

Gabriela Cruz

Théophile Gautier's Spectacular Song

Théophile Gautier, the eminent critic of *La Presse* since 1836, was a consummate mélomane. He is said to have nurtured his love of dance at the Opéra and his pleasure in song at the Théâtre des Italiens. In *Comédie de la mort* (1838) he offered a candid explanation for his avoidance of grand opera. It was:

Car notre idiome, à nous, rauque et sans prosodie,	Because our idiom, hoarse and without prosody,
Fausse toute musique; et la note hardie,	makes all music false and the daring note
Contre quelque mot dur se heurtant dans son vol,	that hits the harsh word while in flight,
Brise ses ailes d'or et tombe sur le sol.	breaks its wings and falls to the ground. ¹

To Gautier, song led a troubled existence at the Académie Royale de Musique. Melody sung in French was to him “hoarse” and “tone deaf,” a damaged figure with broken wings. Grand opera endangered lyrical beauty, threatening to destroy the muse of song. The poet sought to salvage this muse; he called her the Diva, and reclaimed her for posterity.

The Diva The poet whom the *Trésor de la langue française* credits with the first use of the term in French literature actually used it sparingly, even as he wrestled it out of its classical etymology. The diva – the goddess – had long stood for an idea of classical beauty, one that preserved the most exact correspondence between art and life, beauty and truth.² Thus, for Gautier in “Le Triomphe de Pétrarque”, published in *La Comédie de la mort* (1838), “La bella, la diva, celle qui m’a su plaire [la bella, la diva, the one who knew to please me]” described Beatrice, a timeless object of contemplation and a soul not of this world.³ Gautier’s Beatrice was a diva in a near classical sense.

Yet, midway through the little volume, the term returns as a title to a much more involved consideration of beauty as a figure that proceeds from estrangement to familiarity and from marvel to natural fact. Gautier claims to have discovered the new “goddess” at the Théâtre des Italiens during a performance of Rossini’s *Moïse*. “La Diva” here is a grace that attracts the eye and the heart even as she sits silently and to the side of song. She enunciates a paradox, revealed at the very end of the poem. The paradox is that the

- ¹ Théophile Gautier: *La Diva*, in: idem: *La Comédie de la mort*, Paris 1838, pp. 153–158, here p. 154 (<http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k70716q>, accessed on 12 May 2014). All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.
- ² On the classical use of the word in Italy during the 1820s see Francesco Izzo: *Divas and Sonnets. Poetry for Female Singers in Teatri arti e letteratura*, in: *The Arts of the Prima Donna in the Long Nineteenth-Century*, ed. by Rachel Cowgill and Hilary Poriss, New York 2012, pp. 3–20, here pp. 8–10.
- ³ Théophile Gautier: *Le Triomphe de Pétrarque*, in: idem: *La Comédie de la mort*, pp. 123–133, here p. 124.

diva, a form of self-evident grace, appears to the poet in an entirely plastic form – as a figure born out of sight – yet originates from a creature of song – the singer Giulia Grisi.

Here is the tale of the diva. The poet comes to the Italiens beckoned by Antonio Tamburini and Giovanni Battista Rubini and by the lyrical pleasure of grand opera: male song. The space of the theater, immense and yet packed, offers anonymity, which he welcomes. At first Gautier is the *mélomane*. He listens attentively and nervously to Rossini's song:

J'étais là, les deux bras en croix sur la poitrine,
Pour contenir mon cœur plein d'extase divine;
Mes artères chantant avec un sourd frisson,
Mon oreille tendue et buvant chaque son,
Attentif, comme au bruit de la grêle fanfare,

Un cheval ombrageux qui palpite et s'effare [...].

There I was, arms crossed upon my chest,
Holding this heart full in divine ecstasy;
Arteries throbbing in muffled sound,
Ears stretched to drink in each song,
Attentive as a frisky stallion, who, at the sound
of a shrill fanfare,

Quivers and is frightened [...].⁴

Then the act ends, crowned by applause. The curtain falls, and the spectator, equipped with his lorgnette, takes over:

Alors je regardai; plus nette et plus exacte,
A travers le lorgnon dans mes yeux moins distraits,
Chaque tête à son tour passait avec ses traits. [...] J'aperçus une femme. Il me semble d'abord,
La loge lui formant un cadre de son bord,
Que c'était un tableau de Titien ou Giorgione,
Moins la fumée antique et moins le vernis jaune,
Car elle se tenait dans l'immobilité,
Regardant devant elle avec simplicité,
La bouche épanouie en un demi-sourire,
Et comme un livre ouvert son front se laissant lire;
Sa coiffure était basse, et ses cheveux moirés,
Descendaient vers sa tempe en deux flots séparés.
Ni plumes, ni rubans, ni gaze, ni dentelle;
Pour parure et bijoux, sa grâce naturelle;
Pas d'œillade hautaine ou de grand air vainqueur,
Rien que le repos d'âme et la bonté de cœur.

Au bout de quelque temps, la belle créature,
Se lassant d'être ainsi, prit une autre posture:
Le col un peu penché, le menton sur la main,
De façon à montrer son beau profil romain,
Son épaule et son dos aux tons chauds et vivaces,

Then, I looked: exactly and clearly
through the opera glass set on my eyes, less distracted.
Each head, and its features, passed before me. [...] I saw a woman. It seemed to me first,
as the opera box framed her figure,
that she was a painting by Titian or Giorgione,
minus the ancient smoke and yellow varnish,
since she held herself in immobility,
looking ahead with simplicity,
her mouth spread in a half-smile,
and her forehead open like a book waiting to be read.
Her hairdo was low, and her wavy hair
fell over her forehead in two separate waves.
Neither feathers, nor ribbons, nor gauze, nor lace;
for finery and jewels, her natural grace.
No haughty looks or openly victorious airs;
only the restfulness of the soul and the kindness of
the heart.

After some time, the beautiful creature,
tired of being thusly, took another pose:
the neck somewhat inclined, the chin on her hand,
so as to show her beautiful Roman profile,
Her shoulder and her back in warm and vivid tones,

4 Gautier: *La Diva*, p. 154; translation by James Q. Davies: Gautier's "Diva". *The First French Uses of the Word*, in: *The Arts of the Prima Donna*, pp. 123–146, here p. 131.

Où l'ombre avec le clair flottaient par larges masses. where the shadow and light fluctuated in large masses.
 Tout perdait son éclat, tout tombait à côté All was losing brilliance, all fell
 De cette virginal et sereine beauté; to the side of that virginal and serene beauty.
 Mon âme tout entière à cet aspect magique, My soul taken fully by this magical sight,
 Ne se souvenait plus d'écouter la musique [...]. could no longer remember to listen to the music [...].⁵

The description of beauty goes on, and a short précis of the poem could be this: the poet discovers the diva and forgets music. The manner of this discovery is crucially modern. The diva is not a person, but only an image extracted from life, perceived through the opera glass. The lenses make the object. They separate the view from life, amplify it and bring it close to the eye of the observer. The figure is clear, detailed, but it contains no warmth, no scent, none of the palpable signs of presence afforded by physical proximity. Its liveliness is an effect born out of composition, contour and color, as well as of the play of light and shadow, described in detail by the poet. The diva is the portrait, her beauty a phenomenon akin to painting. Here, the sight fabricated within the opera glass supplants nature.

Gautier translates the exactness of the image gathered in the lorgnette into similarly exact language, one that conveys proximity without intimacy, marvel without emotion. This is the poet's new modern manner, one that he described years later as constitutional to his person. He confessed in his *Portrait de Théophile Gautier par lui-même*: "J'ai toujours préféré la statue à la femme et le marbre à la chair."⁶ Already in 1838, then, the diva expresses the dehumanizing potential of poetry, in a new kind of aesthetic operation that later modernists were to find increasingly captivating.

But what of Gautier's crucial two verses, his confession that his soul, "taken entirely by this magical sight, could no longer remember to listen to the music"? The diva is the product of the poet's relationship with his lorgnette. The poet speaks of magic, the extraordinary accomplished here by the technical operation of optics. The lorgnette raises vision above hearing as an organ of aesthetic delivery. It produces an eye open to extraordinary perception, and therefore it inaugurates a mode of seeing otherwise unknown in mundane experience.

The poet, meanwhile, marvels at what he can never possess because, as he suggests in the first part of the poem, it is not even there, not in the same obvious way in which music resonates or that Giulia Grisi sits in her opera box. In this sense, "La Diva" returns the reader to the figure of the muse – the enigma – conceived as a technical

5 Gautier: *La Diva*, pp. 154–156.

6 "I have always preferred the statue to the woman and the marble to the flesh." Théophile Gautier: *Portrait de Balzac précédé du Portrait de Théophile Gautier par lui-même*, Montpellier 1994, p. 14.

offering, the product of vision shaped by the looking glass. Does the new form of enchanted sight leave behind a desire to listen, or does it prompt the reader to imagine the possibility of a similarly enchanted ear? Gautier places Giulia Grisi at the other end of the lorgnette, and this is significant. She is after all a creature of song, and her silence in the poem is the condition that beckons a kind of song awaiting consideration: the diva's song.

The Diva's Song "La Diva" is a poem with a past; it takes a step back from a previous, more radical understanding of the word as magical signifier. Gautier's first use of the term in 1833 may have been inspired, as James Davies suggests, by a short-lived habit of Parisian dilettantes of the 1820s. These lovers of song once addressed Giuditta Pasta as diva, in a doubly expressed allegiance to the singer and to Italianate culture.⁷ Yet, if this was the case, we must acknowledge the significant alteration of its sense in Gautier's first published work, *Albertus, ou l'Âme et le péché* (1833).

Beauty makes an astounding new appearance in *Albertus*, where it arises from revulsion. The legend begins in gothic fashion, with a collection of sordid images and fears drawn from known, and readily acknowledged, sources: François Rabelais, Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffmann, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Walter Scott, Victor Hugo and William Shakespeare are mentioned as inspiration. The initial marasmus of ugliness that opens *Albertus*, and includes among other grotesques a vile baby and a hideous old witch, sets the stage in which beauty emerges like an inaugural flower of evil. This beauty is new, disconnected from nature, and the result of fabrication: mysterious actions transform a repugnant shape into a gorgeous form fated to become the object of generalized fascination and affection.

Let us consider this object of art. Véronique, a Flemish witch versed in black magic, shape-shifts into a beautiful young woman. Then she seduces the townsmen of Leyden and, at the opera house, makes an impression upon the soul of the artist Albertus. Véronique is beautiful in excess. She exists as an overflow of being that communicates an existential pulse even to inanimate things. Thus, the creases of her dress are said to flutter, her silks warble, her fringes sway, her feathers move like birds, her lace's entanglements seem secretly animated. Fabulously fashionable, the enchantress has other even more breath-taking attributes. She is

Une perle d'amour! – De longs yeux en amande
Parfois d'une douceur tout-à-fait Allemande,
Parfois illuminés d'un éclair Espagnol; –
Deux beaux miroirs de jais, à vous donner l'envie

A love pearl! – Long eyes, almond-shaped,
at times most German in their tender sweetness,
at times illuminated by Spanish lightening;
Two beautiful mirrors of jet-stone,

7 See James Q. Davies: Gautier's "Diva", p. 126.

De vous y regarder pendant toute la vie;	one would like to keep on oneself for an entire life;
– Un son de voix plus doux qu'un chant de rossignol;	– A voice sweeter than the song of a nightingale;
Sontag et Malibran – dont chaque note vibre,	Sontag and Malibran – vibrating in every note,
Et dans le cœur se noue à quelqu'intime fibre [...].	And which ties itself with every intimate fiber of the heart [...]. ⁸

In 1833, Véronique's gaze and voice recalled singularities within recent memory of Parisian *mélomanie*. She brought to mind the distinct presences and voices of Henriette Sontag and Maria Malibran, lyrical rivals and partners in song in Paris in 1829. Gautier's description retains within the fabric of poetry a memory of lyrical performance cherished by his generation of *mélomanes*. The poet himself evoked this memory on more than one occasion and in later years. He noticed retrospectively that "Entrer aux Italiens, même en payant le triple de sa place, était une faveur rare et la queue réunissait souvent Meyerbeer, Halévy, Auber, Rossini; temps regrettable où l'art occupait toutes les têtes et absorbait les passions politiques!"⁹ Why Sontag and Malibran? In the 1830s they stood for opposite ideals of song, described in the *Biographie universelle et portative* of 1836, in light of classical principle. Sontag was *Vénus*, Malibran, *Minerva*, the first "a singer for the pulpit" and "more female", the second "a passionate singer" and "more male".¹⁰ Understood to be rivals, Sontag and Malibran joined forces in Rossini's *Tancredi* and *Semiramide* at the Théâtre des Italiens in 1829. Gautier himself recalled their collaboration in song as extraordinary: "quels tonnerres d'applaudissements pour toutes deux; car les deux camps finissaient par se confondre dans un enthousiasme réciproque, les partisans de Sontag battaient des mains à Malibran, les champions de Malibran criaient bis à Sontag."¹¹

8 Théophile Gautier: *Albertus, ou l'âme et le péché. Légende théologique*, Paris 1833, p. 304 (<http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k1079981>).

9 "to enter the Italiens, [to hear Sontag and Malibran] even when one paid triple for one's seat, was a rare favor [in 1829] and the line [of admission] gathered frequently Meyerbeer, Halévy, Auber, and Rossini; a time to be missed when art was on everyone's head and absorbed all political passions." Théophile Gautier: *Portraits contemporains*, Paris 1874, p. 451.

10 "L'une est la Minerve du chant, l'autre en est la Vénus. Mlle Sontag est plus femme; sa voix éolienne est ravissante: Mme Malibran est plus mâle et plus grandiose. Enfin, la première est une chanteuse de pupitre sans rivale, et l'autre une cantatrice éminemment passionnée, qui a besoin des effets de la scène pour augmenter ses émotions de toutes celles des auditeurs qui l'applaudissent." *Biographie universelle et portative des contemporains ou Dictionnaire historique des hommes vivants et des hommes morts depuis 1788 jusqu'à nos jours*, ed. by Alphonse Rabbe, Claude Augustin Vieilh de Boisjolin and Sainte-Preuve, Vol. 5, Paris 1836, p. 770.

11 "What thunderous applause to both of them; for the two parties ended by becoming one in reciprocal enthusiasm, the partisans of Sontag applauded Malibran, the champions of Malibran cried encore to Sontag." Gautier: *Portraits contemporains*, p. 451.

Beyond Gautier, the annals of Parisian *mélomanie* retained a miracle: two voices united, or better, fused into one. Later souvenirs circled over two moments of music: the adagios “Fiero incontro” from *Tancredi* and “Giorno d’orrore” from *Semiramide*. Both scores offer insight into the quality of the lyrical union contemplated by listeners of Sontag and Malibran. The adagios perform an old-fashioned form of musical accord, grounded in the *bel canto* pleasures of melodic parallelism. In both, two voices fuse into a single lyrical object. Yet the object is tarnished by significant distress. *Tancredi* and *Amenaide* are estranged lovers. *Semiramide* and *Arsace* find themselves in a still worse situation. They are mother and son, and their vocal union celebrates the bliss of familial kinship, yet they are also characters sworn to mutual vengeance. They meet only to recognize the horror to come.

The two scenes celebrate a form of endangered lyrical unity, one which Malibran and Sontag were said to perform truthfully in 1829. Their voices performed the union that their natures denied. This is the new pleasure of song Gautier retained in the impossible voice of *Véronique* – “Sontag and Malibran vibrating in every note.” The poet endowed the diva with a new predatory quality. He noted that each of its vibrating notes attaches itself to the intimate fibers of the heart. He also found her liveliness enigmatic. *Véronique* is the product of human craft, of spells and magic recipes that deliver the “beau idéal” to mundane existence. Should the artist not recognize the falseness of her grace? The problem in *Albertus* is that he does not, but instead falls prey to her charm. The painter, consumed by a desire for beauty, will trade his soul for the knowledge of this beauty. He quickly attains this, after a brief moment of bliss standing before an irreprehensible naked form. Later, in bed with the diva, he makes a shocking discovery; he realizes what the reader already knows: that *Véronique*’s overwhelming and all-absorbing beauty is a mirage. The instance of discovery, described so graphically that Gautier felt the need to apologize in advance for it to his gentler readers, is worthy of attention:

La lampe gresilla [sic]. – Dans le fond de l’alcôve
Passa comme l’éclair, un jour sanglant et fauve;
Ce ne fut qu’un instant, mais Albertus put voir
Véronique, la peau d’ardents sillons marbrée,
Pâle comme une morte, et si défigurée
Que le frisson le prit; – puis tout redevint noir. –

La sorcière colla sa bouche sur la bouche
Du jeune cavalier, et de nouveau la couche
Sous des élans d’amour en gémissant pia.
– Minuit sonna. – Le timbre au bruit sourd de la grêle
Qui cinglait les carreaux, joignit son fausset grêle,

Le hibou du donjon cria.–

The lamp flickered – At the foot of the bed,
like lightening, a bloody and wild day passed by.
It was but an instant, but Albertus could see
Véronique, her skin marked by ardent furrows,
pale as death, and so disfigured
he was overtaken by a shiver. Then everything
became dark.

The sorceress stuck her mouth to the mouth
Of the young gentleman, and anew the bed
Beneath the impetus of love, gave with a whimper.
Midnight rang. It sounded with the dull tone
of hail hitting the windowpanes, and joining
this falsetto hail,
the owl cried on the tower.

Tout à coup, sous ses doigts, ô prodige à confondre	All of a sudden – oh prodigy to confound
La plus haute raison! Albertus sentit fondre	The highest reason! – Albertus felt
La gorge de sa belle, et s'en aller les chairs.	the throat of his beauty wane and her flesh
	disappear.
– Le prisme était brisé. – Ce n'était plus la femme	– The prisms were broken – She was no longer the
	woman
Que tout Leyde adorait, mais une vieille infâme [...].	that all Leyden adored, but an infamous crone [...]. ¹²

First, the lamp flickers. The room is plunged into darkness and Albertus sees for the first time. In a flash he becomes aware that violence underpins his pleasure. Then, prisms break and the illusion is undone. Disillusionment settles with a vengeance, affixing a horrible price to the subject's abandonment to grace. An odious old hag is revealed surrounded by the paraphernalia of the devil. Finally, Albertus falls down under. At the end of the poem he exists in a universe of pure cruelty and senseless violence, in which a violin, played with virtuosic gusto, reigns. This is the symphonic obverse to his previous state of grace.

Phantasmagoria Véronique, a phantasmagoria, is beauty tied to the machine. This diva projects into the future a new idea of song, no longer pure incarnated expression, but not yet a self-contained, autonomous form. Gautier's terse description of the diva's exceptional vocality – “a sweet voice, Sontag and Malibran in every note” – retains traces of subjective singularities still within memory in 1833, and yet it also begins to retreat from the grain of nature into a register of smooth sameness. The diva brings into the domain of voice the same symptom of fabrication that Theodor Adorno famously detected in the instrumental music of the Viennese classics.¹³

This diva anticipates (but does not fulfill) the *sensus* of modernity. It foreshadows an understanding of art as a regime of spectacle, wherein a totalizing appearance comes to delineate perception and conscript feeling. In light of Marxist analysis, the diva is “reality that proceeds from illusion” and therefore an object that is commodity-like. She is what Walter Benjamin called a “*Blendwerk*, a deceptive image designed to dazzle [...], in which

¹² Gautier: *Albertus*, pp. 353 f.

¹³ “Age-old elements of bourgeois practice come once more to the surface. Anyone fully able to grasp why Haydn doubles the violins with the flute in piano may well get an intuitive glimpse into why thousands of years ago, men gave up eating uncooked grain and began to bake bread, or why they started to smooth and polish their tools. Works of art owe their existence to the division of labour in society, the separation of physical and mental labour. At the same time, they have their own roots in existence; their medium is not pure mind, but the mind that enters into reality, and by virtue of such movement, is able to maintain the unit of what is divided.” Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno: *In Search of Wagner*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone, London 1991, p. 83.

the exchange value or value form hides the use value.”¹⁴ Gorgeous Véronique is Albertus’ “wish-image”, a charming appearance that conceals unseemly labor, and that is also eminently tradable. Her worth is determined by a simple value of exchange: one diva for one soul. The diva speaks to us about the pleasures of spectacle, and outlines a framework for experience that breaks with the aesthetic code we most often ascribe to the art of grand opera: artistic verisimilitude. In this, she accomplishes significant work. She comments upon the status of lyrical expression in operatic modernity. After Véronique, the machined ghost of Sontag and Malibran, song is never more truthful and more precious than when it registers its own undoing and acknowledges its falseness. When, in short, it declares itself to be a mirage.

14 Rolf Tiedemann: *Dialectics at a Standstill*, in: Walter Benjamin: *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Cambridge/London 1999, pp. 929–954, here p. 938.

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Band 9



Dieses Buch ist im März 2018 in erster Auflage in der Edition Argus in Schliengen/Markgräflerland erschienen. Gestaltet und gesetzt wurde es im Verlag aus der *Seria* und der *SeriaSans*, die von Martin Majoor im Jahre 2000 gezeichnet wurden. Gedruckt wurde es auf *Alster*, einem holzfreien, säurefreien, chlorfreien und alterungsbeständigen Werkdruckpapier der Firma Geese in Hamburg. Ebenfalls aus Hamburg, von Igepa, stammt das Vorsatzpapier *Caribic cherry. Rives Tradition*, ein Recyclingpapier mit leichter Filznarbung, das für den Bezug des Umschlags verwendet wurde, stellt die Papierfabrik Arjo Wiggins in Issy-les-Moulineaux bei Paris her. Das Kapitalband mit rot-schwarzer Raupe lieferte die Firma Dr. Günther Kast aus Sonthofen im Oberallgäu, die auf technische Gewebe und Spezialfasererzeugnisse spezialisiert ist. Gedruckt und gebunden wurde das Buch von der Firma Bookstation im bayerischen Anzing. Im Internet finden Sie Informationen über das gesamte Verlagsprogramm unter www.editionargus.de. Zum Forschungsschwerpunkt Interpretation der Hochschule der Künste Bern finden Sie Informationen unter www.hkb.bfh.ch/interpretation und www.hkb-interpretation.ch. Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über www.dnb.de abrufbar.

© Edition Argus, Schliengen 2018. Printed in Germany ISBN 978-3-931264-89-5