

THE MEZZO-SOPRANO VOICE

An Attempt To Qualify the Voice through
Definition and Examination of Selected Operatic
Repertoire.

By

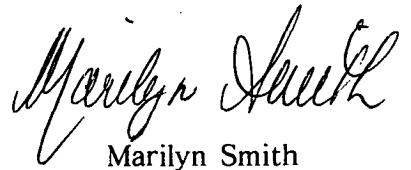
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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Music

University of Tasmania, August 1995

DECLARATION

.This dissertation does not contain any material which has been accepted for an award in any tertiary institution and to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material which has been previously published or written by any other person, except where due acknowledgement has been given.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Marilyn Smith". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Marilyn Smith

August 1995

ABSTRACT

In female voices, 'soprano' and 'contralto' are terms readily used to describe the high and low voice respectively. The term 'mezzo-soprano', on the other hand, has often added an air of confusion, as it refers to something in between. Because of this, the mezzo-soprano voice has become one of the least understood and difficult of all voice types to define.

The first section of this dissertation attempts to clarify the nature of the mezzo-soprano voice, with emphasis on range, timbre, tessitura, registration and anatomy. A brief history of the emergence of the mezzo-soprano voice follows, leading into its development and acceptance as an operatic instrument. It is in opera that the real voice is revealed, with such variables as range and quality being linked to the roles that have to be portrayed.

During its chequered history and its subsequent struggle for recognition, the demands upon and expectations of the mezzo-soprano voice have changed. By examining repertoire for the voice – from the time of the castrato, through to the *prima donna* roles of Rossini, the dramatic use of the voice by Verdi and the favouring of the voice by mid-nineteenth century French composers – the characteristics of the mezzo-soprano voice begin to emerge and its identification becomes much clearer.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The writer wishes to acknowledge the generous help and guidance in the preparation of this dissertation given by Mr. Russell Smith, O.A.M., and Mr. Joannes Roose, Senior Lecturers at the Tasmanian Conservatorium of Music and also Dr. Llewellyn Negrin, Lecturer at the Faculty of Visual and Performing Arts, University of Tasmania.

She also wishes to thank Brian Risby, Librarian at the University of Tasmania, for his assistance in obtaining relevant research material and Brian Beha, composer, for preparing the musical examples quoted in the text.

Finally, she wishes to thank the scholarship committee at the Office for Research, University of Tasmania, for the generous financial assistance given by the Australian Postgraduate Course Award.

Marilyn Smith

August 1995

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CHAPTER ONE

CLASSIFICATION AND DEFINITION

In the twentieth century, the subject of voice classification has aroused the interest not only of singers, but also of those who show an interest in the singing voice, such as composers, teachers, conductors, opera producers and scientists.

In this thesis, the aim is to attempt to clarify the definition of the mezzo-soprano voice through examination of its physical characteristics and subsequently to clarify the concept of the mezzo-soprano voice and explore how this concept arose by examining the history and the relevant operatic repertoire from the sixteenth to the twentieth century. There are many considerations to be taken into account when classifying a singing voice and it is hoped that when all these are collated, any confusion which previously existed will be dispelled.

Range and timbre are the most commonly used methodologies for classification, but no less important are tessitura, registration and anatomy. The accuracy with which these considerations are put into effect is important for the singer, as a voice wrongly categorized could result in incorrect use and subsequent damage to the vocal cords, not to mention psychological damage to the singer.

Shewan (1979, 17) states that:

One of the most important functions of a teacher of singing involves classifying singers as soprano, mezzo-soprano, contralto, tenor, baritone or bass and their respective sub-types. Teachers who make incorrect classification judgements place severe limitations upon their students' development, not to mention the possibility of creating a situation which could result in permanent damage to some of the students' voices.

Because of the nature of the vocal organ, being part of and contained within a singer's body, the process of classification is apt to become subjective and therefore prone to inaccuracies. The approach of both teachers and singers in the past has tended to lean heavily on the empirical; the elements of range, timbre

and tessitura can be included here. Scientists, on the other hand, have sought answers based on an examination of the relevant anatomical features of the singer. The earliest concrete evidence of scientific interest came with Manuel Garcia's invention of the laryngoscope in 1854 (Scholes 1968, 322), a series of mirrors used to examine the functions of the vocal cords. Since then, both scientists and voice teachers have shown an active interest in the vocal apparatus, although as yet there is not total agreement between the two. Again, according to Shewan (1979, 17):

No single classification methodology has gained general acceptance among either voice teachers or voice scientists. Methods are in fact diverse and often controversial; terminology in the literature remains unclear and even confusing.

In Jander, Steane and Forbes (1992, 372) the word 'mezzo-soprano' is described as being of Italian origin, meaning 'medium' or 'half-soprano'. They state that terminology varies from country to country: the French also calling the voice '*bas-dessus*' [lit='low-above'], whilst in Germany the voice is referred to as '*Mezzosopran*' or '*tiefer Sopran*'.

Rosenthal and Warrack (1975, 262) add that the mezzo-soprano is:

...the middle category of female (or artificial male) voice. In Italy the mezzo-soprano differs from the soprano chiefly in that a few notes are missing at the top of the tessitura, and in that the voice has a darker quality. In Germany it is a more distinctly different voice, with a tessitura of about g to b-flat".

Confusion is the keynote of Sabin's (1964, 1348) definition:

That female voice which is intermediate between the soprano and the alto. Some singers style themselves contraltos one year, mezzo-sopranos the next or vice-versa, and although the mezzo quality presumably is a transitional voice, partaking of the qualities of either neighbour, the term mezzo-soprano is more commonly employed for singers who clearly are not sopranos than it is for those who equally clearly are not contraltos.

The simplified statement that a mezzo-soprano is 'that female voice which is intermediate between the soprano and alto' contains an element of truth, but the suggestion that the voice quality is 'transitional' is ambiguous, confused and misleading and should be treated with a degree of suspicion. Certainly no less

colourful is John Steane's statement in Opera Now (October 1989, 20):

The mezzo-soprano, like the baritone, is the voice of common sense, the happy medium between high and low. It does not change a lady into a bird at one end of the scale or into a man at the other...it suggests primarily a woman of rational disposition, a mature character, not a flighty soprano nor a gorgon contralto either.

Steane (December 1989, 40) also refers to the mezzo-soprano as 'the most natural singing voice among women which no doubt goes back in time as far as song itself.' He then boldly states that 'Eve was, I suspect a mezzo-soprano', a supposition upon which no proof can be founded. Biblical History has recorded Eve as being the initiator of original sin, but her abilities as a singer have yet to be proven!

From the examples above, it can be seen that there is little agreement in the definitions of the mezzo-soprano voice. Therefore it will be necessary to take a closer look at those elements which constitute and in turn distinguish one voice from another.

RANGE

The range of a voice is determined by the outer limits which it can comfortably manage. This does not necessarily include the extremes encountered when singing technical exercises, the aim of which is to tone the muscles of the vocal apparatus to achieve an even sound throughout. Rather, it refers to that part of the voice which is workable and which can sustain the rigours of a concert or operatic performance, without showing any noticeable signs of undue strain or discomfort. In order for range to be considered an indicator of voice-type, it is helpful for the singer's voice to be fully developed. According to Shewan (1979, 18), '...few beginners sing all the notes that are characteristic of their natural voice types.' Scholes (1970, 1096) states: 'No exact definition of range is possible, as individual voices differ greatly according to their training.' However, he does suggest that initially the range of each voice type is roughly one octave

above and one octave below a given note, as in the example below:



In this example, the mezzo-soprano range translates as being from G below Middle C to G two octaves above. Presumably, this analysis does not apply to a fully trained singer, as earlier he states (1095):

The normal range of these voices...with training can be a tenth below and above, but the outer three notes at each end must not be overworked.

Using the given note from the first example, the range of the mezzo is thus extended from E below Middle C to b'' , almost two octaves above.

Jander (1980, 259) gives the initial range for a mezzo-soprano as A to f -sharp", but agrees with Scholes in that the range of the voice, with training, can be extended at either end. Foster (1935, 54) maintains that, despite the fact that a mezzo's high notes take longer to develop than those of a soprano, they can be extended upwards to a -flat" and in exceptional cases to a'' or b -flat". He states that: 'the high F sharp (fifth line) is a particularly powerful and characteristic note.'

As a comparison with Scholes, Shewan gives the ranges for all voices in the following table:





In this example, Shewan gives the normal workable range of a mezzo-soprano as A to b-flat", with the extension of a tone at either end. Again, he emphasizes that these results only apply to the fully developed voice. Note the height extension of each voice, compared with the examples given by Scholes almost half a century earlier. This suggests that the conception of voices has changed considerably with different training methods, alongside greater scientific knowledge of the functions of the voice. On this basis, Shewan's findings would appear to be more accurate and therefore would be in agreement with some of the repertoire demands of composers such as Rossini and Verdi (see Chapter 3).

Cooper (1985, 9) believes that the pitch level and range of speech should be an indicator of voice type. In other words, the level at which a singer projects his or her speaking voice should indicate whether a singer is a high soprano, mezzo-soprano or contralto. However, he also states that there is a tendency for most singers, especially in America, to pitch their speaking voices too low.

Shewan (1979, 20) in testing Cooper's theory, recorded the following results:

Coloratura soprano....a' to b-flat'

Soprano.....f to a'

Mezzo-soprano.....e-flat to e

Contralto.....b to d

He says (p. 22) that 'the optimum pitch for speech unmask natural qualities and reveals a singer's vocal focus.' These findings, however, would be dependent upon the singer pitching his or her voice at an appropriate optimum level.

TIMBRE

Timbre is that characteristic quality which distinguishes one voice-type from another. It is possible to identify an individual singer by the timbre of his or her voice, just as it is possible to distinguish a trumpet from a trombone or a violin from a viola. According to Husler and Rodd-Marling (1969, 86), the best way of determining the category to which a voice belongs is by its timbre or 'sound - providing the ear has learned to diagnose.'

Timbre is sometimes referred to as 'colour' as in Shewan's (1979, 18) generalization that the brighter the tone, the higher the voice; conversely, the darker the tone, the lower the voice. As the mezzo-soprano is a middle-ranged voice, it can be concluded that its sound quality is darker than that of a soprano, but not as dark as that of a contralto.

However, referring to the colour of a voice can be misleading, as an experienced singer is able to superimpose or create colour merely as a form of expression. This in itself is not a bad thing; in fact a performance can become bland and lacking in musicality if no attempt to 'colour' the sound is made. The danger comes with inexperienced singers who have a desire to imitate a voice which is not their own. For instance, Jander (1980, 702) refers to many singers who earlier this century labelled themselves contraltos, but who were more probably mezzo-sopranos attempting to darken the sound in the hope of attaining the depth required to sing certain repertoire in vogue at the time. The opposite problem occurs for those mezzos, who, swayed by the enigma of the *'prima donna'*, attempt to push the range higher than is naturally comfortable, resulting in upper notes which are strident in character and which do not match the middle and lower notes of the voice. Steane (Oct.1989, 20) states::

Many mezzos, dissatisfied with their lot and having high C well within their range, have been tempted to drop the rather belittling 'half' in their trade-description and become a whole soprano if only for a few years.

Some sopranos, particularly those who belong to amateur choirs, are apt to

call themselves mezzo-sopranos or even altos. These are known in the trade as 'lazy sopranos', so named because they have not developed the facility of upper range extension and so feel more comfortable singing only in the middle part of their voice. However, the test comes when they are asked to sing in the same range as their mezzo counterparts. The soprano, in order to try to attain the richer alto sound required in much choral writing, is tempted to push the voice beyond its natural limits, resulting in breathiness of tone, excessive vibrato and intonation problems. If timbre is to be used as an indicator of voice-type, it must be natural; that is, the sound should be allowed to float freely on the breath using the resonators, without extraneous facial movement and with the support coming from the diaphragm and abdominal muscles, not the larynx. Landeau (October 63, 6), in defining timbre, states that it is 'the resultant of reinforcements by the resonators of the fundamentals and of certain harmonics supplied by the larynx.' This indicates a natural use of the resonance cavities and it is from this that conclusions about a particular voice can be made. A simple aural test can be made by putting two voices – a soprano and a mezzo-soprano – together in any well-known duet intended for the two voices, such as the Act 11, Scene 1 duet of Bellini's Norma, where the two voices blend perfectly in thirds. Swap the voices around and the balance is immediately overturned. The ear naturally responds to the lighter voice on top with the weightier mezzo voice on the lower part, but is upset when the two voices are placed the other way around.

TESSITURA

The word '*tessitura*' comes from the Italian meaning 'texture' (Scholes 1970, 1096). Whereas range refers to the compass of a particular voice or song, that is, the highest and lowest notes, *tessitura* refers to the general lie or position of the notes within the vocal line. Scholes (ibid) goes on to say that songs with an excessive number of high notes are said to have a high *tessitura*, which could impose a strain on the voice. The same could occur if there is an excessive

number of low notes. Therefore, when choosing repertoire for an individual voice, it is not only the range which should be considered, but the ease or difficulty with which a voice can maintain a high or low pitch. The ideal is to try to find repertoire which shows the true timbre of the voice and that generally means working from the middle of the voice outwards, with not too many notes at either extreme.

Some of the best examples of works with a suitable tessitura for the mezzo-soprano voice can be found in opera (See Ch.3). The role of Carmen is one such, where the singer is required to have a dark, earthy quality within a certain range. However, this has not prevented the role being 'poached' by sopranos with a desire to add yet another *prima donna* role to their curricula vitae. After the première in Paris in 1875, sung by the mezzo-soprano Célestine Galli-Marié (Mandadori 1979, 264), the role was claimed by Emma Calvé, described by Christiansen (1986, 270) as 'the greatest French soprano of the nineteenth century' and who for many years received much critical acclaim for her interpretation. However, it is clear from the writing that Bizet intended the role to be sung by a mezzo-soprano, as the tessitura is comfortable for that voice and the timbre of the voice more suited to that role.

Another example can be found in the role of Mimi from Puccini's La Bohème. Most of the role is written within the comfortable range of a mezzo-soprano voice. However, as the opera progresses, the tessitura becomes higher and more is required of the singer. The Act 1 duet with Rodolfo, which ends on a sustained top c'', has now become so legendary that audience and singers alike expect the sound to be floated with ease. A mezzo attempting to do this would almost certainly fail, as the texture of the voice is too thick and the natural colour too dark. It is important then, when choosing suitable repertoire for any voice, to consider not only the range and quality of the voice, but the tessitura in which the work is written. Only then can a mature singer cope with all that is required to perform the work with conviction.

REGISTRATION

In recent times, no other area of voice research has evoked as much interest and with it as much controversy as that of registration. Since Manuel Garcia's invention of the laryngeal mirror, singers as well as scientists have been actively researching the subject. As science has developed in the twentieth century, so too has the accuracy of measuring the muscular functions of the larynx, the result being that scientists are now discovering what singers have instinctively believed for centuries.

The term 'register' came from the organ builders of Germany and was actually used in reference to the stops of the organ (Husler and Rodd-Marling 1976, 57). In singing, registration refers to those areas of the voice which differ in quality throughout the range. These areas are separated by 'breaks' which occur naturally at different pitches, according to the category of voice. The break is most noticeable in adolescent boys' voices and to a lesser degree in the voices of adolescent girls. When singing an ascending scale, a point is reached where the voice 'stops' before proceeding upwards. This point forms the transition, which can be identified as a single pitch or more often than not, two or three adjoining pitches. The voice then travels through this area – the *passaggio* or passage – before proceeding into the next register. A good singer will aim to perfect a technique which enables him or her to sing through the *passaggio* with no apparent loss of quality. By allowing registers to overlap, a satisfactory sound can be obtained.

Opinions as to the exact number of registers differ amongst teachers, singers and scientists, but it is generally agreed that there are three registers – chest, middle and head – so named, because the sensation of sound vibrations is felt more strongly in each of these areas as the pitch ascends or descends.

Scholes (1980, 1095) states:

The terms 'chest' and 'head', as applied to the supposed place of origin of tone, or of special resonance of the voice, are of ancient usage. They are to be found in a passage of Jerome of Moravia of the thirteenth century (quoted by Henderson, Early History of Singing p.28) and about the same period in a passage of John Garland. These writers did not apply these terms to the registers, as is done today, but they apparently thought of the bass as a chest voice and the tenor as a head voice.

Huie- Armbrister (1982, 51) continues:

Before the renaissance, the voice was divided into the true voice (*vox integra*) and the false voice (*voce ficta*), which in the baroque were known as the voice of the chest (*voce di petto*) and the voice of the head (*voce di testa*). To these were added the middle voice, or *falsestto*, in the romantic period. The terms have persisted to the present, but with the terms head voice and falsetto sometimes used interchangeably.

However, with the increasing accuracy of methods of scientific measurement, it is now possible to summarize, with a degree of certainty, the physical changes that take place as the voice ascends or descends. The research of Husler and Rodd-Marling (1976, 60-64) and Arnold (1973, 141), reveals the following:

(i) In the chest register, the vocal cords appear short, plump and fairly flaccid and vibrate over their entire length. They also close fully when vibrating. The epiglottis and the larynx remain in a low position.

(ii) In the head voice, the cords are sharp-edged, thin, elongated and tense and take on an oval shape. The epiglottis is raised, which in turn raises the soft palate.

(iii) In the middle voice, a combination of the above occurs; the cords gradually change shape as the pitch rises or falls and the tension changes correspondingly.

When singing, it is important not to force either the chest or middle voice too high, as this can have a detrimental effect on the timbre of the voice. A prime example of this occurs in the over-use of the chest voice by 'pop' singers, where the sound produced is often rough and breathy. Continued singing in this manner can result in short-term damage to the vocal cords, such as the growth of nodules or more serious and permanent damage such as cancer.

However, the chest register can be used to advantage if treated carefully and is often favoured by singers from Latin countries, Eastern Europe and Russia. Russian basses are legendary for their deep, course, resonating sound. No less famous are the mezzos from these regions – for example, the Russian, Elena Obratsova and the Czech, Vera Soukupova, who take the chest voice much higher than their Western counterparts. The sound produced is masculine and raw, but often very dramatic and exciting for the listener. The American mezzo Marilyn Horne, the Greek, Agnes Baltsa and the Welsh, Della Jones also make great use of the chest voice, particularly in coloratura singing. The effect is similarly dramatic and no less exciting.

While the use of the outer limits of the voice are the most dramatic, the middle notes of the mezzo-soprano voice are actually the most important, as it is here that the bulk of singing takes place (Croker 1895, 21). Mezzos, more often than not, have a well blended middle to chest voice and as a consequence, it is often difficult to detect where the change of register occurs. The exceptions to this of course, are singers such as those mentioned above. In sopranos, the change is generally more obvious – the lower middle voice is not as strong and the transition takes place on a higher pitch.

Zeilinger (1982, 5) believes that in singing from middle to head voice, the mezzo is likely to encounter difficulties. She says that this is due to the fact that the middle voice is comparatively strong and so it takes more work and a longer maturation period to achieve satisfactory head notes. By taking the middle voice up and over into the head voice, no tone should be lost, provided the singer is careful to avoid shrillness and stridency. She continues (1982, 5):

In the musical literature, one recognizes mezzo roles in as much as the highest notes are always reached from the middle register. In this register, the physiological and psychological coming together of the vocal apparatus of the mezzo voice is at its optimum and means that after a great strain, it immediately recovers. This is where the mezzo-soprano finds her physical and emotional disposition towards singing.

This reinforces the notion that the middle register is the most prominent and therefore the most important for the mezzo-soprano. For the head register to develop, it is apparent that the mezzo has to proceed carefully and not force high notes before they are ready or mature. To do this would inevitably lead to stridency later on, which defeats the purpose of trying to blend the registers to achieve an even tone.

An alternative view to the number of registers is given by Van Diense (June 1982, 33) who names a chest and falsetto register in males and four registers in females – chest, head, little and whistle. The middle voice is not named as such, but is incorporated within the head voice. The little and whistle registers are the domain of sopranos only, with the whistle register being used to describe those notes which occur from g" to c"', three octaves above Middle C. As this is above the range of the average soprano, it barely warrants inclusion as a separate register. Initially, Van Diense makes no differentiation as to where register changes occur between different voice types, but later (p.36) acknowledges that: '...the transition is a fixed point and depends on the type of voice and consequently it constitutes an important criterion in the classification of the voice.'

Other researchers, such as Shewan (1973, 23), Sunderman (1970, 41-52) and Foster (1935, 17) have found that the diversification in the use of terminology and disagreement on the number of registers is widespread. However, it would appear that the most common consensus is that there are three registers and certainly this appears to be the case with the mezzo-soprano voice, which is the main concern here.

Opinions also differ as to where the main transition points are for each voice category. Large (1973, 14-15), reporting on the findings of Luchsinger and Arnold, lists the transition points for each voice as follows:

<u>Type</u>	<u>Upper and Lower Limits of the Middle Voice</u>
Bass	D (147 Hz) to D (294 Hz)
Baritone	E (165 Hz) to E (330 Hz)
Tenor	F (175 Hz) to F (349 Hz)
Contralto	D (294 Hz) to D (587 Hz)
Mezzo-soprano	E (330 Hz) to E (659 Hz)
Soprano	F (349 Hz) to F (698 Hz)

It is interesting to note that, according to the above data, the transition in the mezzo-soprano is exactly an octave above its male counterpart, the baritone, and that in each case, the middle voice has a span of one octave. Again, this reinforces the findings of the majority of researchers, that the middle voice is an important part of any voice, and as already stated, particularly the mezzo-soprano, who uses the extremes more sparingly.

Foster's (1935, 17) estimation of register changes, indicates that there is no differentiation between voice types for changes from chest to middle voice and that the transition note from middle to head is lower in all instances than those tabled by Luchsinger and Arnold. In his discussion on register changes in female voices, he states (ibid):

...in the great majority of cases, the chest and medium registers can be dove-tailed about D; the medium and head at B or C for contraltos, C sharp or D for mezzos and E flat or E for sopranos.

He suggests, as a means of obtaining a uniform, blended sound, the practice of singing pianissimo in the head voice on a downward scale. Dame Nellie Melba in her own book of vocal exercises (1925, 21) is in agreement.

Appleman (Ed. Large 1973, 62) has all female voices changing registers on e-flat' and e-flat".

Shewan (1979, 22) gives the following data:

<u>Voice</u>	<u>Chest to Middle</u>	<u>Middle to Head</u>
Tenor	f or f-sharp	f-sharp'
Baritone	e- flat or e	e-flat'
Bass	c or c-sharp	c-sharp'
Contralto	c-sharp' or d'	c-sharp"
Mezzo-soprano	d' or e-flat'	e-flat"
Soprano	f' or f-sharp'	f-sharp"
Coloratura-		
soprano	g'	g-sharp"

Note that separate measurements have been taken for the coloratura soprano and that there is evidence, apart from a semi-tone between the transition notes from chest to middle voice in the contralto and bass, of an octave between corresponding voice types. Shewan (p.22) states that most authorities agree the 'transition notes from middle to upper voice are most conclusive for categorizing voices.' It is interesting to note that Shewan's findings are more closely in agreement with those of Luchsinger and Arnold. The conclusions reached by these researchers came from controlled scientific tests, whereas Foster used a more empirical approach.

Garcia was another who used an empirical approach, but how he reached his conclusions is rather mystifying. He believed (1894, 17) that all female voices changed from middle to head voice on the same note - d' - and that the change from chest to middle voice occurred on e for sopranos, f-sharp for mezzo-sopranos and g for contraltos. His view of the change from chest to middle voice opposes any of the above research and it would appear that there is little foundation for his findings. That a definitive conclusion has not as yet been reached regarding registration transition points, indicates that more research still needs to be done, if any conclusions regarding voice type are to be drawn.

ANATOMY

When discussing anatomy in relation to voice category, the most obvious physical feature is the source from which all vocal sound is emitted - that is, the larynx and the vocal cords contained therein. Using a variety of devices, scientists are now able to take accurate measurements of the dimensions of the larynx, as well as the length, breadth and width of the vocal cords. From these measurements, a possible attempt can be made to determine basic voice types, such as soprano and mezzo-soprano, as well as sub-types within a category, for example: lyric, dramatic or coloratura.

Using the Trendlenberg device (a series of unsilvered mirrors invented in 1928), Zimmerman, as recorded by Husson (May 1957, 6), gives the length of the vocal cords for each voice as follows:

Bass	24-25 mm	Contralto	18-19 mm
Baritone	22-24 mm	Mezzo-soprano	18-21 mm
Tenor	18-22 mm	Soprano	14-19 mm
(with the best voices = 14-17 mm)			

In this example, the length of the mezzo's vocal cords completely overlaps that of the contralto, indicating that there is little, if any, difference between a low mezzo and a contralto. There is also a similarity between the length of the tenor's vocal cords and those of the mezzo-soprano. If length determines pitch, then according to Zimmerman, there is little difference between the possible range of a tenor and a mezzo-soprano. Similarly, there is an overlap between the soprano and mezzo-soprano. Again, using the assumption that length determines pitch, mezzos with shorter vocal cords would in all probability have an extended top of the range, as is required for singing both dramatic and coloratura roles. The overlap, however, does not incorporate those voices considered by Zimmerman to be the best. Later findings will show that these voices are in fact higher and lighter in texture, which to a voice scientist may represent what he considers to be a true soprano sound.

Shewan (Jan.1979, 22-24), in writing on the findings of Luchsinger, states that the range of an individual voice is determined by the length of the vocal cords. He describes the cords of tenors and sopranos as 'short and broad' and those of basses and contraltos as 'long and narrow', but makes no mention of the mezzo-soprano. Considering that the mezzo is the middle voice, it could be concluded that the corresponding vocal cords would be medium in both length and breadth. It is interesting that Luchsinger makes mention of both the breadth and the length of the vocal cords, but does not qualify this further.

Not so with Landeau (Oct.1963, 6), who says that 'the largeness and thickness of cords contribute with other factors, particularly timbre, in sub-classification. They indicate the power and volume of the sounds.' This would help explain why some voices of the same category and with a similar range can sound completely different from each other.

Landeau (1963, 7) presents another physical factor which he believes contributes to voice classification:

The influence of the resonator on the timbre is of the first order. The bucco-pharynx operates like all resonators, in that the larger it is the more it reinforces the low sounds and vice versa. An individual who possesses large resonance cavities will have naturally a sonorous timbre. The examination of the bucco-pharyngeal cavity in a person of whom we know the classification through other factors will then allow us to determine the sub-classification.

Taking the voices of some of the world's great contemporary opera singers, such as Caballé, Horne, Sutherland, Pavarotti, Norman and even Domingo, adds support to this belief. Each has a large facial structure and chest cavity, which suggests correspondingly large resonators. The voices of each, though individual in quality, have tremendous strength and carrying power.

Another factor which contributes to an individual's vocal timbre is the size of the palate. Shewan (Jan. 1979, 24) and Zeilinger (1982, 5), along with many of the world's contemporary teachers of singing, suggest the size of the palate is a contributory factor in determining voice category. Both have taken measurements of the distance between the last two molars and also from the incisors to the back

wall of the pharynx. They claim, the higher and narrower the palate, the higher the voice. Conversely, the broader and flatter the palate, the lower the voice.

Some researchers have gone even further in their belief that a singer's physical features play a major part in determining his or her voice category.

Brodnitz (1963, 440) in his research paper quotes Weiss as saying:

Singers with high voices were found to have round faces with short noses, a convex profile with small delicate details, short necks, round or quadratic chests and high palatal vaults with delicate soft palates. In contrast, singers with low voices were characterized by long faces and long noses, straight-line profiles with massive details, long and narrow necks, long and flat chests and broad hard palates with massive soft palates.

This statement would undoubtedly be viewed with much scepticism by many singers and teachers, unless a properly conducted survey were carried out. A broad range of singers from different nationalities would provide the material for such a survey and even then it would be difficult to prove all aspects of the statement conclusively. For example, an examination of just four well-known mezzo-sopranos from different nationalities – Frederica von Stade, Agnes Baltsa, Janet Baker and Christa Ludwig – reveals certain similarities and also certain differences. Frederica von Stade and Agnes Baltsa, for instance, both have ovular faces, long noses and narrow, long necks. Their voices could similarly be described as lyric/coloratura, although Baltsa possesses a more dramatic quality. Janet Baker and Christa Ludwig on the other hand, have broader, rounder faces, short, squat noses and medium-sized necks. Their voices, although distinctly different, have a warmer, rounder quality, but again, Ludwig's is more dramatic. Comparing singers according to their external physical traits is a difficult exercise. Other factors, such as the length and breadth of vocal cords, the size of the resonating cavities and palatal structure all need to be considered if an accurate assessment is to be made.

As can be seen from the foregoing discussion, the definition as to what constitutes a mezzo-soprano is not easy to attain. This is further complicated by the introduction of sub-categories for the mezzo-soprano voice – a phenomenon

which first occurred in the mid-nineteenth century. Celletti (1962, 114) comments that, although these sub-categories were merely academic, they were nevertheless valid when it came to allocating operatic roles with a particular singer in mind. He names the following sub-divisions of the mezzo-soprano voice: 'contralto mezzo-soprano', 'mezzo-soprano contralto', 'dramatic mezzo-soprano' and 'lyric mezzo-soprano'.

In the twentieth century, sub-categories for the mezzo-soprano voice have been even further refined. The word 'mezzo-soprano' has been shortened to merely 'mezzo', as in the terms 'Rossini' and 'Verdi mezzo' (Christiansen 1986, 319) and the expressions 'lyric', 'dramatic' and 'coloratura mezzo' (Steane October 1989, 21-22) are in common use. 'Soprano-mezzo' is another sub-category used by Steane (December 1989, 40-43) to describe voices which are on the borderline between dramatic mezzo-soprano and dramatic soprano. Grace Bumbry, Rosa Ponselle, Jesse Norman and Victoria de los Angeles are examples he gives of singers with this type of voice. Such singers can sing soprano roles, but are probably more comfortable and can create a more beautiful tone in the middle or 'mezzo' register.

The *Fach* system, meaning 'branch' or 'specialty' (Huie-Armbrister 1982, 141), is another twentieth century phenomenon which is used exclusively in opera houses throughout Germany. Singers auditioning for roles have to consider not only which sub-category most suits the timbre, range and tone quality of his or her voice, but also the one which most suits the singer's physique and temperament. According to Kloiber (1961, 885-6), the mezzo-soprano has a choice of three categories: *drammatischer Mezzosopran*, *Spielalt*, or *lyrischer Mezzosopran*. Zeilinger (1982, 76) lists the same sub-categories as Kloiber, with the exception that *lyrischer Mezzosopran* is elongated to *lyrischer bis jugendlich-drammatischer Mezzo-sopran*. However, Zeilinger feels that there is some difficulty in putting mezzo-sopranos into specialist categories, as the restrictions imposed limit the singer to only a handful of roles.

As a generalization, Zeilinger (ibid) states that the *lyrischer* mezzo has a light, floating head voice and includes many of the Mozart roles such as Cherubino, Sesto and Dorabella (See Chapter 2). *Drammatischer* mezzos, on the other hand, embody serious, passionate and sometimes demonic characters, such as Dalila, Dido and Orfeo, plus many of the Verdi, Wagner and Strauss roles (See Chapter 3). It is assumed that singers performing these roles are vocally mature and have great acting ability.

The *Spielalt* includes character roles, such as Carmen, Marcellina and Orlofsky. Zeilinger says that the essence of this voice is 'the control of light parlando and coloratura ability'. She also says that this *Fach* embodies *buffo*, or fairly simple characters, who sing folk-like melodies and who have a good acting ability.

In the four hundred and eighty-seven page Concise Biographical Dictionary of Singers, Kutsch and Riemans omit any mention of the mezzo-soprano voice. Instead, such well known mezzos as Christa Ludwig and Grace Bumbry are listed as contralto-soprano, Shirley Verrett, Kathleen Ferrier and Marilyn Horne are listed as contralto, and Janet Baker as a soprano.

Despite the difficulties in defining the mezzo-soprano voice, it has been established that it is the middle female voice, not as high as a soprano, nor as low as a contralto. To distinguish it further, the comfortable tessitura in which the mezzo can sing is an important factor, as is the colour or timbre of the voice. The sound of the voice is also affected by physical features, such as length and breadth of the vocal cords and palatal and facial structure. The use of registration as a deciding factor in voice classification could, in time, produce accurate results, but as yet research has not gone far enough for this to be infallible.

The following chapters trace the emergence of the concept of the operatic mezzo-soprano voice from the sixteenth century to the present day. It is only by examining repertoire written for the voice during this time, that a full answer to the question why the need for the identification of this type of voice arose.

CHAPTER TWO

THE EMERGENCE OF THE OPERATIC MEZZO-SOPRANO VOICE IN THE SIXTEENTH, SEVENTEENTH AND EIGHTEENTH CENTURIES

In the sixteenth and early part of the seventeenth centuries, the enjoyment of music performance was limited almost exclusively to members of the aristocracy or the church. This in turn influenced the course taken by composers to write music which was both politically and socially acceptable. Women performers at this time were rare, as Keyser (1987, 48) explains:

The pool of professional female performers was restricted by two considerations: the low opinion held towards women performing in public and the vocal training needed by professional performers.

Her discussion mentions that women from the upper classes were discouraged from performing in public by their families, as such activities were often associated with prostitution. Women from the lower classes on the other hand, rarely gave public performances, as they were unable to afford proper training. Those women who did succeed as professional singers were either related to musicians or under the patronage of the nobility.

Huie-Armbrister (1982, 32) mentions the three ladies of Ferrara, Lucrezia Bendidio, Laura Peperara and Tarquinia Molza, who were employed by the court in the late 1500's to sing madrigals, duets, trios and solo work. As their singing involved the allocation of three-part harmony, it is possible that at least one of these ladies was a mezzo-soprano.

Keyser (1987, 48) cites evidence that women had sung on the popular stage in Spain and Italy since the 1560's. Adriana Basile (1580-1640) was one such attached to the court at Mantua and mentioned in the letters of Claudio Monteverdi. She also mentions that women were cast in Jacobo Peri's Euridice,

which opened at the Pitti Palace in Florence on October 6th, 1600.

Mandadori (1979, 11) mentions another, Caterina Martinelli, who in 1607 sang the role of Venere in Gagliano's La Dafne at the age of seventeen. According to Keyser (1987, 48) she was to have sung the title role in Monteverdi's Arianna (1608), but unfortunately died of smallpox before the first performance. She was replaced by Virginia Andreini, an actress. Arianna's lament, 'Lasciate mi morire' was, according to Martin (1984, 113-114), 'the first popular melody or "aria" to sweep Europe.' The aria still survives today.

However, there are more significant reasons for the small number of female singers appearing in public during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Roman Catholic church, adopting the teachings of St. Paul, banned women from speaking or singing in church (1 Corinthians 14: 34-35 - Translation: New International Version):

As in all congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says.

Of equal importance, and possibly as a consequence of the above, came the rise of the male castrato, who subsequently dominated church music for nearly two centuries and who competed with female singers both in secular music and on the stage. According to Walker (1980, 875), the operation of castration was carried out on boys who had not yet reached puberty, thus preventing the thickening and lengthening of the vocal cords. This preserved the sound of the boy soprano, although it did not prevent the body from developing into that of a man. The closer to puberty the operation took place, the lower and more developed the tone. Keyser (1987, 51) says that 'castrato voices differed from one another in range and voice quality much as women's voices differ from one another.' This means that according to today's terminology, all three categories of female voice - soprano, mezzo-soprano and contralto - would have been represented, although Scholes (1980, 1089) only mentions two categories of castrato, which he calls 'sopranists' and 'contraltists'.

The popularity of the castrati brought about a number of significant musical developments, namely the rise of *bel canto* [literally = beautiful singing] and the *da capo* aria, in which the singer could embellish the vocal writing with virtuosic displays of his own invention. The singer reigned supreme; he could dictate what he wanted to sing and how he wanted to sing it. Martin (1984, 46) states:

The castrati would be no more than an interesting footnote for scholars except that their position in opera is so inescapable: they were the best singers the world had ever heard.

Adams (1980, 50) notes that castrati

...performed in theatres much smaller than today's and with orchestral accompaniments considerably lighter (their function was to accompany and support the singer, not obscure), so that it is impossible to assess the actual volume of the voices and whether they could survive in today's conditions.

It is interesting to note that France did not embrace the castrati (Christiansen 1984, 36). There were none at the Paris Opera (Sawkins 1987, 318–319), although castrati did appear at the court of Louis XIV until the Revolution. Sawkins says their popularity began to wane much later in Italy under the occupation of Napoleon, when he issued a decree making castration punishable by death. Clark (1979, 82) says this decree lasted only a year, so their demise was short-lived.

Although in theory, the church was opposed to mutilation by castration, Heriot (1975, 23) cites records which show that the castrati Pietro Paulo Folignato and Girolamo Rossini were amongst the first employed in the Papal chapel in Rome in the year 1599. The church's ban on female performers continued, even to the extent of opposition to their appearance on stage, thus ensuring the continuing reign of and demand for castrati (Martin 1984, 48). Women who did manage to sing in the castrato era were often asked to sing the roles of male characters as well as female, which, despite the papal ban, was found to be acceptable on the secular stage. Covell (1984, 209) gives the example of Alessandro Scarlatti's Pompeo (1684) in which four of the male roles are sung by women.

Up until this time, there was no distinction made between high and low female voices or for that matter any regard for differentiation in quality. Celletti (1962, 110) notes that the distinction between female voices in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was never very clear, as all three female voices played all parts indiscriminately, whether as female lovers or their male counterparts.

Jander, Steane and Forbes (1992, 372) note:

In the seventeenth century most music for the soprano voice lay within the range C to g' (at current pitch levels, generally a whole tone or a semi-tone lower than today), which by later criteria would be deemed appropriate for a mezzo-soprano.

In England, the first opera of any significance to make use of female singers was Purcell's Dido and Aeneas, which was performed by girls from Josiah Priest's school, Chelsea, in December 1689. Records are unclear as to who sang the part of Aeneas or in the male chorus, but Dent (1953, p.ii) suggests that these were probably sung by lay clerks from Westminster Abbey or singers employed in the theatre. He also suggests that the roles of Dido, the Sorceress and Belinda would almost certainly have been taken by girls – the part of Dido being sung by a girl soprano. Today this role, due in part to Janet Baker's memorable interpretation, has become one of the standard roles of the mezzo-soprano repertoire.

The first mezzo-soprano mentioned in historical records was, according to Celletti (1962, 110), one Faustina Bordoni, who was born in Venice in 1700 and appeared in Handel's Allessandro in 1728 with Francesca Cuzzoni, a *prima donna* soprano. She lived at the Saxon court in Dresden and for thirty years made several successful appearances at all the major Italian opera houses. 'Faustina, as she was always known...was beautiful, charming, a fine actress and a great singer.' (Christiansen 1986, 23). Christiansen describes her voice as 'a penetrating mezzo-soprano with a wide range' (p.26), who was unfortunately eclipsed from fame by the reign of the castrati.

It was Handel who made a most significant contribution to the casting of women in opera. Castrati and women sang alongside one another and Handel had

no hesitation in employing a female to sing in the event of there being no castrato available. Clark (1979, 87) states:

- . It appears that Handel viewed the castrato voice and the equivalent female voice as interchangeable. When Handel would write for an alto castrato, he wrote for the alto first and the castrato second. Thus one can surmise that it was the sound and timbre which was important to this composer and not necessarily the sex of the musician who was producing it.

Clark (42) says that at least twenty-six of these roles were male characters, but composed for women to sing, and a further nine were sung at first by castrati, but in later revivals given to women. Dean (1969, 207-8) also mentions that most of the leading castrati of Handel's operas were altos or mezzo-sopranos; these parts reverting to their female counterparts in revivals and being altered, where necessary, to suit the new singers.

For example, in Xerxes (1738), the title role was sung by Caffarelli, described by Christiansen (1984, 34) as a 'mezzo-soprano castrato'. The role of Arsamene, brother of Xerxes, was sung by the mezzo-soprano, Maria Antonia Marchesini (Dean 1969, 657), and the role of Princess Amastre by the mezzo-soprano Maria Antonia Merighi. Merighi also created the role of Cornelia in Giulio Cesare in Egitto (1724), with the breeches part of Sesto being sung by the soprano Margherita Durastanti and the title role by the mezzo-soprano castrato, Senesino (Keyser 1987, 52-53). In the revival of Rinaldo in 1731, Handel again used Merighi in the role of Armida, with the other mezzo roles of Eustazio and Rinaldo being sung by castrati (Jander 1980, 702).

It was during this period that professional opera stars rose to prominence for the first time, commanding huge fees because of their international reputations (Headington, Westbrook and Barfoot 1987, 67). The availability of singers, alongside the desire for a certain quality or timbre of voice, seemed to be an important criterion for Handel in casting his operas, even more so than the gender of the singer portraying each character. His operas embraced all styles – from Roman or Greek history (Giulio Cesare in Egitto, 1724), to sorcery (Alcina,

1735 and Orlando, 1733), to a mixture of comic and serious (Xerxes and Partenope, 1730). Most of his operas, if performed with all the *da capo* arias, were over four hours in length, giving the singers an opportunity to display their virtuosity. His innovative casting of mezzo-sopranos and contraltos in roles which hitherto had been the exclusive domain of castrati with similar ranges and timbres, paved the way for the recognition of the three main female voice types. Women's voices were no longer grouped together indiscriminately as high or low according to range, but more specifically grouped according to the quality of the voice and the sound it made.

Mozart continued to use castrati in his *opera seria*, as well as in the comedy La Finta Giardiniera (1775). However, he was quick to follow Handel's lead of casting women in his operas. In Le Nozze di Figaro (1786), the female characters are very clearly delineated. The women involved – Susanna, The Countess and Marcellina – do not conform to any existing stereotype. Each has her own personality, which is capable of expressing a wide range of emotions, both through the drama and the music. Of the three, only Marcellina is suited to the mezzo-soprano voice. In the original Vienna production, the role was given to Maria Mandini. She would have sung the difficult Act IV aria, now eliminated by most conductors because of its high tessitura. Payne (July 1989, 27) suggests a reason for eliminating the aria is that it comes too late in the opera, when 'one is impatient for the plot to be resolved.' Marcellina is cast as a mezzo, principally to give a sense of age and dignity to the part, as well as to provide a contrast to the more youthful Susanna and Countess. By eliminating the Act IV aria, the role sits comfortably for the mezzo voice, allowing the singer to characterize naturally without forcing the low notes.

The role of Cherubino, premièred by Dorotea Bussani, holds a fascination for both singer and audience. Mozart broke new ground in casting a woman instead of a castrato to portray the role of this romantic, passionate, pubescent male. Jefferson (1983, 51–52) speculates on Mozart's casting:

Cherubino must have been an extraordinary sex symbol. To see a woman's legs in public was a rare event, and Mozart recognized that such titillation was bound to put visual emphasis upon Cherubino's character in exactly the way in which he wanted him to appear.

Records show that Cherubino has been sung by both sopranos (Mann 1977, 523) and mezzos (Celletti 1962, 111), but current thinking favours the mezzo for two reasons: firstly, the range and tessitura of the part suit the lyric mezzo voice, and secondly, the fact that Cherubino is a pubescent boy indicates that he would no longer sound like a boy soprano. The use of a mezzo suggests the changing voice and adds weight to his emotional outbursts.

The delineation between the soprano and mezzo-soprano voice was still not firmly established in Mozart's time, with most female voices still being referred to as soprano (Celletti, 1962, 112). Records of the voice categories for particular roles were not always clear, as in the example of Dorabella from Così fan Tutte (1790), in which Mann (1977, 522) describes Louise Villeneuve, the creator of the role, as a soprano, but Mandadori (1979, 102) names her a mezzo-soprano. From the writing it is clear that the tessitura would suit a lyric mezzo with dramatic tendencies. For instance in the first aria, 'Smanie Implacabili', the tessitura remains consistently around e', with a rising phrase to a", which at first glance would appear uncomfortably high for a mezzo voice, but which on closer examination reveals that the speed of the aria - *allegro agitato* - along with the dramatic intensity required, makes the task of singing it much easier.

Example 1 Bars 94 - 102

Allegro agitato



The second aria, 'E amore un ladroncello', is reminiscent of the lyricism required for singing Cherubino and is therefore most suited to a mezzo voice with lyric qualities. Musical considerations must also be given to the ensemble singing, as a wrong balance of voices could result in an unsatisfactory blend. The famous Act I trio, 'Soave il vento', is a good example of this, where the blend of soprano, mezzo-soprano and bass-baritone voices sounds complete. A soprano voice in the middle would upset that balance, with a result that the listener would go away unsatisfied.

In La Clemenza di Tito (1791), Mozart reverts back to the castrato era in the role of Sesto, although Healey (Jan. 1991, 157.6) says it was not his intention to do so:

Mozart had originally intended Sesto to be sung by a tenor, but on arrival in Prague he discovered that a castrato, Domenico Bendini, had been imported from Italy to sing the role...After Mozart's death, Tito became Constanza's favourite opera and she mounted it frequently, usually in concert versions, and always with a soprano in the role of Sesto.

Sesto is now the domain of mezzo-sopranos, with singers such as Frederica von Stade, Teresa Berganza and Yvonne Minton having recorded and performed the role. It requires a voice with good coloratura facility, but also one with warmth and depth of tone, capable of portraying the inner emotions required of the character. The two octave range, up to b-flat", is well within the capabilities of most of today's mezzos and is an excellent vehicle for showing what the voice can do. The following example of the famous aria 'Parto! Parto!' contains several coloratura passages, which stretch the voice to its upper limits.

Example 2 Bars 111 - 116



The role of Vitellia was written for the singer Maria Marchetti-Fantozzi. Some authorities, such as Mandadori (1979, 106) and Healey (Jan. 1991, 157.6) name her as a soprano, but Mann (1977, 570) names her as a mezzo-soprano. He continues:

The casting of a mezzo-soprano as Vitellia was bold, but Mozart's score suggests that Marchetti-Fantozzi was the sort of mezzo with a reliable top register that the French call a 'Falcon' see Chapter 3 after the singer of the same name.

Mozart, like Handel, often wrote for singers whose voices he knew well, and in the case of Marchetti-Fantozzi he was not merciful. The role demands a voice with an extensive range - from low G to a" - and which is capable of producing dramatic top notes as well as strong chest notes. The examples below clearly illustrate this.

Example 3 Bars 121 - 132

(i) Allegro con anima



The musical score consists of three staves of music in G major, 4/4 time. The tempo is marked 'Allegro con anima'. The lyrics are in Italian and are written below the notes. The first staff covers bars 121-124, the second staff covers bars 125-128, and the third staff covers bars 129-132.

Stret - ta fra bar-ba-re, a - spre ri - tor - te,

veg - go la mor - te ver me a - van - zar,

veg - go la mor - te ver me a - van - zar!

Bars 197 - 210

(ii) Allegro

di me, di me_ pie -

ta, pur a - vria di me_ pie - ta pur a - vria di me_ pie

ta, a - vria di me_ pie_ ta!

Mozart's only other important role suitable for mezzo-soprano is Zerlina from Don Giovanni (1787). Again, this is one of those roles which is on the borderline between soprano and mezzo-soprano. Although the role is not high, the tessitura suggests that a light, lyrical voice is required. However, it has been the practice of some present-day producers to give the role to a mezzo, in order that her voice contrasts with the voices of the two prima donnas, Donna Anna and Donna Elvira. The Joseph Losey film version of Don Giovanni, with Teresa Berganza as Zerlina, is one example.

In Mozart's last opera, Die Zauberflöte (1791), the two prima donnas are again sopranos, but mezzos are able to sing Second and Third Ladies, which, while not starring roles, are important in weaving the plot together.

By the end of the eighteenth century, public taste was demanding new operatic forms and there were fewer castrati in training (Martin 1984, 54), so women with equivalent voices were now gaining prominence on the operatic stage. Composers such as Handel and Mozart could be classed as pioneers, in that they were instrumental in recognizing the different qualities of each female voice and so contributed to the emergence of the mezzo-soprano voice as we know it today.

CHAPTER THREE

THE ROLE OF THE MEZZO-SOPRANO IN NINETEENTH CENTURY OPERA

Nineteenth century opera brought with it many changes, not least of these a shift in patronage from the nobility to the bourgeoisie. As a consequence, the public were demanding more for their money, resulting in bigger and more spectacular productions. Larger venues for the staging of operas had to be found and in order to fill the venue with sound, it followed that the size of the orchestra needed to increase. Alongside these developments came enhanced expectations of the human voice. Singers who could previously be heard over the smaller orchestra of Mozart's time, now had to learn a new way of projecting their voices (Adams 1980, 51).

The continuing decline in the popularity of the castrato became particularly significant for the female voice, as roles previously sung by castrati had to be re-allocated (Clark 1979, 84). Christiansen (1984, 40) explains:

The new spirit of liberalism and republicanism condemned castration as an aberration of pampered tyrants and their decadent courts...full-blooded tastes of Romanticism preferred voices that were 'natural', rather than fabricated by surgery. Changes in musical composition and the inevitable withering of *opera seria* left the castrato redundant. The last of the operatic line, Velluti...had to compete with a new vogue for the tenor voice, as well as a magnificent generation of female singers, capable of assuming roles, male and female, that the castrato had previously monopolized.

Of equal importance to the emerging role of female singers was a growing awareness by composers of the difference in timbre between the various female voices (Jander 1980, 259) and an attempt by these composers to write music accordingly.

Gioacchino Rossini (1792-1868) was one such composer, who dominated the European opera scene at the beginning of the century. Although some of his early operas included castrati, for example Aurelia in Palmira (1813) starring Velluti in the role of Arsace (Christiansen 1980, 58), his preference grew more towards the

lower female voice. Zedda (1962) claims that Rossini favoured the mezzo-soprano voice because of its warm quality and more significantly, for being 'the voice of the Italian woman'.

Rossini's association with some of the popular female singers of his time provided the inspiration for many of his operatic roles. Celletti (*ibid*) and Christiansen (1986, 56-65) mention singers such as Colbran, Giorgi-Righetti, Marcolini, Pasta, Melanotte and Malibran, who were amongst those creating the new Rossini style.

Marietta Marcolini, described by Collins (1991, 167.11) as a '*prima donna* mezzo-soprano', was, according to Osborne (1986, 303), 'the most important female singer during Rossini's pre-Naples years, who exercised considerable influence over the writing of the roles which he created for her.' These included roles in lesser known operas, such as Ciro in Babilonia, La Pietra del Paragone and Sigismondo. The most substantial role written for Marcolini would undoubtedly have been the role of Isabella in L'Italiana in Algieri (1813). This role requires a singer not only with good acting ability, but also one who possesses a wide range with the facility for virtuosic coloratura, much favoured and demanded by Rossini of all his singers (Celletti 1962, 112). The role would have suited Marcolini, as Collins (1991, 167.11) explains:

Marietta Marcolini ...knew how to sing as she acted and act as she sang...with her light, warm voice she could simultaneously toss off roulades of ornamentation and accents of expressive diction as she delivered the words.

Of Rossini's *prima donna* roles for coloratura mezzo, none has sparked more interest than Rosina in Il Barbiere di Siviglia, which was premièred at the Teatro Argentina, Rome, on 20 February, 1816, with Elsa (Gertrude) Giorgi-Righetti in the title role (Mandadori 1979, 131). Since then, the role has been attempted by both sopranos and mezzos desirous of a *prima donna* role, including Malibran, Pauline

Viardot, Giulia Grisi, Adelina Patti (Celletti 1962, 113; Christiansen 1986, 59–79) and later Melba, Tetrizzini and the Spanish mezzo Conchita Supervia, who, according to Steane (October 1989, 22), specialized in Rossini's coloratura mezzo roles in the 1930's.

Despite Rossini's liking for coloratura, it appears that he took exception to singers who over-decorated his works with trills and *fioriture*. On hearing the soprano Adelina Patti sing Rosina's famous Act I aria, 'Una voce poco fa', Rossini is reported to have said (Headington, Westbrook and Barfoot 1991, 160):

"Charming my dear, but tell us, who wrote the music you have just sung?" The comment was provoked by Patti's apparent overuse of ornamentation, making a mockery of Rossini's original intentions for the piece. Gui (1963) says, that to freely interpret the music of an opera such as 'Barber', is to 'ignore the style and the historical and cultural reasons which had inspired and guided the creation of the work.' He, along with Martin (1982, 270), Lawrence (1962, VIII) and Steane (October 1989, 21) believes that Rosina should only be sung by a mezzo-soprano, as the tessitura is suited to her voice. Zedda (1962) comments further:

The alto voice, which is not by any means lacking in agility, helps to free the figure of Rosina from the danger of becoming that cliché of comic opera, a shrill soubrette; it helps establish Rosina as a woman, who with wit, pride and sincere feelings fights for her happiness...the casting of coloratura sopranos in this role did more than alter the timbre – a part written to be sung in the lower register was bound to be badly placed for the high voice...cadenzas, leaps and *fioriture* were added, in order to enable the soprano to demonstrate her vocal abilities to best effect...Casting Rosina as a mezzo brings a satisfactory vocal contrast to the reediness of Count Almaviva and the high baritone of Figaro.

Steane (October 1989, 21) points out that transposing the role up to suit a soprano voice unbalances the texture and poses difficulties for the other singers in the ensembles. He mentions a number of mezzos, including Teresa Berganza, Agnes Baltsa, Frederica von Stade and Della Jones, who have performed the role successfully in recent years. They, along with Marilyn Horne and the young Italian

mezzo, Cecilia Bartoli, have done much to bring about a Rossini revival in the late twentieth century and can rightly be called 'Rossini mezzos'.

Another fine example of Rossini's writing for coloratura mezzo can be seen in the title role of La Cenerentola, which premièred in Rome in 1827 with Elsa Giorgi-Righetti, the original Rosina, singing the title role (Osborne 1986, 304). She must have been an extraordinary singer, as again this role demands technical agility, good breath control and an even tone throughout the entire range - low G to b". The following two examples from Cenerentola's aria 'Non piu mesta' illustrate the complexity of Rossini's writing.

Example 4 Bars 24 - 25

Andante *f*

co - me-un ba le no ra pi-do

Example 5 Bars 86 - 91

Allegro *p*

so - gno, un lam - po, un gio - co - Il - mio - lun - go - pal - pi - tar, Ah, fu un lam po

Casting Cenerentola as a mezzo contrasts well with the voices of the two ugly sisters

- Thîşbe, a high mezzo or soprano, and Clorinda, a soprano.

Maria Malibran, the daughter of Manuel Garcia, was another mezzo-soprano favoured by Rossini. Although the only role she created was that of Bertha in Il Barbiere di Siviglia, Rossini was reputed to have liked her interpretations of his work and often used her in revivals (Christiansen 1986, 70–78). Apparently, as a result of an overly strict regime by her father, she stretched the voice beyond its natural limits and in the latter part of her career was tempted to sing soprano roles such as Bellini's Norma, Verdi's Desdemona and Rossini's Semiramide (Christiansen *ibid*; Mandadori 1979, 135; 144). As both her career and life were short (she was only twenty eight when she died), the question as to whether her voice would have lasted remains unanswered.

Rossini included the mezzo-soprano voice in all of his thirty-six operas, ranging from the sparkling Rosina to several trouser roles, such as Malcolm in La Donna del Lago and the title role in Tancredi. His challenge to the mezzo-soprano voice remains as much today as it did in the first half of the nineteenth century. Rossini's importance as a composer of opera can therefore be measured alongside his importance in giving the mezzo-soprano voice a proper place in operatic history.

Rossini's contemporaries, the Italian composers Vincenzo Bellini (1801–35) and Gaetano Donizetti (1797–1848) also made much use of the mezzo-soprano voice. However, unlike Rossini, they did not afford the mezzo with *prima donna* roles, except for Leonore from Donizetti's La Favorite, but rather relegated her to the rank of *seconda donna*. With only a few exceptions, such as the title roles in Carmen and Samson et Dalila, this pattern of casting remains to the present day.

Bellini's most substantial contribution to the mezzo-soprano repertoire was the role of Adalgisa from Norma, sung at the La Scala première in 1831 by Giulia Grisi (Mandadori 1979, 167–169). Although Adalgisa is not given an aria, the work is held together by the ensemble pieces and here she makes a major contribution. For

example, at the end of Act II, Scene I, the *prima donna*, Norma and the *seconda donna*, Adalgisa come together in a musically satisfying duet written in thirds. In Norma, Bellini establishes a new relationship between the *prima* and *seconda donnas* in that they are rivals in love. Jefferson (1987, 52) sums up Adalgisa's role:

Adalgisa does not attract as much sympathy as Norma, but she performs a very important musical function in her duets and trios and dramatically as well by supporting Norma in her hour of greatest need.

The only other Bellini opera of importance to the mezzo-soprano is I Capuleti e i Montecchi, based on Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. Here the mezzo sings the trouser role of Romeo, which at the 1830 premiere in Venice was sung by Giuditta Grisa, whose sister Giulia, the original Adalgisa, sang Giulietta (Jander, Steane and Forbes 1992, 373). Again, many of the musical highlights lie within the ensembles – the final duet between Romeo and Giulietta being another outstanding example of Bellini's blending of the qualities of the soprano and mezzo-soprano voices.

Donizetti offered several substantial roles to the mezzo, the most notable being Leonore of Gusman in La Favorite, which opened at the Paris Opéra on 2 December, 1840. The opera was enormously successful and by 1904 had been performed at the Paris Opéra no less than six hundred and fifty times (Mandadori 1979, 190). The original interpreter of the role, Rosine Stolz, is described by Celletti (1962, 115) as a high mezzo. The role of Leonore is significant in that it is one of the first mezzo-soprano roles to deviate from the purely florid *bel canto* style favoured by Rossini. The Act II aria, 'O mio Fernando', is a *tour-de-force* requiring a new kind of dramatic singing. The top notes up to a" are sung full voice.

Donizetti's other major roles for the dramatic mezzo-soprano include Mary Queen of Scots from Maria Stuarda (1834) and Jane Seymour from Anna Bolena (1830). Both require the same kind of dramatic quality, particularly in the high notes, as required of Leonora in La Favorite. In Lucia di Lammermoor (Alisa)

the mezzo is again relegated to the role of *seconda donna*.

It is in the operas of Guiseppe Verdi (1813- 1901) that the dramatic mezzo-soprano can be heard in all its glory. His mezzos were not *prime donne* in the romantic sense, that is, they were not lovers, but were fired by other forces, which Hussey (1963, 30) describes as: 'jealousy' (Eboli - Don Carlos and Amneris - Aida), 'desire for revenge' (Azucena - Il Trovatore) or 'ambition' (Abigaille - Nabucco and Lady Macbeth - Macbeth). Singers of these roles needed both a powerful, dramatic voice with a good top b" (Amneris and Eboli and even higher for Lady Macbeth) and acting skills which exposed the female psyche in a way not seen before.

The role of Lady Macbeth, premièred in Florence in 1847 by Marianna Barbieri-Nini (Mandadori 1979, 208), is one which many authorities resist categorizing. This is principally because of Verdi's desire to give the role to a singer who had both the vocal power and acting ability to perform with all the drama and vengeance which the character invokes. Weffel and Stefan (1973, 146) mention a letter written by Verdi to Cammarano, the producer of Macbeth at the San Carlo Theatre, Naples in 1848, in which he was apparently unhappy with the casting of one Madame Tandolini in the leading role:

Tadolini's appearance is good and beautiful, but I would like Lady Macbeth twisted and ugly. Tadolini sings to perfection, and I don't wish Lady Macbeth to sing at all. Tadolini has a marvellous, brilliant, clear, powerful voice, and for Lady Macbeth I should like a raw, choked, hollow voice. Tadolini's voice has something angelic; Lady Macbeth's voice should have something devilish.

Barbieri-Nini must have had the qualities he required, but despite his instructions, the vocal demands are still quite substantial, as can be seen in this example from the cavatina from Act 1.

Example 6 Bars 89 - 92

do no, a-scen di - vi a re - gnar. Che tar - di? Che tar -

- di? Ah! a-scen-di-via re - gnar

The tessitura, in this instance, is high for a mezzo, but the role has been attempted by Christa Ludwig and Grace Bumbry (Jefferson 1983, 70), two singers who began their careers as mezzos.

In Il Trovatore (1853), the much coveted role of Azucena again requires a singer with an extensive range, but this time it is the low notes which come to the fore, especially at the end of the aria 'Condotta ell'era in ceppi', where, after having sung consistently in a high tessitura leading to a cry 'Ah!' on b-flat", the singer then has to drop to low a's four times in succession.

Example 7 Bars 130 - 140

Allegro agitato

Sul ca - po mi - o le chio - me sen - to driz -

zar si an cor! Driz - zar si an - cor! driz - zar si an cor!

This transition from head to chest voice, almost without going through the middle voice, is difficult for any mezzo and only those with a good chest register would be

able to fill the role successfully. (The Australian mezzo-soprano Lauris Elms is one such who has successfully performed the role many times). The importance of Azucena's role as she seeks vengeance for her mother's death at the stake and the incineration of her own son cannot be overlooked. Godefroy (1977, 232) sums up Azucena's role as follows:

She brings disquiet to disrupt the romantic flow...a ready made chance for a mezzo-soprano to be matched against the big roles...of equal status with the tenor, baritone and soprano, and with her own arias and a major share in the duets and the top line in an ensemble...a chance to sing passionately and act fiercely. She can easily stop the show, but it must be for her singing, not her histrionics.

Note here the contrast with the casting of Lady Macbeth, where beauty of voice is secondary to the singer's acting ability. Azucena does require good acting, but from the score it is clear that the role, in order to be convincing, must also be very well sung.

Another important role is Princess Eboli from Don Carlos (Paris, 1867), described by Jander, Steane and Forbes (1992, 373) as 'Verdi's finest role for mezzo'. Her aria 'O Don Fatale', in which she is left alone on stage to decry the fatal beauty which has been bestowed upon her, is a real 'show-stopper'. The aria is one huge emotional outburst, relieved only by a reflective middle section in which her thoughts turn to Elisabeth, the woman she has wronged. The ending (see example below) on a rising phrase to b-flat would provide a perfect climax for a soprano, but a mezzo-soprano singing this adds an edge and excitement to the sound, providing an even more impressive exit point.

Example 8 Bars 86 - 91

Allegro agitato

ah si a be-ne-det - to il ciel

lo sal - re - ro!

Hussey (1963, 154) describes Eboli's character as '...coquettish, jealous, vindictive and self-sacrificing; in short, a human being'.

Godefroy (1977, Vol II, 149) elaborates further:

Verdi never quite gets over this spectacular launching of his mezzo-soprano. His Eboli wavers between princess, actress, adventuress, mistress and tigress...In Verdi's opera she is no lady, rather a flamboyant extrovert whose ends justify any sort of means.

There can be little doubt that Eboli is one of the great roles for mezzo-soprano, but Verdi was not content to leave the mezzo without yet another trump card. This came in the form of Amneris from *Aida*, which was sung at the Cairo première in 1871 by Eleanora Grossi (Mandadori 1979, 257) and six weeks later at the Italian première at La Scala by Maria Waldmann, for whom Verdi wrote the mezzo part in his *Requiem* (Dyneley 1963, 352). From the mezzo's point of view, the role of Amneris is equal in stature to that of Eboli, even though she does not sing an aria. The range, from A to b², is similar, and again Verdi demands a singer with a dramatic voice, who is able to project the character with dignity and power. Jefferson (1983, 52) describes Amneris as '...a real woman, fierce, proud, jealous, strong'.

However, it is not until Act IV that the full importance of her character is revealed. In the judgement scene, Amneris stands alone on stage, singing of Aida.

her '*abborrita rivale*'. With all her power she admonishes the priests with the cry 'Empia razza'.

Example 9 Bars 79 - 88

ff

Em-pia raz - za! a - na - te - ma su voi! la ven - det - ta del

ciel, del ciel — scen - de - ra! a - na - te - ma su voi!

Lady Macbeth, Azucena, Eboli and Amneris all have one thing in common and that is the requirement for a dramatic mezzo, who not only has an extended range, but great vocal power and just as importantly, good acting ability.

Steane (Dec. 1989, 21) says:

Verdi has done much to recompense the mezzo in the aptest way by assigning (these roles)...to her, for whereas nature has denied her the vocal excitements associated with the soprano, Verdi has given her a dramatic interest which exceeds that of the heroines' goodness...The same quality that makes the *spinto* tenor a special creation of Italian opera now has to appear in the mezzo voice, thrusting forward under intense emotional pressure.

In his other operas, Verdi has assigned the mezzo roles of lesser importance, examples being Maddalena (*Rigoletto*), Ulrica and Oscar (*Un ballo in Maschera*), Meg Page and Mistress Quickly (*Falstaff*) and the confidantes Inez (*Il Trovatore*), Flora (*La Traviata*) and Emilia (*Otello*). Together with Rossini, Verdi was unique in that no previous composer had paid so much attention to the qualities of the mezzo-soprano voice. The fact that Verdi's operas still form part of the standard repertoire of opera companies world-wide is a testimony to his contribution to the development and recognition of the mezzo-soprano voice, as well as his standing as an operatic composer.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, French composers were using the mezzo-soprano voice to sing lyrical roles as opposed to the more dramatic ones favoured by Verdi. Charles Gounod (1818-93) composed the title role of his opera Sapho, which premièred at the Paris Opéra on 16th April, 1851, for the mezzo-soprano Pauline Viardot, sister of Maria Malibran (Christiansen 1986, 82). Sapho was composed whilst Gounod and his mother were guests at Viardot's farm at Brie (Mandadori 1979, 221). The opera is set on the island of Lesbos in ancient Greece, but apart from Sapho's aria 'O ma lyre immortelle', it is not now performed. However, this aria gives some clue as to the lyrical nature of the writing. The piece is strophic, the phrases are long and the range is nearly two octaves - c to b-flat". The final b-flat" also sees Sapho's farewell from the stage, in this instance over a cliff into the sea, making another great mezzo exit in the style of Eboli.

Gounod's most famous opera, Faust (1859) gave the mezzo two more roles, Marthe, a friend and neighbour to the soprano *prima donna* Marguerite, and Siebel, a student who is in love with her. Neither role is very substantial, although Gounod does allocate an aria, "Fâites-lui les aveux", to the mezzo who sings the travesty role of Siebel.

Hector Berlioz (1803-69) continued the French penchant for lyricism. Macdonald (1982, 175) says of Berlioz, that his feeling for the human voice 'was that of a natural composer of opera, with his personal attachment to the mezzo-soprano lovingly defined'. All of his operas bring the mezzo-soprano back to *prima donna* status, beginning with Orphée, the French version of Gluck's Orfeo, which Berlioz edited, replacing the original castrato with the mezzo-soprano Pauline Viardot in the title role (Christiansen 1986, 81). Next came Béatrice et Bénédict (1862), a setting of Shakespeare's Much Ado About Nothing. The heroine Béatrice, a mezzo, is required to sing with great lyricism, as opposed to the more dramatic style introduced by Verdi. Although this opera is not part of the standard repertoire

(Mandadori 1979, 236), it was performed in full by the Opera North (Leeds) in 1984, as was also his epic Les Troyens – an opera in five acts. This opera is divided into two parts: Part One, La Prise de Troie comprising Acts I and II and Part Two, Les Troyens à Carthège, comprising Acts III, IV and V. The work was written between 1856–8, but according to Macdonald (1982, 175), the definitive score was not published until 1969, one hundred years after his death.

In Part I, Berlioz gives the *prima donna* role of Cassandra full reign in the Verdian sense. The texture of the orchestration is even thicker than that employed by Verdi, so the singer has to project over it without forcing the voice. However, like Verdi, Berlioz had a natural feeling for the human voice, which became apparent in the lyricism of his writing and his attempt to incorporate vocal colours into the orchestral accompaniment.

The role of Dido in Part II also requires a voice with dramatic qualities, but the writing is more lyrical than for Cassandra. The mezzo Anne-Arsène Charton-Demeur, the original Béatrice, sang the role at the Paris première on 4 November, 1863 (Mandadori 1979, 238). The travesty role of Ascagne is variously allocated to a mezzo or a tenor, whilst the role of Anna is a true contralto part, which makes casting and therefore performance of the opera that much more difficult, as today true contraltos are a rarity. Macdonald (1982, 199) supports Berlioz' decision to cast mezzo-sopranos as his leading ladies, partly because of Berlioz' dislike for high coloraturas and partly because the mezzo voice 'carried the seriousness that roles, like Cassandra, Dido and Béatrice demand'.

Of lesser significance is the opera Mignon (1866) by Ambroise Thomas. This is a setting of Goethe's Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahr, one of several great literary works used as inspiration for his operas. The music is lyrical with many attractive melodies, including Mignon's arias 'Connais-tu le pays' and 'Me voici dans son boudoir'. Of significance, however, is the casting of the mezzo-soprano Célestine

Galli-Marié as Mignon, who a few years later was to become the first Carmen (Mandadori 1979, 246, 264).

In Bizet's Carmen, the heroine represents a departure from anything which had gone before. Here is a passionate, fiery, gypsy woman, who exhibits strong, sometimes violent, but always realistic emotions. Her seduction of Don José, followed by his ensuing jealousy had not hitherto been seen on the operatic stage and according to Dean (1975, 226) this was a shocking thing for the audience to witness. Mandadori (1979, 265) elaborates further:

The critics exploded in a storm and the opera was a failure. The libretto was criticized for immorality, for obscenity, for lacking a sense of theatre, for having broken all the standards of good taste, and the music for belonging to so-called 'music of the future' and lacking in melody.

Despite this, Carmen has emerged as one of the most popular box-office successes ever and not since Rosina in Il Barbiere di Siviglia has any role been coveted so much by soprano and mezzo-soprano alike. Carmen is a *prima donna* role of the first order and therefore very alluring to any singer who thinks she can sing it. Galli-Marié, who premièred the role on 3 March 1875 at the Paris Opéra, is described by Celletti (1962, 115) as 'a high mezzo with clear timbre and modest volume'. There can be no doubt, if the tessitura is anything to go by, that Bizet wrote the role with the sound of the mezzo-soprano voice in mind. According to Dean (1975, 293) this was his intention, despite the fact that higher alternatives were added by Choudon after Bizet's death. This could explain why so many sopranos such as Patti, Callas, Rosa Ponselle and Régine Créspin (Steane November 1989, 22; Celletti 1962, 115;) have attempted the role. The music itself is very singable, as in Carmen's well-known arias 'Habañera' and 'Seguidilla', and it is perhaps this, plus the opportunity for complete freedom of expression, which makes the portrayal of the role on stage an attractive proposition for so many singers.

The actual interpretation of the role is a matter of individual taste, as each

producer, singer and audience member has his or her own idea of how Carmen should be portrayed. Nearly all the latter-day mezzos of note have attempted the role, some more successfully than others, but each putting her own mark on it. Again, it is a matter of taste whether a more dramatic or more lyrical voice is preferred, how voluptuous she should appear and whether her actions spring from the earthiness of her roots or from something much deeper. Generally speaking however, the darker tone of the mezzo is more suited to the character of such a role than is the soprano voice. Without artificially having to colour the tone of her voice, the mezzo can express the 'sensuality, capriciousness and flirtatiousness required of the character' (Celletti 1962, 115).

Camille Saint-Saëns presented the mezzo with another *prima donna* role in the form of Dalila from the opera Samson et Dalila, a setting of Judges 16. The opera premièred at the Weimar Hoftheater on 2 December, 1877, with Pauline Viardot in the title role (Christiansen 1986, 80; Mandadori 1979, 276). Like Carmen, Dalila is a seductress, but this time the motive is not love. Her attempts to persuade Samson to reveal the secret of his strength have an underlying evil intent. From a vocal point of view, the singer must possess a voluptuous voice; that is, dark in quality with dramatic overtones, but capable of singing long, lyrical phrases. The tessitura sits mainly in the middle of the mezzo voice with extension to the top in 'Mon coeur s'ouvre à ta voix' and a resonant low a-flat required in the aria 'Amour viens aider'. Even though the drama and characterization deviate from the original biblical text, Samson et Dalila has survived in the modern repertoire, principally because the music is so appealing.

Jules Massenet (1842–1912) was perhaps the only remaining French composer of the late nineteenth century to recognize the potential of the mezzo-soprano voice. He wrote a number of operas which gave the mezzo a chance to utilize both the lyric and dramatic qualities of her voice. In Hérodiade (1881), the mezzo takes the title

role. The music is Verdian in passion, yet has some of the lyrical qualities of Berlioz. Like Le Cid (1885), it is not often performed, but arias from both operas are often sung in isolation. 'Pleurez mes Yeux' (Le Cid) is a favourite amongst mezzo-sopranos who enter aria competitions, because it has the range - b to b-flat", and the drama necessary to make an immediate impression on the adjudicator.

Massenet's best known opera, Werther (1892), is based on Goethe's Leiden des jungen Werthers. The principal female character, Charlotte, a mezzo-soprano, is the object of poet Werther's love, but he meets an unhappy end at the hands of her husband. Charlotte is not a heroine of the same mould as Carmen or Dalila, but nevertheless is central to the plot. The music she sings reflects passion and tragedy in a more restrained, lyrical style. The role is nevertheless a substantial one and takes its place amongst the mezzo *prima donna* roles of which the French composers of the middle to late nineteenth century were so fond.

In Germany during the nineteenth century, the delineation between soprano, mezzo-soprano and contraltos voices was not altogether clear (Jander, Steane and Forbes 1992, 373). Richard Wagner (1813-83), whilst making an enormous contribution to the development of opera as drama, concentrated his vocal efforts on the soprano voice, rather than seize the opportunity of expanding upon the groundwork laid by Verdi and Berlioz in bringing the mezzo-soprano voice to the fore. However, despite not giving the mezzo *prima donna* status, Wagner did write a number of substantial roles for her. Of these, only Mary in Der Fliegende Holländer (1843), Magdalena in Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg (1868) and Erda, the earth Goddess in Siegfried (1876) could be called lyrical roles. The remainder require a dramatic mezzo voice, sometimes stretching to the extremes in range and almost competing with the soprano in sustaining power.

Jander, Steane and Forbes (ibid) in discussing Wagner's casting, mention that the roles of Fricka (Das Rheingold), Venus (Tannhäuser) and Adriano (Rienzi) were

first sung by sopranos, but in later revivals were given to mezzos. Das Rheingold gives the mezzo two more roles - Flosshilde, a Rheinmaiden and the more substantial role of Erda, whose scenes are of sufficient length for her to be noticed. In Die Walküre (1856), four of the eight Walküre can be sung by mezzos, as can two of the three Norns in Götterdämmerung (1876). Brangäne (Tristan und Isolde) requires a dramatic mezzo with both a good top to the voice as well as resonant chest notes. It also requires great stamina, almost a prerequisite in singing any Wagner opera. Ortrud (Lohengrin), which comes under the category of *Tiefer Sopran* (see Ch. 1) is the most substantial of them all. It has a tessitura which is accessible to a high mezzo, but can be sung by either a mezzo or a soprano.

Until the end of the century and even into the twentieth century, composers were still filling the void left by the demise of the castrati by writing travesty roles for the mezzo-soprano. Clark (1979, 102) says that composers found that young boys did not have the stamina or vocal power needed to sustain such roles and that the convention of women portraying young boys was still acceptable on the operatic stage.

Hänsel from Humperdink's Hänsel und Gretel (1893) is an intriguing part which requires the singer not only to sound right, but to look right as well. The part calls for a lyric mezzo with youthful looks and a boyish athleticism. Here is a real boy, playing boys' games and not in any way connected to the pages and messengers of earlier years. The challenge to the mezzo is to look and sound convincing without overdoing it. Nicklausse from Offenbach's Les Contes d'Hoffmann (1881) is a more conventional travesty role, while Prince Orlofsky from Johann Strauß's Die Fledermaus (1874) calls for a more mature singer, able to portray the decadence and eccentricity which the character requires.

Russian composers of the late nineteenth century recognized that the mezzo-soprano voice could be useful in filling those roles requiring seriousness and

maturity. The mezzo was generally relegated to the role of nurse - Mussorgsky's Boris Godonov (1874) and Filipevna from Tchaikowsky's Eugene Onegin (1879); old woman - Madame Larina (Onegin), Najata (Sadko - Rimsky Korsakov, 1898); medium - the title role in Tchaikowsy's The Queen of Spades (1890); and occasionally young man - Feodor (Boris Godunov) and young woman - Olga (Onegin), Princess Marina (Boris) and Kontchakovna in Borodin's Prince Igor (1890). These roles, although pleasant to sing, placed no great demands on the mezzo voice and therefore their significance is inconsequential.

The continuing awareness by composers such as Rossini, Verdi and Berlioz of the timbre and capabilities of the mezzo-soprano voice was significant, however, as it brought about a permanent change in the way this voice was perceived. For a short period the voice came into prominence, robbing the soprano of her *prima donna* status. More importantly, composers found that the mezzo voice presented new and challenging ways of writing - the range was extended as never before and the expressive qualities of the voice given new outlets. The mezzo was seen to be capable of portraying any type of role, limited only by the imagination of the composer.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION: THE MEZZO-SOPRANO IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The turn of the century saw no immediate new developments as far as the mezzo-soprano was concerned. European composers such as Massenet, Puccini and Richard Strauß continued to write worthwhile roles for her, as did later composers such as Poulenc and Ravel from France, the British composers Benjamin Britten and Michael Tippett and the Americans Gian-Carlo Menotti and Igor Stravinsky.

Massenet's work for the mezzo-soprano overlapped into the twentieth century with the title role of Thérèse (1907), Queen Amahelli (Bacchus - 1909), Dulcinée (Don Quichotte - 1910), Postumia (Roma - 1912) and Colombe (Panurge - première after the composer's death in 1913). These roles all required a voice which was similar to the Rossini mezzo - that is a lyric-coloratura, but with dramatic overtones.

Both Puccini and Strauß were writing operas simultaneously, but their styles differed greatly. Puccini, although taking on some of the new tonalities of the twentieth century, still wrote in the traditional style of the Italian Romantic composers. His heroes were tenors and his heroines, without exception, were sopranos. His mezzos were functional and not particularly vital to the plot; the music was dramatic, but without the top b-flats and b's of Verdi and Wagner.

Suzuki, confidante to Butterfly in Madama Butterfly (1904), is his best known mezzo role. Both her character and vocal prominence are subordinate to Butterfly. However, she does get to sing the very beautiful 'Flower duet' with Butterfly, as well as a moving trio with Pinkerton and Sharpless, but is denied an aria.

In Il Trittico (1918), Puccini gave several roles to the mezzo, such as the old aunt Zita and cousin Ciesca in Gianni Schicci; Frugole, the rag-picker in Il Tabarro

and La Zia Principessa from Soeur Angelica. Of these, the Princess is perhaps the only important role, even though musically it is not very significant. Dramatically it makes an impact however, as it is she who brings scorn, shame and finally death to Sister Angelica. In this opera, it would appear that Puccini was trying to make amends for his neglect in giving the mezzo a *prima donna* role, as nine of the eleven roles can be sung by a mezzo, with only Sister Genevieve and the *prima donna* title role of Sister Angelica being cast as sopranos.

Richard Strauß (1864–1949) showed a preference for the same type of dramatic mezzo-soprano voice as Richard Wagner. Like Wagner, he made great use of orchestral colour. In two of his early operas, Salome (1905) and Elektra (1909), the singer has to use full voice to compete with the orchestra, particularly in the roles of Herodias and Klytämnestra respectively. In these roles the mezzo portrays an older woman and in this instance, both vocal and physical maturity are required.

Strauß also gave the mezzo two travesty roles and the contrast in the writing could not be more marked. In Der Rosenkavalier (1911), the music is soaring and melismatic and according to Clark (1979, 98), the role of Octavian is the last major travesty role 'in which a woman is asked to portray masculine passion seriously'. This passion is fully felt in the 'Presentation of the Rose', when Octavian declares his love for the Marschallin and she in turn reciprocates. Octavian has since become the epitome of mezzo travesty roles, as it challenges the singer both musically and dramatically.

Strauß's second travesty role of note is the Composer in Ariadne auf Naxos (1913). Casting a mezzo in the role apparently did not meet the approval of the librettist, Hugo von Hoffmannsthal. He objected to the Composer 'becoming a mezzo breeches role like...Octavian' (Murray 1992, Vol. 1). According to Murray (ibid), Strauß replied that an intelligent mezzo could be found in any opera company and that as Ariadne auf Naxos already had three tenors, no more were needed.

Ravel's fascination with things mechanical, his love of animals, plus a collaboration with the writer Colette resulted in L'Enfant et les Sortilèges (1925). In this opera Ravel composed several roles for the mezzo-soprano, which according to Roland (1947, 96) was his favourite voice. Included is the main character, a seven year-old boy. The role was cast as a mezzo, presumably because a real boy's voice would not have been strong enough, nor have had the required range to carry over the orchestration. Mezzos also sing the roles of the mother and two of the animals, the squirrel and the cat.

At the same time as Ravel was writing operas in Paris, Kurt Weill began an association with the writer Bertold Brecht in Berlin. This was to result in several operas which departed from the mainstream style of writing. Weill's first success was Die Dreigroschen Oper (1928), which was an up-dated interpretation of John Gay's The Beggar's Opera, written two hundred years earlier in 1728, using street ballads and songs to depict the low life of London's East End (Christiansen 1986, 21). Weill's setting was the cabaret scene of Berlin – the songs were politically motivated, employing jazz elements and a new style of recitative called '*Singspiel*', which was half sung, half spoken dialogue (Mandadori 1979, 410-11). Here the singer had to make full use of the chest register, which for the mezzo singing Pirate Jenny, added a challenge not experienced in more conventional opera. The mezzo takes the main role in Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny (1930), which again uses *singspiel*.

Mezzos were more and more being put into categories fitting character portrayal, such as: elderly women, mothers, spinsters, aunts, mediums, servants, secretaries, nurses and the occasional young man. Examples of this type of casting can be found in Janáček's Katya Kabanova (1921), in which four of the roles – the widow Kabanica, the two servants Glasa and Feklusa, and the ward Varvara, are all mezzos. In Prokofiev's The Love for Three Oranges (1921), two of the oranges, who

later become princesses, are mezzos, as is Smeraldina, servant to the witch Fata Morgana.

Witchcraft and fortune-telling also feature in the following roles: Madame Flora in Menotti's The Medium (1946), Baba the Turk in Stravinsky's The Rake's Progress (1951) and Sosotris in Michael Tippett's The Midsummer Marriage (1955). Old ladies and spinsters appear in other operas by Menotti, examples being Miss Todd and Miss Pinkerton in The Old Maid and the Thief (1941), The Secretary in The Consul (1950), and Maria Golivin, the mother, in Amahl and the Night Visitors.

Poulenc's best known opera, Les Dialogues des Carmélites (1957), like Puccini's Suor Angelica, is set in a nunnery and also has several mezzo roles which call for an air of dignity and authority – Mother Marie, Sister Mathilde, Mother Jeanne and the prioress Madame de Croissy. It seemed that both Puccini and Poulenc recognized that the colour of the voice could contribute to the characterization, and the casting of mezzos as nuns is a good example of this.

The most important British opera composer to emerge during the twentieth century was undoubtedly Benjamin Britten. He spent much of his creative life devoted to writing for the voice and although his favourite voice was the tenor, brought about by his long association with the tenor Peter Pears, many operas were written which were both dramatically and artistically satisfying for singers of all voice types. His vocal writing shows a sensitivity for the nuances of the voice, often found lacking in works of other contemporary composers, who are either not singers themselves, or who have had little association with singers. He created several useful roles for the mezzo-soprano, including Mrs. Sedley and Auntie in Peter Grimes (1945), Mrs. Herring in Albert Herring (1947), Lady Essex in Gloriana (1953) and Kate in Owen Wingrave (1971), which he composed for the great English mezzo, Janet Baker (Jander, Steane and Forbes 1992, 374). All the above are mature women, and although the roles are by no means glamorous, they do provide the

mezzo with a challenge in character acting and a chance to experiment with different vocal colours.

One of the most significant developments of twentieth century opera performance has been the re-emergence of the *bel canto* repertoire and of the operas of George Frederick Handel and Gioacchino Rossini. The reasons for this are several, but it could be argued that some modern operas are as difficult to stage as they are to sing, and therefore from both the opera manager's and the singer's point of view, it is better to stage operas which are economically viable and which the singers are going to want to perform.

The Rossini revival began initially with the work of the Spanish mezzo Conchita Supervia and later with another Spanish mezzo, Teresa Berganza (Jander, Steane and Forbes 1992, 374). But perhaps the greatest contribution to the revival of Rossini operas has come from the American mezzo-soprano, Marilyn Horne, whose technique is described by Christiansen (1986, 320) as 'staggering'. He goes on to say that she decorates Rossini's music in 'authentic style' and sings 'with a confidence and precision that no one could remember equalled'. Other mezzos, such as Cecilia Bartoli, Agnes Baltsa, Frederica von Stade and the Australians Suzanne Johnstone and Kirsti Harms have followed suit.

Horne, along with the English mezzo Janet Baker, has also helped revive an interest in the operas of Handel, many of which had been neglected during the Romantic period. Headington, Westbrook and Barfoot (1987, 70) comment on the difficulty of finding suitable voices to replace the castrati, for whom many of the roles were written. However, it appears that mezzos such as Baker and Horne were more than equal to the task. Producers too, were and still are finding that there is a following amongst the opera-going public for the more static *opera seria* style – the musical and dramatic diversity being sufficient to maintain the audience's interest.

According to Adams (1980, 51), the revival of the *bel canto* repertoire

initially began with the soprano Maria Callas, but it was the conductor Richard Bonyng and his wife, the legendary soprano Joan Sutherland, who were really responsible for bringing these works back into the mainstream repertoire. In order for these operas to become a success, a singer had to be found who could equal both the vocal and dramatic power of Joan Sutherland's *prima donna* soprano. Once again it was Marilyn Horne who fitted the role. Her collaboration with Sutherland lasted throughout the 1960's (Christiansen 1986, 319), during which time many otherwise forgotten scores were unearthed and performed, often to rave reviews. Their most successful partnership came in Bellini's Norma and Rossini's Semiramide (Christiansen, *ibid*) and as these operas have been recorded, so the evidence of their unique blend is preserved.

The twentieth century operatic mezzo-soprano has a vast repertoire from which to choose and can, if she wishes, specialize in any type of work, provided she has the temperament, the technique, the range and timbre to suit. On the world stage she is a marketable commodity, so must have the looks and intelligence to go with the job. In order to cope with the vast array of technological advances, such as television, recording, film and video, as well the atonal structure of many twentieth century works, she must be a good communicator, linguist, athlete, and above all a good musician.

Through an exploration of the relevant operatic repertoire from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, I have sought to demonstrate how the concept of the mezzo-soprano voice arose primarily in response to the requirements of composers for a warmer, darker quality of voice, suitable for portraying such characters as Rosina, Amneris, Eboli, Dido and Carmen, for example. Now that this voice type is firmly established, there is a plethora of operatic roles for mezzo-sopranos being created by current day composers. These, alongside the more standard operatic repertoire and the revivals of early operas written before the concept of the mezzo-soprano

ever existed, now give her the widest possible choice of repertoire to perform.

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