

BOOK REVIEW

Judit Zsovár (2020). *Anna Maria Strada, Prima Donna of G. F. Handel* (Peter Lang, ISBN 978-3-631-79243-8)

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A revised version of her doctoral thesis defended at the Liszt Academy of Music in Budapest in 2016, *Anna Maria Strada, Prima Donna of G. F. Handel* is Judit Zsovár's first significant foray into academic publishing. The book takes the traditional format of a biography divided chronologically into seven chapters, but as stated in the title, its essence consists of a detailed examination of the Italian soprano's operatic collaboration with the master from Halle in its central chapters (Three, Four and Five), and it covers in great depth a period of seven and a half years, from 1729 to 1737. Whereas Chapter One (*Early Years*) and Two (*First Maturity*) portray the beginnings of Strada's career in Italy between 1720 and 1726 on the basis of preserved sources, Chapter Six (*The Prima Donna of Oratorios*) gives an informative overview of her activity as Handel's oratorio singer, running parallel with the last five years of her London operatic fame (1732–1737). Chapter Seven (*Back to Italy*) rounds off the book with a depiction of the last years of Strada's career after her return to Naples (1739–1741).

In the preface the author admits that the lack of information on Strada in both contemporary sources and modern-day scholarly literature in contrast to her better known and thoroughly investigated London colleagues Francesca Cuzzoni, Faustina Bordoni and Senesino proved to be a source of inspiration more than a hindrance. She clearly states that her main points of reference are musical scores of Strada's repertory, eighteenth-century theoretical treatises and testimonies on her singing, and lastly her own experiences as a classical singer. (I will revisit this third and most unexpected point later on in this review.) In the bibliography Zsovár lists manuscript sources of operas and excerpts from operas, conducting scores in the case of Handel and most often the only preserved copies of works by other composers. A list of libretti that provide much-needed information when scores had not been preserved and a set of theoretical treatises from which she draws information on the art of singing in the eighteenth century also belong to her primary sources. Secondary ones comprise musicological publications in English, Italian and to a very small extent German, including recent studies. The author clearly knows her way around Handel scholarship, but as we shall see later, she may have chosen not to adopt some of the more critical approaches in the writings of Suzanne Aspdén, Ellen T. Harris or Saskia Maria Woyke, all present in her bibliography.

From the 1720/1721 season in the Teatro Sant'Angelo in Venice, Strada excelled in *seconda* or *terza donna* parts more demanding than the hierarchy of *opera seria* would require. In spite

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of the technical and interpretive proficiency evident in operatic roles created by Antonio Vivaldi, Giuseppe Maria Orlandini, Leonardo Vinci, Leonardo Leo, Domenico Sarro, and later Handel, Attilio Ariosti and Baldassare Galuppi, and also despite the lack of negative testimonies about her singing, Strada does not seem to have sought out opportunities to ‘recycle’ music she had sung earlier, e.g. in the form of *arie di bagaglio*. Zsovár speculates that this may have been because she was modest and unassuming or because she enjoyed the challenges of singing new music. After moving to Naples and marrying scene designer Aurelio del Pò, her repertory gradually began to include *prima donna* roles of heightened complexity, often strong but conflicted protagonists such as Aspasia in Leo’s *Zenobia in Palmira* (1725). This resulted in the introduction of new features to her singing such as extended *legato* phrases, long coloraturas, frequent *messa di voce* and chromaticism. In Zsovár’s opinion, in order to realise her full potential Strada ‘needed to encounter Handel. And to have a mate to accompany him on his journey towards a deeper connection between music and drama, Handel perhaps needed to meet her’ (p. 90).

Chapter Three (*Successor to the ‘Rival Queens’*) serves as an introduction to the aforementioned main part of the book. The investigation of Handel’s hiring process for the Second Academy in Italy reveals that singers of lower technical proficiency but higher stellar status such as Bernacchi and Merighi negotiated higher fees than Strada. From her debut in London, she was framed by contemporary testimonies – and possibly by Handel himself in the first roles he wrote for her – as a voice that combines the often contrasted qualities of her predecessors Cuzzoni and Bordoni. The importance of the singers’ physical appearance, including their facial expressions, are considered in analyses of testimonies by Paolo Rolli, Mrs Pendarves and others, confronting them with two iconographic sources, an idealised portrait and a caricature of the singer. Although no definite conclusions are possible, these insights of Zsovár on Strada’s reception are thoughtful and illuminating. Whereas it is beyond doubt that during their long collaboration she and Handel would have formed a close relationship and maybe even become friends, there is little evidence that allows Zsovár to explore this aspect of Strada’s life in a more significant way. For example, the reasons behind Strada’s ‘faithfulness’ to Handel as opposed to other collaborators could be a result of circumstances rather than a conscious choice.

The main focus of Chapters Four (*In the Midst of Operatic Business*), Five (*The Composer’s Faithful Soprano*) and Six (*The Prima Donna of Oratorios*) is the analysis of the music – mostly Handel’s but also by some of the composers mentioned above in *pasticci* form – that Strada sang under his direction in London. Zsovár’s main argument is that at first Handel wanted to show how Strada could match the specific skill sets of both predecessors in original roles of extreme virtuosity and eccentricity, such as Adelaide in *Lotario* and Partenope. When it comes to revivals of operas originally written for other singers, Strada usually took over Cuzzoni’s parts because of a similar range, but often with added numbers originally written for Bordoni (a mezzo-soprano), in transposed and modified form. However, Zsovár is of the opinion that whereas Bordoni’s original music showed signs of favoring virtuosity for its own sake, e.g. in the repetition of ornamental figures on the same pitch, revisions for Strada prove the opposite. On the other hand, the music she performed in some revivals, but also *pasticci*, whether consisting of music by Handel or other composers, was often left intact, which in Zsovár’s opinion paints a picture of vocal superiority, but could also be interpreted as a lack of distinction. The latter possibility is refuted by a convincing and gradual outlining of some distinguishing features such as the specific treatment of triplets and a different use of *vibrato*. The synthetic quality of Strada’s vocal



abilities is well depicted by the following list of elements in Strada's music for the revival of *Il pastor fido*: 'terzine and messe di voce', 'trills', 'lyric agility', 'parlante declamation', 'castrato-esque virtuosity' and lastly 'pathetic expression, *tempo rubato* and tragic vocal timbre' (p. 149). In his later original roles for Strada such as Cleofide in *Porro*, Alcina and Atalanta, Handel explored specifically lyric traits as part of a musical characterisation replete with contrasts.

Chapter Six does not alter this overall image of Strada with its examination of her oratorio parts but mainly testifies to the occasional inclusion of operatic elements of heightened virtuosity, as well as to the addition of singing in English to the singer's expertise. Chapter Seven, on other hand, portrays a gradual, almost unnoticed decline in agility and range, thus approximating a mezzo-soprano, and stresses that the singer still retired at her peak and by taking on a new challenge, the *en travesti* title role in Porpora's *Tiridate*. The exploration of Strada's earlier and later years makes ample use of conjecture due to the unavailability of evidence, e.g. in the assumption that she may have stemmed from the Bologna school of singing. The relationship with her *castrati* colleagues is considered a vital part of the singer's professional development in the form of emulation, whether through vocal training or direct stage experiences, the first of which was with Farinelli in 1724. As stated in Chapter Seven, in 1740 'her collection of collaborations with the most prominent *castrati* – Farinelli, Bernacchi, Senesino, Carestini, Conti, Manzuoli, and Caffarelli – was complete' (p. 281). However, even when arias originally written for *castrati* were integrated into Strada's repertory, Zsovár insists on the retention of feminine qualities, without sufficiently defining this vocal (and musical) femininity and somewhat disregarding the problems of voice gendering, investigated thoroughly by, among others, Martha Feldman and Roger Freitas, who are both listed in the bibliography.

Zsovár's experiences as a professional singer are of great importance to what she has to say about Strada's career trajectory, and her analyses of the arias and duets the soprano performed offer invaluable insights into the problems of performance practice. It is difficult to imagine that someone without insider knowledge would be able to deduce so much from a singer's point of view. Scattered through the book are several valuable digressions on vocal performance practice: on the position of the larynx (pp. 162–168), on ornamentation (pp. 187–192), on *portamento*, *scivolo* and *strascino* (pp. 193–201) as well as on vibrato (pp. 224–229). These always have a sound basis in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century theoretical sources (less so in modern literature) and are always well integrated into discussions of Strada's repertory.

The book understandably does not refer to Zsovár's own recordings of a selection of analysed arias, but one can nevertheless listen to some of them on YouTube, experiencing first-hand the author's ideas on how Strada might have performed *portamenti*, trills and other ornaments. However, although Zsovár's notions of how Strada's repertory should be sung have considerable legitimacy in historically-informed performance, this is also where aspects of her study can appear questionable because of a heightened subjectivity in relation to the issues discussed. The problem is not helped by an identification of one soprano (Zsovár) with the other (Strada), never openly stated in the book, but nevertheless palpable in Zsovár's writing.

One of these traces is the presumption of maximal professional integrity, almost to the level of perfection. All the points the author makes seem to cement Strada's reputation as an unproblematic collaborator who never diverted the focus from the composer or the musical works of art, and thus they seem to correspond to a nineteenth-century musical aesthetic rather than to Strada's own times. This rootedness can be seen in Zsovár's different approach to 'original' operas, where she insists on the musical unity of a 'character' as opposed to revivals and *pasticci*



that receive less of her analytical attention. Everything seems to point to Strada's professional virtues, so that the fact that she was given *parlante* arias is proof enough of her acting abilities and denser orchestration is an indication of a big voice. The author assumes that any piece of music written for Strada was executed without difficulties, overlooking the fact that even nowadays minor imperfections in live performance sometimes do no harm to the overall impression. The author also does not deliver on all of her promises: for example, a more detailed explanation of the development of a 'deeper connection between music and drama' in Strada's and Handel's collaboration is never given. Also, the question of Strada's consistently lower fees when compared to those of her colleagues could have received more attention.

Another possible point of contention is the category of the *soprano sfogato*, a type that Strada's voice belonged to, according to the author. Defined as a powerful soprano with vocal production entirely '*da petto*' (from the chest), it indeed must have had a wider range and considerable vocal force, but also an evenness of tone in all registers and an elegant agility whether in the use of rapid coloraturas, complex rhythmic formulae or accented wide leaps. Zsovár published the article 'Baroque prototypes of the *soprano sfogato*?' in the 30/2 (Autumn 2019) issue of the *Handel Institute Newsletter*, explaining all of her main points on the origins of this voice-type in the eighteenth century and its prevalence in the first half of the nineteenth (pp. 1–4). All these arguments are integrated into the book, but sometimes they come off as insufficiently justified.

However, in conclusion, it is important to stress that a modification of approach, an exploration of some of the more problematic questions and the inclusion of unexplored aspects would require a broader comparative emphasis or theoretical framework, and thus would surpass both the aim and the scope of this monograph. As it is, it offers a sound base for further considerations of Anna Maria Strada's artistic path. In its numerous music examples and the tables clearly displaying the singer's repertory and career, it also has referential value. This is an exemplary first book, and one cannot but look forward to further investigations of subject matters related to singing from the double point of view of musicologist and practicing singer, as well as to any other matter to which Judit Zsovár will devote her scholarly attention in the future.

