varying and to some extent distorted face often was and is part of technically demanding vocal performances.

According to Richard Wistreich, until the early eighteenth century the audience tolerated to some degree singers’ distorted facial expressions in exchange for the pleasure given by the ravishing sound of the human voice and for the execution of neck-breaking coloraturas. In the case of women, however, the frame of toleration was narrow. It was not acceptable for a woman, for example, to play brass instruments because of the unbecoming change of the face while playing. Although there were some ladies who played these instruments masterfully, unfortunately they were hardly accepted by society. In London, by the time of the English translated edition of Pier Francesco Tosi’s treatise, entitled as Observations on the Florid Song (1743), the issue of the audience’s expectation of singing with the most natural face possible, came into prominence.

**Surpassing the predecessors**

From the very beginning, Strada was compared with the two former divas in London. After Handel introduced the new troupe to the Royal Family within the confines of a private concert in October 1729, accompanying them on the harpsichord, Princess Amelia recorded the audience as ‘mightily satisfied’, and found Strada a ‘charming voice, [we] think her beyond all her predecessors. She is mighty good and easie and hath exactly the way of talking of Cozzony’. Further opinions were also given regarding Strada as a *prima donna* who embodies all the excellences of Cuzzoni and Faustina in one person –

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59 Richard Wistreich, *Geographical and social migrations on Italian noble singing technique: fragments of a social history*, Lecture given in Lugano, 7th February 2014 at the Conservatorio della Svizzera italiana, Divisione Ricerca e Sviluppo; an answer to my question during the discussion following the lecture.

reflecting the same high expectation of the English society. Especially well-rounded reports came from Rolli who—being understandably hostile, having been left out by Handel of the Second Academy’s run—made as censorious and sarcastic notes as he could.\footnote{Rolli as librettist of the Royal Academy was once already dismissed between 1723 and 1726, but he was called back in 1726. After the Academy’s rearrangement in 1729 Handel did not hire him, most probably because of Rolli’s close friendship with Senesino. R. A. Streatfeild, ‘Handel, Rolli, and Italian Opera in London in the Eighteenth Century’, The Musical Quarterly 3/3 (July, 1917): 428–445: 437–438. ‘Strada pleases mightily, and Alto [the Great Man, Handel] says that she sings better than the two who have left us, because one of them never pleased him at all and he would like to forget the other. The truth is that she has a penetrating thread of a soprano voice which delights the ear [a very loud soprano ‘voicelet’ which stimulates / thrills the ear], but oh how far removed from Cuzzona! Bononcini, who was with me at the opera, agrees with me as to this.\footnote{‘La Sig[nor]a Stradina à tutta La rapidità della Faustina, e tutta La Dolcezza della Cuzzona, et sic de singulis. Ne vedremo gli effetti. La Prova del Podino consiste nel mangiarlo, dice il Proverbio Inglese, la Verità e che la d[ett]a Virtuosa è una Copia semplice della Faustina con miglior voce e migliore intonation, ma senza il brio e il Garbo di quella’. Rolli’s letter to Riva, 6 November 1729. George Frideric Handel: Collected Documents Volume 2, 231–232. The translation in the main text is amplified by myself, and taken from: Deutsch, Handel, 249.}'}

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Signora Strada has all the rapid execution of Faustina, and all the sweetness of Cuzzona, and its so with each of the others. We shall see the results: the proof of the pudding is in the eating, says the English proverb. The truth is that this singer is simply a copy of Faustina with a better voice and better intonation, but without her brio and charm.\footnote{‘Strada pleases a good deal, and from on High it is said that she sings better than the two previous ones, because he never liked the one and wants the other to be forgotten. The truth is that this one has a thin and penetrating soprano voice which charms the ear, but oh how far we are from Cuzzona! This is also the opinion of Bononcini, in whose company I heard the opera”; ‘La Strada incontra molto ed ab Alto si dice che canta meglio delle due passate, perché l’una non piacque mai, e l’altra si vuole che si scordi. il vero è che questa à un penetrante filetto di voce soprana che titilla le orecchie: ma oh quanto siamo lunge dalla Cuzzona! Q[u]es[to è il parere ancora di Bon[oncin]o col quale sentii L’op[era].’ Rolli to Riva, 11 December 1729. George Frideric Handel: Collected Documents Volume 2, 331. The translation in the main text is amplified by myself, and taken from: Deutsch, Handel, 249.}’

Strada pleases the very few who would like to forget Cuzzona: as the rest of the rhyme goes they are after all very similar: ‘I ask your pardon, Sir’. Concerning my ears, you were a thousand times right, but concerning my spectacles, my dear Signor Giuseppe, you were a thousand times wrong. ... \footnote{‘La Strada piace a pochissimi che vorebbono scondarsi della Cuzzona: nel resto della Rima sono poi amende somigliantissime: I ask your pardon Sir. In quanto agli orecchj, ave[v]ate mille ragioni, ma in quanto a gli occhiali, mio Caro Sig[nor] Giuseppe, avevate mille Torti.’ Rolli’s letter to Riva, 12 June 1730. Ibid., 365.}'

Rolli’s partiality contradicts the opinion of Johann Joachim Quantz, who defined Strada back in Naples as ‘brilliant’ and remarked on Cuzzoni that ‘her acting was somewhat cold,
and her figure was not too favourable for the theatre’. 65

The most authentic portrait of Strada’s voice was reported by The Weekly Medley, and Literary Journal on 6th December 1729, concerning the public rehearsals (of 24th and 28th November) of Lotario, the Second Academy’s first opera, in the form of a letter (written on 29th November). It proclaimed Strada as superior to Cuzzoni and Faustina, and matchless in having a ravishing voice, proficiency in music theory, and a great talent for acting at the same time:

Cuzzoni has certainly an enchanting Voice, and Faustina an admirable Manner; but I dare to affirm, Strada excels them both. However as the Town had form’d so advantageous an Idea of the Merits of the two Singers abovemention’d, and seem persuaded they had not their Equals in Europe; I suppose I shall be thought either very much prejudiced, or crazy, in being thus confident in my Assertion; yet have this to plead in favour of my Opinion, that ‘twas not barely my own, but that of most of the Judges there present.

We certainly have before had very excellent Performers from Italy, but then most of them were deficient in some Point or other. If their Voices were fine, their Actions [sic] was insipid, or they had very little Skill in the Theory of Music. On the other Side, if they were distinguish’d for the beauty of their Action, or their Skill in the Science, their Voices were indifferent. But as for la Strada, she boasts a very great Perfection in the two last mention’d Particulars; and as for her Action, which indeed is the most unessential Part of an Italian Opera here in England, I am persuaded it will be far from displeasing. […] Tho’ the rest of the present Singers of the Opera, have not such ravishing Voices as Strada, yet ‘tis certain they have a considerable Skill in Music,66

Summarised, Strada possessed a penetrating soprano voice with all the virtuosity admired in Faustina, but she surpassed her in vocal quality and perfectness of intonation. On the other hand, she had lyric abilities as well. Here she was so convincing that she was able to make the audience forget their former favourite, Cuzzoni. Rodolfo Celletti noted that Handel continued to apply the way of composing he used for Cuzzoni in the case of Strada, too, but he expanded it with more energy and versatile types of melody 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 was indeed capable of that kind of pathetic expression Cuzzoni had, but her unlimited, wide-ranging, overall chest-like voice – spanning a-c‴ – went further, demanding longer phrases requiring a weightier and more sonorous projection and a greater measure of coloraturas, all connected by a ringing vocal timbre. Strada not only sang roles created exclusively for her, but appeared in Handel’s Italian pasticci – singing many castrato arias – as well as in revivals of operas in which she mostly performed roles originally taken by Cuzzoni or Faustina (Table 3.1). Nevertheless, the regular occurrence of Faustina’s arias in Strada’s Cuzzonian roles refers to their similar vocal functioning, despite their different tessiture. It shows that there were but some general aspects in Faustina’s style with which Strada was familiar: most probably the energetic and powerful voice production was that feature which inspired the formation of castrato-type virtuoso arias with triplets, trills, long roulades, sustained notes, leaps and trills (for the gorgeousness of which she was celebrated). Moreover, Strada was the leading soprano of Handel’s first English oratorios, singing in English throughout. Unlike Senesino and Bertolli, her pronunciation was not criticised. After the first failed attempt with Esther in 1732, Handel prepared Italian arias for all the other Italian singers but not for her.

Table 3.1: Strada’s London repertoire: original roles, oratorios, revivals and pasticci

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Operas of original roles</th>
<th>Première</th>
<th>Revivals</th>
<th>Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lotario</td>
<td>2 December 1729</td>
<td></td>
<td>Adelaide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partenope</td>
<td>24 February 1730</td>
<td>December 1730, January 1737</td>
<td>Partenope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poro</td>
<td>2 February 1731</td>
<td>November 1731, December 1736</td>
<td>Cleofide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ezio</td>
<td>15 January 1732</td>
<td></td>
<td>Fulvia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susarne</td>
<td>15 February 1732</td>
<td>April 1734</td>
<td>Elmira</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orlando</td>
<td>27 January 1733</td>
<td>April 1733</td>
<td>Angelica</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arianna in Creta</td>
<td>26 January 1734</td>
<td>November 1734</td>
<td>Arianna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aridiante</td>
<td>8 January 1735</td>
<td>May 1736</td>
<td>Ginevra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcina</td>
<td>16 April 1735</td>
<td>November 1735</td>
<td>Alcina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atalanta</td>
<td>12 May 1736</td>
<td>November 1736</td>
<td>Atalanta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armino</td>
<td>12 January 1737</td>
<td></td>
<td>Tusnelda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giustino</td>
<td>16 February 1737</td>
<td></td>
<td>Arianna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berenice</td>
<td>18 May 1737</td>
<td></td>
<td>Berenice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oratorios</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esther</td>
<td>2 May 1732</td>
<td>April 1733, July 1733, March 1734, April 1736, April 1737</td>
<td>Esther</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deborah</td>
<td>17 March 1733</td>
<td>July 1733, April 1734, March 1735</td>
<td>Deborah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atalanta</td>
<td>10 July 1733</td>
<td>April 1735</td>
<td>Josabeth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alexander’s Feast &amp; cant.</td>
<td>19 February 1736</td>
<td>March 1737, June 1737</td>
<td>Soprano</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cecilia volgi</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Il trionfo del Tempo e della Verità</td>
<td>23 March 1737</td>
<td></td>
<td>Bellezza</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

69 Senesino and Bertolli made rare work with the English Tongue you would have sworn it had been Welch.’ Reference to the oratorio Esther in See and Seem Blind (Daily Journal, 8 June 1732), George Frideric Handel: Collected Documents Volume 2, 535.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Revivals</th>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>Strada’s role</th>
<th>Original performer, add. arias by others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Giulio Cesare</td>
<td>January 1730, February 1732</td>
<td>Cleopatra</td>
<td>Cuzzoni</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tolomeo</td>
<td>May 1730, January 1733</td>
<td>Seleuce</td>
<td>Cuzzoni, one aria of Faustina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scipione</td>
<td>November 1730</td>
<td>Berenice</td>
<td>Cuzzoni, one aria of Faustina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rinaldo</td>
<td>April 1731</td>
<td>Almirena</td>
<td>Girardeau, one aria of Faustina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rodelinda</td>
<td>May 1731</td>
<td>Rodelinda</td>
<td>Cuzzoni</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamerlano</td>
<td>November 1731</td>
<td>Asteria</td>
<td>Cuzzoni</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admeto</td>
<td>December 1731</td>
<td>Antigona</td>
<td>Cuzzoni, one aria of Faustina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anosti: Coriolano</td>
<td>March 1732</td>
<td>Volumnia</td>
<td>Cuzzoni</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flavio</td>
<td>April 1732</td>
<td>Emilia</td>
<td>Cuzzoni</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acis and Galatea</td>
<td>June 1732, December 1732</td>
<td>Galatea</td>
<td>unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>July 1733, May 1734, March 1736</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alessandro</td>
<td>November 1732</td>
<td>Rossane</td>
<td>Faustina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ottone</td>
<td>November 1733</td>
<td>Teofane</td>
<td>Cuzzoni</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Handel’s self-pasticci</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Il Parnasso in festa</td>
<td>March 1734, March 1737</td>
<td>Clio</td>
<td>arias of Strada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Il pastor fido</td>
<td>May 1734, November 1734</td>
<td>Erato, Amarilli</td>
<td>arias of Strada, one of Pilotti-Schiavonetti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oreste</td>
<td>December 1734</td>
<td>Ermine</td>
<td>arias of Strada, one of Cuzzoni</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Italian pastici in London</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ormisda</td>
<td>April 1730, November 1730</td>
<td>Arsenice</td>
<td>arias of Scalzi, Mazzoni and Salvai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venceslao</td>
<td>January 1731</td>
<td>Erenice</td>
<td>arias of Faustina, Farinelli and Carestini</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucio Papirio dittatore</td>
<td>May 1732</td>
<td>Papiria</td>
<td>Faustina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catone</td>
<td>November 1732</td>
<td>Marzia</td>
<td>Facchinelli, one aria of Carestini</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semiramide riconosciuta</td>
<td>October 1733</td>
<td>Tamiri</td>
<td>Faustina, Cuzzoni, Mazzoni and Morici</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caio Fabricio</td>
<td>December 1733</td>
<td>Sestia</td>
<td>Monticelli</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arbace</td>
<td>January 1734</td>
<td>Mandane</td>
<td>Fontana, one aria of Facchinelli</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didone abbandonata</td>
<td>April 1737</td>
<td>Didone</td>
<td>Fontana, one aria of Giacomazzi and Gizzi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Burney described Strada’s London period as a process of development, although he might exaggerate Handel’s role, since Strada was already an accomplished singer at the age of twenty-six, when she arrived in London. She was certainly not a ‘coarse and awkward singer’, as her Neapolitan repertoire (1724–26) clearly proves:

This singer had many prejudices to combat on her first arrival in this country: the enemies of Handel were of course unwilling to be pleased with any part of the entertainment he had provided for the public; the abilities of Cuzzoni and Faustina had taken possession of the general favour; […] However, by degrees she subdued all their prejudices, and sung herself into favour, particularly with the friends of Handel, who used to say, that by the care he took in composing for her, and his instructions, from a coarse singer with a fine voice, he rendered her equal at least to the first performer in Europe.\(^70\)

A singer formed by [Handel] himself, and modelled on his own melodies. She came

hither a coarse and awkward singer with improvable talents, and he at last polished her into reputation and favour.\textsuperscript{71}

In his eyes, Strada was Handel’s creation in an artistic sense. He repeatedly mentions Strada’s ‘great vocal powers of execution and expression’ and portrays her as a singer ‘possessed of science and feeling’ for interpreting truly pathetic arias. ‘Extremely spirited’ vocal numbers were sung by her on one hand, and such simple and seemingly insignificant ones on the other which served nothing but as a ‘canvas for a great singer that would admit of fine colouring’.\textsuperscript{72}

On the basis of her contemporaries’ opinions and of the roles and arias written especially for her, Strada’s vocal and artistic abilities entirely correspond to the definition of an early soprano sfogato, of the vented, unlimited female voice, also known as voce assoluta. Geoffrey S. Riggs describes this universal voice type as something which integrates all the favourable features of the female voice: besides its penetrating upper register, it is agile enough to execute virtuoso coloratura passages fluently.\textsuperscript{73} Possessing a wide range, it is capable of singing lower phrases with intensity and power, and changes colour chameleon-wise, with Shakespearean infinite variety. Though the term stems from the romantic bel canto to describe prima donnas like Rossini’s wife Isabella Colbran, Giuditta Pasta, Giulia Grisi or Maria Malibran, these singers were still singing in the way glorified by Tosi, Mancini or Quantz in their eighteenth-century treatises, i.e. applying full-body resonance to execute coloraturas. Martha Feldman projects the teacher-pupil relations from the late 1700s on to dramatic coloratura sopranos of the early twentieth century like Rosa Ponselle and Maria Callas, a crucial point of evidence being that Manuel García, founder of the modern singing technique (particularly the use of the chest in the upper register) demonstrates it through castrato exercises in his method book of 1847.\textsuperscript{74} Although many aspects of singing technique shifted, even changed during the centuries, especially in the second half of the 1800s and also after the 1930s, I agree that there was something essential in castrato singing which was considered as ideal and served as an example to noncastrated voices as well. Strada most probably had a genuine ability for that kind of full-body singing (see chs 4–6 and Postlude).

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 402.
\textsuperscript{72} Concerning arias: Scherza in mar, Menti eterne (Lotario), L’amor ed il destin, Sì, scherza, si (Partenope), Ah! non son io che parlo (Ezio), Dite pace (Sosarme), Sdegno amore (Arianna in Creta), Custodite, o dolci sogni (Atalanta), Và, combatti anch’io da forte (Arminio). Ibid., 342, 343, 345, 356, 358, 372, 397 and 402.
\textsuperscript{74} Martha Feldman, Castrato De Luxe: Blood, Gifts and Goods in the Making of Early Modern Singing Stars, lecture at the University of Chicago 32\textsuperscript{nd} Humanities Day, 13 October 2010; see Manuel García, Art of Singing, vols i–ii (1847, 1872; repr. in London: Leonard & Co., 1924).
Social, political, and financial matters

Despite her vocal and musical excellence, and that she proved herself to be a worthy successor of the two ‘sirens’, Strada’s artistic quality does not seem to have been reflected when it came to salaries. Her initial hire as leading soprano was also very low in comparison to the other members of the company:

Bernacchi has 1200 guineas, Merighi 1000 or 900 with a benefit performance, Stradina 600 with a benefit, Fabri – they say – 500, the bass 300.75

With that £600, which in the 1732/33 season was £565.8s precisely,76 Strada earned as a prima donna half of the wages of the castrato primo uomo, Bernacchi, and around a third or fourth of Faustina’s and Cuzzoni’s annual income.77 Merighi, with a greater reputation, was financially the first lady. However, she might not have taken into consideration that Strada, during those three years when she was out of the Teatro San Bartolomeo (between 1726 and 1729), had overgrown her. When Merighi’s name was placed after Strada’s in the libretto of Lotario, the first opera performed by the Second Academy, she even felt so offended that she did not even talk to Strada for three days (revealing her diva attitude):78

that was a Dispute which arose among the two Heroines about Precedency. One of them took it so much to heart. that she could not be prevail’d with to speak to her Rival, or even to give her so much as one kind Look for three Days together; but at last, by the Mediation of Friends, her Resentments were softened; and they are at the Instant of my writing, Deo Gratias, perfectly reconciled, at least in outward Appearance.79

This also sheds a light on the confusing situation in which Strada was the first lady as a soprano, and the main female character in the drama, but financially the contralto Merighi had advantage. Winton Dean’s acceptable explanation for Strada’s lower fee is that she was not yet a well-known opera star.80

At least she had a benefit which could mean an amount of £250–400 a year, a sum very

76 Judith Milhous and Robert D. Hume, ’Handel’s Opera Finances in 1732–33’, 87 and 89.
79 The Weekly Medley, and Literary Journal on 6 December 1729; Edward Weston to Stephen Poyntz, 4 December 1729. Ibid., 326 and 324.
80 Dean, Handel’s Operas 1726–1741, 127.
far from the £1800 stated in the London Journal about that of Faustina of 9th March 1727.\textsuperscript{81} Yet this annual fee of c. £900, compared to Strada’s Naples salary from 1724 to 1726 – when she earned 1000 silver ducats a year – must have been a change of scale. Michael Talbot remarks, referring to a guide for British travellers in 1791, that a single male tourist could subsist in Venice for a year on £80 sterling, approximately 450 ducats, including a manservant’s pay. The value of the Neapolitan ducat was, however, slightly less than that of the Venetian one: 450 Venetian ducats meant 540 in Naples. Thus, Strada was wealthyly honoured in London, even if not as highly paid as her famous colleagues. The equivalent of her London annual income corresponded to 4725 ducats, the highest wage she ever gained in her life, though the costs of living were also much more expensive than in Italy.\textsuperscript{82} At the time of Strada’s engagement, England was the country paying the highest fees in Europe for musicians, and not least singers.\textsuperscript{83} In addition, it was an important consideration for Handel as well as the Academy to engage a prima donna for less than the two former divas.\textsuperscript{84}

Still, in 1737, the year of a further essential rearrangement of London’s operatic life (discussed below), after Strada agreed with Heidegger, he began negotiations for £1000 with an unnamed singer, who may have been the castrato Caffarelli, Porpora’s former pupil.\textsuperscript{85} One wonders for how much would Strada have been engaged then? Logically, the amount should have been more than eight years before. If under £1000, then it was probably around £700–800. Yet, an awkward thought arises: since after the early 1730s Strada had become the ruling lady of opera in England, one of the ‘the firsts in Europe’ as Burney puts it, how could it be possible that her remuneration had not been moved upward accordingly? This shall be explained by practical financial reasons: since the Academy had

\begin{itemize}
  \item This claim in the London Journal was reported by Elizabeth Gibson, who deemed that amount unlikely. See Milhous and Hume, ‘Opera Salaries in Eighteenth-Century London’, 36–37; Eleanor Selfridge-Field, A New Chronology of Venetian Opera and Related Genres, 1660–1760, (Stanford/CA: Stanford UP, 2007), 659.


  \item Dent, Handel, ch. 5, 60; ‘Senesino had built a fine house with an Inscription over the door to let the world know twas the Folly of the English had laid the foundation of it.’ Sir Lyonell Pilkington to his brother-in-law, Godfrey Wentworth, Paris on 23 April 1729. George Frideric Handel: Collected Documents Volume 2, 290.

  \item ‘Met Mr Smith the Opera Copyest in the Park, who told me the Performers Mr Handel Engag’d were very good and cheap.’ 6 July 1729. Cited in John Grano, Handel’s Trumpeter: The Diary of John Grano, ed. John Ginger (Stuyvesant, New York: Pendragon Press, 1998), 284.

\end{itemize}
a limited budget, demanding a remarkably higher fee would have been unrealistic in the first years, and by the time Strada was standing on the top of her abilities and success, around 1735–36, the company was dealing not only with severe financial difficulties but also had to fight to survive beside the rival troupe, the Opera of the Nobility.

As the years passed by, Strada not only established her position as *prima donna* of the Second Academy but also found favour with the Royal Family, especially with Princess Anne of Orange, and took her own place as a private person in the high circles of the London society – all with Handel’s support. Princess Anne, the second child and eldest daughter of King George II, was one of the main and most loyal supporters of Handel and his singers, especially during the Second Academy.86 Having received her musical education from Handel himself, she reached a relatively high standard both as a singer and harpsichordist. In addition, the Princess made progress in composing.87 After her marriage to William/Willem of Orange in 1734 she gave regular concerts with the small orchestra she founded and directed from the harpsichord.88 Moreover, she probably was the Kapellmeister (music director) at the Dutch court.89 Princess Anne was the one who encouraged Handel to go into a partnership with Heidegger in 1728, and also to present his English oratorios to the general public at the Haymarket Theatre (beginning with *Esther* in 1732).90 Above all, she gave patronage to Strada to such an extent that in the summer of 1736 Princess Anne, being pregnant, took the other Anna with her to Holland.91 (This was not the first such occasion: Strada entertained the Royal family at Richmond in the summer of 1731 as well.)92 Friedrich Chrysander draws a scenario – deriving from the contemporary English courtier, Lord Hervey – about the Princess from the time when her family arranged her marriage with the unattractive Prince of Orange. He quotes the Queen as stating that when Princess Anne is sitting at the harpsichord, she has the ‘opera folks’ by her (Handel and Strada, according to the author), and is as calm as ever.93 Strada certainly sang with the Princess’s orchestra at private concerts in Holland. The loyalty of this royal

89 King, ‘Anne of Hanover and Orange (1709–59) as patron and practitioner of the arts’, 173.
92 *George Frideric Handel: Collected Documents Volume 2*, 460.
lady stood firm even after June 1737, when Strada no longer sang for Handel. Moreover, she was obliged to interrupt her journey back to Italy in June 1738 at the behest of the Princess, to pay her a visit in Holland. According to Richard G. King, Anne, besides that she was patroness of first-class musicians and composers like Jean-Marie Leclair, Christian Ernst Graf, Gaetano Guadagni and Franz Xaver Richter, had a talent ‘throughout her reign for retaining performers and composers on their way through Holland to other destinations’. At least in the case of Strada and Leclair, she shared patronage with the Portuguese Jew named Jacob Lopez de Liz, who gave pompous musical entertainments at the Dutch court as well as regular private concerts. In this light, Strada’s second visit in the summer of 1738 might have lasted considerably longer: she may have sung at the court even until the next spring, since there is no account of her returning to Naples or of her appearance elsewhere until the autumn of 1739.

The spheres of eighteenth-century operatic life, however, were not restricted either to the stage or to the Royal Palace. The emerging middle class initiated a musical revolution, expanding the variety of public concert venues via the foundation of amateur musical societies and gentlemen’s clubs in the 1720s. They were based in public houses like the Crown and Anchor Tavern, the Castle Tavern and the Swan Tavern in Cornhill. Strada herself must have made regular appearances at such places. For instance, right after returning from Holland, she gave a concert at the Swan Tavern, which was reported by the Daily Post on 5th October 1736:

Last night the famous Signora Strada arriv’d from Holland, who is come on purpose to sing next Thursday [the 7th] in a Concert of Musick at the Swan Tavern in Exchange-Alley.

Furthermore, Mrs Pendarves often gave an account of Handel’s private performances at her home or at some other friend’s house. Another time she visited Handel at Brook Street to attend the first unofficial rehearsals of Alcina. One evening, with about fifteen friends present, seems to have been particularly special, for she claimed that she ‘never

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95 King, ‘Anne of Hanover and Orange (1709–59) as patron and practitioner of the arts’, 175.
96 Veronica P. M. Baker-Smith, A Life of Anne of Hanover, Princess Royal (Leiden, New York, Köln: Brill, 1995), 57.
100 Mrs Pendarves’s letter to her mother, Mary Granville, 12 April 1735. Deutsch, Handel, 385.
was so well entertained at an opera': 101 'Next week I shall have a very pretty party. Oh that you were to be here! The Percivals, Sir John Stanley, Bunny, Lady Rich and her daughter, Mr. Hanmer, Lady Catherine, Mr. Handel, and Strada, and if my Lady S. will lend me her harpsichord, she shall be of the party.' 102 She reported Handel’s very good mood and humour, his playing on the harpsichord and accompaniment of Strada who was singing together with the noble ladies for four hours. This little insight is refreshing evidence of a brimming cultural life, where fine art was deeply embedded into the quotidian life of various social circles – even one of the highest. Strada’s visit here was not one of those private appearances singers customarily made with a great deal of ceremony; etiquette was less important and the musicians themselves were equal participants of the company, just as amateurs did not hesitate to sing before the supreme vocalist and composer. Although Handel had been the one to introduce Strada to the world of their influential supporters, Strada in her own right proved to be suitable for conversation and amusement with the prominent members of society, and became accepted not only for her musical achievements but also for her character. It shows that her friendly relationship with Handel extended offstage too.

By the time of this meeting at Mary Delany’s in 1734, Strada’s illustriousness in London’s operatic life had become famous. She was officially and exclusively Handel’s loyal soprano, being the only one not to leave the composer for the newly established rival opera company, the Opera of the Nobility led by Niccolò Porpora, in June 1733. A further virtue of her character was shown in the same year, when she compassionately petitioned the King for a fellow countryman, Anthony l’Anglodge (alias l’Anglois or Porta Anthony) who was condemned to death for stealing. 103

Strada’s insistence on a strict collaboration with Handel was, however, not without precedent. In 1732, Giovanni Bononcini attempted to hire Handel’s singers for his serenata to be performed at the Opera. Strada, together with her husband, Aurelio del Pò – who seems to have worked as his wife’s manager during their English sojourn and afterwards –

101 ‘I must tell you of a little entertainm[en]t of Musick I had last week, I never wish’d more heartily for you & My Mother than on that occasion. I had Lady Rich & her Daughter[,] Lady Cath: Hamner & her Husband, Mr and Mrs. Percival, Sir John Stanley and my Bro[the]r, Mrs. Donellan, Strada, and Mr. Coot. Lord Shaftesbury begged Mr. Percival to bring him, and being a profess’d friend of Mr. Handels (who was here also) was admitted; I never was so entertain’d so well at an opera, Mr Hendel was in the best humour in the world, & played Lessons & accompanied Strada & all the Ladies that sung from seven o’th’clock till Eleven. I gave them Tea & Coffee & abt. half an hour after Nine had a salver brought in of Chocolate, muff’d white wine & biscuits. Every Body was easy and seem’d pleas’d.’ Mrs Pendarves’s letter to her sister, Anne Granville, 12 April 1734. George Frideric Handel: Collected Documents Volume 2, 772.

102 Mrs Pendarves’s letter to her sister, Anne Granville, 28 March and 4 April 1734. Ibid., 769–770 and 766.

rejected the offer, which stirred up a storm and received detailed press coverage:

Whereas Signor Bononcini intends after the Serenata composed by Mr. Handel has been performed, to have one of his own at the Opera-house, and has desired Signora Strada to sing in that Entertainment: Aurelio del Po, Husband of the said Signora Strada, thinks it incumbent on him to acquaint the Nobility and Gentry, that he shall ever think himself happy in every Opportunity wherein he can have the Honour to contribute to their Satisfaction; but with respect to this particular Request of Signor Bononcini, he hopes he shall be permitted to decline complying with it, for Reasons best known to the said Aurelio del Po and his Wife; and therefore the said Aurelio del Po flatters himself that the Nobility and Gentry will esteem this a sufficient Cause for his Non-compliance with Signor Bononcini’s Desire; and likewise judge it to be a proper Answer to whatever the Enemies of the said Aurelio del Po may object against him or his Wife upon this Occasion.¹⁰⁴

The serenata was cancelled after Strada refused to perform it. This is documented by an anonymous author, possibly the playwright and manager Aaron Hill (who attempted to meld English and Italian operatic conventions), who describes how ‘it fell out chiefly by the means of Strada’s Husband, who would not suffer his Wife to sing in it’.¹⁰⁵ A festa pastorale, Amore per amor, was performed instead, in English, on 24th June 1732, right after the revival of Handel’s Acis and Galatea, between 9th and 20th June.¹⁰⁶ The gesture itself signified rivalry, and to top it all Bononcini – who had to leave London the year before, after charges of plagiarism of a madrigal written by Antonio Lotti were proven against him – required Handel’s singers to take part in it, a demand which was turned down only by Strada, or to be more accurate, by her and her husband.¹⁰⁷ In the meantime, Henrietta Churchill, 2nd Duchess of Marlborough and Bononcini’s patroness, ‘has advance’d very largely towards a new Subscription for Italian Opera’s, to be there under the direction of Bononcini and Arragoni; and a new set of Singers, are to be sent for from Italy, for that purpose’.¹⁰⁸ Both this attempt and Amore per amor failed, but these two matters

¹⁰⁵ Anonymous letter published in the Craftsman, 12 August 1732. Ibid, 547.
¹⁰⁷ Political forces stood in the background of their competition from the very beginning: Handel was favoured by the Tories, while Bononcini by the Whigs. Lowell Lingren, ‘Bononcini, Giovanni’, Grove Music Online, ed. L. Macy, Accessed 3 March 2014.
foreshadowed what was to come the following year. The Nobility Opera ‘gave power to contract with any Singer Except Strada’. For that matter, Aurelio must have been well aware of the situation of London’s operatic life, (just as he used to be at Naples), of the evolving opposition to Handel and of the political motivations behind these activities. In addition, the Italian diaspora was probably a tightly more closed circle within London society, and, as such, news and rumours spread more directly, relations between parties were more transparent, and this liaison network naturally expanded to Italy. Thus Strada and Aurelio knew exactly what they were doing when voting for Handel with her denial in 1732 and they must have calculated the consequences.

The catalyst for the Nobility’s (1733–37) establishment, no doubt, was the engagement of Senesino. Handel brought him back to the Royal Academy for 1400 guineas in the fall of 1730 in place of Bernacchi. Unfortunately their former tensions caused new problems, which made them part ways in June 1733. Carestini became Strada’s next stage partner. Thereafter Farinelli – the most celebrated castrato of all time, who used to be Strada’s colleague in Naples – Cuzzoni and, for the position of musical director, Porpora were invited from Italy by the Nobility. Nevertheless they could not hire Farinelli immediately, but from the 1734/35 season onwards; Cuzzoni returned to London only in April 1734. The idea of two Italian opera companies in London was considered nonsense by some contemporaries. The British aristocracy had previously had difficulties in maintaining even one, and now they had two to support. A financial collapse was inevitable.

There were unmistakably political motives standing in the background of this cultural battlefield. Frederick, Prince of Wales, arrived in England in 1727 after his father George II took the throne. He had not seen his parents for fourteen years, nor was he allowed to leave Hanover for England before. In a short time he became the titular head of the political opposition as well as a patron of the arts. As the King and Queen supported Handel, the Prince conversely chose to sponsor the Nobility’s company. Pamphlets, satires and open letters about operatic life almost always involved political allegories, such as the one published in the Craftsman on 7th April 1733, where Strada’s name represented Queen Caroline. Seemingly, this was an attack against Handel but its actual target was the

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112 Dean, Handel’s Operas 1726–1741, 134.
prime minister Robert Walpole, Handel’s supposed protector. His main enemies, the politicians Lord Bolingbroke and William Pulteney, owned the aforementioned journal and utilised Del Pò’s former declaration about Bononcini’s serenata for transmitting coded hints. The Gentlemen’s Magazine of August 1732 contains a satirical discussion about Del Pò’s letter published in the Craftsman of 12th August:

Good God! When shall I see this poor country free from practices? What dignity, what authority discovers itself in every line? Does this sound like the style of a poor Italian, who lets out his wife to sing for hire? I suppose you would make me believe this is Strada’s husband, and no libel, I warrant you; no attempt against the government! ‘Ay, to be sure’, replied an old lady, ‘everybody knows whose name begins with a P, and that it is pronounced in the beginning like those two letters P O.’ The fat gentleman seemed to frown at this. ‘Madam’, said he, … ‘I will undertake to prove that nobody could pen this advertisement but the Pretender himself.’ … ‘Ay, ’tis plain,’ cried a sober fellow … ‘Aurelio stands for the Pretender, Po for the Pope, Del for the Devil. … Is not this the style of a king and his ministers? And would an Italian singing woman’s husband presume to offer terms in this manner to the nobility and gentry of Great Britain? No, no, it must be the Pretender who had endeavoured to impose upon the nation under this disguise, and to open a correspondence with the Royal Academy of Music.”

On the musical battlefield, competition of the highest degree defined the relationship between the two groups from the first moment on. Mirroring each other, the Opera of the Nobility opened at the Lincoln’s Inn Fields Theatre on 29th December 1733 with Porpora’s Arianna in Nasso, while Handel came up with his Arianna in Creta at the King’s Theatre at the Haymarket only in 26th January 1734, despite the fact that he had already completed the opera on 5th October previous year. Evidently, his idea was beating Porpora at his own game. However, at first he did really not succeed by producing Italian pasticci: Vinci’s Semiramide on 30th October, Hasse’s Caio Fabricio on 5th December 1733 and Vinci’s Arbace on 1st January 1734. As Reinhard Strohm has observed, ‘he wanted to confront Porpora with superior examples of Porpora’s own kind of music’. Arianna in Creta, on the other hand, was a considerable success with sixteen performances. Both companies

114 Aurelio’s public notice was reprinted in the Craftsman on 12 August 1732. Ibid., 547–548; McGeary, The Politics of Opera in Handel’s Britain, 126–149.
were performing deliberately on Tuesday and Saturday nights in order to press the audience to opt for one or the other with their attendance. In late 1734 the Nobility moved to the King’s Theatre, while Handel relocated his activities to the newly-built Covent Garden. The great opera war was terminated by the spring of 1737, and both companies collapsed in June. Handel had to join the remainder of the Nobility at the King’s Theatre, sacrificing Strada’s engagement for the for the 1737–38 season.

Burney reports that by 1737 ‘Handel had been so great a loser by striving against the stream of fashion and opposition the preceding season, that he was obliged to fell out of the funds of many former years, to pay his performers, and was still in some danger of being arrested by the husband of Strada for the arrears of his salary.’  

Aurelio del Pò must have been worried, and not without reason. His intention was to get his wife’s wages via an official executive proceeding. This, if true, might be confusing at first sight, considering that he made a public statement on Handel’s side in 1732 when he had not allowed his wife to sing for Bononcini, and also that he himself used to be in the same situation in 1726, owing Strada 2,000 Neapolitan ducats and was able to compensate her solely through marriage. Admittedly, this was an unrepeatable solution. At the same time, it is very important to see that Del Pò acted on Strada’s behalf like a manager would have, and surely not without her approval – with the agent’s pragmatism and not with the husband’s partiality. The couple must have been agreed on calling Handel to account for Strada’s salary. Both here and in the Bononcini case, Del Pò’s reactions, again, reflect an awareness of the actual state of London’s operatic life as well as the political forces driving its changes.

According to contemporary reports, Handel finally paid his singers, albeit with some delay: Hawkins even emphasises Strada’s generosity when he records that in 1737 ‘Strada and others of the singers were content to accept of bonds for the payment of their arrears, and left the kingdom upon Mr. Handel’s assurances that they should be discharged; and he paid a due regard to his engagement by remitting them the money.’  

The 4th Earl of Shaftesbury’s account connects it to Handel’s benefit concert: ‘It was in this Season [1737–38] that Mr. Handell had his great Benefit at the Hay Market, which enabled him to Discharge his Debts’. Handel suffered a stroke in April 1737. Though he recovered during the summer, faster than expected, and was able to compose again, he was physically exhausted as well as socially somewhat insecure, though not all his patrons left him. His

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120 Deutsch, *Handel*, 847.
friends and supporters gave him a benefit concert on 28th March 1738, attended by ‘nearly 1,300 persons besides the gallery and upper gallery’, as it can be read in the diary of the Earl of Egmont, who supposed that Handel received £1,000 for that night; Mainwaring said £1,500, Burney recorded £800.121

Donald Burrows’s assumption is that Handel rejoined Heidegger, who had many of the former Nobility Opera patrons behind him, meaning that the composer had no significant influence over the artistic management any more.122 However, Robert D. Hume has suggested the very convincing hypothesis that the final season of the Royal Academy was in fact 1737/38, accomplished through a financial and professional fusion with the Opera of the Nobility and its directors.123 Following this logic, Strada might have been the necessary loss of the deal, as most of the singers – apart from Caffarelli – were selected from among the remnants of the Nobility troupe: La Francesina, Merighi and Montagnana. Farinelli and Conti had gone in 1737, Senesino a year earlier – as Henry Carey recorded in his satiric song: ‘Fly Heidegger, fly, and my idol restore; / O, let me but hear the enchanter once more. / For Handel may study, and study in vain / While Strada’s expell’d, and my Broschi’s in Spain.’124

As a matter of fact, Handel was gradually but explicitly shifting his profile, i.e. focusing more and more on oratorios. He might have understood the actual socio-cultural changes and the gap between him and the new generation of theatre managers as well as the lassitude of the subsidy of opera, both as far as the supporters and the interest of the audience were concerned.125 Nevertheless, the Daily Advertiser of 20th February 1738 published a report about a rearrangement of subscriptions by twenty noble ladies and with Heidegger as an adviser, in order to save Italian opera playing in London. They mentioned Strada by name as desired prima donna for the future company:

It is pretty confidently said, that the Managers of the Italian Opera in the Hay-Market designing to give over that Enterprize, this innocent and agreeable Entertainment, which is encouraged in all the Courts of Europe, will, the next Season, be undertaken by twenty Ladies of the first Distinction ... As ‘tis said the Ladies who take upon them the Direction, design in every thing to be guided by the Advice of Mr. Heydigger [sic],

122 Burrows, Handel, 258 and 260.
125 Burrows, Handel, 265.
who is indeed the only Person capable of conducting and regulating publick Entertainments. Some go yet farther, and take upon them to name the Performers, which, say they, will be Mrs. Strada, Mr. Caffarelli, Mr. Carestini, Mrs. Francesina, Mrs. Chimenti, Mrs. Marchesini, Mr. Montagnana; and that the Composers will be Mr. Handel and Mr. Pescetti.  

Although Heidegger secured Strada in May, he could not engage Caffarelli, who refused his offer of 1,000 guineas. Besides, the number of subscriptions failed, aborting the idea of a season for 1738/39 and leading to a final breakdown of Italian opera in London.  

Heidegger was waiting with the announcement until the last rays of hope vanished with Caffarelli’s departure (c. 15–17 July): 

Whereas the Opera’s for the ensuing Season at the King’s Theatre in the Hay-Market, cannot be carried on as was intended, by Reason of the Subscription not being full, and that I could not agree with the Singers tho’ I offer’d One Thousand Guineas to One of them: I therefore think myself obliged to declare, that I give up the Undertaking for next Year.  

Strada therefore – after her agreement with Heidegger failed and she was waiting for Handel in vain – had to say farewell. She left for Naples via Holland in June 1738: 

On Saturday last [the 17th] set out for Breda Signora Strada del Pò, to which Place she goes in Obedience to the Command of her Royal Highness the Princess of Orange, from whence she intends to go to Italy; but before her Departure desires that the British Nobility and Gentry (from whom she has received so many signal Marks of Favour) might be acquainted that it is no ways owing to her, that the present Scheme for performing Opera’s next Winter in the Haymarket, under the Direction of Mr. Heydegger, has miscarried, as has been maliciously reported: she having agreed with Mr. Heydegger above a Month ago, as the said Gentleman can testify.  

The question also emerges of whether a decay of Strada’s vocal state was among the reasons why Handel released her, but this suspicion is hard to believe considering what kind of arias she performed in 1736/37, her last season in London. The scores of Arminio,

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Giustino and Berenice testify against this idea, showing a rich voice full of strength and energy. There has been no trace found of a break in comparison with the previous years. Neither seems her allurem as a muse, her ability of inspiration to fade away – she still motivated Handel for new ways of treating the soprano voice, and he began to set forth a flexible and modern conception matchless in the first half of the eighteenth century. Lord Shaftesbury, in his letter to James Harris of 11th June 1737, asserted Strada’s unbrokenly excellent vocal quality: ‘I was at the opera of Alcina last night[,] was incomparably performed. There is hopes that of the undertaker’s hiring Strada for next year’. After all, in spite of the activity of the Nobility Opera, headed by Farinelli, Cuzzoni and Merighi as star singers, Handel was able to prevail artistically. It is noteworthy that his triumph was attributed to Strada, or at least tightly coupled with her, and that the appreciation of Handel as well as the audience towards her remained uninterrupted:

Bunny came [on Tuesday last, i.e. the 23rd] from the Haymarket Opera, and supped with me comfortably. They have Farinelli, Merighi, with no sound in her voice, but thundering action – a beauty with no other merit; and one Chimenti, a tolerable good woman with a pretty voice and Montagnana, who roars as usual! With this band of singers and dull Italian operas, such as you almost fall asleep at, they presume to rival Handel—who has Strada, that sings better than ever she did;

that as for C[uzz]oni, you had no Thoughts of her, no Hopes of her, nor no want of her, S[tra]da being in all respects infinitely superior, in any Excellency requir’d for a Stage; [...] Have you [Handel] not this very Season imported from Italy an Arch-Friend, one Care[sti]no, that will play the Devil with us before he quits us, and leagu’d yourself to a notorious Witch, one Str[a]da, that never lets us be quiet Night nor Day;

This uniquely symbiotic relationship of mutual inspiration between singer and composer reached its culmination in the moving musical description of Alcina’s fallen character (1735). The impact of this symbiosis was so profound that it became publicly poeticised:

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130 Celletti, Geschichte des Belcanto, 103.
132 Mrs Pendarves’s letter to her sister, Anne Granville, 27 November 1736. Deutsch, Handel, 418.
Handel, to wax the charm as strong, / Temper’d Alcina’s [Strada’s] with his own: /
And now asserted by their song, / They rule the tuneful world alone. / Or she
improves his wonderous lay; / Or he by a superior spell / Does greater melody convey,
/ That she may her bright self excel.134

Later reception also noticed Strada and Handel’s special relationship. Among Handel’s
nineteenth-century biographers, Chrysander commented: ‘he made his best find with
Signora Strada, a true pearl of singing’, calling her Handel’s favourite singer; ‘Surely, it
served him [Handel] as a great recompense to work his way with such a singer, with whom
the Faustina-cult was impossible per se. Having a voice similar to Cuzzoni’s, she learned
how to greatly upgrade her stage movements, and seemed to possess no trace of the perfidy
of her famous predecessor. A cordial amity evolved between her and the composer, which
proved itself to be enduring even in uncertain times’.135 The English composer,
musicologist and conductor Mrs Julian Marshall similarly remarked: ‘Signora Anna
Strada, an excellent soprano, who, of all the singers Handel ever had, seems to have
pleased him most’.136 The Dictionary of National Biography 1885‒1900 remarked that in
Strada, Handel found ‘a staunch and much needed friend’.137

Strada was a perfect match for Handel: she combined vocal and personal characteristics
which inspired one of the greatest composers of all time. Hence, her unique style of
singing left its mark on the musical page. She undeniably had the ability to control
negative circumstances: to grow, to flourish professionally in a harsh environment, to
overcome the audience’s preconceptions and gain their appreciation; moreover, to compete
with a rival company graced with the most prominent singer in the Western world. Strada
was a perfect match for Handel: she combined vocal and personal characteristics which
inspired one of the greatest composers of all time. Hence, her unique style of singing left
its mark on the musical page. She undeniably had the ability to control negative

134 Verses 8 and 9 from ‘On Mr Handel’s performance on the Organ, and his Opera of Alcina’, By a
135 ‘Den besten Fund machte er aber an Signora Strada, einer wahren Perle des Gesanges.’; ‘Es gewährte ihm
sicherlich eine große Gemüthung, sich mit einer Sängerin durchzubringen, bei welcher der Faustina-
kultus von vornherein unmöglich war. An Stimme der Cuzzoni ähnlich, lernte sie sich viel besser auf der
Bühne bewegen, und scheint keine Spur von der Falschheit ihrer berühmten Vorsängerin besessen zu
haben. Es gestaltete sich zwischen ihr und dem Tonmeister ein herzliches Freundschaftsverhältnis, das sich
136 Mrs Julian Marshall, Handel (London, S. Low, Marston, Searle and Rivington, 1883), 85–86; Florence
Ashton Marshall was an English writer, composer and conductor, contributor of the first edition of Grove’s
Smith, Elder & Co., 1890), 283.
circumstances: to grow, to flourish professionally in a harsh environment, to overcome the audience’s preconceptions and gain their appreciation; moreover, to compete with a rival company graced with the most prominent singer in the Western world. She had clear sight of the musical and human values of her colleagues around her, which helped her to stand by Handel when all the others left, according to the fashion of the moment. Had she decided otherwise, the Ariosto-operas, for example – with *Alcina* the apogee – would never have been formed in the way they finally were.
Chapter Four: In the Midst of Operatic Business

Queen of revivals

Of the five operas introduced by the Rival Queens, Strada sang in the revivals of three: in Tolomeo (1730), Admeto (1731) and Alessandro (1732). In the first two, she played roles originally belonging to Cuzzoni, yet enriched with Faustina’s arias; while in the third, the role of Faustina was given to her. All of those revivals took place in the first years of her engagement in London, and thus it is reasonable to believe that, so far as Strada was concerned, the goal of the productions was to establish her as a prima donna who possessed the qualities of both Cuzzoni and Faustina. Besides the fact that the vocal requirements of Cuzzoni’s material fell short of Strada’s capabilities (as shown by the respective original roles), Strada seems to have been familiar with some general aspects of Faustina’s style: their energetic and powerful voice production was similar, inspiring the production of castrato-type virtuoso arias, frequently with terzini coloraturas.

For the new cast, Handel drastically re-shaped Tolomeo, transforming it almost into a pasticcio, since he imported twelve arias from eight different operas – mainly for the sake of Bernacchi, Merighi and Fabri. In Strada’s role of Seleuce, two arias and her two duets with Tolomeo were changed in 1730 and retained at the 1733 revival. Instead of the Allegro Aure portate, she sang the aria composed a month earlier for her benefit in Giulio Cesare, Io vò di duolo in duolo. In place of Torni omai, Faustina’s favourite insertion aria – written for her at the revival of Floridante, 1727, and repeated by her in that of Radamisto, 1728 – Parmi che giunta in porto was performed. The recitative E dove, e dove mai with the simple aria Senza il suo bene were cut, together with the middle section of Fonti amiche. With Tolomeo (Bernacchi), Strada had the duet Io t’abbraccio (F♯ minor, C, Larghetto) from Rodelinda instead of Se il cor perde, as well as T’amò, sì (E major, C, Adagio–Andante) from Riccardo Primo, replacing Tutta contenta – both with lower notes (c♯, b) for the primo uomo, indicating that the changes might have been made on Bernacchi’s behalf. Though Aure portate is the first Allegro aria in the role after two slower pathetic parlante numbers, Mi volgo (V3; G major, 12/8, Andante) and Fonti amiche (V5; G minor, C, Larghetto), its short coloraturas, medium difficulty level and restricted tessitura made it reasonable that it should be dropped for Io vò di duolo in duolo (G minor, 6/8; Ex. 4.1), which served as Strada’s signature music for Seleuce. Although it

1 Winton Dean, Handel’s Operas, 1726-1741 (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2006), 117–118.
is neither virtuosic nor dramatic, it is connected to Strada’s name as her benefit aria in *Giulio Cesare*, has a melody catchy enough for the public – the favour of which was urgently sought by both Handel and Strada – and its monumentality was hidden in the details: larger legato lines, longer coloraturas, finer rhythmic elaboration and a higher tessitura with Strada’s best-tinkling notes.


The jewel in the crown was certainly the Faustinian *Parmi che giunta in porto* (B♭ major, 3/4; Ex. 4.2), her last aria at the end of Act III, to which the number it substituted, *Torni omai*, cannot be compared in grandiosity or virtuosity. *Parmi che giunta* has a strong *parlante* aspect but is enriched with *terzini*, which rarely occurred in Cuzzoni’s repertoire but are very frequently, however, in that of Faustina and Strada.

Example 4.2: Vocal part (excerpts) of *Parmi che giunta in porto*, originally Faustina’s insertion aria, bb. 56–76 and 137–146.
The same is true of Strada’s own substitute aria from a month earlier, Parolette, vezzi e sguardi, which she sang besides Io vò di duolo in duolo in her benefit performances of Giulio Cesare (1730) and in the revival of Rinaldo (1731). Parolette is the twin of Parmi che giunta, one might say, as the two arias are strictly similar in their concepts. This duplication of Faustinian characteristics strengthens the assumption that Strada as a soprano had a more powerful voice production than is typical of mezzo-sopranos. It was effective, therefore, to provide for her in the midst of a lyric aria-chain which had been written with this intense way of singing in mind. This kind of penetrating and full-bodied singing used to be the main characteristic of the art of castrati in that era. The presence of the typical elements of male soprano arias, such as trills, triplets, sustained notes and wide leaps, was significant in Strada’s repertoire. The message of this insertion was that Strada’s singing technique was an original soprano version of Faustina’s, but not her simple copy at all, as Rolli implicitly stated. At the same time, the siciliano Mi volgo, the slow air Fonti amiche and Io vò di duolo demonstrate her pathetic skills, for which Cuzzoni was best known. Thus, by proving to the audience that she sang ‘better than the two previous ones’, in displaying the similarities with them, nevertheless the great difference was shown which made Strada unusual. The former leading ladies were singers of their era; Strada with her more comprehensive art created glimpses of the future, predicting the next generations.

The case of the Admeto revival is slightly similar to that of Tolomeo. Strada played Antigona, Cuzzoni’s former role, with the insertion of an aria brillante by Faustina, Io son qual Fenice (F major, C, Andante). Two mostly parlante arias, Spera allor and E che ci posso far dropped out, and Strada’s first aria in Act I, E per monti (B♭ major, C, Allegro; Ex. 4.3), was taken from Act II. Thus she began with Cuzzoni’s most technically demanding number of the role, with a richer orchestration than usual and with some of the castrato patterns like octave leaps and long ascending trill-chains.

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6 Faustina’s additional aria for the same opera, Admeto in 1728.
Example 4.3: Vocal part (excerpt from the A section) of *E per monti*, bb. 11–46.

In this way, Strada sang two virtuoso numbers in the first act, since the other one, *Sen vola* (A major, C, Allegro), which concluded the act, remained in place. The sequence continued in Act II, with Faustina’s *Io son qual Fenice* (F major, C, Andante; Ex. 4.4), fitting perfectly into Strada’s vocal profile by representing the ongoing tradition of chiselled Andante arias with manifold coloraturas, demisemiquaver patterns, dotted rhythms, trills and arpeggiation. Nevertheless, in Faustina’s arias in general there are several unnecessarily repeated coloratura patterns, tokens of sheer virtuosity which Handel practically never applied for Strada.

Example 4.4: Vocal part (A section) of *Io son qual Fenice*, bb. 31–58.

Cuzzoni’s beautiful *lamento siciliana*, *Da tanti affanni oppressa* (E minor, 12/8, Larghetto) came next, followed by *La sorte mia vacilla* (G major, 3/8, Allegro), of a similar type to *E per monti*, but in triple time. In act III, Antigona has an intimate, slow and short air solely with continuo accompaniment, *Io ti bacio* (B♭ major, C). Handel achieved great success by
making Cuzzoni sing such *Falsa imagine*-like numbers, which seem to have been very important for him as picked up the threads of that style with Strada not only in revivals, but also in her original roles (see ch. 5). Cuzzoni must have been able to inspire Handel to develop his naturally florid and instinctive melodiousness, for which she had been favoured by him for years. Her melodic sensitivity matched one of Handel’s main characteristics as a composer, which he wanted to transmit to Strada, who possessed another affinity with his musical personality, that of energy or élan.

Not surprisingly, the last aria was also taken from Alceste’s character as played by Faustina, *Là dove gl’occhi giro* (III/6; A major, C, Andante; Ex. 4.5). It is an aria in Strada’s style: Andante and full of *terzini*, contrary to the likewise lively but more common *E che ci posso far*, the number for which it was substituted.

Example 4.5: Vocal part (A1 section) of *Là dove gl’occhi giro*, bb. 8–18.

Thus, an imposing and improved aria set was drawn up, a concentrate from Cuzzoni’s and Faustina’s best, consisting of seven pieces: first, two lively arias (*E per monti* and *Sen vola*), than one of greatest virtuosity (*Io son qual Fenice*), followed by a *siciliana* (*Da tanti affanni oppressa*), a coloratura one again (*La sorte mia vacilla*), a beautiful pathetic song (*Io ti bacio*), and finally a birdsong with fluent triplets (*Là dove gl’occhi*). It certainly meant a breakthrough for Strada towards the appreciation of the British audience which she in fact seems to have gained indeed in 1731.

At the revival of *Alessandro* (1732), Strada sang Faustina’s role, which was a further step in her career. Nevertheless, the choice itself was made for dramatic reasons as well as for the sake of character hierarchy: though Lisaura is the soprano, Rossane is the one who finally wins the heart of the Macedonian king; therefore she is the *prima donna*. Understandably, her first aria, *Lusinghe più care* (I/4; C, Allegro, mà non troppo; Ex.4.6) was raised from G major to A major, which – besides resulting in a brighter sound and an extra glamour for the already fantastic coloratura passages – meant the occurrence of the
pitch a” nineteen times in the da capo part and once more in the B section. Five times, the pitch is expressly accented: undoubtedly this air of fireworks made for a dazzling start.\(^7\)

Example 4.6: Vocal part (A2 section) of Lusinghe più care, bb. 28–57.

Un lusinghiero dolce pensiero (I/7; A major, 3/4, Allegro) – the first theme of which Handel re-used in 1735 for Tornami a vagheggiar, originally Morgana’s aria but then passed on to Strada as Alcina – has a leggero-styled A section, contrasting with a more dramatic minor B section, which was meant to reflect the anxiety caused by Alessandro’s vacillant emotions. For the revival in 1732 Handel shortened this exceptionally long middle section. He cut only mere repetitions of a musical material already introduced. This might have been one of the advantages of his collaboration with Strada, i.e. she did not insist singing musically superfluous material just to set a record of virtuosity. Besides, the tessitura in the second half of the B part sinks into the real mezzo-soprano range, and this long dwelling on notes such as e’ or d’ may have been not so beneficial for her voice that it would have been worth retaining. The second act opens with Rossane’s soliloquy, Solitudini amate–Aure, fonti (C minor, C, Adagio; Ex. 4.7); it is an entirely pathetic scene, in which Strada could show all her refined lyric talents to captivate the audience.

\(^7\) Dean, Handel’s Operas, 1726–1741, 25.
The compulsory Andante aria with numerous rhythmic complexities again did not fail: *Alla sua gabbia d’oro* (II/4; A major, Andante, e staccato; Ex. 4.8) is also a bird song, rich in trills, demisemiquaver-patterns, triplets, and repeated notes as well as *volatine*. The recitativo *Vilipese bellezze* together with the two duets in the finale were omitted. On the whole, Strada’s role of Rossane was a perfectly-proportioned alloy of strength and agility.

Although Faustina had a ‘charming voice with quite a big sound, though a little rough’, Winton Dean has noticed that in 1727, during the run of the performances, she demanded substitutions for *Lusinghe più care* and *Brilla nell’alma*, the most brilliant aria in her part, presumably because of the fullness of their orchestral accompaniment. Moreover, the violin parts in two other numbers, those of *Un lusinghiero* and *Tempesta e calma*, were thinned out by Handel for the same reason. Although he did not bring *Brilla nell’alma* back for Strada, this case sheds light on the difference between her and Faustina. It is remarkable, that for Strada’s sake there was never a need to make such reductions, nor did she demand substitute arias in her original roles from Handel. On the contrary: her original roles include richly orchestrated airs, the thickness of which is far beyond the fullest that Handel ever wrote for Faustina, who was reported by Quantz to have a solid and penetrating voice projection:

Faustina had a mezzo-soprano voice that was less clear than penetrating. […] She possessed what the Italians call *un cantar granito*; her execution was articulate and brilliant. She had a fluent tongue for pronouncing words rapidly and distinctly, and a flexible throat for divisions, with so beautiful a shake that she put it in motion upon

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11 There were only two occasions when Strada sang a substitution aria in an original role: in Vivaldi’s *La verità in cimento* (Venice, 1720) and in Sarro’s *Tito Sempronio Gracco* (Naples, 1725). The reason for the new material for *Through the land* in Handel’s oratorio, *Athalia*’s revival in 1735 was probably Carestini’s presence, see ch. 6. She took over other character’s numbers, probably on Handel’s demand, at the revivals of *Poro, Alcina* and *Esther*, see chs 5 and 6.
short notice, just when she would. The passages might be smooth, or by leaps, or consisting of iterations of the same note; their execution was equally easy to her as to any instrument whatever. She was, doubtless, the first who introduced with success a swift repetition of the same note. She sang adagios with great passion and expression, but was not equally successful if such deep sorrow were to be impressed on the hearer as might require dragging, sliding, or notes of syncopation and tempo rubato.12

It is highly likely that the unclear factor in Faustina’s singing took something away from the penetration of her voice, and this could be the reason why she did not feel secure enough singing passaggi with full orchestra. Strada, in contrast, had a ‘better voice and better intonation’ than Faustina together with a penetrating soprano voice, i.e. with a higher tessitura.13 These features altogether allowed her voice to be heard naturally over even a full ensemble. A voice, especially a mezzo-soprano, which operates in the middle range, however so strong, cannot be heard through the orchestra if it is not clear. By contrast, a penetrating soprano, or even a soprano with a thinner sound but clear voice production, is audible. In other words, a mezzo-soprano needs more clarity than richness to dominate over the instrumental ensemble, a gift which Faustina might have been lacking. I would also remark, that a period orchestra, when it sounded freely and at full strength, was not of a light sound at all: singers of today who regularly perform pieces from the romantic repertoire with symphony orchestras, easily disappear vocally in the midst of a Baroque aria when the orchestra (consisting of period instruments) has one or two forte chords under the melody.14 Furthermore, Faustina’s arias in general have the trend of repeating the same coloratura patterns, and show more of a static phrase structure. Their units with refined and subtle rhythmic alterations are regularly divided by short pauses; these indicate another significant difference between Strada and her, and also have something to do with vocal shine and penetration as well as breath control. For a naturally dynamic voice such as Strada had, buoyancy is a necessity because the voice can best operate with such a directed energy in any tempo. For a more static voice it is ideal not to have constantly mobile phrases but rather slightly separated islands, isolated group of motifs articulated with short pauses, which can be executed in themselves first and then be connected into the larger

structure. This difference has nothing to do with coloratura ability, as the repetition of
the same patterns on the same pitch is also a form of being static, and the goal of getting from
point A to point B is usually of secondary importance in such coloraturas.

Table 4.1: Revivals of non-original roles, which Strada sang during her collaboration with Handel

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Revivals</th>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>Numbers of performances</th>
<th>Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Giulio Cesare</em></td>
<td>17 January 1730, 1 February 1732</td>
<td>11 + 4 = 15</td>
<td>Cleopatra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Tolomeo</em></td>
<td>19 May 1730, 2 January 1733</td>
<td>7 + 4 = 11</td>
<td>Seleuce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Scipione</em></td>
<td>3 November 1730</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Rinalda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Rinaldo</em></td>
<td>6 April 1731</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Rinaldo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Rodelinda</em></td>
<td>4 May 1731</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Rodelinda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Tamerlano</em></td>
<td>13 November 1731</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Asteria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Admeto</em></td>
<td>7 December 1731</td>
<td>6/7</td>
<td>Antigona</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ariosti: <em>Coriolano</em></td>
<td>25 March 1732</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Volumnia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Flavio</em></td>
<td>18 April 1732</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Emilia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Acis and Galatea</em></td>
<td>10 June 1732, 5 December 1732, 11 July 1733, 7 May 1734, 24 March 1736</td>
<td>4 + 4 + 1 +1 + 2 = 12</td>
<td>Galatea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Alessandro</em></td>
<td>25 November 1732</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Rossane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Ottone</em></td>
<td>13 November 1733</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Teofane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Il Parnasso in festa</em></td>
<td>13 March 1734, 9 March 1737</td>
<td>4 + 1 = 5</td>
<td>Clio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Il pastor fido</em></td>
<td>18 May 1734, 9 November 1734</td>
<td>9 + 5 = 14</td>
<td>Erato, Amarilli</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Oreste</em></td>
<td>18 December 1734</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Ermione</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Strada also sang some of the widescreen-roles of Cuzzoni from the era (see Table 4.1), when she was the absolute prima donna of Handel, i.e. prior to Faustina: Berenice (Scipione), Rodelinda, Cleopatra (*Giulio Cesare*), Teofane (*Ottone*), Emilia (*Flavio*) and Asteria (*Tamerlano*). Generally, Handel cut his operas into pieces when it came to revivals and rendered them into sort of pasticci of his own works. Yet the parts Strada took over either remained untouched – in contrast to the great number of aria substitutions and transpositions of other singer’s roles, and even the reshaping of a character and its dramatic function. Or, when changed, their technical difficulty was increased. This confirms that Strada had no problem in performing Cuzzoni’s arias; and to counteract the usual lack of real bravura numbers in Cuzzoni’s roles, Handel imported Faustina’s songs for her. In this way, Strada’s aptness to adjust her vocal apparatus to a brand new combination and succession of diverse well-known patterns was demonstrated, an ability probably aided by her suspected instrumental training and her excellent music reading as well as memorizing skills.

*Giulio Cesare* had been revived for the Second Academy from 17th January 1730 onwards.\(^{15}\) Strada sang the original role without any changes nine times, until 21st February. The performances used the old costumes and stage set, meaning that Strada was wearing Cuzzoni’s dresses. *Giulio Cesare* was the second production of the new cast, right after the run of *Lotario*. Lady Sarah Cowper’s surviving letter from London to her brother

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\(^{15}\) There was another revival on 1st February 1732, a shortened version of the work. In Strada’s part the benefit arias were withdrawn, *Tutto può donna* and *Piangerò* cut, and *Venere bella* reduced to its A section. Winton Dean and John Merrill Knapp, *Handel’s Operas, 1704–1726* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 504.
in Venice gives a good insight not only into the partiality of the audience (she repeats Rolli’s sarcastic words), but also that Strada started to conquer them from the very beginning:

We have lost all taste for Musick. Our great people prefer to Cuzzoni a Second Faustina [Strada], only with a better voice. And Anna Strada del Po is going to be the Cleopatra once sung by Cuzzoni & in her very cloaths. That great Mistress of Musick [Cuzzoni] you hear every night is despis’d as an old fashion’d Singer, & such staff admir’d as was never heard before with approbation of an English Ear.  

The tenth performance, on 21st March, however, was Strada’s benefit, where new songs were introduced, and this performance was repeated on the 31st. Concerning only this last performance, the advertisement of the *Daily Journal* proclaimed that “The Scenes and Dresses are all entirely new”. Firstly, both the repetition of Strada’s benefit version of *Giulio Cesare* with the new arias and the new costumes suggest that it was a considerable success (not excluding the possibility that as a ‘second benefit’, she also gained a part of the proceeds from the performance on 31st). Secondly, perhaps the new dresses and scenery were meant for 21st March, but they were not ready in time; either way, Strada’s Cleopatra was so convincing that it had to be repeated, but not in the costumes of Cuzzoni. If this latter was the case, a Royal person, perhaps Princess Anne, could have initiated such an expensive change, which would have been nonsensical otherwise, because this was the very last performance of *Giulio Cesare* in the year. The opera was revived only once afterwards, in February 1732, in a shortened version and only for four performances. This circumstance sheds a clear light on Strada’s growing reputation.

The stunning fact that *Io vò di duolo* substituted even *Piangerò* underlines the notion that, especially in the case of revivals, the work itself was of secondary importance, whereas and all the focus was on the vocal and musical personality of the singers, whose task was to render any performance successful. *Piangerò* – to take this example – has a static pathetic lament in the A section, with very little motion built within the melodic structure. The fierce virtuosity of the B section is mainly done by the violins, while in the vocal part it is limited to two medium-sized coloratura patterns; the rest is in *parlante* style. As this *Giulio Cesare* performance was Strada’s benefit, she not only had to sing arias

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which she could not only perform very well but they had to be hits displaying the very essence of her vocal nature. *Io vô di duolo* has motion and energy in the frame of a moderate tempo and contains long coloraturas with some rhythmic variety, fine chromatic moments, large phrase structures, passion in interaction with the violins, and it is quite catchy enough to impress the audience. It served to highlight Strada’s expressiveness, vocal colouring and rhythmic sensitiveness, connected with a proper use of declamation and to some extent, *tempo rubato.*

The other substitute aria written especially for Strada for her benefit, *Parolette, vezzi e sguardi* (A major, C, Allegro; Ex. 4.9; Track 7) – was the replacement of *Tutto può donna vezzosa* and a revised version of *Una schiera di piaceri,* Bellezza’s aria from *Il trionfo del Tempo e del Disinganno* (1707), sung by Strada herself later, in 1737 for its revival as *Il trionfo del Tempo e della Verità.* This aria shows the other side of the coin: it is a *virtuoso coloratura* movement marked with *terzini.* Through its special *parlante* effect it also provides an example of Strada’s presumably expressive pronunciation of words. Its similarity to *Parmi che giunta* suggests that Strada had the same ability of a ‘fluent tongue for pronouncing words rapidly and distinctly’ that Faustina possessed. As we have seen in Vivaldi’s *Silvia,* one of Strada’s early productions in Milan, she had effective acting skills, necessarily including a clear and meaningful presentation of the text. (Moreover, given the fact that she sang in English in Handel’s oratorios while for her fellow singers the arias were translated into Italian, and that Senesino was scorned for his Welsh-like pronunciation while no stone was thrown at Strada, it is very probable that she had a genuine ability for authentic pronunciation and accentuation, which presumably was valid in her mother tongue as well.)

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20 Reinhard Strohm suggested to me that rapid *terzini,* one by one on syllables actually give a strong *parlante* affect like this aria of Strada, *Parolette, vezzi e sguardi* or Faustina’s *Parmi che giunta in porto.*


Example 4.9: Excerpt from Parolette, vezzi e sguardi, Strada’s benefit aria from Giulio Cesare, bb. 10–63.
However and above all, Strada’s powerful voice projection and unusual tessitura become obvious here. There are two axes in this number: e" and a"», the notes displayed with *messe di voce* and strongly connected to coloratura passages. Likewise, two distinct areas can be observed in Handel’s use of vocal range: below and above e", most probably indicating the axis of Strada’s registers. Her most sonorous notes might have fallen between e" and a", later concentrated on the f"–f"–g" area, as the original roles written for her in 1735‒37 show. After the initial *parlante* phrases, the strength of the voice is established through accents and longer notes in the head range (bb. 17‒22); then agility takes the lead (from b. 25), after which the two are mingled in bb. 33‒41 and later. Finally, the culmination of this process arrives with the two-phrase-marathon between bb. 48 and 63, containing a two-bar *messe di voce* on a", which is surrounded by *terzini* scale motifs before and after. Triplets are perfectly suited to a thicker voice production: this is why Faustina as well as the *castrati* preferred them too. The middle section – contrary to the trend of contrast with the A part which in coloratura arias, means a relaxation for the singer generally – does not change in intensity, only modulates to the parallel minor, that of C♯: its demands of virtuosity are equal to the main section. To sum up, the aria goes in every respect far beyond not only *Tutto può donna vezzosa*, but is also superior to *Da tempeste*, the highest mountain of the original role.

These two of Strada’s arias are widely different to the Cuzzonian music of Cleopatra in their ratio of phrase structuring, tessitura and rhythmic environment. Accentuations like those on the words ‘son di donna i forti dardi’ in *Parolette* would be atypical in Cuzzoni’s but they regularly occur in Strada’s repertoire. At the same time, the arias of Cuzzoni
interpreted by Strada must have sounded remarkably different, lacking an innocent lightness. Cuzzoni’s voice, in spite of the fact that sustained notes occur regularly in her repertoire, warbled as if she had a ‘nest of nightingales in her belly’, a description that might refer to a continuous natural vibrato, likely of voluble and rippling waves, while Strada’s might have had a slower motion with longer ones.\footnote{Burney, *A General History of Music*, vol. iv, 316; see Frederick Neumann, ‘The Vibrato Controversy’, *Performance Practice Review* IV/1 (1991), 14–27; 18; Ellen T. Harris, ‘Voices’, In: *Performance Practice: Music after 1600*, eds. Howard Meyer Brown and Stanley Sadie. Norton/Grove Handbooks in Music. (New York: Norton, 1989), 97–116: 105.} With the latter, one could achieve bar-long sustained notes more easily and effectively through stretching them flexibly along the course of a *messa di voce*, which includes not only the increase and the decrease of the dynamics but also the *vibrato*, automatically. Furthermore, Strada’s wide range allowed Handel to extend her phrases not only up to c” but also down to b (and she even sang the low a in the *pasticcio Didone* in 1737), which shows that her voice sounded with a living and tinkling resonance below e’, untypically of sopranos. Handel, while listening to how differently Cuzzoni’s arias manifested themselves in Strada’s voice (and personality) during the first performances, could thus have learned a lot more about her vocal specifics.

Comparison with Cuzzoni was also made possible by the revival of *Scipione* (March 1730). In the case of Berenice, two major changes shaped a medium level role with a single outstandingly brilliant grand aria to a musical portrait of versatile vocal acrobatics and colours of expression. *Com’onda incalza* and *Già cessata* were replaced by two arias from *Riccardo Primo*.\footnote{Dean and Knapp, *Handel’s Operas, 1704–1726*, 618–619.} The first aria of Berenice, *Un caro amante*, is an *Andante siciliana* (12/8, F major) which might have been performed by Strada not in the light style of Cuzzoni but with a denser yet silvery voice production. *Dolci aurette* (I/5; E♭ major, C, Largo; Ex. 4.10), an intimate largo number with continuo accompaniment only, is of the same *Falsa imagine*-type which Handel established for Strada in their later productions. However, the question of size makes a great difference: a five-part *da capo* form would have been far too large for such an air, the essence of which lay in the expressiveness of small gestures and *quasi sotto voce* timbre. Although the section between bars 8 and 21 may be superfluous, Cuzzoni probably would not have been agreed to sing such a short air. I think that Handel found in Strada the person bold enough to make an impression within 10 or 16 bars (as in the operas *Atalanta* and *Berenice*, for instance – see ch. 5).
The other *siciliana* of Berenice, *Com’onda incalza*, was eliminated, and the more melodious *Di notte il pellegrino* (F♯ minor, C, Andante; Ex. 4.11), Costanza’s (Cuzzoni), a lively aria from *Riccardo Primo*, took its place, full of original ideas and with a great demand for flexible vocal stretching and crystal-clear intonation.

*Scoglio d’immota fronte* (II/8; D major, C, Allegro; Ex. 4.12) is a concerto movement in grand castrato style, with an orchestration consisting of strings with three violin parts, two oboes, bassoons, and a voice part with wide notes, wide range and a display of vocal agility. Handel carefully manipulated the accompaniment for Cuzzoni so that when the vocalist enters, the body of the ensemble practically disappears. By all means, Strada’s must have been a more powerful performance.
Tutta brillanti rai (B♭ major, C, Allegro; Ex. 4.13), Faustina’s unmitigated bravura aria (in the role of Pulcheria in Riccardo Primo, Act III) is in common time and has more variable coloraturas than Il fulgido seren or its Cuzzonian substitution, Già cessata, both of which are in triple metre and exhibit little finesse. The fact that Strada forwent the advantages of high notes despite that two virtuoso soprano arias were available, and sang Faustina’s mezzo-soprano number, speaks of a strong distinction between the ways the composer handled certain voices.


A well-written aria gives the singer comfort to apply his or her accustomed voice production. In my opinion, Strada had to synchronize her voice slightly to Cuzzoni’s arias – though Handel had the ingenuity to catch the universal while addressing the individual – and vice versa; she could adjust numbers to her different vocal nature without doing any harm to their musical essence.

A revival of Rodelinda for eight nights took place from 4th May 1731 onwards, after the splendidly successful fifteen-night run of Poro in January–February of the same year. The choice of the lamenting widow, in particular, might have been inspired by Strada’s triumph in a fully pathetic role completely lacking Allegro bravura numbers: that of Cleofide.

25 I would like to thank Reinhard Strohm for drawing my attention to the similarities between Rodelinda’s and Cleofide’s music.
Nevertheless, besides broadly pathetic numbers with declamatory melodies in which superb vocal quality and tone colour could give delight – *Hò perduto il caro sposo* (I/1; C minor, 3/4, Largo), *Ombre piante* (V/7; B minor, 3/8, Largo) and *Ahi perché, giusto ciel* (III/4; C minor, 3/4, Larghetto) – Rodelinda’s role does contain Allegro and more-or-less coloratura arias, like *L’empio rigor del fato* (I/1; G minor, 3/8, Allegro), *Morrai, sì; Spietati, io vi giurai* (II/3; B♭ major, C, Allegro) or *Mio caro bene* (III/9; G major, C, Allegro). As usual in the Cuzzonian repertoire, the coloraturas are shorter or moderate, longer phrases provide chances to steal breath, and the focus is on vocal agility rather than real virtuosity. Johann Joachim Quantz’s description of Handel’s *Admeto* performance in 1727 seems to confirm this, describing a high, clear and light soprano voice which might be not strong and penetrating enough to execute longer coloratura chains firmly:

Cuzzoni had a very agreeable and clear soprano voice, a pure intonation and a beautiful *trillo*. Her range extended from the middle c to the c above the staff. Her ornamentation did not seem to be artificial due to her nice, pleasant, and light style of delivery, and with its tenderness she won the hearts of their listeners. The *passaggi* in the allegros were not done with the greatest facility, but she sang them very fully and pleasantly. Her acting was somewhat cold and her figure was not too favourable for the theatre.  

On the other hand, the high tessitura, including *messe di voce* in the head-register, gives an extra emphasis on the glimmering colour of the voice and thus – together with Handel’s *perpetuum mobile* type of orchestration with the violins complementing the voice part constantly – renders the sensation of those numbers more virtuoso than they actually are. The *siciliana*, *Ritorna, o caro e dolce* has been omitted. *Ahi perché, giusto ciel* (Ex. 4.14), Cuzzoni’s substitution of *Se’l mio duol* at the 1725–26 run – an altered version of *Deh! lasciatemi il nemico* from the previous opera, *Tamerlano* (1724) – was retained for Strada as well. A nice coincidence, indeed, because this Larghetto air still has a certain motion marked by triplets, which are typical of Strada but very exceptional for Cuzzoni.

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*Ahi perchè* is slightly reminiscent of *Se pietà* of Cleopatra, from *Giulio Cesare*, both in melody and its text. Its strange mixture of ravishing melodiousness and sigh-gestures separated with pauses create a solemnity, similar to Strada’s *Menti eterne* in *Lotario*. The duet *Se il cor* from *Tolomeo* (Act II) was performed instead of *Io t’abbraccio*, probably because it had already been used at the revival of *Tolomeo*.

The 1731 revival of *Rinaldo* caused the work to be altered very heavily, especially impacting the third act, which was almost entirely rewritten. In Strada’s case (taking over the former, exceptionally modest part of Isabella Girardeau), there were also more changes than usual: Almira’s first air, *Combatti da forte*, went to Armida, and Strada sang her own first aria she performed on the London stage, *Quel cor che mi donasti* from *Lotario*. That Handel brought it back to her not only here but with a parodied text in *Il pastor fido* shows that *Quel cor* functioned a bit like a baggage aria for Strada, presumably because of the numerous occasions it holds for trills, one of the *prima donna*’s most brilliant skills – as Burney noticed concerning this particular number. She sang the 1711 versions of *Augelletti* (I/6; G major, C, Adagio) and *Lascia ch’io pianga* (II/4; F major, 3/2, Largo), while *Parolette, vezzi e sguardi*, her benefit aria – completely unsuitable for the character of Almirena – found its way into the role, closing act II. Among the two duets of Almirena in the revised version, *Scherzano sul tuo volto* (I/6; G major, C, Allegro) was transposed a whole tone lower, from A major to G major, to accommodate its range not for Strada but rather for Senesino; the other, *Al trionfo del nostro furore* (III/6; B♭ major, C, Allegro), with two oboe parts and bassoons, was a new one in the sense that it was taken from Armida and Argante and given to Almira and Goffredo, the latter entrusted to the contralto Francesca Bertolli. Almirena’s last aria, *Bel piacere* was replaced by Faustina’s *Sì, caro, sì* from *Admeto* (A major, 3/8, Allegro; Ex. 4.15) and put at the very end of the opera.

Example 4.15: Vocal part (excerpt from the A section) of *Sì, caro, sì*, bb. 17–66.

Since Strada in *Admeto* embodied the role of Cuzzoni, that of Antigona, she did not have the opportunity to claim this number of great importance, which ‘made the boxes clatter’ in Faustina’s time and long thereafter: Burney did not fail to remark that it was ‘pleasing every class of hearers; […] this song was the delight of all lovers of Music throughout the kingdom many years after the opera was laid aside’. 29 It proved to be the jewel in the crown for Strada, too, winning the favour of the audience and finally taking the former glory of the ‘Rival Queens’ for herself: on her portrait, painted by Johannes Verelst in 1732, she is holding a printed sheet of music of this aria with the superscription of her name.

*Flavio* was revived by Handel between 18th and 29th April 1732 for four performances; Strada sang the role of Emilia without any changes or adjustments. The first air, the *siciliana Quanto dolci* (I/3; G major, 3/4, Larghetto), might have been favourable to her through its triplet-coloraturas. The majority of the arias do not present technical difficulties and perhaps neither posed great challenges for Strada; only *Da te parto* (III/1; A minor, 3/8; Ex. 4.16) has a fine passage on the words ‘ch’il mio dulolo’ in the second half of the *da capo* section, very similar to that ominous phrase in Strada’s *Parolette* with the sustained note a”, but with no bass accompaniment, indicating Cuzzoni’s light voice production.

Example 4.16: Vocal part of *Da te parto*, bb. 50–86.

Interestingly enough, prior to Flavio, Attilio Ariosto’s Coriolano was revived by Handel – from 25th March 1732 on, for five performances – where in the former role of Cuzzoni, that of Volumnia, Strada encountered longer coloratura passages than in any Handelian Cuzzonian part.

The revival of Ottone, which lasted for four performances from 13th November 1733 onwards, had its difficulties. Handel had originally planned it for spring 1733, maybe to close the season with it in May and June after the oratorio Deborah was premiered and Esther revived (March and April), but he surprisingly revived Floridante for the second time that year (8–19th May) and Giovanni Bononcini’s Griselda (22nd May–27th June) instead, without Strada. Earlier that season, the run of Orlando was interrupted twice: on 13th February and at the beginning of March, when Floridante was revived (3–13th March), likewise suddenly, due to Strada’s illness. Not only that: Strada was indisposed on 3rd April too, and could not sing Deborah (somebody must have replaced her). This means that after May 5th until the Oxford act in July 1733, Strada did not sing for two entire months (her benefit was also delayed and took place at Oxford on 11th July with the revival of Acis and Galatea) because of indisposition and illness, which might suggest that she was pregnant and gave birth to a child (not necessarily, of course, but it is a possibility). In any case, it would explain Handel’s improvisatory revivals and the cancellation of Ottone. In addition, most probably a performance of Ottone would have been for Strada’s benefit, since Acis and Galatea seems very much to have been a forced solution. After all, Strada was not sick during the winter: she was indisposed once in February, whereafter she did not sing between 21st February and 16th March (Floridante revived); oratorios followed, requiring no action on stage (17th March–17th April), but on 4th April Strada was ‘very ill’ again. If she was indeed pregnant, only Orlando’s spring run of five performances could have meant some risk (21st April–5th May). This is at least suspicious. She might have given birth to a child around the end of May / beginning of June, having enough time to return for the Oxford ‘Act’. If this was the case, she was about two months pregnant.

30 Signora Strada, on Account of whose Indisposition the Run of the new Opera of Orlando was interrupted, continues very ill.’ Daily Advertiser, 5 March 1733. The London Stage: 1660-1800. Part 3: 1729–1747, ed. by Arthur H. Scouten (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1960), 275. 31 The Daily Advertiser, 4 April 1733. George Frideric Handel: Collected Documents Volume 2, 609. 32 The lying-in period at that time was supposed to last between four to six weeks, but actresses and singers usually returned to stage earlier. Margherita Durastanti, for instance, returned in a month (by the end of March 1721) after her daughter was born. There is no evidence of Strada being pregnant, because in the 1700s it was very rare that pregnancy was announced publicly, and no private letter or correspondence survives about her personally. Helen E. M. Brooks, “The Divided Heart of the Actress”: Late Eighteenth-Century Actresses and the “Cult of Maternity””, in: Stage Mothers: Women, Work, and the Theatre, 1660–1830, ed. by Laura Engel and Elaine M. McGirr (London: Bucknell University Press, 2014), 19–42: 27–28; Kathryn Lowerre, ‘Staged Virtue: Anastasia Robinson as Ideal Mother in Two Operas of the 1720s’, in: ibid., 137–158: 139–140.
when the 1732/33 season began on 4th November with *Catone in Utica*. In the meantime, by mid-June 1733, the Opera of the Nobility started to form an opposition to Handel, with the policy, dated January 1733, that a contract would be offered to any singer but Strada.\(^{33}\) According to my theory, her pregnancy might have been an open secret by then, and thus the Nobility had one more reason to exclude her (besides her fidelity to Handel and her opposition to Senesino and Handel’s rivals such as Bononcini). Handel became abandoned by all his singers, except Strada.\(^{34}\)

After the new season had begun, and a great Royal event, Princess Anne’s wedding to the Prince of Orange, had been postponed from November 1733 until March 1734, the revival of *Ottone* suddenly became actual again. Although Handel had to alter the work heavily for his new singers, Strada sang Teofane, the former role of Cuzzoni, unchanged. Similarly to *Flavio*, it seems to have been a routine task for her, also because Teofane’s music is not among Cuzzoni’s most brilliant parts. It was her first role performed in January 1723 but written by Handel in the autumn of 1722, not yet with Cuzzoni in mind: *Falsa imagine* (I/3; A major, C; Ex. 4.17) and *Affanni del pensier* (I/10; F minor, 12/8, Larghetto) were meant for Margherita Durastanti, who used to be a soprano but never a high one, and whose tessitura gradually shifted to the mezzo-soprano range.\(^{35}\) Cuzzoni also might have regarded the continuo aria *Falsa imagine* as old-fashioned and therefore inappropriate for her very first appearance on the London stage.

Example 4.17: Excerpt from *Falsa imagine*, bb. 1–14.


Cuzzoni’s higher tessitura starts to show itself in Alla fama (II/11; B♭ major, 12/8, Allegro, ma non troppo) and Gode l’alma consola (III/6; A major, 3/8, Andante), which could display Strada’s ringing tones as well. Some opportunities to demonstrate vocal agility are provided by Benchè mi sia crudele (III/6; A minor, 3/8; Ex. 4.18) and Spera si (II/5; A minor, C, Non troppo Allegro; Ex. 4.19), a substitute and an additional aria written for Cuzzoni which most probably were kept for the 1733 revival as well.

Example 4.18: Vocal part (A2 section) of Benchè mi sia crudele, bb. 46–74.

Example 4.19: Vocal part (A2 section) of Spera si, bb. 27–51.

Surprisingly, *terzini* occur in both arias and in the role of Emilia (Flavio) as well, probably because these were the very first roles by Handel for Cuzzoni and it might have taken some time for the composer to realize that they were not the most advantageous coloratura patterns for her, in contrast with Strada, for whom they were very favourable.

The revival of the ‘fine masque’\(^{36}\)* Acis and Galatea* on 10\(^{th}\) June 1732 resulted in a hybrid genre in every respect: it was a half-way between opera and oratorio, sung partly in Italian, partly in English, according to the singers’ nationalities. Handel kept six numbers from his English pastoral drama of 1720 and mixed them with arias refreshed from the *serenata a tre, Aci, Galatea e Polifemo*, which he composed back in 1708 in Naples, enriching it with various choruses, some taken from the *Birthday Ode* (Contento sol

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promette, duet with choir, Part I) and his Brockes’ Passion (Vuoi veder, for solo and choir, Part II), both with the participation of Strada.\(^{37}\) Galatea’s first aria, Hush, ye pretty warbling choir went to Clori, while the second one (As when the dove, Part I) got an Italian text (\textit{Si lagna augei}). È un fuoco quell d’amore (taken from HWV83 Aminta e Fillide, Nr 8, 1708) was transposed a whole tone higher, from G minor to A minor, letting Strada go up to b". Similarly, Se m’ami, o caro (Part III; G minor, 3/4; taken from HWV 72 Acì, Galatea e Polifemo 1708) was raised up a minor third from E minor to G minor. Although in the short coloratura aria, Del mar fra l’onde, Strada could show her ‘claws’ as far as vocal power is concerned, it was only sung in 1732 and was not retained for the subsequent revivals: in 1733 there was no aria in its place. In 1734 \textit{Nel mio core} (HWV 8a \textit{Il pastor fido}, 1712), a more virtuoso number but of a light orchestration, was performed either by Silvio or by Dorinda, and taken over by Strada as Galatea in 1736. This work was performed in costumes and with scenery but without any action on the stage.\(^{38}\) The choir was formed from the nine soloists; Strada, Mrs Roberts and Mrs Davis as Galatea, Clori and Eurilla mostly sang the same part. There was a further performance in Oxford in July 1733 (Strada’s benefit),\(^{39}\) together with the oratorios \textit{Esther}, \textit{Deborah} and with the première of \textit{Athalia}, but only Strada was present from the previous year’s cast; Senesino was missing and the excellent bass Montagnana was replaced by the German emigrant Gustavus Waltz, who joined Handel’s company in London afterwards.\(^{40}\) There was also a single performance with Carestini in 1734 and some further bilingual ones in 1736.\(^{41}\)

There were three pasticci of Handel’s own works containing arias of Strada’s from former original Handelian roles: \textit{Il Parnasso in festa}, a festa teatrale or serenata, was written for the celebration of Anne, Princess Royal, and Prince William of Orange’s marriage, and performed – in costumes and with a stage set but without acting – on 13\(^{th}\) March 1734, the evening before the wedding. This production could be considered as a revival of the oratorio \textit{Athalia}, or at least of its arias with Italian texts.\(^{42}\) \textit{Athalia} had been performed in Oxford in July the previous year with huge success; no wonder Handel


\(^{38}\) ‘At the Theatre-Royal in Covent-Garden, this Day [...] will be reviv’d a Serenata, call’d Acis and Galatea. There will be no Action on the Stage, but the Scene will represent a Rural Prospect of Rocks, Grotto’s, &c. amongst which will be dispos’d a Chorus of Nymphs and Shepherds. The Habits and other Decorations suited to the Subject’. \textit{London Daily Post}, 24 March 1736. Deutsch, \textit{Handel}, 401.

\(^{39}\) Deutsch, \textit{Handel}, 325.


\(^{42}\) Discussed in ch. 6. Former arias of Josabeth: \textit{Verginette dotte e belle} (Bloomin vergins), \textit{Con un vezzo lusinghiero} (Soothing tyrants), duet \textit{Non potrò mai il cor}, \textit{Quanto breve è il godimento} (Faithful cares), \textit{Nel spiegar sua voce} (Through the land); one aria used to belong to Athalia, that of \textit{Circondin lor vite} (My vengeance awakes me).
wanted to introduce his superb music in London as well, especially to the Royal Family. *Il Parnasso* had a sort of oratorio style, due to the inserted chorus numbers, most probably sung by the soloists themselves, similarly to Handel’s oratorio performances. The *Daily journal* recorded:

There is one standing Scene which is Mount Parnassus, on which sit Apollo and the Muses, assisted with other proper Characters, emblematically dress’d, the whole Appearance being extreamly magnificent; nor is the Musick less entertaining, being contriv’d with so great a Variety, that all sorts of Musick are properly introduc’d in single Songs, Duetto’s, &c. intermix’d with Chorus’s, something in the Stile of Oratorio’s. People have been waiting with Impatience for this Piece, the celebrated Mr Handel having exerted his utmost Skill in it.\(^{43}\)

Another production, the revival of *Il pastor fido* – following *Il Parnasso* closely – took place on 18\(^{th}\) May and once again on 9\(^{th}\) November 1734, including the newly composed prologue in the French style, *Terpsichore* (with the title role danced by Marie Sallé). This is a special case, for the work is from 1712 but the revised version has completely different arias. Strada as Amarilli mainly drew her songs from *Lotario* (*Quel cor che mi donasti* with an altered text as *D’amor a fier contrasti*, *Scherza in mar la navicella*), *Ézio* (*Finchē un zeffiro soave, Ah! non son io che parlo*) and *Athalia* (*Through the land* with Italian text as *Di Parnasso i dolci accenti*); only one number, *Finte labbra!* (II/5; G minor, 3/8, Allegro), was taken from the first *Il pastor fido*. These arias form a fine selection for a colourful display of the best of Strada’s technical and musical skill-set: *Di Parnasso i dolci accenti* stands for terzini and *messe di voce*, *D’amor a fier contrasti* for the abundance of trills, and *Finchē un zeffiro* in Andante for lyric agility, *Finte labbra* is an example of *parlante* declamation, *Scherza in mar* has castrato-type of virtuosity – having little to do with Amarilli’s loving and rather passive and lamenting character – and *Ah! non son io che parlo* demands pathetic expression, *tempo rubato*, and the use of a tragic vocal timbre, going down to b.

The last patchwork of Handel’s own arias, *Oreste*, was introduced at Covent Garden on 18\(^{th}\) December the same year in the presence of the Royal Family and ‘with a great Applause’.\(^{44}\) According to Bernd Baselt, its ‘libretto is one of the strongest that Handel

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ever set to music, and its conclusion one of the most credible’. Strada created the tragic role of Ermione, who, in search for her shipwrecked husband, Oreste, is arrested by King Toante and ordered as a human sacrifice for the goddess Diana unless she gives herself to the king. The set of arias is worthy of the heroine, showing a colossal picture of Strada’s multi-coloured capacities: it consisted of the sumptuous Io ti levo (Partenope) with a parody-text as Io sperai di veder il tuo volto (I/5; G major, C, Andante); two numbers from Sosarme, the hurricane coloratura aria Dite pace (I/10; B’ major, C, Allegro) and the pleasant pastoral bird song with flourishing trills, requiring high level agility, Volà l’augello (II/13; A major, 6/8, Allegro); and furthermore, Bacia per me la mano, Cuzzoni’s aria from Riccardo Primo with a parody-text as Piango dolente il sposo (III/3; F♯ minor, C, Largo), of the finest lyricism, portamenti, and a ravishing chromatic melodiousness, and the vehemently hectic Non sempre invendicato from Lotario (III/6, B’ major, 3/8, Allegro).

**Heroine of pasticci**

Strada sang for Handel in the middle of his ‘pasticcio decade’ (see Table 4.2). She was the *prima donna* in eight of the composer’s nine patchwork operas consisting of Italian arias: *Ormisda* (4th April 1730), *Venceslao* (12th January 1731), *Lucio Papirio dittatore* (23rd May 1732), *Catone* (4th November 1732), *Semiramide riconosciuta* (30th October 1733), *Caio Fabricio* (4th December 1733), *Arbace* (5th January 1734), and *Didone abbandonata* (13th April 1737). This involved singing arias by Johann Adolph Hasse, Niccolò Porpora, Leonardo Vinci, Geminiano Giacomelli, Giovanni Porta, Giovanni Maria Capelli and Leonardo Leo, songs or even complete roles formerly belonging to *castrati* like Carestini and Carlo Scalzi (with both of whom she sang in London), Angelo Monticelli, Giacinto Fontana, Domenico Gizzi, and Farinelli, her stage partner in Naples; furthermore to *prime*

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46 ‘Handel offered his prima donna a chance to express herself in brilliant virtuoso passages that evoke the full impact of her tragic situation, as well as her heroic mastery of the blows of fate.’ Both Strada and Cecilia Young – who played the lyric role of Iphigenia – had five arias each, ‘a sign that Handel considered the dramatic role of both heroines to be of equal importance, and that he esteemed both singers equally highly’. Handel, *Oreste*, ed. by Bernd Baselt, xxiii.


The first pasticcio Strada sang in London was Ormisda, which was so successful that it was given fourteen times from 4th April 1730 onwards, including Strada’s benefit night (the second or third in that season after Giulio Cesare on 21st and 31st March) on 21st April, when she had an additional aria replacing the final chorus (Table 4.3). There was a revival of the work with five performances from 24th November of the same year. Therefore, three versions of Artenice’s role might have existed: that of the first performances, of Strada’s benefit and of the revival of the next season.

Table 4.3: Lists of Strada’s arias performed in Ormisda

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>4 April 1730</th>
<th>21 April 1730 – Strada’s benefit</th>
<th>24 November 1730</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pupillette vezzosette (Hasse)</td>
<td>— ??</td>
<td>Pupillette vezzosette</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O caro mio Tesoro (Vinci)</td>
<td>Non ti confonder (Hasse)</td>
<td>Non ti confonder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Se d’Aquilon (Porpora)</td>
<td>Se d’Aquilon</td>
<td>unknown aria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentirsi dire (Vinci)</td>
<td>Sentirsi dire</td>
<td>Sentirsi dire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passaggier che in selva oscura (E♭ major)</td>
<td>(Hasse) Passaggier (F major)</td>
<td>Passaggier (E♭ major)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amico il fato (Sarro)</td>
<td>Agitata dal vento (unknown)</td>
<td>Amico il fato</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—</td>
<td>Tutto rida (unknown)</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Walsh published three of Strada’s arias among the Favourite Songs: Pupillette vezzosette (I/3; G major, 6/8, Allegro), Amico il fato (III/14; G major, 3/4, Allegro) and Passaggier che in selva oscura. The parlante aria, Amico il fato, was replaced by Agitata dal vento, presumably for the sake of coloratura display for Strada’s benefit, or at least one

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can suspect so from its title, that of a typical shipwreck simile aria frequently used for virtuoso castrato numbers. The fact that Walsh printed *Amico il fato*, might suggest that it had been retained for Strada at the autumn revival. The only number which remained permanently unchanged during the three periods of performances was *Sentirsi dire* (II/12; B♭ major), an Andante castrato aria in *alla breve*, with drumming bass highlighting the singer’s stamina. *O caro mio tesoro* is of the same type; probably this is why it was replaced by *Non ti confonder* (I/7; G major, C, Moderato), which has the same characteristic dotted rhythms but in *parlante* style and attacks *a’* once, which *O caro* lacked. *Passaggier che in selva oscura* (III/12; E♭/F major, C, Moderato; Ex. 4.20) also appears all the three times but in different keys: the original E♭ major was transposed a whole note higher for Strada’s benefit, and restored for the autumn revival. It is another castrato aria with drumming bass and a relatively wide range (from d’ to a♭ ’) and with *martellato* notes in the B section.

Example 4.20: Vocal part of *Passaggier che in selva oscura*, bb. 8–61.

That Strada did not insist on keeping the only aria she had sang before London, *Se d’Aquilon* (II/1; G major, C, Allegro; see ch. 2) in Porpora’s *Semiramide regina dell’Assiria* (1724), can be considered as the final proof of her ability to read a score easily and learn by heart quicker than other singers. Her fellow colleagues like Bernacchi, Merighi, Senesino and Carestini too were travelling around from production to production with their favourite and most popular arias in their suitcases, which they put even by force into whatever role they sang in order to assure success and to reduce the quantity of new
material to be memorised. The cases when Strada might have demanded to repeat arias originally written for her were very rare and done for strategic reasons in agreement with Handel.

*Venceslao* was a failure and had only four performances starting on 12th January 1731. One of Strada’s arias, *Lascia cadermi in volto* (II/9; B major, 3/8, Spiritoso), was added later, and therefore *Del caro sposo* (III/7; G major, C, Andantino) was displaced to the third act. The arias Merighi sang were all originally composed for her, mainly taken from Hasse’s *Attalo* (Naples, 1728). Bernacchi too was to perform four arias of his own role from Vinci’s *Medo* (Parma, 1728), but in the meantime he left and was replaced by Senesino, who received two additional arias from Lotti’s *Alessandro Severo* (1717). Reinhard Strohm assumes that ‘La Strada, too, had already sung Erenice in Porta’s setting (Naples, 1726) but was either unwilling or unable to get any of the arias that she sang then included by Handel.’ I think she was not interested in singing arias that she had done five years earlier, first of all because when, after three years of silence, she was engaged in London she probably wanted to build her career through a new repertoire and various yet unknown and greater challenges than she had before. Strada had two arias of Faustina, two of Farinelli and one of Carestini in *Venceslao*. *Io sento al cor* (parodied text of *Tornate ancor*) was taken from Giacomelli’s *Lucio Papirio dittatore*, which turned out to be Handel’s next Italian pasticcio the subsequent year. *Lucio Papirio* was rather a revival of the work – just as the following pasticci *Catone, Caio Fabricio, Arbace* and *Didone* (but not *Semiramide*) were in fact revivals of Italian operas, at least from Strada’s point of view – in which Strada took over Faustina’s role as Papiria with arias transposed a whole or a semitone higher, but the aria she had already introduced in *Venceslao, Tornate ancor*, was omitted.

*Io sento al cor* (I/8; B major, 3/8, Allegretto) is notable for its terzini, a presumable reason for its later addition. Though *Son belle in ciel le stelle* (I/12; C major, C; Ex. 4.21) is an impressive coloratura (Carestini) number, Farinelli’s aria from Porpora’s *Semiramide regina dell’Assiria, Come nave in ria tempesta* (II/18; E major, C, Allegro; Ex. 4.22), overwhelms it in every respect. Strada knew this latter number because she had been

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52 Strohm, ‘Handel’s Pasticci’, 175.
53 Ibid., 175 and 203–204.
54 Ibid., 176.
56 Strohm, ‘Handel’s Pasticci’, 179.
Farinelli’s partner in *Semiramide* in Naples 1724 as Zomira. Probably she preserved a living memory of how this captivatingly droning aria sounded in performance by Farinelli, and caught the opportunity to try it for herself: coloraturas, repeated quaver notes, syncopations, *cantar di sbalzo*, broken chords, a range of two octaves, from b to b", and a middle section turning into a dramatic recitative are the mountain peaks to climb.

Example 4.21: Vocal part of *Son belle in ciel le stelle*, bb. 30–57.

Example 4.22: Vocal part (A section) of *Come nave in ria tempesta*, bb. 14–64.

As far as range is concerned, Handel might have taken a little risk with the b note in *Come nave* (b. 41), since Strada had never sung one before (as far as the written scores go). It can be concluded, however, that she was able to sing it, sonorously in fact, as Handel applied it again for her the following year in *Ezio* (*Ah! non son io che parlo*, Fulvia).
The Faustinian arias in Giacomelli’s *Lucio Papirio* have rhythmic variety, but once a pattern was introduced, the virtuosity it creates tends to be somewhat monotonically repetitive: *Per dolce mio riposo* (I/6; B♭ major, C) is marked by dotted semiquaver rhythms and *terzini*; *Consigliando* (I/16; G major, C) likewise contains dotted rhythms, and descending semiquaver scales and note repetitions additionally. *Ti lascio m’involo* (II/5; F major, 2/4; Ex. 4.23) is a bravura coloratura aria, just as *Vengo a darti* (III/11; G major, C, Ex. 4.24), the latter also with dotted semiquaver rhythms and demisemiquaver notes.

Example 4.23: Vocal part (exerpts) of *Ti lascio m’involo*, bb. 27–42 and 97–124.

Example 4.24: Vocal part (excerpt) of *Vengo a darti*, bb. 32–42.

In *Catone* (4th November 1732), based on Leo’s opera, Strada played Marzia with the original arias of Lucia Facchinelli. The newly arrived seconda donna was Celeste Gismondi, the Neapolitan buffa mezzo-soprano, known as Celeste Resse or La Celestina as well. She might have met Handel in 1729 when he engaged Strada for the Second Academy. After marrying an Englishman, she seems to have followed her ambition to switch to *opera seria* from *intermezzi*. She might have been jealous of Strada because Handel chose her in 1729, and brought the air of rivalry with her. Lord Hervey, 57

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who had known her since 1729 from Naples, remembered her when he attended Catone in London:

The only thing I liked in it was our Naples acquaintance, Celestina; who is not so pretty as she was, but sings better than she did. She seemed to take mightily, which I was glad of. I have a sort of friendship for her, without knowing why.\(^{58}\)

Handel was bold enough to break up the rank restrictions of opera seria, reshaping and extending roles for outstanding voices like the bass Montagnana. He also left some space for Gismondi as seconda donna, who tried to show herself as prima donna or, moreover, as primo uomo, by singing castrato arias of the most difficult kind.\(^{59}\) On the other hand, for the sake of balance, Handel gave Strada – whose arias were generally not extremely demanding this time—the very last aria of the opera, positioned with the highest priority, and an emblematic one: Carestini’s Vò solcando un mar crudele (III/13; D major, alla breve, Andante; Ex. 4.25 and 4.26), the most famous castrato simile aria with Metastasio’s text in its most popular setting, that of Vinci (Artaserse, Rome, 1730).

However, the first idea for Strada to sing was Domenico Gizzi’s aria from Leo’s Catone, Soffre talor (III/13; D major, C, Andante ma non Presto), with neck-breaking and manifold coloraturas. Its hammered notes are characteristic, and Strada – who probably did not prefer those as they hardly ever appear in her original roles – had already sung plenty of them in Passaggier che in selva oscura (Ormisda; Hasse, Sesostrate 1726, Carlo Scalzi) and Come nave in ria tempesta (Venceslao; Porpora, Semiramide 1724, Farinelli). Repetition of a single note – note ribattute or martellato – can be defined as the ultimate pattern in Baroque vocal music to test the virtuosity and agility of a singer.\(^{60}\) Nevertheless,

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60 Its execution is technically different from the early baroque trillo. Mancini defined it as follows: ‘One of the most difficult styles is the “Martellato” (hammered)... This is very difficult to render perfectly, as it requires an extraordinarily agile voice and great assiduity and perseverance to master it. Before undertaking this style, one must have gained perfect breath control, in order that one may break the tone and retake it without effort. The intonation must be perfect, so that every hammered note will be distinct and perfectly pitched. These tones must be marked lightly and reinforced only where the melody (Cantabile) requires it, otherwise, if they exceed the rules of art, the “Cantabile” would resemble the cackling of a hen, when she shows the joy of having laid an egg. It is because this style is difficult that it is going out of use. The last famous singers who used to perform this kind of agility were Faustina Hasse and Agostino Fontana, pupils of Antonio Pasi, and the Viscontina of Milan.’; ‘Questo genere di agilità è difficilissimo ad eseguirsi a perfezione, poiché per ben riuscirvi fa d’uopo avere una voce agilissima, un genio particolare per applicarvisi, ed uno studio indefesso. Sopra ogni cosa, prima d’intraprendere questo studio, egli è necessario d’avere l’arte di perfettamente reggere il fiato, di poterlo distaccare, e ripigliare senza fatica; bisogna possedere una purgatissima intonazione, acciò ogni nota martellata sia distintamente intonata. Queste note devono essere distinte leggermente, e rinforzate solo in quel luogo, che la stessa Cantilena il richiede poiché se eccedono nella caricatura, rendono la Cantilena somigliante al canto d’una Chioccia, che strepita, ed assorda, lieta di aver fatto un Uovo. Questo genere d’agilità si può dire in oggi fuor d’uso
martellato may have seemed vocally static or even musically causeless to Strada, and
though Soffre talor contains volatine, gruppetti, trills, arpeggiations, expanding semiquaver
leap-chains, and has a contrasting B section both in key and tempo, it rather lists those
elements like a dictionary, whereas the magnificently rich melody line of Vò solcando,
with its brilliant ascending terzini, might have highlighted much more her sonorous and
glimmering voice. It is very intriguing that in the conducting score the end of the first and
the beginning and end of the second vocal phrase are placed an octave higher, although all
the other descending scales in the aria are untouched, and the aria itself starts on a d’ note
for the soprano. There can be a reason for that: Strada, perhaps with Handel together, may
have wanted to display the most beautiful quality of her voice projection to match in
grandeur to the aria’s character and finish the long-ascending phrases gloriously. Once she
showed that, all the rest was the variation and multiplication of shades of her rich vocal
colours. This could have affirmed her leading status, no matter what fireworks were sung
by Gismondi in Caffarelli’s Vede il nocchier (III/9; G major, C, Allegro; Hasse, Euristeo
1732) a few minutes earlier, including a jump from c’ to c‴. Nevertheless, Catone was no
success in London, and after four/five performances it was taken off the schedule.

Example 4.25: Vocal part (first entry) of Vò solcando in mar crudele (original setting by Vinci), bb. 20–37.

appunto per la sua difficile esecuzione. Gli ultimi Professori, che con tanta facilità, e maestria si servirono
dell’ agilità Martellata, furono Agostino Fontana scolare di Antonio Pasi, e la Viscontina di Milano’.
Mancini, Practical Reflections, XII. The Agility of the Voice, 155–156; Pensieri, e riflessioni, 138–139. In
the edition of 1777, Mancini mentions also Faustina Bordoni as one of the last singers who used this
technique authentically. Burney also refers to Faustina, but as the first one of the same, referring to
Quartz’s account: ‘Sie ist unstreitig die erste, welche die gedachten, aus vielen Noten auf einem Tone
bestehenden Passagen, im Singen, und zwar mit dem besten Erfolge, angebracht hat’. Quantz, ‘Herrn
on the contrary, considers her the first one, probably served the social-professional image of the singer:
‘She was doubtless the first who introduced, with success, a swift repetition of the same tone.’ Burney, A
General History of Music, vol. iv, 319; Lorenzo Bianconi, ‘Il trionfo dell'onore’ or strategies of social
Jahrhunderts im Spannungsfeld zwischen Komponisten und Sängern, ed. by Daniel Brandenburg and
Rival Sirens: Performance and Identity on Handel’s Operatic Stage (Cambridge: Cambridge University
(Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2010), 124–125; Antonio Pasi was a student of Francesco Antonio
Pistocchi in Bologna. Johann Adam Hiller, Treatise on Vocal Performance and Ornamentation. Trans. by
Example 4.26: Vocal part (A1 section and an excerpt from the middle section) of *Vò solcando in mar crudele* (as sung by Strada in London), bb. 20–62 and 131–145.

The case of *Semiramide riconosciuta* likewise has its mysterious moments. Handel, after the split of his company and in rivalry with the Nobility, opened the 1733/34 season with the revival of *Ottone*, which was followed by *Semiramide* on 30th October 1733. The new singers, Carestini, Scalzi and the Negri sisters, demanded their own numbers as additional arias, and so did Strada, though this was untypical of her. A strategic motive could be in the background: after Strada had sung Cuzzoni’s role, Teofane, unchanged in *Ottone*, and when considering the competition with the rival company and the artistic habits of her new fellow singers, it was perhaps a better political choice for her to show off a variety of current Italian opera arias, even from the repertoire of Faustina and Cuzzoni. If so, the decision may have been the outcome of an agreement between Strada and, besides Handel, also with her impresario husband, Aurelio del Pò, who was watching over her career all along and according to my presumption might deserve more credit for its final shape than is apparent.

Only Strada’s first aria as Tamiri was from Vinci’s *Semiramide* (*Che quel cor I/5; B♭ major, Alla breve; sung in Rome by the castrato Pietro Morici*). Two others were taken from Hasse’s *Arminio* (1730) numbers for Faustina, and there was a song for Cuzzoni from Sarro’s *Artemisia* (1731; *Tortorella abbandonata* II/9; *F minor, 2/4*).61 Strada’s final aria, *Per far che risplenda* (III/10; *G major, alla breve; Hasse, Tigrane 1729*), is of grand

castrato type but was performed originally by a female soprano, the Florentine Anna Maria Mazzoni. The strategic motive mentioned before could be the reason why Strada undertook to sing hammered notes again, this time triplets ending in a trill (*Ti credo a me pietoso*, I/11, C major, Alla breve, Moderato; parody text of *Potresti esser pietoso*; Hasse, *Arminio*; Faustina; Ex. 4.27). The other Faustina-aria was a virtuoso one (Ex. 4.28; *Mi disprezzi*, II/2; G major, C, Allegro assai; parody text of *Dolce rieda*; Hasse, *Arminio*).

Example 4.27: Vocal part (A2 section) of *Ti credo a me pietoso*, bb. 36–62.

Example 4.28: Vocal part (excerpt from section A) of *Mi disprezzi*, bb. 42–60.

These inserted numbers have some common elements worthy of comment: all have frequent and special opportunities for trills (above the ordinary) and all are of dotted rhythms and applying octave leaps at some point. In *Per far che risplenda* (Ex. 4.29) Strada demonstrated for the third time her range reaching as low as b, in a phrase moving in a scale of crotchets from g⁴ to b.

Example 4.29: Vocal part (excerpt from section A) of *Per far che risplenda*, bb. 70–78.

The performance of *Caio Fabricio* on 4th December 1733 was an adaptation of Hasse’s opera, premièred in Rome in 1732. Strada took the complete role of Sestia, embodied originally by the young soprano castrato Angelo Maria Monticelli, of whom Burney noted...
vocal excellence, great acting skills and a voice as ‘clear, sweet, and free from defects of every kind’. The role has a generally high tessitura with regular a” notes; however, the most remarkable number is by all means Non mi chiamar (II/12; G minor, C, Allegro; Ex. 4.30), reaching b♭” five times in the da capo and two times in the middle section through octave and sixth leaps and once by ascending volatine.

Example 4.30: Vocal part (A1 section) of Non mi chiamar, bb. 5–22.

Arbace, as a Handelian version of Vinci’s famous Artaserse (Rome 1730) had only four performances from 5th January 1734. Mrs Pendarves judged it ‘pretty enough, but not to compare to Handel’s compositions’. Carestini reprised his original role as Arbace, but did not sing his best aria, Vò solcando, evidently because Strada had already performed it in Catone. He sang one of Farinelli’s symbols instead: Son qual nave ch’agitata, another shipwreck simile aria from Hasse’s setting of the same subject (Artaserse, 1730). Strada played Mandane (originally created by Giacinto Fontana), mostly with the arias of Vinci; there were two additional numbers from Hasse’s Issipile (1732, Lucia Facchinelli), Impallidisci ingrato (I/12; G major, C, Presto; parodied text of Impallidisce in campo) and Parto se vuoi così (II/11; C major, 3/4). Both of them are important, for they rendered this role more kaleidoscopic and vocally more feminine. The former has a fine, castrato kind of virtuosity, yet was shaped for a female soprano, and this could be the reason why the arias of Lucia Facchinelli occur frequently in Strada’s pasticcio-repertoire; it was an excellent match for her vocal skills and priorities. It is similar to her attraction to Faustina’s songs, only that here the tessitura is also identical. Parto se vuoi così is a slow air of magnificence and dignity, in the legato of which is combined with rhythmically rich melismas. Strada’s last aria in Arbace, Mi credi spietata (III/4; A major, alla breve; Ex. 4.31) is an angrily

63 Mrs Pendarves letter to her sister, Ann Granville. Deutsch, Handel, 361.
64 Strohm, ‘Handel’s Pasticci’, 209; Clausen, Händels Direktionspartituren, 109–111.
passionate piece, and through its attacked $b''$, $a''$ and $g^♯''$ notes it was especially advantageous to display her strong, chest-coloured high range.

Example 4.31: Vocal part (excerpts) of *Mi credi spietata*, bb. 18–25 and 39–46.

On the other hand, Margherita Giacomazzi for instance, Vivaldi’s virtuoso / mezzo-soprano in the 1730s, also specialised in *primo uomo* roles, singing castrato arias of an extremely wide range, part of a repertoire still very masculine and dramatically one-sided. She, together with Faustina, Facchinelli and others, represented an answer to the crucial question of the era: whether *castrati* can be replaced by women. The presence of *castrati* raised a demand as well as served as an indicator of a need for strong feminine voices with the ability to produce full chest volume in the higher range. The act of castration itself withheld the masculine characteristics from coming into existence and gaining dominion, and preserved the feminine features of the voice. A final answer to the problem was found only in the early 1800s, mostly in connection with Rossini’s works and performers. In the eighteenth century a solution emerged rather sparsely and in exceptional individual cases. I am convinced that Strada was one of these exceptions, due to her special and genuine vocal as well as musical skills, which fortunately were supported by a presumably good training, enabling her voice to mature and develop itself according its own natural timing and order, on one hand, and to the series of exclusive opportunities for working together constantly with the best composers and fellow singers of the era, on the other. In this way, the repertoire and the quality of performances she was dealing with almost on a daily basis shaped and polished her artistic value in the above-mentioned direction; it was that freedom given to her to become a female vocalist with feminine musical features performing with a strong, full and radiant sound.

The period of successive performances of *pasticci* ended in early 1734. One last production occurred separately, more than three years later, in 1737 with Strada playing the title role, that of the Carthaginian Queen of tragic fate. Vinci’s *Didone abbandonata*  

65 Her major roles were: Matilde – *L’Adelaide* (Vivaldi) – Verona, 1734; Irene – *Il Tamerlano* (Vivaldi) – Verona, 1735; Aspasia – *Farnace* (Leo) – Naples, 1736; Erissena – *Alessandro nell’Indie* (Hasse) – Naples, 1736; Epifane – *L’oracolo in Messenia* (Vivaldi) – Venice, 1738; Ermireno – *Armida al campo d’Egitto* (Vivaldi) – Venice, 1738; Ezio – *Ezio* – Modena, 1741; Artaserse – *Artaserse* (Terradellas) – Venice, 1744; Giove – *Le nozze d’Ercole e d’Ebe* (Porpora) – Venice, 1744; she played *travesti* several times until the end of her career in the late 1750’s.
(Rome, 1726) had been staged with Giacinto Fontana detto Farfallino in this role—a limited one as far as range and vocal technical demands are concerned.\textsuperscript{66} For this reason, two foreign songs were inserted among the seven arias Strada sang. The first of these was of a favourite type of hers, a coloratura aria attributed to Orlandini with full provision of triplets hitting $b^\flat$ regularly: *Ritorna a lusingarmi* (Act II; $B^\flat$ major, C; Ex. 4.32) of Margherita Giacomazzi from Vivaldi’s *Griselda* (1735).\textsuperscript{67} The aria contains two $a$-s in *stile di basso* in the B section, which are lower than the lowest note ever written for Strada, showing further extension of her range.

Example 4.32: Vocal part of *Ritorna a lusingarmi*, bb. 10–59.


The other one was from *Didone* but adapted from the role of Enea created in Rome by Domenico Gizzi: *Già si desta* (Act III, B♭ major, C), a real castrato aria offering several opportunities for trills. The three-part *recitativo accompagnato* (*Mancano più nemici? – Vado, mà dove, oh Dio*), which closes the opera, expresses Didone’s agony. It is of the highest dramatism, and represents what made this production the ‘Alcina of the pasticci’, so to speak. Its lurching chromatics, sighs and exclamations on a” notes, dubbed with rugged rhythms, tremolos and furious scales in the orchestra, marvelously depict the decay of a strong and still passionate queen.

Furthermore, *Se vuoi ch’io mora* ([II/7; G minor, 2/4, Tempo giusto; Ex. 4.24](#)) was recomposed by Handel, not only because of Strada’s need of a high, real soprano tessitura, but also to cover the fact that he had already used the original motifs of this aria for her in his *Giustino (Mio dolce amato sposo)* and now the repeated vocalization by Strada had to be avoided. Handel transposed it a whole tone higher, from G minor to A minor, and the first six bars were reshaped to keep the melodic line in the second octave reaching g” regularly. Furthermore, the chromatic melisma in the B section (bb. 81–84 in Vinci’s setting) on the word ‘tormento’ was also cut, because Handel had already applied that too, likewise in *Giustino*, for Zeffiretto che scorre nel prato (Giustino).68

Charles Jennens – who regularly received Italian opera scores via his friend, the classical scholar Edward Holdsworth, and gave Handel access to this material, i.e. works of Hasse, Scarlatti and Vinci, including *Didone* – complained in a letter to Holdsworth of 17th January 1743, that ‘Handel has borrow’d a dozen of the Pieces and I dare say I shall catch him stealing from them; as I have formerly, both from Scarlatti & Vinci.’69 Kurt Sven Markstrom, in his book about Vinci’s oeuvre, makes a crucial statement:

This exposure to the music of Vinci and his rivals Porpora, Leo and Hasse was of great importance to Handel’s artistic development and can be regarded as the major factor in the stylistic changes in his music during the decade 1725–1735, changes that


69 Ibid., 143.
would become an essential aspect of his oratorios, allowing for greater lyricism in the arias and, in the process, setting up greater contrasts with the solemn grandeur of the choruses.\textsuperscript{70}

I would add that this could be one of the key reasons for which Handel and Strada were so familiar, and why his instinctive manner of composing for her was astonishingly well-suited. Strada became impregnated with Vivaldi’s élan and then with the sophisticated melodic and rhythmic variety of the Neapolitans in her early years, and by the time she encountered with Handel, the composer too had already integrated both into himself.

\textsuperscript{70} Kurt Sven Markstrom, \textit{The Operas of Leonardo Vinci, Napoletano} (Hillsdale: Pendragon, 2007), 156.
Chapter Five: Strada’s Faithful Composer

The musical material of the Handelian roles especially written for Strada (between 1729 and 1737; Table 5.1) gives the most authentic picture of her vocal, musical and dramatic skills and how they were shaped by the hands of the composer. In the first years, between 1729 and 1732, castrato-type arias were the key numbers, which at the same time hardly ever harmonised with the embodied character. Handel initially focused on impressing the audience with Strada’s best features, such as her wide range (in those years spanning b–e‴), later a–e‴), virtuosity, stamina, triplets, leaps, messe di voce and the singer’s famously gorgeous trills. Particularly her first two roles, Adelaide in Lotario (1729) and the title role of Partenope (1730) demanded a great deal vocally, heavily accumulating various difficult technical elements.

Strada, as prima donna of the Second Academy, had to gain the audience’s favour, which took her no less than three years. Besides a great number of revivals and pasticci filling in the seasonal programs and demonstrating Strada’s worthiness as successor to the ‘Rival Queens’, Handel undertook one or two new operas per season. Charles Burney talks about new ideas and new divisions, meaning a fresh inspiration of Handel’s inventiveness regarding the new company and Strada personally.\(^1\) Strada’s roles certainly show a greater diversity as far as aria types are concerned, after the enforced polarisation had to be applied in the last years of the First Academy (1726–28), when Handel emphasised the pathetic for Cuzzoni and the bravura for Faustina. C. Steven LaRue, in research of the first Royal Academy period, noted that changes in Handel’s compositional approach were connected to singers of his cast, especially to leading ones: ‘the relation between singer and aria type is closely associated with the relation between arias and the drama as a whole.’ He discovered that the versatility of Margherita Durastanti and Senesino enabled Handel to write for them in all kinds of different musical styles, in contrast with a much less balanced ratio of aria types for Cuzzoni and Faustina: the former is linked to the pathetic, and mainly to the siciliana; the latter, to the highest level of virtuosity.\(^2\) Strada’s arias show a greater variety than Cuzzoni’s and are more individual than those of Faustina.

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Table 5.1: Strada’s original Handelian roles
(with the numbers of performances in round brackets: sum = first run + revivals)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title of the work</th>
<th>Theatre</th>
<th>Première Date</th>
<th>Revivals</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Cast</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lotario (10)</td>
<td>King’s Theatre</td>
<td>2 December 1729</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Adelaide</td>
<td>Bernacchi, Merighi, Pio Fabri</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partenope (18=7+7+4)</td>
<td>King’s Theatre</td>
<td>24 February 1730</td>
<td>12 Dec. 1730, 29 Jan. 1737</td>
<td>Partenope</td>
<td>Bernacchi, Merighi, Pio Fabri</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poro (24=16+4+4)</td>
<td>King’s Theatre</td>
<td>2 February 1731</td>
<td>23 Nov. 1731, 8 Dec. 1736</td>
<td>Cleofide</td>
<td>Senesino, Merighi, Pio Fabri</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ezio (5)</td>
<td>King’s Theatre</td>
<td>15 January 1732</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Fulvia</td>
<td>Senesino, Bagnolesi, Montagnana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sosarme (14=11+3)</td>
<td>King’s Theatre</td>
<td>15 February 1732</td>
<td>27 April 1734</td>
<td>Elmira</td>
<td>Senesino, Bagnolesi, Montagnana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orlando (10=6+4)</td>
<td>King’s Theatre</td>
<td>27 January 1733</td>
<td>21 April 1733</td>
<td>Angelica</td>
<td>Senesino, Gismondi, Montagnana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arianna in Creta (21=16+5)</td>
<td>King’s Theatre</td>
<td>26 January 1734</td>
<td>27 Nov. 1734</td>
<td>Arianna</td>
<td>Carestini, Scalzi, Maria Caterina Negri, Durastanti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ariodante (13=11+2)</td>
<td>Covent Garden</td>
<td>8 January 1735</td>
<td>5 May 1736</td>
<td>Ginevra</td>
<td>Carestini, Young, Beard, Negri</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcina (23=18+3+2)</td>
<td>Covent Garden</td>
<td>16 April 1735</td>
<td>6 Nov. 1736, 10 June 1737</td>
<td>Alcina</td>
<td>Carestini, Young, Beard, Negri</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atalanta (10=8+2)</td>
<td>Covent Garden</td>
<td>12 May 1736</td>
<td>20 Nov. 1736</td>
<td>Atalanta</td>
<td>Conti, Negri, Beard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arminio (6)</td>
<td>Covent Garden</td>
<td>12 January 1737</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Tusnelda</td>
<td>Conti, Aminabili, Bertolli</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giustino (9)</td>
<td>Covent Garden</td>
<td>16 February 1737</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Arianna</td>
<td>Conti, Aminabili, Bertolli</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berenice (4)</td>
<td>Covent Garden</td>
<td>18 May 1737</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Berenice</td>
<td>Conti, Aminabili, Bertolli</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first original roles

Strada’s London debut role, i.e. Adelaide in *Lotario*, contains an extreme sequence of arias. Its music was meant to claim that she officially took the throne of the two former divas, doing all that they had been doing and more: her excellence in vocal, musical and dramatic quality covers every kind of aria type, *tempi*, rare keys, dramatic situations, pathetic expression, rhythmic variety, stamina, agility and leaps, coupled with unfailing intonation. The role requires high notes like a″, b♭″ and b″, frequently occurring on metric accents or at the beginnings of phrases, emphasising support, volume, power and dramatism.

At her very first appearance, Strada as Adelaide sang a dramatic *recitativo accompagnato* (*Soglie, degli avi miei I/5*) with tritone leaps. In this way, Handel got the audience focused on the character of the lamenting queen only, thereby avoiding specific reference to Cuzzoni or Faustina. However, following that, each aria evokes one of the divas, introducing their favourite style with its characteristic technical patterns, but ‘à la Strada’. Thus, Handel allowed the public to recognise similarities to Faustina here, to Cuzzoni there, and to compare their current experience with still-vivid memories of the two leading ladies’ rivalry (from 1726–28, the time they shared the stage in *Alessandro*, 150
Admeto, Riccardo Primo, Siroe and Tolomeo), in order to make evident Strada’s superiority.

The first closed number, the lyric *Quel cor che mi donasti* (I/8; B♭ major, 3/8, Allegro andante; Ex. 5.1), is primarily a Cuzzoni reminiscence, but the dynamic phrase structure and its rhythmic variety goes beyond that of Cuzzoni’s arias and points towards Faustina: all the melismas on the word ‘combatti’ end in f, including twice in the *da capo* part ending in an accented b♭” reached by octave leaps. The lavishness of trills is overwhelming: Burney rightly recorded that ‘it seems chiefly calculated to display her [Strada’s] fine and brilliant shake, for which there are more than thirty occasions in the course of the song.’ ³

In fact, there are at least sixty-two opportunities (including *da capo*). In short, the ability to produce rapid and sprawling trills is due to agility in executing the two notes, good breath control, activity of the expiratory abdominal muscles, and a periodic, flexible and easy shaking of the larynx and the soft palate simultaneously. Besides this, it relies on the singer keeping a large space in the throat (just as Karl Georg Reutter taught the young Haydn).⁴

Example 5.1: Vocal part (A section) of *Quel cor che mi donasti*, with all the possible places to trill marked, bb. 34–123.

The storm breaks out at the end of act I with *Scherza in mar la navicella* (I/9; A major, C, Allegro; Exs. 5.2 and 5.3), a castrato-type aria with which Strada presented herself as Faustina’s successor in England. It bears two significant marks specific to Strada: accented high notes above a rich orchestration, and a chromatic middle section containing all the


twelve semitones. An advantage might have been her high tessitura, which Handel preserved for the singer in the midst of the swirl of octave leaps. It is a simple question of perception: the same aria seems more virtuoso performed at a higher pitch than at a lower one, especially in the case of women. Burney calls it an ‘aria di bravura […] in which Handel has given her many of his favourite divisions, which frequently occurred to him afterwards in composing and playing. It is a spirited song, in which not only the singer, but orchestra, has much to do.”

Example 5.2: Excerpt from the A section of Scherza in mar la navicella, bb. 10–57.

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Example 5.3: B section of *Scherza in mar la navicella* (here the vocal part passes through all the twelve semitones), bb. 76–93.

While *Scherza in mar* with its simile (tempesta) type does not much fit either in the course of the drama or in Adelaide’s character⁶ – though this lack of context emphasises Strada’s vocal power and acrobatics all the more – the air of the prison-scene in the second act, *Menti eterne* (II/4; B♭ minor, 3/4, Largo; Ex. 5.4), has complete emotional as well as psychological depth in service of the drama: written in B♭ minor, it is based on a denser legato and portamento singing. This number gets closest to the real picture of the royal widow who has to fight for her kingdom and is almost forced to kill herself. According to Burney, this air is ‘truly pathetic, and fit only for a singer possessed of science and feeling’.⁷ The climax falls on the phrase ‘volgete grato un sguardo a’ voti miei’ (upbeat to b.30 to b.36), with a minor tenth leap from e’ up to g” and a four-beat long messa di voce on f” progressing into a g♭” (b.35). In this case, after the swallowing effect of crescendo and a slightly lesser decrescendo, on f” a crescendo-estuary has to be formed to build up

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and transfer the tension uninterruptedly to $g^\flat\prime\prime$. Breathing between the two tones is not appropriate, moreover: $f''$ has to be tied to $g^\flat\prime\prime$ with a greater emphasis, which can only be provided by a special type of baroque portamento, by dragging $f''$ audibly to $g^\flat\prime\prime$, which is a sort of strascino, called messa di voce crescente (discussed later in this chapter).

Example 5.4: A section of Menti eterne, bb. 15–53.

In the case of the last two arias, however, the features distinguishing the two former divas’ style are fading away, and through that blurring a quality of Strada’s own vocal art begins to reveal itself. Although the coloratura minuta formulas in D’una torbida sorgente (II/10; B minor, 3/8, Andante; Ex. 5.5) recall Faustina’s style, the aria’s unique, hybrid
Andante type abundant in elaborated rhythmic elements (demisemiquaver notes, dotted rhythms and triplets) is also a trademark of Strada. Its character is founded on a speedy and energetic passion, yet the vocal part is of genuine and continual lyricism. The perfect proportion of their balance is so astonishingly natural that it could be easy overlooked. However, it becomes clear at ‘nasce il rio più chiaro figlio’ (upbeat to b. 47 to b. 56), when the rhythmically most chiselled phrase (upbeat to b. 47 to b. 53) is followed by the purest one of the aria (bb. 53–56): there are quavers only, senza basso and in unison with the violins. Non sempre invendicata (III/2; B♭ major, 3/8, Allegro; Ex. 5.6) also catches something of Strada’s ability to portray the contradictory affections caused by an ambiguous situation, and ‘affords opportunities for good action as well as singing; while the orchestra supports the situation of the performer with great force and effect.’ It especially recalls Aspasia’s musical portrait from Leo’s Zenobia in Palmira (1725, Naples; see ch. 2, aria Vuoi ch’io parta).

Example 5.5: Vocal part (excerpt) of D’una trobida sorgente, bb. 43–56.

Example 5.6: Excerpt from the vocal part of Non sempre invendicata, bb. 46–58.

Handel finished the score of Lotario on 16th November 1729 and it was premièred on 2nd December at the King’s Theatre ‘with great Magnificence, the Cloaths for the Singers, Attendants and Soldiers, being all embroider’d with Silver, and 7 Sets of Scenes [sic] entirely new’. Yet, the opera was not a success; moreover, it was generally considered to be a bad piece. After ten performances Handel was forced to revive Giulio Cesare to fill the time-gap. Nevertheless, opinion reflected that Strada was convincing after all: ‘Strada pleases a good deal, and from on High [Alto, i.e. Handel] it is said that she sings better

8 Rodolfo Celletti, Storia del belcanto, Contrappunti Series 15 (Fiesole: Discanto Edizioni, 1983); transl. in German by Federica Pauli, Geschichte des Belcanto (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1989), 101.
than the two previous ones [Cuzzoni and Faustina] [...] this one [Strada] has a thin and penetrating soprano voice which charms the ear [i. e., a very loud soprano “voicelet” which stimulates / thrills the ear]';\textsuperscript{11} she ‘was the Cheife & best the rest little esteem’d';\textsuperscript{12} ‘her voice is without exception fine, her manner to Perfection';\textsuperscript{13} ‘La Strada and the rest are very well lik’d’.\textsuperscript{14}

No doubt, the new company had a hard time debuting before a London public drowned in partiality for Cuzzoni, Faustina and Senesino. Bernacchi failed the test indeed, just as did some other members of the cast. It is also clear from period descriptions that these members of the audience knew exactly who sang well or badly, how much and why: there are technical defects precisely listed in published accounts, like singing in the nose or throat, or observing that the voice is weak for the stage, or that the acting is poor:

Nine days ago was the premiere of the opera called Lotario. I did not see it until last Tuesday [9th December], which was the third performance. It is generally considered to be a very poor opera. Bernacchi did not please on the first night, but he changed his method for the second night and made a success of it; in his person and in his voice he is not as impressive as Senesino, but his reputation as an artist obtains for him the silence of those who will not or cannot applaud. [...] The libretto was performed in Venice last year by Faustina and Senesino, with the title Adelaide. The villain! Strada pleases a good deal, and from on High it is said that she sings better than the two previous ones [Cuzzoni and Faustina], because he never liked the one and he wants the other to be forgotten. The truth is that this one [Strada] has a thin penetrating soprano voice which charms the ear [a very loud soprano ‘voicelet’ which stimulates / thrills the ear], but oh how far we are from Cuzzona! This is also the opinion of Bononcini, in whose company I heard the opera. Fabri pleases greatly, he really sings well. Would you have thought that a tenor could have such a success here? Merighi is a truly perfect actress and is generally admired for it. There is a Roman girl called Bertolli who plays male roles. Oh my dear Riva, when you see her perspiring under her helmet, I am sure you will desire her in your most Modenese way, oh how lovely she is! There is a bass from Hamburg [Riemschneider] whose voice is a more natural contralto than a bass; he sings sweetly in his throat and down his nose, pronounces Italian in a German way, acts like a young wild boar, and looks more like a valet de chambre than anything else. [...] Heydegger has had much praise for the costumes,

\textsuperscript{11}‘La Strada incontra molto ed ab Alto si dice che canta meglio delle due passate, [...] il vero è che questa a un penetrante filletto di voce soprana che titilla le orecchie’. In my opinion, the expression ‘filletto di voce’ here is a sarcastic one, caricaturing Strada’s powerful, clear and not at all little voice. Paolo Rolli to Giuseppe Riva, 11 December 1729. \textit{George Frideric Handel: Collected Documents Volume 2}, 331–332.

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Colman’s Opera Register}, 2 December 1729. Ibid., 319.

\textsuperscript{13} Mrs Pendarves to her sister, Anne Granville, 29 or 30 November 1729. Ibid., 320.

\textsuperscript{14} Mrs Pendarves to her sister, Anne Granville, 6 December 1729. Ibid., 325.
and for the scenery, in which there is a least a respectable mediocrity. And yet the audience was very thin on the first night. We shall see.\(^{15}\)

Had Strada possessed a poor voice, writers such as Rolli would have willingly, if not with pleasure, described it in full detail. So one wonders how high must have been the quality she was singing with, how pure and powerful the voice production, how clear the intonation, how chameleonic the change of timbres, how agile the execution of coloraturas, how smooth the *legato*, in order to make her singing unassailable? Critics of Strada have basically nothing to say about her voice or her musicality, nor even her acting, but only nag about her bodily appearance, based on subjective and discriminating partiality. Mrs Pendarves, after listening to *Lotario* multiple times, dissociated herself from the general opinion, writing to her sister on 20\(^{th}\) December:

> The opera is too good for the Vile tast[e] of the town[...]: it is condemn’d never more to appear on the Stage after this Night[...]. I long to hear its dying Song poor Dear Swan. We are to have some Old Opera revived [*Giulio Cesare*], which I am sorry for, it will put people upon making comparisons between these singers and those that perform’d before which will be a disadvantage among the ill judging Multitude[...].

Though *Lotario* was never revived, of the arias sung by Strada, *Quel cor che mi donasti* found its way into the 1731 revival of *Rinaldo*, and into *Il pastor fido* in 1734 together with *Scherza in mar*, while *Non sempre invendicata* reappeared in Handel’s self-*pasticcio* *Oreste* (1734).\(^{17}\) In *Lotario* Handel had intended to write a *Scena aggiunta* for Strada (the

\(^{15}\) Rolli to Riva in Vienna, 11 December 1729. Ibid., 331.

\(^{16}\) Mrs Pendarves to her sister, Anne Granville, 20 December 1729. Ibid., 333.

\(^{17}\) Dean, *Handel’s Operas, 1726–1741*, 147.
recitative *Ombre di vil timore* with the aria *Io vedo, sì, più non torbida la face*, G major, 3/8), which then became part of the next opera, *Parthenope*, as *Sì, scherza, sì*.  

*Parthenope*’s reception was much better. Seven performances were given from 24th February 1730 onwards, and there were two revivals of the work: one of them beginning on 12th December in the same year, likewise with seven performances, the other at Covent Garden from 29th January 1737 onwards. The opera focuses on the display of strong female characters, whereas the men are either weak or cunning. Parthenope is the Queen of Naples, a warrior Amazon, and although she knows neither herself nor her own feelings well enough, she is a straight and lively person without deliberate manipulativeness, while Rosmira embodies faithfulness and masculine strength through her disguise as a man. The case of staging *Parthenope* deserves attention of its own from this point of view. In 1726, connected to Faustina’s arrival in London, there were negotiations with the Royal Academy about a *Parthenope* production, most probably on Faustina’s behalf, who gained great success as Rosmira in Leonardo Vinci’s Venetian setting of carnival 1725. The Academy’s ex-impresario Owen Swiney, however, has sent a dissuading letter to London on 18 August 1726, arguing: ‘Then there’s the part of Parthenope (I suppose for Cuzzoni) which is only fit for Merighi or the Diana Vico or some He-She-thing or other.’ Antonia Merighi and Diana Vico were contraltos specialized in *travesti* roles. Merighi played the Corinthian prince Arsace in Sarro’s setting in Naples in 1722, and Faustina embodied Rosmira who disguises herself as a man. In Vinci’s *La Rosmira fedele*, however, Merighi took over Parthenope’s role, whereas Faustina kept that of Rosmira, which became the centre figure and the title role of that production as a tribute to her. Swiney emphasises in this way the fact that the role of Parthenope requires a considerable amount of vocal as well as mental strength to represent an Amazon, the warrior queen of Naples, authentically.

Four years later, Handel brought his version to life (using the libretto of the 1709 Ferrara production, likewise based on that of Silvio Stampiglia from 1699), and though Merighi sang for him at that time, yet the title role went to Strada, who was also familiar with the character of a fiery and bellicose princess welcoming romantic affections from several men simultaneously. Besides thick and intense vocal expression, agility of the larynx was also

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18 Dean suggests that it was probably meant to be placed in Act III, after scene 12 (Source: Fitzwilliam Mus. MS 257, p.61). Ibid., 148.


necessary to do justice to the queen’s music. The role of Partenope can be considered as a milestone in Strada’s career, since all kinds of arias, the virtuoso, energetic and sensible ones, fit to the amazon Queen’s figure, and Handel indeed enlarged Strada’s vocal spheres by offering a particularly rich palette of technical and musical expression.

The opera’s genre as a (heroic) comedy was also exceptional in the series of Handelian operas (together with Agrippina). It was not a straight comedy however, but a fake opera seria: a feigned drama with no tragic content but with all the possibilities of heroic yet emancipated singing. Partenope dominates the work with eight arias, a trio and a quartet. Her first aria is the first solo number of the opera as well: L’amor ed il destin (I/3; F major, C, Allegro; Ex. 5.7), containing c‴, the highest note ever written for Strada – and for a singular occasion. Besides her, Handel only applied it for Elisabetta Pilotti-Schiavonetti (as Armida in Rinaldo), and for the soprano castrato, Gioacchino Conti (as Meleagro in Atalanta and Sigismondo in Arminio). Handel also allowed a top C to Celeste Gismondi in the pasticcio Catone, in the case of Caffarelli’s aria Vede il nocciol (Hasse, Euristeo, 1732). Burney caught the essence of L’amor ed il destin when wrote that it ‘abounds with passages of execution of a very agreeable and uncommon kind, that required a flexibility and agility of voice superior to any difficulties which this singer had to encounter in Lotario’. Indeed, the skeleton of the voice part is based on the constant use of broken chords; everything else grows from and is built around it. The goal of preserving the main notes of a certain chord inspired the coloraturas to be formed in multiple instrumental ways, mainly using certain violin idioms: semiquaver repetitions, third chains and hidden two-part-elements. The majority of the acrobatics have to be executed in a high tessitura, which defines all of Partenope’s arias and highlighting a″ and b♭″. Sixth and even seventh leaps within coloraturas are also regular.

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22 Conti, the only explicit high soprano castrato Handel ever collaborated with, had made his London debut in Ariodante, and ‘met with an uncommon Reception; and in Justice both as to Voice and Judgement, he may truly be esteem’d one of the best Performers in this Kingdom.’ London Daily Post, 6 May 1736. Otto Erich Deutsch, Handel: A Documentary Biography (London: 1955; reprinted New York: 1974), 406.
Example 5.7: A1 section of *L’amor ed il destin*, bb. 4–18.

Both the uncommon nature of the coloraturas and the presence of the high C lead to the question of variations in the *da capo* part and cadenzas at the end of each section. There exists a discussion about this issue contrasting a musicological point of view with the traditions of modern performance practice, i.e. an endeavour to represent a variety of creative ideas in ornaments versus a tendency to show off a wide range including the highest notes possible. I think the exclusiveness is erroneous in both sides. Sources where a composer set down ornaments for a singer cannot be considered as standard ones, because those situations were mostly exceptional. They were written down because the singer was not skilled enough to do his or her job, including to improvise ornaments and vary them from performance to performance. Besides, the composer was not necessarily a singer, after all (though there were some singing teachers amongst them like Porpora and Leo): he wrote embellishments with the priority of fitting them into the composition, even if he considered the singer’s vocal features. There are, however, some examples of singers’, mainly castrati’s, own ornaments of arias, for instance by Farinelli and Luigi Marchesi, which unite every kind of extremity in virtuosity, while remaining completely in style (Exs 5.8–10).
Example 5.8: Selection from Marchesi’s fourteen cadenzas (original cadenza and three variations)\textsuperscript{24}

Example 5.9: Selection from Marchesi’s fourteen variations (original tune and four variations)\textsuperscript{25}

Example 5.10: Farinelli’s ornaments on the aria *Quell’usignolo* from Geminiano Giacomelli’s *Merope*, 1734 (original tune and variation)\textsuperscript{26}

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 230.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 185–186.
It is known that the art of castrati was the ideal that everybody else imitated; the best female singers sang castrato arias, with which Strada also appeared in Handel’s Italian pasticci. Logically, these female singers also wanted to show off their vocal palette on the widest screen possible. Johann Adam Hiller discussed passaggi and range – the two major technical elements of embellishments and cadenzas – as the two main ambitions of singers in the (later) eighteenth century; today’s performers therefore cannot be blamed for behaving according to the practice of that era. Besides, Hiller, in line with Christoph Bernhard and Giambattista Mancini, emphasised the chest support as a technically fundamental matter:

Good performance of passaggi demands not only a very dexterous and fluent voice but also a strong and firm chest; since all singers were not granted the same gifts by nature, it follows that not every singer may achieve that which he has noticed and admired in others. Nevertheless, the desire to sing passaggi has been going to singers’ heads for some time already, and nothing can quite stop them, except another, even more meaningless desire, to sing up to f‴ and g‴. 27

A few simple rules are presumable: (1) in cadenzas, especially in the final one, in order to crown the whole musical process, the voice can be carried above the highest and below the lowest note of the aria, or it can at least reach them; (2) that the ornaments in every respect – pitch, range and rhythm – can greatly diverge from the original melody but have to be in line with the harmony in the orchestra – at which point the education of eighteenth-century singers and especially their training in counterpoint becomes very important; (3) not to violate the aria’s main character, but rather intensify it in accordance with the meaning of the text, or more precisely, the message of the lyrics in general; (4)

that embellishments, other than cadential ones, cannot force the orchestra to modify the beat, but have to be executed within a strict tempo (although “rubato”, freely), as Johann Christoph Nemeitz reported about Faustina:

I heard at the theatre of San [Giovanni] Grisostomo in Venice among others the celebrated Faustina, who always sang the first part of an aria exactly as the composer had written it but at the da capo repeat introduced all kinds of *doublements* and *maniere* without taking the smallest liberties with the rhythm of the accompaniment; so that the composer himself sometimes finds his arias, in the throat of this singer, far more beautiful and pleasing than in his own original conception.28

… and as Mancini testified about Cuzzoni:

When singing a melodic song, she knew how to adorn and embellish it with such varied “gruppettos” and passages without marring the melody; now blending, then vibrated with trills and mordentes, now “staccato” then sustained, and then loose runs in a redoubled style, soaring with a portamento from a chest tone to a high head tone, and finally, all these were done with that fine perfection that caused admiration and wonder.29

In Strada’s case it is probable that the highest note she ever sang in cadenzas too, was c‴, and the lowest must have been a (below the staff). Handel’s application of the high C as well as the low b, and his choice or permission for Strada to sing an aria (in *Didone* 1737) containing a notes, is rather a written reflection of the range she might have been using in cadenzas and *da capo* ornaments regularly.

Beyond the ability to move naturally within a style, the ornaments had to reflect creativity, originality and the personality of the singer, as well as to let the best features of his or her voice shine. This constant variability was twice as necessary in the eighteenth century as it is today, when some of the audience attended the same performance even five or six times in a row. Although they lived their social lives during the opera performances,

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29 ‘Se cantava un aria cantabile, non trascurava ne’ siti convenevoli di ravvivare la cantilena con un cantar rubato, framischianti proprioziani mordenti, gruppetti, volatine, e perfetti Trilli; che il tutto unito produceva ammirazione, e dileitto.’ Giambattista Mancini, *Pensieri, e riflessioni pratiche sopra il canto figurato* (Vienna: Ghelen, 1774), 23–24; trans. in English by Pietro Buzzi as *Practical Reflections on the Figurative Art of Singing* (Boston: Gorham Press, 1912), 39.
chatted, had dinner, and although there was gambling, romance, fighting in the pit sometimes, the spectators listened to their favourite singers over and over again. Despite that some arias were substituted from one night to another (so called refresher arias), the majority of the closed numbers in a role still remained unchanged, meaning that they needed to be introduced variably every time. Upon hearing Marchesi, Burney wrote:

> His variety of embellishments and facility of running extempore divisions are truly marvellous. Many of his graces are new, elegant, and of his own invention; and he must have studied with intense application to enable himself to execute the divisions, and running shakes from the bottom of his compass to the top, even in a rapid series of half notes.

… and described Carestini’s creative abilities and chest-derived executions likewise:

> His voice was at first a powerful and clear soprano, which afterwards changed into the fullest, finest and deepest counter-tenor that has perhaps ever been heard. … having a considerable portion of enthusiasm in his composition, with a lively and inventive imagination, he rendered everything he sang interesting by good taste, energy, and judicious embellishments. He manifested a great agility in the execution of difficult divisions from the chest in a most articulate and admirable manner.

The Earl of Mount Edgcumbe described Gaspare Pacchierotti, the famous mezzo-soprano castrato of the late 1700s, whom he considered as ‘the most perfect singer it ever fell to my lot to hear’:

> He could not sing a song twice exactly the same way; yet never did he introduce an ornament that was not judicious, and appropriate to the composition.

The lack of recording techniques and of the possibility to listen to the same polished studio version of an aria (parallel with the concept of one original, stable, and unchangeable version of an opera) favoured the concept of a written work as an existing unity which was open for adjustments made by diverse and changing performers. This concept focused the listener’s perception on the live performance, which drew attention to

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32 Ibid., 369–370.
an overall impression, from which comparatively extraordinary details emerged. Also, the performer might not have felt the pressure to create one ideal final version of a song, as far as the ornaments or cadenzas were concerned. Today it is different, but I am convinced that it is very important to be innovative, especially when performing music of the past, because the singers of the past centuries certainly were up to date in the sense that their repertoire was based on brand new works. To recreate the unique atmosphere of performing fresh music (in many cases written for one’s own individual voice), one needs to have a contemporary attitude in order to be artistically and vocally creative and personal, besides being ‘historically informed’ as far as style is concerned. Singers back then adjusted their voices every time to the actual auditorium as well as to the audience to deliver their message most effectively. I do not believe in copying either somebody else’s ornaments and cadenzas or way of singing. I think the main goal is neither to sing nor to play exactly as musicians in the Baroque era did, because one has to address today’s audience, considering their life experiences, the diverse types of music they listen to, the history gone by, and all of the economic, social, geographic, political, and cultural circumstances surrounding them. My guideline is to sing in style with the best vocal quality I can achieve, and with embellishments fitting to the composition as well as to the dramatic situation. On the other hand, I always choose to show boldly my personal musical thoughts and highlight my vocal strengths.

After the pompous start of *Partenope* with the declaration of love and destiny’s battle (‘L’amor ed il destin combatterà per me’), softer music comes with a light orchestration as the Queen’s lover, Arsace appears. However, the weakness of a love which is not established on true sentiments is displayed by their duet *Per te moro*, which highlights this by lasting for only for five bars. The details of the following aria, *Sei mia gioia* (I/11; B♭ major, 3/8, Allegro; Ex. 5.11), reveal Handel’s inspired ideas of musical representation. It intends to be smooth on the surface but actually shows symptoms of inner restlessness: due to the lack of passion, the strength of the heroine transforms itself to hidden agitation and dissatisfaction. She cannot pretend happiness even for the first eight bars, because in the seventh bar the melody breaks by two seventh leaps at ‘mia speranza’ – a hint to the future when her infatuation towards Arsace will fade away – and this is the beginning of a large number of sixth- and seventh leaps for the rest of the aria, expressing instability: her feelings are without solid ground, her words without real meaning. Interruptions by rests in bb. 22–24 and b♭" notes placed on first beats point in the same direction. The types of coloraturas likewise contrast with each other: the rolling ease of ‘sei mia gioia, sei mia bene’ is weak in comparison with the violin idioms and arpeggiations of ‘mia speranza’.
Nevertheless, the really strong meat, the two grandiose arias written in the Neapolitan style with finely ornamented yet broad melodic phrases, is yet to come: the climax of Act I, *Io ti levo l’impero dell’armi* (I/11; G major, C, Andante; Ex. 5.12; Track 5), when Partenope herself leads her armies instead of Arsace, and after the battle, at the beginning of act II, *Voglio amare* (A major, 3/4, Andante allegro; Exs. 5.13–14; Track 6) with the preceding cavatina *Care mura* (II/3; B♭ major, C, Largo, e pomposo). Burney defined *Io ti levo* as an aria ‘in the style which Hasse and Vinci were now successfully cultivating, and in which the melody of the voice part more polished, and the accompaniment more simple and quiet than any that could be found in the songs of their predecessors’.

*Io ti levo* is probably one of the best examples of how exactly this union of lyricism and dramatic virtuosity manifested in Strada’s vocal art. It was reused by her in Handel’s self-*pasticcio* *Oreste* in 1734 as well. With its long legato lines, ornamental demisemiquaver elements, dotted rhythms, trills, triplets and *messe di voce*, it is rich and royally outward-looking, but sensitive in details. The simple lyricism of the melodic structure is interrupted and periodically stimulated by trills, broken chords, triplets, sprawling demisemiquavers alternating with sustained notes, which Handel also systematically applied for Faustina. The contrast of the words ‘armi’ and ‘anima’ (weapons and soul) gives an opportunity to enhance the dramatic and lyric features separately, then to blend them together. This chiselled style consists of long phrases demanding a connected manner of singing and requiring a mature and rich voice production and a darker voice colour. In Andante, at the same time, every tiny rhythmic pattern has to be brought out clearly and precisely.

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'Voglio amare', which is extremely graceful and pleasing, was likewise sung by Strada. It is an andante allegro, in which while the bass chiefly moves in quiet iterated notes of a modern cast, the other instruments carry on a subject, different from the principal cantilena, in a very masterly and agreeable manner. This air is so smooth and free from wrinkles that it is difficult to imagine it to be near sixty years of age' – Burney wrote.\textsuperscript{35} *Voglio amare* is the opposite of *Io ti levo*: it has a lyric form but is powerful in details, demanding great stamina and a vented voice emission at the more agile phrases of the vocal part as well, including naturally evolving vibrato (with an oscillation of less than a semitone). It has to harmonise with the almost continually full orchestration – in contrast to *Io ti levo* neither the violins nor violas, only the oboes, stop when the vocalist enters – as well as the ever-pulsating drumming bass Ex. 5.13).

Example 5.14: Vocal part (A section) of *Voglio amare*, bb. 17–90.

Although *Qual farfalletta* (II/7; A major, 3/8, Allegro) – a simile aria with neighbour-note oscillation imitating the butterfly’s motion around the light – was originally meant for the tenor Fabri as Emilio, operates with the same patterns as *Io ti levo*, but in Allegro.
In *Spera e godi* (III/2; B♭ major, C, Allegro; Ex. 5.15) the lyric and passionate sides of Partenope are sharply split, and the edge of the knife is the phrase-beginning on b♭ on the words ‘e tu pena, ingannator’. To begin a phrase with a certain note requires that that note can be sung by the singer securely and resonantly with full support and beautiful colour. Of the two occurrences here, the first contains marked notes, expressing the anger and vengeance with which the queen attacks the unfaithful Arsace; while in the second, though it is on an upbeat, the melody turns back to b♭, which has to be accented to display her sharp disdain. Even *Si, scherza, si*, the last and most relaxed aria of Partenope was based on Strada’s second-octave silver-tones (bb. 70–74, 81–84; on the words ‘scherza ... ad un sol cor’; Ex. 5.16).³⁶

**Example 5.15: Vocal part (A section) of *Spera a godi*, bb. 24–40.**

**Example 5.16: Vocal part (excerpt) of *Si, scherza, si*, bb. 70–84.**

A multi-faceted vocal personality

Besides the series of monumental airs, Handel’s other main goal was to bring Strada’s manifold lyric abilities into blossom. The singer’s secure artistic identity allowed the unique role of Cleofide (*Poro* 1731) to be formed. It is exceptional in the sense that this was the first opera part in Strada’s career entirely dedicated to the pathetic style, lacking Allegro numbers. Burney reported: ‘This opera, though it contains but few airs in a great and elaborate style, was so dramatic and pleasing that it ran fifteen nights successively in the spring season, and was again brought on the stage in the autumn, when it sustained four repetitions more.’³⁷ He also mentioned Strada’s fine voice, good shake (trill) and elegant

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³⁶ *Si, scherza, si* was omitted at the first revival of *Partenope* in December 1730, but restored at the second one at Covent Garden in January 1737.

manner of singing. Strada was inclined to do what no other leading lady or first man would do for Handel, i.e. to sing a role completely without an *aria di bravura*, although that role turned out to be one of her as well as the composer’s greatest successes. At this time, Strada finally gained favour with the British society. In fact, *Poro* was the opera Strada sang the most times: there were twenty-four performances altogether. Lord Hervey wrote about a revival performance in November of the same year that ‘I thought the Opera to Night would never be finish’d, they encore’d so many Songs; and I have wanted this hour & half to come home’. Cleofide’s power as a character resides in her equality with Poro: she is faithful to her spouse, whom she deeply loves, yet is a politically gifted queen. Nevertheless, her beauty puts her unwillingly into dangerous situations, from which Poro’s natural and sincere reactions lead to fatal misunderstandings. Committed love from both sides is displayed through suicidal attempts.

During the succession of Cleofide’s arias, none faster than Andante, the legato singing and *portamento* technique as the highest level of vocal continuity come into prominence. Handel guided Strada on purpose in this direction: for instance, he simplified her first air, *Se mai turbo il tuo riposo* (I/6; $B^\flat$ major, 3/4, Larghetto andante) both rhythmically and in its range, to liberate the voice for other modes of expression.

According to the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century treatises of Giovanni Battista Doni, Tosi, Mancini and others, *portamento* – putting forth of the voice – was considered as the ultimate proof of a singer of high artistic quality:

> Portamento di voce is the perfection of vocal music; it consists in the swell and dying of the voice, the sliding and blending one note to another with delicacy and expression – and expression comprehends every charm which music can produce; the Portamento di voce may justly be compared to the highest degree of refinement in elegant pronunciation in speaking.  

It meant joining together two distant notes of equal strength and quality and were joined together without a break and with expression. Even Nicola Vaccai as late as 1833 wrote

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38 Ibid., 351.
39 There were two revivals, the second of which must have been postponed until a week later, from 1 to 8 December 1736, because Strada got ‘violently ill of a Fever and Sore Throat’. There was an influenza epidemic spread in London at that time. Strada took over the *seconda donna*, Erissena’s Allegro aria, *Come il candore d’intatta neve* (II/V), in 1736, most probably because of the mezzo-soprano Rosa Negri’s limited capacities. *London Daily Post*, 2 December 1736. Deutsch, *Handel*, 419.
in his *Metodo pratico*: ‘By carrying the voice from one note to another, it is not meant that you should drag or drawl the voice through all the intermediate intervals, an abuse that is frequently committed, but it means to unite perfectly the one note with the other’.  

*Portamento* in the Baroque sense, therefore, functioned as an indicator of perfectly blended registers, as Mancini declared that a ‘portamento cannot be acquired unless the student has first blended the registers of the voice which are in every one more or less separate. [...] By *portamento* I mean the passing and blending of the voice from one tone to another, with perfect proportion and union, in ascending as well as descending’.  

Burney also defined it as a proof of a good and healthy technique: ‘Conduct of the voice: the portamento is said to be good, when the voice is neither nasal nor guttural’. Vincenzo Manfredini likewise enumerated it among the most important features of good singing: ‘Singing with *portamento*, the drawing [sustaining] of the voice, the purity [filtering], the spinning [of the sound], the covering [shading] at the right time and place [in time and place], these are the true beauties of singing.’ In addition, *portamento* was not identical to the basic *legato* but a special form of it, required in places where the natural one would not have been enough: it was the *legato* of notes of a greater distance, of larger leaps by strictly technical means, and from a wider point of view, the most direct form of emotional and rhetorical expression connected with keywords of the sung text (Exs 5.17–18).

Example 5.17: Baroque *portamento*: Leonardo Vinci: *Astianatte* – Piangi pur (II/1 Ermione, sung by Strada in Naples in 1725), excerpt from the vocal part, bb. 12–16.

Example 5.18: Baroque *portamento*: Leonardo Leo: *Zenobia in Palmira* – Placar ti dovresti (I/6 Aspasia, sung by Strada in Naples in 1725), excerpt from the vocal part, bb. 6–16.

Portamento was a special form of legato, binding distant intervals sung on keywords of the text, and executed with a higher measure of emotional and rhetoric expression: the stressed syllable had to be prepared by swelling the preceding note through changing breath control and measure of support. In a sense, this was a messa di voce, or drawing of the voice, executed on more than one tone, which Manfredini defined as the basis of portamento singing: ‘By drawing the voice is meant sustaining it as long as possible, and holding the notes for their full value. From these results the most beautiful style of singing that undoubtedly consists of singing legato, and carried (portato) as one is wont to say. For this reason, one would call this style singing with portamento, or portamento of the voice.’

Mancini was of the same mind when discussing cantar di sbalzo: ‘Naturally, the low tone must vibrate and be sustained with strength according to the requirements, and the high note attacked softly, keeping always a corresponding proportion between the tones. This execution must be blended with a “Portamento di voce’”.

One can sing a line with a completely even legato, but in the moment when the singer wants to give an emphasis to a stressed syllable without breaking the line, he or she has to prepare it by swelling the preceding note, which means not only crescendo but also a change in the breath control and a higher measure of support on the stressed syllable within the phrase. Usually, on the succeeding syllable – mostly the last of the keyword – a decrease has to be done to return to mezza voce.

The technique is that of the nineteenth-century portamento, but with no significant vibrato; continual, blast-like sliding with equal speed through all of the microtones was certainly not involved. According to Johann Adam Hiller:

The essential feature of the so-called portamento or carrying of the voice lies in the fact that while progressing from one tone to the next without a gap or break, no unpleasant slur or pull through smaller intervals should be detected. In the first case one says: the singer pushes; in the latter, he howls. In the first case the fault lies in the fact that the singer attacks the tones too strongly and also pushes them forward as his

48 ‘Fermar la voce s’intende sostenerla più che sia possibile, e tener le note tutto il tempo che vagliono. Da ciò poi ne risulta la più bella maniera di cantare, che certamente consiste nel cantar legato, e portato, come si suol dire; quindi per questo motivo dicesi ancora cantar di portamento, o portamento di voce.’ Croskery, The Bel Canto War: A Critical and Annotated Translation of Vincenzo Manfredini’s Regole Armoniche Part III (1797) with Relevant Essay, 63 (English trans.) and 112 (Italian original).
49 ‘è naturale, che in se stessa la corda grave deve esser vibrata, oppur sostenuta con forza secondo il bisogno, eppure anche l’acuto, comunque, si adopera, convien sempre trattarlo con dolcezza, purché fra l’uno, e l’altro resti sempre conservata una proporzionata corrispondenza. Necessario anch’è, che l’esecuzione perfetta vada unita col portamento di voce.’ Mancini, Pensieri, e riflessioni, 141; Practical Reflections, 158.
chest is too weak to sustain the tones evenly; in the second case semitones can be heard which do not have a harmonic relationship to either one of the other tones.\(^{50}\)

Thus, *portamento* also can be considered as a *messa di voce* executed on more than one tone, on relations of two or three. Singers who excelled in *messa di voce*, consequently had a developed support and breathing technique, which automatically meant an easier control over the proportions of *portamento*.\(^{51}\) In fact, the same principle, i.e. that the *messa di voce* can be stretched and projected to different notes, was used for *messa di voce crescente* and *decrescente*,\(^{52}\) executed by dragging the voice imperceptibly a half or whole step in a semi-state between *portamento* and its other types with an audible glide, *scivolo* or *strascino*.\(^{53}\)

*Scivolo* (‘glide’, also called the slur) and *strascino* (drag) were used at slower tempi, especially in declamatory ‘pathetic’ numbers as well as arias *alla siciliana*, and had ornamental and expressive functions. Tosi asserted:

> Divisions and Shakes in a Siciliana are Faults, and Glidings and Draggs are Beauties.

[the *scivolo*] is perform’d in such a Manner that the first Note is a Guide to all that follow, closely united, gradual, and with such Evenness of Motion, that in Singing it imitates a certain Gliding, by the Masters called a *Slur*; the Effect of which is truly agreeable when used sparingly.

The Use of the *Slur* is pretty much limited in Singing, and is confined within such few Notes ascending or descending, that it cannot go beyond a fourth without displeasing. It seems to me to be more grateful to the Ear descending, than in the contrary Motion.\(^{54}\)

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\(^{50}\) Hiller, *Treatise on Vocal Performance and Ornamentation*. Trans. by Suzanne J. Beicke, 56.


\(^{52}\) *Messa di voce crescente* and *decrescente* as a chromatic drag was called interchangeably *strascino* from the seventeenth to the early twentieth century. Nevertheless, Tosi used the term *strascino* differently, describing the audible binding of distant notes above an octave.


\(^{54}\) ‘I Passaggi, e i Trilli nelle Siciliane sono errori; E lo Scivolo, e lo Strascino delizie.’; ‘Il secondo formasi in maniera, che la sua prima nota conduca tutte quelle, che gli vengono appresso così strettamente unite di grado, e con tanta uguaglianza di movimento, che cantando s’initti un certo sdrucciolo liscio, che da’ Professori è detto Scivolo, i di cui effetli sono veramente gustossissimi, allorchè una Vocalista se ne serve di rado.’; ‘La giurisdizione dello Scivolo è assai limitata nel Canto, Egli talmente a poche corde ascendenti, e discendenti di gradi si ristringe, che se non vuol dispiacere non può passar la quarta. All’orecchio parmi più grato però quando scende, che quando cammina per moto contrario.’ Pier Francesco Tosi, *Opinioni de’ cantori antichi e moderni, o sieno osservazioni sopra il canto figurato* (Bologna: dalla Volpe, 1723), 31–32 and 34–35; *Observations on the Florid Song or, Sentiments on the ancient and modern Singers*. Translated by John Ernest Galliard (London: Wilcox, 1743), 53 and 57.
Johann Friedrich Agricola in his *Anleitung zur Singekunst* (1757) illustrated the latter passage by four-note *scivolì* actually arriving on a fifth tone (Ex. 5.19).

Example 5.19: Agricola’s example of *scivolo*

Many singing schools paid special attention to the right measure and careful use of gliding as well as alerting against its abuse. Mancini recommended:

In a “siciliana” style, it is just as well to perform the slur and dragging, if used in the right place and with the right proportion. One of the greatest merits for a singer, is to sustain the voice at the same degree. To do this, one must be attentive that he keeps the right proportion, which means well regulated high tones given with sweetness and facility, devoid of any harshness that would offend the ear.\[55\]

*Se il Ciel mi divide* (II/8; A minor, 3/8, Larghetto; Ex. 5.20; Track 8), Cleofide’s implausibly beautiful aria (a borrowing of *Vado co’ miei martiri* from Francesco Antonio Pistocchi’s *Narciso*, 1687) about not wanting to live without her spouse, is maybe the best example for this in Strada’s repertoire. It has an obbligato solo violin part, offering an exceptional possibility for the virtuoso violinist, Pietro Castrucci, leader of Handel’s opera orchestra between 1718 and 1737, to show off his skills, which he otherwise would not have had in the shadow of star singers (or at least only at some benefit concerts). Here the use of *scivolo* as an audible but soft passing on intermediate diatonic notes with blurred contours is absolutely appropriate, especially on words like ‘divide’ (‘separates’; b. 22), ‘dolor’ (‘pain’; bb. 51–52) or ‘moro’ (‘I die’; b. 88), imitating the motifs of the violin (bb. 13–14 and 53–54).

\[55\] ‘come pure in un tempo di Siciliana conviene frammischiarvi lo *scivolo*, e lo *strascino*, purché siano posti ne’ siti convenevoli, e fatti con le dovute proporzioni. Si dovrà però sempre sostenere la voce al suo grado dovuto, perché abbandonandola se le togli il maggior pregio; E perciò devesti attentamente badare alla proporzione dovuta, con regolare insieme gli acuti con dolcezza, e facilità, spogliandoli totalmente di quella proporzione di crudezza che offende l’udito.’ Mancini, *Pensieri, e riflessioni*, 137–38; *Practical Reflections*, 164.
Example 5.20: Excerpt (violin and vocal parts) from *Se il Ciel divide*, bb. 5–54.

John Ernest Galliard footnoted Tosi’s description of *scivolo* in 1742 as ‘the Gliding notes are like several Notes in one Stroke of the Bow on the violin’. This might refer to playing it with different fingers, for Tosi discusses it as a manner of division. The violinist Francesco Geminiani, a pupil of Corelli declared about sliding that ‘no two notes on the same string, in shifting, should be played with the same finger’ (*The Art of Playing on the Violin* 1751), while Burney considered the same-finger-shifting technique a beautiful effect of great players, towards the end of the century (1789).\(^{56}\) The simplicity of the melody and the triple metre are offering free space for *scivolo* as well as for *tempo rubato* (contrametric *rubato*), the rhythmic flexibility of the melody over the orchestra keeping strict time.\(^{57}\) Tosi’s opinion is that good taste consists

in the *Cantabile*, in the putting forth the Voice agreeably, in *Appoggiatura’s*, in Art,

and in the true Notion of Graces, going from one Note to another with singular and unexpected Surprizes, and stealing the Time exactly on the true *Motion* of the Bass.


These are the principal and indispensable Qualities which are most essential to the singing well\(^{58}\)

Scivolo and strascino, though covering similar vocal gestures, are not identical: scivolare means ‘slipping through’ and refers to a fine and lighter gliding with no significant time aspect. Strascinare, however, stands for ‘dragging’: it is weightier and more dramatic in nature, and presumably a stronger tempo oscillation ought to be involved in its execution.\(^{59}\) Though it also meant a chromatic drag and was interchangeable with messa di voce crescente and decrescente,\(^{60}\) Tosi’s definition is different: ‘on an even or regular movement of a bass, which proceeds slowly, the singer begins with a high Note, dragging it gently down to a low one, with the Forte and Piano, almost gradually, with Inequality of Motion, that is to say, stopping a little more on some Notes in the Middle, than on those that begin or end the Strascino or Dragg.’\(^{61}\) Galliard provided musical demonstrations additionally (Ex. 5.21):

![Example 5.21: Galliard’s example of strascino](https://example.com/Example5.21.png)

According to Thomas Busby’s Complete Dictionary of Music of 1801, strascino ‘is only used in slow passages. It consists of unequal and descending motion, and generally includes from eight to twelve notes… is of powerful effect, especially when performed by a soprano voice’\(^{62}\). As late as 1815, Jousse still adopted Tosi’s definition. In another aria sung by Strada, Al furor che ti consiglia (Tusnelda’s Andante revenge aria in Handel’s Arminio; Ex. 5.22), before the final cadence of section A there is an octave fall from a" to a’, preceded by an eleventh leap from e’ to a" (bb. 40–41). The fermata for the strings as well as the pause for the continuo might indicate strascino, but in this case instead means tempo rubato with time rather stretched, because Andante would be too fast for a steadily continuing metre.

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\(^{58}\) Tosi, Observations. Trans. by Galliard, 129.


\(^{61}\) ‘Quando sul movimento è uguale, d’un Basso che lento cammini di croma in croma un Vocalista mette la prima voce sugli acuti strascinandola dolcemente al grave col forte, e col piano quasi sempre di grado con disuguaglianza di moto, cioè fermandosi più su qualche corda di mezzo, che su quelle che principiano, o finiscono lo strascino.’ Tosi, Opinioni, 114; Tosi, Observations. Trans. by Galliard, 178–179.

Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century vocal techniques like *port de voix*, *accento*, *cercar della nota* and *intonazione della voce* were offshoots of the *strascino*-effect, indicating its consequent use.\(^{63}\) In contradistinction to the modern conception, audible kinds of *portamenti* were part of vocal practice since the sixteenth century, as contemporary treatises give a hint to in such an unequivocal way that Ellen T. Harris plainly concluded: ‘portamento is largely rejected in classical vocal music and opera. This so-called “pure” style of singing, however, has no basis in vocal practice of the seventeenth, eighteenth or nineteenth centuries.’\(^{64}\)

Besides its flowing lyricism, the role of Cleofide continued building the tradition of Strada’s Andante arias with various phrases and unconventional coloraturas. *Se troppo crede al ciglio* (III/4; E minor, C, Andante; Ex. 5.23) has at least three remarkable moments: (1) on the words ‘vede partir le sponde’ a sequential violin idiom can be found; then (2) in the B section there is a combination of trills, note repetitions and rapid back-and-forth fourth and fifth intervals on ‘schiera’, and (3) slow repetitions highlight the word ‘ombra’ (shadow).


Example 5.23: Vocal part (excerpts) of *Se troppo crede al ciglio*, bb. 9–36 and 50–57.

*Ezio*, premièred on 15th January 1732, can also be considered as a transitional work in the progress of Strada’s collaboration with Handel. The composer’s discovery of her complete and extended vocal technical toolkit terminates here, marked by the lowest note ever written especially for her: b in *Ah! non son io che parlo* (although she sang a notes in the *pasticcio Didone*, 1737). *Bravura* elements and lyricism began to become securely balanced and undisturbedly harmonized with the embodied character and dramatic situations. From the fourth year of their collaboration, Handel’s way of composing for Strada’s voice expresses a deeper level: it essentially lies more in the intrinsic construction on a greater scale, in the general manner of an aria or even a whole role, which outcrops in details again and again, as it happens for example in *Quel fingere affetto* (II/7; G major, 3/4, Andante). This transformation is not about reflecting certain features of Strada’s voice on the surface but her essential vocal quality. *Caro padre* (I/3; E minor, 3/4, Larghetto; Ex. 5.24), with flutes, proves the homogeneity of her voice throughout the chest as well as the head registers.
Almost every bar of the voice part contains a sixth or seventh leap in both directions, including a tenth in the A2 section, and shows equally strong resonance of e′ and d′ notes as of g″ or a″, mainly through the continuous stretching of the melody. The first setting of the limb ‘mà in questi accenti non ritrovo il genitor’ with its three-time switch from e′ to e″ and a tenth leap from e′ to g″ re-occurred years later in Al furor che ti consiglia from Arminio in 1737, though with an eleventh leap and with a faster tempo, that of Andante, confirming that Strada’s vocal power was on display throughout it.

Another essential feature of Strada’s art took shape in Finchē un zeffiro soave (I/12; B♭ major, C, Andante; Ex. 5.25) – which she also repeated at the performances of the revised version of Il pastor fido in May and November 1734 – one of the arias so painfully misunderstood by the historically informed performance practice of our days. It seems that there is confusion around the tempo indication Andante, though simply focusing on the vocal part would clarify everything. Instead, it is performed like a slower concerto movement from the late 1700s or early 1800s, with obbligato soprano voice, comfortable for the orchestra but neglecting the true nature of the piece, which causes the weakening of the vocal phrase-building and energy, and forces the singer to breathe where the score itself forbids it. Andante is a tempo which unites vocal virtuosity and lyricism in a galant way, not by compromising and giving up a bit of both but by utilising all the advantages of them: panther-like agility, energy, and rhythmic variety blended with smoothness, various shades of vocal colours and the freedom of time and serenity. Calmness is provided not by slowness but by technical flexibility and by a fresh, resounding yet soft voice production.
both by the singer and the orchestra. Handel’s markings for trills are not exclusive, and in this case they have an additional meaning. Modern Baroque singers use the trill much too sparingly, mostly because they are lacking the right technique and it does not come easily to them. Even the most appreciated ones with the best period-instrument orchestras and conductors behind them are missing fundamental trills in cadential places. Trills, appoggiaturas, portamenti, etc. were not meant for the da capo repetitions solely, but there was a requirement of their general use. Therefore, composers did not write trills out without a special reason, because they left it for the singer. In Finchè un zeffiro, in the longer coloraturas of ‘soave’ (bb. 14–15) and ‘placata’ (bb. 34–35) there is but one trill marked during each, in the only place to breathe. Trills are expected on the other similar notes as well, but without taking an additional breath.

Example 5.25: Excerpts from Finchè un zeffiro save, bb. 12–23 and 32–35.

The one trill is there exceptionally, because everything written in the Baroque era for a single syllable was meant to be sung in one breath. Treatises teach that even cadenzas should be performed without interruption (except by taking breath imperceptibly, see Burney’s remark on Faustina). Moreover, breath capacity limits the length of a cadenza—in other words, the cadenza as well as long phrases are to display breath control. Had the composer wanted otherwise, he would have written some short rests as happens in many arias, but what is written in a block should be sung without interruption, unless by stealing breath unperceived after a sustained or dotted note in the midst of unusually long passages. Necessarily, the performing speed of Finchè un zeffiro’s (and of every other aria) is determined by the singer’s capacity to bind the phrase with one breath, or, in this case, steal a little breath after the written-out trill only. Listening to some of the available recordings, this seems not to be discerned by conductors.

La mia costanza (II/12; A major, 3/8, Allegro; Ex. 5.26) is one of the most excellent outcomes of Strada’s vocal development and Handel’s understanding of it. This concerto-like movement draws out fine energy-lines, and juggles with a manifold virtuosity, containing arpeggiations, messe di voce, volatine in both directions, dotted rhythms, violin idioms, sixth-, seventh-, octave- and ninth leaps, chromatics, trills, accented a” notes and a wide range (c” to a”). The extended and by this time regular use of e” as well as a” reveals that Strada’s head register must have sounded especially beautiful, rich, shiny and firm. The aria’s main difficulty lies in the combination of the applied patterns and bespeaks a crystal-clear and refined intonation.

Example 5.26: Vocal part (excerpts) from *La mia costanza*, bb. 30–42 and 111–145.

The lyric partner of this supremacy is found in *Ah! non son io che parlo* (III/12; B minor, 6/8, Larghetto; Ex. 5.27), introduced worthily by the *accompagnato* recitative, *Misera, dove son!*, dealing entirely with the sensation of time (i.e. with all the aspects of *tempo rubato*, reflecting Fulvia’s feeling of losing contact with reality). She is abused by her father (Massimo) for his ambition to kill the emperor, due to which she has become separated from her beloved Ezio. She pushes Massimo aside as the very cause of all her unhappiness, and then is suffocated by the state of her distorted identity. *Ah! non son io che parlo* is marked by an expressive and even threatening ostinato motif in the bass: ‘the voice of fate’, as Strohm calls it.\(^{67}\) Time can and should be stretched or stopped in different measures at every general pause (in bb.1, 4, 6, 19 and 31) so expressively that this swinging could be transported and transform itself to a melodic waving in the second half of the A part.

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Example 5.27: Ah! non son io che parlo

Ah! non son io che parlo, è il bar. ba. ro do.
mi di. ri. del co. re, che de. li. rar mi fà, è il bar. ba. ro do.
non, che di. li. rar mi fà; ah! nò, non son io che par. le, è il bar. ba. ro do.
Reflecting on available recordings again, Sandrine Piau and Rinaldo Alessandrini have a fantastic insight into this aria: their performance is spasmodic, agonising, halting and ductile, though it merges into necessary heavy points; its gravity is lifted up and carried by the pulsation of the triple rhythm. Although Piau has a light lyric coloratura voice and Strada’s voice production was of fuller volume and with more inner power in my opinion, Piau sings it entirely convincingly.68 Others, unfortunately, are playing after the metronome with no sensitivity of this swinging of time, painfully blasting through all the general pauses and sigh-motives, and thus turning the aria into a dance-movement with rhythmic accents; singers – except for Verónica Cangemi – usually misinterpret it as a vendetta aria, applying ill-fitting and artificial vocal gestures, not discovering at any point the essence of this number, and thus remaining completely out of dimension.

Ezio was shortly followed by Sosarme, the eleven performances of which were held between 4th February and 21st March 1732. Sosarme was a great success: Viscount Percival wrote in his diary that it ‘takes with the town, and that justly, for it is one of the best I ever heard’, and according to Colman’s Opera Register it ‘was for many Nights much crowded to some peoples admiration’.69 The pamphlet See and Seem Blind also spoke about both of the operas of early 1732: ‘We have likewise had two Operas, Etius and Sosarmes, the first most Masterly, the last most pleasing, and in my mind exceeding pretty: There are two Duetto’s which Ravish me, and indeed the whole is vastly Genteel’.70 No surprise Handel revived Sosarme at the height of the rivalry with the Opera of the Nobility, for three performances at the end of April 1734. Mrs Pendarves also looked upon it as ‘a most delightful’ work and ‘a charming one’.71

Handel created a superb role for Strada. The broad spectrum of Elmira’s arias is balanced by the musico-technical weight of the two duets for her and Sosarme (played by Senesino), assuring the unity of the part and portraying her as a great heroine, contradicting to her figure in the drama. Elmira is passive, and does not act but react to the chain of events: rebellion and dynastic war are hindering her happiness and future with Sosarme. She faints and falls into despair but always finds courage to persevere with pacifying the hurricane. Burney was informed that with Rendi’il sereno al ciglio (I/2; B major, 12/8, Largo assai e piano; Ex. 5.28) Strada ‘captivated the audience extremely, by her performance of it. Few are now alive who can remember by what peculiar powers of voice

69 Colman’s Opera Register, 15 February 1732. George Frideric Handel: Collected Documents Volume 2, 495.
70 From the pamphlet from the pamphlet See and Seem Blind (Daily Journal, 8 June 1732), Ibid., 533–536: 535.
71 Dean, Handel’s Operas, 1726-1741, 266.
or expression she delighted the public in this song.\textsuperscript{72} The siciliana style and simplicity of Rendi’l sereno point towards the expressive use of portamenti, tempo rubato and legato as well as various vocal timbres. Beyond that, the applications of such bright keys as B major and F\textsuperscript{♯} major, and of regular general pauses, imply Strada’s silvery ringing voice.

The question also arises of whether Handel’s orchestration could denote Strada’s strong high register. I do not think that the richness of the scoring in general should be taken as the primary indicator of an extended use of the chest. That is because in the case of castrato arias and even of nineteenth-century bel canto ones, the orchestral accompaniment usually has a very sparse substance under the vocal line and it leaves not only cadenzas but in many cases also coloraturas practically free. Nevertheless, a rich orchestration under divisions or going beyond the vocal line is a very good indicator of Strada’s vocal power. Most of the Handelian roles created for her contain arias with a grand orchestral concerto-like accompaniment; probably the stormiest one of these and the most furious Handel ever wrote for her, is Dite pace (I/11; B\textsuperscript{♯} major, C, Allegro/Adagio; Exs 5.29–30; Tracks 9–10).\textsuperscript{73} Strada’s volume becomes evident through the thickness of three violin parts, playing their own material and regularly above the vocal line. In bars 26–27 and 35–36, on top of full orchestral chords the soprano contrasts with the first violins by second interval dissonances. In the second half of the da capo section there are two longer coloraturas (upbeat to b. 22 to b. 25, and bb. 29–33), the second of which is repeated (bb. 39–43). In both cases, as can be seen in the autograph, Handel planned one additional bar each, but he eliminated them in the end (Ex. 5.30).\textsuperscript{74} The reasons may be twofold: these would have been mere repetitions of sequential patterns on the one hand; on the other hand, one more bar may have created a longer phrase than Strada was able to sing in one breath. The coloraturas in their final form are already very long; there are four of them, with exclamations and cadenzas in between, and a shorter one occurs in the A1 section.

\textsuperscript{72} Charles Burney, \textit{An account of the musical performances in Westminster Abbey and the Pantheon, May 26th, 27th, 29th; and June the 3d and 5th, 1784. In commemoration of Handel} (London: T. Payne and Son, and C. Robinson, 1785), 51.

\textsuperscript{73} E.g. Scherza in mar from Lotario (1729), furthermore La mia costanza from Ezio (1732) or Sdegno amore from Arianna in Creta (1734). Castrato-type of arias and rhythmically chiselled numbers regularly occur in first and second acts at Strada.

\textsuperscript{74} G. F. Handel, \textit{Sosarme} HWV 30. Autograph, GB-Lbl R.M.20.c.10, ff 34r–35r.
Example 5.29: Excerpt from the A section of *Dite pace*, bb. 20–48.
Example 5.30: Excerpt from the autograph of *Dite pace* (from Handel’s *Sosarme*)

© The British Library Board, R.M.20.c.10, ff. 35v–35r.

Longer unison between the first violins and the soprano only occurs in the highly chromatic B section (Ex. 5.31), which passes through all the twelve semitones in a whirlwind of modulations.

Example 5.31: Vocal part (B section) of *Dite pace*, bb. 56–69.
Strada must have ruled over the orchestra, as she sang this particular aria no less than seventeen times (fourteen times in Sosarme and on a further three occasions in Handel’s self-pasticcio, Oreste). How strong her projection was and how great and stable her stamina is clearly shown in that the roles she most frequently repeated contain the most demanding numbers, especially of vocal power display: Partenope was staged eighteen times, Arianna twenty-one and Alcina twenty-three times. In Burney’s opinion Dite pace likewise is a ‘capital bravura air for the Strada … in which her powers of voice execution are displayed with great abilities, in turbulent accompaniments and difficult divisions’.  

He went on to reflect on Strada’s twofold talent: ‘The second act is opened with a charming cavatina of a truly pathetic and tender cast: Padre, germano, e sposo, in which the same performer had an opportunity to exhibit powers of a very different kind from those which the preceding air required’.  

This aria (II/1; A minor, C, Larghetto; Ex. 5.32), with its flashes of rhythmic delicacy embedded in the simplicity of the melody, stands for her great abilities of expressiveness: it requires portare la voce along chromatic phrases and tempo rubato to enliven the sigh-motives. Besides, Strada’s not only cuttingly pure but also flexibly changeable intonation comes into play, as this cavatina also lists all the twelve semitones while going through the valley of modulations (i.e. A – C – F – D – E minors before arriving back to A minor again).

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Example 5.32: Padre, germano, e sposo

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\[76\] Ibid., 358.
The regular appearance of arias in Strada’s original Handelian repertoire which have a B section with all the twelve semitones are regular is unmatched in the material of any other singer who worked for the composer. Handel in this way displayed Strada’s unfailing intonation, which, according to Paolo Rolli, was better even than that of Faustina. The chromatic sequences applying augmented seconds, diminished thirds, once a

77 The arias are the following: Scherza in mar (Lotario I/9), Quel finger affetto (Ezio II/7), Dite pace (Sosarme I/11), Padre, germano e sposo (Sosarme II/1, arioso), Choirs of angels (Deborah Act I), and Dice amor (Berenice I/9).
diminished seventh, and zig-zagging tritons – among which the diminished fifth was to be sung larger than the augmented fourth – must have produced an extreme or sometimes even terrifying effect, not to mention the extra vocal accomplishment of a continuous and rapid re-tuning to the instruments of no fixed tuning. Tosi, and later Quantz in line with him, explained this phenomenon, which profoundly impacted every segment of the musico-dramatic performance, as follows:

Everyone knows not that there is a Semitone Major and Minor, because the Difference cannot be known [ie. played] by an Organ or Harpsichord, if the Keys of the Instrument are not split. A Tone, that gradually passes to another, is divided into nine almost imperceptible Intervals, which are called Comma’s, five of which constitute the Semitone Major [e.g. d–e♭], and four the Minor [e.g. d–d♯] … If one were continually to sing only to those above-mention’d Instruments [the organ and harpsichord], this Knowledge might be unnecessary; but since the time that Composers introduced the Custom of crowding the Opera’s with a vast Number of Songs accompanied with Bow Instruments, it becomes so necessary, that if a Soprano was to sing D-sharp, like E-flat, a nice Ear will find he is out of Tune, because this last rises.

Jean Laurent de Béthizey described the necessary adjustment of the singer to the orchestra:

[...] how a singer adjusts to the temperament [...] of an [...] instrument: to sing the first note of an aria, the singer refers to the tonic note of the principal key as played by the instrument, and subsequently adjusts the different intervals [...] without reference to the notes played by the instrument [...] When a new key appears, the singer is obliged to conform to the new tonic as rendered by the instrument [...] If the voice and instrument play a unison or octave together, the voice is obliged to conform to the instrument.

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79 Johann Joachim Quantz, Versuch einer Anweisung, die Flöte traversière zu spielen (Berlin: Johann Friedrich Boß, 1752), 37–38; Quantz, On playing the flute. Translated with notes and introduction by Edward R. Reilly (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2001), 46.
81 ‘...comment la voix s’ajuste-t-elle au tempérament... d’un... instrument: Pour entonner la première note d’un air, elle se règle sur la note tonique du mode principal, telle qu’elle est rendue par l’instrument, & forme ensuite les différents intervalles...sans égard à l’altération des notes que l’instrument fait entendre... Lorsqu’un nouveau mode paroit, la voix est obligée de se conformer à la manière dont l’instrument rend la nouvelle tonique... Si la voix & l’instrument forment ensemble une tenue à l’unisson ou à l’octave, la voix est forcée de se conformer à l’instrument...’ Jean Laurent de Béthizey, Exposition de la théorie et de la pratique de la musique (Paris: 1754), 135.
Another impossibility becomes possible in the sweet bird-song *Vola l’augello* (II/14; A major, 6/8, Allegro; Ex. 5.33): *tempo rubato* is to be applied in Allegro, parallel to Handel’s compositional method of this movement, an irregularly guided melodic line in the frame of regular periodic structure. It is informative that this aria, maybe the softest in Strada’s entire repertoire, was placed in the same role as the wildest one, *Dite pace*.

Example 5.33: Excerpt from the A section of *Vola l’augello*, bb. 1–18.

The first duet of Senesino and Strada as Sosarme and Elmira, *Per le porte del tormento* (II/8; E major, 12/8, Andante; Ex. 5.34), is written in a concertante style and has a gigue character, in which the vocal parts are crowned by complementary chains of *messe di voce*. In fact, the beauty of the whole movement depends on the quality of these dragged-out sustained notes and on the equality and harmonised sound of the two voices. Senesino, famous for his expressive *messe di voce* and powerful voice production, must have been an

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82 Further arias among Strada’s original roles which contain bird-song imitations, mainly that of the nightingale through seconds with dotted rhythms: *Se nel bosco* (*Arianna in Creta* II/14, 1734) and *Lassa! ch’io perduta* (*Atalanta* II/2, 1736).
ideal match for Strada on the stage. Quantz wrote the following about him, corresponding with Burney’s observations of his majestic voice and style, too.

He had a powerful, clear, equal and sweet contralto voice, with a perfect intonation and an excellent shake. His manner of singing was masterly and his elocution unrivalled. Though he never loaded Adagios with too many ornaments, yet he delivered the original and essential notes with the utmost refinement. He sang Allegros with great fire, and marked rapid divisions, from the chest, in an articulate and pleasing manner. His countenance was well adapted to the stage, and his action was natural and noble. To these qualities he joined a majestic figure.

This duet contains far more and longer sustained notes for the female singer than any other duet Senesino had sung either with Cuzzoni or with Faustina. In those cases he had more messe di voce than Cuzzoni; here the score is four to eight on Strada’s behalf.

Example 5.34: Excerpt (vocal parts) from the duet Per le porte del tormento, bb. 27–46.

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The other duet is *Tu caro sei*, which, ‘aided by the performance of Senesino and Strada, became a general favourite’, as Burney asserted.\(^86\) It is worth taking his statement literally, as it refers not only to Handel’s inspired ideas of fierce and joyful Allegro and a contrasting lyric B section (in D and A minor respectively), but also to Senesino and Strada’s role in making it popular. Both of them were considered to be passionate performers\(^87\) and this movement has a very agreeable energy, with rhythmic agility and fine trills, underlining Strada’s high tessitura.

In the case of *Orlando* there were three circumstances which impacted on Strada’s role as Angelica and which are important to be understood, because they caused its music to be formed as it finally was. *Orlando* was Handel’s first opera with a plot based on Ludovico Ariosto’s *Orlando furioso* (1532), which entailed a much more philosophical and allegorical dimension to the drama, even if the magical elements were omitted or reduced. Although Handel’s approach was more defined by his knowledge of diverse European theatrical traditions of the seventeenth century (such as Italian and French opera and spoken drama, *commedia dell’arte* as well as English, German and Spanish theatre practices) than by Ariosto’s play directly, yet the pastoral dimensions of the Ariostian plots opened a way towards a more direct musical-dramatic expression and irregular solutions on the level of form-structure, leading to an extension of the strict limits of *opera seria*.\(^88\)

To fulfil dramatic requirements Handel allowed himself not to take singers’ demands fully into account, especially in the case of protagonists like Senesino as Orlando, who felt offended by the vocal simplicity and the lack of heroism of his role – not understanding its dramatic significance, although he possessed vocal expressiveness and improved acting skills – and by the grandiosity of the lower-ranking role of Zoroastro given to the outstanding bass Antonio Montagnana.\(^89\) (Senesino, a singer of the old system, left Handel after this production.)

As far as the measure of virtuoso elements is concerned, the situation of Strada’s role bears comparison with the one of Dorinda, sung by Celeste Gismondi or Celeste Resse, called La Celestina. The Neapolitan Gismondi, a former *buffo* mezzo-soprano, had spent only one season with Handel; she then left for the rival company and Margherita Durastanti came back. Shifting to *opera seria*, Gismondi naturally wanted to show off her skills – mainly her wide range and agility. Handel might have done to her as Mozart did

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\(^87\) Ibid., 268, 154, 348, 355, 358, 359 and 364.


later to Adriana Ferrarese with the role of Fiordiligi in Così fan tutte: Patricia Lewi Gidwitz noted about Ferrarese that ‘her vocal equipment [was] impressive but incomplete and her performances less than inspiring. Mozart’s achievement was to transform a particular set of vocal skills and limitations into something of exceptional artistic value; Fiordiligi was fashioned out of the temperament, vocal style and dramatic abilities – and limitations – of his soprano.’\(^{90}\) Handel focused on remaining on the path he had begun with Strada, and by coincidence that was exactly what Celestina lacked: the unity of the passionate and lyric, a specifically high tessitura (Così giusta III/4; A minor, 3/8, Andante; Ex. 5.35), extraordinary vocal quality and perhaps a noble dignity suiting to opera seria. Here Handel began, with Se fedel vuoi (I/9; G major, C, Largo) to write for Strada a series of slow, short and intimate Falsa imagine-type arias with sparse accompaniment (mainly continuo) and with fine rhythmic embroidery.

Example 5.35: Vocal part (A1 section) of Così giusta, bb. 21–40.

![Example 5.35: Vocal part (A1 section) of Così giusta, bb. 21–40.](image)

Strada especially could show a deeper lyricism through a touching portamento singing in Se fedel and Verdi piante (III/8; G minor, 3/8, Larghetto), the latter of which Burney described as ‘pathetic, and richly accompanied.’\(^{91}\) On the other hand, the role contains passionate parlante numbers enriched with coloratura passages: Chi possessore (I/6; A major, 6/8, Allegro) has a playful metric aspect: accented a”-s in both word and rhythm are not missing, but accented and unaccented high notes alternate unpredictably, depicting Angelica’s lively and innocent character, and giving a greater emphasis on acting; Non potrà dormi ingrata (II/6; E minor, C, Allegro; Ex. 5.36) is more rigorous initially, then it opens and becomes abandoned in large energetic passages ‘with divisions which required considerable agility, compassing a wide range’\(^{92}\). Nevertheless, cantar di sbalzo is a general feature, which marks the whole role.

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\(^{92}\) Ibid., 364.
Dorinda has strong comic aspects while Angelica has none. Celestina possessed vocal acrobatics but certainly less acquired *cantabile* and *messa di voce*. Reinhard Strohm has suggested a rivalry between her and Strada and not without reason (see ch. 4). It was noted by Burney, too, that La Celestina in the role of Dorinda sang musical material requiring ‘greater abilities in the execution, than are usually found in a singer of the second or third class.’

The symbol of the war between the Opera of the Nobility and Handel might have been *Arianna in Creta*, as an answer to the former members of his troupe who left him. Only Strada remained for Handel, who newly engaged Carestini and Carlo Scalzi, while Margherita Durastanti came back to London. The pamphlet *Harmony in an Uproar* declared this new cast’s prominence:

S[tra]da being in all respects infinitely superior, in any Excellency requir’d for a Stage; as for Singers in the under Parts, you had provided the best Sett we ever had yet; tho’ basely deserted by Mon[tagna]na’.

Although Handel had completed the score on 5th October 1733, he withheld it for a reason: he was waiting until the rival company presented its Ariadne subject, that of Porpora’s *Arianna in Nasso* on 29th December, and came out with his own opera only on 26th January.
Colman’s Opera Register praised the new opera as ‘very good & perform’d very often – Sigr Carestino sang surprisingly well’. Arianna’s musical figure is sensibly dedicated to display Strada’s comprehensive skills as better than that of Maria Segatti, who initially sang Ariadne in Porpora’s production (just as it had been at the time of Lotario, though not in the same way). Besides lyric arias, this ‘favourite singer’ had the jealous Sdegno amore, which is ‘extremely spirited, and of an original cast’, concluding the first act (U/12; A major, C, Allegro; Ex. 5.37). It is a pompous concerto-aria with a composed, written-out stretching of time – very similar to Dite pace (Sosarme, 1732) – in the form of two Adagio stops offering opportunities to introduce free cadenzas, one of them right at her entrance which must have had a double impact through its surprise. The rest of the aria is about Strada’s evenness of vocal power in the chest as well as the head range: her agility is showed by triplets and trills, and her great stamina and breath control, displayed especially by the messa di voce phrase (bb. 74–80) on the words ‘chi vincerà’, which, again, was surely meant to be sung in one single breath.

Example 5.37: Excerpts from Sdegno amore, bb. 15–42 and 62–79.
Interestingly enough, the counterpart of Sdegno amore, carved from the same block of musical marble, is the Arianna–Teseo duet of Strada and Carestini at the end of the opera, Mira adesso (III/7; G major, C, Allegro; Ex. 5.38). The grandeur of both of the singers is revealed by messe di voce – including a long trill – and triplet-coloraturas. This might have resulted in the intensification of each other’s vocal effect, so that they could impress the audience together more than one by one – which is the real goal of any duet, of course.
Example 5.38: Excerpt (vocal parts) from the duet *Mira adesso*, bb. 26–64.

Reinventing Strada

By the mid-1730s a new quality appeared in Strada’s Handelian roles: surmounting certain technical patterns like range and different *bravura* manifestations, focus was placed on the particular quality, personal sound and expressiveness of the voice. The applied vocal components were put entirely at the service of dramatic expression and the true representation of the character (from *Ariodante* onwards). Handel’s method of writing for Strada’s voice became relaxed, fluid and instinctively natural by 1735, applying her skills according to his artistic scopes without the pressure of vocal exhibitionism. These roles reflect Strada’s full vocal and artistic maturity.

*Ariodante* seems to be similar to *Orlando* in the sense that Handel held back or reduced the vocal extension of Strada’s role, that of Ginevra, for a reason. The clearest evidence of
this is that Handel cut the only forceful aria, *Orrida agli occhi miei* (I/2), before the first performance, because it was alien to Ginevra’s character. Strohm notes that since Handel chose the libretto of Antonio Salvi, ‘the librettist most often chosen by him – and for operas as divergent as *Rodelinda*, *Sosarme* and *Berenice* – his interest in the dramatic content and dramaturgical form of the libretto of 1708 seems assured. By deciding for Salvi, the composer opens up his version of the play to the influence of French tragedy and the so-called “regular drama”’.  

The plot is exceptional from several points of view: it is equally free from magic elements and from emphasis on aristocratic ranks; its happy ending is consequential to the drama, not forced. The story is simple, dealing with universal emotions and situations. There is no subplot, only the main one with a naturally developed culmination and solution. Dean draws a parallel with Shakespearian dramas like *Much Ado About Nothing* or *Othello*, the latter on the grounds of Polinesso’s resemblance to Iago’s figure. As Ginevra is quite a plain and passive character, variety must have been shown within its limitations. Most probably even these limits made the choices of Handel and Strada’s collaboration unequivocally clear. By then, Handel found the essence of Strada’s vocal entity in a deeper layer, the source of its roundness and powerful projection, the roots of that penetrating and ravishing sound, and built it into his compositional method. The fine quality of her voice may not have lain in pyrotechnical elements themselves but rather in the way her voice was produced. To start with, he had already written for her the highest, the lowest, the longest, the fastest etc., and to repeat these patterns over and over again would have been rather monotonous. Handel had to do it for other divas and castrati regularly, anyway. Now that he had been working with Strada for more than five successive years, he probably realised this unique possibility with his exceptional soprano. Handel might have instinctively discovered the way to put Strada’s voice on its best sound, where she sings the most easily, the most magnificently, with the biggest volume, with the greatest variety of expression, with the most beautiful colour of her voice. He knew that this method would serve as a magnifying glass; it would render everything he composed for her to seem bigger, more fascinating, more grandiose; then they would enter into a new dimension. It may seem too philosophical but it is actually very practical. One can imagine that by 1734 it was a routine for Handel to compose operas for certain voices, for the same clichéd, dramatic situations on a short notice, and to use well known coloratura patterns, types of arias, keys, tempi, etc., meaning that he could focus on other issues during the compositional process. In the case of *Ariodante*, the

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modern simplicity of the plotline and the driving forces of Ariosto’s drama with its deeper coherency could have helped Handel to achieve a similar consistency in composing for Strada’s voice, which he knew well enough to be well aware of her many other capabilities as yet unexploited.

*Volate amori* (I/6; B♭ major, 6/8, Allegro), with its joyful flying-motifs, is based on Strada’s brilliant trill-ability, i.e. the alternation of notes next to each other, which must have resulted in a fine glimmering sound in her voice. Handel clearly set the f”–g” area as her most sonorous one from *Vezzi, lusinghe* (I/1; G major, 3/4, Andante; Ex. 5.39) onwards, which he also confirmed in the minor key and legato at slower movements like *Mi palpità il cor* (II/8; C minor, 3/4, Largo e staccato); it is a strong tendency even in the duets. *Io ti bacio* (III/4; D minor, C, Larghetto assai) is the second in the row of the *Falsa imagine*-type of numbers, this time with a slightly fuller orchestration. Nevertheless, in the last duet, that of Ginevra and Ariodante, *Bramo haver mille vite* (III/12; A major, C; Ex. 5.40), Handel let Strada and Carestini’s virtuosity blow up through semiquaver triplet garlands.


Example 5.40: Excerpt (vocal parts) from the duet *Bramo haver mille vite*, bb. 24–33.
It filled the 4th Earl of Shaftesbury with awe at the revival of the work in May 1736, when Gioacchino Conti, the young soprano castrato replacing Carestini proved to be the perfect duet-partner for Strada, even more so than Senesino:

He [Conti] has sung nothing of Handel’s yet but the last duet in Ariodante[,] I really think between him and Strada I never was so delighted with any duet I ever heard in my life & it quite charmed the audience.102

The third Ariosto opera, *Alcina* was produced in April 1735. By that time Strada had reached the zenith of her vocal and artistic capabilities (at the age of thirty-two), together with Handel – as Mrs Pendarves thought:

Yesterday morning my sister and I went with Mrs. Donellan to Mr. Handel’s house to hear the first rehearsal of the new opera Alcina. I think it the best he ever made, but I have thought so of so many, that I will not say positively ‘tis the finest, but ’tis so fine I have not words to describe it. Strada has a whole scene of charming recitative—there are a thousand beauties. Whilst Mr. Handel was playing his part, I could not help thinking him a necromancer in the midst of his own enchantments.103

Alcina’s music was regarded by Burney as unfailing: ‘Upon the whole, if any one of Handel’s dramatic works should be brought on the stage, entire, without a change or mixture of airs from his other operas, it seems as if this would well sustain such a revival.’104 Indeed, Handel’s most complete flesh-and-blood portrayed figure was Alcina. The extraordinary union of lyrically framed drama and virtuosity reflects a modern way of musico-dramatic thinking, a ‘Baroque realism’ which seems to have been ahead of its time.

Strada’s role has a build-up process through the succession of arias: the f-♯-g⁴ spot is the main pillar, where she could permanently sojourn. Phrases during her numbers become even longer and even thicker, preparing the singer for the two principal arias: *Ah! mio cor* (II/8; C minor, 3/4, Andante larghetto; Ex. 5.41) …

This song was always as much admired for its composition, as Strada for her manner of singing it, when the Opera of Alcina first appeared. Perhaps a modern composer, from the rage into which the enchantress is thrown in the Drama, by discovering the

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102 Since Conti replaced Carestini, and as the rehearsal time may have been short, Handel allowed him to sing substitute arias. The only Handelian number he sang in *Ariodante* was the duet *Bramo haver mille vite*. 4th Earl of Shaftesbury to James Harris, 8 May 1736. Donald Burrows and Rosemary Dunhill, *Music and Theatre in Handel’s World: The Family Papers of James Harris, 1732–1780* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 17.

103 Mrs Pendarves to her mother, Mrs Mary Granville, 12 April 1735. Deutsch, *Handel*, 385–386.

intended departure of her favourite hero, Rogero, would have given the lady less
tenderness, and more passion; however that may be, the first strain of this Air, upon a
continued moving base, is truly pathetic; and the constant sobs and sighs, expressed by
short and broken notes in the violin and tenor parts, greatly add to this effect. Indeed,
this movement contains some strokes of modulation which are extremely bold and
pathetic, particularly at the words *sola in pianto*. The short second part likewise
expresses much of the spirit, agitation, and fury, which the words and situation of the
singer seem to require.\(^{105}\)

… and the aria standing at the end of the extraordinary series of scenes concluding the
second act, *Ombre pallide* (II/13; E minor, C, Andante; Ex. 5.43; Track 13). It is prepared
by the exclamations and accented a" and g" notes as well as tenth leaps of the previous
*accompagnato* recitative, *Ah! Ruggiero crudel* (B minor, C; Ex. 5.42; Track 12). The
sorceress’s dramatic collapse is enclosed in the form of a lyric Andante. The principal
elements of the movement are of that type of long coloratura passage where the notes of
broken chords simultaneously have their mostly chromatic appoggiaturas incorporated into
the instrumentally- as well as contrapuntally-built vocal line. These are strong indicators of
Strada’s dramatic vocal weight. The loss not only of her beloved one but, at the same time,
also of her magic power, the core of Alcina’s identity, creates a strange mixture of
emotions, a vibrating atmosphere of despair, mental strength and fragile affections of love,
fitting like a glove for the rare combination of Strada’s vocal skills and showing her
prototypical voice of *soprano sfogato* in all its splendour.

Example 5.41: Excerpt from *Ah! mio cor*, bb. 16–47.

\(^{105}\) Burney, *An account of the musical performances in Westminster Abbey and the Pantheon*, 68.

Example 5.43: Vocal part (excerpts) of *Ombre pallide*, bb. 5–13 and 28–37.
A further indicator of higher vocal energy is the fact that high notes as dynamic and musical climaxes are often textually and rhythmically accented here too. Ellen T. Harris reckons this as proof that Strada possessed a strong upper register and sang high notes with the chest, and with natural loudness, whereas her fellow sopranos could only produce thin and fine head notes with a lesser dynamic in the high register – contrary to the general practice of the era and Handel’s way of composing for Cuzzoni and La Francesina, the previous and succeeding sopranos to Strada.\textsuperscript{106} The phenomenon was known to Pier Francesco Tosi, who stated that ‘Among the Women, one hears sometimes a Soprano entirely di Petto’; Giambattista Mancini likewise noted: ‘there are rare examples in which one has received from nature the most unusual gift of being able to execute everything in the chest voice’.\textsuperscript{107} A genuine ability of these exceptional kind of female sopranos like Strada was to sing with an instinctively good diaphragmatic support, to which treatises refer as the ‘chest’:\textsuperscript{108} according to Mancini, ‘all kinds of agility must be supported by a robust chest’,\textsuperscript{109} including Strada’s specialities, the messa di voce and the perfect trill, in line with Christoph Bernhard’s opinion (1655‒60), i.e. one has to ‘strike the trillo in the chest, where the best ones originate’.\textsuperscript{110} Bacilly (1668) highlights it as the key to pure intonation.\textsuperscript{111}

This deep legato singing is crowned by Mi restano le lagrime (III/5; F\# minor, 12/8, Larghetto); moreover, Alcina, although she lost the fight, dominates the terzetto sung with the re-united Ruggiero-Bradamante couple (Non è amor, ne gelosia III/7; B\# major, C, A, F\# minor, 12/8, Larghetto; D, F\# minor, 12/8, Larghetto; C, F\# minor, 12/8, Larghetto).
Andante). At its revival in November 1736 Strada took Morgana’s aria, *Tornami a vagheggiar* (I/14; B♭ major, 3/4, Allegro), presumably because sustained note of b♭′″ – which the mezzo-soprano Rosa Negri, the replacement of the soprano Cecilia Young, was not able to sing – proving she still had that height in 1736. (In addition, Strada sang Partenope, the role containing the high c‴, even in the 1737 revival.) Considering Alcina as the peak of Strada’s whole repertoire comprising original roles, the various airs she took over in revivals, *serenatas, pasticci* and oratorios, and the singing style which is reflected in all of these, I assume that Strada’s voice, and especially her sonorous high notes, had vibrato. By vibrato I mean a natural outcome of healthy singing, not an artificially generated throaty one and absolutely not a pitch vibrato, which I reckon as abuses (acoustically, the vibrato is the periodic oscillation of the pitch; I use this expression for a vibrato larger than a semitone). An intense vibrato of less than a semitone is what marks a trained and beautiful voice.

Strada’s famous colleagues – some of the greatest singer figures of the Baroque era – were reported to have vibrato, too. Burney recorded an anecdote about Cuzzoni from the time of the performances of *Admeto*, when someone in the audience could not help crying out loud: ‘she has got a nest of nightingales in her belly’. He also quoted Mancini who observed the same phenomenon, i.e. the natural and more rippling vibrato of Cuzzoni, which she utilized to render coloratura passages easier to sing: ‘A native warble enabled her to execute divisions with such facility as to conceal every appearance of difficulty.’ Mancini remarked about Faustina: ‘Her type of agility was so much more valuable, because [characterised by] the right degree of vibrato’. Mancini, arguing with Manfredini in the 1777 revision of his treatise, claimed vibrato as a necessity of the cultivated voice production: ‘united in brio, agility of the voice, vibrato [*vibrare*], detached notes [*distaccare*], the drawing back [*ritirare*], strength, and appropriateness of expression’. The *Musical Grammar and Dictionary* (1770) asserted: ‘There is a sort of

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112 ‘In it the pitch winds wave-like around a desired “correct” pitch with a spectrum of “wrong” pitches evenly distributed above and below its core. The desirable vibrato effect rests on the physio-psychological phenomenon of *sonance*, which is the fusion of the vibrato oscillation above a certain threshold of speed (c. 7 cycles per second) into an aural sensation of richer tone, while the perception of the oscillation is minimized and that of the “wrong” pitches *disappears altogether*. On strings the combined range of the oscillation above and below the focal pitch is about a quarter tone; whereas for the voice it averages a half-tone.’ Frederick Neumann, ‘The Vibrato Controversy’, *Performance Practice Review* IV/1 (1991), 14–27: 15.


114 Ibid., 307.


wavering of the voice, very agreeable to the ear.’ W.A. Mozart, in his letter of 12 June 1778 stated:

The human voice trembles naturally – but in its own way – and only to such a degree that the effect is beautiful. Such is the nature of the voice; and people imitate it not only on wind-instruments, but on stringed instruments too and even on the clavier [clavichord].

Although the ornament tremolo was applied on sustained notes, nevertheless, during the course of the eighteenth century *messa di voce* might had more and more to do with a consciously directed yet naturally evolving vibrato. Roger North’s illustrations for example implied a connection of different execution types of a sustained note: the plain note, *messa di voce* with vibrato, and *trillo* (Fig. 5.1). He also commented on Nicolini’s vibrato in his performance of an aria from Mancini’s opera *Hydaspos*: ‘And the swelling and dying of musicall notes, with tremolo not impeaching the tone, wonderfully represents the waiving of air, and pleasant gales moving, and sinking away.’

![Figure 5.1: Copy of Roger North’s *messa di voce* illustrations](image)

Not only *portamento* but also the technique of vibrato is connected to *messa di voce*. This is because *messa di voce* is the quintessence of voice production as a kind of slow-motion zooming of its structure, i.e. the ‘beginning-culmination-finishing’ triangle, the sections of which are to be stretched or diminished, intensified or weakened according to the length and pitch of the note, its place in the phrase, syllable, word, etc. Vibrato is to be handled in the same way. It needs control and is controllable; it has to be directed just as *messa di voce* and *portamento*. It is a tool and has to be used as it was used by great singers over centuries. Depending on the character of the aria, of dynamics, and of the timbre fitting to the actual word it can have long or shorter waves, flat or higher ones in any combination; the performer has to be able to change somewhat its length and height during

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the course of a sustained note. If a note is several bars long and the accompaniment indicates it, vibrato can be born from nothing, die, and then be born again. It has a powerful effect which ought not to be ignored.

Without the presence and variety of vibrato, arias like *Ah! mio cor* are unimaginable not only for the listener but also the performer: to produce longer or sustained notes naturally, the larynx needs a slack allowing it to move flexibly and periodically and to maintain the note in clean intonation. Without vibrato one actually forces the larynx artificially – therefore not naturally – to stick in a certain position, resulting in a rigid, harsh and in a few seconds also false tone. On the other hand, vibrato becomes an abuse and loses its purpose at the moment when the larynx moves too much and the pitch becomes uncertain, or the importance of the volume overcomes the intonation, the beauty and timbre of the sound, and thus the tone becomes static instead of its entity as a living process being emphasised. The key would be rather the use of plain and vibrated notes with balance, variability and good taste, always fitting to the dramatic situation and the text of the aria.

By the time of the première of *Atalanta* (12th May 1736), the skeleton of Handel’s compositional conception for Strada was fully covered with flesh and muscles; clothes were put on it with the fine embroidery of her favourite *terzini*, chiselled gallant dotted patterns with trills and demisemiquavers. The role of Atalanta is complete and original: in the first act she is a young lady with masculine independency, a hunter who rejects crown and love for her passion: both her *arioso* (*Al varco, oh pastori!* I/7; C major, C, Allegro; Ex. 5.44) and aria afterwards (*Riportai gloriosa palma* I/8; A major, C, Allegro) are triumphant and glorious with arpeggiation motifs imitating trumpet signals.

Example 5.44: Excerpt from *Al varco, oh pastori!*, bb. 8–27.
However, hers is a developing character, of a very rare kind in opera seria and Strada’s repertoire alike: apart from Atalanta, only the personalities of Alcina, Adelaide (in a sense) and later Berenice change during the course of the drama. Atalanta’s figure, however, differs from those. She is a lady devoted to her so-called profession: she is a passionate huntress and therefore, despite being a princess, she lives as a nymph in the forest. Although she has a crush on the shepherd Tirsi (not knowing that he is the disguised Prince Meleagro), the prospect of a marriage seems to be impossible because of his putative lack of noble rank. After the triumphant arias in the first act, declaring Atalanta as winner of the hunt and celebrating her masculine independence through the victorious killing of the bear, a sharp shift takes place to the pathetic in act II with Lassa! ch’io t’ho perduta (II/2; C minor, 3/4, Larghetto; Ex. 5.45), the minor Larghetto atmosphere of which demands a deeper and thicker ‘inner or virtual legato’. By ‘inner legato’ I mean large legato phrase-chains, which had to be developed technically as a sole musical gesture, by the control of the speed of air and the measure of support; even if the performer has slight opportunities
to steal a little breath in-between, rather imperceptibly, she is certainly not allowed to breake the phrase in two.

Example 5.45: Vocal part (excerpt) of Lassa! ch’io t’ho perduta, bb. 21–39.

Atalanta’s duet with Meleagro, Amarilli! Oh, Dio! Che vuoi? (II/3; G major, C, Andante; Ex. 5.46), is likewise challenging with its large lines and messe di voce. Ben ch’io non sappia ancor (III/1; B♭ major, C, Andante; Ex. 5.47), stands out with its uncommon, kind of jazzy and richly orchestrated rhythms.

Example 5.46: Excerpt (vocal parts) from the duet Amarilli! Oh, Dio! Che vuoi?, bb. 29–46.

Example 5.47: Vocal part (excerpt) of Ben ch’io non sappia ancor, bb. 24–27.

Additionally, an intimate, slow and short lyric aria/arioso-type with rare accompaniment deserves special attention. Its form is mostly a one-part non-da-capo one, hardly exceeding an octave range. The reduction of vocal technical demands put the focus entirely on the effect of expression and vocal colours. These are those Falsa imagine-like numbers Handel built into a tradition also with Strada in her original roles (Poro – Spirto amato III/12 [one-part form with full accompaniment], Orlando – Se fedel vuoi I/9 [da capo], Ariodante – Io ti bacio III/4 [short da capo with strings], Atalanta – Custodite, o dolci sogni III/5, Arminio
– *Ho veleno e ferro* III/3, and *Berenice* – *Avvertite, mie pupille* III/8 [da capo with violins]). They mostly occur in third acts and in the deepest dramatic moments: the heroine is either preparing for death or she is waiting for the execution of her beloved one, planning suicide simultaneously or else the couple’s whole life and happiness is coming to a turning point. It is noteworthy that the simplest and shortest of those cantilenas was given even to that character among Strada’s operatic roles who goes through the biggest transformation in the drama. Progressively, by Act III, all the kaleidoscopic tenderness and intimate sentiments of love awake and develop in Atalanta’s heart, culminating in the *largo* lullaby, *Custodite, o dolci sogni* (III/5; A major, C, Largo; Ex. 5.48; Track 14). When she sees her beloved asleep, crying out while battling a nightmare, compassion overwhelms her, and she evokes sweet dreams to watch over him in peace. This ten-bar-long miniature with only a solo violoncello accompaniment and with a vocal range of a mere octave is the boldest feat Handel ever served to a *prima donna*, and probably one of the most beautiful droplets of music ever written. According to Burney, it ‘would have but little effect from an ordinary singer, but is a *canvas* for a great singer that would admit of fine colouring’.²¹²

Because of its absolute simplicity, hardly anybody but Strada might have agreed to sing such a song, considering the well-known anecdotes about the fights Handel had with Cuzzoni and Carestini to get them to sing *Falsa imagine* and *Verdi prati*, and Senesino’s break up after *Orlando*. This is the ultimate proof of Strada’s beautiful vocal timbres, variety of expressiveness and her authentic and convincing art. Her final duet with Meleagro is marked by her high tessitura, culminating on b♭".

In *Arminio*, Strada had a dramatic part. Tusnelda’s own father betrays her husband and wants to give her to the Roman general, Varo, in marriage. Her first solo number, *Scaglion amore e sangue* (I/3; B major, C, Allegro; Ex. 5.49) is about this conflict. It is a sharply furious aria demanding passion and a strong voice projection: f♯", g" and a" have to be attacked on a regular basis during this movement, mostly as exclamations on the word ‘sangue’ (blood).

The next air is its equilibration: although it has a Minuet character, *È vil segno* (I/7; G minor, 3/8, Larghetto; Ex. 5.50), with its crawly, collapsing motifs and weighty legato, is a labyrinth of chromatic roaming and asymmetric coloratura. Its recurring g"-s must have made the soprano to cry out over and over again in a sonorous yet absorbed voice. The first phrase of the aria is the same as Handel used for Faustina at *Il mio core* (II/5 Elisa; 3/8, G minor, Allegro) in *Tolomeo*, but with an inverse conception, since the same pitch meant one of the highest notes for the mezzo-soprano, but not for Strada. The phrase Faustina sang is in Allegro and with dotted demisemiquaver rhythms, has a dance character and the
g"-s are free of accents, to be sung shortly and *leggero, quasi non legato*, while the line in *Arminio* has its centre of gravity inversely on the sharp and furious high notes and on the falls to c", b♭' and a'. Tusnelda is articulating the words ‘debole amore’ – ‘weak love’ – which manifests itself in crying: here in the A section, she portrays her brother Sigismondo’s complaints caused by his immature feelings in contrast with the middle section, where she states that real flames, like hers, are in defiance even of death.

Example 5.50: Vocal part (excerpt) of *È vil segno*, bb. 38–57.

The alternation between passion and lyric enunciation goes on with *Al furor* (II/5; E minor, 3/4, Andante; see Ex. 5.17) and *Rendimi il dolce sposo* (II/10; A major, 12/8, Largo; Ex. 5.51), a Largo siciliana in A major moving in long legato waves and arcs.

Example 5.51: Vocal part (excerpt) of *Rendimi il dolce sposo*, bb. 5–12.

Example 5.52: *Ho veleno, e ferro avanti*
The arioso *Ho veleno, e ferro avanti* (III/3; B♭ minor, C, Largo; Ex. 5.52) is the partner of Atalanta’s *Custodite*, and creates a tradition of Strada’s last Handelian operas: Largo, likewise with continuo accompaniment and an octave range but in the extreme B♭ minor. Originally, it had a sixteen-bar long three part form, but it became abbreviated to only its A section (to bb. 1–6) in the première. Though the situation is also intimate and lonely, here Tusnelda prepares for the sleep of death: she wants to poison herself simultaneously with Armino’s execution. Finally, in *Và, combatti ancor da forte* (III/6; B♭ major, C, Allegro; Ex. 5.53) Handel lets Strada’s soprano loose like one loosens a wild horse: her power and wide range explodes in vehement zig-zagging jumps through ‘original passages and peculiar difficulties of execution.’ The role of Tusnelda, exceptionally, has no less than three duets, two of which (*Il fuggir, cara mia vita* I/1; A minor, C, Andante allegro; *Ritorna nel core vezzosa* III/9; B♭ major, C, Allegro) Strada performed with the alto castrato Domenico Annibali.

Example 5.53: Vocal part (excerpt) of *Và, combatti ancor da forte*, bb. 33–39.

In *Giustino*, the first two arias of Strada are of the parlante type – *Da’ tuoi begl’ occhi* I/3; A major, C, Allegro, and *Mio dolce amato sposo* I/12; D minor, C, Largo; Ex. 5.54) –, the second of which applies to the chromatic descending of *Se vuoi ch’io mora* (II/6, D minor, C) from Vinci’s *Didone abbandonata*, catching the moment when Arianna is preparing to face death by the sea monster. *Qual torrente* (II/9; D major, C, Allegro; Ex. 5.56), which ‘seems written for the display of Strada’s powers of execution, with a quiet accompaniment, *alla moderna*’, is a castrato-type of movement with a grandiose oboe solo which echoes the voice’s nightingale-like patterns and trills, though they are ironic ones, since Arianna scorns the rebel Vitaliano’s love for her. Its range is exceeded by the previous duet, where Strada’s part has a b♭ g arrival. Interestingly, there are two places in *Da’ tuoi begl’occhi* (bb. 28 and 55; Ex. 5.55) where Handel rewrote the course of the melody to keep it on a higher tessitura, as it can be seen in the autograph score.

121 Ibid., 402.
122 Ibid., 406.
Example 5.54: Excerpt from *Mio dolce amato sposo* (Giustino), with the chromatic descending taken from *Se vuoi ch’io mora* (Didone abbandonata), bb. 10–18.

Example 5.55: Correction of the vocal line in *Da’ tuoi begl’occhi*: first setting and final version of b. 55.

*Qual torrente* (Ex. 5.56), on the other hand, has been transposed a whole tone down, from E to D major (the autograph has it in E major) and became extended, as the conducting score shows.\(^\text{124}\) Strohm has suggested that the reason for the key change was the replacement of Conti’s aria, *O fiero e rio* in A major: this originally preceded *Qual torrente*, but, after it was removed, Strada’s aria came after the B\(^b\) major *Sull’altar di questo* and the dissonance between B\(^b\) and E major called for a transposition.\(^\text{125}\) *Il mio cor* (III/4; F minor, 3/4, Largo), Arianna’s lament over the pains caused by her husband’s unjust jealousy, has a fuller orchestration and reveals the intense ringing of her voice.

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Burney calls it of ‘such an elegant and masterly style of composition as was but little known in any part of Europe at this time.’\(^{126}\)

Example 5.56: Vocal part (excerpt from section A) of *Qual torrente*, bb. 17–53.

Strada’s passion, together with her unique vocal skill set, never ceased to inspire Handel to innovative and extraordinary compositional solutions. For instance, her first aria in her last original role in London, Berenice, was written ‘in a very uncommon style, and supported […] with spirit and ingenuity’. Nò, che servire altrui (I/2; F major, 3/4, Andante; Ex. 5.57; Track 15), applies an asymmetric phrase structure (combining 1, 2, 3, 4, 6 and 7-bar units) with unexpectedly placed accents and dispersed melodic notes. All, based on the display of Strada’s best sounding tones (the most frequently accented fʺ, gʺ and aʺ notes) and her vocal liquidity, might have resulted in a special virtuoso effect.\(^{127}\) The Egyptian Queen namely feels that she is being forced into an unwanted arranged marriage with the Roman general Alessandro, and resists the idea like a wild horse.

*Sempre dolci* (II/3; A major, 3/8, Andante; Ex. 5.58) adds to the Andante-aria tradition, although it operates on the energetic side of the tempo, and the melody is twisted multiple times with octave breaks, arpeggiation and rhythmic variety. Another aria in the role, *Chi t’intende* (III/4; B♭ major, C, Adagio–Andante; Ex. 5.59), is an exceptional piece where the dramatic situation surmounts the form, resulting in the birth of peculiar compositional ideas. The aria occurs after Berenice has found that her beloved Demetrio never cared for her but was interested in her sister, Selene, instead. Moreover he became a traitor, planning to depose Berenice and to make Selene the Queen of Egypt, so Berenice imprisons him and orders his execution. Also, she submits herself to the wisdom of the Roman ambassador

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\(^{127}\) Ibid., 408–409.
Fabio, giving him her signet to find her a worthy husband and ruler for her kingdom. Fabio names Alessandro, the Roman nobleman; Berenice, having agreed, is astonished by the seemingly illogical divine plan. *Chi t’intende*, ‘a very elaborate and fine composition’, besides its tempo changes, contains a strangely chromatic oboe solo, which turns into a duet with the soprano, nearly exceeding the frames of the traditional *da-capo* form. The key and tempo alterations in the middle section deepen the dimensions of the number.

Example 5.57: Vocal part (A section) of *Nò, che servire altrui*, bb. 11–69.

Example 5.58: Vocal part (excerpt from section A) of *Sempre dolci*, bb. 61–102.

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128 Ibid., 411.
Berenice’s feelings, however, do not change easily. *Avvertite, mie pupille* (III/8; C♭ minor, C, Largo, e piano) is the final member of the *Falsa imagine*-type series, this time of a complete *da capo* form with violins, expressing her intention to commit suicide after Demetrio is beheaded. Yet, in the end she forgives and, being healed from vengefulness and pride, finds requited love by Alessandro’s side.

The idea that the musical material dedicated by Handel to Strada is hallmarked by the imprint of her special vocal skills was reflected even in her lifetime by her contemporaries.
The aforementioned sarcastic pamphlet about Handel from 1734 underscores the same, although negatively: ‘Mr. Honeycomb protests, that he cannot adapt one Air of your Composition either to his Eyes or Nose; and they are such Stuff as is only fit for the Throat of a Care[sti]ni or a Stra[d]a’.  

The opportunity to work for eight years with a composer who can provide outstanding material not only suited but generated exclusively for a certain voice of a certain person, is exceptional and luxurious for a singer; such a collection of arias has the value of the best singing master. Strada’s original roles certainly helped her to develop in the right direction and to improve the profound consciousness of her vocal profile and artistic identity: to become aware of what kind of strengths her voice had, and to focus absorbedly on refining them, opened the door to liberate further technical, musical and dramatic skills. This is like wearing an individually tailored dress and looking at oneself in the mirror to realise and to learn something constructively new about one’s character through that favourable visual emphasis; it is this very self-consciousness I discover in Strada’s eyes in Verelst’s painting. Conversely, Handel’s compositional thinking in terms of the soprano voice likewise shifted because of the prospects Strada’s individual skill-set provided. She therefore, through her transformation, transformed her transformer in the process as well.

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Chapter Six: The Prima Donna of Oratorios

Strada’s privileged situation as Handel’s prima donna was not limited to opera roles: she was the pioneering leading soprano during the years when English oratorio was being established by the composer. She sang in five oratorios altogether between 1732 and 1737, four of them in English (Table 6.1). This regularity, as well as the fact that in a critique of the performance of Esther, Senesino’s and Bertolli’s pronunciation was disparaged by comparing it to Welsh whereas that of Strada was not attacked, refers to her good or at least acceptable English enunciation.1 Probably she had a good ear for picking up native accents. The fact that before the nineteenth century there was no standard English pronunciation (Received Pronunciation) – although a strong tendency was shown towards that in the later part of the eighteenth century – and that several regional accents were simultaneously in use, could have made this challenge a bit easier.2 Oratorios in which Strada sang were often revived, and thus the numbers of performances rivalled those of the opera productions. The special features of oratorio were the choruses, the parts of which most probably were sung by the soloists, supported by additional tenors and basses, as happened in the case of the hybrid, half-oratorio half-masque serenata, the bilingual revival of Acis and Galatea in June 1732.3

Esther and Deborah

Although during the process of Handel’s turn towards the genre of English oratorio, and slowly away from Italian opera seria his Italian singers were gradually replaced by British ones, the vocal-technical requirement of great stamina, with which one can sing two hours of alternating chorus movements and solo numbers with relatively short breaks provided by other soloists’ arias, still called for singers with an Italian manner of training. This

1 ‘Senesino and Bertolli made rare work with the English Tongue you would have sworn it had been Welch: I would have wish’d it Italian, that they might have sung with more ease to themselves, since, but for the Name of English, it might as well have been Hebrew’; from the pamphlet See and Seem Blind (Daily Journal, 8 June 1732), George Frideric Handel: Collected Documents Volume 2, 1725‒1734 ed. by Donald Burrows, Helen Coffey, John Greenacombe and Anthony Hicks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 535. Some fifty years later Mrs Thrale reported about the castrato Giuseppe Millico, that he, in a performance of Esther, ‘set to sing these English Words – come my Queen to Chaste Delights – He sung and pronounced them thus. / comb my Queen to catch the lice’. Cited in George E. Dorris, Paolo Rolli and the Italian Circle in London 1715‒1744 (The Hague: Mouton, 1967), 101.


might be the reason why Handel retained until as late as the 1740s and 1750s Élisabeth Duparc (La Francesina), Giulia Frasi and Caterina Galli in his troupe for oratorio performances,\(^4\) and this same reason could justify Strada’s stable presence therein. Additionally – besides the religious topic, the nature of English language, and that British singers were coming from a theatrical background with less vocal education – this explains why arias per person in oratorios were generally less in number, and sometimes even less demanding, than in opera: the soloists had to sing and lead their sections in choruses, which frequently contained sustained notes as well as coloratura passages.

Table 6.1: Strada’s oratorio performances under Handel in London

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Oratorios (with the numbers of performances)</th>
<th>Première</th>
<th>Revivals</th>
<th>Strada’s role</th>
<th>Original cast</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Esther (6+2+2+6+2+2=20)</td>
<td>2 May 1732</td>
<td>April 1733, July 1733, March 1735, April 1736, April 1737</td>
<td>Esther</td>
<td>Senesino, Bertolli, Montagnana, Robinson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deborah (6+1+3+3=13; -1; the performance on 3(^{rd}) April 1733 went without Strada)</td>
<td>17 March 1733</td>
<td>1733 July, April 1734, March 1735</td>
<td>Deborah</td>
<td>Senesino, Bertolli, Gismondi, Montagnana, Waltz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athalia (2+5=7)</td>
<td>10 July 1733</td>
<td>April 1735</td>
<td>Josabeth</td>
<td>Mrs. Wright, Powell, Rochetti, Waltz, Goodwill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alexander’s Feast (&amp; Cecilia, volgi) (5+4+1=10)</td>
<td>19 February 1736</td>
<td>March 1737, June 1737</td>
<td>Soprano</td>
<td>Young, Beard, Erard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Il trionfo del Tempo e della Verità (4)</td>
<td>23 March 1737</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Bellezza</td>
<td>Annibali, Negri, Conti</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Anthony Hicks derives the birth of the Handelian English oratorio from two of the composer’s independent revivals that coincided in the spring of 1732: the Cannons masques from 1718, Esther and Acis and Galatea.\(^5\) Neither of them had been forgotten in the 1720s, due to printed scores and copies circulating, and to amateur performances promoted by music societies. One of these productions, a subscription concert – undoubtedly an exceptional one – gained wider publicity: the choir master of the Chapel Royal, the composer and bass Bernard Gates, prepared with his boy choristers a performance ‘in action’ at the Crown and Anchor Tavern for 23\(^{rd}\) February, Handel’s birthday. (The performance was repeated also on 1\(^{st}\) and 3\(^{rd}\) March.) An important contribution to the momentum of the event was, as Burney stated, that ‘Mr. Handel himself was present at one of these representations, and having mentioned it to the Princess Royal, his illustrious scholar, her Royal Highness was pleased to express a desire to see it

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\(^4\) I am grateful to Donald Burrows for sharing his opinion with me.

exhibited in action at the Opera-house in the Hay-market’. Since the Bishop of London prohibited the chorister boys to sing in a staged work in a theatre, but the choruses were too important to omit, Handel decided to perform it without action and expanded Esther to a full-night production, including two of his coronation anthems composed for King George II and Queen Caroline’s coronation service in 1727 and further solo numbers fitting for the soloists, members of his opera company. According to Deborah W. Rooke, the Coronation Anthems’ introduction into the story of Esther created an evident connection to the Royal couple as protectors of the British nation, and also promoted Queen Caroline’s role as national conciliator. The original text, based on Jean Racine’s drama, was accordingly enriched by Samuel Humphreys.

The first scene was an addition, although Handel reused some of his earlier music. Throughout it, the proportions of the drama were reshaped: Esther’s figure gained much more significance and elaboration than in the 1718 version, and was brought closer to Racine’s character. Rooke emphasises that the portrayal of Esther in the 1732 version focuses on Esther’s role as a heroine in saving her nation on the one hand, and on her physical beauty in winning King Assuerus’s heart on the other – with the suspicion that it might have been influenced by Handel himself which is, again, closer to Racine’s drama and not least to the Biblical story too. As there was no action and only the voices took part in the representation of the characters, Strada’s putative lack of physical charms was no obstacle in rendering Esther audibly delightful with her ‘ravishing voice’. Esther praises God by a ‘Hallelujah of half an hour long’ (I/1; 12/8, Allegro, a tempo giusto; Ex. 6.1) in the noble B♭ major which also represents cheerful love. This number is a double borrowing: it is taken from the Latin motet, Silete venti, which Handel may have composed

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8 Rooke, Handel’s Israelite Oratorio Libretti, 27.
9 She thinks so because in I.1 Mordecai, in his aria, praises Esther’s beauty, and immediately after that the Coronation anthem closes the scene, containing the line ‘The King shall have Pleasure in thy Beauty’. Ibid., 27–28.
10 According to the rabbinic tradition, along with Sarah, Rahab, and Abigail, Esther was one of the most beautiful women in the world (Babylonian Talmud Megillah 15a). Elsewhere they claim that God increased Esther’s beauty before the king, so that he could not resist her.
12 From the pamphlet See and Seem Blind (1732). George Frideric Handel: Collected Documents Volume 2, 535.
in Rome in 1729 – during his Italian journey contracting singers for the Second Academy – for Cardinal Colonna, but its Alleluja, as a reminder, is from Saeviat tellus inter rigores (HWV 240, 1707), the motet Handel wrote to Colonna some twenty years earlier. Here Strada sang practically no text, but miles-long coloratura triplet-chains vocalised on the vowel ‘a’: it means that all of the other aspects of vocal music (i.e. the text and dramatic expression) were eliminated; only the beauty of the sound and the perfection of technique – in other words, the ‘absolute music’ – remained. Handel’s idea of describing Esther’s twofold spiritual and natural beauty through musical notes and without words became linked to Strada’s vocal characteristics, especially her voice’s individual sound. Besides terzini, trills and sustained notes in the head range for display of messa di voce highlight this air. The scene is magnificently ended by Queen Caroline’s coronation anthem My Heart is Inditing (1727).

Example 6.1: Vocal part (excerpt) of Alleluja, bb. 81–94.

In general, the extended role of Esther still seems to have made only modest demands of Strada’s skills, especially concerning range – there are light and unaccented a" notes in the plaint Tears, assist me (II/2; A minor, 3/8, Larghetto), and the others go only up to g" – and virtuosity. Since this was a revival, the original of which was sung by a boy soprano, and since the title role had to be sung by Strada, I think Handel’s possibilities were quite restricted from this point of view. Only in this way could it occur that the music of the Israelitish Woman (sung by the fine soprano, Ann Turner Robinson) went beyond that of Esther in range (b♭"), and was equal with her in divisions, similarly applying triplets in B♭ major as a musical code when she praises Esther’s beauty (Heaven has lent her ev’ry charm II/4; B♭ major, 3/4, Andante allegro). Strada could at least show her vocal strength in the vengeful air of Act III (scene 2), Flatt’ring tongue (B♭ major, C, Allegro; Ex. 6.2). Nevertheless, at the 1733 revivals of Esther Strada took over the whole scene of Act I,

15 Rooke, Handel’s Israelitische Oratorio Libretti, 27.
16 The key A minor was considered as serious and stood for sorrow and lamentation. Mattheson, Das Neu-eröffnete Orchester, 238; Johann Joachim Quantz, Versuch einer Anweisung, die Flöte traversière zu spielen (Berlin: Johann Friedrich Boß, 1752), 138.
singing *Breathe soft, ye gales* and *Watchful angels* (the adopted version of *Ferma l’ali* from *La Resurrezione*, HWV 47, 1708), transposed a major third higher (from E♭ major to G major). In turn, her *parlante* aria in Act II, *No, no more* was given to the Israelitish Woman in *Deborah*, and as both works were performed at Oxford in July 1733 Strada may have not performed this air then. At the 1736 and 1737 revivals, *Watchful angels* went to Gioacchino Conti as *Pure menti amico ciel.*


From the expressive point of view, Esther is one of the most dramatic of Strada’s oratorio roles. A plot which focuses on her decisions, sacrifice and submission to the truth, and how in the process she sets aside her personal emotions and comfort, even risking her life for a greater good, is sensitively reflected in the music. The moment when she enters the king’s presence after three days of complete fasting (even without water), weakened and fainting, witnessed by all the leaders of the kingdom and against the law – she, who had been chosen, now initiates, and he (Ahasuerus, i.e. Xerxes, 485–465 BC) who dismissed his former wife (Vashti) because she was disobedient when he called, now honours his beloved Esther who came uninvited – is breath-taking in its simplicity, gravity and romantic gentleness: the effect of this duet between the Queen and Ahasuerus (*Who calls my parting soul?*; II/3, F minor, 3/4, Adagio e staccato; Ex. 6.3) is achieved mostly with a single, time-stopping, space-erasing gesture of a steady heartbeat-accompaniment in staccato-crochet motion. In *Flatt’ring tongue* then, Esther’s relief, and simultaneously her anger deriving from sense of injustice, burst out spontaneously.

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Example 6.3: Who calls my parting soul
All of the six performances were given ‘By His Majesty’s Command’ and attended by members of the Royal Family – in particular because Princess Anne ‘might have attached herself enthusiastically to the virtuous heroine’ –, attracting ‘very full’ houses. Nevertheless, as with nearly every new beginning, this one did not go without a hitch: the lack of action shocked some to whom a musical drama, even a sacred one, lost its meaning without the visual representation:

This being a new Thing set the whole World a Madding; Han’t you been at the Oratorio, says one? Oh! If you don’t see the Oratorio you see nothing, says t’other; so away goes I to the Oratorio, where I saw indeed the finest Assembly of People I ever beheld in my Life, but, to my great Surprize, found this Sacred Drama a mere Consort, no Scenery, Dress or Action, so necessary to a Drama; but H[ande]l, was plac’d in Pulpit, I suppose they call that (their Oratory), by him sate Senesino Strada Bertolli, and Turner Robinson, in their own Habits; before him stood sundry sweet Singers of this our Israel, and Strada gave us a Halleluiah of Half an Hour long [...] We have likewise had two Operas, Etius and Sosarmes, the first most Masterly, the last most pleasing, and in my mind exceeding pretty: There are two Duetto’s which Ravish me, and indeed the whole is vastly Genteel; (I am sorry I am so wicked) but I like one good Opera better than Twenty Oratorio’s: Were they indeed to make a regular Drama of a good Scripture Story, and perform’d it with proper Decorations, which may be done with as much Preverence in proper Habits, as in their own common Apparel; (I am sure with more Grandeur and Solemnity, and at least equal Decency) then should I change my Mind, then would the Stage appear in its full Lustre, and Musick Answer its original Design. ...

Handel, however, after the general success supported by permanent Royal presence, went on with this enterprise of English oratorio in collaboration with the librettist Humphreys by producing two further sacred dramas in 1733, the former of which was Deborah, premièred at the King’s Theatre on 17th March. As for the choice of the subject, there must have been a motive of competition in the background: in late 1732, the English composer, Maurice Greene, probably being inspired by Handel’s success with Esther, wrote an oratorio entitled The Song of Deborah and Barak, which had a well-

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20 From the pamphlet from the pamphlet See and Seem Blind (Daily Journal, 8 June 1732), George Frideric Handel: Collected Documents Volume 2, 535.
received private performance at the Apollo Academy in October 1732 (and after that a public one at Whitehall Chapel on 17th April 1733). Handel might have answered this challenge with his own setting of the same subject. On the other hand, similarly to its predecessor Esther, Deborah, with its subject of another Biblical female hero, was likewise Handel’s salute not only to the Hanoverian reign but also to female leadership, and especially to Queen Caroline, to whom the word book was dedicated.22 Rooke notes that three previous Protestant English queens opposing Catholicism, namely Elizabeth I, Mary II and Anne, were regularly compared to Deborah in literature; she suggests also that in the case of the Hanoverian Queen Caroline too, the word book of Deborah could be work of allegorical propaganda suggesting that Anglican Britain is potent enough to overtake its Catholic neighbours.23 Ruth Smith has warned that these parallels cannot be strictly applied to every action in the plot, since ‘in the early 1730s the lack of a strong national leader to redeem the population from a tyrannical rule was a favourite theme of Patriot opposition, whereas Caroline was Walpole’s most powerful supporter’,24 yet satirical writings and pamphlets utilised Handel and Strada’s names as well as their professional relationship as a metaphor for the Queen’s favour and political influence on the Prime Minister, Robert Walpole. Thus, as Strada’s voice represented both symbolic characters, Esther and Deborah, her person became involved in these political allegories as a code for the Queen, even concerning her role as Deborah. (See the Craftsman on 7th April 1733.)25 Deborah’s text might also reflect political relations between the diplomatically gifted Queen Caroline and the military man of distinction, King George II as Barak, emphasising the prophetess counselling the heroic leader of the people. This is especially evident in their two duets.26

The music of Deborah’s role radiates magnificence, authority and strength. It is a much more queenly music than that of Esther, whose purity, beauty and emotional approach to her people’s enemy were highlighted, and who was depending on the favour and decision of a yet ungodly king, whereas Deborah with her authority as a prophetess – in a nation functioning according to divine structure and through its judges, directly ruled by God and without an earthly king – counsels and spiritually supports the executive power led by general Barak in order to gain victory. The splendour of the sound is permanent throughout

22 Deutsch, Handel, 308.
23 Rooke, Handel’s Israelite Oratorio Libretti, 33–34.
26 Rooke, Handel’s Israelite Oratorio Libretti, 52.
the whole role. Deborah approaches the situation of Israel from a spiritual point of view, raised above the natural; therefore her personal emotions are distanced from the faith and wisdom she represents. She is not directly involved in the battle against the Canaanites – the turning point in the nation’s history – as Esther is by entering into the throne room, a deed entailing the death penalty unless the king decides otherwise. Deborah’s first appearance at the beginning of the oratorio is a duet with Barak, *Where do thy ardours raise me* (I/1; E♭ major, 12/8, Larghetto). The music is in E♭ major, a key connecting to tenderness and love elevating the soul, and has a light tone in Minuet character. Deborah gently encourages the general to fulfil his divine calling (This is in contrast to the Biblical account, where Barak had not answered God’s calling to initiate a battle, and Deborah had to remind him and repeat the command. When Barak still hesitated and wanted Deborah to come with him, the prophetess announced the consequence of his spiritual disobedience and cowardice: it will be not he but a woman who will gain the glory instead; see Judges 4). It has a catchy melody, just as their other duet, *Smiling freedom* (II/1; A major, 3/8, Larghetto) at the end of part II.

Strada’s first aria, *Choirs of angels* (I/2; B♭ major, C, Allegro; Ex. 6.4), with oboes, is an established Handelian oratorio aria, taken from the *Brockes Passion*, the sound profile of which became typical in Handel’s sacred works. Here, Deborah is rejoicing in the divine splendour and the security of her faith in victory. Although Deborah was likewise a pasticcio, recycling many numbers from earlier works of Handel (the two other Coronation Anthems which were not used for *Esther*, *Let thy hand be strengthened* and *The King shall rejoice*, the Chandos Anthems *O Praise the Lord with one consent* and *In the Lord I put my trust*, the *Brockes Passion*, *Dixit Dominus*, *Il Trionfo del Tempo*, *Aci, Galatea e polifemo*, etc.), in Strada’s role everything apart from *Choirs of angels* was newly composed.

![Example 6.4: Vocal part (excerpt) of Choirs of angels, bb. 20–27.](image)

*In Jehovah’s awful sight* (II/1; F minor, 3/2, Adagio; Ex. 6.5) can be compared to the duet in *Esther* II/3, *Who calls my parting soul*, for both share the same key – the profound, obscure, lamenting and desperate F minor – the same tempo, similar metre and

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27 Quantz, *Versuch einer Anweisung*, 203.
accompaniment, although in Deborah without staccati. Again, its severe magnificence overshadows any drama or lamentation; she, though agreeing, is simply transmitting the heavenly truth about tyrants’ vain pursuit of fame and might, as well as their temporary reign.

Example 6.5: In Jehovah’s awful sight

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28 Mattheson, Das Neu-eröffnete Orchestre, 238; Quantz, Versuch einer Anweisung, 138 and 203.
In *All your boast* (II/1; Soli & Chorus, D minor, 3/8, Andante) Strada had opportunities to let her marathon (six-bar long) *messe di voce* shine in a rising sequential way, which foreshadows the middle section of the future *Hallelujah* chorus of the *Messiah*. Her sustained notes must have been extraordinary and beautiful indeed: Bryan Robinson in his *A Treatise of the Animal Oeconomy* (1732), published in *The Gentleman’s Magazine* in 1737, refers to them in the entertaining rhymed description about the lungs: ‘Or hear a Strada or Cuzzoni swell, In sweet proportion’d notes, th’ *Italic* air’. The effectiveness of *The glorious sun* (III/3; A major, 3/4, Andante; Ex. 6.6) with its two accented a” notes reached by seventh leaps, the many occasions for trills, and its rhythmic variety (syncopations, triplets, dotted rhythms, semiquavers, etc.), lies in the glimmering, silver-like quality of tone with which Strada must have executed it.

Example 6.6: Vocal part (excerpt) of *The glorious sun*, bb. 49–80.

*Deborah’s* success was ruined already before its first performance (17th March) because of the high ticket prices, raised by Handel from half a Guinea to a whole, and because he denied admission to subscribers when they did not want to pay that margin. The reasons could be that the house had to be illuminated, and that a larger number of performers than Handel ever needed for an opera performance had to be paid. For the second time it was given (27th March), the prices were ‘reduced to the common standard’.

Last week we had an Oratorio: Compos’d by Hendel out of the Story of Barak & Deborah the latter of which name it bears[.] Hendel thought[,] encourag’d by

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the Princess Royal[,] it had merit enough to deserve a Guinea & the first time it was performd att that price, exclusive of subscribers tickets, there was but a 120 people in the House: the subscribers being refus’d unless they would pay a Guinea they insisting upon the right of their silver tickets forc’d into the House & carry’d their point.[.]32

The situation was aggravated by the unfortunate coincidence that three days prior to the première Sir Robert Walpole introduced his idea of a Tobacco Excise Bill in Parliament (which was defeated in the end). The two scandals were paralleled by satirical political writings, representing Handel and Walpole as accomplices in greediness.33

In half they succeeded, in half they were crost; The Tobacco was sav’d, but poor Deborah lost.34

After such a prelude, not even the high level of the performance, as recounted by Viscount Percival, was able to help much with the work’s reputation:

Went in the evening to see deborah an Oratorio made by Hendel. It was very magnificent, near a hundred performers, among whom about 25 singers.35

From Athalia to Bellezza

Athalia, although it was composed shortly after Deborah, and despite that it is based on a drama of Racine, like Esther, differs from the former two in that it portrays the demise of an ungodly female Biblical leader, and that the majority of its music was almost entirely newly composed.36 The story of this anti-heroine, as Rooke calls her, became a metaphor for the Jacobite attempt to restore the Stuart monarchy. Athalia was created for the Public Act of the University of Oxford in 1733, and as Oxford was then a centre of High Church Tories and Jacobites, a subject for an oratorio to promote the Hanoverian house had to be chosen carefully, diplomatically and intelligently. Humphreys paraphrased Racine’s concept, emphasising the purification of the land from idolatry – symbolising the

33 McGeary, The Politics of Opera in Handel’s Britain, 137–139; see Deutsch, Handel, 309.
35 From Viscount Percival’s Diary, 27 March 1733. Ibid., 606.
36 Hicks, ‘Handel and the idea of an oratorio’, 154–155.
removal of Catholicism – and in so doing, he underlined the dominion of the Protestant Hanoverian monarchy.  

During the Oxford ‘Act’, the University’s annual graduation ceremony, not only *Athalia* was performed – premièred at the Sheldonian Theatre on the 10th July (postponed from the 9th to the 10th) and additionally given on the 11th – but *Esther, Deborah, Acis and Galatea* (Strada’s benefit), the *Utrecht Te Deum* and two of the *Coronation Anthems* also were planned (*Esther* was performed on the 5th and the 7th, *Acis* on the 11th and Deborah on the 12th). The University’s intention to honour Handel with a ‘Degree of Doctor of Music, at the Publick Act to be held there this summer, that Signor Senesino is expected to be present on the Occasion’, was reported in the *Applebee’s Original Weekly Journal* of 7th April. As is well known, in the meantime all of Handel’s Italian singers except Strada left him for the Nobility’s company. From the cast of *Deborah* that spring, therefore, neither Senesino nor Bertolli, Gismondi or Montagnana were present; and the honorary D.Mus., if offered at all in the end, obviously had been turned down by the composer. However, Handel arrived at Oxford not only with his singers but with his orchestral players as well, and *Athalia* was performed by ‘about 70 Voices and Instruments of Musick, and was the grandest [performance] ever heard at Oxford’. Its success has been claimed to be enormous, with 2,500–2,600 or even 3,700 persons in the audience, although according to Diack Johnstone the maximum capacity of the Sheldonian Theatre could not be more than 1,250 seats.

Strada’s role this time was markedly larger than in the two previous oratorios; as Josabeth had five arias and three duets. It is reminiscent of the case of *Poro* because of its homogenously lyric nature: it contains only one Allegro number. Although this meant a lack of coloratura fireworks, gestures of virtuosity are incorporated into and covered by the ongoing lyricism and pastoral feeling: in *Blooming virgins* (I/1; G major, 6/8, Larghetto) the first part of the da capo section is simple and the A2 section is where sixth and seventh leaps, stretching of range – manifesting in an octave and a fifth large phrase – and fine rhythmic embroidery occur. *Tyrrants would in impious throngs* (I/1; B♭ major, 3/4,

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37 Rhode, *Handel’s Israelite Oratorio Libretti*, 55 and 72–73.
39 *The Craftsman*, 14 July 1733. Cited in Deutsch, *Handel*, 326; ‘Mr Handel has not accepted his Degree of Doctor of Musick, as was reported’. Diary of Thomas Hearne, Oxford, 18–19 July 1733. *George Frideric Handel: Collected Documents Volume 2*, 667. Most probably because Handel did not want to be in the same group where his rival, Maurice Greene belonged, who earned a doctorate by his performance in Cambridge in July 1730. See Johnstone, ‘Handel at Oxford’, 251.
Allegro), a solo number with chorus, focuses on the text; its effect is created by accents, while the range of Josabeth’s part goes up to b♭. Its counterpart is Soothing tyrant (III/2; B minor, 6/8, Andante; Ex. 6.7), a non da capo aria, the passion of which is expressed by exclamations: accented crotchets and sequential arpeggiation-waves are designed to highlight Strada’s fine vocal tone. While Faithful cares in vain extended (B♭ major, 12/8, Larghetto) is entirely parlante, Through the land (II/1; D minor, 3/8; Ex. 6.8; Track 11) bears the typical marks of Strada’s style: triplets, trills, messe di voce and dotted rhythms with demisemiquavers. Her duet with Joas, the two-part My spirits fail (F minor, C, A tempo ordinario, ma un poco lento – Andante), has a Purcellian music in which plaint turns into a victorious declaration of faith. Among the two duets of Josabeth and Joad, Cease thy anguish / All thy mercies is a catchy Minuet (E♭ major, 3/8, Larghetto); their second one, Joys, in gentle trains / Softest joys (A major, 3/4, Andante), after Athalia’s fall, is brief, shadowless, sweet, innocent and melodious.

Example 6.7: Vocal part (excerpt) of Soothing tyrant, bb. 14–56.

Example 6.8: Vocal part (excerpts) of the first setting of Through the land so lovely blooming, bb. 47–61 and 65–96.
The first London performance of *Athalia*, at Covent Garden on the 1st April 1735, can be considered as a second première, for Handel applied significant revisions (although much of its music had been heard in his *festa teatrale, Il Parnasso in festa* at the King’s Theatre in March 1734). First of all, it became a bilingual hybrid version, because new Italian arias had to be provided for Carestini in taking the role of Joad. Further new members of the cast were Cecilia Young as Athalia, John Beard as Mathan and William Savage as Joas. Only Strada (Josabeth) and Waltz (Abner) remained from the performers of 1733. Handel was composing *Alcina* simultaneously with the revisions of *Athalia*; it is not surprising, therefore, that the second setting of Strada’s aria *Through the land so lovely blooming* (Ex. 6.9) utilised the music of Ruggiero’s air *Bramo di trionfar*, which Handel eliminated before the première of *Alcina* (16th April). He also introduced his organ concertos as intermezzi between the parts.

Example 6.9: Vocal part (excerpt) of the second setting of *Through the land so lovely blooming*, bb. 27–50.

Strada, by singing the aria originally meant for Carestini, through its pompous, overflowing and at the same time playful terzini-garlands, became vocally assimilated by Handel to the castrato’s Italian style during birth of the English oratorio, and thus the edge
of the sharp break between Carestini’s and the others’ musical material (and sung language) was taken off, or at least lessened. There was a significant difference in the lengths of the numbers: all of the other movements are approximately 3–5 minutes long, while the arias of Carestini are around 6–7. Naturally, Joad and Josabeth’s duet Cease thy anguish was sung in Italian as Cangia in gioia, and Joys, in gentle trains was replaced by Carestini’s aria Angelico splendor. Furthermore, the fact that Strada as an Italian singer sang from the beginning in English, whereas for the others, after the fiasco of Esther, Handel allowed Italian texts to be sung, strengthens the assumption that she really might have had a reasonable English pronunciation.

Not only Greene and the Apollo Academy, but also the Opera of the Nobility seems to have tried to rival Handel in the field of oratorio: Porpora’s Davide e Bersabea with Rolli’s text was produced on 12th March 1734 (and revived in Lent 1735):

I went to the Oratorio at Lincoln’s-Inn, compos’d by Porpora [. . .] some of the Choruses & recitative are extremely fine & touching[,] but they say it is not equal to Mr. Handel’s Oratorios of Esther or Deborah.43

For his next oratorio-type work, Handel set ‘to very fine music’ John Dryden’s ode, Alexander’s Feast, or the Power of Music (1697, written on the celebration of St. Cecilia’s day on 22 November).44 The librettist was Newburgh Hamilton this time – a minor poet and playwright, from whom the very suggestion of the use of an English text might have come to Handel.45 After it was completed on 17th January 1736, the first performance took place at Covent Garden on 19th February that year. Since in the plot everything was built around the celebration of Alexander the Great’s conquest of Persia, led by the musician Timotheus, and as the work was too short to give a full-value evening, its turn into to a grandiose production by the addition of three concertos and the cantata, Cecilia, volgi un sguardo – performed by Strada and the Florentine composer, lutenist, harpsichordist and tenor, Carlo Arrigoni – was reasonable.46 The main soloists were Strada, the tenor John

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43 Mrs Pendarves to her sister, Anne Granville, 28 March 1734. George Frideric Handel: Collected Documents Volume 2, 766.
44 From the Earl of Egmont’s diary, 19 February 1736. Ibid., 399.
45 Hicks, ‘Handel and the idea of an oratorio’, 155.
46 The concerti were: (1) B major Harp, Lute, Lyrichord and other Instruments (HWV 294) – this was played after the recitative Timotheus, plac’d on high (Part I); (2) Concerto grosso in C major for oboes, bassoon and strings, now known as the Concerto in Alexander’s Feast (HWV 318) – just like Cecilia, volgi un sguardo (HWV89), it was performed between Parts I and II; (3) G major organ concerto (HWV 289), performed after the chorus Let old Timotheus yield the prize (Part II) – Arrigoni played the lute part in the first concerto as well as sang the tenor solo in the cantata. Donald Burrows, Handel (London: Oxford University Press, 1994), 243–244; John Walter Hill, ‘Arrigoni, Carlo’, Grove Music Online ed. L. Macy. Accessed 13 August 2015.
Beard and the bass Erard; the second soprano was Cecilia Young with one air, *War, he sung, is toil and trouble*, together with the previous arioso *Softly sweet in Lydian measures*.

Strada’s arias were as follows: *With ravish’d ears* (I; D major, 3/8, Allegro, ma non presto), *He sung Darius, great and good* (I; E♭ major, 6/8, Largo, e piano), *The prince, unable to conceal* (A major, C, A tempo giusto), *Thais led the way* (II; B♭ major, 3/4, Andante larghetto), duet *Let’s imitate her notes* (II; F major, 6/8, Allegro). In *Cecilia*, volgi she had one additional air and a duet: *Sei cara* (B♭ major, C, Andante allegro) and *Tra amplexsi innocenti* (A major, C, Andante allegro) – altogether five arias and two duets. Beard and Erard had only two each, just like Arrigoni in the cantata; Beard and Arrigoni had one duet each with Strada. Thus, Strada was given maximum priority in this project, not only by virtue of the number of arias but also by their technical demands.\(^{47}\) One is tempted to think that Handel let her appear as his muse in this respect.

Her first aria, *With ravish’d ears* (Ex. 6.10–11), written in the glorious D major key, connects poetic metaphors with picturesque musical depictions by commenting how the power of music impresses leaders and affects even the functioning of the universe. The most extraordinary of them is the twenty-three-bar-long phrase at the word ‘shake’, beginning with a four-bar long *messa di voce* on e"\(^{4}\), and continuing with coloraturas of alternating seconds, seventh jumps, trills and scales, to another *messa di voce* at the end on a". This latter note is reached by an octave leap and has a tail of an octave and a fourth large scale down, with a seventh jump up attached before the cadential motif. The first sustained note on e", when the singer pronounces the word ‘shake’, must have been done by Strada very logically with a trill, which was at the same time a musical mannerism and a pun on the word, since shake has trill as its secondary meaning in English (it is completely ignored by recent recordings). Additionally, as the voice and the violins are complementing each other in that phrase, the first probable point where a *messa di voce* could have turned into a trill is after the first trill of the violins (g" sharp), when they have a dotted crotchet b'. I think that in the next bar, when the violins were moving in dotted rhythms and high in the second octave, the best solution would have been for the soprano to switch back to sustaining the note, and in the fourth bar of e" to trill again. In this way the play with the word and the effect of ‘shake’ would have been doubled and with a nice sense of beat, not to speak of the back and forth conversation with the violins. The other solution was and is to trill continually from the second bar onwards, but I would rather

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flatter myself with the thought that Strada did the former or some other, more creative one. The wide-ranging tail at the end of the phrase is as natural as it can be; the seventh jump after that is more surprising than the long scale itself.

Example 6.10: Excerpt from *With ravish’d ears*, bb. 25–68.

It sheds light on the proportions of Strada’s skill set, and its difference is marked in comparison to similar motifs in some other Handelian sopranos’ repertoire. Of those singers whose arias contained such reoccurring phrases explicitly stressing one particular element, which became too frequent and after a while less interesting, one can suspect that they might have lacked the variety provided by multi-coloured abilities. Features like the
beauty and sonorousness of the voice, the richness of its emission, colours and even *stamina* have priority over a wide range. For those who did not possess enough of the formers, the latter turned to be the main talent to show. Examples include Élisabeth Duparc – with a light but very agile voice, quite musical also, though Burney ranked her as a singer of a second class\(^48\) – who had at least one aria in every opera and in several oratorios she sang with the same type of large ascending scale, and that repeatedly; also Maria Monza, who played Nerea in *Deidamia* and was given extremely demanding arias while her performance was considered as ‘below criticism’ – which must have been an exaggeration; nevertheless, it refers to unbalanced talents.\(^49\)

In the second part of *With ravish’d ears* (it is a *non da capo* aria; Ex. 6.11) ‘shake’ has two more coloraturas, with lengths of ten and fifteen bars. The former uses the inversion of the elements of the original: the second alternations and the same dotted rhythms with trills; while the latter emphasises the semiquaver-scales and bar-long a” notes. This aria may have been one of those which Handel accompanied with organ, not with harpsichord.

Example 6.11 Vocal part (excerpt) of *With ravish’d ears*, bb. 101–136.

The lyric side of Strada’s vocal variety could make a deep impression through the beautifully pathetic *He sung Darius, great and good* (Ex. 6.13), surrounded by two *recitativi accompagnati*, the first of which is the highly chromatic, *stile antico* lament, *He chose a mournful Muse* (G minor, C, Adagio e piano; Ex. 6.12).

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\(^{49}\) Duparc called La Francesina: Deidamia in *Deidamia – Nasconde, l’usigno’l*, the idea of this aria came from Strada’s *Se troppo crede al ciglio from Poro; Consolami se brami; Romilda in Serse – Chi cede al furore; Clotilde in Faramondo – Mi parto lieta; Rosmene in *Imeneo – Io son quella navicella*; Occasional Oratorio – *Fly from the threatening vengeance, Prophetic visions strike my eye, When warlike ensigns, When Israel; Joseph and his Brethren – The silver stream, Prophetic raptures swell; Semele in *Semele* – With fond desiring*. Maria Monza: Nerea in *Deidamia* – both setting, especially the second one from both of *Di lusinghe and Sì, che desio*; the second setting of *Non vuò perdere l’istante* which is actually based on *Sei cara* from *Cecilia*, vol. 1. According to Mrs Pendarves, ‘her voice is between Cuzzoni’s and Strada’s – strong, but not harsh, her person miserably bad’. Burney claimed her as below criticism. Winton Dean, *‘Monza, Maria’*, *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy. Accessed on 17 August 2015; Burney, *A General History of Music*, vol. iv, 436.
Example 6.12: *He chose a mournful muse*
It is assumable that in *Cecilia*, volgi Handel initiated a competition between her faithful soprano and Arrigoni, who was involved in the Opera of the Nobility’s circle. As a faster aria for Arrigoni (E major, 3/8, Andante allegro; strings only), Handel reworked his secular Italian cantata-aria from 1711–12, *Splenda l’alba*, transforming its Lombard rhythms into triplets, which, together with the six *messe di voce* the number contains, are among the most typical elements of Strada’s singing.\(^{50}\) Handel might have done it with the motive of contrasting the vocal qualities of the two singers by giving Strada’s typical patterns to Arrigoni and vice versa, to show that she was able to sing exhibitionistic virtuoso passages reflecting the Nobility’s style. Her only aria, *Sei cara* (Ex. 6.14), cumulatively contains almost every kind of show-off element a qualified singer can have. Furthermore, Handel made a blow-up effect with the contrasting pathetic middle section of astonishing beauty (‘Un puro ardor’, G minor, 3/4, Andante larghetto) to emphasise his singer’s expressive assets.

Example 6.14: Vocal part (excerpt) of *Sei cara*, bb. 33–90.

\(^{50}\) Fragmental cantata *Splenda l’alba in oriente* (HWV 166). Nr. 1. Splenda l’alba (B♭ major, 3/8, A tempo giusto e staccato), for alto voice, two flutes, oboes and strings.
First of all, in the Allegro there are two Adagio stops with *messa di voce* for longer cadenzas; then many trills, some hammered quavers, complex coloratura-motions with large scales up and down, arpeggiation patterns and sixth semiquaver leaps occur. Almost the same section is repeated in A2 a fifth lower, bringing Strada’s chest register and wide range into focus. The coloratura passages are built of multiple repetitions of the same patterns on the same pitch successively – a phenomenon highly atypical of Strada’s style, and stressing further the competitive nature of the work. Moreover, towards the end of part A, a *messa di voce* on f” concluding in a *cantar di sbalzo* gesture on the word ‘maggior’ (encompassing a range from f’ to b♭” in within two beats) proclaims Strada as winner. *Sei cara* is more than eight minutes long; the duet *Tra amplexsi innocent*, a space for another vocal race, around six minutes and a half.

The success of *Alexander’s Feast* was undoubted. The *London Daily Post* reported about the première the next morning:

Never was upon the like Occasion so numerous and splendid an Audience at any Theatre in London, there being at least 1300 Persons present; and it is judg’d that the Receipt of the House could not amount to less than 450l. It met with general Applause, tho attended with the Inconvenience of having the Performers placed at too great a distance from the Audience.\(^{51}\)

The acoustical problem was solved for the next time:

For the better Reception of the Ladies, the Pit will be floor’d over, and laid into the Boxes; and the Orchestre plac’d in a Manner more commodious to the Audience.\(^{52}\)

The Italian oratorio, *Il trionfo del Tempo e della Verità*, premièred on 23\(^{rd}\) March 1737 in the midst of a group of oratorio and serenata revivals (*Il Parnasso in Festa, Alexander’s Feast* and *Esther*), was in fact the revived and extended version of Handel’s very first oratorio from 1707 (Rome), *Il trionfo del Tempo e del disinganno* (libretto by cardinal Benedetto Pamphili).\(^{53}\) It was the Lent period, and due to a restriction operas could not be given on Wednesday and Friday nights; oratorio revivals were an ideal choice for Handel to fill this vacuum (just as he did in 1735).\(^{54}\) According to Burrows, ‘this gave him a

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54 ‘We hear, since Operas have been forbidden being performed at the Theatre in Covent Garden on the Wednesdays and Fridays in Lent, Mr. Handel is preparing Dryden’s Ode of Alexander’s Feast, the Oratorios of Esther and Deborah, with several new Concertos for the Organ and other Instruments; also an
competitive advantage in access to the London audience and provided his performers with continuity of employment'.\textsuperscript{55} From Strada’s point of view, who sang Bellezza’s part, those numbers which were rewritten (Io sperai trovar nel vero, the quartets Voglio tempo per risolvere and Se non sei più) became shortened and/or much more simple than their original versions – among which the most painful one is undoubtedly the new parlante setting of the originally fantastic and passionate bravura aria with a ravishingly expressive B section, Un pensiero nemico di pace (Ex. 6.15–16); additional ensemble numbers likewise did not have any particular vocal technical demands, nor did they contain genius-sparks of the composer (Soli e coro Viver, e non amar, part II). Handel was in a hurry, but more importantly he was exhausted and in the midst of one of his busiest seasons ever (with eight operas and four oratorios, among which five were new in London): shortly after the fourth and last performance of Il Trionfo he suffered a stroke (sometime around 9–11\textsuperscript{th} April).\textsuperscript{56} Aside from Handel’s health problems, another reason for the simplification of Il Trionfo is that he might have adjusted this Italian oratorio’s music to the British audience’s oratorio standards.

Example 6.15: Excerpt from the 1707 setting of Un pensiero nemico di pace, bb. 20–28.

\textsuperscript{55} Burrows, Handel, 252.

\textsuperscript{56} ‘Considering his advanced age (fifty-two), careless diet and financially ruinous competition with the “Nobility” opera, a health breakdown was likely.’ Ilias Chrissochoidis, ‘Handel recovering: Fresh light on his affairs in 1737’, Eighteenth-Century Music 5/2 (2008), 237–244: 237-38.
Example 6.16: Excerpt from the 1737 setting of *Un pensiero nemico di pace*, bb. 1–13.

As far as Strada’s vocal excellences are concerned, the original numbers of the 1707 oratorio still provided her with enough space to shine: above all in *Una schiera di piaceri* (the prototype of her *Parolette vezzi e sguardi*, see ch. 4) and in her first duet with Piacere, *Il voler nel fior* (Ex. 6.17), both containing long semiquaver terzini-chains and some a” notes. *Venga il Tempo* (Ex. 6.18) gives many possibilities to trill, has two *messe di voce* at the word ‘dorme’ (‘sleeps’) in the middle section and mainly consists of quaver-triplets. Among the further arias there were two pathetic numbers: *Io vorrei due cori in seno*, with continuo accompaniment, and *Quel del ciel ministro eletto*; two parlante ones, *Voglio cangiar desio* and *Ricco pino*; and a shorter *a mezzo carattere*, *Fido specchio*. 
Example 6.17: Excerpt (vocal parts) from the duet *Il voler nel fior*, bb. 26–35.

Example 6.18: *Venga il tempo*
Probably the most important outcome of Strada’s participation in Handel’s oratorios ‘on this curious point of musical history’ was the participation itself and its quality. It had a strategical significance that an internationally known, top-level leading soprano could accompany the composer on this path to the establishment of English oratorios. Through Strada the Italian manner of singing and the highest vocal technique met the English language. She as a role model may have opened the way for a group of English singers to be integrated into Handel’s world, and some of them (like Ann Turner Robinson and Cecilia Young) into his operatic activity too.

Chapter Seven: Back to Italy

The uncertainties of London’s operatic life in 1737 and 1738 cost Strada entirely missed seasons. After both the Royal Academy and the Opera of the Nobility collapsed, and Handel, recovering from his stroke of April 1737, began producing operas for singers of the former rival company, Strada remained in London, hoping that the situation around him might settle and her status as prima donna could be restored. As discussed earlier, the attempt to reorganise opera subscriptions by the twenty noble ladies and Heidegger meant a real possibility for that to happen. After it failed, Strada went to Holland to sing for Princess Anne of Orange, afterwards she and her husband Aurelio returned to his home town of Naples. By then, it was probably too late for her to get any appointment for the upcoming 1738/39 season, although she probably had regular private appearances in high circles (Table 7.1). Aurelio may have renewed all his contacts on her behalf to put her back in the ‘market’.

That in the end Strada became engaged at Teatro San Carlo for the 1739/40 season, was also due to the fortunate coincidence that the prima donna already contracted, Lucia Facchinelli, was sent to Spain for the marriage celebrations of the son of King Felipe V with the daughter of King Louis XV of France, as late as mid-August.\(^1\) Thus, Strada jumped in to substitute for her. This was a great relief to the primo uomo, Senesino, for whom it would have been displeasing to perform with Facchinelli, according to his agent, Albizzi.\(^2\) The seconda donna was the superb contralto, the young and attractive Teresa Baratti/a. Her father, the tenor Pietro Baratti, was also a member of the S. Carlo company, together with Maria Cattaneo (soprano), Francesco Tolve (tenor), and the prodigious, nineteen year-old soprano castrato, Giovanni Manzuoli.\(^3\)

Although Strada as prima donna was the second in rank after Senesino, she had the lowest salary of the cast, that of 600 ducats. Senesino, for instance, with his nearly 3700 ducats earned more than six times more than her (the others’ wages were: Amorevoli, 1053; Cataneo, 1108; Tolve, 750; Teresa Baratti, 1004; Manzuoli, 613 ducats).\(^4\)

\(^1\) Caffarelli, Vittoria Tesi and Teresa Peruzzi also were among the elected ones. Benedetto Croce, I teatri di Napoli: Secolo XV – XVIII (Naples: Luigi Pierro, 1891), 344.
\(^3\) Holmes, Opera Observed, 142.
\(^4\) Croce, I teatri di Napoli, 348.
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<td>Tiridate, 1mo uomo</td>
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<td>lost</td>
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Before the first public première in the autumn, Strada sang at least two private concerts at noble houses together with the tenor Angelo Amorevoli, likewise her co-singer in the forthcoming season. This was documented by a young Dutch nobleman, Jan Teding van Berkhout (1713–66), who was on his Grand Tour, accompanying one of his relatives on a diplomatic mission.⁵ He himself was an amateur musician: after reaching Naples on 17th July 1739, he started to take violoncello lessons with the famous cellist and composer Salvatore Lanzetti three times a week, and further daily cello, harpsichord and singing tuitions with his nephew, most probably Domenico Lanzetti.⁶ The first festive soirée Jan mentions concerning Strada happened on Monday 7th September 1739, when he was a guest at the palazzo of Prince Scitella:

There were many people in several rooms one playing [cards?], and in a beautiful gallery there was a fine concert, performed by the greatest virtuosi. Porpora played the harpsichord, the tenor Amorevoli sang, and there was also la Sig. Stradina.⁷

The second occasion took place at the home of the Duchesse de Balena in honour of the Count and Countess de Milan. This time Jan’s teacher Lanzetti accompanied Strada and Amorevoli on the violoncello, together with other qualified musicians.⁸

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⁶ Vlaardingerbroek, “‘The promised land of music’”, 116.

The first San Carlo season

Teatro di San Carlo, the first large-scale opera house in Europe, opened its doors on 4th November 1737 (the king’s name day) with Sarro’s *Achille in Sciro*, based on the libretto of Metastasio. The house was erected next to the Royal palace by commission of the Bourbon King Charles III of Naples, and was a rapid construction, which began on 11th March and ended on 28th October of the same year. Designed by the military architect Giovanni Antonio Medrano and Angelo Carasale, the former director of the preceding opera house, S. Bartolomeo, the gigantic proportions of the building symbolised the monarch’s power.9 The theatre’s vast capacity was around 3,000 persons (around 1,400 seats and a standing room), likely twice the size of the S. Bartolomeo’s.10

A long and greatly detailed letter from Princess Isabella Caposele to her Venetian friend survives, which she wrote immediately after returning home from the opening night of S. Carlo. She gives an exceptionally direct insight into that experience, comparing the new theatre with its predecessor the S. Bartolomeo, in which Strada was singing between 1724 and 1726:

> It is two o’clock in the morning. I come from the theatre of San Carlo, opened this evening for the first time, to the astonishment of the Neapolitans, with music and ballet, and inaugurated in the presence of His Majesty – may God keep him! The signor, my husband, Prince de Caposele, who has just now gone to bed and is sleeping, wearied by continual visits to the boxes, possessed, as you well know, a little box in the old theatre of San Bartolomeo, for which we paid at the distribution only ninety ducats. For the same box in the second tier which we have now at the San Carlo my husband gladly paid seven hundred and sixty ducats for the satisfaction of taking pleasure in the neighbourhood of the king and playing court to him. [...] between us, I admit to you I experience far greater pleasure when Scarlatti comes to us to play an allegro or a minuet downstairs. What shall I say? Sarro is perhaps a highly respectable composer, but, according to my poor judgement, he is too much given to lamentations for enjoyment in the Opera House. His Majesty – may God have him in his keeping! – slept nearly the whole evening. Serious music, my dear, very serious, and not suited to our ears. It was not agreeable for me to hear from my husband, who was informed of the fact at the auditor’s office, that we could not put on our box the device of our

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house. The king – may God preserve him! – has ordered that no box-holder should
paint or engrave on his box the coat-of-arms of his family. On the other hand, it gave
me great pleasure to learn that His Majesty had prohibited smoking in the lobby, so
that women should not have their stomachs upset. The old San Bartolomeo Theatre
had become a barracks by reason of this annoyance, and you know how I suffer in this
circumstance which does not respect the nobility. My Violante, what an illumination,
what pomp, what a feast for the eye! [...] You may ask: “How have they been able to
construct such an immense theatre in so little time?” What can I say in reply? My
mind is still bewildered by the spectacle, and it seems as though I were deep in a
dream.11

Despite all of its grandeur, the acoustics of the too large auditorium were proved far
from ideal. Complaints rose from the very beginning and were heard even two seasons
after the opening event. Van Berkhout, attending the performance of Sarro’s Partenope,
Strada’s first production at the grand theatre, was embarrassed by the impressive
dimensions of the hall as well as by the similarly great size of the orchestra:

The orchestra was very numerous: 45 violins, 2 harpsichords, 4 basses, 2 violoncellos,
bassoons, horns, oboes and flutes. The width and the length of the theatre are so
considerable that one cannot distinguish the persons who are at the opposite side. As
soon as Their Majesties entered, the orchestra played, and two children dressed as
angels descended from up on high and came to lift and accompany the rising theatre
curtain. Two other angels emerged at the same time and brought flying from the stage
the librettos of the opera to Their Majesties, for which both received a golden Spanish
pistole. They then both withdrew up to the sixth tier [of boxes]. The stage decorations
were all magnificent and formed a vanishing perspective. We were in the box of the
Duchess Salandra.12

Accordingly, singers were criticised from time to time not only because their voices
were not always clearly audible, due to the huge distances, but also because Italian taste

11 Letter of the Princess of Caposele to Violante Zanolini, 4 November 1737. Published in: Salvatore di
Giacomo, Napoli. Figure e paesi (Naples: Francesco Perrella, 1909), 23–32. Translation by Philip Hale,
Programme of the Seventh Rehearsal and Concert of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, 436–440.
12 Letter of Jan Teding van Berkhout, Wednesday, 4 November 1739: ‘L’orchestre etoit fort nombreux 45
violons, 2 clavessins, 4 contrabasses, 2 violoncelles, des bassons, cor des chasses, haubois flutes. La largeur
et longeur du theatre est si considerablement grand, qu’on ne peut pas distinguer les personnes qui sont de
l’autre coté. Si tost que leurs majestés etoient venu, l’orchestre jouoi, deux enfans habilé en anges
descenderent d’en haut, et vinrent lever et accompagner la toile du theatre jusqu’en haut. Deux autres
sortirent en meme temps, et porterent en volant du theatre les livres de l’opera a leur majesté, pour qui il
recurent chacun une pistolle d’or d’Espagne. Ils se retirerent ensuite en haut dans le 6e rang. Les
decorations furent toutes superbes, et la longeur etoit une perte de vue. Nous etions dans la loge de la

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was in change at that time, and those who were considered modern in the 1720s started to become regarded as old-fashioned by 1739. Taste in compositional style changed similarly. Charles de Brosses noticed this tendency, likewise concerning the production of *Partenope*:

The Teatro Reale in Naples is tremendous in size. It has seven tiers of boxes, led into by corridors, and a wide and deep stage, equipped for displaying large scenery in perspective.\(^{13}\)

It was here that we saw the first grand opera. Composed by Sarri, learned musician, but dry and dull; [the music] was not very strong, but in return it was performed perfectly. The celebrated Senesino sang the principal role; I was enchanted by the taste by his singing and his acting on stage. However, I noticed with astonishment that the local people were not all satisfied. They complained that he sang in a *stile antico*. I must tell you that a musical taste changes here at least every ten years. All of the applause was reserved for [Teresa] Baratti, a new singer, attractive and easy-going, who sang a role disguised as a male.\(^ {14}\)

Another traveller, Samuel Sharp, nuanced the picture, attributing the poor acoustic circumstances to the noisiness of the audience:

The amazing extent of the stage, with the prodigious circumference of the boxes, and height of the ceiling, produce a marvellous effect on the mind, for a few moments; but the instant the Opera opens, a spectator laments this striking sight. He immediately perceives this structure does not gratify the ear, how much soever it may the eye. The voices are drowned in this immensity of space, and even the orchestra itself, though a numerous band, lies under a disadvantage: It is true, some of the first singers may be heard, yet, upon the whole, it must be admitted, that the house is better to contrived to see, than to hear an Opera. There are some who contend, that the singers might be very well heard, if the audience were more silent; but it is so much the fashion at *Naples*, and, indeed, through all *Italy*, to consider the Opera as a place of rendezvous and visiting, that they do not seem in the least to attend to the musick, but laugh and talk through the whole performance, without any restraint; and, it may be imagined,


\(^{14}\) Holmes, *Opera Observed*, 145–146.
that an assembly of so many hundreds conversing together so loudly, must entirely
cover the voices of the singers.\textsuperscript{15}

The enormous space provided by the opera house proved, however, very advantageous for
spectacular elements. If one could not hear the singers, if they were singing in the old style,
the visual pomp of the show surpassed the inconveniences. Both Van Berkhout and De
Brosses recorded the splendid battle scene in \textit{Partenope} with live horses, sumptuous stage
machines and ballet, in which Strada appeared as leader of one of the two armies. Van
Berkhout wrote:

\begin{quote}
We saw two armies on the stage: that of the Queen Parthenope, and the other of the
Prince of Cumae. He sat on a very beautiful horse in front of his army. They each had
their band of oboes and trumpets. The fight was realised admirably well, without any
disorder, man against man. Also, there were more than ten armed men. The prince was
vanquished and taken prisoner. We saw the queen [Strada] arriving on stage in a
chariot drawn by four horses, with the prince and other prisoners chained to it. It was a
completely silver-plated machine of an immense size, and this really was a very
beautiful sight. We [also] saw other decorations, such as the chariot of Venus, which
changed in the blink of an eye into one of Bacchus, which was a vat for making wine
with several wine barrels stacked on top of each other, on which a live Bacchus was
seated. The ballets were admirable, and there were some very good dancers among the
male and female dancers. This beautiful spectacle lacked, however, two very
important things, which is that one enters a theatre both in order to look at the
attractive ladies and to listen to the singers, of which one is deprived because of the
size of the theatre. We were in the loge of the Duchess of Salandra, a beautiful
German woman. I had the good fortune to sit next to her.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{15} Samuel Sharp, ‘Letters from Italy (1767)’, in: Enrico Fubini, \textit{Music and Culture in Eighteenth-Century
Europe}, 209.

\textsuperscript{16} Letter of Jan to his sister, Naples, Tuesday, 10 November 1739: ‘Nous vimes deux armées sur le theatre
celle de la Reine Parthenope, et l’autre du Prince de Cumes [Principe di Cuma, KV]. Il etoit sur un tres bau
cheval devant son armé. Ils avoient chacun leur bande d’hautbois et de trompettes. Le combat se fit
admirablement bien sans la moindre disordre, man tegen man [sic]. aussi il y avoit plus de dix maitres
d’armes, le Prince etant battu et pris prisonnier. Nous vimes venir la Reine dans un char de triomphe tiré
par quatre moreset le prince et autres prisonniers y enchainé. C’etoit une machine d’une grandeur terrible
tout argenté, et donnait veritablement un tres beau spectacle. Vimes une autre decorations [sic] d’un char de
triomphe de Venus qui se changeot dans un instant dans un de Bacchus, qui etoit une cuve ou on fait le vin,
et plusieurs tonnau l’un sur l’autre, sur le quel etoit un Bacchus vivant assis. Les ballets furent admirables
et des tres bon danseurs et danseuses parmi; il y manque pourtant a ce bau spectacle deux choses
principales, qui est qu’on va dans un spectacle et pour voir les belles dames et pour entendre les acteurs, de
quoy on est privé par la grandeur du theatre. […] Nous etions dans la loge de la duchesse de Sallandra, une
allemande et belle femme. J’avois le bonheur d’etre assis au coté d’elle’. Cited and translated in
Vlaardingerbroek, ‘‘The promised land of music’’, 119.
De Brosses compared the scenery with the French tradition, and found it very convincing. Moreover, he remarked that it was well synchronized with the musical representation of Sarro:

The construction of the libretto in the Italian operas is different from ours. . . . The taste of the common people is carefully consulted. An opera will not please unless, with other things, there is the representation of a battle: two hundred blackguards take part in it, but care is taken to put in the first row a number of hired assassins who know well how to fight. This is amusing and is not so ridiculous as our warriors of Cadmus and Theseus, who kill each other while dancing. In this opera of ‘Parthenope’ there is an effective cavalry action which greatly pleased me. The two commanders before coming to blows sing on horseback, a duet of contradiction of a chromatic perfection capable of doubling the long harangues of the heroes in the ‘Iliad’. 17

The long, contrapunctally built duet between Strada and the tenor Francesco Tolve, mentioned here by De Brosses, must have been a new addition at the beginning of the battle scene (I/14), presumably replacing Emilio’s aria, Forti schiere vicino è il cimento, for the 1722 version does not contain it. 18

Generally, there is not much to say about the music of Partenope. Although the score of 1722 survives, that of the 1739 production is lost. In 1722 the title role was sung by Anna Bombaciardi, (later wife of the tenor Annibale Pio Fabri). Bombaciardi was a mezzo-soprano, and the part of Partenope, although its tessitura is not inconveniently low (which would not have been a problem for Strada anyway) completely lacked virtuosity. Therefore, several arias were presumably substituted: some of them might have been taken from Handel’s Partenope, the title role of which Strada performed no less than eighteen times in London. The replacement of In veder, che sò cangiarmi with the corresponding Io tì levo l’impero dell’armi, Voglio amare, one of Handel’s most galant-styled arias, together with the attached arioso Care mura seems possible, and likewise that of Godi e spera with
the Handelian *Spera e godi*. Baratti might have been satisfied with the coloratura role of Faustina. Senesino took the former role of Merighi, which was demanding enough, but he must have brought some of his baggage arias, too. Some of these also might have been by Handel, as Senesino replaced Bernacchi in London from 12th December 1730 onwards, for seven performances of the same production in which Strada embodied the Amazon queen. Moreover, he was given a substitution aria by Handel: *Seguaci di Cupido*, sung in the very last scene, which could have happened in Naples as well.

The next opera of the season was Giovanni Alberto Ristori’s *Adriano in Siria* (19th December 1739; based on Metastasio’s libretto), in which Strada played the role of Emirena. The composer was staying in Naples at that time, and thus he himself attended and directed the rehearsals as well as the performances.19 Strada may have been especially convincing as Emirena, because right after this production she was borrowed for the carnival season of 1740 by the Teatro Regio of Turin, where one of the operas she participated in was Baldassare Galuppi’s setting of the same subject. Additionally, she sang the same role in Lampugnani’s *Adriano* in May of the same year. The Parthian princess, who is in love with and betrothed to Farnaspe (Teresa Cataneo), prince of the Parths, is imprisoned by the Sirian governor, Adriano (Senesino), who is infatuated with her despite being engaged to Sabina (Baratti). Emirena is forced to deny her beloved in order to defend him, and has to pretend to be willing to marry Adriano. The musical material shows quite a radical reduction of Strada’s vocal technical palate. Both in *Prigioniera abbandonata* (I/9; C minor, C, Andante; Ex. 7.1) and *Infelice invan mi lagno* (I/16; G major, C, Andante, with corni di caccia; Ex. 7.2) syncopation, octave and ninth leaps as well as trills are the most significant elements, although the tessitura and coloraturas are moderate. There is an affettuoso parlante number, *Quell’amplesso* (II/9; G major, 3/4, Andantino), but without any great technical requirements. The last aria in the role, *Oh Dio! mancar mi sento* (III/7; A minor, C, Moderato; Ex. 7.3), goes down to c′, which in Naples was equal to b of the common Baroque tuning.

Example 7.1: Vocal part (excerpt) of *Prigioniera abbandonata* from Ristori’s *Adriano in Siria*, bb. 25–34.

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19 Holmes, *Opera Observed*, 144.
Example 7.2: Vocal part (A section) of *Infelice invan mi lagno* from Ristori’s *Adriano in Siria*, bb. 10–38.

Example 7.3: Vocal part (excerpts) of *Oh Dio ! mi mancar il sento* from Ristori’s *Adriano in Siria*, bb. 12–18 and 25–28.

A natural tendency took shape in the last years of Strada’s career: namely that the lower part of her range remained stable, while the very highest notes (as well as her agility) lost somewhat their flexibility and shine. Probably it was not comfortable for her to sing long coloratura passages and heights any more. However, Strada arranged her forces smartly: she seems to have known her current vocal state and new limits well, and was aware of which of her vocal features still conserved their outstanding quality. This is supported by De Brosses’s note about *Partenope*, that the compensation for the overly serious music of Sarro was that it was perfectly performed. With Strada in the title role, this surely included her performance. In the case of *Adriano* in Naples, a close cooperation between Strada and Ristori, who was present in Naples, is assumable. As *prima donna*, she had enough influence to discuss her requirements with the composer.

The last active years

Unusually, Strada did not sing in the third opera of the season, Porpora’s *Il trionfo di Camilla*, premièred on 20\(^{th}\) January 1740, because she became engaged to Turin for the carnival period. Therefore, she was not subject to the criticism of Senesino, who wrote in his letter to Albizzi of 26\(^{th}\) January that his fellow singers were ‘inferior, especially the
women [Baratti and Maria Cattaneo] who vie with each other to sing out of tune’. In Turin, Strada (again as *prima donna*) had the opportunity to sing together with her former London colleagues, Gioacchino Conti and Francesca Bertolli. With the latter she worked together in Vicenza in May that year too. It is very probable, that – besides Aurelio’s assumable activity as her agent – Conti wanted to sing with her, and Leo must have been agreed, since he had previously written Strada the most ambitious role of her early period, back in 1725 (*Aspasia* in *Zenobia in Palmira*). Conti, whom Handel considered as a ‘rising star’ (according to Jennens), – and the only castrato for whom he ever wrote a top C – was her last stage partner in London (from May 1736 to June 1737). After returning to Italy in 1738, he rebuilt and polished his technique by taking lessons with Bernacchi. He and Strada must have had complimentary voices, for their duet in *Ariodante* evoked admiration in 1736; this in spite of their common unpleasant grimaces (Conti’s mouth formed a square while singing). Indeed, for the production of *Achille in Sciro*, Leo honoured them with an especially long duet (*Non temer* III/4; C major, C; Ex. 7.4), in which their voices could mix up frequently and have the benefit of longer cadenzas. Apart from that, Strada had four arias: *No, ingrato* (I/2; A major, alla breve; Ex. 7.5), demanding strong voice projection and frequently reaching a"; *Del sen gli ardori* (I/14; B♭ major, 2/4), a grand galant air with octave leaps, trills and chiselled demisemiquaver rhythms, occupying a range up to b♭"; *Non vedi, tiranno* (II/11; G minor, C), similarly with octave leaps and *messe di voce* combined with trills; and *Chi vuol dir* (III/7; B♭ major, Alla breve, Allegretto; Ex. 7.6), of a high tessitura, operating from e" to b♭"; the latter note of which occurs often on accented places (note that the tuning was even higher than in Naples). To summarise, in Turin Strada had the opportunity to sing, apart from long coloratura passages, with the customary fullness of her voice, maybe for the last time. Besides, in an old theatre (the new Teatro Regio, with a seating capacity of about 2,500, was under construction at that time; it opened on 26th December 1740) and not in the vast S. Carlo, in a city of lesser importance than Naples, one could take more risks, especially as far as high notes were concerned. Indeed, Leo maintained his way of composing for Strada, with

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20 Holmes, *Opera Observed*, 146.
21 In Leonardo Leo’s *Achille in Sciro* she played Deidamia, coupled with Conti as Achille; Bertolli sang a trouser role again, that of Ulisse. In Baldassare Galuppi’s *Adriano in Siria* Strada and Conti were Emirena and Farnaspe, Bertolli sang the *seconda donna* role, that of Sabina.
23 They sang together in *Atalanta, Arminio, Giustino and Berenice*; in the revivals of *Ariodante, Partenope, Poro, Il Parnasso in festa* and *Alcina*; in the pasticcio *Didone*; in the oratorios *Esther* (revival) and *Il trionfo del Tempo e della Verità*.
reduced virtuosity – and besides appoggiaturas, now also with written-out on-beat *cercar della nota*-type of grace notes – but otherwise unchanged in comparison to that of the 1724–25 Neapolitan operas.

Example 7.4: Excerpt (vocal parts) from the duet *Non temer* from Leo’s *Achille in Sciro*, bb. 31–56.

Example 7.5: Vocal part (A section) of *Nò, ingrato* from Leo’s *Achille in Sciro*, bb. 22–97.
Example 7.6: Vocal part (end of section A) of *Chi vuol dir* from Leo’s *Achille in Sciro*, bb. 112–123.

From the 1740 performance series of Davide Perez’s *Siroe*, the first production of Strada’s last season (started on 4th November), only the score of Act I has been preserved. It contains two arias of her role (that of Laodice) the first of which, *O placido il mare* (I/8; B♭ major, 3/4, Allegro ma non tanto; Ex. 7.7), is of the same type as *Placarti dovresti* (from Leo’s *Zenobia* 1725): its long sustained notes, however, are combined with trills. A grand aria demanding a strong, castrato type of vocal emission, it provides several opportunities for extended cadenzas and its range goes down to b♭ in the A part and up to a” in the middle section (equal to a and a♭” of the common Baroque tuning). Besides, its musical style is a pre-classical one, similar even to Mozart’s early operatic tone. The other aria, the Pergolesi-like and passionate *L’incerto mio pensiero* (I/16; G minor, C, Spiritoso; Ex. 7.8), is also based on trills and dotted demisemiquaver rhythms, having enough coloratura patterning to create a virtuoso effect, but it moves only in the middle, mezzo-soprano range.

Example 7.7: Vocal part (A section) of *O placido il mare* from Perez’s *Siroe*, bb. 16–92.
Example 7.8: Vocal part (A1 section) of *L’incerto mio pensiero* from Perez’s *Siroe*, bb. 10–26.

In this opera, Strada’s character frequently appeared together with Medarse, played by the teenager Manzuoli, the later Ascanio in Mozart’s *Ascanio in Alba* (Milan, 1771), who was one of the most talented castrati of all times. He sang at S. Carlo from the opening night onwards, mostly playing minor roles as befitted a singer who stood at the very beginning of his career. Singing in London in his post-heyday, in 1764–65, Burney still acclaimed him as the only worthy successor to Farinelli, even if his former rapid coloratura-ability has already vanished by that time:

Manzoli’s voice was the most powerful and voluminous soprano that had been heard on our stage since the time of Farinelli; and his manner of singing was grand and full of taste and dignity. […] His voice alone was commanding from native strength and sweetness; for it seems as if subsequent singers had possessed more art and feeling; and as to execution, he had none. However, he was a good actor, though unwieldy in figure, and not well made in person, neither was he young when he arrived in London; yet the sensations he excited seem to have been more irresistible and universal, than I have ever been witness to in any theatre.

The cast for the new season was somewhat changed. Another famous castrato-pupil of Porpora, Caffarelli, substituted for Senesino. Thus, Strada finally could sing with him too, after the plan for a common season of 1738/39 in London had failed. Her collection of collaborations with the most prominent castrati – Farinelli, Bernacchi, Senesino, Carestini, Conti, Manzuoli and Caffarelli – became complete.

The Teatro San Carlo dedicated the Christmas production of 1740 (premièred on 19th December), Porpora’s setting of Metastasio’s *Zenobia*, not without irony, to Strada’s farewell from the stage. (Presumably she would have liked to stay for a few seasons more,


26 In the seasons 1739/40 and 1740/41 he played Ormonte in Sarro’s *Partenope*, Aquilo in Ristori’s *Adriano*, Mezio in *Il trionfo di Camilla* by Porpora (carnival 1740) and Bireno in Latilla’s *Alceste in Ebuda*.

but at the end of this one the whole company was exchanged, the rumour of which might have reached the members much earlier. Strada probably did not want to quit Naples for an extended period of time any more.\(^{28}\) Thus, her retirement was marked by Porpora’s music, who as director of the Opera of the Nobility caused great difficulties to Handel and his company, leading directly to the abortion of Strada’s London engagement. Metastasio himself warned once his mistress, Marianna Benti-Bulgarelli detta La Romanina, of Porpora as a generator of scandals: ‘In sum, where Porpora mixes in, disagreement enters by necessity. For Goodness sake keep from ever having the slightest thing to do with him’.\(^{29}\) On the other hand, Strada was in Italy, in Naples now, and Porpora was a compatriot who belonged to the city as maestro di cappella of the Conservatorio di S Maria di Loreto (1738–42), and therefore they had to maintain a professional relationship.

For this special occasion of Strada’s resignation, both she and the theatre made an exceptional gesture. Strada, who never played travesti in her life, now embodied Tiridate, the primo uomo role, while Baratti, with whom she rivalled, according to Ulisse Prota-Giurleo, played queen Zenobia. Prota-Giurleo called them ‘un’aurora e un tramonto’, a dawn (Baratti) and a sunset (Strada). Strada may have wanted to display her vocal powers, proving that she was still competitive with any young rising stars. The institutional gesture was the change of the opera’s title from Zenobia to Tiridate, a tribute to Strada and such an extreme case that the only precedent was for Faustina, who sang the role of Rosmira (disguising herself as a man) in Sarro’s Partenope (1722): later, in Vinci’s Venetian production utilising Sarro’s work, the dramatic as well as musical significance of that character was increased for Faustina’s sake to such an extent that the title became altered to La Rosmira fedele.\(^{30}\) The difference is, however, that Faustina benefited from the exceptional circumstance that Vinci had to set a libretto of Silvio Stampiglia within 4 or 5 days for 31\(^{\text{st}}\) January 1725 – the carnival season in Venice – as a tribute to Stampiglia following his sudden death on 26\(^{\text{th}}\) January 1725, and Faustina had the score of Sarro’s setting, besides that she knew the role.

\(^{28}\) ‘Proprio per contentar lei, in gara con la Baratti (un’aurora e un tramonto), il Dramma che andò in iscena la sera del 19 dicembre 1740, la Zenobia del Metastasio con musica del Porpora, comparve sotto il titolo di Tiridate, giacché la Stradina sosteneva lei quella parte di uomo.’ Ulisse Prota-Giurleo, Pittori napoletani del seicento (Napoli: Faustino Fiorentino, 1953), 75; Croce, I teatri di Napoli, 355.


The idea that Strada sang a male role is supported by the changes of her vocal features: the strength, projection and quality of her sound might have been still the same as earlier, together with the balance between the registers, and the *travesti* role, if acted well, made the lack of highest virtuosity pardonable. Although the libretto does not survive, the fact that Porpora inserted into Metastasio’s complete story a new character, Farasmane, refers to the adjustment of the cast. Given that Strada played Tiridate and Baratti Zenobia, Caffarelli must have been Radamisto, and the other castrato, Manzuoli, needed a new role: he may have been Farasmane. Furthermore, since Zenobia forms a couple with Radamisto according to the plot, and in the end Tiridate renounces his love for her, Baratti and Caffarelli were singing together, which would correspond to the general arrangement of the company (in the same season, as *prima donna* and *primo uomo* they were the couples Emira and Siroe in *Siroe rè di Persia* by Perez as well as Olimpia and Alceste in Gaetano Latilla’s *Alceste in Ebuda*).

Nevertheless, *Tiridate* was not the very last production in which Strada participated, since her contract obliged her to sing in all the new operas of the season, the last of which was *Alceste in Ebuda* by Latilla, performed in the carnival of 1741. Strada as Cleotilde was coupled with Margherita Giacomazzi, who played Leotardo, a male role. After that, Strada and Aurelio settled in an apartment in a palazzo of Caffarelli’s property in Via Carminiello. However, an intriguing fact is that Aurelio, at the age of sixty-two (in 1760), wanted to rent S. Bartolomeo once again. He died on 10th December 1773. Strada lived some one year and a half more and passed away on 20th July 1775. Both are buried at the S. Anna di Palazzo church.

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31 Vivaldi’s soprano specialized in castrato style of singing; one of whose arias Strada performed in Handel’s *pasticcio Didone*, in London.

32 Aurelio del Pò’s petition to the King Carlo di Borbone, 12 November 1760: ‘D. Aurelio del Po, figlio del qm. Andrea, supplicando espone come negli anni 1705, 1712 e 1721 prese il riferito suo Padre in affitto il Teatro di S. Bartolomeo dalla Casa Santa degl’Incurabili, che per concessione degli antichi serenissimi Regnanti n’era utile Padrona, e tutte e tre le volte dai Vicerè di quei tempi ne fu spogliato e fu ad altri concesso. E perché si fatte oppressioni danno luogo al supplicante di chiedere a tenore degli obblighi allora fatti con detta Casa Santa de’ giusti escompi, ecc’. Cited in Prota-Giurleo, *Pittori napoletani del seicento*, 75.


The most positive aspect of Strada’s retirement (at the age of thirty-eight) was that she knew how to quit with dignity while still on top.35 That she did not collapse after two years wasted in false hope of a renewed London engagement, but fought her way back to sing prima donna roles with the best current singers in magnificent productions of the modern S. Carlo, shows an estimable attitude. Moreover, she had the opportunity to reunite with Conti and Leo in Turin. It was also symbolic to sing a travesti for the first time in her life even in her farewell production. Strada, just as her style of singing, was by nature an uncommon, unique and innovative artist.

35 Her fellow singer, Senesino did not get a new engagement at the rebuilt Teatro Regio in Turin, after his poor reception in Naples. Thus his career came to an end an unwanted way in 1740. See Holmes, Opera Observed, 147–150. Cuzzoni, who tried to sing as late as 1750, although she almost completely lost her voice by than, at the end of her life she was forced to support herself by making buttons. She died in absolute squalor and poverty in 1770. See Winton Dean and Carlo Vitali, ‘Cuzzoni, Francesca’, Grove Music Online ed. L. Macy. Accessed 5 September 2015.
Postlude – A Baroque Soprano sfogato?

The term *soprano sfogato* stems from the nineteenth century and was used to describe voices of an extended range, strong stamina and great projection capacity, able to fill large houses on the one hand, and possessed of agility and a fine, silvery ringing vocal quality on the other. Vented,\(^1\) unlimited voices like that of Matilde Kyntherland Cascelli were defined as ‘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’.\(^2\) 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 French writer and poet Théophile Gautier reported from Paris in February 1845, after a performance of Bellini’s Norma at the Théâtre-Italien with Grisi in the title role, that real Italian singing is ‘generous and expressive, always in tune, the song of a human throat and not the warbling of a flute’.\(^3\) Geoffrey Riggs describes the *assoluta* voice, which is a synonym of the *voce sfogata*, as a voice capable of high-level agility in singing equally high and low notes, intricate passages of divisions, trills and *messe di voce*, and also of chameleonic colour changes, whilst having the dramatic weight ‘to sing over an emotionally charged orchestra’.\(^4\)

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 it was recorded about Malibran,\(^5\) and Pasta before her:

> The middle or mixed voice can be taken very high from the chest or very low from the head, at the pleasure of the singer. Madame Pasta, who is the most remarkable example within our recollection, could take G above the staff either in her breast or

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her head voice. Thus when she wanted force she employed one, when she desired facility – the other.6

Her tones of the chest are full of the deepest passion, while those of the upper voice are sparkling with brilliancy. In fact she seems to possess two distinct voices – using them at pleasure; as, upon the repetition of a passage, you might suppose it proceeded from the voice of another person.7

Jeffrey Snider, in his article about this very voice type, quotes several sources from this period, among them one of the *British Journal* from the 1830s, which described Adelaide Tosi and Giulia Grisi as *soprani sfogati*: ‘for it is a voice that can only be properly appreciated by those who are used to it. It is a refined, and consequently attenuated, treble, which approaches the voice of the musico [a euphemism for castrato], and partakes of its peculiar beauties and defects exactly in the ratio of its approximation’.8 The reference to a continuation of the castrato voice production (or at least to a similar effect or aesthetic) is not by mere chance. In my opinion, the overall technique needed to reach the ideal vocal sound (a strong and masculine voice projection in the female range, and of greater volume than the ordinary), adumbrated by *castrati*, 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 transformed bodies enabled the ability of 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. (Castrato voice production was not the powerless, disembodied and unresonant *falsetto* – 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.) Their legacy, therefore, went on unbroken. The extended range of arias during the eighteenth century and the shifting of the (coloratura) soprano voice towards a more dramatic and weightier direction confirms this (e.g. the e‴-s written for Blondchen and the role of Konstanze in Mozart’s *Entführung aus dem Serail*, the Queen of the Night in the *Zauberflöte* with her f‴ notes, or such further dramatic type of soprano roles as Donna Anna or Donna Elvira in his *Don Giovanni*, just to name a few of the most popular ones).

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Even Manuel García, who established the technique of singing with a lowered larynx (in 1847), took musical illustrations from the long-living castrato tradition, connecting it to his personal experiences. His father, Manuel García the elder, studied with Giovanni Ansani, possibly a pupil of Porpora, and sang for Rossini (he was his first Almaviva). Rossini was fascinated by castrati, and even wrote a role for one of them; his wife, Isabella Colbran, was likewise trained by a castrato, Giromalo Crescentini. Semiramide, the title role of which he wrote for Colbran, was called by Rodolfo Celletti the last opera of the great Baroque tradition. It was one of Grisi’s favourite grand dramatic parts as well, with which she made her debut at the Théâtre-Italien de Paris in 1832, after the composer himself engaged her and offered her the part. Furthermore, she sang it at the re-opening of Covent Garden as the ‘Royal Italian Opera House’ in London in 1847 as well as gaining tremendous success in St Petersburg in 1848/49.

Grisi’s voice approached the voice of the castrato, it has been said; it was strong, sonorous, sweet and extensive – a legitimate dramatic soprano; in its freshness and purity of intonation, her refined style approached the sublime. The journalist Thomas Cox called her full and rich tone her ‘peculiarity’, while the art critic Henry Chorley claimed that her ‘voice was poured forth with […] fullness and brilliancy’. Grisi’s creative artistry allowed her to adopt and personalise the former roles of Giuditta Pasta so successfully that Norma in Paris and Anna Bolena in London became identified by her name. The Babylonian Queen’s brilliant musical material is full of fast, glissando-type scales, florid coloratura roulades, portamenti, cadenzas, messe di voce and changes of tempo and dynamics, and demands dark, wighty vocal colouring. Whilst Grisi took on heavier dramatic roles originally written for Pasta – like that of Norma (in the première of which

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11 Rossini looking back to the age of castrati in 1858: ‘I have never forgotten them. The purity, the miraculous flexibility of those voices and, above all, their profoundly penetrating accent – all that moved and fascinated me more than I can tell you’. Naomi Adele André, *Voicing Gender: Castrati, Travesti and the Second Woman in Early-nineteenth-century Italian Opera* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 26.

12 That of Arsace in *Aurelio in Palmira* for Giambattista Velluti.


15 ‘The peculiarity of her rich and full tone, the decision of her manner, and the undoubted signs of her proficiency, disarmed all criticism, and made her at once that favourite she never ceased to be so long as she remained in the full vigour of her powers.’ Cox on *La gazza ladra*. Ibid., 27; ‘Mme. Grisi, with whom this part has always been her best, is now at her best in the part. She seems to have studied it anew. Her by-play has a sinister and voluptuous delicacy, and her grand scenes have a force, without her olden violence, which make it surpass any of her former efforts; and her voice was poured forth with such fullness and brilliancy as if she wished the Amina at that moment on her former throne to hear the challenge.’ Chorley on *Lucrezia Borgia* (London, 1847). Ibid., 90.
Grisi sang the role of Adalgisa) and Anna Bolena – and for Malibran – that of Desdemona (Rossini), furthermore Lucrezia Borgia (Donizetti), Verdi’s Lucrezia (I due foscari) and Donna Anna (Mozart) – she excelled in lighter roles, like Rosina, Norina, Susanna, Pamina and Ninetta (La gazza ladra) at the same time. A perfect and unrivalled beauty, she was a favourite singer for the young Queen Victoria, while she alternated between London and the Théâtre-Italien, singing for Rossini in Paris.

The descriptions cited above could have easily applied to Strada’s voice as well. Looking at her original 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), Tusnelda (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.

Strada and Grisi (1811‒1869) are similar from that point of view that they both started their careers as high sopranos, and developed to sfogati through the extension of their range downwards, through the enrichment of their emission and supposedly by naturally gaining a darker voice colour with maturity. Others like Malibran, Colbran and Pasta, and in the eighteenth century Faustina or Lucia Facchinelli, were originally mezzo-sopranos who stretched their vocal territory towards the high register. I would parallel Strada’s and Grisi’s early singing characteristics here as similarly high, agile and lyric coloratura ones, with signs of a strong stamina. Addio caro, tu ben sai, from Strada’s first Vivaldian role (Rosane in La verità in cimento II/2; see Ex. 1.8), is probably the best example of this, with its rapid-motion, sixth-, seventh-, and octave leaps, including climbing to a peak of b♭. Elvira’s cabaletta, Vien diletto, in the second Act’s mad scene of Bellini’s I puritani – one of Giulia Grisi’s few original roles, likewise from her early repertoire – demonstrates fine shades of flexible tempo and various timbres. Having a high tessitura, it balances between lyric passages and both diatonic and chromatic scale-chains leading to a powerful climax, raising the tension of her inner battle with lunacy.

One of the greatest debates of historically-informed performance practice today is about the singing technique not only of the eighteenth but also of the nineteenth and even early twentieth centuries. Although it is fundamental that a large, wide and heavy continuous pitch-fluctuation vibrato is a product of modern, post-war singing, yet some have drawn

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16 The Vivaldian soprano, Margherita Giacomazzi could also come under the assoluta category. She possessed an extraordinary range and specialised in travesti, singing frequently primo uomo roles as a worthy substitute for castrati.
conclusions that bring into doubt the existence of healthy vibrato even during the romantic period, referring to certain passages of memoirs and treatises from the 1800s whilst neglecting others. In my opinion, apart from the expression of simply different tastes that contemporary accounts reflect, most such passages actually condemn the abuse (the exaggerated pitch vibrato) and not the right and healthy proportioned swinging of the voice, as can be read, for instance, in Maria Malibran’s own letter about the decaying voice of Henriette Méric-Lalande singing Bellini’s *Il pirata* (May, 1830). I cannot agree with the theory that until the twentieth century singing with vibrato, with a lowered larynx and full breath combining the lowered diaphragm with the parting of the ribs, or costal breathing (called *appoggio*) was not in use, but a naturally positioned larynx with basically no audible vibrato was preferred instead. There are various reasons for my disagreement.

First of all, the music itself – not only that of the late 1800s by Verdi, Meyerbeer and Wagner, but also of the bel canto era, by Rossini, Donizetti and Bellini – contradicts this theory. Singing demanding arias with a natural use of the larynx cannot produce sufficiently the volume which is needed to be heard over the orchestra, and leads to an uncertain intonation, with the substance and colour of the voice becoming dull and lifeless. Without vibrato or with one artificially throttled down, one cannot sing sustained notes appropriately: instead they result in starting a glide well before the long note ends, which is not a real *portamento* but the exact *glissando* that the most prominent treatises of the 1700s and 1800s warned against. Particularly, when both the orchestra and the soloist have *forte* sustained notes, and the strings are playing tremolo repetitions, a straight vocal tone without vibrato cannot compete in any way with a renewed *forte* orchestral chord.

Also, there is quite a great amount of ignorance concerning systematically occurring statements from people like Mozart that a natural and healthy vibrato – vibrato of intensity, but of less than a semitone – was and is an indispensable part of good singing. I agree with

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18 An addition from my personal experiences: I could only embrace full understanding of the two most simple and fundamental element of singing technique, the lowered larynx and the deepest support possible, quite late, in the second half of my twenties. Until then, I was like a bird without wings: I have showed capabilities for a ringing, sonorous coloratura soprano voice with a wide range, but I could neither sustain a healthy tone above *e*'', nor produce enough volume below *c*'. My throat was stuck, and I could not handle my voice flexibly (i.e. to sing *cantabile* or *legato*) and my high notes were sharp, narrow and harsh. Singing was toilsome and difficult. It was a hopeless situation, and when I finally could control my larynx so that it did not jump up, and at the same time was able to bring support as deep as possible, it was like a revelation. I experienced freedom in singing for the first time. My range was doubled within a few months (today I warm up between *c* and *f''*#, and am applying a range from *g* to *f''* in arias), and my voice obeyed my musical and technical intentions: *legato* was not a problem any more, vibrato developed naturally and I gained a remarkably richer, warmer, darker and stronger voice production. Although I am continually polishing my technique as well as my musical approach, this discovery brought satisfaction and made me, as I was told by some, among them several illustrious musicians, who heard my performance, an accomplished singer.
David Montgomery that there is a great confusion about vibrato and vibrato-effects. He says that an ornament is ‘something that stands out against the texture of the music […] but not an ongoing, abstract aspect of sound itself’ as vibrato is. He sees one of the reasons might be that by the end of the sixteenth century pedagogical treatises multiplied in English, French, German and Italian, using a wide diversity of terms (Bebung, tremolo, flattement, battement, balancement, pincement, étouffement, vibrato, sting, shaking, ondeggiano, trillo, trilletto, mordente fresco, etc.) which are not to be confused with one another. On the other hand, treatises themselves, especially earlier ones, used the same terms differently, or various terms to describe the same phenomenon.

Ellen T. Harris observes, for example, that the Baroque term ‘tremolo’ might refer to two kinds of vibrato: either to the diaphragmatic pitch alteration or to a rhythmic pulsation without pitch variation that originates in the throat (originally also called ‘trillo’). She goes on to suggest that Zacconi’s ‘continuous vibrato’ refers to the latter one, and that seventeenth-century German and French writings, such as that of Christoph Bernhard, do not support pitch waver at all. This also shows a difference between Italian and Western-and Northern-European aesthetics of singing. Since sixteenth- and seventeenth-century treatises – those of Zacconi (1596), Giulio Caccini (1600), Georg Quitschreiber (1598), Michael Praetorius (1619), Johann Caspar Printz (1690) and Martin Fuhrmann (1706) – associate the idea of vibrato with the agility to produce trills and rapid coloraturas, most probably the expressions such as zitternd, schwebend, Bebung, tremolo, tremoletto or trillo refer to the gorgia technique. Later, however, in the eighteenth century, several descriptions emerged of women singers who practised pitch vibrato; Cuzzoni’s and Faustina’s are well-known examples. Harris 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 [during the course of the eighteenth century], pitch vibrato


23 Historische Beschreibung der edelen Sing- und Kling-Kunst (Mieth, Dresden 1690).

24 Musikalischer Trichter (Frankfort an der Spree: 1706).

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’.26

According to Montgomery, sources are often simply misinterpreted by modern musicians and scholars alike: one important example is Mozart’s comment on Joseph Nikolaus Meissner, describing the Bebung ornament as a ‘shaking’ of the voice at regular intervals, not vibrato, which is defined by Mozart right after that: ‘The human voice trembles without help, but in such a manner and proportion that it is beautiful, that is the nature of the voice’.27 The Bebung as a vocal ornament – described by Johann Mattheson (Der vollkommene Capellmeister, 1739) and Johann Adam Hiller (1780)28 – was adapted by instrumentalists, mainly flutists: the schools of Quantz (1752) and Tromlitz (1791) give examples of this metric oscillation of a note. Scholars such as Will Crutchfield and Clive Brown consider Bebung as if it were the vibrato of its time and as if it would exclude the presence of natural vibrato.29 In my opinion this is what causes confusion, because it defines vibrato exclusively as an occasional ornament and not as an essential vocal phenomenon.30 The concept of the artificial, ornamental oscillation effect in the very metre of an aria, i.e. a waving of the voice at every crotchet or quaver, is in contradiction to the genuineness and naturalness of vocal vibrato.

James Stark denotes that although García’s ideal was also a ‘steadiness of sound’ – that is ‘a firm and continuous flow of sound, free from every sort of tremor and quavering’ – yet he authorised ‘tremolo’ at highly emotional passages. Furthermore, Stark recognises that the fundamental elements of García’s teaching, such as the firm glottal closure, lowered larynx, and elevated subglottal pressure, are the same muscular actions which tend

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29 ‘In the widely-known Norton volume, Performance Practice: Music after 1600 (1989), Will Crutchfield mistranslates “zittert” (shakes) as “vibrates”. Furthermore, he simply omits the definitive part of 7 Mozart’s statement, where the composer explains that Meissner purposefully marked off his long notes in both quarter and eighth-intervals. It is no wonder, then, that Crutchfield allows his readers to come to the wrong conclusion about this quotation, confusing “vibrato” with “tremolo”.’ Montgomery, The Vibrato Thing, footnote 3.
to evoke vibrato as a reaction. He suggests – what is the most logical and most feasible theory in my opinion too – that García, as well as other authors, commented and warned against excessive tremulousness and did not mention normal vibrato because it was implicitly understood to be inherent in proper singing.\textsuperscript{31} It is telling that the ‘descendants’ of the García school, mainly the ‘pupils of his protégé Mathilde Marchesi – Nellie Melba, Emma Eames, Emma Calvé, and Blanche Marchesi, among others – made recordings, and all sang with vibrato. In 1922, Max Schoen measured the vibrato of Nellie Melba and Emma Eames, and noted that in Melba’s voice “the vibrato is constantly present,” while with Eames “the vibrato is intermittent,” with tones often beginning without vibrato and ending with a vibrato (Schoen 1922, 252–3).\textsuperscript{32} Melba’s vibrato, for example, is audible even to the naked ear. I am convinced that the key to a clearer insight into the use of vibrato is to understand that, prior to the 1920s, the focus of the teaching and aesthetic of singing was not on vibrato, whereas in our days it is to such an extent that the quantity of it defines an operatic voice. The ideal of a steady tone in treatises did not exclude vibrato, but it served as an indicator of good technique, marked by the evenness of quality, the security and sonorousness of the sound, and pure intonation; these can dominate even with vibrato present. If vibrato comes out of focus, if it is considered as a natural outcome of singing with a good technique, independently from any expressive purposes, it suddenly becomes clear why treatises of the seventeenth-eighteenth- and nineteenth centuries did not deal with it very much; meanwhile we know that even in the Baroque era some singers had more vibrato than others, but that this was not a main factor in artistic evaluation. Vibrato was and is also connected to national features: Ronald Foster observed in 1934 that it was preferred by Latin races and not by Anglo-Saxon ones.\textsuperscript{33} Italians, who dominated European singing until the second half of the nineteenth century, might have always tended to have a greater amount of vibrato; the critical resistance of German and English treatises, therefore, cannot be considered as a universal aesthetic of non-vibrato singing.\textsuperscript{34}

The magnificence of the castrato voice production – described by numerous period memoires, letters and treatises – and their virtuoso, wide-ranging arias, together with the repertoire of the eighteenth-century’ leading female singers simply exclude the possibility of an adequate accomplishment without some genuine, probably not conscious, ability to lower the larynx, improved by breathing exercises – resulting in a large throat and thus


\textsuperscript{32} Stark, \textit{Bel Canto}, 134.

\textsuperscript{33} Brown, \textit{Classical and Romantic Performance Practice}, 523.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 523–524.
providing freedom for the production of a rich and variable sound with great agility. Singing with a deep breath specifically enables a greater stamina and support in order to gain a bigger voice emission; not to mention that the soft palate goes automatically higher, thereby creating a larger space in the throat and helping the voice to be well-positioned. Costal or appoggio breathing, which Dan Marek derives from the castrato era, might also have been much in use before García’s time. James Stark likewise refers to certain eighteenth-century authors who urged singers to ‘hold back’ the breath while singing, ‘that is, to create a balance between inspiratory and expiratory forces. In the nineteenth century, this idea was referred to as lutte vocale, or “vocal struggle”, leading directly to the concept of appoggio’. Antonella Nigro discusses the fact that, as early as 1562, Maffei set a rule of breath-control by ‘pushing the breath little by little with the voice’. Tosi also made some remarks about the guided use of the breath during singing. Mancini, for instance, gave a description of an exercise designed specifically to strengthen the chest and vocal energy:

To make this rule easy for those whose chests are not so strong and for those who cannot hold the breath so long, the solfeggio should be written of only two notes in each measure, and they must be two ‘Minime’ giving to it a slow movement, so that the voice may have time to expand; the student must not take breath between the first and second note.

Furthermore, he may have referred even to a relaxed larynx, by warning against a forced position of the ‘fauces’, i.e. of the throat, which automatically includes the larynx:

The voice cannot come out naturally and spontaneously, if it finds the fauces [throat, including the larynx] in a forced position, which impedes natural action. Therefore the

35 ‘The diaphragm should be lowered without any jerk, and the chest regularly and slowly raised. This double movement enlarges the compass or circumference of the lungs; first, at their base, and subsequently throughout their whole extent, leaving them full liberty to expand, until they are completely filled with air. When the lungs have been gradually filled, without any jerking movement, they have the power of retaining the air without effort; this slow and complete inspiration is what the Italians term Respiro, as contrasted with that slight and hurried inspiration which gives the lungs a slight supply, merely sufficient for a moment, and technically termed the Mezzo Respiro.’ Manuel García, Art of Singing, vols i–ii (1847, 1872; repr. London: Leonard & Co., 1924), 10.


37 Stark, Bel Canto, 118.

38 Nigro, Observations on the Technique of Italian Singing from the 16th Century to the Present Day, xvii; Pier Francesco Tosi, Opinioni de’ cantori antichi e moderni, o sieno osservazioni sopra il canto figurato (Bologna: dalla Volpe, 1723), 36–37.

39 ‘Ed acciocché questa regola tanto necessaria di non pigliar fiato, non riesca allo scolare troppo ardua, e penosa; se egli fosse di petto debole, gli si deve scrivere il solfeggio di due sole note per battuta, e saranno due minime, dovendosi dare al tempo un moto lento, acciò la voce abbia libero campo di spandersi; e lo scolare non deve pigliar fiato dalla prima alla seconda nota, ma soltanto nell’incominciamento della seconda battuta.’ Giambattista Mancini, Pensieri, e riflessioni pratiche sopra il canto figurato (Vienna: Ghelen, 1774), 92–93; trans. in English by Pietro Buzzi, Practical Reflections on the Figurative Art of Singing (Boston: Gorham Press, 1912), 112.
student must take the trouble to accustom his chest to give the voice with naturalness, and to use the ‘fauces’ very lightly. If the harmony of these two parts, the mouth and the ‘fauces’ is perfect, then the voice will be clear and harmonious.\(^4\)

Corsets are also considered as obstacles to deep breathing, preventing the lowering and extension of the diaphragm and the widening of the ribs. The daily wearing of a corset may have indeed reduced lung capacity by up to thirty percent, but also, as compensation, it produced larger rib-cages up top so that the accessory breathing muscles became stronger.\(^4\) It follows that female opera singers, who were performing in specially made corsets (very wide in the shoulder and hips, to make the waist appear small) that left more room for them to allow their diaphragm to sink properly and thus to breathe deeply,\(^4\) had the additional benefit of the strong upper chest as well.

Traces of what García called *timbre sombre*, the lowering of the larynx resulting in a darkened voice and vowels, appear in treatises from the seventeenth century onwards. Mancini advised a certain sweetening (*raddolcire*) of the voice when singing the vowel ‘i’, otherwise it would become sharp or harsh and the mouth and throat would get narrow.\(^4\) Ottavio Durante (1608) prohibited the singing of coloraturas on ‘odious vowels, which are the “i” and “u”, the first of which resembles a whinny, the second a wail; the singer should insure that he sings *passaggi* only on the long syllables and on the other vowels, “a”, “e” and “o”.\(^4\) These instructions reflect the idea of *timbre clair* and *timbre sombre* or covering, and imply that something has to be done with the vocal apparatus which is not natural, and which belongs to the art, because the natural production of these vowels is inappropriate for singing, especially in the head register.

Just because eighteenth and early nineteenth-century treatises do not discuss the production of vocal sound in an anatomically detailed way, it does not mean that the

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\(^4\) ‘Art teaches, and the experience of many years has taught me plainly, that in forwarding the mouth too much and arching it too much in pronouncing the vowel “i” in singing, gives a dull, lifeless sound and not agreeable at all; while on the contrary, by keeping the mouth in the shape of a composed smile, we have as a result gracefulness and sweetness which are so necessary to pronounce the “i”. Under these conditions, it gives delight to the hearer.’ Mancini, *Practical reflections*, 94; Julianne Baird, ‘An Eighteenth-Century Controversy About the Trill: Mancini v. Manfredini,’ *Early Music* 15/1 (Feb. 1987), 36–45: 36.

conscious and intentional use of the vocal organs would have been excluded.45 These treatises addressed every singing student in general, amateurs and professionals alike. Their observations, therefore, were likewise about singers and singing in general, among which the most fundamental one was that in most cases there is a register break which has to be undone. The main goal was to render the complete unification of the chest and head notes as if they were homogenous, but at least it was necessary to join the two ranges seamlessly. Nevertheless, the ideal state would have been to have a chest-quality for the whole range. John Ernest Galliard commented on a passage of Tosi’s treatise, about the registers:

Voce di Petto is a full Voice, which comes from the Breast by Strength, and is the most sonorous and expressive. Voce di Testa comes more from the Throat, than from the Breast, and is capable of more Volubility. Falsetto is a feigned Voice, which is entirely formed in the Throat, has more Volubility than any, but [is] of no Substance.46

Both Tosi and Mancini recognised a rare phenomenon: the natural soprano; the singer who genuinely sings with chest-like voice production in the high range as well. Strada most likely was one of these. As has been discussed, by the time of Mancini’s treatise, the blending of the registers had a much deeper definition than in Tosi’s era, about eighty years earlier: by the 1770s, it was about developing a chest-voice quality for the head notes as well. This refers to a development in the method and practice of teaching singing, and in the practice of singing itself. Increasing knowledge and experience meant that those talented ones who did not possess the prodigious attribute of naturally unified registers could obtain it through education, and more easily than before. The same regards the low-larynx technique. The birth of the theory neither precludes that the practice was in use before, nor that there were singers in preceding eras who naturally applied this part of voice production without needing a method to learn it. The realisation of the break between registers and the issue of their proper joint does not necessarily indicate a neutral larynx method either. The main issue of singing studies today is the same as it was earlier, to reach and maintain seamless and homogene voice production between the registers – in other words, to blend them appropriately. This needs many years of work, even with the training of the low-larynx method. Once learned, it requires constant focus on the part of the singer every time to keep the transition between the registers unbroken. Still, the passaggio notes will always remain vulnerable and not as comfortable as other notes; their

45 Potter, Changing Vocal Style and Technique in Britain during the Long Nineteenth Century, 18.
production will always demand special attention and extra work so that they do not sound harsher, narrower and duller than other tones, and so that the larynx does not jump involuntarily. *Messa di voce* on one’s *passaggio* is the most difficult to solve, because the position of the larynx has to be set especially finely and precisely.

It is accurate that the abuse of the lowering of the larynx – i.e. forcing the larynx down constantly – and the abuse of vibrato – which is a pitch oscillation greater than a semitone, resulting from extreme pressure put on the vocal apparatus – are phenomena of twentieth-century singing and, as such, are foreign to any earlier singing techniques. But these abuses do not mean that the original technique is wrong. To sing with a lowered larynx does not connote that the organ is stuck down; even during singing with this technique, the larynx moves minimally and flexibly, and even a lowered larynx rises slightly at specifically high notes. As it is with taking medicine, the right proportion is the key: less or more could equally bring damage.

Based upon historical accounts dating from 1780 to 1820, Brown recognises a change in use of left-hand vibrato by string players; and since they imitated singers’ mannerisms, one can assume that this reaction indirectly refers to the phenomenon of a use of an increasing amount of vibrato among vocalists. Undoubtedly, the nineteenth-century orchestra was of a greater number of members, using instruments with a remarkably bigger sound than any ensemble in the eighteenth; combined with the vastness of modern opera houses, this logically created a demand for singing with a big volume in order to be heard over the orchestra. García’s method of the low-larynx technique combined with that of producing high notes with *timbre sombre* was an answer to these questions. Vibrato by nature has the ability to increase sound; moreover, it serves as a relaxation to the muscles under an increased amount of pressure:

> Although the purpose of vibrato is not completely understood, most voice scientists agree that vibrato enters vocal production as a relaxant principle because the body has a need for periodic muscle relaxation during heavy-duty or intense vocal activity, such as when singing sustained notes at high pitches. It is generally assumed to result from neuromuscular excitation of the laryngeal mechanism. Vibrato is the result of a balance between muscle systems in antagonistic relation to each other during phonation. When this balance occurs, the antagonistic muscle systems develop an alternating pulse that is a reflection of the continued energy level required of them to

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maintain equilibrium and muscular health. (Consider how muscles elsewhere in the body, such as those in our arms, begin to shake when strain or tension is prolonged. When we lift or hold a heavy object for a long period of time, we’ll often experience a periodic but constant shaking of the muscles that are being used.) In other words, the muscles of the larynx begin to pulse rhythmically in response to tension and subglottic pressure, and that produces the characteristic vibrato sound. It occurs naturally in order to protect the vocal folds.  

Undoubtedly, the changing musical style of operas of late-nineteenth-century composers required a much more powerful voice production, not least because the orchestra and the capacity of its improved instruments left no other choice than the improvement of vocal technique. Since this experimentation with a forceful voice production also resulted very frequently in an abuse of pitch vibrato (multiplying the number of detesting accounts), the discussion of compressed breath and strong glottal adduction also increased, forming a more important part of treatises like those of the Mandl-Lamperti school (Francesco Lamperti Guida teorico-pratica-elementare per lo studio del canto 1864 / The Art of Singing 1884, and his son, Giovanni Battista Lamperti’s The Technics of Bel Canto 1905, sourcing the physiologist Dr. Louis Mandl’s L’Hygiene de la voix 1879), than it did of Garcia’s. The requirement of a bigger sound caused the reduction of ornamentation, and the vacuum which it created was regularly filled by an improperly large vibrato. This is the reason why there are more warrants against vibrato during the course of the 1800s than ever before: because there was a real danger that it could have become the focal point of singing technique, since it can easily and addictively turn into a habit.

One of the biggest misconceptions regarding pre-romantic singing is that singers and teachers did not want a voice to be sonorous and strong. Mancini dedicates at least a whole chapter in his treatise to how to gain a strong voice, when one is not blessed with that by nature. He contrasts his method with that of others, which makes clear that this was a fundamental question of vocal training. Mancini claimed that a ‘weak voice […] bars the singer from ever being able to make himself heard in a large place’. Moreover, he

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52 Stark, Bel Canto, 43–45 and 104.
53 ‘Una voce, a cui manchi la robustezza chiamasi voce debole, e porta il grave disturbo al Cantore, che non può farsi sentire senza sua pena, e fatica, in campo vasto.’ Mancini, Pensieri, e riflessioni pratiche, 76; Mancini, Practical Reflections, 99.
emphasises that this strong and sonorous sound must be equally developed throughout the whole range, including head notes:

It will prove to be of great help to a pupil who has a weak and limited voice, whether it be soprano or contralto. He must exercise with a solfeggio with sustained notes in his daily study. [...] to increase the volume of their voices each day little by little, directing them thus, with the aid of art and continuous exercise, until they become vigorous and sonorous. When this first step has been accomplished the solfeggio must be augmented with high tones. As these high tones belong to the head register, I shall tell in my next chapter how to blend them.  

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 by the practice of messa di voce and by fact that this was one of Farinelli’s special abilities for which he was most admired:

Farinelli without the assistance of significant gestures or graceful attitudes, enchanted and astonished his hearers by the force, extent and mellifluous tones of the mere organ, when he had nothing to execute, articulate, or express.

John Potter remarks that, although the lower larynx position in most cases is accompanied by a stiffness of the muscles of the vocal folds (at the cost of some agility, since the motion of the cords become slower in this way), there have been many singers, among them Jenny Lind and Maria Callas, who still possessed ‘an unconscious natural facility, clearly superior to that of their rivals, which is not easily explained in general physiological terms’. Strada’s case is the same, only inversely: although she had a high and virtuoso coloratura soprano voice, and although the low-larynx technique as an educational method did not exist in her lifetime, she certainly had an instinctive and innate ability for a poured-out voice emission all over her range, which made her head notes especially powerful. Above all, that Strada’s way of singing with her louder, accented and

54 ‘Fra questi l’esperienza Maestra Fedele me ne ha fatto credere uno per il migliore, che qui vi propongo: riflettetevi … una voce limitata, e debole, sia di Soprano, sia di Contralto, ne proverà givoimento non mediocre, se nello studio giornale verrà coltivata con un solfeggio composto con note di valore; […] Si deve pure consigliare lo scolare ad accrescere a poco a poco il corpo di queste voci, regolandole coll’ ajuto dell’ arte, e continuo esercizio; acciò arrivi a farle robuste, e sonore. […] e siccome questa seconda porzione di voce appartiene al registro di testa, come altrove ho provato, dirò nell’ Articolo seguente come unirle:’ Mancini, Pensieri, e riflessioni pratiche, 80–81; Mancini, Practical Reflections, 102.
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 – the powerful soprano range, represented by *castrati* until the third decade of the 1700s, with variable feminine vocal expression. Her exceptional vocal features made composers like Vivaldi and Handel diverge from their general way of vocal writing including some stylistic features, which teaches us how flexible Baroque style is and how it was dominated by its performers. Since Strada as one of the best singers of her era was regarded as no less authentic than others, the conclusion presents itself that the ‘tailoring of the dress’, if made ideally, by strengthening the one who wears it, enhances its (the dress’s) own values: the composition, through a proper adjustment to the performer’s vocal personality, makes its own splendour manifest in a unique and unrepeatable way.
Deutsche Händelgesellschaft, Georg Friedrich Händels Werke, ed. by Friedrich Chrysander
(Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1858–1894, 1902)

HG 72, Alessandro (HWV 21): Exs 4.7 (Aure, fonti, bb. 1–9) and 4.8 (Alla sua gabbia d’oro, bb. 31–37)

HG 58, Rinaldo (HWV 7b): Ex. 4.9 (Parolette, vezzi e sguardi, bb. 10–63)

HG 71, Scipione (HWV 20): Exs 4.10 (Dolci aurette, bb. 1–8) and 4.12 (Scoglio d’immota fronte, bb. 13–35)

HG 74, Riccardo Primo, rè d’Inghilterra (HWV 23): Ex. 4.13 (Tutta brillanti rai, bb. 23–37)

HG 66, Ottone, rè di Germania (HWV 15): Ex. 4.17 (Falsa imagine, bb. 1–14)

HG 77, Lotario (HWV 26): Exs 5.2–3 (Scherza in mar la navicella, bb. 10–57 and 76–93) and 5.4 (Menti eterne, bb. 15–53)

HG 78, Partenope (HWV 27): Exs 5.7 (L’amor ed il destin, bb. 4–18) and 5.13 (Voglio amare, bb. 16–31)

HG 80, Ezio (HWV 29): Exs 5.24 (Caro padre, bb. 20–32), 5.25 (Finchè un zeffiro save, bb. 12–23 and 32–35), and 5.27 (Ah! non son io che parlo)

HG 81, Sosarme (HWV 30): Exs 5.32 (Padre, germano, e sposo) and 5.33 (Vola l’augello, bb. 1–18)

HG 83, Arianna (HWV 32): Ex. 5.37 (Sdegno amore, bb. 15–42 and 62–79)

HG 86, Alcina (HWV 34): Ex. 5.41 (Ah! mio cor, bb. 16–47)

HG 87, Atalanta (HWV 35): Ex. 5.44 (Al varco, oh pastori!, bb. 8–27)

HG 89, Arminio (HWV 36): Exs 5.22 (Al furore, che ti consiglia, bb. 31–47), 5.49 (Scaglian amore e sangue, bb. 1–30), and 5.52 (Ho veleno, e ferro avanti)

HG 88, Giustino (HWV 37): Ex. 5.54 (Mio dolce amato sposo, bb. 10–18)

HG 41, Esther (HWV 50b): Ex. 6.3 (Who calls my parting soul)

HG 29, Deborah (HWV 51): Ex. 6.5 (In Jehovah’s awful sight)

HG 12, Alexander’s Feast (HWV 75): Exs 6.10 (With ravish’d ears, bb. 25–68), 6.12 (He chose a mournful muse), and 6.13 (He sung Darius, great and good, bb. 13–37)

HG 24, Il trionfo del Tempo e della Verità (HWV 46): Exs 6.15 (1707 setting of Un pensiero nemico di pace, bb. 20–28), 6.16 (1737 setting of Un pensiero nemico di pace, bb. 1–13), and 6.18 (Venga il tempo)
Appendix A: Recorded Portfolio Tracklisting

Online access to the recorded portfolio:
https://soundcloud.com/user-512442604/sets/la-strada-recorded-portfolio

1. Antonio Vivaldi: *La verità in cimento* – Solo quella guancia bella (I/3, Rosane) 2:35
2. Domenico Sarro: *Tito Sempronio Gracco* – Se veglia, se dorme (I/2, Erminia) 4:42
3. Leonardo Leo: *Zenobia in Palmira* – Placarti dovresti (I/6, Aspasia) 1:23
4. Leo: *Zenobia in Palmira* – Quando irato il Ciel s’oscura (II/11, Aspasia) 4:00
5. G. F. Handel: *Partenope* – Io ti levo l’impero dell’armi (I/11, Partenope) 5:37
7. Handel: *Giulio Cesare* (1730 revival) – Parolette, vezzi e sguardi (I/7, Cleopatra) 4:52
8. Handel: *Poro* – Se il Ciel mi divide (II/8, Cleofide) 5:43
9. Handel: *Sosarme* – Oh diva hecate (I/11 recitative, Elmira) 0:21
10. Handel: *Sosarme* – Dite pace (I/11, Elmira) 5:34
11. Handel: *Athalia* – Through the land (first setting; II/1, Josabeth) 7:37
13. Handel: *Alcina* – Ombre pallide (II/13, Alcina) 6:09
14. Handel: *Atalanta* – Custodite, o dolci sogni (III/5, Atalanta) 1:21
15. Handel: *Berenice* – Nò, che servire altrui (I/2, Berenice) 4:33

Performers:
Judit Zsovár – soprano
Fanni Edőcs – harpsichord

Recorded in Budapest in 2015.
Appendix B

Domenico Sarro: Tito Sempronio Gracco (Naples 1725)
Se veglia, se dorme l'amante suo core (I/2 Erminia) – Full Score
Se ve glia se dorme, fà man te mmo
cor con te re for me lungi acci omo re so spina lungi acci so-
Piu piano
Spi ra per te so spina per te

290
Appendix B2

Leonardo Leo: Zenobia in Palmira (Naples 1725)

Vuoi ch’io parta (I/8 Aspasia) – Full Score
Appendix B3

Leonardo Leo: Zenobia in Palmira (Naples 1725)

Quando irato il Ciel s'oscura (II/11 Aspasia) – Full Score
Appendix C: Strada’s London Season Schedules

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Work</th>
<th>1729/30 King’s Theatre</th>
<th>Number of performances</th>
<th>Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lotario</td>
<td>2 December 1729</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Adelaide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giulio Cesare rev.</td>
<td>17 January 1730</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Cleopatra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partenope</td>
<td>24 February 1730</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Partenope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giulio Cesare rev.</td>
<td>21 and 31 March 1730</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Cleopatra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ormisda</td>
<td>4 April 1730</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Arsenice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tolomeo rev.</td>
<td>19 May 1730</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Seleuce</td>
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<th>1730/31 King’s Theatre</th>
<th>Number of performances</th>
<th>Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Scipione rev.</td>
<td>3 November 1730</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Berenice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ormisda rev.</td>
<td>24 November 1730</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Arsenice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partenope rev.</td>
<td>12 December 1730</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Partenope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venceslao</td>
<td>12 January 1731</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Eremice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poro</td>
<td>2 February 1731</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Cleofide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rinaldo rev.</td>
<td>6 April 1731</td>
<td>6/7</td>
<td>Almirena</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rodelinda rev.</td>
<td>4 May 1731</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Rodelinda</td>
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<table>
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<th>Number of performances</th>
<th>Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tamerlano rev.</td>
<td>13 November 1731</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Asteria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poro rev.</td>
<td>23 November 1731</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Admeto rev.</td>
<td>7 December 1731</td>
<td>6/7</td>
<td>Alceste</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ezio</td>
<td>15 January 1732</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Fulvia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giulio Cesare rev.</td>
<td>1 February 1732</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Cleopatra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sosarme</td>
<td>15 February 1732</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Elmira</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ariosti: Coriolano rev.</td>
<td>25 March 1732</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Volumnia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flavio rev.</td>
<td>18 April 1732</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Emilia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esther</td>
<td>2 May 1732</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Esther</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucio Papirio dittatore</td>
<td>23 May 1732</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Papiria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acis and Galatea rev.</td>
<td>10 June 1732</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Catone</td>
<td>4 November 1732</td>
<td>4/5</td>
<td>Marzia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alessandro rev.</td>
<td>25 November 1732</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Rossane</td>
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<tr>
<td>Acis and Galatea rev.</td>
<td>5 December 1732</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Galatea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orlando</td>
<td>2 January 1733</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Seleuce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deborah</td>
<td>17 March 1733</td>
<td>6 (one without Strada)</td>
<td>Deborah</td>
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<tr>
<td>Esther</td>
<td>17 April 1733</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Esther</td>
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<tr>
<td>Orlando</td>
<td>21 April 1733</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Angelica</td>
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<tr>
<td>Esther</td>
<td>5 July 1733, at Oxford</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Esther</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athalia</td>
<td>10 July 1733, at Oxford</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Josabeth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acis and Galatea rev.</td>
<td>11 July 1733, at Oxford</td>
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<td>Galatea</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deborah</td>
<td>12 July 1733, at Oxford</td>
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<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td>1733/34 Covent Garden</td>
<td>Number of performances</td>
<td>Role</td>
</tr>
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<td>------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Semiramide riconosciuta</td>
<td>30 October 1733</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Tamiri</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ottone rev.</td>
<td>13 November 1733</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Caio Fabricio</td>
<td>4 December 1733</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Sestia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Arbace</td>
<td>5 January 1734</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Mandane</td>
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<tr>
<td>Arianna in Creta</td>
<td>26 January 1734</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Arianna</td>
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<tr>
<td>Il Parnasso in festa</td>
<td>13 March 1734</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Clio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deborah rev.</td>
<td>1 April 1734</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Deborah</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sosarme rev.</td>
<td>27 April 1734</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Elmira</td>
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<tr>
<td>Acis and Galatea rev.</td>
<td>7 May 1734</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Galatea</td>
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<tr>
<td>Il pastore fido</td>
<td>18 May 1734</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Erato, Amarielli</td>
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<thead>
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<th>1734/35 Covent Garden</th>
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<td>Il pastore fido</td>
<td>9 November 1734</td>
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<td>Erato, Amarielli</td>
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<tr>
<td>Arianna in Creta</td>
<td>27 November 1734</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Arianna</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oreste</td>
<td>18 December 1734</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Ermione</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ariodante</td>
<td>8 January 1735</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Ginevra</td>
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<tr>
<td>Esther</td>
<td>5 March 1735</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Esther</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deborah</td>
<td>16 March 1735</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Deborah</td>
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<tr>
<td>Athalia</td>
<td>1 April 1735</td>
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<td>Josabeth</td>
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<td>Alcina</td>
<td>16 April 1735</td>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alexander’s Feast (Cecilia volgi)</td>
<td>19 February 1736</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Soprano</td>
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<td>Acis and Galatea rev.</td>
<td>24 March 1736</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Galatea</td>
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<tr>
<td>Esther</td>
<td>7 April 1736</td>
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<td>Esther</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ariodante</td>
<td>5 May 1736</td>
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<td>Ginevra</td>
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<td>Atalanta</td>
<td>12 May 1736</td>
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<tr>
<td>Private concert at the Swan Tavern</td>
<td>7 October 1736</td>
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<td>6 November 1736</td>
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<td>Alcina</td>
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<tr>
<td>Atalanta</td>
<td>20 November 1736</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Atalanta</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poro</td>
<td>8 December 1736</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Cleofide</td>
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<tr>
<td>Arminio</td>
<td>12 January 1737</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Tusnelda</td>
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<td>Partenope</td>
<td>29 January 1737</td>
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<tr>
<td>Giustino</td>
<td>16 February 1737</td>
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<tr>
<td>Il Parnasso in festa</td>
<td>9 March 1737</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Clio</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alexander’s Feast</td>
<td>16 March 1737</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Soprano</td>
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<tr>
<td>Il trionfo del Tempo e della Verità</td>
<td>23 March 1737</td>
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<td>Bellezza</td>
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<td>Esther</td>
<td>6 April 1737</td>
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<tr>
<td>Didone abbandonata</td>
<td>13 April 1737</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Didone</td>
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<tr>
<td>Berenice</td>
<td>18 May 1737</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Berenice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcina</td>
<td>10 June 1737</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alexander’s Feast</td>
<td>25 June 1737</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Soprano</td>
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</table>
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