

The Lost Voice of Rosine Stoltz

Author(s): Mary Ann Smart

Source: *Cambridge Opera Journal*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Mar., 1994), pp. 31-50

Published by: [Cambridge University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/823762>

Accessed: 30/09/2013 00:26

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Cambridge University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Cambridge Opera Journal*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

The lost voice of Rosine Stoltz

MARY ANN SMART

Read no history: nothing but biography, for that is
life without theory.

Disraeli, *Contarini Fleming*

I have chosen to write of women's lives, rather than of
the texts I have been trained to analyze and enjoy. I
risk a great danger: that I shall bore the theorists
and fail to engage the rest, thus losing both
audiences.

Carolyn Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life*

Until recently, women's biography and feminist interpretation of texts have travelled along separate paths, the exhaustive documentation required by biography often seeming to overwhelm efforts at interpretation, dictating that the genre remain essentially conservative and anti-theoretical. This is unfortunate, if only because it is in the writing of women's lives that biography and theory may need each other most. The women we examine are sometimes minor figures, ordinary people most interesting when seen as emblematic of a broader context; and of course they rarely lived according to modern feminist principles: what does one make of a talented woman who devoted her life more to caring for men than for herself? Such situations present conundrums that simultaneously resist and require the solace of theory.¹

A similar dichotomy has informed feminist musicology, where studies of female musicians co-exist, but rarely overlap, with gendered readings of the canon. However, some recent work suggests that opera criticism, though still living somewhat on the margins of musicological respectability, has begun to explore new, synthesising avenues, innovations perhaps propelled by the solitary, often eccentric passion of the opera fan. Catherine Clément's poetic evocations of the lives of prima donnas and Wayne Koestenbaum's queer celebration of the diva lifestyle are strong, albeit idiosyncratic, examples of this trend: of operatic biography (or at least biographical anecdotes)

This article could not have been written without the help of Rebecca Harris-Warrick, who generously shared with me the press and musical material she has gathered in her work on the critical edition of *La Favorite*, to be published in 1994 by Ricordi.

¹ In the last few years, feminist biography has begun energetically and imaginatively to absorb theoretical perspectives. See *The Challenge of Feminist Biography*, ed. Sara Alpern *et al.* (Urbana, Ill., 1992); *Between Women*, ed. Carol Ascher, Louise DeSalvo and Sara Ruddick (Boston, 1984); and Elisabeth Young-Bruhl, 'The Writing of Biography', and 'Psychoanalysis and Biography', in *Mind and the Body Politic* (London, 1989), 125–54. Ruth Solie has examined theories and problems of feminist biography and musicology with sensitivity in her 'Changing the Subject', *Current Musicology*, 53 (1993), 55–65.

informed by theory.² The immediacy of their prose, as well as their relative freedom from footnotes and other scholarly encumbrances, might lead us to conclude that writing about singers of the past will inevitably have a speculative bent, a histrionic tone designed to make us forget that immediate physical traces of a voice cannot survive. Unlike women writers, who leave their voices encoded in literary texts, singers – at least before the age of recorded sound – survive only in ventriloquistic detritus: descriptions by critics, admirers and the like. (In this context, it seems significant that what often *does* survive is a wealth of visual evidence: engravings, costume designs and portraits allow us to recover a sense of the body, their power as visual signs perhaps overwhelming the memory of voice even more completely.) This silence at the centre of singer biography obliges us to turn to testimonies inevitably incomplete, biased, inaccurate. For the postmodern sensibility, of course, this may be less a liability than a mixed blessing: the leanings and omissions of second-hand accounts can be as revealing as ‘the facts’ – and the difficulty (some would say impossibility) of uncovering an objective truth is hardly confined to *singers’* biographies. However, the gulf between the singer’s essence – the lost voice – and the person who produced it is perhaps greater than in other fields, and it is this split between voice and bodily source, as much as the dearth of concrete evidence, that opens operatic biography to infiltration by theories.³

Dead singers can seem mute, then, in a way that writers cannot; but the dimension of opera that is interpretative (rather than creative) also has more positive implications, ones with particular relevance to female performers. Carolyn Heilbrun’s dominant image (and Virginia Woolf’s before her) of a woman writing alone in a room, and struggling, often in vain, to gain public and financial recognition must be replaced in operatic history with that of a bejewelled, well-paid prima donna accepting accolades, perhaps graciously, perhaps haughtily.⁴ To put it less positively, because female singers performed works by men, they did not have to fight to be noticed. In the nineteenth century, at least, divas enjoyed a generous professional equality: opera’s celebration of the female voice ensured that they were always in demand by the male-controlled operatic establishment, their timbres and ranges essential for the romantic struggle at the centre of most plots. The traditional contrast of vocal types – the competition of tenor and baritone for the soprano – might even seem to grant women added power by guaranteeing them a place at the apex of opera’s triangle of romantic archetypes.

This rosy picture of female dominance can, of course, easily be inverted. The apparent advantage provided by plot and vocal hierarchies could also breed resentment, the criticism and ridicule to which divas were – and are – often subject.⁵ Sopranos are routinely demonised in operatic history as greedy and ambitious, willing to sacrifice the aesthetic balance of a masterwork to satisfy their vanity with an additional showpiece

² Catherine Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis, 1988); Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen’s Throat: Opera, Homosexuality and the Mystery of Desire* (New York, 1993).

³ The difficulty of arriving at ‘biographical truth’ is a theme of most of the essays in *The Challenge of Feminist Biography*, and of Geoffrey Wolff’s ‘Minor Lives’, in Marc Pachter, ed., *Telling Lives: The Biographer’s Art* (Washington, 1979), 56–72.

⁴ Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman’s Life*; Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (1928; rpt. New York, 1982).

⁵ See, for example, Ethan Mordden’s *Demented: The World of the Opera Diva* (New York, 1984), and Susan McClary’s discussion of the pejorative connotations of ‘demented’ in her foreword to Clément, xvi.

aria, a few more gaudy ornaments. Male composers are not slow to provide epistolary ammunition: Verdi's letters, for example, regularly document heroic struggles to 'preserve his art' from the exhibitionistic urges of sopranos. Translated into the language of feminist theory: the soprano's power – her economic, creative and sexual independence – seems to demand containment, and much of the rhetoric that surrounds her, whether in 'primary' sources, journalistic writings or biographies, attempts to control or limit her potential supremacy.⁶

It is in interrogating this rhetoric, and thereby diminishing its power, that modern theory can come to our rescue. Clément has notoriously launched such an attack on the language and shape of opera plots, accusing them of conspiring to diminish women by focusing on sopranos doomed to sacrifice and death. Michel Poizat's obscure but compelling Lacanian theory goes a step further, arguing that diva deaths are made necessary by the *sound* of the female voice: our enjoyment of the long-buried primal pleasures evoked by the soprano's highest notes must be banished violently.⁷ Objections leap to mind: Clément conveniently forgets comic opera, in which no one dies and the girl usually gets what she wants; and she gazes serenely past opera's impressive heap of dead tenors;⁸ Poizat has a huge blind spot where the Italian operatic tradition should be. But these are mere quibbles. Whether or not one accepts the details of these particular formulations, by extending their demystifying rigour from discussions of operatic texts to the rhetoric that surrounds opera, these celebrations of opera's women can provide a starting point for theorising both their lives and the roles they play.

As Clément implies in the few pages she devotes to singers, one method of containing divas, even punishing them for being necessary to our operatic fantasies, has been to subsume their biographies into the roles they play. Her rhapsody on Maria Malibran uncovers the ways opera plots invade our chronicles, how biographies of female singers inevitably pack the messy details of life into the neat packages of art.⁹ In Malibran's case, this process emerges most vividly in the story of Rossini's *Otello*. As a girl of fifteen, she sang Desdemona opposite the Otello of her father and voice teacher Manuel García, trembling with fear under the paternal threat that if she did not meet his vocal expectations, he would *really* strangle her in the final scene. More striking than the cruelty of the threat is the tale's narrative force, the way it superimposes art on life, reads Malibran's relationship with her father through her most famous role. It is a gesture endlessly repeated, until singers' lives begin to seem as alike as opera plots.

La favorite du roi

When a biographer's romanticising tendencies encounter a particularly wilful or resistant subject, the tension between archetype and reality rises to the surface. Take the

⁶ For a historical view of the controls exerted over female singers since the seventeenth century, see John Rosselli, *Singers of Italian Opera* (Cambridge, 1992), 56–70.

⁷ Michel Poizat, *The Angel's Cry: Beyond the Pleasure Principle in Opera*, trans. Arthur Denner (Ithaca, 1992).

⁸ See, for example, Paul Robinson's 'It's Not Over Till the Soprano Dies', *New York Times Book Review*, 1 January 1989.

⁹ Clément, 11, 29–30 and 32–3.

case of French mezzo-soprano Rosine Stoltz, attacked in almost every memoir of the mid-nineteenth century. She is blamed for everything: she singlehandedly ruined the Paris Opéra's box office receipts; she even drove poor Donizetti insane. Her temper tantrums in rehearsal and performance are endlessly chronicled by colleagues, composers and journalists, all of whom attribute (with varying degrees of subtlety) the greater part of her success in Paris to her liaison with Léon Pillet, then superintendent of the Opéra. Perhaps more than that of any other nineteenth-century soprano, Stoltz's biography falls into familiar patterns, endless rehearsals: of her outbursts and the people she offended, the powerful men she married and had affairs with, the analogies between her life and the roles she played. The 'real' Rosine Stoltz, like the 'real' Malibran, has been buried under the weight of plots.

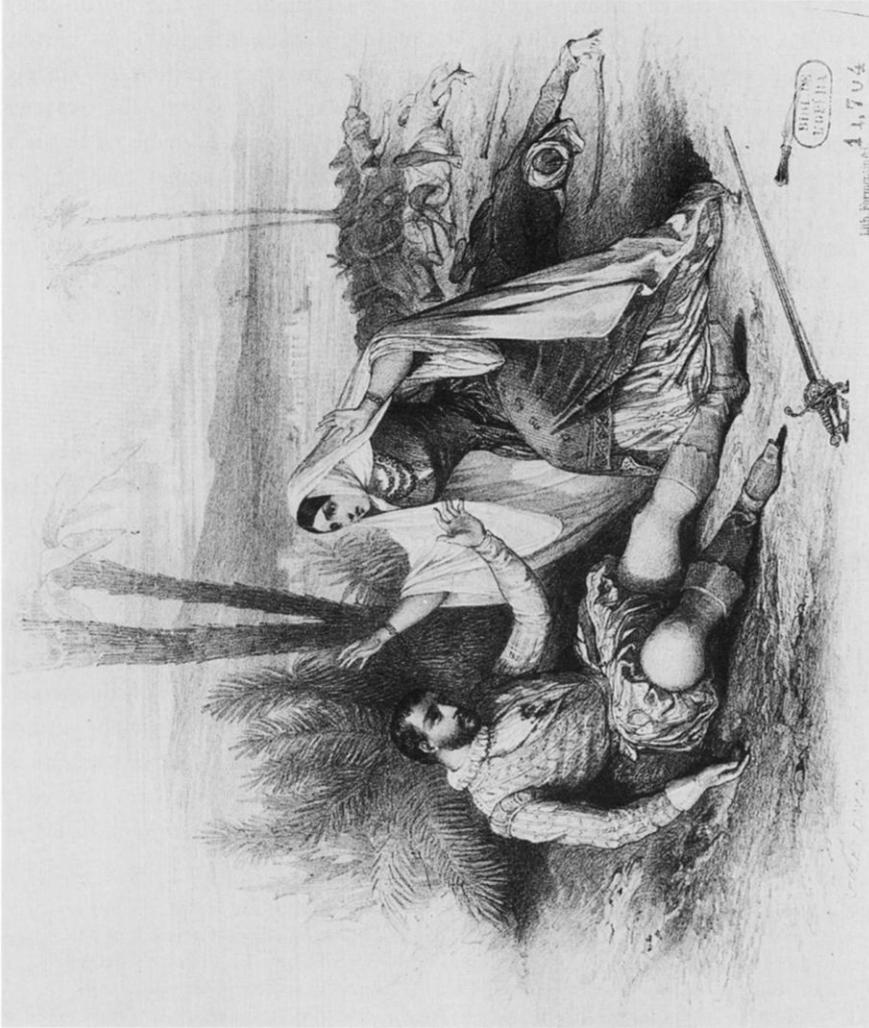
The role assigned to Stoltz in Donizetti's breakdown is both paradigmatic and bizarre. The background is the last days of rehearsal for Donizetti's last opera; as usual, Stoltz's temperamental antics occupy the foreground, although the murderous power attributed to them is exaggerated even within the shrill context of the Stoltz demonology. Léon Escudier relates the decisive incident with indecent relish:

Donizetti put up with an infinite number of deceptions during the rehearsals for [his last opera] *Dom Sébastien*. Many times Mme. Stoltz, who at that time had supreme power at the Opéra, created difficulties for Donizetti that deeply wounded his artistic dignity. For example, in the fifth act, Mme. Stoltz refused to remain on stage while [the baritone, Paul] Barroilhet sang his beautiful offstage barcarolle. The success that he could not fail to enjoy with this melody aroused her jealousy. . . . One evening, Mme. Stoltz insisted that Donizetti cut out one strophe of this barcarolle; the maestro, furious, grabbed his score, threw it down on the stage, and rushed out, hurling some most colourful curses at the singer. Three friends, I was among them, led him home; he could no longer speak, he let loose inarticulate rattles of fury; his mind was unhinged. Nothing could restore him to reason. Donizetti sustained a violent blow to his mind; from that day dated the dreadful illness that gradually eroded his faculties and finally bore him to the grave – alas, too young!¹⁰

There may well have been some flamboyant disagreement, although the newspapers, who made it their business to report almost everything that occurred at the Opéra, rather surprisingly carry no mention of the 'event'. It is easier to cast doubt on the tantrum's supposed consequences: Donizetti had probably contracted syphilis sometime in the 1830s, began to show symptoms in the mid-1840s, and by 1846 was confined to an asylum. Although early biographers hint that his true affliction was well known, whenever it suits their narrative flow they routinely blame his deterioration on emotional upheavals. After the Stoltz incident was first recounted, in Charles de Boigne's 1857 memoir of the Opéra, it became an *idée fixe* of Donizetti biographies for the next half century.¹¹

¹⁰ Escudier, *Mes Souvenirs* (Paris, 1863), 50–1.

¹¹ De Boigne, *Petits Mémoires de l'Opéra* (Paris, 1857), 204–5. The incident was first picked up in Filippo Cicconetti's *Vita di Gaetano Donizetti* (Rome, 1864) although Cicconetti does not mention Stoltz, but rather blames the management of the Opéra. However, Alborghetti's and Galli's influential *Gaetano Donizetti e G. Simone Mayr. Notizie e documenti* (Bergamo, 1875), 191, takes note of the incident only to dismiss it.



Rosine Stoltz (Zayda) is supposed to be ministering to Gilbert Duprez (Sébastien) on the battlefield in Donizetti's *Dom Sébastien* (1843). The pose she adopts here seems to have been characteristic, almost as if the publicly disseminated images aimed to contradict the diva's growing reputation as imperious and unbending. (Photograph from Bibliothèque de l'Opéra.)

It might seem perverse to begin a biography with a story that is almost certainly apocryphal, but The Case of the Tantrum that Killed Donizetti may tell us more than any 'facts' could. Facts about Stoltz are elusive, overwhelmed by the political and personal agendas that dominated the backstage world, and were particularly acute in the troubled atmosphere of the mid-century Paris Opéra. It becomes necessary, then, to scrutinise agendas, sources, biases; eventually these contexts will begin to contend for the spotlight with the life itself.

During her Parisian career, Stoltz's activities were chronicled by the notoriously partisan theatrical papers, which tended to be either ruthlessly critical or blindly approving of the Opéra and its stars, partly depending on whether their publishers also had rights to print the new operas of the season.¹² However, the reviews transcend their biases often enough to create a believable collective image of Stoltz's voice and performance style. They are thus a doubly interesting source: early in her career they supply a much-needed musical profile; later they fill in the gossipy backstage context. Almost all notices of the 1840 première of Donizetti's *La Favorite*, for example, have something good to say about the soprano, and they often concur about her strengths and weaknesses. Later reports, by the mid-1840s mostly negative, may have responded to a decline in her vocal powers but were probably more influenced by the intensification of political and personal rivalries at the Opéra.

Journalistic accounts are complemented by more permanent testimonies, many of them recorded after Stoltz was no longer a dominant force. Several laudatory biographical pamphlets commemorated her retirement from the Opéra in 1847.¹³ An inkling of their *partis-pris* can be gleaned from Julien Lemer, who explained that the impetus for his pamphlet was a commission to write *two* accounts of Stoltz's life for a series on famous actresses. One was to be glowingly admiring, the other cruelly satirical; the publisher would wait until the singer's retirement to decide which she had earned. Outraged, Lemer rushed into print with an energetic defence, blaming most of Stoltz's problems, both of image and performance, on an unfriendly clique. All these book-length fan letters culminate in Stoltz's sentimental farewell performance and the extravagant soirée she hosted a few days later. The retirement is followed by a half century of biographical near-silence: from 1847 onwards only memoirs of the Opéra mention her, usually to lament her influence.¹⁴ Her death in

¹² On these biases, see Rebecca Harris-Warrick, 'Historical Introduction' to the critical edition of Donizetti's *La Favorite* (Milan, forthcoming 1994); Laurie C. Shulman, 'Music Criticism of the Paris Opéra in the 1830s', Ph.D. diss., Cornell University (1985); Andrew G. Gann, 'Théophile Gautier: Critique musicale et l'accueil de Verdi en France', *Bulletin de la Société Théophile Gautier*, 8 (1986), 179–91; and his 'Théophile Gautier, Charles Gounod and the Massacre of *La Nonne sanglante*', *Journal of Musicological Research*, 13 (1993), 49–66, here n. 24.

¹³ The most enthusiastic of these, Eugénie Pérignon's *Rosina Stoltz* (Paris, 1847), was, not surprisingly, authorised by its protagonist; Julien Lemer's *Mme. Rosine Stoltz: Souvenirs biographiques et anecdotiques* (Paris, 1847) and Corneille Cantinjou's *Les Adieux de Madame Stoltz* (Paris, 1847) are only slightly less admiring. Copies of these pamphlets, along with various newspaper obituaries and press accounts, are preserved in Stoltz's 'Dossier d'artiste' at the Bibliothèque de l'Opéra, Paris.

¹⁴ Anecdotes about Stoltz and assessments of her abilities, almost all of them negative, can be found in Gilbert Duprez, *Souvenirs d'un chanteur* (Paris, 1880); Léon Escudier, *Mes souvenirs*; and Charles de Boigne, *Petits Mémoires de l'Opéra*.

1903 provoked a spate of articles revaluing her career, mostly negatively; Gustave Bord's self-styled 'definitive' biography, purporting to demythologise her, appeared in 1909.¹⁵

Most of these accounts indulge in an obsessive blurring of art and life: biographies and even newspaper gossip columns overflow with imagined links between Stoltz and her roles.¹⁶ By far the most common comparison is with Léonor, heroine of *La Favorite*, a role that eventually became almost her only vehicle.¹⁷ The links were usually simple, focusing on the plot's love triangle; an outline synopsis can provide ample context. Léonor, the mistress (or 'favourite') of the King of Aragon, falls in love with Fernand, a novice who has left the monastery before taking vows because of his love for her. Unaware of Léonor's position, Fernand asks the king for her hand in marriage; under political pressure, the king agrees. But when Léonor tries to warn Fernand of her past, the king intervenes, ensuring that Fernand discovers the truth only after the wedding has taken place. Believing that Léonor has deceived him deliberately, Fernand returns to the cloister. Stricken by one of those mysterious illnesses that seem to afflict powerful sopranos, Léonor follows him to the monastery. The lovers meet, recognise each other, reconcile. As soon as Fernand forgives Léonor, she expires. Romanticising biographers drew from this plot many ingenious and unlikely connections, but the most popular subsumed Stoltz into the labyrinthine institutional intrigues of the Opéra, as the spoilt protégée of the Opéra's director, Léon Pillet. References to her as 'la favorite' were a convenient and not-too-libellous shorthand for the protection she was said to receive from the 'king' of the Opéra.¹⁸ A typical insinuation was as understated as the report in *La France musicale*: 'Mme. Stoltz has departed for Baden-Baden; M. L. Pillet accompanies her'.¹⁹ A more savage reference appeared, not surprisingly, in the satirical journal, *Le Charivari*, which called Stoltz the 'surintendante' of the Opéra.²⁰

¹⁵ Gustave Bord, *Rosina Stoltz* (Paris, 1909). The obituaries included in the 'Dossier d'artiste' at the Bibliothèque de l'Opéra are almost all negative. See, for example, *Les Annales* (9 August 1903), the article by Arthur Pougin in *Le Ménestrel* (2 August 1903), *La Liberté* (1 August 1903) and *Le Soleil* (31 July 1903). The only complimentary obituary appeared in *Le Figaro* (31 July 1903).

¹⁶ The singer herself may have participated in this process: inspired by success in Halévy's *La Juive*, she is said to have fabricated a Jewish background for herself; after her appearance in Berlioz's *Benvenuto Cellini*, she claimed to own a Christ figure sculpted by Cellini (Bord, 6 and 18).

¹⁷ According to Bord, Stoltz sang Léonor in *La Favorite* 481 times. Her next most frequently performed roles were Catarina in Halévy's *La Reine de Chypre* (118 performances) and the trouser role of Lazarillo in Marco Aurelio Marliani's *La Xacarilla* (100 performances).

¹⁸ Such circumlocutions were necessary, since Pillet did not hesitate to sue journalists who attacked him openly. In the mid-1840s, the Paris theatrical papers regularly reported Pillet's lawsuits. *La France musicale* of 12 January 1845, for example, gives lively details of Pillet's fight with *Le Constitutionnel*. According to Bord (80–5), in 1842 Stoltz herself launched a defamation suit against Stanislas Champein, music critic of *La Mélomanie* (later to become *Le Musicien*). In articles published between August and November of 1842, Champein accused Stoltz of eloping to Brussels with a fellow voice student, and of bearing and abandoning two children in 1833 and 1834.

¹⁹ *La France musicale*, 14 July 1844.

²⁰ 'Seconde crucifixion de la Favorite, grand opéra, en la personne de Maestro Donizetti', *Le Charivari*, 3 March 1841 (thanks to Jeffrey Kallberg for bringing this to my attention).

While this kind of reporting was common in the nineteenth century, it is perhaps more surprising that Stoltz's 'romantic' connection has continued to dominate perceptions of her, even scholarly ones, up to the present. Discussing the rehearsals for *Dom Sébastien*, Philip Gossett writes that 'many changes were made [in the score], some for artistic reasons, others frivolously'; and that when these matters were under discussion, as in the dispute over the length of the baritone's barcarolle, Stoltz's 'rights were brazenly sustained' because of her liaison with Pillet.²¹ William Ashbrook blames Pillet's lack of enthusiasm for Donizetti's *Les Martyrs* on the 'unsuitability of the role for his mistress Rosine Stoltz; operas in which she could not shine were not given much attention by the management of the Opéra'.²² Most emphatic of all is Steven Huebner, who repeats late nineteenth-century gossip verbatim: 'During rehearsals at the Opéra for his *Dom Sébastien* . . . Donizetti had *quite literally* been driven mad by Rosina Stoltz, mistress of director Léon Pillet'.²³ Of course, the nature of Stoltz's relationship with Pillet is unknowable; but the 'truth' about her private life is less interesting than the fact that her entire career continues to be overshadowed by this single narrative.²⁴ The persistence of her image as 'the favourite' in both the historical and modern literature is surely iconic: women have always served as allegorical symbols for institutions and abstract ideas, and Stoltz became (and has remained) a sort of statue, like the female personifications of 'liberty' or 'justice' that can be seen all over Paris; unlike them, however, the ideas she symbolises are negative: power, intrigue, ambition.²⁵

Professional success and sexual power can be a threatening combination; taken together with Stoltz's temperament and vocal flaws, they became overwhelming, especially when they coincided with the newly precarious artistic and financial state of the Opéra in the 1840s. The obsessive focus on Stoltz's personal life masks a deeper historical narrative, a documentation of the Opéra's decline, which was all but inevitable by the time Stoltz made her début in 1837, but for which she nevertheless became a scapegoat. The 1830s had seen huge financial and popular success, yielding at least one successful new opera a year, including Rossini's *Guillaume Tell*, Auber's *La Muette de Portici*, Meyerbeer's *Robert le diable* and *Les Huguenots*. Pillet's advent as superintendent in 1840 saw the Opéra's fortunes decline rapidly. After the triumph of *La Favorite*, Paris's first theatre slipped into disappointing premières and lacklustre revivals with singers often past their primes. Stoltz's tenure coincided with the departures of many popular artists and the vocal decline of others, including the leading tenor and pioneer of the

²¹ Gossett, unpaginated 'Introduction' to the Garland facsimile edition of the first printed score of *Dom Sébastien* (New York, 1980).

²² Ashbrook, *Donizetti and his Operas* (Cambridge, 1982), 150. Ashbrook concludes his biographical note with a capsule summary of Stoltz's later life: 'After being mistress of the Emperor of Brazil for a while, she married in succession a baron, a count and a prince' (653).

²³ Steven Huebner, *The Operas of Charles Gounod* (Oxford, 1990), 51, emphasis added.

²⁴ A notable exception to this tendency is the biographical note in Spire Pitou, *The Paris Opéra* (New York, 1990), IV, 1264–6.

²⁵ A similar association between the opera star and female allegorical figures is drawn in Jean-Jacques Beneix's 1981 film *Diva*: when the star-struck fan finally connects with the diva he idealises, they take a walk through a Paris landscape dominated by grandiose stone figures of symbolic women.

famous high C ‘from the chest’, Gilbert Duprez. Of course laments about vocal decline and departed great singers are a commonplace of any opera house in any season, but they had greater polemic urgency in Paris, becoming the basis for an aesthetic debate about the relative merits of the spectacular scenic effects so beloved of French grand opera and the Italian style’s emphasis on voice and melody. A satirical pamphlet published in 1845 accused Pillet of alienating all the singers and composers associated with the Opéra, with the result that he had to produce operas without singers and without music – what remained were spectacular sets and costumes, which were all Pillet cared about anyway.²⁶

As the unpopular superintendent’s ‘favourite’, Stoltz was a convenient symbol: since the aesthetic and political problems that haunted the Opéra were too sweeping to be confronted directly, attention could be diverted towards the smaller conflicts and disasters that could plausibly be blamed on her vanity and ambition. She was accused of sabotaging the sopranos already at the Opéra by preventing Pillet from giving them starring roles, and of forbidding him to invite rivals to Paris. In 1845, for example, François-Joseph Fétis reported that:

A woman of talent counts among the singers at the Opéra. Although her voice is mediocre and her musical training no more than sketchy, she compensates for these disadvantages with a lively dramatic sense and an unusual intelligence. Well placed, and confined within the limits of her speciality, this actress could be very useful; but [because she is] ambitious far beyond the limits within which an artist should sensibly confine herself, she wanted to invade everything, to dominate everything, and M. Pillet’s naive admiration has not left her to desire in vain the sacrifices demanded by her *amour-propre*.²⁷

Baritones and tenors were not safe either: Stoltz’s tempestuous behaviour and insistence on the limelight is supposed to have discouraged strong male singers from remaining at the Opéra. Critics even credit her with influencing the repertoire by insisting that every work performed give the most prominent role to her particular brand of soprano.²⁸ Indeed, Stoltz’s career was so completely synonymous with the Opéra that her vocal weaknesses were seen as influential in shaping the theatre’s dominant musical style. *La France musicale* charged that:

In 1772, there was a struggle between the ancient school and the modern style introduced by the Italians; [at the Opéra] today there is a struggle of the lovely school of Rossini against the bastard genre to which M. Pillet has given birth, in order to spotlight the dramatic talent of one of his

²⁶ ‘Indiscrétion en trois actes et en vers par l’un des Trente-Six auteurs de la Tour de Babel’ (Paris, 1845).

²⁷ *Revue et gazette musicale*, 5 January 1845.

²⁸ Cantinjou, *Les Adieux* (n. 13), 30–6, however, devotes a good deal of space to defending Stoltz from this accusation. He lists the sopranos who left the Opéra during Stoltz’s tenure, exonerating his heroine in each case: Cornélie Falcon (the most frequently named victim of Stoltz’s ambition) was already losing her voice by the time Stoltz arrived in Paris, Julie Dorus-Gras could not act, Rossi-Caccia departed to take up a prior contract in Lisbon, Sophia Loewe could never sing anyway, and Sophie Méquillet was so near-sighted that she virtually had to be led on stage by the hand.

employees to the exclusion of anyone else. For her, melody has been sacrificed for declamation, song for pantomime.²⁹

Temperament, private life and institutional crisis collide violently in accounts of the fiasco that precipitated Stoltz's retirement in 1847. By that time her professional fortunes were so closely tied to Pillet's that, when she was finally run off the stage by the intensity of public criticism, Pillet was pressured to offer his own resignation almost immediately. The turning point came in one of those public moments of humiliation commonly undergone by prima donnas. After an extended respiratory illness had required her to cancel a string of performances, she appeared in December 1846 in the première of Louis Niedermeyer's *Robert Bruce*, a loose assembly of recycled Rossini grafted on to a plot from Walter Scott. The public's anger with Stoltz for cancelling, and with the management for presenting a pastiche in the guise of a new work, was probably helped along by an especially energetic anti-Stoltz claque that night. She was violently whistled and hissed. Never noted for even temper, she tore her lace handkerchief into tiny pieces, threw them at the audience, shouted 'C'est intolérable! Je suis brisée!' and stormed off stage.³⁰ Shreds of the handkerchief immediately became collector's items; they were acquired by a kinky English nobleman who displayed them with fetishes culled from temperamental outbursts by Malibran and Catalani.³¹

Although some say that Stoltz never again stepped on to the stage of the Opéra, she in fact continued to perform there for a few months, announcing her official retirement in a letter to the Commission spéciale des théâtres royaux in March 1847.³² This letter, published in the *Revue et gazette musicale*, strikes a skilful balance between apology and recrimination: her recent vocal failures are due both to a lingering indisposition and to the calumnies of a biased public; her retirement is selfless, taken to avoid becoming an obstacle to the theatre's prosperity.³³ Her last appearance at the Opéra (except for an unsuccessful comeback attempt in 1854) was a benefit performance on 22 April 1847, in a programme of excerpts from operas she had premièred. Although gestures of goodwill seem to have prevailed – a flock of doves with coloured ribbons and bouquets attached to their feet was let loose in

²⁹ Ad. V. de Pontecourt, 'Influence de l'Académie Royale de Musique sur le sort des théâtres de la France et de l'étranger' (in the third article of a four-part series), *La France musicale*, 9 February 1845. Pontecourt continues 'We repeat again, to firmly establish our impartiality, that we recognise in Mme. Stoltz a great dramatic talent; she feels vividly, she gives a realistic, even sometimes too realistic, expression to her gestures [son jeu] and to her diction; but as a singer, we must deny her that wealth of qualities that certain newspapers, indiscriminate admirers of everything admired by M. Pillet, have attributed to her. Mme. Stoltz knows neither how to place her voice, nor how to move it around. . . . [Pillet] has worn out this actress by trying to make her, and her alone, shine always and everywhere.'

³⁰ This episode is narrated, from points of view ranging from sympathetic to cruel, in almost all accounts of her life and in most obituaries. The most famous is probably Théophile Gautier's compilation of reviews, *Histoire de l'art dramatique en France* (Paris, 1858). Of the three laudatory pamphlets published in 1847 (see n. 13), Cantinjou and Lemer recount the *Robert Bruce* incident from a sympathetic perspective, while Pérignon, the most fervent admirer of all, neglects to mention it. Gautier's excerpt is reprinted in Ezvar de Fayl, *L'Académie nationale de musique 1671–1877* (Paris, 1878), 302.

³¹ Lemer, *Mme. Rosine Stoltz*, 24.

³² See, for example, the *Liberté* obituary of 1 August 1903.

³³ *Revue et gazette musicale*, 21 March 1847.

the theatre at the end of the evening – Gilbert Duprez, with characteristic bad grace, gleefully (but inaccurately) recalled that Stoltz

was obliged to mount the performance entirely alone, because all the artists [whose participation she requested] had refused. As far as I know, this woman had never rendered a single favour to artists; she wanted to surround herself with the ornaments of Parisian society so that it would be said that she inspired sympathy among artists and so that she would leave the stage accompanied by their best wishes and regrets. Nothing. Solitude, complete isolation.³⁴

A kaleidoscope of names

One tries, by juxtaposing such fragments, to tell another story, to counter the impersonal narratives that have buried Rosine Stoltz the woman. Bits and pieces culled from diaries and memoirs have a narrative immediacy that promises an antidote to overarching political and historical theories; at the same time, however, as Duprez's self-serving fictions illustrate, they demand to be considered in context, from the biographer's critical remove. Perhaps it is this undulation between reminiscence and theory, experience and context, that must shape a biography: stories crowd in, refusing to respect critical distance, but eventually mutate into narrative tropes. The tension is particularly acute in Stoltz's case because she so energetically aided the proliferation of stories around her. Her need to mythologise herself, to embroider and fabricate a persona, enlivens her narrative, but it also creates a need for theories – explanations of her unreliability as a chronicler of her own life.

Take, for example, her kaleidoscope of names. With every twist and turn of her career or personal life, Rosine took a new name, at first simply discarding the old, later accumulating them, hoarding assumed personae. By the end of her life the woman born Victoire Noël was signing her letters 'Rosa Carolina, comtesse de Ketschendorf, baronesse de Stolzenau, princesse de Lesignano, duchesse de Bassano, princesse de la Paix, née d'Altavilla (Rosina Stoltz)'.³⁵ The earliest names seem ephemeral, provisional: carrying little narrative or symbolic weight, they give the impression of a young woman trying on identities until she finds one that fits. All we know of the early professional names – Rose Niva, Rosine Ternaux and Heloise Stoltz – is that 'Stoltz' may have been her mother's maiden name, while 'Rosine' was probably inspired by her success in Rossini's *Barber of Seville*. Stories associated with the later, aristocratic titles are more extravagant. The ranks comtesse de Ketschendorf and baronesse de Stolzenau seem to have been 'borrowed' from her son, who was granted them by his natural father, a minor German noble. Stoltz claimed to have married the prince of Lesignano on his deathbed in 1872, but this may have been fabricated. The duchesse de Bassano and princesse de la Paix derive from a genuine marriage in 1878, but her biographer Bord ungallantly stresses that this was merely a business arrangement: Stoltz agreed to bail out

³⁴ Journal entry of 13 April 1847. Duprez's memoirs are a goldmine of calumnies against Stoltz: the same entry accuses her of bringing his career at the Opéra to a premature end and recounts verbatim a conversation in which Stoltz blamed Pillet for all her difficulties at the Opéra. *Souvenirs d'un chanteur*, excerpts reprinted in *Voix d'Opéra: Ecrits de chanteurs du XIXe siècle* (Paris, 1988), 159–60.

³⁵ Bord (n. 15), 149.

Bassano, a compulsive gambler, in return for his titles; immediately after the wedding, the happy couple went their separate ways. Stoltz's quest for nobility reached its greatest heights in 1874, when she claimed to have discovered her natural father, the Marquis d'Altavilla, and persuaded him to acknowledge her. Bord found signed documents granting Stoltz the right to use the name d'Altavilla, but the Marquis's son later revealed that his father had remembered nothing about the birth, had made a highly operatic deathbed denial of paternity, and claimed to have signed the papers only because Stoltz had promised him a handsome pension which, in characteristic style, she never paid.

The stories could continue, but theory again intrudes: how can we account for all these fabrications? Her 'definitive' biographer's approach was adversarial: Bord makes much of his subject's enigmatic qualities, and crows with triumph whenever he uncovers one of her lies. Modern theory might offer a more sympathetic context for the self-mythologising drive; feminist and psychoanalytic approaches suggest several mutually compatible explanations. From the chronological perspective, it is perhaps no coincidence that most of these imagined episodes date from the 1870s: after her final appearance on stage in 1860, Stoltz seems to have turned to a new kind of role-playing, an aristocratic masquerade. But the names and their attendant stories clearly have symbolic significance as well. On one level, the absurdly extravagant string of titles suggests status sought through associations with men; but it also recalls the predilection of some women writers to 're-make' themselves through pseudonyms, to achieve power and success by assuming a disguise.³⁶ By far the most alluring apology for self-mythologising, and one specific to opera, is suggested by Wayne Koestenbaum, who imagines that the diva is driven to create a persona when she realises she is marked by the compelling voice that incomprehensibly emanates from her body:

Her confidence that she will be a diva lifts her from an obscure, immobile, difficult childhood; the vocation of diva permits her to read her life backward and see clear meanings, hints of tremendousness, where there was once shame. . . . How can a doll be a force of nature? Only if her plastic, paralyzed head conceals a masterplot.³⁷

In other words, the singer's voice, emerging almost in spite of herself, alienates her both from her body and from her previous self; elaborate fictions are required to piece her together again. Koestenbaum's frequent references to the diva's invention of herself concentrate on the extravagant and self-aggrandising gestures of the opera singer, rather than on biographical fabrications, but the idea could easily be stretched to encompass a star's reshaping of her past, to attempts to make her life (and her body) as grand as her voice. Perhaps Bord was grasping for something of this sort when he called Stoltz a victim of 'pseudomania', her autobiographical narratives dominated by identification with her *alter ego*, Léonor:

For the rest of her life she would remain 'la favorite': in a perpetual quest for titles like those of Léonor de Guzman, she would seek without respite Kings of Aragon and Fernands, dramatic situations in the gardens of Alcazar or in the cloister of Monréal. Until the end of her life, her

³⁶ Heilbrun (n. 4), 109–12 and 116–18. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar call the woman's pseudonym 'a name of power, the mark of a private christening into a second self, a rebirth into linguistic primacy'. See their *No Man's Land* (New Haven, 1988), 241; quoted in Heilbrun, 110.

³⁷ Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat* (n. 2), 90.

favourite aria was always ‘O mon Fernand’; she would hum this melody constantly to evoke her past.³⁸

As the dip back into opera plots suggests, narratives easily come unglued from attempts to ground them in broader theoretical contexts. The abstract explanations, apologies required by a subject who deliberately deceives, will always be at odds with the urge to chronicle *everything*, no matter how trivial, and to revel in the concreteness of anecdote, whether carefully authenticated or spurious. This conflict evokes once again the image of the statue – the allegorical stone figures of public art whose meanings remain abstract – but it also recalls Pygmalion’s Galatea, that vessel of male creativity who surprised her creator by springing to life. Perhaps we can grant Rosine such a chance, encourage her to come alive by giving way to her stories for a few more moments.

A Stoltz miscellany

1815: Jours de son enfance

Conflicting stories begin at birth; the early years of the career are, if anything, even more shadowy, molded into a series of glamorous operatic climaxes. Stoltz herself claimed to have been born in Spain and brought to Paris as an orphan at an early age. There she obtained the protection of the duchesse de Berri because her birthdate coincided with that of the late duc; she embarked on her musical training and convent education under the duchesse’s patronage. However, biographers generally agree that Stoltz was born as Victoire Noël into a working-class Parisian family in 1815. She may indeed have been educated in a convent but, according to Bord, it was an establishment that supplied room and board for poor girls in exchange for needlework and laundry.³⁹ Her ‘big break’ came at about age twelve: one day, while hanging out the washing, she was overheard singing by a professor of the Paris Conservatoire, Alexandre Choron. Struck by her voice and informed that her family could not afford music lessons, he arranged for her to be taught free of charge. She studied and sang regularly in Choron’s weekly concerts until she was sixteen, attracting considerable notice. Her coach and accompanist, M. Ramier, became obsessed; in addition to her vocal training, he took it upon himself to oversee her clothes, grooming and behaviour, making her his ‘chef-d’œuvre’.

Perhaps resisting this control, Stoltz left Paris around 1830, resurfacing as a singer and actress in Belgium and the Netherlands. Auguste Thurner’s sentimental account reports that Ramier chanced upon her in Lille under a different stage name, and heard her sing ‘Jours de mon enfance’ from Hérold’s *Le Pré aux clercs*. A magnificent recognition scene ensued: Ramier heard her voice, erupted into tears; when Stoltz perceived the presence of her mentor, ‘emotion paralysed her voice for an instant, as she recalled the man who had been at once father and friend to her in the “jours de son enfance”’.⁴⁰

After several years in provincial theatres, Stoltz married a M. Lescuyer, director of the Théâtre de la Monnaie in Brussels; she began to sing principal roles. In 1836 the leading

³⁸ Bord, 112–13.

³⁹ Bord, 25.

⁴⁰ Thurner, *Les Reines du chant* (Paris, 1883), 183–6.



Stoltz in male monastic drag, wilting again, supported (reluctantly?) by Duprez. The demure pose and the uplifted gaze belie the vocal force required of the soprano in this final scene of Donizetti's *La Favorite*. (From the frontispiece of the first vocal score; photograph from Richard Macnutt, Withyham, Sussex.)

tenor of the Paris Opéra, Adolphe Nourrit, sang opposite her in Halévy's *La Juive*. Brought to tears by Stoltz's declamation of Rachel's words 'Mon père, j'ai peur', just before she is thrown into a cauldron of boiling oil, Nourrit urged the Paris Opéra to offer Stoltz a contract; she made her début there the following year.⁴¹

1838: The narrow ankle, the graceful foot

Stoltz regularly indulged in masquerade of a less sensational variety: she enjoyed some of her greatest professional success playing trouser roles. Although male impersonation was a virtual requirement for mezzo-sopranos, donning the trouser apparently often caused female singers a discomfort proportionate to the thrills it afforded their audiences. John Rosselli tells of a soprano who resisted brazen audience demands that she remove her boots to reveal her legs, and later apologised: 'I was a singer, and I was not going to bring myself down to that level. The women will understand.'⁴²

Stoltz seems to have had no such reservations. Théophile Gautier, generally one of her harshest critics but a connoisseur of male impersonation, was ecstatic about her cross-dressed demeanour:

Mme. Stoltz excels in trouser roles, such as Ascanio [in *Benvenuto Cellini*] and the page Isolier [in *Le Comte Ory*], which is not to say that she is not also charming in the dress of her own sex. . . . such a beautiful voice and a lovely leg! the narrow ankle, the graceful foot, the leg as rounded and fine as that of a young Greek god! – What pleases us above all in Mme. Stoltz's performance of trouser roles is that she abstains from those equivocal simperings, those hermaphroditic ambiguities, that make the old men in the orchestra stare through their opera-glasses; she is quite thoroughly a charming boy, vigorous, petulant, spiritual, with romantic and courtly charms, a bold clown whom it would surprise no one to see wooing a pretty girl.⁴³

1878: La grande duchesse

Stoltz's marriage to Emmanuel-Charles-Louis Godoy, prince de Bassano, took place in Pamplona, probably because the region's laws allowed quick ceremonies without a licence. According to Jean Gourret's vitriolic account, the whole affair was arranged, presumably at the behest of the impecunious Bassano, by a broker in Bordeaux.⁴⁴ The wedding was an unhappy affair: the bridegroom reportedly drank ammonia the night before, a gesture that left him alive but disfigured; his guests insulted Stoltz, calling her the mere purchaser of a title.⁴⁵ Even the financial aspect went awry, since within the year Bassano ran through the 100,000 francs Stoltz had given him, and ended up a menial worker in the casino at San Sebastien. Stoltz seems to have remained the diva throughout: Bord reports that when, at the wedding party, she sang an aria from Halévy's *La Reine de Chypre* 'with incomparable brio', 'a crowd collected in the salons of the hotel and in the street outside. It became necessary to open the windows.

⁴¹ Although Nourrit's 'discovery' of Stoltz is mentioned in most accounts of her life, Louis Quicherat's comprehensive three-volume biography, *Adolphe Nourrit: sa vie . . . sa correspondance* (Paris, 1867), contains no mention of her.

⁴² Rosselli, *Singers of Italian Opera* (n. 6), 58–9.

⁴³ Quoted in Bord, 54.

⁴⁴ Gourret, *Encyclopédie des cantatrices de l'Opéra de Paris* (Paris, 1981), 78.

⁴⁵ Bord, 153–65.

Rosine Stoltz, duchesse de la Paix, had won a new victory. It was her last operatic success.⁴⁶

1880: The new novice

Late in life, Stoltz turned her energies to spiritual matters, though the enthusiasm seems to have had characteristically theatrical and manipulative dimensions. Perhaps inspired by the memory of the novice Fernand in the cloister of Montréal, she began to show marked interest in a young priest, 'M.E.', whose manner of saying Mass had particularly impressed her. She took the young man under her wing, discharging his debts and arranging elocution lessons to rid him of his Provençal accent. M.E. was initially delighted by her patronage, but when he refused to sever all ties with his humble family and friends, matters became difficult. The end of the affair is obscure, but there is no doubt that M.E. came off the worse, charged with theft, required to pay back Stoltz's money and dismissed from the priesthood.⁴⁷

1903: Dictées spirites

In addition to collecting aristocratic titles, Stoltz in retirement also wrote a pamphlet on spiritualism, *Dictées spirites*, and composed a handful of songs.⁴⁸ Not surprisingly, some mystery surrounds her death: she ended her days alone at the Hôtel Bellevue near the Opéra; according to one report, only two mourners followed her body to the grave. Although said to have died wealthy, and to have financed two funeral monuments for herself – one in Paris, one in Nice – Stoltz was buried in the cemetery for the poor at Pantin, just outside Paris.⁴⁹

Envoicing the diva

These tales (who knows how much truth there is in them?) testify to the myths that proliferated around Stoltz, some encouraged by her penchant for fabrication, others pure biographers' invention. But the stories also fill the gap between Stoltz's voice – public property that separates itself from its source in the woman – and the rest of Rosine, the private self. To quote Wayne Koestenbaum once more:

the diva, debuting, invents herself, imposes herself on an audience unaware of her magnitude until she opens her mouth.

We know she is there only because she has projected a self for us to hear.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Bord, 161–2.

⁴⁷ The episode is recounted by Bord, 173–9; he refers to newspaper accounts published in *Le Temps* (13 November 1881) and *La Gazette des tribunaux* (23 July and 13 November 1881) when M.E. was expelled from the church and legal proceedings initiated.

⁴⁸ The title of the pamphlet is given in *Le Figaro* of 31 July 1903. Several of the songs were published; copies are preserved at the Bibliothèque Nationale (Musique). In characteristic fashion, Bord (181–5) claims that the work on spiritualism is plagiarised and that Stoltz's songs are of the lowest quality, a charge partially supported by the conventional sentimentality of the ten song texts published in his appendix (223–33). However, the publication of her *Dix Mélodies* in arrangements for violin and piano, piano solo, organ, harmonium and piano four-hands attests to their popularity.

⁴⁹ *La Liberté*, 3 August 1903.

⁵⁰ Koestenbaum (n. 2), 92 and 86.



'Beautiful black hair, nicely arched eyebrows, luminous brown eyes, sometimes with a startling fixity, sometimes strangely alluring and disturbing, all were set apart from a burnished skin of pale gold; a beauty mark on the left temple gave a piquancy to the severe oval of her face; a narrow, even nose, with mobile nostrils and a wilful chin contrasted with a mouth of evenly spaced teeth, of thin, almost wicked lips, happily relieved at the corners by a childish dimple. The proudly held head was supported on a long, graceful neck, on superb shoulders. Such was Mme. Stoltz until an unimaginable age. Even when in her eighties, the décolletage of her wine-coloured velvet dress seemed more daring than foolish; she never abdicated.' (*Bord, 187–8.*)

On one level, then, this self-mythologising impulse alleviates the temptation to censure a biographical subject for obscuring truth and making our task more difficult. On another, Koestenbaum's construction of the diva's voice as a separable entity, available for the fan's multiplicitous pleasures, enfranchises fan-dom, granting it licence to 'read' opera in exhilaratingly personal terms. However, as Heather Hadlock has recently pointed out, this appropriation, this transformation of the diva into 'a fantastic echoing mirror of the fan's life', can also work to *disenfranchise* the singer, glorifying her voice

as a free-floating object divorced from the human being who creates it.⁵¹ It is perhaps better to end by reuniting Stoltz's voice with the rest of her, to listen for her echoes rather than to let her fabrications and those of her biographers have the last word.

Voice, after all, is only a little more ephemeral than other 'realities' of a life, and many descriptions of Stoltz the singer survive. They tell of power, sometimes stridency, a range of only about two octaves, very good low notes, a strong but harsh upper register. Certain common compliments and criticisms emerge: she often sang out of tune and lacked agility and technical control, but her timbre and extensive range of nuance are praised almost unanimously.⁵² All agree that her greatest strength was as an actress, that the intensity of her gestures and her tragic declamation were unequalled. In the *Revue des deux-mondes*, one of the rare attacks on her acting none the less gives a sharp sense of extremes:

Mme. Stoltz's pantomime proceeds much like her singing, by leaps and bounds: you see her pass in an instant from the delirium of a bacchante to the immobility of a marble statue. Never a glance, a gesture, an intention in her that suggests intelligence or the least concern for the character she is impersonating. From beginning to end, one perceives a gambler's need to risk everything, in both voice and acting.⁵³

One of Stoltz's champions, Eugénie Pérignon, described her dramatic ability in a more positive – and fanciful – vein:

One night a deaf man was seated beside me on the parterre at the Opéra: they were presenting [Halévy's] *Charles VI*. Because of his affliction, [my neighbour] could apprehend the plot of the opera only through facial expressions and gestures. He tried to translate these by writing on his programme the ideas he had grasped from this or that gesture made by Stoltz. When the curtain fell, he presented me with his manuscript, and I read there, word for word, the text sung by Madame Stoltz.⁵⁴

Such accounts rapidly collapse into the Romantic embroidery that dominates the biographies. Perhaps a better approach to the disembodied diva voice – as well as to the woman Rosine Stoltz – might be to examine the music written for her, music that must often have been shaped to suit her, and may sometimes have been composed with her participation. Even more so than in Italy, the staging of a new opera in Paris was intensely collaborative, involving months of rehearsal, composition and revision. Since rehearsals for the beginning of a work usually began long before the last acts were composed, the specific abilities of the singers engaged for the première – and of course the demands they made on the composer for numbers that would highlight their strengths – could be highly influential in shaping vocal style and characterisation. Perhaps the great mezzo showpiece from *La Favorite*, Léonor's 'O mon Fernand', calls for a style more demure than Stoltz's, but her voice (and her energy) are powerfully evoked in a passage Donizetti added to the final scene during the last stages of

⁵¹ Heather Hadlock, 'Peering into *The Queen's Throat*', this journal, 5 (1993), 265–75, here 274.

⁵² See, for example, *Le Corsaire*, 4 and 10 December 1840; *Le Ménestrel*, 6 December; *Le Courier des théâtres*, 8 December; *Revue et gazette musicale*, 13 December; *La France musicale*, 6 December; and *Le Moniteur des théâtres*, 5 December.

⁵³ *Le Revue des deux-mondes*, October–December 1840, 56.

⁵⁴ Pérignon, *Rosine Stoltz* (n. 13), 25.

composition, probably at Stoltz's request.⁵⁵ It bears all the features hinted at in the reviews: sharp shifts between extremes of range, extended passages in the low register and an emphasis on declamation through short, intense phrases. It requires not a pretty voice but a dramatic one:

Fer - nand, i - mi - te la clé - men - ce du ciel à qui tu t'es li -
- é. Tu vois mes pleurs et ma souf - fran - ce é - coute, é - cou-te la pi - tié

These same traits are even more evident in a substitute cabaletta appended to 'O mon Fernand', which in the autograph score bears the legend 'Air ajouté pour Mme. Stoltz'.⁵⁶ The transitional passage with which it begins is marked by dotted rhythms and short, emphatic phrases. Both this and the cabaletta have a jagged melodic contour, alternating stepwise motion with leaps from chest to head register. In short, the aria demands a declamatory style of delivery, juxtaposing extremes of register and volume, and avoiding legato lyricism or subtle shifts of dynamic or expression. It is appealing to think that this number was tailor-made for Stoltz, even that Donizetti composed it while she looked over his shoulder, perhaps imperiously, perhaps seductively, offering suggestions. Could she have been there when he wrote this passage?

quel es - poir, quel es - poir fuir tous deux cet-te cour, cet-te cour que j'ab - hor - re!

Or this?

Sous le ciel — dans cette î - le, mon Fer - nand — bien ai - mé,
nous choi - sir pour a - si - le un om - brage em - bau - mé;

⁵⁵ Rebecca Harris-Warrick, 'Historical Introduction' to *La Favorite*.

⁵⁶ This cabaletta will be included in the appendix of the forthcoming critical edition of *La Favorite*.

Or maybe this?

l'a - - - mour, l'a - - - mour, l'a - - -

- mour, l'a - mour dans nos cœurs, l'a - mour dans nos cœurs.

The collaboration of singer and composer, not uncommon in the pragmatic world of nineteenth-century opera, hints at one way to bridge the abyss between biography and theory that concerned me at the beginning of this essay. I have dealt with evidence that might reinforce the view that women, both real and fictional, are silenced by opera, that Rosine Stoltz's reality and individuality were submerged in archetypal operatic narratives. But that image of Stoltz and Donizetti collaborating on her music offers a less gloomy prospect. Perhaps we can draw on their struggles and petty negotiations – over ornaments, high notes and extra arias – as a basis for a new relationship between biographies of singers and the operas they performed. At the same time as their biographies were being shaped according to the romantic models of the characters, these singers' idiosyncrasies were exerting an equally strong force in shaping the characters of the women they impersonated. We are, that is, in their debt. We owe some of the individuality and vigour of opera's female characters to the humanising touch of the demanding, fallible, sopranos who were their 'creators'.