

**Opera in a New Age: Mass Media, the “Popular,” and Opera, 1900-1960**

**by**

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## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated with gratefulness to my parents, Michael Douglas Mitchell (1951-2014) and Betty Ann Mitchell.

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## CHAPTER I

### Introduction: Opera in the Mass Media

On December 30, 2006, the bright colors of large puppets swirled through the air onstage at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City, as well as on approximately 150 movie screens throughout the United States, Canada, Europe, and Japan. Around 30,000 people simultaneously watched acclaimed director Julie Taymor's popular and innovative production of Mozart's *The Magic Flute*.<sup>1</sup> Taymor's production had debuted the previous year to sold-out audiences and positive press notices. This performance was different, however, because it marked an important watershed in the history of the Metropolitan Opera. It inaugurated what would become a surprisingly successful series of live satellite broadcasts of Met performances into movie theaters. This innovation was only one of many steps that the Met's new General Manager, Peter Gelb, has taken to broaden his company's reach and enlarge its audiences.<sup>2</sup> In subsequent seasons the broadcasts have

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<sup>1</sup> "'Metropolitan Opera: Live in HD' Makes its Debut (Press release)," The Metropolitan Opera (December 30, 2006), <http://www.metoperafamily.org/metopera/news/press/detail.aspx?id=282>.

<sup>2</sup> In his inaugural season at the Met, Peter Gelb created a satellite radio station that plays both live and historical Met opera broadcasts twenty-four hours a day. He also began offering on-demand access to old Met broadcasts and telecasts, and periodic broadcasts (usually of opening night performances) now stream free over the Internet on the Metropolitan Opera's website. In addition, Gelb lowered the prices of the cheapest seats at the Met (while raising the prices of the most expensive seats) and has begun offering a selected number of highly popular twenty-dollar orchestra level seats for many performances. He has also made a point of recruiting movie and Broadway directors to work on Met opera productions, among other popular innovations. "Five Metropolitan Opera High-Definition Transmissions from the 2007-08 Season to

expanded in terms of the number of operas transmitted and the quantity of theaters worldwide showing the performances. In general, reviews have been positive and tickets at most of the participating venues are often sold out months in advance. One British reviewer, however, denigrated these innovations, arguing: “[I]n our politically correct times, an opera company—surely synonymous with elitism and privilege—dare not pretend to be a civilising force; it must find a niche in the market place of popular culture, amid the babble, glitz and dreck.”<sup>3</sup>

Although many people, such as this reviewer, perceive opera companies as “synonymous with elitism and privilege,” others see opera as increasingly popular and accessible. This populist trend can be seen in a variety of recent developments, from the immense popularity of the Three Tenors phenomenon during the 1990s to Gelb’s current out-reach efforts at the Met, the United States’ most prominent and influential opera company. Perhaps more significantly, the popularity of the Three Tenors spurred the creation of what some consider a new genre of music, commonly referred to as “popera.” Within this genre singers as diverse as Aretha Franklin and Michael Bolton have recorded operatic arias, but its most successful proponent has been the extraordinarily popular Andrea Bocelli. Opera bands or singing groups, such as Opera Babes and Il Divo, have also formed in more recent years.<sup>4</sup>

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be Released on DVD (Press release),” The Metropolitan Opera (July 18, 2007), <http://www.metoperafamily.org/metopera/news/press/detail.aspx?id=351>; “Met Opera Radio,” Sirius Satellite Radio, <http://www.siriusxm.com/metropolitanopera>; “Met Opera On Demand,” The Metropolitan Opera, <http://www.metoperafamily.org/ondemand/index.aspx?sn=watch>; “Listen Live,” The Metropolitan Opera, <http://www.metoperafamily.org/stream.aspx>.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Conrad, “Lessons from America,” *New Statesman* (January 22, 2007), <http://www.newstatesman.com/200701220032>.

<sup>4</sup> Jim Collins, ed., introduction to *High-Pop: Making Culture into Popular Entertainment* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002). For additional arguments on recent and current cultural convergences, also see Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); Herbert J. Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture:*

What all these musicians hold in common is their reliance upon new media technologies to spread their own fame and operatic music, more generally. “Popera” stars do not typically sing in opera houses; they perform on television shows, recordings, the Internet, and in live concerts that almost always also include explicitly “popular” selections. Even professional opera singers who first made their names in opera houses, such as Plácido Domingo, Renée Fleming, and the late Luciano Pavarotti, have reached far larger audiences through their television performances and recordings than on the operatic stage. The Three Tenors phenomenon, for example, with Pavarotti, Domingo, and José Carreras, sprang directly out of a highly successful worldwide television broadcast.<sup>5</sup> Although many observers mark these changes as a new trend, this is not the first time that art forms normally considered part of “high culture,” such as opera, have redefined the conventional boundaries of high and low, art and pop. Recent events in the opera world are not signs of the genre’s sell-out to the “babble, glitz and dreck” of popular culture. Rather, opera has in certain ways been a part of popular culture throughout its entire, two hundred year history in the United States.<sup>6</sup>

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*An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 10; Michael Kammen, *American Culture, American Tastes: Social Change and the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 100.

<sup>5</sup> The first Three Tenors concert in 1990 was supposed to be a one-time only event. However, after the extraordinary response to the television broadcast and the subsequent CD and cassette releases of the concert, the Three Tenors decided formally to join together as a singing group and repeat their success in tours around the world throughout the 1990s and early 2000s.

<sup>6</sup> Like Lawrence Levine, I am primarily defining popular culture here as “culture that is *popular*,” that is, culture that is widely used, well known, and easily accessible. I will mostly use the term “popular culture” in order to emphasize the truly “popular” aspect of this culture and to draw connections with earlier time periods before the rise of mass culture. I will, however, occasionally use the term “mass culture” to refer to the mass production, distribution, and consumption of cultural products that began to arise in the nineteenth century and came to fruition in the twentieth. Richard Ohmann lists the key attributes of this mass culture:

1. Voluntary experiences
2. Produced by a relatively small number of specialists
3. For millions across the nation to share
4. In similar or identical form
5. Either simultaneously, or nearly so
6. With dependable frequency
7. Mass culture shapes habitual audiences

In this dissertation, I argue that opera substantially interacted with and was a surprisingly ubiquitous part of the mass media and American popular culture, in ways that had larger effects on the meanings and functions of both opera and the media. Opera and the mass media worked together in complicated and symbiotic ways, creating and reaching new publics and perpetuating earlier operatic traditions and aspects of vernacular culture, especially in the early to mid-twentieth century. Cultural arbiters increasingly signified opera as a part of specifically “high” culture by the late nineteenth century. Opera as celebrated and set-apart “art” continued to function as an unseen, pervasive, and formative trope in a wide variety of cultural products, even as it became increasingly popularized in reality. Different groups of peoples, including diverse producers, performers, and consumers, appropriated and utilized the “highbrow” discourse surrounding opera to their benefit. The ways in which they deployed (or countered) this discourse in many instances brought them money, fame, prestige, power,

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8. Around common needs or interests

9. And it is made for profit

Definitions and periodizations of popular and/or mass culture, however, inevitably provide problems and provoke disagreements, in part because, as James Cook points out, “qualitative labels such as ‘popular’ and ‘mass’ inevitably refer to modes of production that are historically mobile and often vary from medium to medium.” Lawrence W. Levine, “The Folklore of Industrial Society: Popular Culture and Its Audiences,” *American Historical Review*, Vol. 97, No. 5 (Dec 1992): 1373; Richard Ohmann, *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets, and Class at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Verso, 1996), 14-16; James W. Cook, “The Return of the Culture Industry,” in *The Cultural Turn in U.S. History: Past, Present, Future*, eds. James W. Cook, Lawrence B. Glickman, and Michael O’Malley (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); 295. Beyond literal cultural artifacts and the structures that make them available, popular culture as I am using it also represents a theoretical locus, wherein the culture industry and different sub-groups of the public constantly contest, appropriate, and transform the meanings and effects of culture, which are never fully stable or fixed. See Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘the Popular,’” in *People’s History and Socialist Theory*, ed. R. Samuel (London: Routledge, 1981), 443, 449, 453. In addition to “popular” and “mass” culture, I will frequently discuss the “mass media,” the industrialized mechanisms of large-scale, wide ranging distribution and access. The mass media can facilitate making culture popular, but not everything that goes through the mass media is in itself popular. Many disparate media are part of the mass media. My use of the term is not meant to gloss over the differences of these media, but rather to highlight how they operated in a similar and often synergistic fashion in certain broad processes and transformations within the larger capitalist system.

and cultural capital, as it also spread opera more broadly throughout American culture.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, the important role of opera in the early mass media during this time is often overlooked and unrecognized.<sup>8</sup>

This blind spot primarily had its origins in two intellectual movements that helped to shape the popular, institutional, and academic discourses surrounding opera: first, the efforts of late-nineteenth-century elites to sacralize “high” culture as uplifting, edifying, and distinct from the culture of the masses; and second, the so-called “mass culture debates” of the Cold War era that often posited the idea of a “pure” art (or “historical *avant-garde*”) unsullied by capitalism. Both conceptualizations of culture have helped to clarify, but also to obscure aspects of opera’s history in the United States.<sup>9</sup>

In the early to mid-nineteenth century, live performances frequently combined and blurred cultural forms that later became differentiated as “high” and “low” in public

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<sup>7</sup> My concept of “cultural capital” as a form of symbolic capital that can be exchanged for other forms of capital comes from Pierre Bourdieu. Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John Richardson (New York: Greenwood), 241-258; Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge, Polity, 1991), 229-231; Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge, 1984), 128-129.

<sup>8</sup> Opera, as I am using it, encompasses not only complete works as performed in grand opera houses, but also elements of individual operas (plots, arias, ensembles, melodies, musical themes, and leitmotifs), the operatic singing style, and the larger operatic tradition. I also view it significantly in terms of its meanings and significations.

<sup>9</sup> For more on these mid- to late nineteenth century intellectual and institutional changes with critics like Matthew Arnold and John Sullivan Dwight and builders/planners like Frederick Law Olmsted in influential positions, see: Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 172-242; Kammen, *American Culture, American Tastes*; Michael Broyles, *Music of the Highest Class: Elitism and Populism in Antebellum Boston* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture*; Collins, *High-Pop*. In regard to the second of these intellectual movements, the mid-twentieth century mass culture debates, one of the key contemporary texts is the 1957 volume, *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America*, a collection of essays by such influential thinkers as Theodor Adorno, Clement Greenberg, Dwight MacDonal, José Ortega y Gasset, Paul Lazarsfeld, Gilbert Seldes, Leo Lowenthal, and Marshall McLuhan. This volume serves as both a description of the mass culture debates, as well as part of the debates themselves. C. Wright Mills was another important voice that weighed in on similar topics at the time, especially in the essay, “The Cultural Apparatus.” C. Wright Mills, “The Cultural Apparatus,” in *Power, Politics, and People: The Collected Essays of C. Wright Mills* (Oxford University Press, 1963), 405-422. For more recent scholarly analyses of these mass culture debates and some major issues that arose from them, see: Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture and Postmodernism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986) and Michael Denning, “The End of Mass Culture,” *International Labor and Working-Class History*, No. 37 (Spring 1990), 4-18, reprinted in Michael Denning, *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds* (New York: Verso, 2004), 97-120.

discourse.<sup>10</sup> Shakespeare's lines appeared in minstrel shows and performers sometimes treated operatic arias like popular ditties. Especially before the Civil War, opera and other forms of cultural expression later understood as "elite" found an audience across a wide spectrum of the population, including members of varying classes, backgrounds, and ethnicities. All types of contemporaneous performance culture frequently shared the same venues and entertained the same audiences. This had been true since the colonial era, when impresarios tried to appeal to broad audiences with mixed programs that included English ballad operas, which reused popular song melodies set to new, often satirical and irreverent, words. Once foreign-language opera debuted in the United States in the early nineteenth century, theaters frequently presented opera alongside a wide variety of other entertainments, including minstrel acts, light musical comedies, and performances by strong men, jugglers, animals, tightrope artists, and so forth. Impresarios and singers showed little respect for the inviolability of opera; neither did they confine operas to a single category of performance. They often combined parts of different operas together or even melded them with popular tunes, just as popular songs were freely rearranged. Opera audiences were sometimes highly unruly, and some performers, especially in minstrel shows, added operatic parodies to their repertoires.<sup>11</sup> At this time, cultural forms now considered "highbrow" were thoroughly intertwined with the popular.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> This is not to argue, however, that no class divisions existed in the opera world at this time. As Levine explains, "Opera was an art form that was *simultaneously* popular and elite." Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 85.

<sup>11</sup> Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 85, 90-92, 95; Richard Crawford, *An Introduction to America's Music* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 64-65, 114-116; Jim Collins, ed., *High-Pop: Making Culture into Popular Entertainment* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 4. Popular minstrel show performer, Thomas Dartmouth Rice, for example, created his own burlesque opera, *Othello*, in 1844, which he set in New York City's streets and slave markets. By having his characters use the common cross-racial street dialect of New York, he helped make his "opera," a parody of Rossini's *Otello* (1816), relevant to working-class audiences of the day. W. T. Lhamon, Jr., *Jump Jim Crow: Lost Plays, Lyrics, and Street Prose of the First Atlantic Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 14, 24-25, 66, 70-77.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, this intermeshing of cultural forms began to break down and more distinct divisions between supposed “elite” and “popular” cultures solidified. These divisions placed different cultural forms, genres, performance venues, and publics into disparate categories. Scholars disagree on some of the specifics of when and how this bifurcation in the cultural discourse occurred, indicating that it was a multifaceted process that varied based on location and individual factors.<sup>13</sup> In

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For information on opera in minstrel shows, see: Renee Lapp Norris, “Opera and the Mainstreaming of Blackface Minstrelsy,” *Journal of the Society for American Music* (2007), 1:341-365.

<sup>12</sup> In *Horrible Prettiness* Robert Allen argues that even though diverse audiences experienced different forms of culture that were mixed freely together, cultural contestation occurred between groups of people within the same entertainment spaces. He believes that there is no reason to suppose that audiences divided by social, cultural, political, and economic differences would perceive the same meanings in the same performances. He also notes that especially in smaller cities theaters often had to draw in a wide variety of people for each performance in order to survive economically. Inhabitants of less populated areas typically had fewer entertainment choices and thus may have been forced to see types of entertainment that they did not prefer merely to be able to see a performance at all. Although these points suggest that it would be wrong to assume that everybody shared a singular culture at that time, it reaffirms that a certain level of cultural intermixing was occurring (even if performances likely had varying meanings for different people in the same audiences). At the same time, Allen also argues that nineteenth-century society understood specific performance venues to represent varying class and status levels, indicating that different classes did not necessarily enjoy all of the same entertainments in the same spaces. Some venues did cater to certain classes of people and tastes throughout the nineteenth century. Robert Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 296, n. 9. In *Raising Cain*, W. T. Lhamon discusses the class divisions that already existed in performance culture in the early nineteenth century. In some ways, the working class had already separated out some forms of culture and certain performance venues as their own prior to the sacralization of high culture by elites. Culture was not as unified before the late nineteenth century as Levine, Crawford, and Collins indicate. Nonetheless, cultural blurring of different cultural forms and sharing of venues were quite common, even if some specific performances, venues, or genres appealed specifically to certain groups of Americans more than others. W. T. Lhamon, *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> Scholars have presented different time frames and key events for understanding this process of nineteenth-century stratification. Bruce McConachie, for example, contends that by the 1850s, opera was an elite preserve in New York City. McConachie suggests that from the time of the introduction of foreign language opera in New York in the 1820s to the middle of the century, New York City elites claimed opera as their own by creating separate theaters for opera, instituting dress codes and codes of behavior during performances, and demanding that only less accessible foreign language opera was authentic opera. Bruce A. McConachie, “New York Operagoing, 1825-1850: Creating an Elite Social Ritual,” *American Music*, 6 (Summer 1988): 181-93. Using Boston as his case study, Michael Broyles likewise asserts that the sacralization of culture happened much earlier than commonly supposed. Examining what he calls the division between “cultivated” and “vernacular” traditions in American music, Broyles argues that sacralization arose in Boston in the early 1800s when some musicians and commentators began to conceive of music as a positive force for good and thus more than mere entertainment. In the early years of the century, hymnody reformers, in particular, saw that music could be used to further religious worship. Later in the 1830s and 1840s, music critics like John Sullivan Dwight began to see symphonic music also as a morally uplifting force. It was around this time, Broyles indicates, that the socio-economic elite began to

*Highbrow/Lowbrow* Lawrence Levine argues that the division took place in the latter half of the nineteenth century, at least in part because of the desire of many urban elites to institute hierarchies that set aside certain types of culture as their own privileged domains.<sup>14</sup> These social elites, who were typically well-educated members of the “best families,” began to establish rules and boundaries around certain art forms. These new limitations served to police conduct, especially in regard to the unruly or excessively participatory behavior of audiences.<sup>15</sup> One of the key changes that these elites instituted during the Gilded Age is what Levine terms the “sacralization of culture.” During this time of rapid industrialization and conspicuous consumption, elites sacralized culture by endowing certain cultural forms like opera with an almost sacred and inviolate status. To

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support local symphonic orchestras, in part to help establish their cultural hegemony in Boston. Broyles specifically differentiates between two sets of related but separate tensions: conceptualizations of music in religious terms (moral uplift vs. entertainment) and class-based terms (elite music vs. popular music). In sacralizing music, different groups of people often had separate goals. Broyles shows that the elites who categorized and divided culture cannot all be placed in the same ideological box. Michael Broyles, *Music of the Highest Class*. Karen Ahlquist presents another alternative viewpoint. In her estimation, when Italian opera first arrived in New York in the 1820s, most people under the sway of the predominant ethos of the times, Jacksonian Democracy, rejected the new art form as aristocratic and esoteric. Her evidence combined with that of other scholars suggest that even at the beginning of its history in the United States, foreign-language opera had a complicated and perhaps contradictory position in American society. Karen Ahlquist, *Democracy at the Opera: Music, Theater, and Culture in New York City, 1815-60* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997). Although disagreements exist on the timeline, details, and causes of culture’s sacralization, most scholars nonetheless concur that over the course of the nineteenth century “high” and “popular” culture became more divided and distinct. However, the process of sacralization was never complete and the timeline of its development was muddled and fluctuating.

<sup>14</sup> This occurred concomitantly with the emergence of a distinct bourgeois class in New York City. Sven Beckert defines some of the chief characteristics of this new bourgeoisie and distinguishes it from the lower middle class, or petit bourgeoisie. The lower middle class consisted of artisans, shopkeepers, and other independent propertied workers. In contrast, the bourgeoisie included more powerful big city merchants, financiers, and industrialists who had stable incomes and diverse investments. Members of this coalescing class had more free time, consumed conspicuously, and created exclusive social institutions for themselves. It is this “bourgeoisie” that primarily promoted the sacralization of opera and other cultural forms. Sven Beckert, “Propertied of a Different Kind,” in Burton J. Bledstein and Robert D. Johnson, eds., *The Middling Sorts* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Sven Beckert, *The Monied Metropolis: New York City and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie, 1850-1896* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>15</sup> Ralph Locke takes umbrage at the idea that operagoers are merely interested in exerting social control and promoting class differentiation. Instead, he asserts that any evaluation of opera audiences and the ways in which opera changed in form, location, and style over time needs to consider the aesthetic value of opera and opera fan’s appreciation of this artistic aspect. Ralph P. Locke, “Music Lovers, Patrons, and the ‘Sacralization’ of Culture in America,” *19th-Century Music*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Autumn, 1993), 149-173.



support their beliefs about opera and other forms of “high culture,” certain self-proclaimed intellectual and social elites treated these cultural forms as intrinsically and timelessly superior to and separated from popular culture.<sup>16</sup> Matthew Arnold, who defined culture as “the study and pursuit of perfection,” was a key figure in providing the theoretical framework for this sacralization. In the wake of his influential writings, critics of the day began to divide culture into the “highbrow” and “lowbrow.”<sup>17</sup>

After elevating certain forms of culture such as opera in this way, elites used these cultural forms more and more to confer social distinction. In this larger context, John Storey argues that opera “was actively appropriated from its popular audience by elite social groups determined to situate it as the crowning glory of their culture, i.e., so-called ‘high culture.’ In short, opera was transformed from *entertainment* enjoyed by the many into *Culture* to be appreciated by the few.”<sup>18</sup> Ignoring much of the earlier history of opera in the United States, those who sacralized opera promoted the genre as inherently highbrow. Instead of viewing opera as a leisure pursuit for a broad spectrum of Americans, many people began to conceive of opera as esoteric and “civilizing.” In accord with this discursive shift, many of those who belonged to wealthy, socially elite circles began to fund the building of institutions of high art, such as grand opera houses, where they could more easily elevate opera as a rarefied art. These institutions, typically

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<sup>16</sup> This usage of “elites” includes not only powerful and wealthy “high society” patrons, but also many scholars and members of the music world who helped to promote the theoretical and institutional aspects of sacralization.

<sup>17</sup> Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 223-224.

<sup>18</sup> John Storey, “‘Expecting Rain’: Opera as Popular Culture?” in *High-Pop: Making Culture into Popular Entertainment*, ed. Jim Collins, 32-55 (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 37.

built for only one art form each, further served to separate different cultural forms and genres from each other.<sup>19</sup>

One of the most prestigious of the institutions of sacralized art was the big city opera house. The Metropolitan Opera was the most significant opera house built in the United States during the late nineteenth century. A group of wealthy box holders directly ran the Met for decades, controlling the design, programming, pricing, and exclusiveness of the house.<sup>20</sup> These elite managers not only held sway over the Met but also influenced opera in the rest of the country. Annual tours across North America helped to solidify the Met's position as the nation's foremost opera house. These tours provided many Americans, especially in small to medium-sized urban areas, with their only access to staged opera productions. Opera companies in other large American cities, such as Philadelphia, Boston, and Chicago, often resembled the Met in their social stratification and functions. Nonetheless, they never so overwhelmingly dominated the opera scene in the United States as the Met did up through the mid-twentieth century, when increasing numbers of small regional opera companies sprang up across the nation.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*; Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 227, 230. Levine elaborates on his view of the sacralization of high cultural forms: "They were in effect 'rescued' from the marketplace, and therefore from the mixed audience and from the presence of other cultural genres; they were removed from the pressures of everyday economic and social life, and placed, significantly, in concert halls, opera houses, and museums that often resembled temples, to be perused, enjoyed and protected by the initiated—those who had the inclination, the leisure, and the knowledge to appreciate them." Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 101-2, 184.

<sup>20</sup> John Dizikes, *Opera in America: A Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 214-8.

<sup>21</sup> Martin Mayer, *The Met: One Hundred Years of Grand Opera* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 174, 339-340. This sacralization within prestigious intuitions had its counterpart in the symphonic world with the founding of permanent orchestras during this same time frame. The New York Philharmonic became the first major symphony orchestra in the United States in 1842. The second half of the century saw the birth of larger numbers of symphony orchestras, including Leopold Damrosch's New York Symphony (1878), Henry Lee Higginson's Boston Symphony Orchestra (1881), and Theodore Thomas' Chicago Symphony Orchestra (1891). In order to try to remove the Boston Symphony Orchestra from the marketplace, Higginson personally financed the orchestra. Once in control, he eliminated mixed musical genres from the orchestra's performances. Thomas spoke of the great classical works as an "uplifting influence" that only "cultivated persons" could fully understand. Both Higginson and Thomas believed that only limited numbers of people could appreciate great classical music and thus it should not be watered

New institutions of “high culture” were not the only structural cause of the growing divisions between the elite and popular. Another reason was the rise and increasing dominance of national industries devoted specifically to producing popular culture for the masses. These new culture industries helped to solidify the “low other” (of both audiences and entertainment) against which “high culture” now defined and separated itself.<sup>22</sup> One of the first of these entertainment industries was the blackface minstrel show, which rose to immense popularity in the decades leading up to the Civil War. Minstrelsy’s use of operatic parodies was far different from the sacralized art form of the new grand opera houses. It provided an antithesis of the entertainment and audiences desired by the elites. Unlike the Met, which catered to the upper class, minstrel shows were geared specifically toward the working class.

The lingering effects of opera’s sacralization and the concurrent discourses about opera’s essence continued as powerful forces into the twentieth century—indeed, they still echo into the present. However, they were not the only cultural and intellectual movements to pigeonhole what opera’s position in society should be. The twentieth-century mass culture debates among intellectuals, artists, and other theorists also dealt with the categorization and divisions of high and popular culture. These debates constituted a contemporary response to the “massification” of culture and ultimately altered scholarly discourses about the stratification of culture. Depression-era intellectuals, critics, and theorists began to make mass culture itself an object of intense

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down or popularized. Joseph Horowitz, *Understanding Toscanini* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 28-34; Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 115, 123-124, 126-127.

<sup>22</sup> Stallybrass and White explain that the “low other” is despised and devalued by the dominant social order, but still an object of the desire and fascination of that order. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 5.

analysis and debate. In the early to mid-twentieth century, many commentators, especially modernist critics and Marxist intellectuals, saw the cultural and technological transformations of their day as deleterious to both art and society. Andreas Huyssen explains that modernism was by nature exclusionary and expressly rejected mass culture as legitimate. Many modernists, he notes, exhibited fear of “contamination” with the popular.<sup>23</sup> Key to one major strand of modernist thought was the idea that an insurgent modern art should be kept separate from and unsullied by the culture of the masses.<sup>24</sup> In 1948, Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset succinctly laid out this argument: “All modern art is unpopular, and it is so not accidentally and by chance, but essentially and by fate.” He asserted that modern art divides the public into “a specially gifted minority,” who understand it, and “the shapeless mass of the many,” who cannot. Thus, one purpose of art was to aid this “gifted minority” in recognizing themselves as part of an elite, while also helping them learn to hold “their own against the many.”<sup>25</sup>

American modernists often responded in similar ways to mass culture. In his 1939 essay, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” the modernist art critic Clement Greenberg theorized that with the advent of universal literacy, newly urbanized masses created a market for a new type of culture. In response to this new demand, capitalist interests devised a new type of culture, which Greenberg termed “kitsch” and conceived of as an *ersatz* culture for those who were ignorant of the values of “genuine culture.” In Greenberg’s conception, kitsch presented the easiest aspects of art through repeated formulas, instead of presenting art in all of its complexity (thus, not making it authentic art at all). In his

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<sup>23</sup> Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*, vii.

<sup>24</sup> Not all modernists, however, wanted to separate their art from the masses. Bauhaus artists and architects, for example, wanted to use their new aesthetic forms to uplift and reform the masses.

<sup>25</sup> José Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art: And Other Essays on Art, Culture, and Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968, 1948), 4-7.

essay “The Modernist Painter,” Greenberg suggested that from the middle of the nineteenth century, many artists actively sought ways to escape from the rapidly spreading, emergent industries of a new and more simplified mass culture. Greenberg argued that the only way in which art could accomplish this separation was by recognizing the need to “purify” itself from the culture industry’s influence. In his view, then, one of modernism’s primary functions was to resist the broader historical pressures to reduce “art” to the level of the commercialized popular.<sup>26</sup>

Frankfurt School scholar Theodor Adorno also believed in the existence of pure, “autonomous art” as an ideal to fight for during the 1930s and 1940s. Like many modernists, this neo-Marxist thinker criticized mass culture as fake and inferior and especially decried its domination by the capitalistic culture industry. In his 1938 essay, “On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening,” Adorno vehemently rejected the idea that radio would democratize great works of art by making them cheaply available to the masses. Instead of a liberating force, Adorno saw the technological reproduction of high culture as just another means for the culture industry to manipulate people.<sup>27</sup> Not only did Adorno view the effects of radio on classical music as harmful to

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<sup>26</sup> Clement Greenberg, “The Modernist Painter,” *Art and Literature* 4 (1965): 74.

<sup>27</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, “On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening,” *Essays on Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 295-6. When the mass media produces and distributes art, Adorno argued, anything that is negative in art is turned into a positive, with the artwork itself rendered episodic and listening atomized. The end result of this false manipulation, in his view, was not genuine art, but rather a fetishization of culture. He asserted that once music is fetishized through technological reproduction, “Music, instead of being ‘lived’ by the listener, is actually transformed into property.” The “attributes of the ethereal and sublime,” which society typically accorded to music, were responsible for obscuring this commodification. The assumptions here, in short, were that music could be “lived” and consumed outside the contexts of its medium or venue, and that music, in its original form, was not necessarily already a piece of commercial property. In this essay, Adorno was building on Karl Marx’s conception of “commodity fetishism.” In *Das Kapital* Marx used the term “commodity fetish” to describe the delusion that the “exchange-value” of a product is intrinsic to the commodity itself. This, he argued, ignores the labor value needed to create that product and unnaturally separates the producers from the consumers of the same product. Thus, the fetishization of a commodity is based upon false perceptions of its actual value. *Ibid.*; Karl Marx, *Das Kapital* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 1867, 2012), 37-46.

its listeners, he believed that technological reproduction had a negative impact on the art form itself. In “The Radio Symphony,” Adorno argued that radio was not a neutral medium that merely reproduces original pieces of music in new contexts. In particular, he focused on what he called the “hear-stripe” of radio broadcasting—the constant background noise that especially plagued early, low quality broadcasts. He also believed that the dynamics of broadcasted music were inferior to live performances and that because of these differences in quality, radio trivialized the “particular intensity and concentration” that was uniquely required in symphonic music. As a bastardization of true art, music on the radio could only serve to distract its listeners from real-life concerns rather than edify or educate them. “Under present radio auspices,” Adorno asserted, music “serves to keep listeners from criticizing social realities; in short, it has a soporific effect upon social consciousness.”<sup>28</sup>

At the core of these mid-century critiques lay the over-riding idea that “art” could (and should) be separated from the “popular,” the “commercial,” or the “masses” themselves. If one digs into the shifting histories of high and popular culture that

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<sup>28</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, “A Social Critique of Radio Music,” *Essays on Music*, 212-3. In his later years, Adorno modified his attitudes on technological reproduction of classical music significantly, no longer viewing all forms of “popularization” in the same negative light. In his 1969 essay, “Opera and the Long-Playing Record,” Adorno suggested that reproductions, in this case the LP record, could be superior to live performances of opera. In his opinion, “phony hoopla” marred live performances, both in regard to highly stylized, outdated traditional performances and modernized stagings that detracted from opera’s “substance.” He also hated the shallow bourgeois pretentiousness of operatic festivals, which he saw as a corrosive influence on serious listening. Imposing his own personal interpretations on what authentic opera is, he preferred recordings of opera to these “fake,” “anachronistic” live performances because new improvements in recording technology allowed listeners to focus solely on a full-length opera’s unedited music, which he believed to be the “true object of opera.” Theodor W. Adorno, “Opera and the Long-Playing Record,” *Essays on Music*, 283-286. In his 1957 essay, “New Music, Interpretation, Audience,” he argued that modern music should utilize the radio as a means of turning the culture industry against itself. In his opinion, new music always contains criticism of the public, which Adorno saw as a positive effect that could help undermine the culture industry. For this reason, he asserted, “Snobbishness toward the mass media is idiotic.” Because of modern music’s critical, esoteric nature and general lack of public support, he believed that “radio alone can provide a shelter for new music, separate as it is from the market.” Although he did not elaborate here on what he meant by “separate from the market,” this statement indicates that he viewed modern music as a disparate entity from the popular, commercialized music that he disdained. Adorno, “New Music, Interpretation, Audience,” *Sound Figures*, 37-39.

preceded these debates, however, it quickly becomes clear that the very notion of a “pure” and autonomous art, unsullied by capitalism and mass consumption, was merely a retroactive fiction used for critical effect. Ironically, Huyssen suggests that it was only when music moved into the marketplace during the nineteenth century that it could even aspire to autonomy since prior to that time it was financed and controlled by the church, the state, and wealthy patrons.<sup>29</sup> In his essay “The End of Mass Culture,” Michael Denning has likewise suggested that “autonomous art” was itself a discursive construct produced by the mid-century mass culture debates—as opposed to an actually existing category of culture under late capitalism. In his opinion, no culture outside of mass culture exists; therefore, no autonomous art outside of commodification and capitalism can exist either.<sup>30</sup>

Although aiming for entirely different goals, both economic elites and radical intellectuals helped to create and perpetuate a theoretical bifurcation of culture. Because many twentieth-century intellectuals promoted the idea that an “autonomous” art existed apart from the popular, many academic and artistic figures came to believe in an actual strict separation of different cultural forms, typically with mass culture as the most debased or exploitative form. This made popular culture in the mass media seem less worthy of study and devoid of worth. The belief in “art” as separate from and superior to popular culture had important ramifications for opera.<sup>31</sup> Because of these thinkers’ influence in shaping the very terms of debate on “the popular” into the second half of the twentieth century, these viewpoints served to obscure a fuller and more nuanced

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<sup>29</sup> Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*, 17.

<sup>30</sup> Michael Denning, “The End of Mass Culture.”

<sup>31</sup> Adorno, in particular, viewed traditional opera in a different light from modern music, as discussed above. See Adorno, *Sound Figures*.

understanding of opera's development in the United States; in particular, they made it difficult to perceive fully the extent, significance, and unpredictability of opera's interaction with various forms of twentieth-century mass media.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, a large degree of continuity existed between the earlier open and diverse and later sacralized opera worlds of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Levine believed that sacralization began in the late nineteenth century and continued through the mid-twentieth century. He thought that by the late twentieth century, when he was writing, more diversity and boundary crossing was returning to American culture.<sup>32</sup> I hope to show that opera and mass media technologies, especially the movies, worked together in a mutually influential, multifaceted manner to create something hybridized and new, which was in certain ways popular and accessible as well as "high" and limiting. Even at the height of late nineteenth-century sacralization, vibrant ethnic theaters still performed operas for local, working-class audiences, and the prevalence of sheet music provided access to this type of music beyond the opera house. Although big city opera houses, especially the Met, were the temples of sacralization, the small town opera houses that proliferated across the United States in the late nineteenth century had a more varied civic function than just or even primarily showing operas. They often provided a venue for a variety of performances, community functions, lectures, dances, and even sports. More informal than larger, sacralized opera houses, small town opera houses were cheap enough for most people in the community to attend and were often paired in the same buildings with office space, restaurants, and even

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<sup>32</sup> For a similar timeline, but with more focus on sacralization in the twentieth century, see: Storey, "Expecting Rain': Opera as Popular Culture?" 33-37, 44.



hotels. The late nineteenth and early twentieth-century explosion in new media technologies greatly built on and expanded this already existing commercialization and democratization of opera. These media, in particular, would have a fundamental impact on opera's position in society.<sup>33</sup>

Stuart Hall argues that the culture industry, concomitantly with local vernacular groups and subcultures, constantly reworks and reinvents what it represents. The “popular” itself, he asserts, is the contested category and commercial terrain on which such transformations occur. These transformations have both elements of control and domination. And yet, the academic “study of popular culture,” Hall argues, “keeps shifting between these two, quite unacceptable, poles: pure ‘autonomy’ or total encapsulation.” He suggests that the reality lies somewhere in between.<sup>34</sup> Opera has always performed many functions at the same time: democratizing, sacralizing, consolidating, diversifying. It has been simultaneously popular and elite, conservative and transgressive. These multivalent meanings were due in large part to opera's success within and influence on the mass media that defined the bulk of the twentieth century—the movies, phonograph, radio, and television.

Modernist thinkers decried the culture industry's influence on art, while ignoring what the pervasiveness of consumer capitalism meant even for modern art. In their belief in a theoretical but unproven pure “art” that would and should only appeal to the few, certain modernists like Ortega y Gasset took a similar attitude toward culture as the social

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<sup>33</sup> Dizikes, *Opera in America*, 269, 272-3, 277; Mark Clague, “The Industrial Evolution of the Arts: Chicago's Auditorium Theater Building (1889-) as Cultural Machine,” *Opera Quarterly* (2008): 1-2, 4-6, 7. In addition, not even all big city opera houses were fully sacralized by powerful elites. The Auditorium Theater, where many operas were performed, in Chicago was built with both accessibility and uplift in mind. Its founders proclaimed “music for the people” and low prices as a key goal, showing that opera could be concurrently elitist and still democratic. *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘the Popular,’” 443, 447.

elites who wanted to sacralize it.<sup>35</sup> Both groups searched for, in Greenberg's words, "genuine culture," untarnished by the masses.<sup>36</sup> Many modernists and cultural Marxists strongly opposed the control of the social elites, but by focusing on technological imperfections like hear-strips and by making the assumption that all commodified culture is inherently and monolithically exploitative and manipulative, some scholars like Adorno in his early writings failed to see some of the larger societal effects of mass media forms.<sup>37</sup> What such thinkers missed in their analyses was the effect that media technologies and commercialization had on "high" culture's sacralization. Even as elites tried to control artistic forms like opera, new media provided cultural spaces that allowed for contestation. The creators of the mass media made a broad variety of cultural products available to the average American, bypassing the limited performance spaces the elites dominated. These media producers' reworking of opera also often made elite ideas of the

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<sup>35</sup> Compared to Ortega y Gasset, Adorno was less concerned about the purity of art. He was more disturbed by the decline of a historical *avant-garde* that (he argued) maintained a critical distance from the capitalist system. He called the *avant-garde* the "adversary" of the culture industry and argued that, unlike the culture industry, members of the *avant-garde* "serve truth" in their work. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1947, 2002), 71, 101-102.

<sup>36</sup> Victorian thinker, Matthew Arnold, for example, stressed the personal interiority of experiencing true culture. In his words, culture was "above all, an inward operation" and thus separated from the masses. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 164. I do not mean to gloss over differences between various thinkers here. I am trying to illustrate how—even coming from disparate backgrounds and having extremely divergent goals—these various groups created an atmosphere that discursively bifurcated culture and failed to give a balanced picture of the effects of the mass media.

<sup>37</sup> Some of his misconceptions may be due to the ahistorical nature of his analyses of mass culture. Both Huyssen and Cook see the necessity for any modern conceptions of the culture industry to be placed in the proper historical context. Andreas Huyssen, "Introduction to Adorno," *New German Critique*, No. 6 (Autumn 1975): 3; Cook, "The Return of the Culture Industry," 291-317. In his belief in top-down capitalistic domination, Adorno also failed to acknowledge evidence of audience agency or awareness. He saw the culture industry as manipulative and audiences as the manipulated, but scholars like Cook and Bailey show that audiences were often quite savvy and "in" on the "manipulation." The understanding that P. T. Barnum's hoaxes were indeed fakes was part of the entertainment and attraction of his exhibits, as Cook illustrates. Baily asserts that a certain type of "knowingness" existed between audiences and performers in British music halls. These performers, working within the culture industry, used innuendos and double entendres that their working-class audiences would understand subtly to attack the social elites. The audiences' knowingness was not a sign of their mindless exploitation but of their transgressiveness, even within the culture industry. Cook, *The Arts of Deception*; Peter Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City* (Cambridge University Press, 2003).

boundaries and sacredness of art irrelevant. I intend to illustrate some of the ways in which the existence of mass media forms provided new opportunities to subvert elite conceptions and control over opera—sometimes as a direct goal of people within the production process, but at other times as an unexpected or peripheral consequence.

All of this said, the broader effects of opera's incorporation into mass culture were not purely or fully democratizing. The initial spread of the mass media coincided with and contributed to the decline in small town opera houses, which had helped to bring communities together and involve individuals in their local culture. The inscribed messages in these new cultural products, like opera movies, could also present ambivalent or conflicting messages that were not necessarily liberating. Some cultural producers, including Adolph Zukor and Jesse Lasky, used opera to consolidate their position within the culture industry. The concentration of industry control in only a few hands in effect served to limit other, more diverse producers and performers. This "closing" of the industry helped to exclude racial minorities in particular. Even when prominent African-American opera singers like Paul Robeson appeared as performers in movies, for example, they were restricted in what they sang and how they were portrayed. This was also true in general of minority characters, regardless of the performer. Even more extremely, homosexuals, an important part of the operatic community, were absent as characters in Hollywood's early opera films and on opera related radio and television shows.

The new hybridization of opera in the mass media paired elements of the "high" and "low" in such ways as to undermine the whole logic of such separations. Opera films, in particular, show the dialectical interplay between aspects of culture that were often

ideologically figured disparate and antithetical. Clement Greenberg dismissed such hybridized culture as “kitsch,” because he considered it formulaic and inauthentic. In his important study of dime novels, Michael Denning shows how even the most formulaic, mass-produced cultural forms could still articulate elements of working-class values and play a crucial role in non-elite culture.<sup>38</sup> Although certain themes and ideas reappear in them at the level of genre convention, operatic films were far less formulaic than dime novels. Because of their complexity and expense, the production of movies required the efforts of large groups of people in differing capacities, including financiers, producers, directors, writers, actors, editors, cinematographers, set and costume designers, and composers. These cultural producers often had myriad and diverse goals for their films. Many people, especially studio bosses, considered financial concerns to be supreme. The monetary focus of these cultural producers pushed opera in new and different directions.

In addition, many creators of operatic films and other media had larger aims than mere financial remuneration. Some loved opera and believed in the quality of their product. Others utilized opera for its cultural capital. Both early Hollywood and the nascent recording industry suffered from a reputation for poor quality; some producers were able to transfer opera’s prestige to these young industries through their opera movies and records, as well as in accompanying publicity. Opera singers could also draw on the cultural capital of their art form and use it for greater status, leeway, and control. What Greenberg saw as “kitsch” was in reality a complex and multivalent convergence of the historical processes of democratization, sacralization, industrialization, and technological development, which had a variety of positive and negative and sometimes contradictory results.

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<sup>38</sup> Denning, *Mechanic Accents*.

These changes wrought by the mass media (as a fundamental part of mass culture) in the twentieth century had their bases in earlier developments from the previous century. Mass culture initially emerged at a time of crisis in American industry. The end of the nineteenth century was a time of intense economic growth, spurred in part by the expanding national infrastructure, including railroads, telegraph, telephone, and electric power. Consumption, however, was not keeping track with capital growth.

Overproduction and speculation sparked several financial downturns, and conflicts between workers and their employers were common and sometimes violent. Too much competition caused profits to fall and made going into business very risky. Big business' solution to these problems was to gain more control over the exigencies of the market, sometimes through monopolies. In another major solution, industry moved to control consumption as well as production. Marketing became a fundamental aspect of this strategy. Through use of market research and segmentation, businessmen became more knowledgeable in their expectations regarding consumers. Through advertising, they targeted workers as the new consumer. At the same time, they pushed for greater rationalization and collaboration, pushing smaller companies out of business.

The largely "hands off" approach of the U.S. government also aided big business in its quest to overcome these crises. Compared to the European model, the early American communications industries that led to the modern mass media were subject to far fewer restrictions and were more market driven. Their distribution networks reached larger stretches of territory and in a more decentralized manner. The American government's strict enforcement of copyrights and patents by the late nineteenth century

and its constitutional protection of free speech also promoted and protected these industries and their products. In addition, court cases allowed for the formation of the modern corporation, which was more stable and involved less risk in its functioning.<sup>39</sup>

These corporations utilized new avenues of widespread distribution and access, increasing standardization, and innovative marketing techniques. One of the key heralds of the emerging mass culture of the late nineteenth century was the national magazine. Some periodicals existed during the colonial era, but they were few in number and could not be considered national in scope. By the 1830s, newspapers transformed from small-town weeklies to high-circulation, sometimes countrywide publications, due in part to a drastic decrease in price that made the new “penny press” extremely popular. Papers began sending out newsboys to sell copies in the streets, instead of relying solely on subscribers, and journalism became professionalized. The formation of the Associated Press in 1848 and the common syndication of news articles by the 1880s provided a nationalized form of the news. Like newspapers, national magazines developed in the second half of the century. They especially exploded in popularity in the 1890s, after a steep drop in price that served greatly to increase their circulation. These new national magazines pioneered the successful business practice of relying primarily on advertising, rather than sales for profit. Mass wholesaling developed in the mid- to late nineteenth century, along with mail order catalogues that sold the same products across the country. New companies began to use the mechanisms of the booming press to advertise their products nationwide. They created easily recognizable national brands that they now aggressively marketed, often in attractive display ads. Brand names and national

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<sup>39</sup> Ohmann, *Selling Culture*, 23, 48-60, 56-60; Starr, *The Creation of the Media*, 2-17.

advertising (often via proliferating ad agencies) became the industry standard by the 1890s.<sup>40</sup>

By the second half of the nineteenth century, the expansion of inexpensive printed media allowed for an explosion of cheap, mass produced “pulp fiction” paperback books. Such “dime novels” were heavily standardized and formulaic. They reutilized successful characters and plot structures over and over, while their authors often remained anonymous. Once the American News Company developed a monopoly over their distribution, the production of dime novels became a national industry. This proliferation of printed media also served to promote new types of journalism that reported on the lives of celebrities. By the end of the century, “yellow” journalism ensured that the news could be a form of entertainment. This shifting focus of the print media eventually led to the creation of movie fan magazines in the 1910s, which eventually helped spread the fame not only of specific movies but also of many opera singers (like Geraldine Farrar, Nelson Eddy and Jeanette MacDonald, and Mario Lanza) who appeared in the medium. P. T. Barnum became a celebrity himself in the press because of how he drew attention to other people and objects, not so much, as in the past, for what he himself accomplished.<sup>41</sup> He was one of many who promoted one-time spectacles and gathered together mass audiences in the nineteenth century. This type of celebrity-focused or sporting event did

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<sup>40</sup> Ohmann, *Selling Culture*, vii, 16, 18-28, 36-37, 66-71, 82-83, 94.

<sup>41</sup> Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986, 1997), 500. Another of these new showmen celebrities was Buffalo Bill Cody, who toured nationally and internationally with his Wild West Shows. For more, see: Joy S. Kasson, *Buffalo Bill's Wild West: Celebrity, Memory, and Popular History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000).

not yet constitute a form of mass culture, however, because its publics were not dispersed and national in scope, but it did serve as an early precursor.<sup>42</sup>

The showman Barnum was also heavily involved in the circus business, another major culture industry of the nineteenth century that was an antecedent of mass culture. Circuses and later, vaudeville helped to develop a national and standardized performance centered entertainment industry. Circuses utilized the new continental railroad network in order to travel fast and far across the nation. Circus owners also used market researchers to determine where best to perform. Before the circus came to town, press agents would use publicity to stir up local excitement. As a circus arrived, it followed a standardized pattern that allowed it to assemble and disassemble its tents and other gear rapidly. Coming from another important performance oriented culture industry, vaudeville players did not have to deal with creating their own stages. By the end of the century, vaudeville circuits developed that allowed all types of variety performers to move seamlessly from one theater to the next. These circuits provided diverse entertainment across the country for lower prices than the so-called “legitimate” theater or staged opera.

These culture industries, with their scale, nationwide reach, standardization and rationalization, marketing, and affordability, combined with technological developments to lay the groundwork for the emergence of the visual and aural mass media of the twentieth century. The Keith-Albee vaudeville circuit, the first truly widespread circuit of theaters, led to greater standardization and nationalization of the entertainment industry. The movies especially built on this innovation and growth, and many vaudeville theaters eventually became motion picture houses. Businessmen in the nascent movie and music

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<sup>42</sup> Barnum’s American Museum also provided a stark contrast to the fine art museums of Gilded Age social elites. Instead of sculptures and paintings, Barnum displayed human curiosities, exotic animals, and assorted hoaxes.



industries relied heavily on the new types of mass advertising in the print press to sell their products and make them knowable to the public at large. By the 1920s, radio in particular followed the pattern forged by magazines. Radio programs broadcast for free over the airwaves, but made money from advertisements. A couple of decades later television began to follow the earlier examples of magazines and radio. By the turn of the twentieth century, many of the structural conditions that would allow the mass media to make opera more visible and accessible were already in place and grew to full fruition over the succeeding decades.<sup>43</sup>

How did new media technologies, building on these earlier transformations, change the existing cultural landscape and the larger values attached to opera? A key answer involves the related questions of opera's production, consumption, and distribution.<sup>44</sup> Most obviously, perhaps, the development of the movies, phonograph, radio, and television, made opera more accessible to Americans outside of the restrictions

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<sup>43</sup> For detailed examinations of the development of these culture industries, see: Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (New York: Verso, 1987); Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1999); Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Verso, 1990); James W. Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P.T. Barnum* (University of Chicago Press, 1981); Eric Lott, *Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); W. T. Lhamon, *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop*; W. T. Lhamon, Jr., *Jump Jim Crow: Lost Plays, Lyrics, and Street Prose of the First Atlantic Popular Culture*; Annemarie Bean, James V. Hatch, and Brooks McNamara, *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1996); Janet M. Davis, *The Circus Age: Culture and Society under the American Big Top* (University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Robert M. Lewis, *From Traveling Show to Vaudeville: Theatrical Spectacle in America, 1830-1910* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007); Robert W. Snyder, *The Voice of the City: Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Alison Kibbler, *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*; Ohmann, *Selling Culture*, 18-19, 21, 361, 363.

<sup>44</sup> I examine the structural aspects of opera within mass media culture industries in this dissertation, along with related textual and contextual issues. The sense of the term "cultural industry" that I am using comes primarily from Cook's re-conceptualization of Adorno's original idea. Cook, "The Return of the Culture Industry," 291-300, 303, 308-309.

of the opera house. By reaching bigger and more diverse audiences, opera in the media was at least partially removed from the social and class hierarchies common in the opera world. New media, which were part of the larger historical processes of industrialization and commercialization, helped to remake opera, especially in regard to its image, class associations, and accessibility.

Before the advent of the mass media, opera was less commercialized than it would become.<sup>45</sup> One key feature of opera's sacralization was its partial removal from the marketplace, as wealthy patrons subsidized and endowed artistic institutions, keeping them running regardless of ticket sales. Because social elites largely paid for and controlled the Metropolitan Opera, commercial concerns were less paramount for the house, as was the case in many other high culture institutions in the United States. This changed significantly, however, when opera began to appear as explicit products of the culture industry and big advertising, and because commercial aims were now more significant, the format and usage of opera changed too in hopes of appealing to broader audiences. Opera related movies, radio programs, records, and television shows relied on the dictates of the market in ways that elite opera houses had not.

The reproduction of opera through mass media also affected the presentation of the music itself. Radio shows sometimes broadcast operas in their original form, but the radio also frequently modified, excerpted, and condensed operas. Like nineteenth-century theater owners, the producers of these new media rarely considered an opera's score inviolable. Although some lengthy scenes from operas did appear in movies and moviemakers (especially in Europe) released an occasional film based entirely on a full opera, in general movies included only the arias or well-known ensembles from operas.

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<sup>45</sup> Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 101-102, 184.

Similarly, radio and television programs often excerpted the main “hits” from various popular operas, although some complete operas were also broadcast on the radio, including weekly Saturday afternoon performances from the Metropolitan Opera. Until the advent of the long-playing record (LP) in 1948, the music industry could only release very short musical numbers on disk. Full opera recordings, which were of necessity spread out over several records and prohibitively expensive, were quite rare during the 78-rpm era. Because of this restriction, music producers often had to cut the size of operatic pieces or choose only those numbers that would fit on one side (or on occasion both sides) of a single record. Although it was common for conductors sometimes to cut a cabaletta or piece of recitative out of performances in opera houses, live operas remained far more intact than the operas engraved onto early shellac discs.<sup>46</sup>

In addition, media technologies changed the ways in which opera was distributed. Instead of local opera houses, with at most a couple thousand seats, or small touring troupes, going from town to town, opera was now distributed in a much wider, more rapid manner. And whereas an opera troupe might take an entire summer to tour selected cities throughout the country, the movies, phonograph, radio, and television simultaneously brought opera to thousands of cities nationwide. This transformation in opera’s distribution gave much larger numbers of people the opportunity to see and hear opera. For example, Lary May records that from 1930 to 1940, movie attendance in the

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<sup>46</sup> These sort of modifications were often due to the specific “path of development” of a new medium. Paul Starr argues that with each nascent communication technology, constitutive choices early in its industrial development determined to a significant extent the path of its later development. The “entrenchment” of early design and structural decisions made the limitations of each new medium eventually seem “natural and inevitable,” when they were not. Paul Starr, *The Creation of the Media* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 2-19. The constitutive choice to make radio advertising dependent, for example, made lengthy, uninterrupted broadcasts of entire opera’s less common than that of single arias with commercial breaks between musical numbers.

United States rose from 37.6 to 54.6 million viewers per week.<sup>47</sup> During this decade of expanding movie attendance, opera films proliferated as they did at no other time.

Nineteen-thirty six alone could boast forty-five opera oriented movies.<sup>48</sup> During the 1930s, opera related movies often made up a significant proportion of all movies released each year. Because of the numbers of movies that dealt with opera, it would have been difficult for regular moviegoers to avoid opera all together. Millions of viewers could now watch opera on the big screen in their own local neighborhoods. In contrast, less than 4,000 people could attend each performance at the Metropolitan Opera, one of the world's largest opera houses, and anyone outside of New York City who wanted to attend a Met performance either had to travel to Manhattan or wait for the Met's summer tour to reach their city (provided they were fortunate to live on the limited tour route).

While many scholars focus on opera houses and touring troupes and the key singers and conductors working within them, operatic films, which played in thousands of movie theaters across the nation, reached far larger audiences than any live productions ever could.<sup>49</sup> Major opera houses with their class divisions and social

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<sup>47</sup> Lary May, *The Big Tomorrow* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 122.

<sup>48</sup> Richard Fawkes, *Opera on Film* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 2000), 98.

<sup>49</sup> For examples of such scholars, see: Dizikes, *Opera in America*; Broyles, *Music of the Highest Class*; Mayer, *The Met*; Horowitz, *Understanding Toscanini*; Ronald L. Davis, *A History of Music in American Life, Volume II: The Gilded Years, 1865-1920* (Huntington, NY: Robert Krieger Publishing Co., 1980); Roger Parker, *The Oxford Illustrated History of Opera* (Oxford University Press, 1994); Katherine K. Preston, *Opera on the Road: Traveling Opera Troupes in the United States, 1825-60* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Irving Kolodin, *The Metropolitan Opera, 1883-1935* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936); John Louis DiGaetani and Josef P. Sirefman, ed., *Opera and the Golden West: The Past, Present, and Future of Opera in the U.S.A.* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1994). Even more scholars focus on the composition and content of the operas themselves, largely ignoring the venues in which they were viewed. For some select well-known examples, see: Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi, Vol. 1-3* (Oxford University Press, 1973, 1992); Arthur Groos and Roger Parker, ed., *Reading Opera* (Princeton University Press, 1988); Joseph Kerman, *Opera as Drama* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1956, 1988). *A Short History of Opera* barely mentions operatic movies over the course of

distinctions were paramount in establishing the genre's prestige and influence that later groups were able to appropriate; however, and surprisingly even during the silent era in Hollywood, the nation's numerous and widespread movie theaters were more essential venues for viewing and hearing opera for the average American. The inexpensiveness of movie tickets coupled with a significant working-class and other non-elite presence are tangible markers that distinguish movie theaters from most traditional operatic venues. Even more drastically, the radio, phonograph, and television were used primarily in people's homes, entirely bypassing public venues and their social aspects.

Any analysis that attempts to understand these varying consequences should be viewed in the larger historical context of opera in the mass media. Each medium had its own pattern of development and main figures and works, although many commonalities cut across different media, including the frequent and extensive use of opera in all of them. Foremost among the new technologies that altered the way opera functioned in American society was the motion picture, a medium that opera in turn powerfully shaped in its early development. Unlike radio and television, the motion picture was a dominant vehicle for opera across the entire twentieth century, and unlike the phonograph and radio it could represent both the visual and aural aspects of the art form.<sup>50</sup> The Metropolitan Opera's current efforts with live satellite broadcasts hardly represent the first time that opera has appeared in the nation's movie theaters. From its inception, many filmmakers

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its 1030 pages. Donald Jay Grout and Hermine Weigel Williams, *A Short History of Opera* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003, 4<sup>th</sup> ed.).

<sup>50</sup> It is outside the scope of this dissertation to provide detailed analysis of all aspects of opera in each of these media. Instead, I am choosing to focus primarily on the movies and then to draw relevant parallels with other media where appropriate in order to make larger points about the key effects and meanings of opera in the mass media.

viewed the motion picture as an ideal format for opera performances. Their goal of creating filmed operas helped to catalyze early aspirations of melding audio and video into something new.

Thomas Edison, one of the inventors of the moving picture camera, wrote in 1893: “My intention is to have such a happy combination of photography and electricity that a man can sit in his own parlour, and see depicted upon a curtain the forms of the players in opera upon a distant stage and hear the voices of the singers.”<sup>51</sup> Two years later during the depression that followed the Panic of 1893, he asserted that his motion picture camera and the phonograph, another of his inventions, would bring much greater availability and affordability to opera. “Before many years we will have grand opera in every little village at 10 cents a head,” he claimed.<sup>52</sup> Although movie depictions of operatic performances never became a primary goal of the industry, a golden age of opera in Hollywood movies existed from the silent era through the middle part of the twentieth century. Most analyses of the movies elide opera’s important place in the history of the medium.<sup>53</sup> Yet opera has left an important imprint on the motion picture since its beginnings and has been tied up in the key shifts in the early years of film production.

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<sup>51</sup> Quoted in Paul Fryer, *The Opera Singer and the Silent Film* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., Inc., 2005), 44.

<sup>52</sup> “The Great Inventor’s Latest Marvel,” *Montreal Daily Star* (April, 10 1895): 3, quoted in Rick Altman, *Silent Film Sound* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 157.

<sup>53</sup> Examples include: Lary May, *The Big Tomorrow*; Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994); Steven Ross, *Working Class Hollywood: Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); Douglas Gomery, *Movie History: A Survey* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1991); Douglas Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System: A History* (London: British Film Institute, 2005); Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907* (History of the American Cinema, Vol. 1) (University of California Press, 1994); Eileen Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema, 1907-1915* (History of the American Cinema, Vol. 2) (University of California Press, 1994); Richard Koszarski, *An Evening’s Entertainment: The Age of Silent Feature Picture, 1915-1928* (History of the American Cinema, Vol. 3) (University of California Press, 1994); Tino Balio, *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939* (History of the American Cinema) (University of California Press, 1996); Thomas Schatz, *Boom and Bust: American Cinema in the 1940s* (History of the American Cinema) (University of

During its earliest years, the medium borrowed heavily from already existing entertainment forms, including opera, theater, and vaudeville. In 1894 Edison released a thirty second long film clip of a woman dancing in Spanish styled clothes entitled “Carmencita,” which he likely based on Bizet’s opera *Carmen*. At the turn of the century, Edison made a fifteen minute adaptation of Flotow’s *Martha* with the intension that live singers would accompany showings of the film. In order to achieve his dream of matching sound and image on the screen, Edison experimented with synchronizing phonograph records of operatic music with short films. All together filmmakers produced at least eighty operatic sound films using synchronized phonograph records during the first decade of the twentieth century. In 1904 Edison’s film company released a version of Wagner’s *Parsifal* directed by Edwin S. Porter, best known for directing the popular movie, *The Great Train Robbery*, the year before. Edison and Porter first made *Parsifal* with accompanying phonograph records, but after Wagner’s estate sued them, they instead provided theaters with synchronized musical instructions on what to play during each scene. The company’s publicity for the movie stressed “we have gone to considerable trouble to specify the exact music from the opera.” Edison continued to make additional operatic films, including *La Bohème* and *Aïda*, all with the expectation that live singers would accompany the movies. Most filmmakers who made operatic movies early in the twentieth century envisioned live singers accompanying their works.

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California Press, 1999); Peter Lev, *The Fifties: Transforming the Screen, 1950-1959* (History of the American Cinema) (University of California Press, 2006); Roy Pickard, *The Hollywood Studios* (London: F. Muller, 1978).

In total, the film industry produced twenty-seven movies that were adaptations of operas or contained scenes from operas in 1910 alone.<sup>54</sup>

Even movies that had ostensibly nothing to do with opera often had operatic music for accompaniment. In 1909 Edison Pictures released the first cue sheets to be used during the playing of the studio's films. Each cue sheet listed different song choices or moods of music for every scene in a movie. Cue sheets for non-operatic movies often listed operatic pieces. One example of this is Edison's 1910 adaptation of Mary Shelley's novel, *Frankenstein*, which contained several numbers from *Der Freischütz* and one each from *The Bohemian Girl* and *Lohengrin*. Other film companies soon followed Edison's lead in creating musical cue sheets. The year 1909 also saw the release of the first of many film music handbooks, which contained songs of various moods and genres, including opera, for pianists, organists, and symphonies to play live in movie theaters. Many studios also released full scores, occasionally by operatic composers, to be performed with their most important big budget movies. These scores often used opera either as a stylistic inspiration or in direct quotations. For example, the score for the 1928 comedy, *The Circus*, starring Charlie Chaplin, included music from the operas *I Pagliacci* and *Carmen*. Notably, Wagner heavily influenced the score for D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*.<sup>55</sup>

In the summer of 1915, while World War I raged in Europe, Met soprano Geraldine Farrar made three movies for Jesse Lasky's young Hollywood film company: *Carmen*, *Maria Rosa*, and *Temptation*, all of which were directed by Cecil B. DeMille.

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<sup>54</sup> Fawkes, *Opera on Film*, 10-14; James Wierzbicki, *Film Music: A History* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 37, 43, 50-52.

<sup>55</sup> Wierzbicki, *Film Music*, 36-41, 52-57; Marcia J. Citron, *Opera on Screen* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 28.



Pedro de Cordoba, who began his career on the stage as an operatic bass, appeared with Farrar in each of these movies, as well as several other films from the silent and sound eras, including Alfred Hitchcock's *Saboteur* (1942). These films, especially *Carmen* (which was accompanied by live performances of Bizet's music), sparked a series of other movies starring opera singers in the mid-1910s. Farrar herself starred in fifteen films all together. The most famous opera singers to follow Farrar to Hollywood were tenor Enrico Caruso, who made two films for Jesse Lasky, and soprano Mary Garden, who starred in two films for Samuel Goldwyn, including an adaptation of Massenet's opera, *Thaïs*. Italian soprano Lina Cavallieri, touted in the press as the "most beautiful woman in the world," also appeared in films for both Lasky and Goldwyn, in addition to movies she made in Italy and France.<sup>56</sup> Cavallieri's husband, French tenor Lucien Muratore, made a brief appearance in her 1918 movie, *A Woman of Impulse*, directed by Edward José, who also directed Caruso's films for Lasky. In addition to encouraging other opera singers to attempt film careers, Farrar's *Carmen* inspired a two-reel comedic parody, *A Burlesque on Carmen*, with Charlie Chaplin, the number one box-office draw in the nation at the time, and Edna Purvance. Theda Bara also appeared as Carmen in a film that was released around the same time as Farrar's version and was intended to rival it.

Other key opera singers to perform in silent movies include Beatriz Michelena, the star of a 1915 adaptation of *Mignon*, Fedor Chaliapin, Anna Case, Fritzi Scheff, Marguerita Sylva, Michael Bohnen, Ganna Walska, and Bertha Kalich, who appeared in three films for Fox in 1916. Hope Hampton was one of the rare opera singers to make movies during both the silent and sound eras. Notably, she sang Musetta's waltz in *The*

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<sup>56</sup> Fryer, *The Opera Singer and the Silent Film*, 4.

*Road to Reno* in 1938. Marguerite Namara was another who successfully made this transition. She appeared with Rudolph Valentino in 1920, as well as in a sound adaptation of *Carmen* in 1931 called *Gypsy Blood*. By the late 1910s, as the influenza epidemic swept the country and scared audiences from movie theaters, films starring opera singers fell in popularity. Professional movie actors, who were reliable box-office attractions, appeared in operatic adaptations more frequently than opera singers. Among these were Mary Pickford in *Madame Butterfly* (1915), Ivor Novello and stage legend Ellen Terry in the hit, *The Bohemian Girl* (1922), and Lillian Gish and John Gilbert in *La Bohème* (1926). Opera houses also occasionally served as settings for silent films, such as the popular adaptation of Gaston Leroux's novel, *The Phantom of the Opera*, starring Lon Chaney, Sr. The movie was one of the biggest box-office successes of the silent era and took place entirely in (or under) the Paris Opéra.<sup>57</sup>

Although not a major movie star, from the time of his first recordings in 1902, Enrico Caruso popularized the phonograph as a musical device and became its most important early representative. His success encouraged additional prominent musical figures to record.<sup>58</sup> Victor Talking Machine Company's "Red Seal" line, in particular, specialized in operatic recordings. Calvin Child, an executive at Victor, recorded most of the leading singers at the Met for the Red Seal catalogue. It soon became the norm for almost all leading opera singers to make records. Besides Caruso, several tenors including John McCormack, Giovanni Martinelli, Beniamino Gigli, and Tito Schipa, became successful recording artists in the early twentieth century. Records with sopranos

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 19, 26-27, 31-32; David Schroeder, *Cinema's Allusions, Opera's Allure: The Operatic Impulse in Film* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 41, 48.

<sup>58</sup> "Historical Records: The Art of Caruso," *The Gramophone* (January 1957), 306; "Caruso Recording Anniversary Observed," *Musical America* (Feb 1, 1954): 15.

like Luisa Tetrazzini, Geraldine Farrar, Nellie Melba, and Amelita Galli-Curci were also especially popular. Although the cost of a Red Seal record was often as low as \$1.50 each, Victor raised its prices depending on how many recognized stars appeared in a recording. The sextet from *Lucia di Lammermoor* that featured Caruso, Antonio Scotti, Marcella Sembrich, and Marcel Journet retailed for an exorbitant \$7.00.<sup>59</sup>

Columbia Phonograph Company attempted to replicate Victor's success with opera, but the label's operatic records did not sale as well. Although most opera stars recorded for Victor, well-respected singers Jean de Reszke, Ernestine Shcumann-Heink, Marcella Sembrich, Antonio Scotti, and Suzanne Adams made recordings for Columbia early in the century. Later in the 1910s, the company recruited popular Met soprano Rosa Ponselle. Due to such competition from Columbia, Victor lowered the prices for its Red Seal records and retained its domination of the market. Opera singers remained mainstream recording stars until the Great Depression, when overpriced opera records lost much of their popularity with a general public now more accustomed to the radio.<sup>60</sup>

By the 1920s the young medium of the radio began to rival the phonograph as the most popular means of listening to music. As opposed to recordings, once a consumer

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<sup>59</sup> Samuel Holland Ross, *The Victrola Book of the Opera* (Camden, N. J.: Victor Talking Machine Co., 1919); Peter Tschmuck, *Creativity and Innovation in the Music Industry* (New York: Springer, 2012), 38-39; William Kenney, *Recorded Music in American Life: The Phonograph and Popular Memory, 1890-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 59. For a detailed examination of Red Seal Victor, see David Suisman, *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in American Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

<sup>60</sup> Dizikes, *Opera in America*, 478-480; Suisman, *Selling Sounds*, 145-146; Kenney, *Recorded Music in American Life*, 50, 59; C. G. Child, Letter to Sydney W. Dixon, May 12, 1919, Louise Homer Papers, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Box 25, Folders 3-7 - Victor Talking Machine Company (contracts, royalties, letters), Folder 3: 1906-1915. In a letter from 1919, Child complained about the "keen competition" from Columbia over their operatic recordings. He recognized that Columbia was attempting to ape Victor by bringing in expensive, prominent opera singers. He recalled that over the course of several interviews, he evaluated tenor Charles Hackett and decided not to sign him to a Victor contract. However, to his amusement, Columbia took his numerous meetings with Hackett as a sign that the tenor was in high demand. Columbia signed him to a lucrative contract. Victor's strategy, Child believed, should be to load Columbia up with "has-beens." *Ibid.*

purchased a radio set, the music was free. In 1910 the Metropolitan Opera made an early experimental radio broadcast of one of its live performances. Lee De Forest supervised the broadcast of a double bill of *Cavalliera Rusticana* and *I Pagliacci* with Caruso and Emmy Destinn, but radio was such a new medium that few people had the capability to hear it. In 1921 the Chicago Grand Opera (later renamed the Chicago Civic Opera) began regular broadcasts of live performances. It took a decade longer before the Met began its own weekly broadcast.<sup>61</sup> After the establishment of the first commercial radio station in the United States in 1920, radios soon came to play an integral role in most people's leisure time. By 1940 over 80% of American households owned a radio. Although radios were most common in wealthy households, ownership was not solely confined to the upper or even middle classes; a majority of working-class families also had radios.<sup>62</sup> From their early days, radio shows frequently featured operatic music and, even more commonly, opera singers as guest stars. Popular radio soprano, Jessica Dragonette, became the first noteworthy opera singer to make a hit in the medium in the 1920s. By 1930, she had her own successful show on CBS, *The Cities Service Hour*. Almost solely a radio personality, she did not make her first concert tour until eight years later.<sup>63</sup>

Radio stations aired selections from operas, broadcasts of full-length operas, and musical programs like *The Met Auditions of the Air*, *Concert Hall*, and *Chicago Theater of the Air*. Certain musical shows frequently featured opera and classical music. The long-running *The Voice of Firestone* and *The Bell Telephone Hour* provided many opera

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<sup>61</sup> John Dunning, *On the Air: The Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 456-457.

<sup>62</sup> For example, in 1935 almost 60% of the poorest American household (those earning under \$1,000 per year) owned a radio. Douglas B. Craig, *Fireside Politics: Radio and Political Culture in the United States, 1920-1940* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 14-15.

<sup>63</sup> Victoria Etnier Villamil, *From Johnson's Kids to Lemonade Opera: The American Classical Singer Comes of Age* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004), 17-20.

singers with the opportunity to perform on the radio. Opera singers reached larger audiences when they appeared as guest stars on the most popular shows of the era. Two of the most successful programs of the 1940s, *The Bing Crosby Show* and *The Fred Allen Show*, occasionally featured opera singers, including John McCormack, Lauritz Melchior, Dorothy Kirsten, Richard Crooks, and James Melton. Melton, who also appeared in movies for Warner Brothers, later became a regular and well respected performer at the Met. Opera singers also appeared in World War II broadcasts intended for servicemen overseas, including appearances on *Command Performance*, a series of programs based on personal requests from members of the military. Several opera singers had their own radio shows, although some like *The Robert Merrill Show* were short lived. In contrast, Melton had a long career hosting and appearing in a variety of radio programs. These shows often combined operatic selections with popular, classical, traditional, and occasionally religious songs.

One of the most successful opera singers on the radio was American baritone John Charles Thomas. Thomas hosted a regular musical show on the weekends during the daytime for Westinghouse from 1943 through 1946. In the program's second year, Thomas received a Hooper rating of almost 10. This meant that 10% of all radios in use at the time were tuned in to his show.<sup>64</sup> Such ratings indicate that substantial numbers of Americans listened each week over the airwaves to hear the Met baritone sing. Another singer who would later become famous, Beverly Sills, won the *Major Bowes' Amateur Hour* contest at the age of ten in 1939. On the program, she sang "Caro Nome" from *Rigoletto*. Radio networks also occasionally commissioned operas for broadcast,

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<sup>64</sup> "Hooperating Air Shows Built Around Singers," *Billboard* (September 9, 1944): 14. By the early 1940s, Hooper was the most popular radio rating/polling company in the United States. *Ibid.*

including most significantly Vittorio Giannini's *Beauty and the Beast* (1938) and Gian-Carlo Menotti's *Old Man and the Thief* (1939).<sup>65</sup>

Although radio, as a rival entertainment, grew in popularity and many studios initially suffered financial setbacks, the movies continued to dominate popular culture during the Depression.<sup>66</sup> In some ways, moviemakers continued what had worked in the silent film industry into the sound era. Music, however, added a new dimension. As with *Carmen*, they continued to film adaptations of full operas. However, beginning in the late 1920s with smash hits like *Rio Rita*, a large percentage of early film musicals were operettas (or "light operas" as they were usually called at the time), sometimes starring actual opera singers. As the success of *Carmen* inspired Hollywood to create more silent movies starring opera singers, these early film operettas sparked the industry's interest in classically trained opera singers throughout the 1930s. In particular, MGM's operettas starring Nelson Eddy and Jeannette MacDonald became immensely popular.<sup>67</sup> Eddy, who had been a professional operatic baritone, and MacDonald also periodically sang numbers from operas onscreen.<sup>68</sup> Opera also influenced the plot, style, and music of other classic movies that were not filmed versions of grand or light opera. Some well-known opera singers, including Giovanni Martinelli, Beniamino Gigli, Marion Talley, Pasquale

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<sup>65</sup> Villamil, *From Johnson's Kids to Lemonade Opera*, 16.

<sup>66</sup> Gomery, *Movie History: A Survey*, 183-184.

<sup>67</sup> Hollywood's emphasis in repeating the same successful formulas with operatic singers is acknowledged in "Talent in Duplicate," *New York Times* (February 23, 1941): X4: "Hollywood wants new faces, but it doesn't want them to do new tricks. The old act with a new actor is more apt to find favor at the studios for the producers endeavor to keep specific talents in duplicate on their player rosters. For years at Metro, Nelson Eddy has had some one [*sic*] else with a good male voice right on his heels. At the moment, Douglas McPhail seems to be the alternate, but Allan Jones and Stanley Morner (now hitting his stride as Dennis Morgan) are among others who have been in the fraternity."

<sup>68</sup> After the success of his films, Nelson Eddy became the highest paid concert singer in the United States. Villamil, *From Johnson's Kids to Lemonade Opera*, 26.

Amato, and Andrés de Seguro, appeared in some of the earliest talking films, often singing operatic numbers.<sup>69</sup>

By 1931 during the nadir of the Depression, the Hollywood musical boom that had started just a few years before slowed significantly, affecting the output of opera related films. Some leading opera singers made their movie debuts before the musical went briefly out of fashion. Esteemed Met baritone Lawrence Tibbett received a Best Actor Academy Award nomination in 1930 for his role in *The Rogue Song*. In the same year, Irish tenor John McCormack, one of the few singers considered a rival of Caruso's, received an unheard of \$500,000 for his first movie appearance in *Song o' My Heart*. By the mid-thirties with a return of optimism under Franklin Roosevelt and a gradually improving economy, the short-lived slump for movie musicals had passed and Hollywood regained lost audiences after a decline in movie attendance. Soprano Grace Moore revived the operatic film when her 1934 movie *One Night of Love* became one of the biggest musical hits of the decade. A romantic melodrama set in Europe, the movie provided an escape from the economic realities of the time. Moore was perhaps the most popular of the sopranos Hollywood recruited from the operatic stage during the sound era. *One Night of Love*, like the early movie operettas, sparked a new wave of films starring opera singers. Movie commentator Douglas Churchill correctly predicted in 1934 after RKO studios signed French coloratura soprano Lily Pons: "The success accorded the Grace Moore musical film, 'One Night of Love,' has started producers on what may turn out to be an operatic cycle."<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Balio, *Grand Design*, 222-224, Fawkes, *Opera on Film*, 50-52.

<sup>70</sup> Balio, *Grand Design*, 211; Fawkes, *Opera on Film*, 50-53; Mordaunt Hall, "In the Western Studios: Florenz Ziegfeld Gives His Ideas on Screen Revues—Other Hollywood Notes," *New York Times* (July 27, 1930): 97; Douglas W. Churchill, "Nobody Loves the Film City," *New York Times* (November 4, 1934):

Nineteen thirty-four through 1938 were the most prolific and successful years for operatic filmmaking, as the United States slowly recovered from the Depression.

Nineteen-thirty six alone could boast forty-five opera oriented movies.<sup>71</sup> Columbia continued to make films with Grace Moore, although none were as successful as *One Night of Love*. In the wake of Moore's success, Paramount recruited several opera singers, including Gladys Swarthout, Kirsten Flagstad, and Jan Kiepura. After leaving RKO, Lily Pons made a few films for Paramount, while Fox revived the film career of Lawrence Tibbett. In October 1935, the *Motion Picture Magazine* discussed this trend:

Hollywood is knee deep in opera singers this summer. Among the notables there, all contracted for pictures are Jeritza, Gladys Swarthout, Lily Pons, Marion Talley, Lawrence Tibbett, Nino Martini with Grace Moore expected early in the fall and Rosa Ponselle also expected. To quote Al Jolson: "There are more opera singers in Hollywood than there are Marx Brothers."<sup>72</sup>

A month later the magazine enthused, "Grand opera stars stud the Hollywood sky, and they come to you on wings of song." In addition to the earlier singers noted in the October article, the magazine added Mary Ellis, Jan Kiepura, Michael Bartlett, Helen Jepson, and Everett Marshall to the list of opera singers already scheduled to make movies.<sup>73</sup> When Tibbett returned to the screen for the first time in three years in Twentieth Century-Fox's *Metropolitan* later that year, the magazine raved about the "greatness of his voice and the magnetism of his personality" and called the movie "one of the greatest musical offerings to date." Fairly typically for this sort of film, the

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X5. A reviewer for the *Motion Picture Magazine* described Moore as the "sensation of the year in 'One Night of Love'" and noted that she was "one of the most brilliantly interesting women in all Hollywood" [emphases in the original]. Gladys Hall, "'What Fame Has Given to Me' – Grace Moore," *Motion Picture Magazine*, Vol. 48 (November 1935): 32-33, 86-87.

<sup>71</sup> Fawkes, *Opera on Film*, 98.

<sup>72</sup> "The Talk of Hollywood," *Motion Picture Magazine*, Vol. 49-50 (October 1935): 46-48, 72.

<sup>73</sup> Ida Zeitlin, "The Song Birds Are Flying West," *Motion Picture Magazine*, Vol. 49-50 (November 1935): 28-29, 76-77.



baritone sang three arias (from *The Barber of Seville*, *Carmen*, and *Pagliacci*) and one popular song.<sup>74</sup>

Even after the opera film boom of the mid-1930s ended, young singing star Deanna Durbin continued making light-hearted musicals that contained operatic arias and other classical pieces. Her movies, which tapped into the growing youth culture of the 1930s and 1940s, made so much money that she, more than any other actor or actress, helped to save Universal Studios from bankruptcy.<sup>75</sup> Allan Jones, who like Durbin was not a professional opera singer, performed several operatic numbers on film, including in the MGM movies, *A Night at the Opera* (1935) and *Everybody Sing* (1938). In the latter film, he appeared with Judy Garland and comedian Fanny Brice. In one scene, he, Garland, and two other actors sang “Down on Melody Farm,” which contained the melody of the quartet from *Rigoletto* set to new words. Other screen tenors rose to some acclaim besides Jones. Kenny Baker, who first became famous as a regular on Jack Benny’s very popular weekly radio show, sang part of the “Brindisi” from Verdi’s *La Traviata* in the 1938 MGM film, *The Goldwyn Follies*. He appeared with Metropolitan Opera soprano Helen Jepson and tenor Charles Kullmann, who also sang a staged version of the “Brindisi” as part of the movie.<sup>76</sup> Although George and Ira Gershwin wrote most of the music in the film, Jepson, playing a professional soprano, performed Toselli’s “La Serenata,” an Italian song often performed by opera singers. Moviemakers also sometimes used opera just for film scores. The soundtrack for the MGM film, *Escape*,

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<sup>74</sup> Eric L. Ergenbright, “The Picture Parade,” *Motion Picture Magazine*, Vol. 49-50 (January 1936): 40-41.

<sup>75</sup> Balio, *Grand Design*, 222-224, 232-233.

<sup>76</sup> The “Brindisi” also appears in a scene from the Best Picture Oscar winner from 1945, *The Lost Weekend*. Ray Milland’s character, an alcoholic, is tempted to drink again while watching opera singers performing this toast duet.

contained recordings of Caruso singing “*Questa o quella*” and “*La donna è mobile*” from *Rigoletto*.<sup>77</sup>

In the 1930s Jesse Lasky produced three movies with Italian tenor Nino Martini. Two of these were written by Sonya Levien, who later penned the screenplay for *The Great Caruso*. Prominent Austrian soprano Ernestine Schumann-Heink appeared with Martini in the 1935 film, *Here’s to Romance*. Felix Knight, a Met tenor, appeared in a couple of Laurel and Hardy’s comedic operettas in the thirties. Former operatic baritone and Broadway star George Houston performed in films as Italian singers, cowboys, and historical figures in the 1930s and 1940s. He appeared as the father of an operatic boy soprano, played by Bobby Breen, in the RKO movie *Let’s Sing Again* (1936). In the film Breen, who regularly appeared on Eddie Cantor’s radio program, sang Verdi’s popular aria, “*La donna è mobile*.” Russian soprano Nina Koshetz periodically performed in movies from the 1920s through the 1950s.

After the Great Depression, Hollywood produced far fewer escapist films about glamorous opera stars in European settings. More often, opera singers portrayed in movies were down-to-earth, “regular” people, who fit well with the growing anti-Fascist, egalitarian ethos of the times. During the 1940s, Hollywood continued to use renowned opera singers in supporting roles. Their movies usually included at least one operatic aria. MGM utilized legendary heldentenor Lauritz Melchior in this fashion, typically having him portray avuncular characters while singing popular songs and operatic numbers like Wagner’s “*Winterstürme*” from *Die Walküre*. Although MGM was the leader in opera films, other studios also produced these types of movies. Paramount cast popular mezzo-soprano Risè Stevens in the Oscar-winning hit film, *Going My Way*, starring Bing

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<sup>77</sup> “The Talk of Hollywood,” *Motion Picture Magazine*, Vol. 49-50 (September 1935): 48.

Crosby. She sang the “Habanera” from *Carmen*, in addition to portraying a friendly old flame of Crosby’s. In other instances, opera singers were characters in films rather than actors. Charles Foster Kane’s sympathetic wife, Susan Alexander, in the 1941 classic, *Citizen Kane*, was a failed soprano. Bernard Herrmann, who composed the film’s score, wrote a new, staged opera scene for the character. Spanish bass, Fortunio Bonanova, played Susan Alexander’s voice coach. He also appeared in dozens of other classic movies, including *Blood and Sand* (1941) with Pedro de Cordoba, Billy Wilder’s *Five Graves to Cairo* (1943) and *Double Indemnity* (1944), *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1943), *Going My Way* (1944), and the MGM musical, *Fiesta* (1947).

In 1947 after World War II, United Artists released *Carnegie Hall*, starring a plethora of popular figures in the classical music and opera worlds, including Stevens (singing the “Seguidilla” from *Carmen*), Lily Pons (the “Bell Song” from *Lakmé*), Jan Peerce (the Neapolitan song, “O sole mio”), and Ezio Pinza (“Fin ch’han dal vino” from *Don Giovanni*). Conductors Leopold Stokowski, Fritz Reiner, Artur Rodzinski, and Bruno Walter, violinist Jascha Heifetz, pianist Artur Rubinstein, and cellist Gregor Piatigorsky performed in the movie, as did swing band leaders Harry James and Vaughn Monroe. Composer and conductor Walter Damrosch also appeared briefly in the movie. The film billed its cast as “The World’s Greatest Artists” in the credits. The story revolves around an Irish immigrant janitor at New York’s prestigious Carnegie Hall and all the performers she and her young son saw there over the decades. She tells another cleaning woman that the hall is her son’s music school, and she has high hopes that he will become a distinguished classical musician. Instead, he joins a jazz band, but to his mother’s delight he performs one of his own compositions, a jazz-influenced Rhapsody

for Trumpet and Piano, at Carnegie Hall. His success helps to blur the line in his mother's mind between "good" classical music and "bad" popular music.

Operatic films experienced renewed popularity with the discovery of tenor Mario Lanza in the early post-war period. Lanza's early hit films, like *That Midnight Kiss* (with well-known movie soprano, Kathryn Grayson) and *The Great Caruso*, were made during a boom period for movie musicals. Lanza was one of the biggest singing stars of the late 1940s and early 1950s and included many operatic numbers in his films. In the early fifties, Met baritone Robert Merrill, who had made his professional start on the radio, appeared in a comedy, *Aaron Slick from Punkin Crick*. The time of filming coincided with the Met's spring tour. When Merrill chose the film over the tour, the Met's general manager, Rudolph Bing, fired him. He later rehired the baritone, but Bing continued to show a bias against his opera singers entering the movies.<sup>78</sup> Other opera singers who appeared in films during the Classic Hollywood era include Roberta Peters, Lotte Lehmann, Jarmila Novotna, Helen Traubel, Salvatore Baccaloni, Marek Windheim, Kathleen Howard, and Miliza Korjus. Although never as common as musicals with opera singers or operatic numbers, Hollywood continued to produce adaptations of full operas during this time. Two key examples of this type of movie are *The Medium* (1951), directed by the opera's composer, Gian-Carlo Menotti, and *Carmen Jones* (1954), Otto Preminger's updated version of *Carmen* with African-American characters. The latter movie contained large segments of Bizet's original score, but truncated and with new lyrics or played as background music.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> "Robert Merrill, a Favorite Baritone at the Met for 30 Years, Is Dead at 87," *New York Times* (October 26, 2004), [http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/26/arts/music/26merrill.html?pagewanted=2&\\_r=0&adxnln=1&adxnlnx=1403410821-v3xIUrx w67ekF6zJ6amKg](http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/26/arts/music/26merrill.html?pagewanted=2&_r=0&adxnln=1&adxnlnx=1403410821-v3xIUrx w67ekF6zJ6amKg).

<sup>79</sup> Citron, *Opera on Screen*, 35-38.

Film attendance steadily increased from 1940 to 1946, but by the late 1940s television began to depress the size of movie audiences. In 1953, almost fifty per cent of Americans owned a television set. By 1956 movie attendance had dropped to nearly half of what it had been ten years earlier.<sup>80</sup> As the film industry experienced internal disruptions, opera thrived on burgeoning television. Starting as early as 1936, NBC sporadically broadcast operas on television. Even though few people owned television sets at the time, in 1940 the Met's general manager, Edward Johnson, hosted a televised performance of operatic arias starring some of the Met's most famous singers. In the late 1940s the Met became the first opera company to telecast live opera performances. Although NBC was the primary television station that showed opera, the other two national networks, CBS and ABC, also occasionally broadcast operas or opera segments.<sup>81</sup> ABC telecast the opening night performance of Verdi's *Otello* at Met in 1948. A half a million TVs tuned in to the program. Also in 1948, both NBC and CBS broadcast versions of Menotti's *The Medium* three years before the movie version of the opera came out.

In 1949, the *NBC Opera Theatre* debuted on television. It regularly showed adaptations of operas filmed at NBC's studios. The program's producer, Samuel Chotzinoff, used only English-language librettos of operas so that audiences could understand the plots better. He also tried to cast singers who could act and were "of

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<sup>80</sup> Gomery, *Movie History: A Survey*, 186; Wierzbicki, *Film Music*, 159; Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, 269-272.

<sup>81</sup> NBC's chief executive Sylvester "Pat" Weaver argued that TV should be primarily focused on artistic and educational content. In addition, Weaver wanted to wrest control over NBC's shows from the shows' sponsors, which he believed would lead to higher quality programming. Shifting the focus of NBC programs away from soap operas and situation comedies, Weaver promoted televised versions of classic plays (*Hamlet* and *Macbeth*), Broadway musicals (*Peter Pan*), operas (*The Magic Flute*), and news shows (*The Today Show*). Even after he lost influence in the mid-1950s, the *NBC Opera Theatre* continued on television as the premier show for operatic adaptations. See James L. Baughman, *Same Time, Same Station: Creating American Television, 1948-1961* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), 2007.

convincing appearance.” NBC’s publicity referred to the program as the “people’s opera” and related that many of the letters the studio received about the telecasts came from people who had never seen an opera before. By 1963, the *NBC Opera Theatre* had telecast forty-five different operas, including seven world premieres.<sup>82</sup> The show ran until 1964, when Chotzinoff died. As was the case with radio, the show commissioned new operas specifically for television. Gian-Carlo Menotti’s 1951 Christmas opera, *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, was the most significant of these commissions. Peter Herman Adler, an immigrant conductor who served as the music director of the *NBC Opera Theatre*, wrote in 1951 that televised opera would “bridge the gap between the mass audience and the opera house.” *The Opera Television Theater*, hosted by Lawrence Tibbett (one of the most successful opera singers to appear in movies) aired on CBS during the 1949-1950 season. Unlike NBC’s similar program, the *Opera Television Theater* was cancelled after its first year. By utilizing television before it became immensely popular and almost universal, these opera programs helped to promote the young medium while also reaching new audiences.<sup>83</sup>

In the 1950s many of the most popular radio shows, including ones that featured opera, transferred to the rapidly growing medium of television. *The Voice of Firestone*, in particular, was a pioneer not just in opera oriented programming but also in the initial development of television in its earliest stages. While continuing to sponsor *The Voice of Firestone* as a radio program, Firestone Tire and Rubber Company also sponsored a

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<sup>82</sup> “Chotzinoff to Address Music Groups in Colorado” [press release], July 24, 1963, NBC Collection, Library of Congress, The History Files, Folder 1221 (NBC Opera 1963-4); Press release, NBC Collection, Library of Congress, The History Files, Folder 1223 (NBC Opera 1961-2); “Here and There,” *Holiday* (December 1963), 218, NBC Collection, Library of Congress, The History Files, Folder 1221 (NBC Opera 1963-4).

<sup>83</sup> Citron, *Opera on Screen*, 42-45.

television version of the show called *The Voice of Firestone Televues*, which first appeared on the air in 1943 when television was still in the developmental phase. The radio show moved directly to television in 1949. It ran for the next ten years on NBC and later returned for an additional season in 1962. Numerous leading opera stars appeared on the show, including Jussi Björling, Lauritz Melchior, Leonard Warren, Risë Stevens, Eleanor Steber, Roberta Peters, Jerome Hines, Ferruccio Tagliavini, Robert Merrill, Cesare Siepi, Helen Traubel, Thomas L. Thomas, Bidu Sayão, Gladys Swarthout, and Richard Tucker. *The Bell Telephone Hour* was another transferred radio show that typically featured opera singers and classical musicians.

Most former radio shows largely retained the same formulae on television they had previously used. Some opera-singing radio hosts, like James Melton, were able to transfer their shows to television once radio began to wane in popularity, while other singers, who had not had their own radio programs, like Ezio Pinza and Patrice Munsel, became TV show hosts. Pinza even had his own short-lived sitcom, *Bonino*. Popular variety shows also occasionally featured opera singers as guests. The best known of these was *The Ed Sullivan Show*. *The Perry Como Show*, *All-Star Review*, and *Your Show of Shows* were other variety shows that periodically included opera. Opera singers often appeared on other types of television programs too. The classic game show *What's My Line?* had opera stars, classical musicians, and conductors appear once in a while as “mystery guests,” including Marian Anderson, Ezio Pinza, Lily Pons, Leontyne Price, Robert Merrill, and Seiji Ozawa, among others.

Numerous additional opera singers performed on a wide variety of programs in the medium's early years, including Nicolai Gedda, Renata Tebaldi, Guiseppe di Stefano,

Jan Peerce, Anna Moffo, Birgit Nilsson, Régine Crespin, Eileen Farrell, Rosalind Elias, Mary Costa, and Theodore Uppman, as well as movie opera singers like Mario Lanza, Kathryn Grayson, and Jane Powell. By the 1970s, after the massive social and cultural transformations of the previous decade, opera programs and opera singers' frequent guest appearances on TV became significantly less common. In 1977, the Metropolitan Opera began its *Live from the Met* series, which broadcast full operas on television. By this time, an occasional complete opera filmed from the stage of an opera house became more common than earlier, more malleable and widespread forms of televised opera performance.<sup>84</sup>

Because of its specific historical development, opera is a form of culture that is especially intertwined with issues of class, ethnicity, and gender. Many urban elites used opera as an exclusionary tool; however, its position and purpose in society were never monolithic. A “central tension” runs through many of these mass media presentations of opera: opera as a prestigious art form, controlled by social and intellectual elites, performed in great opera houses, and consumed by knowledgeable sophisticates versus opera as a legitimate cultural form for everybody, including immigrants, workers, minorities, and women, to participate in both as performers and audiences. The tension between these opposing concepts, which were never black and white in reality, sprang directly out of the divisions in society that the discursive and institutional sacralization of the late nineteenth century created. Such tensions are less significant in popular culture,

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<sup>84</sup> This is meant only as an overview of opera and opera singers in the key mass media during the silent and Classic Hollywood eras, in order to provide context for more in depth discussions over the course of the dissertation. It is not intended in any way to be comprehensive but merely to illustrate highlights and larger trends.



which strove to appeal to broader audiences prior to the advent of media technologies and was not something that social elites separated out as their own cultural “turf.” Thus, we can most clearly see this cultural struggle and tension only when the “high” and popular forms combine, as they did in the new mass media technologies of the era.

As I show in my Chapter 1 analysis of Hollywood as a culture industry, a significant gap existed in the early years of cinematic history, wherein the movies and movie production were more fluid, open to a more diverse set of filmmakers, and less standardized and centralized. On the one hand, operatic movies helped in the “closing” and consolidation of the film industry that ended this earlier and more “open” phase by helping to raise the prestige, standards, and costs of movies and by providing key filmmakers and studios with early successes that strengthened their positions in the industry over smaller producers. This was especially true with studio heads Jesse Lasky and Adolph Zukor. They, together with directors like Cecil B. DeMille and D. W. Griffith, utilized opera and opera singers, most notably Geraldine Farrar, to elevate the prestige of their industry during the early development of the Hollywood studio system, both for economic and artistic reasons.<sup>85</sup> On the other hand (and in some ways contradictorily), these early “hybrid opera films” also spread opera (in a form reinvented through technology) to much larger audiences in a greater variety of places, so that even as they were helping to limit access to production, they were also broadening audiences in terms of consumption.

Opera films also included multivalent messages, some of which audiences could potentially read as transgressive, even as most filmmakers were trying to appeal to

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<sup>85</sup> Contrary to modernist critics’ claims of movies as “kitschy,” formulaic mass culture, in the early years of the movie industry, DeMille and Griffith were eager to innovate and to leave their own unique stamps on their cinematic creations.

traditional middle-class tastes and values through opera. The movies *Carmen* and *Joan the Woman*, in particular, presented ambivalent messages about women and the “exotic” that are in ways both positive and negative.<sup>86</sup> Beyond the intentions of the moviemakers, whose approaches were themselves multifaceted, these silent films with their flexible scripts supplied a greater means for opera singers to promote their own interpretations and personal viewpoints to a wider public.<sup>87</sup> As I discuss in Chapter 2, the most significant example of this is Geraldine Farrar and her disregard for conventional gender boundaries, both in her acting and in her life. As a prestigious opera singer, Farrar was allowed greater control over herself and her career than the typical woman of the day. She was able to transfer her cultural capital from opera across the stage, movies, records, radio, and her personal life in order to create greater independence for herself.

In her private life, Farrar expressed many of the same transgressive ideas of her dramatic portrayals and became a role model for many young women at a time when women’s position in society was transforming and the suffrage movement was coming to fruition. Her media appearances spurred her fame to new heights and brought her millions of devoted fans. She became a larger-than-life celebrity at a time of major changes in journalism. The new focus in the press on “personalities” gave Farrar wide-scale, national visibility. Celebrity journalists and publicity departments promoted her image as a talented, strong, and independent woman. In articles, books, and interviews, Farrar also helped to mold this image of herself, which appealed to her devoted young

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<sup>86</sup> Its creators also used *Joan the Woman*, which was filmed only a few months after the United States’ entry into World War I, to promote the war effort in France.

<sup>87</sup> Without standard dialogue, silent film scripts tended to be much more general and broadly descriptive than later screenplays for sound movies.

female fans nicknamed the “Gerryflappers.”<sup>88</sup> Yet, because she routinely operated within the confines of the culture industry, her work and career exhibited a combination of objectification and liberation.<sup>89</sup> This was true, to an extent, of later women opera performers in the movies too, including the most famous screen sopranos of the 1930s, Grace Moore and Jeaneatte MacDonald, but they often presented more “acceptable” public images than Farrar.

Even after opera was partially sacralized within the urban opera house, Chapter 3 shows that the genre remained a key component of Italian-American vernacular culture, both at the grass roots level of participation and through mechanically transmitted forms that to some extent transcended the ethnic enclave. Continuing ethnic, and often specifically working-class, connections with opera further complicate the concept of opera’s sacralization and the idea of elite control. To a surprising extent, previous scholars have paid scant attention to the effects of music and technology on Italian-Americans’ position in society and their sense of themselves and their culture.<sup>90</sup> Instead, the conventional focus is on important political and social events and movements,

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<sup>88</sup> For more on the development of these mechanism of celebrity creation that Farrar utilized, see: Charles L. Ponce de Leon, *Self-Exposure: Human-Interest Journalism and the Emergence of Celebrity in America, 1890-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Joshua Gamson, *Claims to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986, 1997); Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961, 1987, 2012).

<sup>89</sup> Other scholars that deal with similar issues in women’s history, including larger analyses of agency and domination, include: Faye Dudden, *Women in the American Theatre: Actresses & Audiences 1790-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*; Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure*; Susan Glenn, *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); Marybeth Hamilton, *When I’m Bad, I’m Better: Mae West, Sex, and American Entertainment* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995); Kibbler, *Rank Ladies*; Carol Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian American* (Oxford University Press, 1985).

<sup>90</sup> For examples, see: Thomas Guglielmo, *White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago: 1890-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); David R. Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America’s Immigrants Become White* (New York: Basic Books, 2005); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Jennifer Guglielmo, ed., *Are Italians White? How Race is Made in America* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

thereby ignoring a major aspect of the immigrant experience in the United States. The “star power” of Italian opera singers, as well as the frequent mass cultural representation of great opera singers *as* Italian, suggests that, in at least one important domain of early twentieth-century society, Italians were often assumed superior to other Americans. The idea of Italians as poor, criminally inclined immigrants and Italians as the premier opera singers in the United States coexisted within the discourses of the same society at the same time. We can see this tension play out in the life of Enrico Caruso, the most legendary singer and recording star of the first two decades of the century, who in some ways had both a higher and lower status than native-born Americans.<sup>91</sup> Both contemporary reviewers and later cultural representations, including *The Great Caruso* with Mario Lanza, repeatedly stressed the tenor’s Italian background. The Lanza bio-pic, made in the post-war era, also showed a new acceptance of Italian-Americans and an idealized conception of Italian culture. The image of the Italian opera star that Caruso exemplified was prominent in many other popular films and shows from the silent movie era through the 1950s.

Italian-Americans primarily heard Caruso by means of the phonograph. No one was more integral to the early growth in popularity of the phonograph in the early 1900s than Caruso, who recorded for the Victor label. As with movies, the phonograph reciprocally helped to popularize opera, reaching large audiences with operatic music and bringing greater fame and influence to opera singers. Opera in the film and recording industries allowed those industries to gain more cultural and economic capital, while spreading a variety of cultural and social messages to a larger number and spectrum of people. By the mid-1920s, these two technologies had melded together into the new

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<sup>91</sup> Caruso worked in the U.S. from 1904 through 1920.

“talking” picture. Opera played an important role in the development of the “talkies,” and sound films conversely opened up new opportunities for opera.

Early opera films from the silent era focused more on opera’s prestige and on using that prestige to attract wealthier audiences. Later during the Great Depression, with the most prominent studio MGM leading the way, moviemakers tried to attract a more working-class audience and not scare people off with opera’s snobbish “high art” reputation. As I argue in Chapter 4, the opera films of the “Classic Hollywood,” big studio era catered to working-class audiences by focusing on themes that could potentially appeal to them and by rejecting the cultural elitism that at times characterized upper-class opera goers. In the midst of the opera picture boom of the mid-1930s during the heyday of the Popular Front, the Marx Brothers starred in a hit comedy, *A Night at the Opera*, that incorporated many common working-class and anti-elitist themes of several opera films. On its face, the movie seems to be an attack on opera and on the genre of operatic films so popular at the time. It is, nonetheless, a prime example of the opera movie itself. It is more an attack on the elitist social world constructed in opera houses rather than opera as an art form. Additional films from the Classic Hollywood era, including the Mario Lanza vehicles, *The Great Caruso* and *That Midnight Kiss*, portray opera singers as poor or working-class people who eventually find success through a non-elitist career in opera. Such themes indicate a substantial shift in the types of publics moviemakers were trying to hail through the messages inscribed in opera films.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> I am using here Michael Warner’s idea of publics in conjunction with Miriam Hansen’s conception of “spectatorship.” Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002); Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

The mass media, and movies in particular, were key factors that caused opera's position and function in U.S. society to shift substantially between limited and accessible, elitist and populist. Such high and low cultural divisions were never clear-cut and the process of sacralization was always partial and shifting, never falling cleanly into periodizations or broad generalizations. As opera became more sacralized within grand opera houses, new markets and media technologies helped to reinvent the genre in novel ways. Opera's ubiquity in movies, records, radio, and television opened up greater access to the art form both for audiences and performers, including members of the non-elite. Creators of the mass media brought opera to publics far larger than any previous form of operatic performance and did so largely without reproducing the class associations and exclusivity of the grand opera house.

Disparate producers, including businessmen and artists, searching for wider audiences, greater profits, elevated prestige, and increased creative latitude for their work often geared their products toward diverse publics. Their movies and other media creations on occasion presented radically different images of opera than the sacralized vision of the most prominent opera houses. Instead of simply supplanting tradition with a generic mass culture, opera in the media, both in its discourses and new forms of consumption, helped to continue the more "open" traditions of opera in the nineteenth century, especially in regard to immigrant and working-class cultures. Yet, even while popularizing and de-sacralizing the genre, these cultural producers were often able to exploit opera's "highbrow" signification to promote themselves and their professions.

Because the movies had such a significant impact on opera, we can see more clearly the importance of mass media technologies as transformative agents in the

contexts of industrialization, corporate capitalism, and mass immigration. While new media technologies influenced and transformed much of American culture, opera's incorporation into the mass media also reciprocally influenced how these media functioned. Contrary to discourses that argue the existence of a "low," mass produced culture and a separate, pure "high" art, opera illustrates the often overlooked importance of so-called high cultural forms in the development of the "massified" culture industries of the twentieth century. Many of the effects of these processes can still be seen today.

## CHAPTER II

### The Hybrid Opera Movie and Transformations in the Early Film Industry

“Carmen at Tally’s is in its second week. It is doing the biggest business in the history of the Theatre. In fact no exhibitor in his wildest dreams ever conceived of a picture doing such enormous business. The Theatre opens at 10:00 a.m and there is a crowd all day with two lines, running in either direction,” movie producer Jesse Lasky enthused in a telegram to one of his business partners.<sup>93</sup> *Carmen* was the latest release of the young Hollywood movie studio, the Jesse L. Lasky Feature Play Company.<sup>94</sup> The general director of the studio and Lasky’s personal friend, Cecil B. DeMille, directed the film, and operatic celebrity Geraldine Farrar, surrounded by a flurry of publicity at her entry into movies, topped the billing. Lasky had offered the Metropolitan Opera soprano an unheard of salary of \$300 per week with all the perks to come to Hollywood to make films. When the diva arrived in Los Angeles from New York in a privately rented railroad car paid for by the studio, the city’s mayor greeted her, a brass band played music from the opera *Carmen*, and a red carpet ran from the train to a waiting car. Lasky

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<sup>93</sup> Quoted in Robert S. Birchard, *Cecil B. DeMille’s Hollywood* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 60, 63.

<sup>94</sup> This was one of the most popular film companies of the 1910s. One journalist wrote about Lasky, “his name is as well known, probably, as any other name in the United States.” “Lasky’s Genius Contributed to Success of ‘Joan the Woman’ at 44<sup>th</sup> Street Theatre,” Geraldine Farrar Collection, Library of Congress (LOC), Box 28, Lister album.



came from New York beforehand in order to greet her personally upon her arrival. She was “ushered in like a visiting queen,” he later recalled.<sup>95</sup>

All the expense and extravagance spent on a single actress appeared, however, to be paying off. As Lasky’s first-hand account of the film’s success at Tally’s in Los Angeles suggests, *Carmen* was a major box-office hit and finished its theatrical run as the largest grossing film to date for the Lasky Feature Play Company.<sup>96</sup> The movie, which opened on October 31, 1915, took in \$147,599, while it cost only \$23,429 to make. *Carmen* became the most important and influential silent adaptation of an opera and the first to star an opera singer of the caliber and fame of Geraldine Farrar.<sup>97</sup> *Carmen*, the title character of a popular French opera by Georges Bizet, was one of Farrar’s most successful parts onstage. Her interpretation of the role remained a triumph as it was transferred to the screen, even though her strongest asset, her voice, could not be utilized in silent films. The concept of such silent film operas may appear to be an oxymoron; however, silent films were hardly ever truly silent.

Soon after the invention of the feature length motion picture, the nascent film industry produced a wide variety of adaptations of operas like *Carmen*. Opera’s influence on the movies, however, was not limited to filmed versions of operas. Opera had a broader and more notable impact on the movie industry. In particular, it influenced the development of film plots, formats, styles, visual imagery, and scores. Even movies that

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<sup>95</sup> Gabe Essoe and Raymond Lee, *DeMille: The Man and His Pictures* (South Brunswick: A.S. Barnes, 1970), 36; Jesse L. Lasky, *I Blow My Own Horn* (New York: Doubleday, 1957), 117. For an example of the publicity surrounding Farrar and her high salary for *Carmen*, see “Miss Farrar in Movies: Prima Donna to Receive \$2 a Minute Before the Camera,” *New York Times* (April 28, 1915): 13. One article from this time asserted that Farrar would “draw the largest salary ever paid” in the movies. “Great Diva for Movies,” *Los Angeles Times* (April 28, 1915): III4.

<sup>96</sup> Lasky, *I Blow My Own Horn*, 118.

<sup>97</sup> Gene Ringgold and DeWitt Bodeen, *The Films of Cecil B. DeMille* (New York: Cadillac, 1969), 87; see also Paul Fryer, *The Opera Singer and the Silent Film* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2005).

seemingly had little connection to opera often reflected opera's emphasis on grand spectacle. Silent films and opera often both utilized excessive makeup, elaborate costumes, and exaggerated or overwrought musical accompaniment. Opera provided an acting pool that producers mined for talent. It also aided in the development of early film acting methods. The "pantomimic" acting of both opera and silent films had much in common, and early movie acting styles featured big, melodramatic gestures that were common on the operatic stage. Stereotypical, overly broad gestures served to make plotlines clearer on both the stage and silent screen. Nineteenth-century acting had popularized standardized movements and expressions to represent specific feelings, emotions, and attitudes. These ideals remained popular on the silent screen and operatic stage, in part, because of the difficulty of following stories with no spoken dialogue. Although operatic music could not be added directly to movies at the time, as was the case with *Carmen*, opera supplied much of the incidental music that theater orchestras, pianos, or organs played as an accompaniment to silent films, including movies that were unrelated to actual operatic stories. Even when film scores did not contain actual operatic numbers, opera nonetheless continued to influence the style of music in the movies.<sup>98</sup>

Movies also changed opera in return. Filmmakers cut operatic music and stories, shortening, rearranging, and even augmenting opera. Unlike stylized and limited stage

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<sup>98</sup> Richard Abel, "Opera," *Encyclopedia of Early Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 489; Marcia J. Citron, *Opera on Screen* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 24; Eileen Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema, 1907-1915* (History of the American Cinema, Vol. 2) (University of California Press, 1994), 87-88; Richard Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of Silent Feature Picture, 1915-1928* (History of the American Cinema, Vol. 3) (University of California Press, 1994), 181; Peter Franklin, "Movies as Opera," in Jeremy Tambling, *A Night in at the Opera: Media Representations of Opera* (London: John Libbey, 1994), 79-108. For further elaboration on opera's impact on film, see Schroeder. Schroeder asserts, "In spite of the use of opera as a model, audiences do not necessarily recognize it, and those who would not be caught dead at an opera, can nevertheless enjoy an operatic film experience without suspecting that they are absorbing something operatic." He also notes that many film directors, including Griffith, DeMille, Eisenstein, Chaplin, Lang, Welles, Buñel, Hitchcock and others, have all created operas for the screen in their movies, especially in the Wagnerian style. David Schroeder, *Cinema's Allusions, Opera's Allure: The Operatic Impulse in Film* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 1-7.

performances and productions, operatic movies had the opportunity to be more realistic in their sets, costumes, locations, and scope. Without needing to play to the far away galleries, they could also offer more nuanced and “smaller” acting that included more facial expressions and little gestures than onstage performances typically did. Instead of each audience member looking toward the stage from the angle and direction of their seat without change, the different angles and the variations of close, medium, and long shots allowed for diverse vantage points to view the action on film. Writers, directors, and film score composers also typically highlighted and stressed different aspects of the operas they adapted or otherwise used, while also leaving many features out or laying less stress on them. In particular, operatic movies usually utilized only key popular numbers found in the original music. Generally, filmmakers distilled opera down to its fundamentals. These attributes distinguished operatic movies from complete, staged opera performances. This sort of modified opera movie represented a melding of an old cultural form onto a new mass medium with its own limitations and potentialities.

Such blending of opera and film created something new: the hybrid opera movie. Hybridized operatic films incorporated elements of opera in three primary ways: direct operatic adaptations, movies that opera influenced, and films with musical selections or scenes from operas. The opera movie was cheap and accessible, and it focused on plot, acting, costumes, and sets more than on the complex vocal and orchestral music that frequently accompanied it. With its story and music shortened and simplified, it was also less intimidating to the opera novice. At the same time, such operatic films often lost some of the quality of the original operas in their adaptation to the new medium. Both the movie industry and the opera world benefited from this blurring in some ways. Auteur

directors and clever producers worked with opera stars to create a new cultural product, which differed from both typical films and opera performances of the day. They brought “highbrow” performances down to make them accessible to much larger groups of people and brought the lowly “flickers” up to the level of a legitimate artistic medium. In this manner, opera and the movies had a mutual and synergistic effect on each other.

In “The Return of the Culture Industry,” James Cook suggests that scholars revive the “cultural industry” concept as a useful means of theorizing the impact that capitalistic systems and structures like the movie industry had on modern culture. This idea sidesteps problematic and controversial issues of labeling cultural productions into different “brow” levels or fragmenting culture into various periodizations or categories. It provides specific entities whose development and lineaments can be examined. As Cook notes, however, the culture industry as an analytical concept first needs to be reconfigured to remain useful. Theodor Adorno originally conceived of and utilized the concept of the culture industry as a means of stressing the illegitimacy of popular cultural forms like the movies, which he viewed as a means of top-down domination of the masses via an oppressive capitalistic system.<sup>99</sup> Since that time many scholars have shown that mass culture can be contested, potentially positive, and not solely a dominating, oppressive force.<sup>100</sup> They nonetheless choose to approach their topics as individual culture industries in order to examine the structural aspects of production, distribution, and consumption. In doing so, however, they redefine and broaden Adorno’s concept to allow for contested

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<sup>99</sup> Later Adorno nuanced his views and to an extent recognized the open and promising potentialities of mass culture in his essays, “Free Time” and “Opera and the Long Playing Record.” Theodor W. Adorno, “Free Time,” *The Culture Industry* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 187-197; Theodor W. Adorno, “Opera and the Long-Playing Record,” *Essays on Music*, 283-286.

<sup>100</sup> A few of these scholars include Michael Denning, Janet Davis, Miriam Hansen, and Janice Radway.

meanings and multi-accentuality.<sup>101</sup> Retaining an understanding of the industrial frameworks of culture while moving away from the idea of an overwhelmingly negative, hegemonic, and monolithic culture industry also allows for a deeper analysis of contradiction and contestation within these industries.<sup>102</sup> The individuals involved in the film industry often had varying or multidimensional goals in mind for their hybrid opera movies. Numerous people with disparate positions of power and influence played important roles in producing each film according to certain already set standards in addition to their own preferences and capabilities. The movies they created then circulated through a pre-determined system of distribution and exhibition that contained limitations but also new choices.

The movie industry promoted the varying discourses and priorities of the producers of mass culture. This point, however, would have been mitigated to an extent because of the desire to appeal to audiences' preferences in order to increase attendance and profits. In his research on Hollywood studios, Douglas Gomery concludes that profit was the primary motive for decisions within the industry. He asserts that the powerful moneymen in the industry provided a check on the agency of the cinema's creative figures (producers, directors, writers, etc.) in disseminating the messages they wanted.

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<sup>101</sup> James W. Cook, "The Return of the Culture Industry," in *The Cultural Turn in U.S. History: Past, Present, Future*, eds. James W. Cook, Lawrence B. Glickman, and Michael O'Malley (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 291-300, 303, 308-309.

<sup>102</sup> As examples of this, Michael Denning illustrates how members of the Popular Front utilized popular culture to promote their own alternative and dissenting views during the Great Depression. Philip Deloria shows how James Young Deer and Princess Red Wing used the early Hollywood culture industry to make films that ran against the grain of the most prominent cultural representations of American Indians. Steven Ross, also focusing on early twentieth-century Hollywood likewise shows how a nascent culture industry could promote very disparate messages, including atypically positive film portrayals of labor dissidents. Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1998); Philip Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places* (Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 2004), 52-108; Steven Ross, *Working Class Hollywood: Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 202-210.

Instead, the financiers expected them to make movies that would have the broadest appeal to audiences.<sup>103</sup> In order to ascertain the preferences of the public, movie studios often utilized film previews to gauge audience reactions to their movies. Some directors, such as Frank Capra, placed great weight upon the responses their movies received from preview audiences. Such responses would sometimes even inspire them radically to re-imagine their works. After previews, moviemakers sometimes re-cut their films, removed or added additional scenes, or changed the climaxes or ending of their movies. At the same time, audience tastes were molded by myriad different factors, including the movie industry itself and its publicity machine, but many other personal and societal influences and choices also factored into such reactions.<sup>104</sup>

Not everyone involved in the process of film creation, furthermore, was concerned only with making movies as economically appealing as possible. Some path-setting figures of silent-era Hollywood also wanted to try new things, to be artistically creative, and to elevate the prestige of their films and their industry. Directors like D. W. Griffith and Cecil B. DeMille worked within the capitalistic system, but they also had greater goals than merely making money. Some figures like Jesse Lasky even promoted opera in the movies, in part, out of a personal love for opera. Yet, at the same time, Lasky never lost sight of both the financial limitations and the larger benefits of his work. Others in the movie industry, including businessmen like Adolph Zukor, placed profit as the main motive for his company. Even in cases like this, though, not everyone involved

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<sup>103</sup> Douglas Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System: A History* (London: British Film Institute, 2005), 3. Similarly, Nan Enstad asserts that the major goal of the movie industry was to maximize profits. The new possibilities that she asserts movies opened to women were incidental to the industry's main profit oriented goal. Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1999), 165-166.

<sup>104</sup> Lawrence W. Levine, "The Folklore of Industrial Society: Popular Culture and Its Audiences," *American Historical Review*, Vol. 97, No. 5 (December 1992): 1396-1397.

always agreed on how best to accomplish that end. Producers were too varied in their goals and methods to consolidate them into a unified analytical group. Even within a single cultural work different people may push in contradictory or ambiguous directions. Typical debates among academics have often posited a dichotomy between producers and consumers struggling with each other over the meaning and uses of popular culture. Some, like Lawrence Levine, have focused on the agency of consumers and their “bottom-up” appropriation of and influence on culture; whereas others, such as T. J. Jackson Lears, view popular culture more in terms of the “top-down” “agenda-setting power” of largely monolithic producers over consumers. The example of hybrid opera movies, however, move past this debate by showing diverse motives, goals, and methods among the producers of popular culture.<sup>105</sup>

Key industry figures used singers like Farrar to lend gravitas and respectability to their work in the new feature film format at a time when the motion picture was still overcoming its reputation as a lowbrow, insubstantial novelty for the indiscriminate masses. These cultural producers used the symbolic cultural capital that had accrued to opera and prominent opera singers over the centuries in order to legitimate their industry

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<sup>105</sup> For a key academic example of this dichotomizing tendency, see the debate over popular culture in the *American Historical Review* from 1992: Levine, “The Folklore of Industrial Society: Popular Culture and Its Audiences,” 1369-1399; Robin D. G. Kelley, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘The Folk,’” *American Historical Review*, Vol. 97, No. 5 (December 1992): 1400-1408; Natalie Zemon Davis, “Toward Mixtures and Margins,” *American Historical Review*, Vol. 97, No. 5 (December 1992): 1409-1416; T. J. Jackson Lears, “Making Fun of Popular Culture,” *American Historical Review*, Vol. 97, No. 5 (December 1992): 1417-1426; Lawrence W. Levine, “Levine Responds,” *American Historical Review*, Vol. 97, No. 5 (December 1992): 1427-1430. James Cook explains the problems and omissions inherent in these sort of arguments:

[T]he production of the popular has never simply unfolded according to some inexorable logic of capitalist expansion. Rather, it always (simultaneously) runs through multiple axes of competing products, shifting publics, and localized power struggles. For the most part, previous scholarship has cast these struggles as relatively narrow conflicts between producers and consumers, with some conflicts over access, others over behavior, and still others over the forms and meanings of the representations themselves. Less well explored or understood are the contemporaneous struggles that often take place *within* and *across* culture industries.

Cook, “The Return of the Culture Industry,” 303.

and personal work.<sup>106</sup> Using this cultural capital, certain filmmakers and marketers used the aesthetic “highbrow” position of opera in order to reshape a “lowbrow” cultural form. Through the use of these star singers, operatic material, and filmic innovations, some directors and producers in the industry even hoped to “raise the tastes” of the public, while elevating their own profiles. If established opera stars could also bring in sizeable box-office receipts, so much the better. At the same time, industry leaders used the massive shifts taking place in the movies to help consolidate their control over motion picture production and circulation. Operatic stars in return received handsome paychecks, much wider and more frenzied acclaim, the benefits that came from being in-demand celebrities, and a certain permanence for their work. Audiences, for their part, gained greater access to the previously inaccessible, as the new technology of the motion picture made “high” art, and in particular opera, cheaper and more widespread, negating the supposed distinction of highbrow culture. The multifaceted effects of hybrid opera movies undermine the fixity of “high” and “low” culture as positions in mass culture. They had a complex spectrum of functions, meanings, and repercussions that defied such easy categories. Among other things, the hybrid opera movie was a high art form that because of its elitist connotations helped to legitimize motion pictures. At the same time, it was also a popular, well-known entertainment easily accessible to even many in the lowest socio-economic rungs of society in areas all across the United States.

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<sup>106</sup> For more on the different types of symbolic capital, including cultural capital, see: Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge, Polity, 1991), 229-231; Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge, 1984), 128-129; Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John Richardson (New York: Greenwood), 241-258.



## **Transformations in the Early Film Industry**

The early years of the movies differed greatly from what the medium would later become. Subsequent shifts in film production, distribution, and exhibition in the 1910s and 1920s would have far reaching effects that radically altered the young industry. As filmmakers tried to raise the quality of their product in order to broaden their audiences, they helped to create and consolidate the motion picture industry as a form of big business. A once open system now became closed, raising profits for those who survived to run the industry. Lasky and DeMille (and through them and others, opera) had an important part to play in this transformation through their efforts to create new standards and increase the prestige of their work in elaborate feature films. At the start of the motion picture era, early moviemakers simply filmed what was going on around them: boxing matches, women dancing, sleigh rides, snowball fights, and many other slices of everyday life. Beyond an occasional reenactment, such as scenes from the recent Spanish-American War, filmmakers had yet to experiment with movies as an artistic medium or to convey complete, fictionalized stories. This changed in 1903, when Edwin S. Porter made *The Great Train Robbery* for Edison Films and helped to transform the meaning of motion pictures. While only twelve minutes long, the movie told an entertaining fictional story using new film techniques such as crosscutting and camera movement. In some important respects, this was the birth of the movies as commonly conceived.

During the following dozen years, the motion picture industry remained unconsolidated, unsure of itself, and characterized by experimentation. In the first decade of the twentieth century, most movie audiences watched short films in small storefront

nickelodeons rather than traditional theaters. The movie industry, as had many earlier and later media, began as an open system that provided a great deal of competition and opportunities for large numbers of different people. Overhead expenses to make movies were low and few set standards or requirements existed for the young medium. Over time, however, a small number of key studios took control in Hollywood, lessened possibilities for rival producers, and limited the variety of messages moviegoers saw.<sup>107</sup> In the industry's early open period, working-class moviemakers were able to produce films championing the working class and its values. Not only did early filmmakers create many of their movies specifically for the working class and its sensibilities, they made many intended specifically for working-class women. Several of the popular serials of the day showed strong, courageous heroines, who break the typical gender molds and stereotypes. In addition, women workers were well represented in most fields in the movie industry. This was also an era when Native Americans entered the film industry as actors and occasionally even as filmmakers. However, as this system closed and consolidated, a few powerful studios pushed out these independent and small-scale moviemakers, limiting the types of motion pictures that the American film industry produced and the breadth of their discourses and possibilities.<sup>108</sup> With the narrower focus that the big studios brought to the movies, audiences the films primarily attempted to address also shifted.

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<sup>107</sup> See Paul Starr, *The Creation of the Media* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), especially chapter 9, "The Framing of the Movies."

<sup>108</sup> Ross, *Working Class Hollywood*, 202-210; Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure*, 161-200; Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places*, 52-108. For more information on women's prominent roles in the early movie industry, see Martin F. Norden, "Women in the Early Film Industry," in *The Studio System*, ed. Janet Staiger, 187-198 (Rutgers University Press, 1995).

Although people of all classes attended movies from the first years of the medium, the working class constituted the bulk of early film audiences, especially in the heyday of the nickelodeon.<sup>109</sup> Nickelodeons were typically located within working-class areas and were frequented by the poor, immigrants, and children. However, they began to die out in the early 1910s. The demise of the nickelodeon helped to hasten some of the great shifts in the movie industry in the second decade of the twentieth century. When more expensive and luxurious venues replaced the nickelodeon, the class profiles of the audience members tended to shift too. As they had since their early days, movies continued to run in vaudeville theaters. Houses of varying quality and size appealed to different classes of people. Vaudeville tickets were easier for the middle class to afford than the poorest of the working class who had frequented the nickelodeons. However, as with most venues, vaudeville houses were usually tiered with varying prices for seats in different sections of the theater, which helped draw in socio-economically diverse audiences, while also keeping disparate groups separate. Many houses, though, tended to cater more to a certain range of peoples, including predominantly working-class audiences in some theaters. Overall, vaudeville theaters drew from all classes of Americans.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Sklar argues that early movies were “the first modern mass media, and they rose to the surface of cultural consciousness from the bottom up, receiving their principal support from the lowest and most invisible classes in American society.” Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 3. Ross writes, “[W]orking-class people were the industry’s main audience before American entry into World War I (April 1917) and it was not until the construction of movie palaces after the war that the bulk of the ‘middle class’ flocked to the movies on a regular basis.” Ross, *Working Class Hollywood*, xiii.

<sup>110</sup> Russell Merritt, “Nickelodeon Theaters, 1905-1914: Building an Audience for the Movies,” in *The American Film Industry*, ed. Tino Balio, 59-82 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976), 63; Michael Kammen, *American Culture, American Tastes: Social Change and the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 109-10, 126.

During the 1910s and 1920s, entrepreneurs began to build theaters specifically to show movies. Theaters used to be located in the entertainment districts of cities, but the new movie houses sprang up in a greater variety of locations. Sam Katz, the manager of the distribution company Paramount, which merged with Lasky's company in 1916, took great interest in carefully erecting theaters in places where they were most likely to bring in new revenue. In particular, Katz built movie theaters on the edge of cities, nearer to the suburbs where he hoped to appeal to larger numbers of the middle class. In addition to motion picture presentations, these new movie theaters offered stage shows to attract viewers. In the early years of the film industry, movie attendance was very high. Keeping attendance levels up, however, required getting the same people to return frequently for additional showings. Most movie theaters cycled through films quickly and tried to vary the nature of their combination film and stage shows to keep them fresh and appealing. In addition to a main movie, showings frequently included newsreels, cartoons, and serials. Most houses also offered some form of musical performance from orchestras of varying sizes, organs, or pianos. The majority of movie house programs included at least some classical music, often in the form of an opening operatic overture, but also sometimes symphonic or light classical pieces. Musicians typically played through much of the rest of the program too. This was all designed to keep large audiences entertained and coming back.<sup>111</sup>

Katz's theaters also exhibited another trend of motion picture exhibition. He constructed his theaters to be far more luxurious and elegant than the earlier nickelodeon had been. Other theater chains soon followed suit. Theaters became larger and their

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<sup>111</sup> Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System*, 21-25; Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment*, 9, 34, 41, 47-50; Fryer, *The Opera Singer and the Silent Film*, 140.

decorations more ornate. Instead of merely showing pictures, the new theaters became complete entertainment complexes. They often offered such extra incentives to their customers as free childcare, smoking rooms, art galleries, and even playgrounds in the basement. Uniformed ushers helped people to their seats. These fancy new movie houses often appealed to well-off patrons, many of whom also attended live theatrical performances. These visually impressive, service-oriented movie theaters discarded all the working-class sheen of the nickelodeon and opened the medium to broader audiences. The working class continued to frequent the movies, but the new theaters did not become the working-class social spaces of the nickelodeons. The movie palace primarily catered to new groups of viewers.<sup>112</sup>

Around the time of these changes in movie consumption, film production also underwent a major transformation that played a fundamental role in the consolidation and closing of the industry. In the medium's early years, the film industry had centered around New York City. The first movie producer, Thomas Edison, located his research laboratories in Menlo Park, New Jersey. Unsurprisingly, he made his early moving pictures in the vicinity of his laboratory. In 1900 he built a film studio in Lower Manhattan. Soon more businessmen sought to invest in the movies, and the industry in and around New York City grew to sizable proportions. A thriving film industry also developed in Chicago. These cities, however, were not ideally suited to the early motion picture camera, which required steady bright light to function properly. For this reason, filming was often not possible in wintertime. In 1909, however, filmmakers discovered

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<sup>112</sup> Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System*, 21-25; Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment*, 20-25, 28. Richard Butsch argues, "These large, luxurious theaters opened a decade earlier than is traditionally thought of as the movie palace era." Some of these changes had already occurred as earlier as 1908, and some large cities had several impressive movie theaters by 1910. Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750-1990* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 160.

the tiny, rural community of Hollywood just outside of Los Angeles. By 1911 ten film companies were working in the Hollywood area, but initially moviemakers only made short one- and two-reelers there. However, in 1912 representatives of the Jesse L. Lasky Feature Play Company arrived in the small community with the intention of filming feature length films.<sup>113</sup>

Director Cecil B. DeMille later recalled how the studio unexpectedly relocated to Hollywood. DeMille had decided that he wanted to have more visual authenticity in his first feature-length film than New York City could provide. Since the film was set in Arizona, he boarded his cast and crew onto a train to Arizona, but once there he realized the location was unacceptable for filming. Unwilling to return with no movie, the director took a chance and continued on to Los Angeles, where he found a small number of filmmakers already working. Improvising, he bought a barn in Hollywood to serve as the studio's new offices and headquarters. He filmed outdoors near the barn. Lasky was shocked to learn afterwards the location of his new studio, but was willing to trust his partner's judgment. Soon DeMille made a great success of the young studio when his film, *The Squaw Man*, the first feature film made in Hollywood, became a hit. The Lasky Feature Play Company's output grew rapidly thereafter.<sup>114</sup>

Once Lasky's company was successfully ensconced in Hollywood, more and more movie studios moved their main operations to southern California. By 1915, the year Lasky released *Carmen*, six movie companies located in Hollywood were producing feature films. Additional studios there continued to create prolific numbers of shorts. The

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<sup>113</sup> Douglas Gomery, *Movie History: A Survey* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1991), 12; Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema*, 149, 159-161. The Lasky Company was the first studio in Hollywood to focus on features. Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment*, 227.

<sup>114</sup> Cecil B. DeMille, *The Autobiography of Cecil B. DeMille* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1959), 78-80; Lasky, *I Blow My Own Horn*, 98.

consolidation of the American film industry in Hollywood was largely completed by the early 1920s. By 1922 Hollywood produced 84% of American movies. Soon after the American film industry settled in Hollywood, the studios themselves began to combine into a handful of big studios that largely held a monopoly over film production. This greatly constricted a previously sprawling, fragmented, and variegated system. No longer could almost anyone enter the industry and make the sort of films that he or she wanted with little money or experience. As the new industry structure solidified, the Classic Hollywood system, which dominated American film production from the 1920s and early 1930s, began to develop along the lines of a vertically integrated corporate business model. Already in the 1910s, the manner of financing movies began to change as Wall Street investors became far more involved in the industry than ever before. More standardized fare replaced the early diversified movies and the production process became more rationalized. Since films from the early twentieth century appeared as parts of larger variety programs, individual theaters had much greater input on how the films were shown in context, making movies seem more “live.” This too began slowly to change, as even movie showings became more uniform and predictable. Among other significant developments, the new predominance of the feature film, which required more money, time, skill, and better facilities and equipment to make, played an especially important role in this “closing.”<sup>115</sup>

In the middle of the first decade of the twentieth century, filmmakers began to develop basic one-reel, fictionalized story films. By the end of the decade, they began to

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<sup>115</sup> Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment*, 63, 91-92, 104; Miriam Hansen, “Early Cinema, Late Cinema: Transformations of the Public Sphere,” in *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*, ed. Linda Williams (Rutgers University Press, 1995), 136-139. Hansen notes that the classical Hollywood studio system was especially characterized by economic Fordism, standardization, social homogenization, exploitation, Americanization, and cultural imperialism. *Ibid.*, 136.

expand these short movies into longer and more substantial feature films, which were more explanatory and easier to follow. With features came other cinematic improvements, including better lighting and editing, greater filmic realism and attempts at a more artistic appearance. Sophisticated ways of using film, including double-exposures and fade-ins and fade-outs also became much more common.<sup>116</sup> Along with better movies, filmmakers began to recruit higher quality, experienced actors from the stage. At the same time, audiences began to expect professional actors in onscreen roles and started to have their favorites, which helped to lead to the nascent movie star system. Commentators began to compare motion pictures with stage plays and even speculated whether movies could replace live theater. The shift toward both better theaters and improved feature films was part of the same strategy to broaden movie audiences. Features, one commentator of the day noted, “attract a class of patrons formerly absent from picture theatres.” Another commentator in a 1911 article noted that filmmakers were now eager to convince the public that movies were no longer “circus shows,” in order to counter the “ill repute” of the medium’s early days.<sup>117</sup>

Studio executives primarily wanted to use higher quality films to attract larger, more varied audiences because of the increased profits that they would bring. Many directors, including D. W. Griffith and Cecil B. DeMille, however, sought greater prestige and acclaim for their work through feature films with substantive plots.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema*, 53-56, 235-239, 244-245, 260-261.

<sup>117</sup> Horace Plimpton, *New York Dramatic Mirror* (February 24, 1915): 22, quoted in Koszarski, *An Evening’s Entertainment*, 163; “Is the Moving Picture to Be the Play of the Future?” *New York Times* (Aug 20, 1911): SM8. Paramount’s trade paper in a Christmas 1914 article, “The Dawn of a New Era: Better Pictures, Finer Theatres, Higher Admission Prices,” specifically remarked on the connection between features films and the nice, new movie theaters being built. Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema*, 135.

<sup>118</sup> Merritt, “Nickelodeon Theaters,” 63-66; Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, 58, 64; Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure*, 170; Sumiko Higashi, *Cecil B. DeMille and American Culture: The Silent Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 30-31. As Douglas Gomery writes, the overriding goal of



Griffith, in particular, revolutionized the new industry with his blockbuster hit feature, *The Birth of a Nation*. In his early quest for suitably artistic topics, Griffith had filmed a version of the popular Verdi opera *Rigoletto* in 1909. Entitled *A Fool's Revenge*, the movie was an eleven minute short film.<sup>119</sup> Several of Griffith's early Biograph shorts were well regarded for their outstanding quality according to the standards of the day, but the brevity of early short films limited his scope and artistic vision. Nothing he ever did matched the influence and success of *The Birth of a Nation*, a twelve-reel film at a time when one- and two-reel shorts were still immensely popular and a five-reel movie was considered a feature. Griffith conceived of this 1915 film as a piece of art intended to appeal especially to the middle and upper classes, while expanding the sort of techniques and intricate stories that movies could utilize.<sup>120</sup> Although much that was remarkable in the film, like its novel lighting, moving shots, and interspersed plot lines, were not Griffith's original innovations, the director combined many recent film developments into an experimental new whole. Griffith attempted both the grand and the intimate in the movie. The size and scope of the production gave the film an epic feel, while close-ups and a more naturalistic style of acting that Griffith encouraged allowed viewers to empathize with the characters. Although controversial because of its heroic portrayal of the Ku Klux Klan and racist depiction of African-American characters, the film enjoyed unprecedented success. Touring as a road show rather than playing typical brief engagements in regular theaters, *The Birth of a Nation* became the most successful

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the movie moguls and financiers was "to make as much money as possible." Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System: A History*, 164.

<sup>119</sup> Richard Fawkes, *Opera on Film* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 2000), 12. Another film based on *Rigoletto*, *The Duke's Jester*, came out concurrently with *A Fool's Revenge*. Music from the opera accompanied showings of both films. *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, 58, 64.

motion picture to date and convinced many moviemakers of the financial viability of making expensive feature films.<sup>121</sup> Griffith's next film, *Intolerance*, although not as successful as *The Birth of a Nation*, also pushed the boundaries of what could be done.

Unlike many silent film directors, Griffith cared passionately about the music for his films. Music was an integral part of the movies from the early years of their inception. However, the production of silent film music was often haphazard. No standardization existed, and each theater independently made decisions about what music to play with the movies shown. Early in the second decade of the twentieth century, movie studios frequently began to release cue sheets with their films. These cue sheets varied in detail, but generally indicated the type of music to be played during different scenes throughout the movie. In many instances the cue sheets recommended specific musical numbers, but they often only suggested the mood of the music that would be most appropriate. Cue sheets frequently referenced operatic and classical pieces, since they were in the public domain and generally available. Opera was especially well-represented in the musical anthologies and handbooks that many movie theater musicians used as their source material. The style and clichés of opera soon became those of movie music. In the first decade of the century scores specifically written for the screen were rare, but by 1915 they became more common. Some famous operatic composers, including Pietro Mascagni and Ruggero Leoncavallo, wrote scores for the movies. Camille Saint-Saëns, the composer of *Samson et Dalila*, created one of the first totally original film scores in 1908. The idea of an underscore to highlight moods, events, and characterizations on film

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<sup>121</sup> Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment*, 320. *The Birth of a Nation* was the biggest financial success of all silent films (although no exact box office figures exist), even though there were "storms of protest" over the subject matter of the film. *Ibid.* In an obituary of Griffith, critic James Agee wrote that watching *The Birth of a Nation* was seeing "the birth of an art." Quoted in Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment*, 214.

traces back to the orchestral sections of the earliest operas. At first, though, early film scores were mainly only used for higher priced “road show” movies.<sup>122</sup>

The varied and unpredictable manner in which each theater dealt with silent film accompaniment could present problems. In his autobiography, Cecil B. DeMille recounted an experience of watching one of his films, *The Warrens of Virginia*, at Tally’s Theater in Los Angeles. DeMille had innovatively cross cut scenes from a battle and a love scene, but was appalled to find loud martial music blaring throughout the entire section of the film, which in his opinion destroyed the mood of the love scene sequences. He later recalled the influence that this had on his conception of movie music:

From my experience with Mr. Tally’s orchestra I came to a conclusion which D. W. Griffith had already reached independently: that the producer of a film should provide the musical score to go with it, a score either compiled from existing music or specially composed for the film, and synchronized with each scene appearing on the screen, so that the accompaniment of the pianist or orchestra would help and not hurt the story.<sup>123</sup>

DeMille’s experiences were by no means unique. This lack of correlation was a common problem during the silent era.<sup>124</sup> The synchronized scores that Griffith and DeMille championed in the 1910s constituted a major advance in the quality of film accompaniment, an advancement that eventually became the expected standard.

D. W. Griffith worked closely with composer Joseph Breil on the music for *The Birth of a Nation*. Breil, heavily influenced by Richard Wagner, had composed film scores prior to this one, but some scholars consider his score for *Birth* to be the “first ‘modern’ film score.” Unlike most scores up to that time, Breil precisely synchronized his music with the actions on screen. Instead of merely shifting themes when intertitles

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<sup>122</sup> James Wierzbicki, *Film Music: A History* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 23, 36-41, 48-49, 52-57; Fawkes, *Opera on Film*, 28-29; Franklin, “Movies as Opera,” 82.

<sup>123</sup> Cecil B. DeMille, *The Autobiography of Cecil B. DeMille*, 132-133.

<sup>124</sup> Wierzbicki, *Film Music*, 33-34.

appeared onscreen, Breil introduced numerous thematic shifts in the middle of scenes. Breil's score was not used for the movie's Los Angeles premiere, however. For that performance, Romanian-born composer Carli Elinor compiled a score of primarily operatic musical pieces. Breil's score, played by an orchestra traveling with the movie's road show exhibitions, also utilized copious amounts of operatic material. Most notably, Wagner's "Ride of Valkyries" from *Die Walküre* played during the film's climax, the "heroic" appearance of KKK to save the white maiden. Breil also used music from Wagner's *Rienzi*, as well as themes from Bellini's *Norma*, Hérolde's *Zampa*, and Weber's *Der Freischütz*. In addition, snippets of many classical orchestral works appeared in the score, such as Grieg's *Peer Gynt* and Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*. To situate the film better in the Civil War era, Breil likewise included several well-known nineteenth-century popular songs, including Stephen Foster's "Camptown Races," the sentimental ballad "Home! Sweet Home!" and the Civil War songs "Dixie," "Tramp, Tramp, Tramp," and "We Are Coming, Father Abraham."<sup>125</sup> As was common in the nineteenth century itself, operatic, classical, and popular music all mixed freely together on the same bill.

As a young man, Griffith had originally aspired to be a singer. Even after becoming a director, "[h]e could burst into *Tannhäuser* or any of the arias from opera at any minute," actress Lillian Gish later recalled. Griffith modeled his films on the operas he so loved. Like Wagner, Griffith saw his works in terms of *Gesamtkunstwerk*: the plot and meaning must combine in perfect harmony with visual spectacle and music. Breil agreed with his director on the operatic nature of the movie. Years later he recalled that in his opinion the first half of the picture "was a tragic romance, just such as every opera composer is looking for. And right there I decided that the film would be treated as an

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<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 58-60; Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment*, 34.

opera, without a libretto, of course.” Griffith considered the lack of a libretto and words to be no hindrance to his goals with the movie. “Music—fine music,” he argued, “will always be the voice of the silent drama.”<sup>126</sup> This operatic approach received approval in the press. *The Los Angeles Times* noted: “A tremendous idea that of Mr. Griffith, no less than the adapting of grand-opera methods to motion pictures! Each character playing has a distinct type of music, a distinct theme as in opera.” *The Atlanta Constitution* praised Griffith’s use of musical motives and claimed that the director had created “a new kind of grand opera.” At least fifteen of the themes that Breil uses in the movie are repeatedly associated with a person, action, or mood. Breil’s use of Wagnerian style leitmotifs is the way in which the movie is most overtly operatic. Although not an adaptation of an opera, *The Birth of a Nation* is nonetheless a superlative example of an early hybrid opera movie.<sup>127</sup>

Griffith was not the only innovator in the industry at the time, however, nor was he the only prominent director to film an opera of sorts for the silent screen. Cecil B. DeMille with the encouragement of Jesse Lasky also sought to improve the respectability and quality of the new medium in part by incorporating opera into his work. Prior to World War I, European movies dominated the artistic feature film market. Two Italian features, *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1913) and *Cabiria* (1914), especially influenced the young director. Although a rival, Griffith also significantly influenced DeMille, who later recalled: “He was the teacher of us all. Not a picture has been made since his time that does not bear some trace of his influence.” DeMille especially credited Griffith with

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<sup>126</sup> Schroeder, *Cinema’s Allusions, Opera’s Allure*, 25-36.

<sup>127</sup> Wierzbicki, *Film Music*, 59-60; “Advance Seat Sale At the Criterion for ‘Birth of a Nation,’” *Atlanta Constitution* (March 8, 1919): 4.

teaching moviemakers like himself “how to photograph thought.”<sup>128</sup> So enthusiastic was he about Griffith that he told an interviewer in 1958, “Griffith is my number one director.”<sup>129</sup>

DeMille first entered the film industry at the suggestion of Jesse Lasky. Lasky in turn was inspired to start a production company at the urging of Samuel Goldfish (later named Goldwyn). Lasky initially dismissed the idea because he considered himself a “showman” and a “high-class vaudeville producer,” while he did not consider movies worthy of the appellation “entertainment.”<sup>130</sup> A French film, *Queen Elizabeth*, helped to change Lasky’s mind about the inferiority of the motion picture. This historical bio-pic starred the legendary and talented actress Sarah Bernhardt and Geraldine Farrar’s future husband Lou Tellegen. It had been imported by Adolph Zukor’s Famous Players Company, which specialized in quality films. Lasky and DeMille first worked together on a staged operetta entitled *California* and later on various vaudeville projects. When DeMille was musing about going to Mexico and writing about the revolution ongoing there, Lasky made a “hasty proposal” that they join together with Goldfish to create their own movie company. Lasky added one stipulation. He told DeMille, “Cecil, if we’re going to go into this at all, let’s for heaven’s sake do it in a big way and make a *long* picture like *Queen Elizabeth*.” With only \$20,000 in capital the Jesse L. Lasky Feature

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<sup>128</sup> Cecil B. DeMille, *The Autobiography of Cecil B. DeMille*, 124-125. DeMille was especially impressed by the spectacle in the most successful Italian films of the day. He wrote, “It was Italian films, like *Cabiria* and *The Last Days of Pompeii*, which gave me my first full conception of the possibilities of great spectacle on the screen, of photographing massive movements, whole battles, whole cities, whole nations almost.” DeMille also noted that he and Lasky attended the premiere of *The Birth of a Nation*, which he believed came along at the perfect time, not only because he and other directors were also starting to focus on feature films, but because the Edison Trust, a monopoly of filmmakers focused on short films, had just broken up. *Ibid.*

<sup>129</sup> George C. Pratt, “Forty-five Years of Picture Making: An Interview with Cecil B. DeMille,” *Film History*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (1989), 137.

<sup>130</sup> Lasky was not alone in this sentiment. Newspapers, for example, did not typically even consider films worthy enough to review around the time of the birth of the feature film. Koszarski, *An Evening’s Entertainment*, 191.

Play Company was born with Lasky as president, Goldfish as general manager, and DeMille as director-general.<sup>131</sup>

The nascent company first looked to the theater for both stories and actors.<sup>132</sup> Lasky especially focused on the people and plays with which he was already most familiar, and he remained in New York City in order to deal with the recruitment of Broadway actors, the purchase of plays, and negotiations with distributors and other business figures. In 1914 Lasky bought the rights to ten plays by the famous and well-respected writer and theater impresario David Belasco. Eventually, however, the studio began to offer bonuses to scriptwriters who could come up with original stories in addition to the adaptations already being used. For greater authenticity in screenplays, sets, and costumes, the company built the first movie studio research department. The Lasky Company also employed the movie industry's first art director to enhance the appearance of its films. According to Lasky, DeMille would "stop at nothing in the attempt to give his pictures 'class.'" <sup>133</sup>

Lasky once wrote to DeMille that "my slogan is 'Dividends first and art second.' Or rather a blend of the two."<sup>134</sup> DeMille, however, preferred to stress the medium's artistic value. In an interview, the director claimed, "Motion pictures are the most

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<sup>131</sup> Lasky, *I Blow My Own Horn*, 88, 90-92.

<sup>132</sup> Filmmakers, beginning around 1907-1908, began trying to uplift and educate viewers by filming "acknowledged cultural masterpieces." The development of the feature film allowed a deeper exposition and elaboration of plots. In turn, moviemakers began to look for higher quality, more complex material to film. This brought about a focus in the industry on primarily filming successful novels and plays. During the first years of the feature film, original scripts were still uncommon. Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema*, 42, 206, 256.

<sup>133</sup> Lasky, *I Blow My Own Horn*, 101-109; Sumiko Higashi, "Cecil B. DeMille and the Lasky Company: Legitimizing Feature Film as Art," *Film History*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (1990), 183-187.

<sup>134</sup> Higashi, "Cecil B. DeMille and the Lasky Company," 187.

important contribution to literature and art since the invention of fiction.”<sup>135</sup> Lasky also shared his personal views with reporters. In an article for the new magazine, *Moving Picture World*, Lasky discussed the benefits of features. In his opinion, feature films led to nicer theaters and higher ticket prices. Furthermore, he averred, motion pictures were now interesting to the “classes” and legitimate critics were beginning to review movies in newspapers. Features also attracted more creative men, who would, he said, “dignify the industry” with their movies.<sup>136</sup> Adolph Zukor, whose studio soon merged with Lasky’s, also expressed views on these subjects. He told one interviewer: “We believe that we are doing a sort of missionary work for the higher art—that we are aiding in the cultivation of a taste for better things.” He also noted that he wanted those who could only afford to pay as little as ten cents to be able to attend his pictures.<sup>137</sup>

Beyond shifting to feature films and using sophisticated moviemaking methods, another concurrent and interrelated strategy in legitimizing films for DeMille and Lasky was to recruit already popular and esteemed opera singers and stage stars. Both Lasky and DeMille were long-time opera fans. Lasky used to go often to the Metropolitan Opera as a young man when he performed in vaudeville in New York.<sup>138</sup> He was arguably to become the foremost proponent of opera films and singers in Hollywood over

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<sup>135</sup> “ ‘Joan the Woman’ Film Triumph for Star and Director,” Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album. DeMille also wrote an article on this subject entitled “Photodrama a New Art” in 1917. Koszarski, *An Evening’s Entertainment*, 228.

<sup>136</sup> Quoted in Higashi, “Cecil B. DeMille and the Lasky Company,” 189-190.

<sup>137</sup> George Blaisdell, “Adolph Zukor talks of Famous Players,” *Moving Picture World*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (January 1913): 136. The view of movies as an art form was becoming more and more generally accepted at this time. In 1915 alone, two books promoted the artistic side of the young medium (*The Art of the Moving Picture* by Vachel Lindsay and *The Photodrama: Its Place Among the Fine Arts* by William Morgan Hannon). Hannon even went so far as to argue that movies, already produced by corporations as part of a larger industry by this time, were not commodities but the artistic creations of single geniuses. Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema*, 272.

<sup>138</sup> Jesse L. Lasky, “I Remember Caruso” (February 6, 1951), Jesse L. Lasky Papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, Box 2, Folder 45: Writings 1904, 1950-1951; Cecil B. DeMille, *The Autobiography of Cecil B. DeMille*, 133.



the long course of his career. DeMille's mother used to take him and his brother William to operatic performances in New York when they were boys, especially to the operas of Richard Wagner. Years later, he explained the influence this had on him: "I sometimes surprise or annoy the Paramount music department nowadays by saying that I want something like this or that obscure Wagnerian theme worked into the score of one of my pictures." As a young man, he toured with an opera company, primarily doing backstage jobs. Once when he was older, before his entry into movies, the conductor was ill for a performance of the opera *Martha*, and DeMille stepped in and conducted the music in his stead. He also briefly performed as an opera singer.<sup>139</sup> These men's love of opera led them to look to the operatic stage when recruiting stars to increase the prestige and enlarge the audiences of their movies. Of the opera singers they recruited, Geraldine Farrar was unquestionably the most important and successful for their company.<sup>140</sup>

### **Making DeMille's *Carmen***

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<sup>139</sup> Abel, "Opera," 490; Cecil B. DeMille, *The Autobiography of Cecil B. DeMille*, 37, 56, 146.

<sup>140</sup> One journalist at the time wrote about the larger purpose of Farrar's entry into the movie industry: "There is one portion of the public which has not so easily been reconciled to the cinematograph, however, and that is the box holders and that large body whose criterion of an artistic effect is the price they pay for a seat...It was to combat this feeling that the Jesse Lasky Company engaged Miss Geraldine Farrar to play the title role in the opera of 'Carmen.' ...[A]n immediate return upon the investment was not considered by them to be of paramount importance in this particular instance. What they desired was to interest that part of the public previously alluded to which still regards moving pictures as essentially a cheap and therefore vulgar form of amusement. That they have succeeded in so doing will undoubtedly be proved by a long line of automobiles drawn up before the house where the 'Carmen' pictures are playing." E. H. Bierstadt, "Opera in Moving Pictures," *Opera Magazine* (October 1915): 30-32. In an interview with the press during the filming of *Carmen*, Sam Goldfish made his and the Lasky Company's reasons for hiring Farrar explicit: "[I]t isn't for the sake of the money we will make that we employ her. By the time we pay her and pay for the expense of production there won't be any money. But we want her to give prestige to pictures. People who think of them as 5 cent movies and never go near them, when they hear of Geraldine Farrar in a film will go out of curiosity to see what it is like, and then the picture will be so pleasing that they will be picture converts and we will have won them as patrons for our and other people's pictures which are just as good, but not so expensive." Kitty Kelly, "Flickerings from Filmland: Why Farrar Gets Such a Big Salary," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (June 17, 1915): 14.

One of the most popular singers of her day, Geraldine Farrar was also one of the most influential female performers of the early twentieth century. Famed Irish tenor John McCormack named her America's greatest singer. Some newspaper critics dubbed her "America's most popular prima donna." In the more limited world of opera, she was the biggest box-office draw of all female opera singers.<sup>141</sup> Farrar was fundamental to Lasky and DeMille's goals. They focused some of their main aspirations for their work around her, as they pushed to bring about substantial changes in the larger industry. She lent them and the young medium her cultural capital as a well-respected, admired, and successful "highbrow" operatic artist. In exchange Farrar and her art benefited from the movies.

As movies banked on opera's high-class, exclusive reputation, they also at the same time helped partly to undermine that reputation by bringing it to far larger audiences than ever before. Farrar had substantive reasons for entering the movies that highlight some specific qualities of the new medium that made it attractive to opera singers, including reaching wider publics. In July 1915 in the pages of *Photoplay* magazine, Morris Gest, the son-in-law of dramatist David Belasco and a close personal friend of Farrar's (as well as her manager at the time), recounted the story of the soprano's motion picture recruitment. According to Gest, after dinner one night Farrar showed him a portrait hanging in her library of the German Kaiser, a former patron of hers. As she mused on how different he looked in real life at the time compared to his

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<sup>141</sup> Tim Page, "The Opera's First Superstar," *New York Times* (February 28, 1982): D19; "Geraldine Farrar is Dead," *World Telegram Journal* (New York: March 12, 1967), Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album; "Miss Farrar Scores Triumph in 'Joan the Woman,'" Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album; Mitchell Mantering, "Our Youngest Prima Donna," Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 39, album; "Festival is Here; Farrar Concert Opens Bangor's Biggest Musical Event," Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 39, album; "MUSIC ART AND DRAMA; Metropolitan Operas," *The Independent*, Vol. 64 (New York: March 26, 1908), 677.

youthful appearance in the painting, Gest took the opportunity to mention the movies. “The only way to really live forever,” he told her, “is on a picture screen.” Having broached the subject of the movies with her, he took her to see a filmed version of Belasco’s play, *The Girl of the Golden West* (on which Puccini had based his opera, *La Fanciulla del West*). Gest recorded her astonishment at the luxury of the motion picture palace they attended. He recalled her exclamations: “[I]t is almost as big as the Metropolitan Opera House! I had no idea so many people went to see moving pictures and such people! I really see opera-goers here!” Pushing his point further, he remarked to her about how many more people could attend a movie than a dramatic performance and how much cheaper it was for them to do so. Finally getting to his real point, he suggested to her that it would be wonderful for so many more people to be able to see her on the movie screen than were able to watch her on the opera stage. She fretted that people came to see her mainly because of her voice, not her acting, which would be all that she could rely on in silent movies. Nonetheless, she thought over Gest’s suggestions.<sup>142</sup>

The next time she saw Gest, she brought up their previous discussion. She told him that she had been impressed with the films that she had seen. “I believe a new and very great art is being born,” she averred. Gest now got to specifics. He believed that she should film her greatest stage role, *Carmen*. When she worried about her acting ability, he responded by comparing a potential movie career with her already successful recording career:

There are nine million records of your voice to-day, and everyone who owns Farrar records has a ‘Carmen’ record. Every one of those people, as well as many others, would be more than glad of the opportunity to see you as an actress even

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<sup>142</sup> Morris Gest, “Winning Farrar,” *Photoplay* (July 1915): 115-117; Essoe and Lee, *DeMille*, 36; Lasky, *I Blow My Own Horn*, 116.

as they now hear you as a singer.<sup>143</sup> Your voice is heard in every American town and city of consequence, and yet you've been in comparatively few of these places. Do you think that your actual moving personality would have less appeal?

The next day, Gest called Jesse Lasky to meet about Farrar. Although incredulous that Farrar would actually agree to work in the movies, Lasky listened with great enthusiasm to Gest's suggestions about a film adaptation of *Carmen* with Farrar.<sup>144</sup> Together Gest and Lasky attended a performance of Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*, Farrar's last performance of the season at the Metropolitan Opera. The auditorium was sold out, and the two men had to stand through the performance. "I have never seen such adulation as when the final curtain came down," Lasky later recalled. After the performance, he went backstage to talk with the lauded soprano. Wasting little time, he offered her a contract to star in a film version of *Carmen*. Painfully aware of the low status of motion pictures at the time, Lasky immediately tried to head off a potential objection before it was made. "We have no trouble securing famous plays and engaging their stars," he asserted, "but they're always afraid acting in a movie will hurt their stage prestige. I could see by the ovation you got today that your prestige is such that whatever you do, your public will accept it as right." He further predicted that she could be the break-through artist that

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<sup>143</sup> Apparently, Gest was correct in asserting that fans of her recordings would like to be able to see her too, suggesting one of the reasons people attended her movies in large numbers. In an article from the time period, Farrar discussed one letter from among her fan mail:

Most of these letters came from small towns, many of them that I had never even heard of. One, for instance, was from a blacksmith in a little Virginia town who said he was over sixty years old. He said he had a little phonograph on which he played some of my records, and he was glad I was going to act for the "movies" because he could never hope to see "Cio-Cio-San" any other way. The other letters were in the same tenor.

"How My Public Manages Me," Farrar, LOC, Box 39, album.

<sup>144</sup> Gest, "Winning Farrar," 115-117. *Carmen* had been the first opera that Farrar had seen, and thus it held a special place in her appreciation. After one performance her mother took her to as a child, she determined that she too would sing *Carmen* at the Met one day. John Dizikes, *Opera in America: A Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 402; Geraldine Farrar, *Geraldine Farrar: The Story of an American Singer* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Pub., 1916, 2008), 27.

would make it appear acceptable for other stage stars to act in movies. Convinced, she accepted his offer.<sup>145</sup>

These recollections indicate some of the reasons for her recruitment and her acceptance and perhaps also suggest the motives of other later opera singers who went to Hollywood. Lasky, for his part, recognized Farrar's prestigious reputation and popularity, which he could take advantage of for his studio. Farrar knew that she could benefit from Lasky and his movies in return. Specific practical reasons also factored into her decision, including the need to rest her vocal cords and the limitations that World War I imposed on foreign touring, but as her conversation with Gest indicates, the possibility of "living forever" in a sense was especially appealing to her.<sup>146</sup> That she could leave behind a permanent record of her interpretation of her favorite role factored into her decision. She also expressed faith in the artistic value of the young medium. Beyond this Gest apparently impressed her with the idea that she could reach far larger numbers of people in a greater variety of locations with her art and spread her fame with the concomitant publicity.

Contemporary news and magazine articles highlighted the permanency of movies compared to live performances and discussed their popularity. One writer referred to Farrar's films and recordings as "the immortalization of a mortal."<sup>147</sup> When she did *Carmen* onstage, movie reviewer Julian Johnson wrote in November 1915: "[A]t most, only three or four thousand people heard and saw her at one time. And in the immemorial springtimes of the future, when her lithe and passionate beauty is as much history as the wars of yesterday, all the glory and splendor and fire of her impersonation may be

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<sup>145</sup> Cecil B. DeMille, *The Autobiography of Cecil B. DeMille*, 139; Lasky, *I Blow My Own Horn*, 116-117.

<sup>146</sup> Lasky, *I Blow My Own Horn*, 117.

<sup>147</sup> Mannering, "Our Youngest Prima Donna."

rekindled, studied, analyzed, thrilled over.”<sup>148</sup> Another journalist pointed out that the number of people who would see Farrar’s later film *Joan the Woman* would equal all the people who watched her perform live across the entirety of her operatic career.<sup>149</sup> A *Washington Post* reporter also commented on this aspect of Farrar’s films: “Every day Miss Farrar on the screen will entertain more persons as a photoplay star than if she appeared for a month every day before the great crowd at the Harvard-Yale game.”<sup>150</sup> Farrar herself likewise commented on the immortality of the medium and the breadth of the audiences it could reach. In an article in the *Woman’s Home Companion* in 1915, Farrar noted, “to you in the thousands of small towns and to many of you in the big cities I am but the voice, an elusive being—no visible personality. It is because I want to come closer to you in reality that I have taken up that other imperishable record—the motion picture.”<sup>151</sup>

In addition to their permanency, most movies were more widely distributed and easily accessible than similar live stage performances. The Metropolitan Opera, Farrar’s “home” opera house, provided New York audiences with numerous operatic performances each season. In the early twentieth century, Chicago and Boston also had important opera companies that showcased key singers, and San Francisco was another important city for opera at the time.<sup>152</sup> Nonetheless, relatively few cities or towns had their own opera companies. Because of the paucity of permanent opera companies in most American cities, audiences of the early twentieth century typically only saw operas

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<sup>148</sup> Julian Johnson, Review, *Photoplay*, Vol. 8, No. 6 (November 1915), 77-80.

<sup>149</sup> “Farrar Film Breaks All Records,” Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 39, album.

<sup>150</sup> “Current Attractions: Columbia—Geraldine Farrar in Films,” *Washington Post* (November 7, 1915): SM2.

<sup>151</sup> Quoted in Anne Morey, “Geraldine Farrar: A Star from Another Medium,” in *Flickers of Desire: Movies Stars of the 1910s*, ed. Jennifer M. Bean, 137-154 (Rutgers University Press, 2011), 141.

<sup>152</sup> Joseph Horowitz, *Classical Music in America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2005), 376-377, 380.

or heard operatic numbers via operatic tours and singers' recitals. Operatic tours could be quite limited in the number and variety of cities they visited. Although recitalists often sang in places more varied by size and region, prominent opera singers never covered the vast areas that movies could. Not only were recitals limited by location, some opera singers largely focused on non-operatic materials during their recitals. Farrar, for example, once noted in a letter that she did not want do "same-old-same-old" arias in concert, because she felt that it was distressing to hear them only with piano accompaniment.<sup>153</sup> Although she had in fact included opera in earlier recitals, and occasionally included an operatic aria, such as one from Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*, in her later recitals, Farrar mostly focused on art songs in her tours. Sometimes her entire recitals would consist solely of lieder by Beethoven, Schumann, Grieg, Rachmaninoff, and others. However, after her official retirement from the Met, Farrar occasionally toured with full opera productions. From 1924 to 1925, she toured with the opera *Carmen* in numerous cities throughout the country.<sup>154</sup>

Soprano Rosa Ponselle's recitals are also illustrative of the scope of locations recitalists reached. In 1921, for example, Ponselle gave recitals in New York City, Boston, Schenectady, Washington, DC, New Haven, Springfield, MA, Bridgeport, CT, Worcester, MA, Bangor, Portland, ME, Newark, and New Castle, PA. Four years later she included some tours outside of the Northeast, including appearances in San Diego, Oakland, Sacramento, San Francisco, Seattle, Springfield, MO, and Wilson, NC. In these few large and medium sized cities, she typically sang a mixture of operatic arias, such as

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<sup>153</sup> Untitled letter, December 1920, Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 8, Folder 19.

<sup>154</sup> "Farrar Concert Leading Event of Season," *Richmond Journal* (January 24, 1916), Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 30, album; Leonard Liebling, "Farrar Wins Triumph as Lieder Singer," Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album; Olin Downes, "Music: Geraldine Farrar Triumphs," Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album; Tour notes, Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 12, Folder 19.

“Ernani involami” and “Vissi d’arte,” along with *Lieder* and an occasional nineteenth-century popular song, such as Stephen Foster’s “Swanee River” or “Love’s in My Heart” by Huntington Woodman.<sup>155</sup> Opera singers’ recitals commonly contained combinations of operatic numbers, art songs, popular music, and hymns, which showed a willingness to mix popular culture with “art” as was common in nineteenth-century entertainments but had grown uncommon in the nation’s opera houses.<sup>156</sup>

The most famous and well-attended operatic tours were those of the Metropolitan Opera. However, these tours of full opera performances were often more limited in scope than even singers’ recitals. During the course of Farrar’s movie career (1915-1921), the Met toured primarily in Brooklyn and Philadelphia. In addition to numerous performances in these cities, the Met also often (though not every season) appeared in Boston and Atlanta. Beginning in the 1914-1915 season (the season before she made the film *Carmen*), Farrar eventually brought her *Carmen* to each of these four cities. Even in the first half of the 1910s, the only additional cities that the Met visited were Montreal, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Baltimore, and Albany. During the entire decade, the Met never toured in the West and only appeared in Atlanta in the South.<sup>157</sup> Even the legendary tenor Enrico Caruso during the course of his career in the United States (1903-1920), only

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<sup>155</sup> Rosa Ponselle Papers, New York Public Library, Box 9, Folder 1 - Recital Programs, Folder 2 – 1921, Folder 6 – 1925, Folder 16 – 1935.

<sup>156</sup> Ponselle was no stranger to performing in a variety of regions and theaters even prior to her operatic career. She began her career in vaudeville with her sister and made her debut in a movie house. The sisters’ act largely consisted of singing operatic arias. Fryer, *The Opera Singer and the Silent Film*, 133.

<sup>157</sup> Quaintance Eaton, *Opera Caravan: Adventures of the Metropolitan on Tour 1883-1956* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1978), 260-286. In contrast, Farrar appeared as a recitalist in a much greater variety of places, including New Orleans, Mobile, Birmingham, Charlotte, Norfolk, Canton, Grand Rapids, Racine, Green Bay, Dubuque, among many others. Farrar Collection, Library of Congress, Box 12, Folder 19. A Met tour to city could be a thing of great civic pride. An Atlanta newspaper even celebrated the event with the headline: “Atlanta’s Fame as Opera Center Interests New York,” when New York papers reviewed the Met’s performances in Atlanta. Articles, Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 30, “Atlanta Opera Season, 1915, Geraldine Farrar” album.



performed in a limited number of large cities with the Metropolitan Opera on tour.<sup>158</sup>

Although an attempt was made to present a variety of operas while on tour, the Met of necessity had to limit the number of operas it performed outside of New York City.<sup>159</sup>

Tour performances could, however, attract people from all over the country and especially from the same region. The Met's tours to Atlanta, for example, brought in people from all over the South.<sup>160</sup>

In contrast, motion pictures could reach much larger audiences across the country in a wider variety of locations at the same time. Movie theaters were not just heavily concentrated in big cities but were also found in small town, suburban, and country environments. Unlike the small number of opera companies performing in limited locales, a 1919 survey found that approximately 15,000 movie theaters operated in the United States. These theaters varied from a few hundred seats to a few thousand and charged average admission prices of ten to twenty-five cents based upon the size, quality, and "run" (first, second, third, etc.) of the theater. By 1922 the majority of movie tickets' costs fell within this range, although small numbers of tickets for the best seats in the

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<sup>158</sup> He appeared with the Met in Philadelphia, Boston, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Chicago, Minneapolis, Kansas City, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Baltimore, Washington, St. Louis, Omaha, St. Paul, Milwaukee, Brooklyn, Cleveland, and Atlanta (as well as Paris, France). John Bello, *Enrico Caruso: A Centennial Tribute*, Rosa Ponselle Papers, New York Public Library, Box 9, Folder 3 - Enrico Caruso [exhibit catalogue], 1973. Caruso appeared in 235 performances with the Met on tour in: *Tosca*, *I Pagliacci*, *Aida*, *Rigoletto*, *La Gioconda*, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *La Bohème*, *La Favorita*, *Carmen*, *Faust*, *Martha*, *Fedora*, *Madama Butterfly*, *Manon Lescaut*, *L'Africana*, *Iris*, *Il Trovatore*, *Germania*, a gala concert, *La Fanciulla del West*, *Manon*, *Les Huguenots*, *Un Ballo in Maschera*, *Samson et Dalila*, *L'elisir d'Amore*, *Lodoletto*, *L'amor dei Tre Rei*, *Le Prophète*, *La Forza del Destino*, and *La Juive*. *Ibid.*

<sup>159</sup> During the 1915-1916 season when the movie *Carmen* was released, the Met performed numerous popular Italian operas while on tour (*Il Trovatore*, *La Bohème*, *Un Ballo in Maschera*, *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, *Tosca*, *Aida*, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *I Pagliacci*, *Madama Butterfly*, *Rigoletto*, *La Sonnambula*, and *Martha* [the Italian version]), some well-known and one rare German operas (*Die Zauberflöte*, *Lohengrin*, *Tristan und Isolde*, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, *Parsifal*, *Hänsel und Gretel*, *Der Rosenkavalier*, and *Der Widerspenstigen Zähmung*), a small number of French operas (*Carmen*, *Manon*, *Madame Sans-Gêne*, and *Samson et Dalila*), and one Russian opera (*Boris Godunov*). Eaton, *Opera Caravan*, 260-286.

<sup>160</sup> "From All Parts Folk Flock to Grand Opera," Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 30, "Atlanta Opera Season, 1915, Geraldine Farrar" album.

most lavish first-run theaters could occasionally sell for over a dollar each.<sup>161</sup> Most opera house prices, however, were around \$10 for orchestra seats. The “cheap seats” often averaged around \$2.50, and even standing room tickets sold for a pricey \$1. At the Metropolitan Opera, orchestra tickets were \$6 starting in 1911 and \$7 by 1919. Additionally, by 1919 the federal government imposed a war tax that raised opera’s prices even higher. A couple attending the opera could expect to pay \$15.40 for places in the orchestra level at the Met. Poorer quality seats in the dress circle still cost a hefty \$4 each. Even on tour, prices tended to be only slightly lower. In Atlanta, boxes seating six people for one Met tour performance cost an extravagant \$40.50, while front orchestra and dress circle tickets sold for \$5.50, and the most inexpensive tickets were \$1.65. Oscar Hammerstein’s rival New York City company at the Manhattan Opera House, which opened in 1906, offered slightly lower prices than the Met, with \$1 seats in the highest balcony.<sup>162</sup> The substantially cheaper cost of movie theater admissions helped to democratize and enlarge audiences by making tickets considerably more affordable for much larger socio-economically diverse segments of the population.

Movies were tremendously popular and frequented regularly. Several surveys from the time indicate that the nation’s younger demographic groups, in particular, attended film showings at least once and sometimes more per week on average. Movie theaters also had repeated showings throughout the day and evening, allowing for larger total numbers of spectators per film. This repetition, both at the same theater and potentially at other nearby theaters, permitted viewers to re-watch favored movies. This

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<sup>161</sup> Koszarski, *An Evening’s Entertainment*, 12-13, 15.

<sup>162</sup> Major-Minor, “The Place Grand Opera Holds, *The Billboard (Archive: 1894-1960)*, Vol. 26, Issue 51 (December 19, 1914): 33, 173; “\$7 Opera Adopted for Metropolitan,” *New York Times (1857-1922)* (September 15, 1919): 15; “Scale of Prices for Opera Season,” *The Atlanta Constitution (1881-1945)* (February 9, 1919): C8; Dizikes, *Opera in America*, 324.

provided an important distinction to the very limited number of showings in a run at an opera house, where performances often sold out, especially those with big stars like Farrar and Caruso. Unlike in opera houses, movie theaters did not have such problems with easily sold-out performances, and anyone turned away could usually catch a later showing. In the 1914-1915 Met season, Farrar performed her acclaimed role as Carmen a mere thirteen times in New York and on tour. Innumerable more people were able to view her Carmen on screen than on the stage.<sup>163</sup>

Beyond reaching bigger audiences in a much greater variety of places, money and generous perks could also be powerful inducements for opera singers to try a Hollywood career. Farrar topped the *Los Angeles Times* list of Lasky stars and was noted as the highest paid of all movie actors at any studio.<sup>164</sup> In addition to Farrar's unheard of salary of \$20,000 for three films, her contract stipulated that she did not have to work more than six hours a day. The contract, which Samuel Goldfish negotiated and signed for Lasky, also guaranteed that the soprano would appear only in films that would "reflect credit and not impair the dignity, position or reputation of the Star." In keeping with this clause, Farrar was granted approval over which parts she would do.<sup>165</sup> In the early days of the movie star system, special bungalows or even private dressing rooms were uncommon. Lasky provided Farrar with a two-story bungalow next to the movie set, replete with

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<sup>163</sup> Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment*, 27-29; Metopera Database: The Metropolitan Opera Archives (November 22, 2013), <http://archives.metoperafamily.org/archives/frame.htm>.

<sup>164</sup> "Movie Stars Who Scintillate in Los Angeles," *Los Angeles Times* (January 1, 1916), III:71.

<sup>165</sup> Fawkes, *Opera on Film*, 2-3; Contract, April 21, 1915, Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 12, Folder 14 - Jesse Lasky Co. The contract allowed her these perks because "the Star [Farrar] has achieved unprecedented success and distinction as an actress and operatic star and is desirous of achieving success and distinction as a moving picture Star of the highest grade...." *Ibid.*

tasteful furnishings and a maid, cook, and butler. He also provided her with a limousine and chauffeur while in Hollywood.<sup>166</sup>

As another concession, music accompanied Farrar's movie acting as it did her operatic stage performances. Farrar told DeMille that she needed music for the "tempo and phrasing" of her acting.<sup>167</sup> In 1910 Vitagraph Studio first used accompaniment during filming, in the words of DeMille, "to help the actors overcome drawbacks of the new medium and get into the proper mood for their scenes." Some of these drawbacks included the boredom of doing scenes over and over and the distraction of noisy prop men, painters, carpenters, and janitors working nearby in the primitive early studios.<sup>168</sup> The accompanists for the movie, however, were not the only ones making music. Lasky recounted the impression that Farrar's singing made on the studio's workers:

The next morning as soon as I came in the studio, Cecil said, "I want to show you something you'll never forget." He led me out through the orchard toward the stage. Work had come to a dead standstill. Everyone on our payroll—the cast, carpenters, grips, cowboys, and office staff—was standing bareheaded in a transfixed circle around Miss Farrar's bungalow. The door was open and she was at the grand piano joyously singing an aria from *Madame Butterfly*. The radio had not yet been invented, and those people—many of whom had never before heard an opera singer—were hearing the greatest.<sup>169</sup>

Silent film star Blanche Sweet later recalled that she used to leave her bungalow door open on the lot whenever Farrar would sing.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Lasky, *I Blow My Own Horn*, 117-118; Cecil B. DeMille, *The Autobiography of Cecil B. DeMille*, 140.

<sup>167</sup> Geraldine Farrar, *Such Sweet Compulsion: The Autobiography of Geraldine Farrar* (New York: Greystone Press, 1938), 169.

<sup>168</sup> Cecil B. DeMille, *The Autobiography of Cecil B. DeMille*, 134. Music that could be a benefit to an actress, could however be distorting for a director. Illustrating the impact music could have on the drama, DeMille explained that he sometimes shot scenes with his hands over ears: "I found that if I let myself be influenced by the mood music, my judgment of the acting was likely to be faulty. Under the spell of the music, I might be deeply moved by a scene, but later, when I ran it on the screen in silence, find it cold and flat." *Ibid.*

<sup>169</sup> Lasky, *I Blow My Own Horn*, 118.

<sup>170</sup> DeWitt Bodeen, *From Hollywood: The Careers of Fifteen Great American Stars* (South Brunswick, N.J.: A.S. Barnes, 1976), 54.

When the time to film *Carmen* came, however, DeMille decided instead to start with a movie entitled *Maria Rosa*. Even though DeMille would film *Maria Rosa* first, the Lasky Company planned to release it after *Carmen*.<sup>171</sup> The director feared that Farrar would be too operatic in her film acting and wanted her to get some experience before working on such an important production as *Carmen*. In DeMille's opinion, this was a very apropos film to serve as preparation for *Carmen* because it was also set in Spain and was somewhat similar to the opera. DeMille's brother, William deMille, the screenwriter for *Carmen*, also wrote the script for *Maria Rosa*. He based the story on a play by Angel Guimera written in the nineteenth century, but which had only recently debuted in the United States. Compared to the play, actor Wallace Reid's part in *Maria Rosa* was considerably broadened. DeMille hoped that he could turn Reid into a star with this film and his key role as Don José in *Carmen*. Operatic bass and movie character actor, Pedro de Cordoba, later Escamillo in *Carmen*, played the leading male role in *Maria Rosa*. DeMille also used this film to experiment with lighting in general and with lighting Farrar in particular. The movie evinced what was to become DeMille's trademark style of lighting with strong contrasts of light and dark.<sup>172</sup> The cameraman for *Maria Rosa* and *Carmen*, Alvin Wyckoff, preferred to use very bright lighting. This led to problems filming Farrar, whose light gray eyes essentially disappeared on film under Wyckoff's bright light, but he and DeMille were able to work out the proper lighting for Farrar

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<sup>171</sup> Cecil B. DeMille, *The Autobiography of Cecil B. DeMille*, 141. *Maria Rosa* was eventually released as Farrar's third motion picture after *Carmen* and *Temptation*. Ads proclaimed that it was "A Greater Picture Than 'Carmen'—More Interesting Than 'Temptation.'" Advertisements for Farrar's movies also exploited her fame. One ad for *Maria Rosa* proclaimed Farrar: "America's Foremost Artiste of Stage and Screen." Display Ad, *Washington Post* (May 7, 1916): MT3.

<sup>172</sup> Birchard, *Cecil B. DeMille's Hollywood*, 57-59. DeMille later recalled about the movie: "Our cautious decision to withhold *Maria Rosa*, however, was somewhat deflated when it was finally released and *The New York Times* casually said that it was 'as good if not better than *Carmen*.'" Cecil B. DeMille, *The Autobiography of Cecil B. DeMille*, 147.

before *Carmen*. *Maria Rosa* provided a useful test run in DeMille's attempt to ensure the quality of *Carmen*.<sup>173</sup>

When work finally began on *Carmen*, another problem presented itself. The copyright owners of Bizet's opera demanded a high sum for the rights to film *Carmen*. DeMille was unwilling to pay an exorbitant fee and decided instead to base the movie on Prosper Mérimée's story, from which the opera had originally been adapted.<sup>174</sup> William deMille was upset about the supposed change in source material. Cecil, however, asserted that more than enough of the exciting parts of the story still existed in the Merimee novella: "smugglers, and a tavern, and soldiers, and a fight between two dames (and give that the works, too), and a camp in the mountains, and, best of all, the bullfight." The goal, he asserted, was to "make the audience think they're seeing the opera without butting into their damn copyright," which he thought his brother should be able easily to accomplish.<sup>175</sup> William deMille had already written much of the script by this point. In the typically hybridized fashion of Hollywood's opera movies, *Carmen* still showed many similarities to the opera, but mediated by both the confines and new opportunities of the filming process. "I do not believe anyone knew the difference," DeMille later claimed.<sup>176</sup>

At the request of Farrar, the movie premiered in her hometown at the Boston Symphony Hall on October 1, 1915. Two thousand five hundred people attended the premiere, including Boston's mayor and Farrar herself. She told the press covering the event that she was "thrilled" with the film. Accompanied by an orchestra of fifty, three

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<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>175</sup> William C. deMille, *Hollywood Saga* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1939), 154-155.

<sup>176</sup> Cecil B. DeMille, *The Autobiography of Cecil B. DeMille*, 144-145.

singers performed the most famous numbers from *Carmen* as the film played: the “Habanera,” the “Flower Song,” and the “Toreador Song.”<sup>177</sup> As the home of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, one of the most prestigious orchestras in the nation and commonly patronized by Boston’s prominent families, Boston Symphony Hall may have provided an atmosphere for the film closer to that of an opera house than the average movie theater. Never before had Boston Symphony Hall been used to show a movie.<sup>178</sup>

In the wake of heavy press coverage, anticipation for the release of the film ran high. Before the picture’s premiere, the *Los Angeles Times* noted: “Countless inquiries have come to this department as to when the famous diva would make her appearance on the screen...” The Strand Theater in New York City also received inquiries about reserved seats before the movie’s opening.<sup>179</sup> Once in general release, the film was a hit, easily “beating” another *Carmen* film out at the time.<sup>180</sup> When William Fox had learned that DeMille’s *Carmen* was based on a public domain book, he decided to make his own version starring popular “vamp” Theda Bara rather than a professional opera singer. From the beginning of this project, Fox intended his version to be a rival to the Lasky Company’s *Carmen*. He attempted but failed to finish his movie before DeMille. Consequently, both movies premiered in October 1915 and were in circulation at the

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<sup>177</sup> Birchard, *Cecil B. DeMille’s Hollywood*, 60, 62; “Miss Farrar Sees ‘Carmen,’” *New York Times* (October 2, 1915): 11; Fawkes, *Opera on Film*, 4.

<sup>178</sup> Phil Powrie, Bruce Babington, Ann Davies, and Chris Perriam, *Carmen on Film: A Cultural History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 44.

<sup>179</sup> Grace Kingsley, “At the Stage Door,” *Los Angeles Times* (September 20, 1915): III4; “Written on the Screen,” *New York Times* (October 31, 1915): X8. The theater decided in the end not to have reserved seats for their showings. *Ibid.*

<sup>180</sup> The other two films that Farrar made for Lasky that summer were also successes. *Temptation*, which DeMille filmed after *Carmen* and also starred Pedro de Cordoba, came out on January 2, 1916. It cost \$22,472.25 and grossed almost five times that amount. Although the first to be filmed, *Maria Rosa* was not released until May 8, 1916. Similarly to *Temptation*, *Maria Rosa* cost \$18,574.97, but grossed \$102,767.81. Birchard, *Cecil B. DeMille’s Hollywood*, 57-59, 64.

same time.<sup>181</sup> Fox's *Carmen* was successful, although not as clear a blockbuster as DeMille's version, nor as critically acclaimed and influential.<sup>182</sup>

DeMille met his larger goals with *Carmen*. The critics lavished praise on Farrar, and her co-star Wallace Reid catapulted to stardom with this film. *Carmen* was a five-reel film when shorter movies were still more common. This allowed DeMille to focus on developing the plot to a fuller extent than typical at the time.<sup>183</sup> DeMille also had Hugo Riesenfeld compile a quality score for the film's general release that included major musical pieces from Bizet's *Carmen*, as well as some connecting material that Riesenfeld himself composed. After the premiere, in a *Boston Post* article Samuel Goldfish touched on the larger hopes of DeMille, Lasky, and himself: "I believe that Miss Farrar will supersede any human being ever seen on the screen and that she will bring into the moving picture house people who have never been there before. I am confident that she will elevate the moving picture drama to heights never dreamed of."<sup>184</sup> Farrar agreed with Goldfish's sentiments. She told the press that she was happy to work with people who were promoting the improvement of motion pictures and praised audiences for their growing "taste."<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Essoe and Lee, *DeMille*, 43, 46; Powrie, et al., *Carmen on Film*, 41, 44.

<sup>182</sup> Fox's *Carmen* cost \$32,269 to make. It grossed \$106,086 worldwide. Birchard, *Cecil B. DeMille's Hollywood*, 381. The *Variety* reviewer wrote about Fox's version: "At first glance one would arrive at the conclusion that Miss Bara would make an ideal *Carmen* on the screen. She has large, beautiful eyes and uses them well, but, somehow, doesn't quite carry out the remainder of the characterization... One thing is sure—the Fox production, despite any fault-finding, can be classed as one of the best features ever filmed. It just misses being a masterpiece." *Carmen* review, *Variety* (November 5, 1915).

<sup>183</sup> Fawkes, *Opera on Film*, 3; Birchard, *Cecil B. DeMille's Hollywood*, 60.

<sup>184</sup> Quoted in Gillian B. Anderson, "Geraldine Farrar and Cecil B. DeMille: The Effect of Opera on Film and Film on Opera in 1915," *Critical Studies*, No. 24 (2005): 30; Fawkes, *Opera on Film*, 5. Opera films in general attracted new audiences. A movie came out of Strauss's opera *Elektra* the year the opera first premiered. One theater manager in New Orleans wrote when discussing attendance for this operatic movie at his theater: "The class of patrons we have are made up of the best people in the city." Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema*, 128.

<sup>185</sup> "Farrar Finds Rest in Opera," Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album.



Although Farrar helped to give the movies prestige and extra publicity, DeMille's film also helped to bolster the level and the breadth of her fame far beyond her fans at the stage door or the people who bought her recordings. After the release of *Carmen*, attendance at Farrar's concerts and operatic performances rose. Some venues in which she performed now had record-breaking crowds for her appearances.<sup>186</sup> Because of the movies, as well its complementary medium the phonograph, the number of classical recitals and operatic tours around the country grew in frequency and popularity.<sup>187</sup> One contemporary article entitled "Are Movies Popularizing Opera?" discussed Farrar's *Carmen* and Mary Pickford's film version of *Madame Butterfly*, among other operatic films of the day. It argued:

[T]he screen is slowly but surely popularizing opera in America. This is no sweeping, revolutionary statement—made for effect—but a bald statement of fact... The queer American prejudice against grand operas—the feeling that they are for the wealthy, the musical 'highbrow' only—is being overcome by help of the humble film. If the movies can help in any way to popularize opera, more power to them!<sup>188</sup>

As a prestigious star in the opera world, Farrar helped to transfer some of opera's cultural capital to the movies. At the same time, movies won Farrar many new fans and caused her fame to spread to new heights. Through these films, opera reached far larger and more diverse audiences—albeit in a truncated, hybridized form.

The widespread public appeal of *Carmen* largely rested on its story and quality of filmmaking, including DeMille's talent and innovation and Farrar's acting abilities. Perhaps as Morris Gest argued, some of the numerous fans of Farrar's records wanted to put a face and personality to her voice. Her celebrity and the movie's heavy press

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<sup>186</sup> "Farrar Concert Leading Event of Season," *Richmond Journal* (January 24, 1916), Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 30, album.

<sup>187</sup> "Geraldine Farrar Takes to the Road," Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 39, album.

<sup>188</sup> "Are Movies Popularizing Opera?" *Theatre Magazine* (May 1919): 297.

coverage undoubtedly contributed to the film's popularity, but the already established familiarity of operatic themes and styles within movies would have also added to its success. Because movies had blurred the lines between opera and film since the inception of the motion picture, a melodramatic filmed opera would not have seemed particularly strange to its viewers, whatever their rank in society or their familiarity with opera. A theatrical art, much of the allure of elaborate costumes, stagecraft, and the patina of quality from the grand opera stage were largely transferred successfully to hybrid opera movies. This would help to explain the widespread popularity and box-office success of a silent film based on a supposedly highbrow and esoteric musical form.<sup>189</sup>

### ***Carmen* as Hybrid Opera Movie**

DeMille's adaptation of *Carmen* recreated many aspects of Bizet's opera hybridized with the unique characteristics of the movies. The medium of film allowed the director to use close-up shots, which stressed plot points and exposed facial expressions, allowing viewers a much more detailed look at Farrar's acting than permitted onstage. Instead of a perpetual view of an opera house's proscenium and the limited space of its stage, DeMille filmed several scenes outdoors and from different angles. With these benefits of film also came new limitations. *Carmen* was a long movie for its time, but it remained much shorter than the opera. Because of the nature of silent film, DeMille had

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<sup>189</sup> The Farrar *Carmen* was so successful that William deMille wanted to make it over again as a sound film years later. He submitted scenarios for a new *Carmen* movie to Paramount in 1934 and again promoted the idea in 1941-1942. "3. Synopsis and memo, December 30, 1934," "4. Summary and synopsis of opera, August 27, 1934," and "9. Synopsis, January 29, 1941," Paramount Pictures Scripts, 1912-1980, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, Production files-Produced, Series 1, Folder "Carmen: Cecil B. DeMille; 1915 (Paramount Pictures, 1915)."

no choice but to rely on each individual theater to play the music in the score as proscribed. Most theaters also would not have had singers to accompany the music.

The movie script stresses some important themes from the Mérimée novella that are not in the opera. Like Mérimée, the movie portrays a grittier Carmen. Both the book and movie lay greater stress on the smugglers and Carmen's trickery. They both focus on a breach in the city wall that the smugglers want to use, which is absent from the opera. Perhaps the most important difference from the opera, however, is the absence of the character Micaëla, the "good girl" foil to Carmen. The opera does not sexualize her as it does Carmen, and her Basque heritage also sets her apart from the Gypsy. Unlike the movie, which begins with the smugglers, the opera starts with the story of Micaëla. In contrast to most of what Carmen sings, Micaëla's music is melodic, soft, slow, and predictable. In her aria she gently asks for the Lord's protection and shows that she has the courage to face the smugglers. Arpeggios in the orchestration highlight the "heavenly" element of her prayer. Micaëla in stark contrast to Carmen, innocently and selflessly loves Don José, and until he falls under the spell of Carmen, he reciprocates. Micaëla's presence in the opera perpetuates a stereotypical, black-and-white "good girl" versus "bad girl" dichotomy that is absent from the film. This allows for a more nuanced and equivocal filmic depiction of Carmen herself.<sup>190</sup>

Although the DeMille brothers based some of their story on the original novella, the movie retains many similarities with the opera. One of the key ways in which the DeMilles reproduced Bizet's *Carmen* onscreen was by retaining and highlighting the opera's themes of exoticism and much of its most memorable music. *Carmen*, set in nineteenth-century Spain, presents an exotic setting and plot infused with spectacle and

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<sup>190</sup> *Bizet's Carmen: Complete French Libretto* (New York: Dover Publications, 1970, 1983), 9.

titillation, characteristics common to both nineteenth-century opera and the epic silent films of the 1910s.<sup>191</sup> At the time Bizet's opera first premiered, Orientalism flourished in French opera, including in such popular pieces as Gounod's *La Reine de Saba* (1862), Saint-Saën's *Samson et Dalila* (1877), Delibes' *Lakmé* (1883) and Massenet's *Thaïs* (1894). *Carmen* was part of this larger trend. Many nineteenth-century critics, in particular, noted the exotic nature of the opera. Among these, the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche argued: "This music is cheerful, but not in a French or German way. Its cheerfulness is African; fate hangs over it; its happiness is brief, sudden, without pardon. I envy Bizet for having had the courage for this sensibility which had hitherto had no language in the cultivated music of Europe – for this more southern, brown, burnt sensibility." The movie uses various strategies to recreate and stress the exoticness of the opera, both in the characterizations and the musical score. Carmen and the smugglers' identities as Gypsies especially comprise a key part of this exoticness. The smugglers wear bandanas around their heads and hoop earrings. Several have beards and mustaches, which contrast with the clean-shaven, clean-cut Spanish officers. Carmen tells fortunes with cards like a stereotypical Gypsy woman, and she believes the cards when they signal her doom to the accompaniment of a plaintive cello melody from the opera. In a short scenario summary, screenwriter William deMille described Carmen as "a half-wild, fascinating creature; a Gypsy by birth."<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> Spain was often the object of Orientalist thought in nineteenth-century France, as Susan McClary explains: "Whatever the reality of Spain's history or culture, French Orientalists ascribed to it the same inscrutable, luxuriant and barbarous qualities they imagined to be characteristic of the entire Middle East." Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 30.

<sup>192</sup> McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 33, 118-119; Powrie, et al., *Carmen on Film*, 21, 23; José F. Comeiro, "Exorcising Exoticism: 'Carmen' and the Construction of Oriental Spain," *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (Spring 2002): 128-129; William C. deMille, "Title continuity and scenario," (undated), Paramount Pictures scripts, Production files-Produced, Series 1, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of

The setting of Andalusia also helps to heighten the exoticism of the story. The last part of Spain controlled by the Muslim Moors and the nearest part of mainland Europe to Africa, Andalusia provided an especially alien setting. In the opera, Don José, in contrast, is not from Andalusia, but is a Basque from the north of Spain. As portrayed in DeMille's adaptation, José becomes more wild and Gypsy-like himself the longer he remains with the smugglers. In the final scene, Carmen is clothed in an elegant dress and jewelry, whereas José is in smuggler's clothes with a bandana around his head. His shirt is open and his sleeves are rolled up. By the end of the movie, José and Carmen switch places in regard to status and appearance.

In addition to the story, much of the music accompanying the film suggests the exotic. Before writing *Carmen*, Bizet studied a collection of Spanish folk songs. In his music, the composer utilized traditional Spanish folk rhythms, often with eighth notes as the rhythmic unit. At the bottom of the original score of the "Habanera," Bizet added: "Imitated from a Spanish song." Bizet also composed the "Chanson Boheme" ("Gypsy Song") with its descending tetrachord progression, chromaticism, and erratic harmonic shifts in the style of Spanish flamenco music. This piece plays in the background when the movie first shows Lillas Pastia's tavern. In the opera, Carmen performs the song for others; in the movie, she likewise puts on a flirtatious performance for the men at Pastia's to the music.<sup>193</sup>

Carmen's most famous aria, "L'amour est un oiseau rebelle," another "exotic" number, also appears in this scene in the film. It uses the rhythm and style of the

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Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles, Folders: CARMEN Cecil B. DeMille (Paramount Pictures, 1915).

<sup>193</sup> Julien Tiersot, "Bizet and Spanish Music," *Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (Oct 1927): 566-567, 569, 573, 578; McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 90.

*habanera*, a dance with mixed African and Spanish origins that was popular in Havana. Bizet noted that he based his “Habanera” on the song “El Arreglito” by Spanish composer Sebastián Yradier. Yradier in turn wrote the song based on Cuban *habaneras*. Yradier had traveled through Latin America, and the “Creole” music he heard there strongly influenced his own compositions.<sup>194</sup> The heavily syncopated, sensuous dance rhythm and chromaticism of this piece stresses its exotic nature. Bizet’s “Habanera” begins playing in the movie at the end of Carmen’s talk with Pastia about Don José right before title: “The game begins.” Strings play the lead in a vocal-like fashion, making it reminiscent of the sung aria. The tune returns several times throughout scene, and it is especially associated with Carmen’s sensuality and her efforts at seduction. During the “Habanera” at the movie’s premiere, audience members would have heard a woman as Carmen sing lyrics focusing on the fickleness and wildness of love. The “Habanera” continues to play in the following scene as Carmen pursues José by the breach in the city wall. During this scene, she has a flower in her mouth and carries a fan with a dragon design and an “Oriental” appearance. Although out of place in Southern Spain, the fan helps to Orientalize her character.<sup>195</sup>

During the second scene at Lillas Pastia’s tavern, an arrangement of the “Seguidilla” (with a piano lead) plays from the start of the scene. Like the “Chanson Boheme,” the “Seguidilla,” a type of Spanish dance, is meant to suggest flamenco

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<sup>194</sup> McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 51-52, 74; Comeiro, “Exorcising Exoticism,” 142.

<sup>195</sup> For more on Orientalism, see Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1979). The “Habanera” is the most popular number in the opera and has been reinterpreted in popular music. As two examples, Glenn Miller arranged and performed a jazzy orchestral version of the “Habanera” in the early 1940s and a little later, the Andrews Sisters recorded “Carmen’s Boogie,” which included these lyrics sung to the melody of Bizet’s “Habanera”: “Take the opera, it’s too highbrow / But there’s one number I can dig right now / Just like shifting without a clutch / I ride the boogie with the Carmen touch / You ain’t living if I have missed / The long-haired music with the crew-cut twist / Don’t love often, and don’t love much / But love that boogie with the Carmen touch.”

through its abrupt tonal instability and chromaticism. Later in the scene when Escamillo appears at the tavern, the score includes the bombastic “Toreador Song” with the lead melody taken by the violins. This number can also be interpreted as exotic with its flashy orchestration and strong rhythms.<sup>196</sup> When Carmen starts to seduce José, the “Habanera” plays again. In keeping with her exotic Spanish Gypsy image, she dances on Pastia’s table with castanets accompanied by the same music as in the opera (“Je veux danser en votre honneur”). Another of Carmen’s numbers in the opera, “Là-bas, là-bas dans la montagne,” also plays when Carmen distracts José while the smugglers are coming through the breach in the wall. This plethora of operatic music throughout the movie helped to add some highbrow gloss to the film, while at the same time underscoring the exotic aspects and grittier, even at times shocking, nature of the story. Exoticism was a popular theme that could be counted on to attract audiences. Its appeal cut across classes and different types of culture. It appeared frequently in opera and literature, as well as dime novels and popular music.<sup>197</sup> By using opera, Lasky and DeMille could produce a film that was both titillating and well-respected, both of which were calculated to bring in

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<sup>196</sup> Comeiro, “Exorcising Exoticism,” 142; McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 56, 87, 92; H. Marshall Leicester, Jr., “Discourse and the Film Text: Four Readings of ‘Carmen,’” *Cambridge Opera Journal*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Nov 1994): 506. Parts of the toreador song also play later when Seville is first shown and during the ending/death scene outside of the bullring where Escamillo is performing.

<sup>197</sup> For an example from dime novels, the *Brave and Bold* serial of 30 stories published between 1906 and 1910 featured a world traveling detective who worked on cases in Africa, Java, and the Arctic regions. Some other examples of “exotic” popular dime novels include works such as “The African Trail; or, Adventures in the Dark Continent” (1906), “Manton, Monte Cristo; or, The Hidden Treasures of Montezuma” (1907), “Against the Sultan; or, Trapped in a Turkish Rebellion” (1910), and “The Boy Slaves of Siberia; or, The Vulture King” (1912). J. Randolph Cox, *The Dime Novel Companion: A Source Book* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing, 2000), 150, 268. In the previous century the very popular dime novelist Ned Buntline wrote stories set in exotic islands, Peru, and Mexico. Wilbur R. Miller, ed., *The Social History of Crime and Punishment in America: An Encyclopedia* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2012), 173. Depictions of non-white others were sometimes appealing and positive in dime novels. Michael Denning recounts the story of the 1877 dime novel, *Nemo*, in which a band of “gypsies” [sic] help the hero of the story regain his position as a senator’s son. The book portrays the Gypsies nobly and their campsite is “idyllic” in the face of suppressed labor riots nearby. Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (New York: Verso, 1987), 151-153.

larger audiences. The hybridized nature of the film allowed the director to take a successful classic cultural work and re-imagine it as something new but old in his own style and with the unique opportunities that film provided. What he created was something with a similar story colored by the same exoticism and accompanied by selections of the same music. Yet, it was still different from staged opera—but from that difference opened new opportunities to popularize the art form and make it more accessible.

### **DeMille's Operatic Spectacle: *Joan the Woman***

Not all movies influenced by opera or starring opera singers were so directly operatic as *Carmen*. A major change at Lasky's studio inspired DeMille to make a new film with Farrar in the epic grand opera style, although not adapted from any single opera. In 1916 Jesse Lasky merged his company with Famous Players, Adolph Zukor's well-known and successful movie studio. Zukor became president of the newly combined company, and he gave DeMille the responsibility to choose between Lasky and partner Samuel Goldfish for the vice-presidency. The director chose Lasky and in the process alienated Goldfish, who left to form his own company.<sup>198</sup> Zukor took Famous Players-Lasky in new directions, while still helping to bolster some of the prestige building work of his star director, Cecil B. DeMille. Like DeMille, Zukor had followed D. W. Griffith's work and tried to learn advanced filmmaking techniques from him. Like Lasky, he wanted to promote quality actors in films of artistic stories; thus, he supported Geraldine Farrar's continuing involvement with the company. He also tried to learn from audiences. He would sit in theaters and observe reactions in order to tailor his films toward the

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<sup>198</sup> Cecil B. DeMille, *The Autobiography of Cecil B. DeMille*, 155-156.



people who would consume them. Zukor was a businessman, who gave Lasky a largely free reign when making movies. One limiting factor that he did impose, however, was economic. Lasky wrote about Zukor: “[H]is keen financial analyses determined the upper limits of the budgets we could safely allot to our pictures.” Monetary concerns were always foremost among Zukor’s priorities for his company’s movies.<sup>199</sup>

Zukor’s biggest achievement in his career lay in building Famous Players-Lasky into an innovative business empire. He was the first movie mogul to begin consolidating the industry. Initially, Zukor sold his films to distributors on a “states rights” basis. He divided the country into fifteen independent distribution units, and contractors in each unit negotiated separate exhibition rights with Zukor. In order to keep these units supplied properly, he increased the number of films his studio produced per year to thirty. Both Zukor and Lasky utilized this open-market regional system, but both men soon decided that their companies’ efficiency would benefit from consolidated nation-wide distribution. In 1914 Zukor and Lasky each signed with the new national distribution company, Paramount. For a percentage of each film’s profits, Paramount agreed to distribute the two businessmen’s films efficiently throughout all major areas of the country. Two years later at the time of the Lasky merger, Zukor bought controlling shares in Paramount, combining production and distribution under his control. In 1921 Zukor hired Sidney Kent as his head of distribution. Kent further revolutionized movie distribution through his run-zone-clearance system, which divided movie bookings by different runs (first-run, second-run, third-run, etc.), locations, and lengths of time. This system became the industry standard during the Classic Hollywood era that dominated American moviemaking from the 1930s through the 1950s. Kent’s system guaranteed

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<sup>199</sup> Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System*, 11-14, 19; Lasky, *I Blow My Own Horn*, 124.

that Paramount's films automatically appeared in a wide variety of places and types of movie theaters while maximizing profits.<sup>200</sup>

Even this did not go far enough for Zukor, who wanted to manage all facets of the movie industry. By the early 1920s the ambitious businessman owned around 300 movie theaters, the majority of the large first-run theaters in the country. He eventually bought a chain of a thousand theaters in order more completely to vertically integrate production, distribution, and exhibition. In keeping with his goal of high quality movies, Zukor's theaters were ornate in design and provided live performances from house orchestras during movie programs, which included classical and operatic overtures. An estimated fourth of all motion picture houses in the United States, including many not owned by Zukor, exclusively showed Paramount movies. Zukor's efforts were among the first and most important steps in closing what had once been a relatively open industry. Soon big Hollywood studios like Paramount replaced the early plethora of affordable and diverse start-up movie companies that had proliferated during the first two and a half decades of the motion picture's existence. By 1930 only eight major studios, including Paramount, took in 95% of all movie profits. As the big studio era developed in Hollywood, Paramount became the largest of all the studios.<sup>201</sup>

After the success of *Carmen* in raising both the profits and prestige of movies, DeMille set his sights higher. Famous Players-Lasky's merger with Paramount and its new national distribution system permitted the studio to guarantee much larger advances for its productions, allowing for the creation of longer, more expensive and elaborate

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<sup>200</sup> Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment*, 69, 75; Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System*, 4, 11-15, 17-20; Lasky, *I Blow My Own Horn*, 121-122.

<sup>201</sup> Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System*, 2. Zukor also expanded his focus outside of the United States. By 1920 Paramount became the biggest and most important studio worldwide. Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System*, 18-19.

films. Knowing for certain that movies would be widely exhibited before they were even made removed one of the key risks of filmmaking.<sup>202</sup> For her third summer with Lasky in 1917, Farrar worked on only one film, but it was a movie which superceded anything the company or DeMille had done to date in terms of scope, length, authenticity, and cost. The story of Joan of Arc was an epic tale for DeMille to film in style with a large budget approved by Zukor. Impressed by the success of Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* the year before, DeMille joined other directors such as Thomas Ince in attempting to create his own grand epic on the big screen. Producer Jesse Lasky later wrote about the film, "It was more pretentious than anything we had attempted before, and with that picture Cecil started breathing hard on D. W. Griffith's heels as a purveyor of spectacles." Like Griffith, DeMille recognized the importance of music for his epic film. Content with a score by William Furst, DeMille wired Lasky, "Furst's music for Joan is excellent." Also like Griffith in *The Birth of a Nation*, DeMille made his film operatic, which did not go unnoticed by reviewers, one of whom referred to the film as an "opera for the eyes."<sup>203</sup>

As opposed to a straight operatic adaptation like *Carmen*, DeMille created a movie whose connection to opera was more subtle. *Joan the Woman* shared commonalities with nineteenth-century French grand opera, including the works of Meyerbeer and Auber. As in grand opera, DeMille especially focused on spectacle and extravagance.<sup>204</sup> His sets were big and expensive, his cast for the film was huge, and his

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<sup>202</sup> Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment*, 69.

<sup>203</sup> Lasky, *I Blow My Own Horn*, 119; Birchard, *Cecil B. DeMille's Hollywood*, 95; Julian Johnson, "Joan the Woman," *Photoplay*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (March 1917), 113-116. *Joan the Woman* was twelve reels long like *The Birth of a Nation*. Birchard, *Cecil B. DeMille's Hollywood*, 90, 100.

<sup>204</sup> By the time of the motion picture era, opera had become more intimate, realistic, and small-scale as *verismo* gained in popularity. Movie spectacles helped to carry on some of the more bombastic and excessive aspects of nineteenth-century opera, while other movies expanded on the greater realism and personal focus of *verismo* operas. The birth of the movies and shift towards *verismo* at around the same

costumes were lavish. Both DeMille's spectacles and grand opera typically focused on historical or religious subjects, while also drawing connections with modern times, sometimes even including political themes in historical disguise.<sup>205</sup> The scope of this film and other of its aspects were also in some ways Wagnerian. In *Joan the Woman* DeMille used different color tints for the film like musical leitmotifs. The screen shades green when "Spider" and "The Black Horseman," the "bad guys" of the movie, appear. Green tinting also represents negative intrigue and betrayal in the film. In addition, the color tint changes whenever Joan sees visions. Farrar's portrayal of Joan of Arc exhibited attributes of the operatic heroine. One music critic saw aspects of Farrar's most famous operatic characters, including Carmen, Manon Lescaut, Juliet, and Tosca, in her performance as Joan, whom the writer also believed Farrar made into a sort of Valkyrie figure.<sup>206</sup>

As with their prestigious filmed opera, *Carmen*, DeMille and Lasky made *Joan the Woman* expressly to appeal to middle-class tastes of the day.<sup>207</sup> The film starts with several lengthy explanatory titles. The titles throughout the film are very stylized. They attempt to sound historical and literary in order to give a distinguished and classic veneer to the film that might appeal to a more highbrow audience. At one point Trent, the male lead, exclaims in a title, "Return to camp with thy loot: I'll follow thee anon." Later another character proclaims, "Dost think, Sire, to ransom a witch – who would make herself queen and reign in thy stead!" This faux antiquated style of the written intertitles contrasts with the filmmakers' concurrent attempt to make the movie topical and relevant

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time together helped to illustrate the unstable distinctions between high and popular culture. Schroeder, *Cinema's Allusions, Opera's Allure*, 170, 174-176; Franklin, "Movies as Opera," 79-108.

<sup>205</sup> Schroeder, *Cinema's Allusions, Opera's Allure*, 170, 174-176. Schroeder devotes a chapter of *Cinema's Illusions, Opera's Allure* to drawing comparisons between DeMille's movies and French grand opera. *Ibid.*, 168-187.

<sup>206</sup> "Miss Farrar's Joan Born in Opera," Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album.

<sup>207</sup> For more, see Higashi, *Cecil B. DeMille and American Culture*, 127, 139-141.

by connecting the story and characters with the ongoing war in Europe. The movie is book-ended by scenes set in an army trench in France. So that no viewer would miss the assertion that this story was still relevant during World War I, one title about Joan and her native France reads, “[I]n the war-torn land she loved so well, her Spirit fights today.” By making this historical epic part modern morality tale, the filmmakers hoped to broaden their audience even further.

DeMille intended his film to be “artsy” and appealing to higher tastes. This movie helped to solidify DeMille’s reputation for his acclaimed “contrasty” lighting that had already developed by the time he had filmed *Carmen*. *Joan the Woman* evinces many instances of sharply contrasted darkness and bright light in the same shot, creating a *chiaroscuro* effect like that of many of the great Renaissance painters.<sup>208</sup> DeMille also clearly intended some specific shots and scenes to appear profound and artistic. In one example of DeMille’s pictorial imagery, Joan is standing in her living room with her arms outstretched as if toward heaven. Suddenly everything around her turns black with only Joan herself illuminated. A French fleur-de-lis appears brightly behind her, and she stands with her arms out to her side as if being crucified. Then she dramatically drops her head. Playing off the stylized theatrical and operatic traditions of the day, Farrar’s acting in *Joan* is more melodramatic, broad, and elevated and less realistic than in *Carmen*. Some of her motions are stilted and formal, especially in religious tableau. Her farewell scene with Trent is overdramatic and affected. The two lovers turn their heads away from each other with heartbroken faces. She throws her arms out in a theatrical gesture after he walks away from her.

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<sup>208</sup> Essoe and Lee, *DeMille*, 40. Lasky cameraman Alvin Wyckoff was the one who originally termed DeMille’s lighting “contrasty.” Cecil B. DeMille, *The Autobiography of Cecil B. DeMille*, 144.

*Joan the Woman* was DeMille's first historical spectacle, a genre with which he subsequently became identified.<sup>209</sup> In keeping with its scope and aspirations, the movie took a lengthy four months to film and required 40,000 costumes. DeMille enhanced the movie with innovations and experimentation. Expressly for *Joan*, he developed the largest motion picture camera at the time, which could shoot both foreground and background in focus. The film also represented DeMille's first use of double exposures and color. In addition to common tinting and toning of film prints, DeMille utilized the novel stencil-color Handschiegl Process for some scenes. He notably colorized Joan's burning at the stake at the end of the film to give the scene greater realism and dramatic impact. The scale of the movie showed the expense and skill that went into its production compared to the average film of the day.

In his quest for quality and the new audiences and prestige it would bring, DeMille also focused on greater authenticity than was typical for the time. Instead of plastic armor, he had a real metal suit of armor made to order for Farrar. Although lighter than historical armor, it was still so heavy that Farrar had to be lifted onto her horse. Her character then had to fight in armor on horseback in a large-scale battle scene. She also had to spend days of filming in a water-filled ditch. Even more demanding, DeMille insisted that Farrar herself appear in the scene where the church leaders burn Joan at the stake. He had her body, hair, and clothes fire-proofed in an attempt to ensure that she did

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<sup>209</sup> Fawkes, *Opera on Film*, 19. DeMille recalled: "[T]his was my first big historical picture. It was the beginning of a pattern which I have followed in many pictures since." Cecil B. DeMille, *The Autobiography of Cecil B. DeMille*, 169.

not actually catch fire. In addition, she had to act the scene with ammonia saturated cotton stuffed into her nose and mouth.<sup>210</sup>

The finished movie opened on January 15, 1917. It initially played in New York City for an impressive sixteen weeks. It later returned for an engagement at another nearby theater after crowds of people had been turned away from many first-run performances. The film also did reasonably well in Los Angeles, where it ran for eight weeks; however, it did not do quite as well in most other cities. All together, it ran for a total of fifty-eight weeks in first-run, road-show theaters across the nation. The movie's overall box office was disappointing, although primarily because of the great expense in making the film rather than sparse audiences. It cost a remarkable \$302,976.26 to produce, but only brought in \$605,731.40, barely enough to cover the expenses, marketing, and theater owners' cuts. Nonetheless, the movie's receipts were around four times those of the much cheaper hit, *Carmen*. Zukor's more widespread and efficient distribution and exhibition system helped *Joan* reach bigger audiences in more locations than the earlier film had been able.<sup>211</sup>

The reviews for *Joan the Woman* were overwhelmingly positive. Julian Johnson writing in *Photoplay* thought the film "a big and splendid thing." "Though it is not faultless," he wrote, "*Joan the Woman* is the best sun-spectacle since *The Birth of a Nation*, and in the opinion of the writer only that sweeping review of arms and hearts has excelled it." In particular, he praised DeMille and more specifically the camerawork on

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<sup>210</sup> "Lasky's Genius Contributed to Success of 'Joan the Woman' at 44<sup>th</sup> Street Theatre," Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album; Fawkes, *Opera on Film*, 19-20; Essoe and Lee, *DeMille*, 50; Birchard, *Cecil B. DeMille's Hollywood*, 100; Lasky, *I Blow My Own Horn*, 117; Cecil B. DeMille, *The Autobiography of Cecil B. DeMille*, 173-174.

<sup>211</sup> Birchard, *Cecil B. DeMille's Hollywood*, 90, 101-102; "'Joan the Woman' Renews Engagement Here in the Park," Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album; Essoe and Lee, *DeMille*, 51. As a point of comparison, *The Birth of a Nation* cost \$110,000, and filmmakers considered it a financial risk at the time. Birchard, *Cecil B. DeMille's Hollywood*, 90.

the film, which he compared to Michelangelo's use of the chisel. The diva Farrar, on the other hand, did not in his opinion properly fit the role of a French peasant girl. To another reviewer, the film was more "beautiful and artistic" than anything previously shown, and in the writer's opinion, it struck "a new chord in the history of cinema." As with *Carmen*, many reviews singled Farrar out for praise. Some explicitly compared Farrar's new project positively with her previous great screen success as *Carmen*. One went so far as to suggest that "[i]n this role Geraldine Farrar surpassed her fame as a singer and won new laurels as an actress." Foremost, the film was successful in ways DeMille specifically wanted. One review elaborated on what the movie had achieved: "'Joan, the Woman' has raised the whole standard of motion-picture producing. It has taken the sting of childishness from a great art and clothed it with respectability and power."<sup>212</sup>

Although acclaimed and popular, Farrar's time in Hollywood was short lived. By 1918, just two years after *Joan the Woman*, Farrar's film career was already on the decline. The studio cut its budgets for her movies, and she occasionally began to receive some negative reviews. After the mild box-office disappointment of *Joan the Woman*, Farrar's later pictures for the Famous Players-Lasky Company were less ambitious and cheaper. On March 10, 1917 Lasky wrote to DeMille urging "that you produce two pictures with Farrar six thousand feet each costing about seventy-five thousand dollars each including her salary instead of one long expensive picture as planned." This he felt

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<sup>212</sup> Birchard, *Cecil B. DeMille's Hollywood*, 100; Johnson, "Joan the Woman," 113-116; Jane M'Lean, "Joan the Woman Has Threefold Appeal," Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album; "Lasky's Genius Contributed to Success of 'Joan the Woman' at 44<sup>th</sup> Street Theatre"; "Geraldine Farrar," Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album; "Farrar in 'Joan the Woman' Is At Her Best," Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album; The Screen Girl, "Joan the Woman Masterpiece of Screen," Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album; "'Joan the Woman' Film Triumph for Star and Director," Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album. Comparing the film to that other famous epic, *The Birth of a Nation*, was a common theme among the reviewers for the movie.



would insure the company solid profits. He also wanted to release these films through his subsidiary Artcraft Pictures, in order to give Artcraft extra “prestige.” *The Woman God Forgot* and *The Devil Stone* were the result of this planning.<sup>213</sup> Released on November 8, 1917, *The Woman God Forgot* grossed almost three times its cost.<sup>214</sup> *The Devil Stone* released less than two months later on New Year’s Eve did even better. It cost only \$67,413.36 to make, but grossed \$296,031.58. Far fewer people saw and were potentially influenced by these two films, but they were much more financially lucrative for their studio. By this point in Zukor’s newly merged company, profits were a higher priority than artistic development. Farrar’s movies had largely served their purpose for the young studio.<sup>215</sup>

Although neither of these films were critical hits, Farrar still showed that she could attract a good box office and Lasky wanted to keep her under contract. Nonetheless, these were the last films that Farrar made for Famous Players-Lasky. The reason was largely personal. During the filming of *Maria Rosa* in 1916 Farrar met Sarah Bernhardt’s former lover, actor Lou Tellegen. They were married later that same year. Tellegen also signed with Lasky, but unlike his wife’s movies, Tellegen’s films were

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<sup>213</sup> “Two Opera Stars in Silent Films,” *New York Times* (Nov 25, 1918): 11; Birchard, *Cecil B. DeMille’s Hollywood*, 112-115. At the same time, Lasky had just hired D. W. Griffith to make six films for Artcraft, probably also for reasons of prestige. *Ibid.*

<sup>214</sup> Birchard, *Cecil B. DeMille’s Hollywood*, 112-117. One reviewer specifically admired the “art” of this “animated museum” of a film. Another reviewer called the movie an “amazingly beautiful picture” and praised the decision not to charge special prices for it. He also thought it a better film than *Joan the Woman*. About Farrar’s performance, he wrote: “In this picture Miss Farrar makes you forget she is one of the greatest of the world’s vocalists. You think of and see only her amazing dramatic talent, which she has never displayed to better advantage—not even in *Carmen*.” “Farrar Scores Another Triumph in New Film at Rialto,” Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album; ZIT, “Farrar Hit at Rialto,” Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album.

<sup>215</sup> Birchard, *Cecil B. DeMille’s Hollywood*, 112-117. Reviews for *The Devil Stone* were mixed. *The New York Times* critic considered the film unremarkable except for Farrar’s performance. *The Washington Post* reviewer, on the other hand, gushed that the film was a “photoplay of uncommonly high quality” and that Farrar’s acting was characterized by “power and resource.” “Last of Farrar Films,” *New York Times* (Dec 17, 1917): 10; “Loew’s Columbia—Geraldine Farrar in Films,” *Washington Post* (Dec 18, 1917): 9.

unsuccessful with the public. Lasky telegraphed DeMille that Tellegen was box-office poison, and he wanted the actor out of the company. As a compromise, the two filmmakers decided to allow him to direct movies for the remainder of his contract. He failed at this too, which caused unnecessary tensions between Farrar and DeMille and Lasky. The singer later named her husband's anger at Lasky as the chief cause for her split with the company.<sup>216</sup>

Farrar, however, was not finished making movies. Samuel Goldfish hired her—and her husband—soon after her departure from Lasky. Almost two weeks into filming *Joan the Woman* with Farrar, Lasky's merger with Zukor occurred. Soon afterwards Goldfish left Famous Players-Lasky and entered a partnership with Edwin Selwyn, creating the Goldwyn Pictures Corporation (a combination of their two surnames), which later became part of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), the second largest Hollywood studio in the classic era. Because Goldfish became so associated with his company, he officially changed his name to Goldwyn. Like Zukor and Lasky's company, Goldwyn's new studio focused on producing quality films. He even instituted a special "eminent authors" project to recruit prominent writers for his screenplays.<sup>217</sup> Goldwyn intended the films that Geraldine Farrar made for him to be part of this larger prestige raising effort for his studio and for the industry in general. He also hoped to capitalize on the already established popularity of Farrar's movies for Lasky. Goldwyn Pictures still used

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<sup>216</sup> Birchard, *Cecil B. DeMille's Hollywood*, 57-59, 93, 116-117; Geraldine Farrar, *Such Sweet Compulsion*, 179.

<sup>217</sup> Birchard, *Cecil B. DeMille's Hollywood*, 90; DeMille, *The Autobiography of Cecil B. DeMille*, 176-177; Kevin Lewis and Arnold Lewis, "Include Me Out: Samuel Goldwyn and Joe Godsol," *Film History* 2 (1988): 133-136. In the end, the studio's financially unsuccessful "Eminent Authors" project crippled Goldwyn Pictures. Unlike Zukor, Goldwyn often placed artistic values over business matters. Playwright George Bernard Shaw once joked that the reason he would never sign with Goldwyn was because Goldwyn cared only about art, while Shaw was concerned only with money. After selling Goldwyn Pictures, Goldwyn went on to form the successful Samuel Goldwyn Productions, which dealt only with the production end of moviemaking. Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment*, 244, 246.

references to *Carmen* in advertising for her new films. One newspaper advertisement even made the point of giving Goldwyn the credit for bringing Farrar to the screen in *Carmen*.<sup>218</sup> As with her films for Lasky, Farrar benefited financially from her work with Goldwyn. Once again Farrar only had to work during the summer after the end of the Metropolitan Opera season. Goldwyn paid her on a percentage basis. She received 10% of the box-office gross for one year after each of her films' release, and her contract furthermore stipulated that she would receive \$300,000 in guaranteed royalties, regardless of whether the movie in question in fact earned that amount.<sup>219</sup> In all, Geraldine Farrar made seven films for Goldwyn, the most famous of which was 1918's *The Hell Cat*. Once at Goldwyn Studios, the quality and popularity of her movies were on the decline. Fewer people saw them, and critics more often viewed their scripts as inferior. After she left Goldwyn because of the poor quality of her recent films, Farrar starred in one movie for Associated Exhibitors-Pathé, *The Riddle Woman*. Although the film received some good reviews, it was not a success. She had signed a contract in 1920 to appear in two films for the company for \$100,000. However, after the failure of *The Riddle Woman*, the studio did not make the second movie with Farrar.<sup>220</sup>

### **Continuing Changes of the Late Silent Era**

“Miss Farrar is an artist to her finger tips, and that she has entered the movie field is regarded as a vindication of the substantial qualities of the film drama,” wrote one critic in a 1915 article when Farrar first signed with Lasky. DeMille and Lasky reached

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<sup>218</sup> “As Big as the Biggest Special: Farrar ‘The Stronger Vow,’” Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 30, album.

<sup>219</sup> Contract (July 12, 1917) and Contract (February 10, 1919), Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 12, Folder 11 (Goldwyn Pictures). Her 1919 contract lowered her guaranteed royalties to \$250,000. *Ibid.*

<sup>220</sup> Bodeen, *From Hollywood*, 61; Contract (April 7, 1920), Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 12, Folder 4 (Associated Exhibitors, Inc.).

their goal in raising the prestige of their industry with *Carmen* and *Joan the Woman*. Lasky recalled in his memoirs the furor and frenzy in the press that surrounded Farrar's transition into film acting.<sup>221</sup> DeMille later described Lasky's acquisition of Farrar as "achiev[ing] the impossible," and he asserted that she played a particularly important role, as he quoted a popular movie magazine of the day, "in advancing the dignity of the motion picture." Criticism of the movies by those working in the "legitimate theater" had been widespread until the early 1910s, and many stage actors feared their own replacement by the moving picture.<sup>222</sup> Other theatrical luminaries, like Sarah Bernhardt, appeared on film before Farrar, but no prestigious established star had made such a huge hit in the new medium.<sup>223</sup> Farrar not only contributed some of her own and opera's long-established cultural capital to the new mechanized medium in order to raise its prestige as skillful art, she also helped to make the movies "safe" for legitimate singers and stage actors.

At the time of Farrar's initial steps in the movies, many theater and opera artists feared that appearing in films would damage their careers.<sup>224</sup> Morris Gest was right in thinking that Farrar could open up the movies for other classical performers. Lasky later argued that it was *Carmen* that "took the curse off movie work for stage personalities." With *Carmen's* success, more and more stars of opera and theater turned

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<sup>221</sup> "Farrar Signs Here to Go in Movies," *Georgian* (Apr 29 1915), Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 30, "Atlanta Opera Season, 1915, Geraldine Farrar" album; Lasky, *I Blow My Own Horn*, 116-117.

<sup>222</sup> E. H. Bierstadt, "Opera in Moving Pictures," *Opera Magazine* (October 1915): 30-32; Higashi, "Cecil B. DeMille and the Lasky Company," 181.

<sup>223</sup> Bernhardt received \$30,000 for each of her four films, but they were not big successes. Robert Grau, "Woman's Conquest in Filmdom," *Motion Picture Supplement* (September 1915), 41-42.

<sup>224</sup> Whether stage stars would harm their reputations by acting in movies was an important and uncertain question at the time. "Does a Star Lose Prestige by Acting for the Movies?" *New York Times* (July 18, 1915). Also see Fryer, *The Opera Singer and the Silent Film*.

without embarrassment to the movies.<sup>225</sup> After Farrar's lauded transition to film, many opera singers and stage actors followed her in front of the camera, such as Polish soprano Ganne Walska and American soprano Anna Case. One newspaper article described the impact that Farrar's triumph had on Enrico Caruso's decision to enter motion pictures: "There were doleful predictions as to her loss of prestige and all that sort of thing. What did actually happen? A stampede of other opera singers toward the camera! When Caruso was approached, he referred the matter to Met General Manager Giulio Gatti-Casazza, who said to him 'If Signorina Farrar has ventured it, I think you can risk it too.'"<sup>226</sup> Hollywood also continued to make movies based on operas, sometimes with and sometimes without opera singers. For example, the famed dancer Anna Pavlova starred in a movie adaptation of Daniel Auber's *The Dumb Girl of Portici* in 1916.<sup>227</sup>

Samuel Goldwyn, after he left the Lasky Company, hired renowned sopranos Lina Cavallieri, who had also previously worked for Lasky, and Mary Garden. Their works for Goldwyn were not great box-office successes.<sup>228</sup> Nonetheless, Garden's version of Massenet's *Thaïs* was arguably the most important opera adaptation besides *Carmen* to star an opera singer in the silent era. Goldwyn paid Garden \$125,000 for the film. Unlike Farrar, however, she was not able to overcome her stage theatrics and bring her character to life. After complaining about Garden's lack of emotional appeal, Hazel Simpson Naylor wrote about her performance in the *Motion Picture Magazine*: "Miss Garden seems quite conscious that this is Mary Garden having her picture 'took.'" The reviewer for *Photoplay* was even more critical: "Mary Garden brings to the screen the

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<sup>225</sup> Lasky, *I Blow My Own Horn*, 118.

<sup>226</sup> Henry T. Finck, "Geraldine Farrar's Career" (November 1922), 57, Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 44, Lister album.

<sup>227</sup> Fawkes, *Opera on Film*, 22-23.

<sup>228</sup> Fryer, *The Opera Singer and the Silent Film*, 105; Fawkes, *Opera on Film*, 21-22.

tedious and dismal technique of operatic acting, which is not acting at all, but slow motions made while waiting for the music to catch up with the drama.”<sup>229</sup> Garden later referred to the filming as “torture” and blamed the director for his lack of authenticity. In her opinion, the film turned out to be a “monstrosity.” After *Thaïs*, Garden starred in another film for Goldwyn, a World War I spy movie, *The Splendid Sinner*, about which she exclaimed: “I hope nobody in God’s world will ever see it again.” After these two films Garden permanently ended her film career.<sup>230</sup> Mary Garden’s misadventures in Hollywood illustrate how the abilities of individual opera singers to adapt to the camera could influence the success and popularity of hybrid opera movies. Farrar was popular not only because of her reputation developed on the operatic stage, but also because she could act and had a lively and attractive screen presence.

The movie industry had already produced over a hundred opera related films (most simple and short) before *Carmen* spread opera to an even larger audience. The rapidly growing and consolidating industry would continue to make hundreds more in the future.<sup>231</sup> By the late 1910s and early 1920s, however, occasional poor reviews and bad box office dampened the popularity of movies starring opera singers. This was part of a larger drop-off in the production of successful artistic films, and to a lesser extent, all films in general. World War I and the subsequent influenza epidemic hit movie theaters hard and box-office receipts went down. During the war, the government instituted a new tax on theater tickets, which also caused attendance to decrease. During the influenza

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<sup>229</sup> Hazel Simpson Naylor, *Motion Picture Magazine*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (March 1918), 98; Randolph Barlett, *Photoplay*, Vol. 13, No. 5 (April 1918), 70. Barlett also criticized the film as “so tawdry, so crude, so vulgar” that it most likely turned off any new audiences to the whole medium of the movies. *Ibid.*

<sup>230</sup> Mary Garden and Louis Biancolli, *Mary Garden’s Story* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1951), 230-233.

<sup>231</sup> Fryer, *The Opera Singer and the Silent Film*, 129.

epidemic all movie theaters were even temporarily shut down in order to prevent further contamination.<sup>232</sup> More expensive prestige pictures were hurt in particular during this slump.

Harry Aitken, president of the Mutual Film Corporation, believed like DeMille, Lasky, Goldwyn, and Griffith that moviemakers should provide “highbrow” films for a wide audience, which he likewise hoped would legitimate the movie industry. Aitken left Mutual and started the Triangle Film Corporation in 1915, the same year that Lasky released his tremendously successful *Carmen*. Even with Griffith directing for his company, Aitken found no such success. Much of his failure, however, lay in his economic and aesthetic missteps. He raised his ticket prices to an outrageous \$2 per person, and he combined such unlikely and disparate films as Keystone Comedy shorts with D. W. Griffith and Thomas Ince dramas. Instead of focusing on quality filmmaking, Aitken confused excellence with expensiveness. Not only did tickets to his movies cost an excessive amount of money, so too did he needlessly overspend when making his films. Like Lasky and Goldwyn, Aitken paid huge salaries to already established stars of the stage. However, he then put these stars in largely mediocre films, which turned into box-office failures and, along with poor management, eventually destroyed his company. Commercial factors triumphed over Aitken’s promotion of genteel middle-class values and “high” culture in his films.

Aitkin appears to have based Triangle on Adolph Zukor’s “Famous Players in Famous Plays” strategy, but even Zukor had largely dropped his focus on established theatrical actors and dramatists by that time. The public, instead, expressed a preference

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<sup>232</sup> Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System*, 18.

for movie stars rather than theatrical figures in films.<sup>233</sup> Triangle's story illustrates the larger (but never complete) move away from stage and operatic figures in the industry toward "home-grown" movie stars. However, the fact that Farrar's films subsequent to *Carmen* continued to be successful during the time of Triangle's demise suggests that quality films with popular, skilled actors could in fact still be successful with the public, even when they were "highbrow." It was not the high culture aspect of Triangle that destroyed it, but rather the incompetence with which Aitken ran the company and the inferiority of the products it released. Lasky trod a similar but in the end very different path that led to prestige *and* success, but also a loss of some of his own control and independence, as he merged with the more powerful Zukor and helped to consolidate the industry. The Zukor-Lasky-DeMille-Goldwyn model became almost unimaginably successful, but only at a cost to those this reinvented culture industry left behind. Greater and easier access to previously sacralized materials like opera on the consumption side came with the price of limiting the number and diversity of voices and opportunities on the production end. Soon only a few men, Adolph Zukor foremost among them, held extraordinary power over the movies and their future course.

These movie industry figures utilized established opera stars to promote their product, while the fame of key opera singers, like Geraldine Farrar, rose after achieving movie stardom. Hybrid opera movies pushed "up" while simultaneously pushing "down." They served to increase the cultural capital and artistic quality of the motion picture, as they popularized opera. "High" and "low" cultural forms (opera and the movies) worked together dialectically to produce something new that defies such categorization and

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<sup>233</sup> Rob King, *The Fun Factory: The Keystone Film Company and the Emergence of Mass Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 143-159, 178-179; Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment*, 68.



complicates old narratives of opera's sacralization and monolithic views of its producers. Moviemakers appropriated the cultural capital that opera had accrued in exclusive opera houses and used it to promote a little respected popular medium. Contrary to sacralized operas on the stage of the Met, the new hybrid opera movies paid scant attention to the integrity or totality of any operatic work; yet, they still succeeded in helping to increase the prestige of the motion picture. In the process, these films democratized opera by making it more readily available and easily accessible to larger and broader audiences. Audiences took advantage of this new accessibility and affordability in many instances, especially when the quality of the movies were high. These operatic films illustrate how in opera no clear-cut boundaries existed between the "high" and "low." Rather, opera in the early twentieth century was ever adapting and hybridized. Its meanings and position in American culture shifted depending on its venue, format, medium, and the decisions of the individual people involved in its production and consumption.

## CHAPTER III

### **Farrar and the Gerryflappers: The Female Operatic Celebrity**

On April 22, 1922, the Metropolitan Opera opened its doors for the last performance of the operatic season. Renowned soprano Geraldine Farrar was appearing in Leoncavallo's verismo opera, *Zazà*. It was to be her last performance with the company. After 493 appearances in thirty roles at the Met, the soprano was retiring at the age of forty. She had recalled to the press how when she was a teenager, she had seen an aging opera star who was now a "pathetic silhouette" of her former self. To the disappointment of her adoring fans, she was determined to avoid that fate by retiring while still at the height of her fame and ability.

Farrar usually sold-out performances at the Metropolitan, but tonight was a unique occasion. The box office had to turn thousands away from the packed house. Hawkers outside the Met sold tickets for a greatly inflated \$100 each. Her fans sent two wagonloads of flowers for her until the foyers of the opera house overflowed with them. Long before the doors were supposed to open for the opera, her devotees stormed into the auditorium. Once the performance began, rowdy fans interrupted the opera many times to cheer the soprano. Her every entrance onstage provoked demonstrations in the audience. After the first act, fans threw over forty bouquets onstage for Farrar. Each of the

numerous curtain calls at the end of every act met with “shrieks and yells” from the audience. After act two, a page brought out a plush cushion with a jeweled scepter and tiara on it, which the soprano put on her head to more applause from the audience.

After the performance, the stage appeared to one reporter to be “carpeted” by flowers. Some floral pieces brought onstage for Farrar required more than one man to carry. Many in the audience screamed for a speech from the departing soprano. She obliged by asking that there be no tears at her leaving. A voice yelled back from audience: “But we can’t help it, Miss Farrar.” At the end, people rushed forward toward the stage *en masse*, and Farrar’s fans unfurled a banner over the orchestra pit that read “Hurrah, Farrar, Farrar, Hurrah.” The press noted how few eyes were dry in the house.

The remarkable events of the night, however, were not purely spontaneous. One reporter explained: “The motive power behind the demonstration was a concerted action on the part of the so-called Jerry Flappers [usually spelled “Gerryflappers” in the press], the singer’s youthful devotees. A committee of this unincorporated organization stimulated and directed the applause of the great audience at the Metropolitan.” Another critic noted that this set of devoted fans consisted of “the ranks of the younger society set, the tearoom flapper contingent and youthful enthusiasts of every walk of life, younger matrons included.” These young female fans were responsible for the huge banner and the multitude of flowers. They also passed out 500 blue and red pennants, across which the name of Farrar was printed in large white letters, for audience members to wave during the opera, curtain calls, and after the performance.<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> One later music critic compared the Gerryflappers to modern rock groupies. Tim Page, “The Opera’s First Superstar,” *New York Times* (February 28, 1982): D19.

The bedlam did not end with the opera. Stagehands carried the singer on their shoulders from the stage door to her car. The street outside the Met was so packed with people that mounted policemen had to keep the crowd from blocking the stage door. In honor of her fans, Farrar left the Met in an outfit that some Gerryflappers had given her as a present. Hordes of young women and teenage girls surrounded her outside waving Gerryflapper pennants. Many female fans also waited on fire escapes on the buildings around the Met to shower Farrar's car with flowers and ribbons. The crowd followed her car for two blocks up Broadway, and a police captain had to push admirers off of the running board of her car. The many reporters present marveled at this extraordinary and unique demonstration of affection and admiration for the great soprano.<sup>235</sup>

As this event illustrates, the opera going public fêted Farrar as one of the legends in her field. Her fame rested, however, not only on her stage career, but also on her appearances in the new media of the movies, phonograph, and later, radio. In particular, her film versions of *Carmen* and *Joan the Woman* garnered a plethora of publicity for her and an abundant supply of enthusiastic fans. By the time of her 1922 Met farewell, her popularity had reached tremendous proportions. She had a devoted following of fans in general, but she was especially beloved by young women like the Gerryflappers. As the press highlighted at the time, Farrar herself was an independent woman and a role model for many young women of the early twentieth century. In some ways, her films reflected

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<sup>235</sup> For accounts of Farrar's Met farewell, see: "Farrar's Farewell Most Amazing," Geraldine Farrar Collection, Library of Congress (LOC), Box 28, Lister album; "Hail Farrar Queen as She Sings Adieu," Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album; Max Smith, "4,000 Shower Diva with Rain of Buds," Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album; Henry T. Finck, "Geraldine Farrar's Career" (November 1922), 57, Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 44, Lister album; "Geraldine Farrar is Dead," *World Telegram Journal* (NY, March 12, 1967), Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album; "Geraldine Farrar, Met Soprano, Dies," *New York Times* (March 12, 1967), Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album; "Geraldine Farrar, Famed Singer, Dies in Ridgefield," *News-Times* (Bridgewater, Roxbury, March 12, 1967), Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album; "Farrar's Farewell Most Amazing," Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album.

her own independence and fiery temperament. On the screen and in her own life, she promoted independent depictions of women.

To an extent that would seem peculiar today, opera singers of the early twentieth century were treated like typical celebrities of the day.<sup>236</sup> Their names often appeared in the press and, with increasing frequency, in the gossip columns. In addition to the hope of appropriating some of opera's cultural cachet, Hollywood moviemakers in the early 1910s decided to utilize opera singers in their films because they were already well-known and well-respected celebrities—and they were willing to pay big bucks to do so.<sup>237</sup> In 1915, Famous Players-Lasky Corporation paid Geraldine Farrar the highest salary up to that point in the company's history to star in three films. Her salary was higher than that of Mary Pickford (Famous Player's most popular movie star) or Charlie Chaplin at the time. Three years later, Lasky paid Enrico Caruso ten times Farrar's salary for only two pictures. In the early years of the movie industry, uncertainty existed over what attributes characterized a successful movie star. This ambiguity motivated moviemakers to seek out people, like opera singers, who already garnered substantial name recognition and press coverage.<sup>238</sup> Even singers who did not find themselves

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<sup>236</sup> DeMille's sister Agnes DeMille wrote later: "The world-famous Geraldine was the first great international star to try the Western [Hollywood] experiment. Grand Opera meant far more in those days than it does now or possibly ever will again. It represented the ultimate in theatrical grandeur, honor, permanence and splendor and Farrar was among its most dazzling names." Agnes DeMille, *Dance to the Piper* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1951): 17. One obituary noted that Farrar "became a reigning soprano in an era when famous singers were cherished, hailed and saluted by the public of several continents." "Geraldine Farrar is Dead," *World Telegram Journal* (New York, March 12, 1967), Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album. Opera's popularity was especially strong in the nation's largest city and the home of its leading opera house. New Yorkers spent more on opera than on any other type of music. "New York Pays About \$7,000,000 Yearly for Its Music; Opera the Biggest Item," *New York Times* (March 19, 1911): SM8. This is possibly the residual result of how "opera mad" New York City had been in the nineteenth century. Joseph Horowitz, *Classical Music in America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2005), 358.

<sup>237</sup> See Paul Fryer, *The Opera Singer and the Silent Film* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., Inc., 2005).

<sup>238</sup> Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 74. Throughout its early history, Hollywood frequently barrowed already established stars

performing in movies, often became objects of movie star-like popular acclaim. The media enthusiastically covered the exploits and triumphs of Farrar's contemporaries, including Enrico Caruso, Luisa Tetrazzini, and Titta Ruffo, who were successful recording artists. Even a somewhat less known Italian baritone, Antonio Scotti, was renowned enough to inspire jokes by popular comedian Fanny Brice.<sup>239</sup>

Although part of the larger star system in Hollywood, opera singers like Farrar were a different sort of celebrity precisely because they were opera singers. Robert Allen in *Horrible Prettiness* argues that burlesque was a “low other” against which the dominant social hierarchy was defined. Those in the dominant social order, he explains elaborating on the work of Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, often dictate the discourses that define the low others. “In the case of burlesque, however,” he argues, “the low other produces another discourse, one that—within the confines of the theatrical space—might invert that hierarchy.”<sup>240</sup> Geraldine Farrar illustrates that not only could low others disrupt standard hierarchies, but “high-culture” figures working within the mass media could also disrupt and transgress the “normal” boundaries of the day. With cultural capital she accrued from opera's status, Farrar had more leeway to make her own path than most women in the early twentieth century. Like her film characters, Farrar herself was famed for her assertiveness and individuality. She molded the discourse about her own life and career, as well as aspects of her film characterizations. She had no

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from other fields. In the first half of the twentieth century, moviemakers especially recruited stars of the vaudeville stage and the radio waves, such as Bob Hope, Bing Crosby, Jack Benny, and Burns and Allen, among many others. Douglas Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System: A History* (London: British Film Institute, 2005), 7, 11, 83, 91, 159, 169. Opera stars were part of this larger process and were some of the first celebrities recruited.

<sup>239</sup> John Dizikes, *Opera in America: A Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 427; Fryer, *The Opera Singer and the Silent Film*, 12, 76, 150; Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, 74.

<sup>240</sup> Robert Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 26.

compunction about violating middle-class mores. Farrar, through her films and her own example, was able to promote new images of women during a time of flux for women's rights and their accepted roles in society. She showed that women could have a voice within the mass media. In the process she became a hero and role-model for many young women. Yet, at the same time, she worked within the culture industry, whose portrayals of women were often negative or restrictive. She was often very "daring" for the times in her acting but she nevertheless helped to spread the discourses of producers of mass culture. She was often subversive—but only to an extent.

Farrar's appearances in the mass media helped to turn her into a renowned national celebrity. As a well-publicized star, Farrar helped to popularize opera by attracting larger and more varied audiences to the art form, both in its hybridized form onscreen and in sometimes controversial onstage productions, including her movie-influenced *Carmen* and her titillating *Thaïs* at the Met. Her celebrity brought opera to much larger numbers of people. Unlike "empty" celebrities, "known for [their] well-knownness," Farrar built her reputation as a dedicated artist on the operatic stage prior to entering the mass media.<sup>241</sup> She brought that talent to the movies and records. Late in life, she also brought the knowledge that she had gained from a career in opera to her radio commentaries and interviews. She received cultural capital in return for her cultivation of skill and knowledge in the operatic world.

Charles Ponce de Leon has written, "What distinguishes celebrity from the anonymous masses is visibility." In addition to film, phonograph, and radio, the print

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<sup>241</sup> In *The Image* Daniel Boorstin argued that celebrities are only "human pseudo-events"—"events" without an organic or spontaneous development manufactured by the advertising industry and the larger "machinery of information." Boorstin considered the modern celebrity to suffer from a "lack of qualities." Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961, 1987, 2012), 9, 57.

media was fundamental to the production of Farrar's celebrity. In the nineteenth century, new types of printing presses and faster means of communication spurred the growth of inexpensive magazines and newspapers like the penny press. The professionalization of journalism and the founding of wire services for the news contributed further to this proliferation of printed media. With this expansion, came a new type of reporting. Gossip columns had first emerged in the antebellum penny press, but it was not until late in the nineteenth century that a more encompassing and widespread celebrity journalism developed, which came to full fruition in the next century, as new mass media forms emerged. Some reporters, like Hedda Hopper, covered the details of the private lives of Hollywood stars. Other columnists, foremost Walter Winchell, published personal information (often hearsay) about a wide variety of national figures well beyond just the entertainment world. The use of anecdotes and photographs helped to bring public figures to life, allowing many readers to feel a personal connection to them. Farrar was featured extensively in news articles, profiles, and interviews. The press thoroughly analyzed her career, but they also turned her into a likeable "personality" by focusing on her private life and personal attributes.

Studio publicity departments utilized new press outlets to advertise their movies and spread the fame of their stars, as well as to attempt to shape public discourses about them. Farrar herself also worked to mold her own image by writing articles and books and giving numerous interviews. Image manipulation was nothing new in itself. Leo Braudy describes how Alexander the Great molded his own public myth, even during an invasion of the Persian Empire. Famous people had always tried to develop a certain public image of themselves. What changed with the advent of the twentieth century was



the new “mass” scope of this fame. Farrar was able to take advantage of her popularity in the mass media.<sup>242</sup>

Farrar’s celebrity made her known to large numbers of young women around the nation, who were presented with new concepts of the possible from Farrar’s example as an actress and in her real life.<sup>243</sup> As the Gerryflappers illustrate, many became intensely devoted to her because of what they perceived in her performances and public persona. In *Women in the American Theatre*, Faye Dudden provides a declension narrative, wherein speaking skills were actresses’ most valued attribute in the late 1700s and early 1800s. By the mid- to late nineteenth century, however, with the rise of “leg shows” and other new types of theatrical shows, greater value began to be placed on women’s looks than elocution, in the process turning actresses into objects.<sup>244</sup> Robert Allen also notes a change in burlesque in the late nineteenth century. In the early years of burlesque, women writers and producers dominated the industry, and female performers were often witty and defiant of conventional standards, even to the point of promoting women’s suffrage onstage and addressing other political issues.<sup>245</sup> By the early twentieth century, mass culture again changed the circumstances of women performers. Farrar negotiated tensions between inscribed objectification and her own desire for liberation in her performances. She frequently included elements of her own “voice” or attitudes in her work, and she

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<sup>242</sup> Charles L. Ponce de Leon, *Self-Exposure: Human-Interest Journalism and the Emergence of Celebrity in America, 1890-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 13, 38-41, 44, 52-53, 61-63, 66; Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986, 1997), 32-37, 500, 508, 554-555; Joshua Gamson, *Claims to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 19-20, 22.

<sup>243</sup> Faye Dudden explains the new possibilities presented by women acting: “Whenever a woman enacts a part she implicitly threatens the prevailing definition of womanhood: she shows she can become someone else and make you believe it.” Faye Dudden, *Women in the American Theatre: Actresses & Audiences 1790-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 2.

<sup>244</sup> Dudden, *Women in the American Theatre*, 14, 74, 183-184.

<sup>245</sup> Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, xii, 16-17, 25.

utilized the mechanisms of celebrity making, especially the print media, to express her own opinions to a large public. Her story was much more complex than mere objectification. Many women opera singers followed in Farrar's wake, some of whom became popular movies stars like Grace Moore and Jeanette MacDonald. Both these women were independent in their personal lives, but unlike Farrar they typically perpetuated gender norms in their movies. None of the leading women opera singers of the "talking picture" era ever quite reached the level of cultural prominence, transgressiveness, or freedom that Farrar did.

### **The Opera Singer as Star**

The level of Farrar's popularity can perhaps be gleaned from a best actors contest that ran in the widely circulated *Motion Picture Magazine* from November 1915, the month that *Carmen* premiered, through mid-April 1916. Each monthly edition of the magazine came with a detachable card with which readers could vote for five movie "players," whom they thought were the best. The magazine recommended that "real ability, talent, merit and strength of characterization be given the greatest weight" when voting. Although Farrar started low on the results list in a tie with Lillian Gish for *Birth of a Nation*, the soprano's vote total rose rapidly as the contest came to a close. As the magazine editors wrote at the end of the contest, "Perhaps the most remarkable result was in the race between Mary Pickford, Marguerite Clark and Geraldine Farrar for first honors among the women." In the end, Farrar won first place among actresses and fourth

place among all movie actors. She garnered a total of 17,900 votes from the movie-going public.<sup>246</sup>

Reviews of the film expressed widespread approval and appreciation of Farrar's performance.<sup>247</sup> The reviewer for the trade paper *Variety* echoed one audience member, who exclaimed that Farrar's part in the film was "a fine piece of acting." Even more effusive, the reviewer for the *New York Dramatic Mirror* declared: "Geraldine Farrar has put her heart and soul and body into this picture, and without the aid of the magic of her voice, has proved herself one of the greatest actresses of all times. Her picture, *Carmen*, will live long after her operatic characterization has died in the limbo of forgotten singers."<sup>248</sup> Another reviewer claimed that this movie provided Farrar with a triumph greater than all her previous successes on the operatic stage.<sup>249</sup>

Other reviewers largely praised the film, but lamented the movie's lack of sound that prevented them from hearing Farrar sing her part. *The New York Times* reviewer remarked how odd it was that a soprano would devoted herself to a medium "wherein the chief characteristic is a complete and abysmal silence" and found some of her acting to display questionable taste.<sup>250</sup> *The Los Angeles Times* reviewer marveled at Farrar's vitality and personality, but missed "the beauty of her wonderful voice."<sup>251</sup> One writer for

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<sup>246</sup> "Screen Masterpieces Contest," *Motion Picture Magazine*, Vol. 10 (November 1915): 119; "Screen Masterpieces Contest," *Motion Picture Magazine*, Vol. 10 (January 1916): 164-165; "Screen Masterpieces Contest," *Motion Picture Magazine*, Vol. 11 (February 1916): 182-183; "Screen Masterpieces Contest," *Motion Picture Magazine*, Vol. 11 (March 1916): 178-179; "Screen Masterpieces Contest," *Motion Picture Magazine*, Vol. 11 (April 1916): 178-179; "Screen Masterpieces Contest," *Motion Picture Magazine*, Vol. 11 (May 1916): 179.

<sup>247</sup> For an enthusiastic example by a major critic, see: Kitty Kelly, "Flickerings from Film Land: Farrar's *Carmen* Opens New Strand," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (October 16, 1915): 14.

<sup>248</sup> *Carmen* review, *Variety*; *Carmen* review, *New York Dramatic Mirror* (November 6, 1915) as quoted in Robert S. Birchard, *Cecil B. DeMille's Hollywood* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 89 and Fryer, *The Opera Singer and the Silent Film*, 167-168.

<sup>249</sup> Julian Johnson, "Carmen," *Photoplay*, Vol. 8, No. 6 (November 1915), 77-80.

<sup>250</sup> "Geraldine Farrar Seen But Not Heard," *New York Times* (November 1, 1915): 11.

<sup>251</sup> Edwin F. Schadlert, "Geraldine Farrar's Spell," *Los Angeles Times* (October 31, 1915): III21.

the movie magazine *Photoplay* complained when she first arrived in Hollywood that Farrar in a silent film was like: “The Mona Lisa without her smile; a Stradivarius with its strings; children of a deaf and dumb institute at play.”<sup>252</sup> However, once the movie came out, *Photoplay* too joined in the chorus of praise for the film, likening it to Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation*. The reviewer also praised Wallace Reid’s Don José, exclaiming that he would beat leading tenor Giovanni Martinelli at the Metropolitan if only he could sing. The *Photoplay* reviewer, however, pinpointed the true focal point of the movie. “It is of course with Farrar’s assumption of the gypsy that people are mainly concerned,” he wrote. “All else—plot, players and production—are of secondary importance when judged by public curiosity.”<sup>253</sup> The quality of her acting—and the allure of celebrity—helped ensure the success of the film.

From the time of Farrar’s signing through the release of the film, much of the movie’s publicity revolved around Farrar. “Since she was the first personality in motion-picture history to receive what has since become known as ‘the full treatment,’ every detail of it was front-page news,” Lasky recalled.<sup>254</sup> In the film, during the first scene a title card appears that reads: “GERALDINE FARRAR As Carmen – the gypsy.” This is an unnecessary title to insert into the action; it merely highlighted her presence in the film, capitalizing on her fame and prestige.<sup>255</sup> Advertisements for *Carmen* focused on her name, picture, and celebrity, as well as to a lesser extent banked on the good reputation for quality filmmaking that DeMille and Lasky had already developed during their short

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<sup>252</sup> Quoted in Charles Higham, *Cecil B. DeMille* (New York: Scribner, 1973), 53.

<sup>253</sup> Johnson, “Carmen,” 77-80.

<sup>254</sup> Lasky, *I Blow My Own Horn* (New York: Doubleday, 1957), 117.

<sup>255</sup> Farrar’s next film, *Joan the Woman*, repeated this focus on the star soprano. Farrar’s name is as big as the movie’s title during the introductory credits, for example.

film careers. Ads also argued that Farrar's appearance in *Carmen* was a sign of the studio's "supreme quality."<sup>256</sup> One advertisement proclaimed:

Geraldine Farrar, most famous of all women artists of today, will make her photodramatic debut in the Lasky Feature Play Company's production, "Carmen," produced by Cecil B. DeMille. Here are four names which combined in one production hold forth exceptional promise—Miss Farrar—Lasky—"Carmen"—and DeMille.

After describing Farrar's success at the Metropolitan Opera in *Carmen*, the ad closed by asserting about the film: "Nothing finer in motion pictures ever has been seen."<sup>257</sup>

Another ad, which gushed that this was "the greatest picture play ever shown," stressed Farrar's starring role and displayed a picture of Farrar and Reid embracing.<sup>258</sup>

In the few years leading up to the release of DeMille's *Carmen*, the star system had developed in Hollywood, becoming largely established by 1912.<sup>259</sup> Prior to this, moviemakers marketed films based on the studio or producers' own brand names. Companies tended to be fairly uniform in their product, so people could be familiar with the sorts of films each studio produced. It was only in the early 1910s that most major studios even listed actors' or directors' names in credits.<sup>260</sup> The eventual creation of a movie star system was due in part to the development of a discourse on film acting. Prior to 1907 no such discourse existed, since appearing in films was not seen as "acting" but merely "posing" for pictures. The fascination of the public with the moving picture focused on the novelty and interest of the technology itself. However, by 1907 narrative

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<sup>256</sup> Display Ad, *Chicago Daily Tribune* (October 10, 1915): 11; Display Ad, *Chicago Daily Tribune* (October 24, 1915): D4; Display Ad, *Chicago Daily Tribune* (November 1, 1915): 14; Display Ad, *New York Times* (Nov 1, 1915): 5; Display Ad, *Washington Post* (November 7, 1915): SM3.

<sup>257</sup> "Carmen (1915)," CORE COLLECTION: Clippings and Other Written Materials, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles.

<sup>258</sup> Display Ad, *Chicago Daily Tribune* (October 12, 1915): 8.

<sup>259</sup> Richard DeCordova, *Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1990, 2001), 131.

<sup>260</sup> Eileen Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema, 1907-1915* (History of the American Cinema, Vol. 2) (University of California Press, 1994), 103, 105, 118.

films began to dominate the movie industry, which required actors to play parts in fictional stories. As the popularity of narrative film grew, a new discourse which tied motion picture “players” to their stage counterparts helped to legitimate movies and to center more attention on the people appearing in films, which led to a new fascination with the on- and off-screen lives of movie actors.<sup>261</sup> By the time feature films became prominent in the early 1910s, audience members expressed their interest in screen actors by sending letters to movie theater managers and studios asking for the names of actors. They also wrote to the studios requesting photographs of unnamed actors they had seen.<sup>262</sup>

Beginning in 1910, the development of film magazines, such as *Photoplay* and the *Motion Picture Story Magazine*, helped to fan this new public fascination. These magazines reached huge numbers of film fans and was a part of a larger shift in society toward a new personality based culture.<sup>263</sup> Although originally concerned primarily with the movies themselves, by 1913 and 1914 these film magazines started to focus more on the personal lives of actors, who were as famous in real life as their characters were on the big screen. This was the birth of the full-fledged movie star.<sup>264</sup> Studios used the development of the star system as a form of product differentiation. They preferred stars

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<sup>261</sup> DeCordova, *Picture Personalities*, 132-134, 138; Jennifer M. Bean, *Flickers of Desire: Movies Stars of the 1910s* (Rutgers University Press, 2011), 1-2.

<sup>262</sup> Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema*, 107, 118; Bean, *Flickers of Desire*, 2.

<sup>263</sup> Gamson, *Claims to Fame*, 25; Richard Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of Silent Feature Picture, 1915-1928* (History of the American Cinema, Vol. 3) (University of California Press, 1994), 193; Bean, *Flickers of Desire*, 3; Gaylyn Studlar, “The Perils of Pleasure: Fan Magazine Discourse as Women’s Commodified Culture in the 1920s,” in *Silent Film*, ed. Richard Abel (New Brunswick, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 267. By 1922, for example, *Photoplay* had a circulation of 2 million per month. *Ibid.*, 264. For more on the culture of “personality” dominant at this time, see Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2003), 271-285. Boorstin termed “a personality” to be a synonym of “a celebrity.” “To be known for your personality actually proves you a celebrity,” he wrote. Farrar was a personality, but one known for more than just her personality. Boorstin, *The Image*, 65.

<sup>264</sup> DeCordova, *Picture Personalities*, 98.

that they could rely on to bring in good box-office receipts and to draw fans, who would become repeat viewers. In particular, fan magazines and studio publicity departments directed much of their promotion of specific stars toward women viewers, whom they believed made up the majority of movie audiences. By mid-decade, major newspapers were also reporting on the leading stars. Farrar topped the *Los Angeles Times* list of Lasky stars and was noted as the highest paid of all movie stars at any studio.<sup>265</sup>

Hollywood heavily promoted its new stars, but the movies' star system was merely a part of longer running star systems in other media and fields. Hollywood's star system was patterned on the earlier star systems of vaudeville, the theater, and opera, and Farrar, already a star in the opera world, fit into this nascent system well. In the 1700s, the early written media followed the exploits of the castrati, the first stars of the operatic stage. Farinelli, the most famous of the castrati, gained wealth and lived with the honors and privileges of nobility because of his famed singing ability. By the late classical era, sopranos replaced castrati as the glamorous stars of the operatic stage. Maria Malibran became the first operatic star to perform in the United States. Later in 1850 P.T. Barnum heavily promoted Swedish soprano Jenny Lind's first American tour, turning her into an adulated early media celebrity.<sup>266</sup> Many highly publicized opera stars followed in her wake, including the widely celebrated Adelina Patti.<sup>267</sup> As an outgrowth of the special prominence of Italian opera with its focus on melody and the cult of the singer, opera

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<sup>265</sup> Studlar, "The Perils of Pleasure," 264; Gamson, *Claims to Fame*, 25, 27-28; "Movie Stars Who Scintillate in Los Angeles," *Los Angeles Times* (January 1, 1916), III:71.

<sup>266</sup> Farrar was a long-time admirer of Lind. At age 12, she even imitated Jenny Lind at a carnival. Later, Farrar collected some of Lind's opera related possessions. She later gave some of these, two items Lind had used in *Carmen* on stage and a kimono worn in *Madama Butterfly*, to a museum. "Geraldine Farrar, Met Soprano, Dies," *New York Times* (March 12, 1967), Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album; Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 12, Folder 19.

<sup>267</sup> Dizikes, *Opera in America*, 86-87; Fryer, *The Opera Singer and the Silent Film*, 12, 14-15; John Rosselli, *Singers of Italian Opera: The History of a Profession* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 47, 68.

singers in the United States retained much of the star status and glamour that they had long had in Europe. Metropolitan Opera general director Heinrich Conried recognized this phenomenon in a 1905 article for *Leslie's Monthly Magazine*, in which he noted, "rightly or wrongly, the American opera-goer is still more concerned about the singers than about the operas which are presented to him."<sup>268</sup>

In his autobiography, DeMille marveled at the level of fame that Farrar was able to achieve even without the help of film, radio, or television.<sup>269</sup> The press gave her frequent and widespread exposure, both before, during, and after her movie career, publishing frequent articles that dealt with gossip, her marriage and relationships, fashion, money, and not necessarily foremost, her performances. The print media in particular displayed a fascination with her love life, especially the rumors of her affair with the crown prince of Germany, Kaiser Wilhelm II's eldest son, Prince Friedrich Wilhelm. Farrar's father even knocked down the editor of a paper that printed a story about her and the German prince.<sup>270</sup> Unsurprisingly, her later marriage to movie actor Lou Tellegen received extensive coverage. Articles stressed that the couple got to know each other through the movies. The print media covered their married life and subsequent divorce at length.<sup>271</sup> Magazines and newspapers also discussed her home and its

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<sup>268</sup> Heinrich Conried, "Grand Opera in America," *Leslie's Monthly Magazine*, Vol. LIX, No. 3 (January 1905): 243. Musicologist Joseph Horowitz argues that opera in the United States was "a collection of great names." Horowitz, *Classical Music in America*, 360.

<sup>269</sup> Cecil B. DeMille, *The Autobiography of Cecil B. DeMille* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1959), 139.

<sup>270</sup> Dizikes, *Opera in America*, 402.

<sup>271</sup> "The Movie That United Jerry Farrar and Lou-Tellegen," Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 39, album; "Geraldine Farrar Becomes Mrs. Lou Tellegen Zahard," *Philadelphia Enquirer* (February 9, 1916), Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 39, album; "Miss Farrar a 'Movie' Bride; Married Before the Camera" (February 9, 1916), Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 39, album; "Miss Geraldine Farrar and Lou-Tellegen to Be Married; Romance of the 'Movies,'" *New York Herald*, Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 39, album; "Geraldine Farrar to Wed Lou-Tellegen," *New York Times* (February 6, 1916): 1; "At Home with the Farrar-Tellegens," *Shadowland*, Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album; " ' How I Keep Married and Happy' Geraldine



furnishing and decorations, as well as her everyday fashions, theatrical costumes, and makeup.<sup>272</sup> And like later-day celebrities, Farrar even endorsed products such as chocolates—with the stipulation that they be of high quality and well packaged.<sup>273</sup>

Although Farrar helped to give the movies prestige and extra publicity, DeMille's film also helped to bolster the level and the breadth of her fame far beyond the Gerryflappers at the stage door or the people who bought her recordings. After the release of *Carmen*, attendance at Farrar's concerts and operatic performances rose. Some venues that she appeared in now had record-breaking crowds for her appearances.<sup>274</sup> Because of the movies, as well its sister medium the phonograph, the number of classical recitals and operatic tours around the country grew in frequency and popularity.<sup>275</sup> One contemporary article entitled "Are Movies Popularizing Opera?" discussed Farrar's *Carmen* and Mary Pickford's film version of *Madame Butterfly* among other operatic films of the day and argued:

[T]he screen is slowly but surely popularizing opera in America. This no sweeping, revolutionary statement—made for effect—but a bald statement of fact...The queer American prejudice against grand operas—the feeling that they are for the wealthy, the musical 'highbrow' only—is being overcome by help of the humble film. If the movies can help in any way to popularize opera, more power to them!<sup>276</sup>

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Farrar," Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album; "Lou Tellegen Sues Miss Farrar; Clash of Temperaments," *New York Times* (August 6, 1921): 1.

<sup>272</sup> "The New Residence of Geraldine Farrar Tellegen," Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album; "Farrar Her Own Modiste," *The Atlanta Georgian* (May 1, 1915), Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 30, "Atlanta Opera Season, 1915, Geraldine Farrar" album; "Geraldine Can Dip Now," Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 39, album; "Great Singer, Geraldine Farrar, Talks of What She May Wear" (Cincinnati, 1915), Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 39, album; Sue Roberts, "From the Inside Looking Out," Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album.

<sup>273</sup> Letter, Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 12, Folder 5 - Claggett.

<sup>274</sup> "Farrar Concert Leading Event of Season," *Richmond Journal* (January 24, 1916), Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 30, album.

<sup>275</sup> "Geraldine Farrar Takes to the Road," Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 39, album.

<sup>276</sup> "Are Movies Popularizing Opera?" *Theatre Magazine* (May 1919): 297.

As the movies benefited from opera's prestige and from opera singers' established fame, opera and opera singers likewise benefited from a growth in the breadth and size of their popularity. As a prestigious star in the opera world, Farrar helped to transfer some of opera's cultural capital to the movies. At the same time, movies won Farrar many new fans and caused her fame to spread to new heights.

The movie *Carmen*, however, not only increased her renown, it also influenced her operatic career, and reviews of her later stage performances of *Carmen* often referenced her movie version. The cigarette factory fight that was a popular scene in the film was not in the Bizet version.<sup>277</sup> However, it proved so successful that many subsequent productions of the opera have included it. Farrar herself added it onstage with surprisingly realistic violence in a performance at the Met soon after movie's release.<sup>278</sup>

One journalist noted how the addition of the fight scene enticed more people to the opera:

One thing is certain: Nobody better than Miss Farrar knows the advertising value of the sensation that she created by her realistic fight with an unknown chorus girl that shocked our sensibilities. Last night's audience exhausted the capacity of the house. Applicants for seats by the hundreds had to be turned down. Four hundred people seeking admission to the balcony had to go away disappointed. In all the combination of snow, and slush, and freeze and wind of last night, 500 would-be standees were still in line around the building when the last admission ticket was sold. Notoriety has its reward!<sup>279</sup>

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<sup>277</sup> " 'Carmen' Is Given Fine Performance," Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 39, album; "Music," Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 39, album. One reporter later noted, "[Farrar] set aflame all the films in the land with her pugnacity in the quarrel scene." In a later interview, Farrar laughed with gusto over "her famous fight." "They did not believe I had strength, but they did after that fight," she happily remembered. James Gibbons Huneker, "Music: A Carmen Matinee," Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album; "The Dominating Diva," Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album.

<sup>278</sup> Birchard, *Cecil B. DeMille's Hollywood*, 62. DeMille recalled: "Geraldine told me later that when she returned to the Metropolitan to sing *Carmen* again, she conspired with one of the chorus girls to include the fight in the opera, to the astonishment of the rest of the cast and the delight of the audience. Since then it has become a traditional part of every *Carmen*, I am told." Cecil B. DeMille, *The Autobiography of Cecil B. DeMille*, 146.

<sup>279</sup> Sylvester Rawling, "Miss Farrar's Carmen Packs Opera House," Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 39, album.

Not all music critics appreciated the addition however.<sup>280</sup>

Farrar changed the rules of operatic acting by transferring her film acting style to her subsequent stage roles, increasing the popularity of her operatic portrayals in the process. Indeed, some people considered her acting somewhat wild and excessive by Met standards. One critic, who blamed the movies for Farrar's reduction of *Carmen* to a role of "common vulgarity," noted Enrico Caruso's annoyance at Farrar for her "energy in acting" while he was trying to sing. The article included his irritated question to Farrar at the end of the act: "Do you think this is an opera house or a cinema?"<sup>281</sup> More notoriously at her first staged *Carmen* when she returned to the Met from Hollywood, she unexpectedly and forcefully slapped Caruso's face (and in some reports also bit his hand) for the sake of greater realism.<sup>282</sup> Caruso responded later in the opera by releasing her from an embrace so abruptly that Farrar fell down. The press became rife with rumors of a feud afterward, which Caruso tried to head off by noting that, although he had made some remarks to Farrar after the performance, they were good friends and not quarreling.<sup>283</sup>

Many critics responded negatively to what they considered to be the vulgarity of her new movie inspired characterization. One reviewer compared her enticing of Don José to a cowboy lassoing an ox and mentioned a football scrimmage when discussing her acting style. The author closed by suggesting her antics were intended solely for publicity.<sup>284</sup> After all the complaints and controversy over the "vulgarity" and "brutality"

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<sup>280</sup> Karleton Hackett, "Geraldine Farrar An Ideal 'Carmen'" (December 4, 1915), Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 39, album.

<sup>281</sup> "Mme. Farrar Returns to the Opera," Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 39, album.

<sup>282</sup> Harold C. Schonberg, "The Goddess That Was Geraldine Farrar," *New York Times* (Sunday edition) (March 19, 1967), Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album.

<sup>283</sup> "Farrar and Caruso Deny a Quarrel," Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 39, album.

<sup>284</sup> Untitled clipping, Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 39, album.

of the previous performance in the run, Farrar toned down the extremes of her acting for the next performance. She made the interpolated fight with the chorus girl less violent. She still wrestled with her as before, but this time did not kick her or tear at her hair. She dropped the flower in Caruso's lap instead of throwing it in his face as she had at the previous performance, and she did not slap him, bite his hand, or cut off his air support in an embrace this time. One reviewer asserted that this revised Carmen was a cross between her old stage Carmen and the one from the movies, and he cited a lingering embrace between Farrar and Caruso as a sign that they had made up. When Caruso held the embrace even after the applause had ended the audience broke out in laughter. One article reviewing the performance, however, was subtitled "Audience Is Disappointed" because of Farrar's greater moderation in the second performance. Several articles at the time argued that she got her initial wilder portrayal from the movies.<sup>285</sup>

Not all the reviews of Farrar's reinvented, movie influenced Carmen, however, were negative. *The New York Times* praised her "animation and power" in the role.<sup>286</sup>

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<sup>285</sup> "Farrar Again in 'Carmen,'" Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 39, album; "Farrar is Carmen Again and Not a Face Slapped," Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 39, album; "Farrar-Caruso Embrace Lingers," *The New York Press*, Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 39, album; "Farrar Subdued and Enticing in Carmen," Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 39, album; "Geraldine Farrar Revises 'Carmen,'" Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 39, album; "Miss Farrar This Time a Mild Carmen," Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 39, album; "Gatti's Hair Turning White Over Caruso-Farrar Feud," Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 39, album; "The supporters of the greatest opera house in the world have not yet approved of one of the stars acting for the flickering films, especially when that star made an inartistic and rather vulgar debut in 'Carmen' arranged for popular consumption," wrote one reviewer. "Seen and Heard," Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 39, album. Farrar also connected her stage Carmen with her movie portrayal in an interview. "I lived the role so constantly in the movies that I feel I must live it when I am singing it," she told one gossip columnist after a *Carmen* performance at the Met. The Dowager, "Farrar Gives Society Many Pointers on the Latin Idea of Dancing," Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 39, album. Farrar's new-found notoriety as Carmen lasted beyond the run of *Carmens* at the Met. One review of a *Carmen* performance in St. Louis was subtitled, "Lived Up to the Film." The author praised the greater richness in her acting since her screen debut. Later reviewers of her dialed-down Carmen performances on the Metropolitan Opera tour, however, made a point of saying that Farrar's performance was not like her movie version. Albert C. Wegman, "Farrar, Greatest of Carmens, Wegman Says, Is Superb in Role of Spanish Cigarette Girl," *St. Louis Times*, Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 39, album; "Ellis Co. Presents Brilliant 'Carmen,'" Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 39, album; "'Carmen' Thrilled 4,500," Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 39, album.

<sup>286</sup> "Geraldine Farrar a Lively Carmen," *New York Times* (February 19, 1916): 9.

Another critic called her a genius and insisted that she did not “transcend the bounds of decorum” in the role.<sup>287</sup> One article entitled “Opera and the Movies” read symbolic meaning into her innovations and stressed how important composer Richard Wagner considered acting for opera singers. Opera has always been a mixture of different arts, he argued; thus, mixing opera with the movies was positive development in keeping with the past.<sup>288</sup> Another reviewer dealt with the role that class-based notions of propriety played in the cries of outrage. With a hint of sarcasm, the author discussed the “air of well-bred expectancy” that initially greeted Farrar’s *Carmen* at the Met, “that august temple of grand opera.” He described the well-dressed, glittering ladies, “leaders of New York’s ultra fashionable set,” who had their sense of propriety shaken and their traditions disturbed. The writer, on the contrary, seemed to think Farrar improved the opera by giving it new life and an energy and realism she had learned from the movies. He exclaimed with mock horror: “She had shattered the inviolable traditions of dignity with the common business of the movies!” The article also noted that some in the audience clapped and cheered Farrar, while others did not.<sup>289</sup> Another reviewer likewise recognized a division within the audience: “The gallery cheered her, but the parterre frowned, and the screen-tainted singer, while she remained ‘copy,’ was no longer ‘class.’”<sup>290</sup>

Farrar’s new *Carmen* may have disturbed some of the wealthy doyens of the Met’s “Golden Horseshoe” and several critics, but her fans and many regular opera goers were thrilled and turned out *en masse*. Even her fourth *Carmen* after her return to the Met

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<sup>287</sup> Sylvester Rawling, “Miss Farrar’s *Carmen* Stirs Big Opera Audience,” Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 39, album.

<sup>288</sup> “Opera and the Movies,” Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 39, album.

<sup>289</sup> “Charlie Chaplin’s Influence on the Grand Opera,” Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 39, album.

<sup>290</sup> Wegman, “Farrar, Greatest of Carmens, Wegman Says, Is Superb in Role of Spanish Cigarette Girl.”

was so packed, not just in the auditorium but also outside the opera house, that New York City police men had to disperse the gathered masses. A reporter noted that Farrar could now be relied upon to draw crowds as large as Caruso's.<sup>291</sup> The movies sparked greater interest in her and influenced her characterization of the role. Her fan base, already sizable, also expanded.

Farrar, as a star of the opera, screen, and phonograph, and a darling of the press, received widespread devotion from her fans, which they illustrated in the pandemonium with which they greeted her Met farewell in 1922, as well as many of the performances leading to her last. Huge demonstrations arose after each of her performances at the Met after the announcement of her pending retirement. A reporter noted that after one of her final *Carmens*, the demonstration by the audience "grew into hoodlumism and for a while threatened to become a riot."<sup>292</sup> One fan responding to the news of her impending retirement from the operatic stage, wrote her a poem protesting that the lives of her fans would be "drear" without her performances. In an exhortory tone, the poem began: "O Farrar, how can we, great or small / Refrain from kneeling at your throne?" Illustrating the impact that she made on the author's life, the poem goes on to proclaim: "You have made our lives worth living!"<sup>293</sup> She received other similar poems over the years that illustrated her fans' devotion to her.<sup>294</sup> Edward Wagenknecht, one of Farrar's biographers and admirers, recalled the first time he saw her sing: "That was a great religious

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<sup>291</sup> "Fourth 'Carmen' Turns as Many Away as the First One Did" (February 21, 1917), Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 39, album.

<sup>292</sup> "Noisy Ovation by Farrar Admirers," (January 25, 1922), Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album.

<sup>293</sup> Letter from a New York City fan, February 5, 1922, Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 10, Folder 27.

<sup>294</sup> Letters, Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 10, Folder 29.

experience. Through Miss Farrar, I was born again that day, born into the world of music, which is a form of life.”<sup>295</sup>

After her farewell, when she returned to the New York stage for a recital at Carnegie Hall, her “army of admirers” gave her an enthusiastic reception.<sup>296</sup> After she had stopped singing professionally in operas, one writer for a musical magazine in 1927 wrote of her fans and the impact of her retirement: “A flaming personality like Farrar cannot vanish without leaving a great vacuum. Geraldine Farrar is a part of the fabric of this generation; for years her public has followed her, with tears, chuckles or gasps, but always with attention and devotion whether the impish trail led up Olympus or down the valley.”<sup>297</sup> When she died the music critic for the *New York Times*, Harold Schonberg, recalled: “She was idolized in a manner hard to understand today.”<sup>298</sup> The paper’s obituary for Farrar noted: “To the audiences of her day she was as much an idol as Jenny Lind had been in hers.”<sup>299</sup> The state assembly of her native Connecticut honored her by passing a resolution expressing admiration for her and sympathy at her passing.<sup>300</sup> At the time of her controversial Met *Carmen*, one reporter argued that Farrar was damaging her reputation as an artist by her work in movies and recordings and by writing magazine articles, even though they had brought her worldwide fame and riches. By the time of her

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<sup>295</sup> Edward Wagenknecht, *Geraldine Farrar: An Authorized Record of Her Career* (Seattle: University Book Store, 1929), 20.

<sup>296</sup> Samuel Chotzinoff, “Music: Geraldine Farrar Comes Back,” Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 44, Lister album.

<sup>297</sup> Alfred Human, “Geraldine Farrar Emerges from Her ‘Exile,’” *Singing* (September 1927), 57, Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 44, album.

<sup>298</sup> Schonberg, “The Goddess That Was Geraldine Farrar.”

<sup>299</sup> “Geraldine Farrar, Met Soprano, Dies,” *New York Times* (March 12, 1967), Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album. Historian John Dizikes has also noted that nothing like Farrar’s Gerryflappers had existed since the sort of fans who adulated Jenny Lind in the nineteenth century. Dizikes, *Opera in America*, 403-404.

<sup>300</sup> “State Assembly Regrets Passing of Miss Farrar,” April 6, 1967, Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album.

passing, the press applauded all of these eclectic achievements as part of a truly remarkable career.<sup>301</sup>

### **Carmen and Joan the Women**

Geraldine Farrar, as a famous and prestigious opera singer, felt little need to abide by the rules of polite society either on the stage or on the screen. Farrar helped to legitimize stories that were on the risqué side. Because of her prestige and the elevated cultural position of opera, movies like *Carmen* could push further against standard bourgeois morality without alienating its audience.<sup>302</sup> Throughout the film, Carmen rejects any attempts to restrict or restrain her on the part of any man or moral code not her own. Carmen's sexuality and sensuality further underscore her refusal to be limited by any type of boundaries.<sup>303</sup> The overt sexuality in the movie—in some ways both transgressive and objectifying—was intentional. Screenwriter William deMille wrote that the costumes for the factory girls should be “the least that will pass the censors.”

In the Lillas Pastia's scene, Carmen flirts with Don José, Escamillo, and another officer all at once, while numerous other men are ogling her to her apparent pleasure. At one point, she provocatively presses Escamillo's head to her breast, while looking and smiling at José. Before long she dances on a table for José, Escamillo, and the other men gathered around her. Although mild by today's standards, the short scenario by the screenwriter indicates that he intended it to be “a wild sensuous Spanish dance.” Don

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<sup>301</sup> “Seen and Heard,” Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 39, album.

<sup>302</sup> For more see: Anne Morey, “Geraldine Farrar: A Star from Another Medium,” 138-139, in *Flickers of Desire: Movie Stars of the 1910s*, ed. Jennifer M. Bean (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 137-154.

<sup>303</sup> A reviewer from the 1990s averred about Farrar's *Carmen*: “Fully clothed, she is shockingly sexual.” Albert Innaurato, “When Opera Singers Mattered, These Mattered More Than Most,” *New York Times* (August 31, 1997): H25.



José watches her dance while noticeably breathing heavily. When the dance is over, Carmen falls from the table into José's arms. At Pastia's, the script informs us, "She is conscious of the fact that she is dressed to attract all eyes." In keeping with her self-absorbed vanity and her position as a sexualized object, both the scenario and the script make constant mention of her being viewed and watched by others. Sometimes the script makes it clear that this is her doing, as it notes that she loves "having focused all eyes upon herself" and "is always ready to receive admiration." The *Photoplay* reviewer, Julian Johnson, especially took note of the character's overt sexuality. Farrar's Carmen was in his mind an "embodied orgy of flesh" that would likely be subject to the censors' shears. Johnson also especially commented on the scantiness of Carmen's clothing. He praised the fight scene in the cigarette factory and in a somewhat exaggerated manner noted that Carmen divested her enemy "of most of her apparel above the waist." Even Don José eventually appears in a disheveled state with his shirt unbuttoned displaying most of his chest.<sup>304</sup>

Not everyone found the sexuality of Carmen acceptable, however. Film censors in Philadelphia found 5,000 feet of the film "shocking and improper." This stance invited scorn over "these sanctimonious Philadelphians" from a *New York Evening Sun* reporter: "As if the fetching Miss Farrar could ever be shocking to any one [*sic*]!" Farrar's stage presentations could likewise push the boundaries of acceptable early twentieth-century sexual expression. Her *Zazà* at the Met stirred up controversy primarily for one scene in

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<sup>304</sup> William C. deMille, "Title continuity and scenario," (undated), Paramount Pictures scripts, Production files-Produced, Series 1, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles, Folders: CARMEN Cecil B. DeMille (Paramount Pictures, 1915); "Cecil B. de Mille's Work Manuscript Carmen (script)," Cecil B. DeMille Collection, University of Southern California, XVII. Scripts, Box 1227, Folder 15, 5-6, 11; Johnson, "Carmen," 77-80. Censors in Pennsylvania, in fact, attempted to cut large swaths of the film, but DeMille and Lasky won in the Common Pleas Court and the film was not censored in that state. "Dangerous 'Carmen,'" *Washington Post* (May 5, 1991): G3.

which she sat with her back to the audience entirely naked from waist up. Her partial nudity caused discussion in the press and received public criticism from at least one religious leader. Some reviewers were also disgusted. One of them accused Farrar of contributing to a larger “prostitution of art” that the writer believed was growing more and more common at the time. Regardless of the criticism, audiences loved her *Zazà*. It was a big success at Met and demand was so high for admission that normally \$7 seats sold for \$15.<sup>305</sup>

Because of her aggressive movie *Carmen*, the press gave Farrar the nickname of “Tigress of the Screen.” The controversy over her boisterous and even violent acting in her first *Carmens* at the Met after she made the movie solidified her reputation for energetic aggressiveness. Overall, her stage *Carmen* had much in common with her movie *Carmen*. In particular, both stressed the character’s independence and love of freedom. One music critic described Farrar’s stage portrayal of the role: “Miss Farrar’s *Carmen* proclaims the gypsy’s primal right to liberty...It seemed that she must avow her love for the toreador even in the face of death not so much because of the compelling power of that passion as because the fundamental quality of her being was her right to absolute liberty, and that life itself was as nothing save as she felt herself free to do as she willed.” Unlike some singers’ interpretations, Farrar’s *Carmen* was not in the grips of animalistic passions, she was simply determined to be free always no matter the cost.

In the movie, her lover Don José claims that she belongs to him. She resents his air of ownership and declares: “*Carmen* belongs to no man. She is free.” She likes Escamillo, but even in that relationship, according to William deMille’s early written

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<sup>305</sup> “Bill Penn’s City Shocked,” *New York Evening Sun*, reprinted in the *Washington Post* (October 19, 1915): 6; “Is Geraldine Farrar’s Bare Back Too Suggestive?” Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album.

scenario, she “has clung to her freedom.” The script calls Carmen’s attitude “defiant” and describes the tension between the two main characters as a “struggle for mastery.” After José flees to live with Gypsy smugglers, he finds Carmen again, but she seems uninterested in him. He threatens her: “If you have been playing with me, I will kill you!” Carmen responds: “You can’t frighten me.” He kisses her as she struggles against him. He places a knife next to her face with a crazed look. A title card follows: “Remember – You belong to me.” The fate motive from the opera plays in the background foreshadowing the tragedy to come. After he leaves the scene, she has “mixed feelings” according to the script: “At one moment she admires his strength – at the next realizes that he may interfere with her liberty.” In the end, José discovers that she is not his and will not remain with him against her will.<sup>306</sup>

Towards the end of the film, Don José lies in wait for Carmen outside the bullring where Escamillo is performing. One of Carmen’s fellow smugglers tries to stop her from confronting José, but she points to herself and, according to the title card, exclaims, “I fear no man.” As she talks to José in front of the arena, she responds to his crazed entreaties that she return to him: “My love is mine – to give or to deny.” When it is clear that he intends to murder her, unlike in many productions of the opera, this cinematic Carmen fights back. She bites at José and tries to climb over a high gate to get away from him. Even with her efforts to survive, she dies defiant. The movie script describes Carmen’s final moments: “Her face is close to his and expresses more a great astonishment than pain, and as she feels that he has killed her, she is nearer to loving him than she has ever been. She says to him – ‘You are a man after all.’” Geraldine Farrar as

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<sup>306</sup> William C. deMille, “Title continuity and scenario”; “Cecil B. de Mille’s Work Manuscript Carmen (script),” 27-8.

Carmen, however, plays this scene with scorn, defiance, and bravado, not admiration or love. She is surprised and shows pain but does not say anything else to José immediately after the stabbing. She purses her eyebrows and looks at him briefly with a pained expression.<sup>307</sup>

The script lists the final dialogue title after José has stabbed Carmen as: “You have killed me José – But I laugh at you.” However, the title in the movie was changed to stress Carmen’s independence. As she dies, the title appears on the screen with Carmen’s final words delivered with a slight smile: “You have killed me José – but I am free!” In the opera, the libretto emphasizes the love story aspect and José’s jealousy motive is clearer. In the movie, José also kills her because of his resentment that she got him to do so much for her. He feels that he has been taken advantage of by a woman who was only toying with him. The ending is also less centered around Escamillo than in the opera. In the opera Carmen tells José about Escamillo: “je l’aime et devant la mort même je répéterai que je l’aime” (I love him and I’ll repeat in the face of death itself that I love him!). The film version makes her refusal of José revolve around her need for freedom and self-determination, rather than any real love of Escamillo. Deviating from the opera, José also stabs himself and collapses over Carmen’s body.<sup>308</sup> Farrar imbued other of her stage characterizations with similar assertive independence. One interviewer described her Zazà, a role that she originated, as having a “flashing, dominant personality, going a

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<sup>307</sup> “Cecil B. de Mille’s Work Manuscript Carmen (script).”

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.*, 36; *Bizet’s Carmen: Complete French Libretto* (New York: Dover Publications, 1970, 1983), 86.

little farther than anyone else would dare go...She blazed defiance at you, at the world, at convention, she crashed and flashed, she scintillated brilliance.”<sup>309</sup>

In *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure*, Nan Enstad examines the “narrative cues” of silent female adventure films, which she views as a means for working-class women to identify themselves with dauntless and daring working women characters. Such identifications with fictional characters, she indicates, influenced constructions of early twentieth-century working-class women’s subjectivities—multiple identities that are “continually shaped and reshaped in human social exchange.”<sup>310</sup> Farrar’s films may have functioned in a similar way for her Gerryflapper devotees and other fans. A reviewer for *Variety* cited Carmen’s “boasts” about her freedom as one of the character’s undesirable moral shortcomings.<sup>311</sup> However, for some audience members, especially women, this love of freedom and independence may have been a point of identification or inspiration. Farrar provided another character with whom women in particular could potentially identify in her 1916 film, *Joan the Woman*. The movie’s screenwriter, Jeannie MacPherson, writing from a working woman’s perspective, created a brave, independent,

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<sup>309</sup> Wegman, “Farrar, Greatest of Carmens, Wegman Says, Is Superb in Role of Spanish Cigarette Girl”; Karleton Hackett, “Geraldine Farrar An Ideal ‘Carmen’” (December 4, 1915), Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 39, album; “Interview,” Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 2, Folder 7 (articles) (typed draft).

<sup>310</sup> Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1999), 13-14, 176, 182-7, 191. In the essay, “On Grief and Complicity: Notes Toward a Visionary Cultural History,” Enstad laments that she did not emphasize her critique of consumer culture enough in *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure* and that her book should not be read as an uncritical celebration of consumer culture as a form of “resistance.” She argues that no real resistance versus domination binary exists, but rather the two are in actuality “inevitably intertwined.” Nan Enstad, “On Grief and Complicity: Notes Toward a Visionary Cultural History,” in *The Cultural Turn in U.S. History: Past, Present, Future*, eds. James Cook, Lawrence Glickman, and Michael O’Malley (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

<sup>311</sup> *Carmen* review, *Variety* (November 5, 1915): 22.

freedom-loving character for Farrar to portray.<sup>312</sup> The movie periodically contrasts her favorably with some of the male characters. Even after Joan entreats him to stay to fight the English, one French soldier runs away and hides when the enemy arrives. Joan, in stark contrast, crosses herself and stays. Later the same French soldier almost kills Trent, an Englishman with whom Joan falls in love, as he hides in a barn. Joan stops the French soldier. She undauntedly hits him on the arm and commands him to fetch the other French soldiers. The cowardly soldier goes to where everyone is hiding and lies to Joan's father: "Thy daughter, Joan, is safe: I hid her in the loft while I put them all to rout!" She is brave and in control; the male soldier is afraid and duplicitous. Later in the movie, an English messenger demands that the French surrender. The French King looks terrified at the command. Only Joan stops him from signing the capitulation. She defies the English messenger with a dignified pose and her head up, while the king, who is physically smaller than she, cowers beside her. Taking the initiative that no Frenchman does, Joan yells: "Men of France – will ye follow me to battle?" In response, the king appoints her commander of the armies of France and gives her a sword.

Men doubt and underestimate her, but she constantly proves them wrong. The governor, whom she informs of her visions, does not believe her. Empowered with supernatural strength, she convinces him by taking a tiny dagger and chopping his huge sword in two with it. Her English enemies make fun of her: "This petticoat general bids us flee from France – lest she carve us with her sword!" They laugh, but in the end she

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<sup>312</sup> Jeannie MacPherson played the cigarette girl who fought with Farrar's character in *Carmen*. MacPherson and DeMille specially chose the name *Joan the Woman* for the film rather than *Joan of Arc*. Not everyone supported this choice. Jesse Lasky wired DeMille that reporters in New York all assumed that the title of the upcoming film would be *Joan of Arc*. He added, "It seems to us that we would be throwing away one of the picture's greatest assets if we used any other title, even if the title you suggest [*Joan the Woman*] would better fit the version." Later, however, he wired the director again and told him that he could pick the final title (although he still promoted *Joan of Arc* personally). Birchard, *Cecil B. DeMille's Hollywood*, 97-98.

defeats them in battle. She repeatedly shows herself to be more courageous and a greater leader than the men in the story. In the big battle scene of the movie, she stands dangerously exposed in the midst of the fighting, holding the standard and cheering her forces on. Later in the scene, she is the first French soldier to climb into the enemy fortress. She does so while still carrying the French standard and telling the others to follow her. An Englishman responds by shooting her in the chest with an arrow. Even after being shot, she still leads the soldiers on. After the battle, the French crowds hail her as a hero. She stands in a group of women who reach up their arms to her. A monk who witnesses this scene is very upset and reprimands her: “Wouldst thou become Queen – that thou lettest the people kneel to thee!” She is a hero to the women, but a presumptuous, overreaching threat to some of the male characters.

Although Farrar’s Joan provides a strong, brave, unorthodox, and independent role model for women viewers, the moviemakers made her part expressly male-focused. In the middle of the opening credits, a title card about the film appears that reads: “Founded on the Life of Joan of Arc, the Girl Patriot, Who Fought with Men, Was Loved by Men and Killed by Men – Yet Withal retained the Heart of a Woman.” Many of her actions throughout the film are in response to those of men, especially in regard to the invented love story plot. In the end, her enemies destroy her for playing a man’s role, which is represented in the film by a fixation on her male clothing. In a scene toward the close of the movie, men dressed in robes reminiscent of Klu Klux Klan members threaten Joan with torture if she does not sign a confession, which “declares that thou hast rashly sinned against Holy Church [*sic*] – hast lied concerning thy Saints and Voices – and dost promise to return to the garb of a woman!” She signs after being tortured, while one

bishop brags about his plans: “By morning this wench will have returned to men’s garb. We can then pronounce her a relapsed heretic – and burn her!” He then sends a ruffian to guard her. The guard harasses her, drink in hand, while the bishop and others voyeuristically watch from a hole in the ceiling. Joan becomes an object of their gaze, while trapped in their lewd control. However, as the guard starts to kiss her neck, Trent comes in and fights him. She gets dressed in her former clothes, while Trent tries to rescue her. The Bishop enters with the others, sees what she is wearing, and declares: “Since thou hast resumed the garb of a man I declare thee, Joan, to be a relapsed heretic – and as such thou shalt be taken to the public square at daylight and - - burned!” More than any supposed blasphemy, her death becomes a question of her usurpation of a male’s rightful role and the shirking of what is expected of her as a woman.<sup>313</sup>

The movie shows her as pious and righteous to the end (and thus, a heroine rather than a liar or lunatic). DeMille and screenwriter Jeannie MacPherson turned this historical woman into a Christ-like figure. On her last night, she sees ghostly visions of men in Klan-like robes pointing fingers at her accusingly, but they disappear when she falls to her knees, raises a crucifix, and calls out like Jesus: “Oh, Lord my God - - why hast thou forsaken me!” Once she crosses her arms with a crucifix in hand, she looks serene and determined. In contrast to Joan’s godliness, the king and his courtiers spend the night in bacchanalia. All the men in the royal court are too drunk to do anything to save Joan the next morning, when the king discovers that Joan is about to be burned. At the end, Trent, whose love she had rejected in favor of her righteous work, gives her a

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<sup>313</sup> Carroll Smith-Rosenberg discusses the fears of social disorder awakened in the early twentieth century over the “androgyny” of the second wave of New Women, who wanted full equality with men and sometimes dressed in men’s clothing or took on other attributes that were gendered male. Carol Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian American* (Oxford University Press: 1985), 265, 272, 285-288.



little stick cross to keep with her as she dies. In the midst of the flames, she cries: “My voices were of God – they have not deceived me!” The musical score stresses the idea of her true religious inspiration throughout the film by using church-like organ music frequently, even in the bigger orchestral ensembles.

Although once considered unladylike, the level of physical activity that Farrar had to perform throughout the filming of the movie fit well with the growing physical culture of the early twentieth century. Around this time a discourse grew up around several film actresses, such as Pearl White and Grace Cunard, which promoted and praised physical and athletic ability in women. Comediennes in particular showed physical vigor and even participated in acts of (slapstick) violence in their movies. Active women in adventure serials also especially appealed to female audiences of the day with their bold physical exploits.<sup>314</sup> Farrar had to perform feats of daring and aggression as the heroine of *Joan the Woman*, as she had already done to a lesser extent in *Carmen*. The big battle scene required great physicality from the soprano. The final burning at the stake further demanded physical endurance from her and placed her in a legitimately dangerous situation. Farrar relished the realism of the movie, however, and even bragged to a reporter about the lacerations and bruises she got during the torture scenes. Her versatility and activity did not go unnoted in the press. “Tain’t enough that she can act; she can ride a horse like a veteran, fight like a bull-dog, love like a queen and die like a martyr,” one reviewer remarked.<sup>315</sup>

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<sup>314</sup> Bean, *Flickers of Desire*, 8, 9, Rob King, *The Fun Factory: The Keystone Film Company and the Emergence of Mass Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 219-227; For more see: Mark Garrett Cooper, “Pearl White and Grace Cunard: The Serial Queen’s Volatile Present” and Christine Gledhill, “Mary Pickford: Icon of Stardom,” in *Flickers of Desire* (Rutgers University Press, 2011).

<sup>315</sup> “Miss Farrar Scores Triumph in ‘Joan the Woman,’” Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album; The Galleryite, “Joan the Woman as Seen from the Gallery,” Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album.

Some reviews discussed audience reactions to *Joan the Woman*. One article noted how the crowds at a theater in New York applauded and cheered the film. Another mentioned the applause and “excited comment” the movie elicited. One woman sitting next to a reporter said about the film: “It’s the greatest acting, greatest photography and greatest story I ever saw in my life.” Another article noted that it was specifically “crowds of young women who attended the matinees.” “The Galleryite,” a movie columnist, recorded a conversation between two “shop girls” in attendance at one showing. “If Joan went through all those things, just because she loved her country, guess it will be easier for me to-morrow, and to-morrow is a hard day at the store...,” said one young woman, whose friend added, “This isn’t a picture—it’s art, Ethel, art.” The first woman replied, “Well, maybe it is. I don’t claim to know...I’m going again.” This conversation suggests that the movie helped the first shop girl to accept the hardships of her job (and perhaps by inference, the larger capitalist system), as she compared her own life to that of Joan’s, while it also indicates that at least one audience member viewed the film as art, as DeMille wished.<sup>316</sup>

*Joan the Woman* was Farrar’s favorite story of all that she filmed. DeMille wrote to Lasky that Farrar “says it is the greatest work of her life,” a remarkable statement from an accomplished opera singer with many achievements already to her name. After seeing the movie for the first time, Farrar reportedly exclaimed, “She is perfectly wonderful.” Her interviewer questioned, “You mean that Joan was acted wonderfully?” Farrar replied: “No, not that. I mean that Joan of Arc was simply a wonderful, beautiful woman,

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<sup>316</sup> “Farrar in ‘Joan the Woman’ Is At Her Best,” Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album; “Miss Farrar Scores Triumph in ‘Joan the Woman,’” Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album; The Spender, “Joan the Woman Film Worth the Price,” Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album; “School Heads Laud ‘Joan the Woman’ Film,” LOC, Box 28, Lister album; The Galleryite, “Joan the Woman as Seen from the Gallery.”

possessing a soul of feminine greatness which for all time will be an inspiration to every woman of the world.”<sup>317</sup>

### **Farrar the Woman**

Not only did Farrar portray potentially influential female characters in her acting career, she was herself a role model for women in real life. Her fame in the media allowed her to reach millions more people, including many women who admired and looked up to her. She was an independent, strong, and successful woman at a time when the rights and opportunities of women were still severely limited. Farrar was part of the larger societal change that began in the late nineteenth century and grew in the early years of the twentieth century. By the time of *Carmen*'s release, feminists were transitioning from morality based social activism and charity work to an emphasis on more personal opportunities and full equality for women. They soon shifted much of their focus toward gaining greater sexual freedom, independence, and individuality.<sup>318</sup>

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<sup>317</sup> “Miss Farrar Scores Triumph in ‘Joan the Woman’”; DeMille, *The Autobiography of Cecil B. DeMille*, 172-73; Jessie Niles Burness, “True Art in the Movies,” Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album. One reviewer also saw Farrar’s Joan as an inspiration and example for women, but focused more on her sacrifice than strength:

In this story of a poor girl who gave her life up to helping others, and suffered herself to be burned at the stake for her convictions, is a stirring example for all women. Geraldine Farrar has been able to portray exactly what the producers were striving for, not a Joan the Saint, but a Joan the Woman—a woman suffering all the longings and impulses of heart, cherishing home, and foregoing everything dear to her heart to help others, to free her heart to help others, to free her groaning country from the foot of the invader. And finally suffering death and torture rather than renounce her faith, or denounce her work...It is more a vision that is inspiring.

The Movie Girl, “Example is Set for Women by ‘Joan,’” Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album.

<sup>318</sup> Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct*, 177. Smith-Rosenberg further describes this new wave of feminists:

A second generation of New Women followed the first. Educated in the 1890s, often by the first generation of New Women, they came into their own in the years immediately preceding and succeeding the First World War. As political as the first generation, they placed more emphasis on self-fulfillment, a bit less on social service, and a great deal more on the flamboyant presentation of self...They fought not in the name of a higher female virtue (as women had from the 1860s through the founding of the settlement houses), but for absolute equality. They wished to be as successful, as political, as sexual as men.

Acceptable public images of women were also shifting. Female performers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were at the forefront of changing images of women. Stars of the stage helped to transform cultural representations of women and of what was proper and allowed for them. At the same time, they had unusual freedom in their own private and public lives compared to average women of the day. By the mid- to late nineteenth century a larger percentage of theater audiences consisted of women, some of whom looked to actresses as role models. Many female stars were especially influential among their many women fans and followers who avidly watched them perform. These new onstage portrayals of women may have influenced female viewers' sense of identity and self.<sup>319</sup>

Foremost among these stage stars was the Jewish French dramatic actress, Sarah Bernhardt. She had large numbers of female fans who followed her onstage and in the press. The late nineteenth century saw the beginning of the era of the New Journalism. The sensationalist press loved to lavish attention on flamboyant actresses, and Bernhardt was happy to use spectacle and personality to draw attention to herself. She largely molded her own public image, becoming a rare female figure of self-invention. Even in the Victorian era, Bernhardt capitalized on her sexual expressiveness onstage by playing many "fallen women" characters, such as Camille, a character on which Verdi based his opera *La Traviata*. Her characters were especially characterized by "moral equivocation." Instead of bringing her condemnation, her public transgressiveness brought her tremendous fame and wealth and changed the image of what was possible for women.<sup>320</sup>

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*Ibid.*

<sup>319</sup> Susan Glenn, *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 2-7, 10-39, 216.

<sup>320</sup> *Ibid.* Susan Glenn writes about Bernhardt:

Farrar was in many ways a similar sort of performer as Sarah Bernhardt. Around the time of *Carmen*'s release, one journalist likened Farrar to Bernhardt. Farrar herself admired the legendary actress and said publicly that Bernhardt was one of the key influences in her life. She even had a picture of Bernhardt in her library at her home.<sup>321</sup>

Farrar, like Bernhardt, pushed past the discourses of proper female behavior both in her acting and real life. In her private life, Farrar also often expressed independent, unconventional views. This was especially true of her attitudes toward marriage. She had no compunction telling the press on multiple occasions how her work and plans for the future, including her desire for travel, made marriage impossible for her. One reporter noted how she made this declaration with "a note of triumph." In one *Cosmopolitan* article, she recalled that when a boy wanted to carry her books at school, she slapped his face. Her rejections were based in part on assumptions of what marriage meant in a time of rigid patriarchy, including quitting work and raising children. Farrar noted that a married woman has to served two masters and that is "one too many." She furthermore argued that she did not have an instinct for motherhood and insisted that no man could replace her interest in her work. She also associated marriage with going to teas and listening to "inane gossip." Instead, she believed that all women should have a real purpose for their lives and publicly pitied those who did not. In some of her quotes she even hinted at a desire for sexual freedom. "I shall never marry because marriage means

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More than any other figure of the late nineteenth-century stage, Bernhardt symbolized the radical new possibilities that theater presented for elaborating new forms of female identity...Her entire career had been devoted to crafting and then magnifying a defiant self who refused to smooth all the edges in order to fit in. Her candor and her unwillingness to play by the rules of feminine comportment provided American women with a compelling example of how a female rebel might successfully invent (and play a starring role in) a new public drama of personal freedom.  
Glenn, *Female Spectacle*, 10, 39.

<sup>321</sup> "Farrar's *Carmen* to Draw Greatest Audience to Opera," Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 30, "Atlanta Opera Season, 1915, Geraldine Farrar" album; Theodora Bean, "Geraldine Farrar Keeps House," *The Morning Telegraph* (New York: Dec 8, 1912), Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 39, album.

eating one cake all your life and keeping on eating it whether you like it or not,” she argued. Farrar also noted in the press how women’s roles were in flux. She tied her personal situation in with the larger changes occurring at the time:

Perhaps it is because I rebel at the routine of monotony, the acceptance of marital duties, with all their nagging responsibilities; the job of constantly trying to be subservient to any one man’s interest. How can an ambitious and forceful woman dedicate herself to those conventions that are rapidly becoming a subject of much controversy in this day of advanced feminism.

The Cult of True Womanhood, which assigned women the primary role of the pure, pious, subservient, and domesticated wife and mother, dominated the previous century. Farrar rejected these old-fashioned conceptions about the proper place of women in society in favor of feminism and a career of her own.<sup>322</sup>

Some reporters gloated when she did eventually marry actor Lou Tellegen in 1916. One writer for the *Evening World* even republished old quotes from Farrar claiming that she would never marry. Farrar herself wrote an article explaining how her marriage came about. She recalled that when Tellegen declared to her, “I am going to marry you!” she replied, “No. I am *never* going to marry—I am wedded to my work. I would not even *think* of relinquishing my personal independence!” He eventually won her over, however, and they were married to great publicity. Drawing the attention of newspapers, Farrar chose to leave “obey” out of her marriage vows, which was still unusual at the time. Her original view of marriage for herself nonetheless turned out to be

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<sup>322</sup> Untitled, Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 2, Folder 7 (typed draft) (penciled in “Copy Cosmopolitan 29 Aug 1924”); Fryer, *The Opera Singer and the Silent Film*, 29; Theodora Bean, “Geraldine Farrar Keeps House”; Nixola Greeley-Smith, “Geraldine Farrar Used to Say...,” *The Evening World* (February 8, 1916), Farrar Collection, Box 39, album; Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct*, 13, 173. Smith-Rosenberg notes that it was common for New Women who came of age in the late nineteenth century to reject marriage in favor of professional development. *Ibid.*, 245.

the correct one. After only four years of wedlock, they divorced to much fanfare.

Fourteen years later in 1934, Tellegen committed suicide with a pair of scissors.<sup>323</sup>

Farrar helped to mold the public discourse about herself by giving frequent interviews and writing articles. In interviews, she highlighted certain aspects of herself. For example, an interview with Farrar included in the book *Stars of the Opera* under the title “The Genius of Geraldine Farrar” stressed the diva’s work ethic, intelligence, and originality and innovation. As opposed to the idea of instinctive ability, Farrar emphasized how much practice and study was involved in her work.<sup>324</sup> When the author of the book, Mabel Wagnalls, discussed Farrar’s greatness, she emphasized the singer’s intelligence: “The *mind* is what counts, after all. Geraldine Farrar impresses one forcibly with this fact. Her mind is alert, keen, observant, thoughtful, quick at reaching conclusions, widely interested, eager to learn, but at the same time self-contained and firmly poised.” The interviewer also stressed Farrar’s enthusiasm for studying and reading. Farrar made it clear how much research she did for each role. For *Madama Butterfly*, for example, she insisted that she had “read everything [she] could find about the Japanese,” including works in French and German as well as English. Instead of allowing others to portray her as just a pretty face or even just a pretty voice, Farrar made it clear that she wanted also to be known for her intelligence and diligence in her work.<sup>325</sup>

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<sup>323</sup> Greeley-Smith, “Geraldine Farrar Used to Say...”; “Miss Farrar a ‘Movie’ Bride; Married Before the Camera” (February 9, 1916), Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 39, album; Geraldine Farrar, “A Rapid Fire Courtship,” Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album.

<sup>324</sup> A common discourse at the time was that of star actresses being “discovered.” This made them seem passive and ignored their hard work to be successful. In an attempt to counteract this, some actresses publicly stressed how hard they worked. Shelley Stamp, “‘It’s a Long Way to Filmland’: Starlets, Screen Hopefuls, and Extras in Early Hollywood,” in *American Cinema’s Transitional Era*, Eds. Charlie Keil and Shelley Stamp (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 342.

<sup>325</sup> Mabel Wagnalls, *Stars of the Opera* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1907), 369-378. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, a powerful medical discourse argued that education and intellectual competitiveness would damage women’s health. The New Women forcefully and publicly rejected this

In addition, Wagnalls singled out two examples of Farrar's originality, which she tied in with the realism of Farrar's acting style. In recalling the soprano's take on the waltz song in *Romeo et Juliet* at her Met debut, the interviewer praised the novelty of Farrar singing the words as if she were "thinking aloud." Wagnalls considered Farrar's decision to sing almost the entire last act of *Romeo et Juliet* lying down as an "amazing innovation." This ability to be idiosyncratic and inventive was very important to Farrar. In recalling her voice teacher, the famous German soprano Lilli Lehmann, Farrar noted: "But she—and all Germans—appreciate *personality*. That is why I have been allowed to develop my own ideas—to be individual. That is, to me, the most interesting part of the art." Like her portrayal of Carmen, the real life Farrar crafted an image as a woman determined to do things her own way.<sup>326</sup>

Other journalists also recognized these traits in Farrar. They emphasized her individualism and attraction to new ideas, as well as her charm and "fight." Reporters particularly noted her writing ability and sharp mind. "Few women in any walk of life have as keen a mind as Geraldine Farrar," a *Washington Post* writer asserted in 1925. This was a time of transformation in American culture from an emphasis on self-sacrifice and moral rectitude to one of personality rooted in consumer products. The focus on the public image, appearance, charm, and magnetism of the new movie star was part of this process, which spread far beyond the confines of Hollywood and its products. In an article that she penned, Farrar stressed how important having personality is for an actress

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belief, instead promoting education and careers for women. Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct*, 258-259, 262.

<sup>326</sup> Wagnalls, *Stars of the Opera*, 369-378. Christiansen notes a common theme when discussing prima donnas: "Alongside this idealizing of the *diva* came the journalistic emphasis on charisma, genius, and mystique." Christiansen, 3. Although the press left little mystique surrounding Farrar, writers often praised her charisma and genius.



because it is something that creates a lasting impression on audiences. She cultivated her own public personality, and the press loved her for her flashes of colorful style.<sup>327</sup>

Farrar not only succeeded with journalists, more importantly she was a popular figure among modern “New Women” and a role model to many young girls in the 1910s and 1920s. *New York Sun* music critic, W. J. Henderson first dubbed Farrar’s devoted fans the Gerryflappers. “What is a gerryflapper?” he wrote a little scornfully. “Simply a girl about the flapper age who has created in her own half baked mind a goddess which she names Geraldine Farrar.” Hundreds of Farrar’s young fans would crowd around the stage door after her performances at the Met. The police often had to hold them back as she left the theater. One music critic discussed the Gerryflappers in a review of one of Farrar’s performances of Puccini’s *Tosca*. The writer noted that the Gerryflappers present did “what they usually do,” but the article argues that Farrar was so successful she did not need the organized support of her fans. She received a huge ovation for her aria “Vissi d’arte” and another at the end of the second act. During the act two curtain calls, the soprano received a huge bouquet from some of her admirers. A dove flew out of the bouquet into Farrar’s arms and a card tied to the dove’s foot read, “Come Back Again, From Eight Little Girls.” Even after the curtain dropped and the lights dimmed, the audience led by the Gerryflappers refused to leave.

One friend wrote to Farrar retelling his own experiences at another of her performances: “On the third curtain two adolescent flappers, bearing a vase filled with

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<sup>327</sup> “Geraldine Farrar,” *Town Topics* (October 24-31, 1918), Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 39, album; “Geraldine Farrar,” Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album; “Geraldine Farrar Here in ‘Carmen’ on Friday,” *Washington Post* (March 1, 1925): S16; David Suisman, *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in American Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 271-285; Geraldine Farrar, “Farrar on the Rise of the Singer-Actor,” *Evening Post Magazine* (March 23, 1918), Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 39, album.

real water and containing three dozen France roses, tottered down the aisle, leaned over the orchestra rail and began to shout ‘Farrar! Farrar! Farrar!’ sprinkling the musicians with the pronunciation of each magical word. In self defense one of them passed the flowers to the stage.” Cecil B. DeMille later recalled in his autobiography how the teenage Gerryflappers “swarmed around her whenever she appeared.” He also specifically noted how they would imitate her style. Music critic Samuel Chotzinoff once called Farrar “the symbol of electric youth.”<sup>328</sup>

Farrar’s fans were “disconsolate” after her premature Met farewell. When many of her personal and work-related effects, including costumes, jewelry, wigs, and furniture, went on auction later that same year after her divorce, Gerryflappers and other admirers turned out in droves. In total, 8,240 people viewed the display before the auction. Five hundred people were present for the auction itself, and many had to be turned away. A wide variety of people came: older wealthy opera goers, young “Gerryflappers from the family circle” [the cheapest seats at the Met], actors, and fellow opera singers. *The Washington Post* noted that most of the crowd consisted of women. The *Post* reporter specifically described the Gerryflappers present as the after school crowd that “came in the town cars with their mammas.” Many women across the country wrote letters to the man in charge of the sale asking that he purchase items on their

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<sup>328</sup> Schonberg, “The Goddess That Was Geraldine Farrar”; “Geraldine Farrar Dies in Ridgefield,” *Bridgeport Sun* (CT) (March 12, 1967), Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album; “Geraldine Farrar, Met Soprano, Dies,” *New York Times* (March 12, 1967), Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album; “Farrar Triumphs in Farewell ‘Tosca,’” Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album; Letter (April 25, 1922), Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 9, Folder 1 (Robert H. Davis); Cecil B. DeMille, *The Autobiography of Cecil B. DeMille*, 140; Samuel Chotzinoff, “Music: Geraldine Farrar Comes Back,” Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 44, Lister album.

behalf. In these letters, the women often refer to Farrar simply as “Geraldine,” as if they knew her.<sup>329</sup>

Some fans appreciated the sexual frankness of Farrar’s performances. More of her fans admired her for her independence and willingness to stand up to anybody, including people in authority over her like Met general managers, Heinrich Conried and Giulio Gatti-Casazza. Farrar never allowed anyone to exercise control over her. When he first saw her, Gatti-Casazza declared Farrar to be “a very tempestuous young person.” Later he would address her as “Cara e terribile G.” (Dear and terrible G.). Even the press noted that Gatti never understood Farrar’s “direct approach.” At the Met, Farrar helped to lead a protest over the opera house’s treatment of its assistant director, Andreas Dippel, and she received some criticism in the press for this activism. A reporter for the *Musical Courier* insisted that she ought to “keep silent and sing well.”<sup>330</sup> The former she refused to do.

While at Goldwyn Pictures, Farrar actively complained about the poor quality of the films in which she starred. Her contract stipulated that her movies “be selected with due deference to her artistic reputation” and gave her final approval on which stories she would appear in.<sup>331</sup> Farrar, however, believed the quality of the scenarios the studio submitted to be uniformly inferior. In July 1918, she wrote a detailed letter to Goldwyn laying out her grievances. Not only were the conditions under which she worked in *The Hell Cat* poor, more disturbingly to her the studio had prepared no working story with continuity by the start of the film. She described the scenarios that Goldwyn wanted her

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<sup>329</sup> “Hail Farrar Queen as She Sings Adieu,” Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album; “Memories for Sale,” *Los Angeles Times* (October 12, 1922): 11; “Geraldine Puts Cupid’s Effects Up at Auction,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (October 14, 1922): 3; “Women Crowd Auction Sale for Souvenirs of Farrar,” *Washington Post* (October 22, 1922): 2.

<sup>330</sup> Dizikes, *Opera in America*, 403-404; Finck, “Geraldine Farrar’s Career”; Geraldine Farrar, “No Means No!” *Saturday Evening Post*, 8, Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album; Article, *The Musical Courier* (December 9, 1908), quoted in Fryer, *The Opera Singer and the Silent Film*, 28.

<sup>331</sup> Contracts, Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 12, Folder 11 (Goldwyn Pictures).

to film in the future as “trash.” She suggested that he get her good stories with “guts,” including operatic ones like *Tosca* and *Fedora*. “Either find me stories worthy of me and the Goldwyn productions your ambition dictates for my screen appearances, or let us amiably dissolve business relations,” she insisted.<sup>332</sup> The poor quality of these later films are undoubtedly one of the reasons why Farrar’s movies began to bring in less and less at the box office. Her movies’ box-office decline made Goldwyn desire to end their working relationship, while the ongoing quality issues pushed Farrar to leave the studio. To Goldwyn’s relief, after her seventh Goldwyn film, *The Woman and the Puppet*, Farrar tore up her contract, even though it had guaranteed her a large sum of money for additional films.<sup>333</sup>

Farrar’s actions, attitudes, and style both onstage and in real life struck a strong chord with the women of her day, especially the youth. Farrar always treated the girls who idolized her with respect and care. After performances she would greet the Gerryflappers before the prominent society women, businessmen, diplomats, and military officers who had come backstage to see her. One *Washington Post* article even asserted that her talks with her young fans inspired some of them to start singing careers of their own. In one interview, Farrar discussed the hundreds of letters that young girls sent her every year asking her questions about becoming singers themselves. Farrar noted how difficult it was to answer questions about their voices and careers from afar but emphasized how eager she was to help them. In another interview, she insisted that her biggest responsibility was to her young fans, and she showed that she understood her position as a role model and inspiration. She remarked about the Gerryflappers, “I have

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<sup>332</sup> Geraldine Farrar, Letter from Cody, Wyoming, July 24, 1918, Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 9, Folder 26 (Samuel Goldfish (Goldwyn)).

<sup>333</sup> Birchard, *Cecil B. DeMille’s Hollywood*, 116-117.

them in my mind constantly for I know what my success will mean to them, their ambitions and hopes.” One writer for *Cosmopolitan* talked about the “thousands of girls who look upon Geraldine Farrar as the embodiment of what the American girl can accomplish with the aid of talent and determination. How this singularly unique career has impressed itself as a veritable beacon of light in the dreams of young American womanhood!” In 1920 Farrar received a letter with the request that she submit to an interview on the subject of “what a woman can and will do, given the equipment and the justification.” She was one of the best qualified women of her generation to answer this query.<sup>334</sup>

Farrar not only wanted to inspire her young female fans, she aspired to create a real connection with her audience, including both men and women. In particular, she singled out “the vague masculine snuffle that comes over the footlights” that signified an emotional bond between the singer and her male listeners as her most satisfying response from an audience. The year of her Met farewell, she received a fan letter from a certain Irene M. Hartley, who angrily insisted that she would cancel her subscription to the Met if the soprano did not appear there the following season. Hartley added that the previous Friday, she had sat by an old man at the Met who told her, “the thing about Miss Farrar that I like most is she makes me feel that she belongs in part to me...” Beyond striving for a personal connection with her fans, Farrar also worked to make opera more popular with the public in general.<sup>335</sup>

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<sup>334</sup> Maxwell H. Forrest, “Geraldine Farrar,” *Washington Post*, Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 2, Folder 7 (typed draft); “Geraldine Farrar Admires American Girls,” *Political Review*, 73, Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 44, album; Untitled (“Copy *Cosmopolitan* 29 Aug 1924”); Letter (March 5, 1920), Farrar, LOC, Box 9, Folder 1 (Robert H. Davis).

<sup>335</sup> Farrar, “Farrar on the Rise of the Singer-Actor”; Irene M. Hartley, Fan Letter, January 25, 1922, Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 9, Folder 39 (Correspondence – “H”); Jane Grant, “Geraldine Farrar’s First Aid to Opera,” *New York Times* (September 21, 1924): SM10.

Even though she was known for her voice, acting, intelligence, and personality, like so many objectified women performers, others still judged her on her appearance.<sup>336</sup> For example, *Photoplay's* movie critic noted that Farrar was “rising to battle-cruiser weight” in his review of *Joan the Woman*. When she was younger, Farrar signed her first opera contract in Berlin. The general manager of the Berlin Opera, Count von Hochberg, especially wanted her on his roster of singers because she was a “novelty” with her svelte figure that made her so much more believable in many of her roles. Later when she moved to the Met, the Gerryflappers were not the only ones to admire her. Boys in the balconies at the Met would cheer and whistle at Farrar when she was onstage.<sup>337</sup> Obituaries of the soprano especially recalled her glamorous looks. The writers especially noted how she was known for being slender when it was most common for prima donnas to be heavysset. They remembered her “ravishing beauty,” along with her singing, fiery temperament, and acting ability. This, however, is not how Farrar wanted to be remembered. In an interview, she condemned the critics who weighed whether or not she filmed well, rather than whether she made the most of an emotional mood onscreen.<sup>338</sup>

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<sup>336</sup> For more on actresses' objectification, see Dudden, *Women in the American Theatre* and Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*.

<sup>337</sup> Julian Johnson, “Joan the Woman,” *Photoplay*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (March 1917), 113-116; Finck, “Geraldine Farrar's Career,” 57; The Galleryite, “Joan the Woman as Seen from the Gallery.” One 1937 book specified Farrar's two types of fans: “By this time, however, the queen could do no wrong, according to the code of the ‘Gerryflappers,’ as the ironic W. J. Henderson had dubbed the diva's highly applaudive bands of schoolgirl admirers; and the house bulged with young things who came to adore, as well as with less young types of masculinity who attended for reasons similar to those which attract men to the burlesque theaters.” Oscar Thompson, *The American Singer: A Hundred Years of Success in Opera* (New York: The Dial Press, Inc., 1937), 262.

<sup>338</sup> “Geraldine Farrar: Famed Singer of the 1920s Dies,” *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner* (March 12, 1967), Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album; “Opera Star Geraldine Farrar Dies,” *The News* (Mexico), (March 12, 1967), Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album; “Miss Farrar, Retired Opera Star, Ridgefield's ‘Good Neighbor,’ Dies” *News-Times* (Bridgewater, Roxbury), (March 13, 1967), Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album; Schonberg, “The Goddess That Was Geraldine Farrar”; “Geraldine Farrar, Met Soprano, Dies”; “The Dominating Diva,” Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album.

Some in the print media viewed Farrar's independence as a sign that she was a stereotypical "prima donna." After she had her first success in Europe, *Vanity Fair* asserted that the soprano had "become the typical spoiled prima donna, independent and saucy." The magazine gave no more evidence for this allegation than an anecdote that Farrar had Metropolitan Opera director, Heinrich Conried, come to see her about a contract to sing at the Met. The author of the piece believed that she should have gone to meet Conried instead. Another writer insisted that Farrar was a prima donna solely because the singer would not give her an interview. A contemporary article in *Motion Picture* described some of the broader connotations of the "prima donna":

A Prima Donna! There's magic in the sound of that word. The visualization of a beautiful, statuesque woman, robed in silks and satins and ermine, raising her voice in volumes of heavenly song before an awe-inspired multitude. Kings and princes worship at her shrine; her slightest whim is satisfied before she expresses it. Her pathway of life is paved with rose-leaves and the pearls of gratified egoism.

With this stereotype in mind, the reporter was surprised to find during their interview that Farrar was just "a regular person." In a twist on the typical signification of "prima donna," the writer added that "the great prima donna prided herself upon being democratic." Because of (generally unfounded) accusations of haughtiness and petulance, Farrar occasionally had to defend herself to the press. Once when asked, "Are you temperamental?" she replied: "No, decidedly not. I am just nice and human. There is no need for temperament in an opera singer. Neither does it make for success. Grand opera singing is a business. It demands cooperation, common sense and hard work to win success in it."<sup>339</sup> Female opera singers often had to face accusations from the news and

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<sup>339</sup> Finck, "Geraldine Farrar's Career," 118; Lorena Lawrence, "Geraldine Proves She's Prima Donna," Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album; Hazel Simpson Naylor, "Farrar, 'Jerry,' Mrs. Lou-

gossip columnists of arrogance and “prima donna” behavior. The movies also helped to perpetuate these stereotypes about women opera singers. *Metropolitan*, *Luxury Liner*, and *The Great Caruso* all have abrasive, demanding, haughty soprano characters, who play into the more negative aspects of this prima donna image.<sup>340</sup> Such long-held negative stereotypes plagued divas more than they did actresses, dancers, comediennes, and other performers. Even so, the greater prestige of opera singers largely tempered this negative image, and the stereotype of female opera singers as spoiled, lazy, and pompous prima donnas competed with more positive, strong, and independent images of female singers both in real life and in the media.

In her later years, Farrar limited her public appearances to the radio, which to her delight allowed to her have “a private life—at last” away from the public view.<sup>341</sup> On Christmas Day 1931, the Metropolitan Opera began its first weekly Saturday afternoon live radio broadcast that continues still today. The Met general director at the time, Giulio Gatti-Casazza had at first been reluctant to allow the broadcasting of Met performances but he changed mind and the broadcasts became a success.<sup>342</sup> From early in the broadcasts’ history, the Met tried to utilize “big name” opera stars to host different features to occupy the time during intermissions in the performances. Farrar hosted several of these. In most instances, she provided commentary on the opera being broadcasted, including its story, historical background, and chief musical features. She

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Tellegen,” *Motion Picture*, Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album; “Farrar Here; Just Human, She Says,” Chicago, October 13, 1916, Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album.

<sup>340</sup> For more on these movies and characters, see Chapter 4.

<sup>341</sup> Dorothy Ducas, “Farrar Quits Opera to Join Radio,” c. 1932, Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, Lister album.

<sup>342</sup> Victoria Etnier Villamil, *From Johnson’s Kids to Lemonade Opera: The American Classical Singer Comes of Age* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004), 14-15. During World War II, ten million Americans listened to the Met broadcasts each week on average. “Opera...A National Asset,” Program Insert, Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 10, Folder 23: Correspondence – Metropolitan Opera Company, NY.



also sang musical examples when discussing these operas. Farrar heavily edited the scripts for these commentaries, some of which she originally wrote herself. She also conducted occasional interviews of her fellow opera singers on the show. In addition to the Met broadcasts, Farrar appeared on many other radio programs.<sup>343</sup>

During a 1938 radio interview with Milton Cross, the announcer for the Met broadcasts, Farrar discussed her autobiography, *Such Sweet Compulsion*: “I like to think of it as not only a true story of a musical personage, but an encouragement as well, perhaps, for those who need it in the shaping of their own particular destinies. I have tried to show in it, that to be an artist, one does not necessarily become less a human being.” Still concerned about her fans, she told Cross how happy she was to see Gerryflappers bringing their children and grandchildren to her book signings.<sup>344</sup> Her fans remained loyal to her and sent letters of appreciation after her radio appearances. The vice-president of one station wrote to Farrar, mentioning all the fan mail his station had

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<sup>343</sup> “Journey Backstage Aïda Intermission” (handwritten), Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 13, Folder 1 – Scripts – Aïda (23 Feb., 1935); “2<sup>nd</sup> Intermission: Die Walküre” (handwritten), Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 13, Folder 5 – Scripts – Die Walküre (2 Feb., 1935); “Don Giovanni,” Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 13, Folder 6 – Scripts – Don Giovanni (9 Feb. 1935); “Don Pasquale,” Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 13, Folder 7 – Scripts – Don Pasquale (23 Feb. 1935); “La Forza del Destino,” Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 13, Folder 8 – Scripts – La Forza del Destino-Ponselle (19 Jan. 1935); “General Electric Program, Sunday, February 14, 1932,” Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 13, Folder 9: Scripts – General Electric Show (2 Feb., 1932); “Xmas broadcast 1938 Met opera,” Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 13, Folder 10: Scripts – Handel and Bach – Xmas broadcast 1938; “Hänsel und Gretel,” Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 13, Folder 11: Scripts – Hänsel und Gretel (25 December 1935); “6-A Geraldine Farrar,” Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 14, Folder 1: Scripts – Lily Pons (21 Feb 1935); “1<sup>st</sup> Intermission Lucia” (handwritten), Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 14, Folder 2: Scripts – Lucia di Lammermoor (1938); “Stars of the Future,” Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 14, Folder 3: Scripts – Palmolive – “Stars of the Future” Audition; “-A- Tiny,” Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 14, Folder 4: Scripts – Pre-Season (Metropolitan); “Tannhäuser,” Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 15, Folder 4: Scripts – Tannhäuser (12 Jan. 1935); “La Sonnambula,” Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 15, Folder 3: Scripts – La Sonnambula (Bori) (2 March 1935); “Third Intermission,” Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 15, Folder 6: Scripts – La Traviata (5 Jan. 1935); “Mr. Connolly – Announcing,” Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 15, Folder 10: Scripts – WOR (1 November 1938); “Station WQXR: Lehmann Records/Farrar Records,” Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 15, Folder 11: Scripts – WQXR; “Lilli Lehmann, the Teacher & Geraldine Farrar the Pupil,” Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 15, Folder 11: Scripts – WQXR; “Broadcast: Hall of Fame,” Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 15, Folder 12: Scripts – WTIC (Hall of Fame. 1938?).

<sup>344</sup> “Let’s Talk It Over,” Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 15, Folder 9: Scripts – WEA (October 28, 1938).

received about her. He added, “No broadcast on WQXR in recent months has been more enthusiastically received than your program Monday evening.”<sup>345</sup>

Farrar also personally received numerous letters from her listeners. In 1935, one young man wrote her to say that he had started a “Farrar Opera Club” with twenty-five members in their teens and early twenties. He explained that the club listened to the Met broadcasts together and then shared their opinions of the performances afterwards. The one conclusion they had come to, he informed her, was that Italian opera was more “enjoyable” than German. He thanked her for her “delightful chats” on the broadcasts.

In the same year, a housewife wrote Farrar a seven page letter thanking her for allowing “all of us to learn to know what grand opera really is” through her radio commentaries. This woman’s letter provides an informative look into the role of opera broadcasts in a regular listener’s life. She said that she would never see the Metropolitan Opera, but she doubted whether she could enjoy the performances more if she were there in person. Not originally an opera fan, the live broadcasts fostered her love of genre. She noted that she sometimes took her mixing bowl into the living room so that she could hear the broadcasts better, even while cooking. Occasionally, when she heard something familiar during a broadcast, she tried to find the music in her church organist books in order to play along with the orchestra—“just to get the thrill as though that sound were coming from my own fingers.” This fan also told Farrar about her husband’s change of heart about opera because of the Met broadcasts. She recounted how they used to “skirmish” over the broadcasts, which her husband called “infernal opera noise.” However, later after listening regularly for a while, he wanted to know who had that

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<sup>345</sup> Elliott M. Sanger, Letter, Interstate Broadcasting Company, November 23, 1938, Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 15, Folder 10: Scripts – WOR (1 November 1938).

“lovely voice” he heard. To his embarrassment, it was the same woman whose singing had caused their earlier argument. To his wife’s delight, he started paying attention to the music on the radio instead of reading magazines while the broadcast was on. As a coda to this story, she informed Farrar: “So you see your wish is becoming fulfilled. You are making people acquainted with grand opera music.” She added: “You can see by my ‘stationery’ [regular wide-ruled paper] that our home is one of the very ordinary ones. But we common people, too, have souls and souls for music.”<sup>346</sup>

### **Leading Movie Sopranos After Farrar**

Other major sopranos dominated the big screen (and radio waves) in the decades after Farrar left the movies, but none played quite the same role in society and culture as Farrar. Like Farrar they benefited from the greater prestige of opera and popularity of film, but they rarely pushed the same boundaries in their professional work. Although usually strong women themselves and celebrity role models, these later movie divas often promoted patriarchal attitudes toward gender roles in their movies and personas as celebrities. In the mid-1930s, the female movie opera star was typically sophisticated and cultured—not the free and wild subaltern characters Farrar often played. They were also typically portrayed as under the control of their male voice instructors or love interests (often one and the same).

The most significant Met soprano to go to Hollywood after Farrar was Grace Moore, who was also a prominent radio personality. In 1930, she appeared in *A Lady’s Morals* as nineteenth-century opera legend Jenny Lind. The same year she performed

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<sup>346</sup> William Moran, Pres. Farrar Opera Club, Letter, January 19, 1935, Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 10, Folder 29 – “Correspondence – M”; Mrs. Gilbert Meade, Letter, February 21, 1935, Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 10, Folder – “Correspondence – M.”

with popular Met baritone Lawrence Tibbett in *New Moon*. Her initial films were box-office disappointments, but her third film *One Night of Love* was a blockbuster and spurred several imitation movies. Moore herself was a determined woman, who defied her father's refusal to allow her to go on the stage. As a teenager in Tennessee, she ran away from school to New York City and appeared in musicals on Broadway. After saving enough money, she moved to Paris to study voice. Unlike many singers who have to work their way up, she made her operatic debut at the Metropolitan Opera in 1928 in Puccini's *La Bohème*. Like Farrar, she wanted to help young singers. Once soprano Dorothy Kirsten came to prominence on a fifteen-minute daily radio show, Moore paid for her to study for a year in Italy. Another of the most successful American sopranos of the 1940s and 1950s, Eleanor Steber, later recalled the influence that Moore and her movies had on her as a young woman: "I never missed a movie musical. We drove all the way to Pittsburgh [from West Virginia] to see 'One Night of Love.' That movie—Grace Moore herself, and the part she played—stirred something earthshaking deep inside of me, some recognition, some inner urge, which fired my imagination beyond my ability to express."<sup>347</sup>

The 1934 film, *One Night of Love*, became one of Columbia Studio's biggest hits of the decade. The movie helped to establish Columbia, one of the lesser-known, so-called "minors" in Hollywood, as a studio of significance.<sup>348</sup> It also won the soprano millions of new fans.<sup>349</sup> Unlike the strong, independent women that Farrar portrayed onscreen, Moore's character in *One Night of Love*, Mary Barrett, is petulant and at times almost servile. She starts out by independently going off to Italy with little money hoping

<sup>347</sup> Quoted in Villamil, *From Johnson's Kids to Lemonade Opera*, 23, 25-26, 35, 117.

<sup>348</sup> *Ibid.*, 23. Chapter 4 of this dissertation discusses the "majors," especially MGM.

<sup>349</sup> "The Picture Parade," *Motion Picture Magazine*, Vol. 49-50 (August 1935): 52-53.

to study singing. Once she finds a famous voice teacher, Giulio Monteverdi, though, she submits to his rigorous teaching and lifestyle demands and frequent verbal abuse. Instead of exercising her own agency, she accepts Giulio's determination to mold her like a "block of marble" and turn her into his own creation. Instead of finding his authoritarianism repulsing, she falls in love with him. Mary, now called Maria, successfully appears in opera houses around Europe, but Giulio insists on controlling her every move. When she believes that he is in love with another soprano, she refuses to appear in *Carmen*. Mary only goes on to perform the "Habanera" after Giulio confesses that he loves her. However, they soon quarrel, and she goes to New York to make her Met debut alone. Playing on a common Victorian stereotype about women, her character becomes hysterical right before she is about to make her first entrance. Only when she sees Giulio in the prompter box mouthing "I love you" does she have the courage to go onstage and make a dazzling debut in *Madama Butterfly*. Contrary to Farrar's *Carmen*, Moore's soprano is almost entirely dominated by a man, and she accomplishes no great feats like Farrar's *Joan of Arc*. Although the movie is very opera-centric, it is also fundamentally a romantic melodrama with little depth to its female characterization. Lauded by the critics, Moore received a best actress Oscar nomination for her part.

Grace Moore also promoted domesticity and romance in her private life, although with more nuance. In an interview with the *Motion Picture Magazine* from 1935, she argued that "Every ambitious woman should be married" and that "women are made for love." At the same time, she argued stringently against the unwritten rule in Hollywood that disapproved of successful actresses marrying, as if the two were mutually incompatible. She complained that she had been unhappy before her marriage to her

Spanish husband, even with her great success. Contrary to the common thought of the day, after she was happily married, she felt that she could work better.<sup>350</sup> Like Farrar, the press debated whether the soprano was a “prima donna,” and discussed her clothes in depth. In one article, Gladys Hall stressed the soprano’s “grand manner” and “intemperate personality.” She made a point of writing that Moore lived in luxury and had her whims fulfilled. Hall also viewed Moore’s “aggressive” nature as a negative.<sup>351</sup>

In the mid-1930s a reporter for *Variety* noted that Grace Moore had a key rival on the operatic screen; the reporter placed Jeanette MacDonald “at the head of the singing moving picture prima donnas.”<sup>352</sup> From her earliest years in Hollywood, unlike other independent women opera singers, MacDonald was almost always paired with a male singer in her movies. As of early 1935, only seventy-three films had ever made over a million dollars in Hollywood history. One of MacDonald’s early film operettas was among them. An adaptation of Franz Lehar’s operetta, *The Merry Widow*, with MacDonald and French singer Maurice Chevalier, took in a million and a half dollars at the box office.<sup>353</sup> At MGM she partnered with operatic baritone Nelson Eddy to great success. MacDonald and Eddy made eight operettas together, all of which were financially successful. Two of their movies, *Rose Marie* and *Maytime*, made *Variety*’s top annual grossers list. Their first film together, *Naughty Marietta*, got an Oscar nomination for best picture. In 1936, MacDonald was one of the top ten box-office draws

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<sup>350</sup> T. B. Fithian, “Little Corner of My Heart,” *Motion Picture Magazine*, Vol. 49-50 (March 1935): 37, 58.

<sup>351</sup> Jay Chapman, “I’m Not a Prima Donna’--Grace Moore,” *Motion Picture Magazine*, Vol. 49-50 (October 1935): 36; Dorothy Manners, “Fall Fashions--And Grace Moore,” *Motion Picture Magazine*, Vol. 49-50 (September 1935): 43-45, 72; Gladys Hall, “Hollywood Goes Grand Opera,” Gladys Hall Papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles, Box 9, Folder 340, Moore, Grace -- article manuscripts undated.

<sup>352</sup> Quoted in Edward Baron Turk, *Hollywood Diva: A Biography of Jeanette MacDonald* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1998), 173.

<sup>353</sup> Jack Grant, “At Last--An Answer to What the Movie Public Really Wants!” *Motion Picture Magazine*, Vol. 49-50 (February 1935): 32-33, 74-75.

in the nation. Yet, Elizabeth Wilson in *Screenland* still asked, “Just where would she be if not for Nelson Eddy?” when rumors surfaced that the two stars were quarrelling.<sup>354</sup>

MacDonald demanded to appear with other singers besides Eddy and was determined to control the course of her career. About her own determination she once said: “Halfway ambition can be a dangerous thing. If you’ve a burning desire to be something, do something.” In order to diversify her movie career, she lobbied for a role in *San Francisco* (1936) with Clark Gable and Spencer Tracy. Going over the head of MGM studio boss, Louis B. Mayer, MacDonald contacted the corporate office in New York City about the part, which in the end she got.<sup>355</sup> Even when she did not appear with Nelson Eddy, however, her character was often the plot of a love triangle or some other conventional romance, as in her previous pictures. The following year she appeared with movie tenor, Allan Jones, as a singing spy and seductress in the romantic musical, *The Firefly*.

Although loosely based on the Sigmund Romberg operetta, *Maytime* was the film in which MacDonald performed the most opera. The movie included a fully staged scene from the French grand opera, *Les Huguenots*, by Meyerbeer.<sup>356</sup> In a montage, MacDonald sang music from operas by Donizetti, Verdi, Gounod, and Wagner, and when she and Eddy’s characters reunite at the end, they perform a staged operatic scene created specially for the movie based on Tchaikovsky’s Fifth Symphony.<sup>357</sup> Like many operas,

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<sup>354</sup> Balio, *Grand Design*, 222-224; Turk, *Hollywood Diva*, 175; Elizabeth Wilson, “What’s Behind the MacDonald-Eddy ‘Feud?’” *Screenland*, Vol. 36 (February 1938): 23.

<sup>355</sup> Turk, *Hollywood Diva*, 176-177.

<sup>356</sup> Although Meyerbeer is rarely performed today, his music was still somewhat popular in the early to mid-twentieth century and occasionally appeared in movies. Kathryn Grayson sang his aria, “Ombres Légères,” from the opera *Dinorah, ou le pardon de Ploëmel* in the 1942 MGM comedy, *Rio Rita*, starring Abbott and Costello.

<sup>357</sup> The reviewer for *Screenland* said that the adaptation of Tchaikovsky’s symphonic music for an opera scene was “a performance to appall critical music-lovers, perhaps, but sure to delight the rest of us who just

the plot consisted of a melodramatic tale of romance and tragedy. Unlike Farrar's feisty and independent characters, MacDonald plays a demure prima donna named Marcia Mornay, who marries her voice instructor Nicolai Nazaroff (played by John Barrymore) instead of the man she truly loves Paul Allison (Nelson Eddy). When she parts from Paul, she tells him she must marry Nicolai because he made her everything she is as a famous soprano. Nicolai can sense, however, that she is not in love with him. He praises her for being a "perfect wife," who is faithful, loyal, obedient, and affectionate, but he complains bitterly, "Never once...have I ever felt I completely possessed you." After she performs in a romantic scene with Paul on the operatic stage, she tells Nicolai that she wants to leave him for Paul. He says that he consents but then he fatally shoots Paul out of jealousy. The movie begins and ends with scenes of Marcia as an old woman. A teenage girl who lives next door wants to go to New York to become an opera singer. Her boyfriend wants her to stay and marry him instead. She tells him, "I've got the right to a career." He replies, "And I've got the right to a home and wife." After witnessing this scene, Marcia relates her own story to the young woman in order to encourage her to marry her boyfriend instead of seeking operatic fame. After hearing how Marcia lost Paul, the two young people reunite and the girl says that she will not go to New York for a career after all.

*Maytime* was the top grossing movie in the world in 1937. MacDonald later said that playing Marcia Mornay, which won her a Screen Actors Guild Award, was her favorite part of her career. Gossip columnist and critic Louella Parsons raved about her performance in the *Hollywood Reporter*: "She does a job of acting that a Bernhardt or

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like to listen." The reviewer also praised the "snatches of familiar opera" in the movie and MacDonald's singing performances. Delight Evans, "Reviews of the Best Pictures," *Screenland*, Vol. 35 (June 1937): 52.



Duse wouldn't refuse to applaud...*Maytime*, I would say, entitles her to Academy award attention." *Hollywood* magazine praised the film for "presenting just about the finest musical selection any tune film has yet given us." Delight Evans' "An Open Letter to Jeanette MacDonald" in *Screenland* illustrates how singing opera (as opposed to operetta or popular numbers as in her earlier films) elevated MacDonald's status. Evans noted that she initially disliked MacDonald. She elaborated on this disapproval: "To put it frankly, you cloyed. There was so much sweetness and light about you that I was enveloped in gloom by it all. How I wished you would trip up, just once; go off-pitch, or forget to smile." She also disdained all the soprano's fan clubs and the "masses" of fan mail that *Screenland* received about her, as well as the "devotees" in the movie theater, whose sighing drowned out MacDonald's singing during the her climatic duet with Eddy. However, by the end of the movie, Evans said that she had become a fan and now had to admit MacDonald was "a great artist." She also expressed the hope that the soprano would film complete grand operas on the screen and eventually sing at the Met. The article ended: "Meanwhile, Miss MacDonald, may I join your fan-club?"<sup>358</sup>

Like Farrar, Jeanette MacDonald received numerous letters from ambitious girls asking for advice. In 1937 she wrote a four page pamphlet published by MGM's publicity department that contained advice to ambitious fans on becoming a singer, vocal technique, and music history. She insisted in the pamphlet: "Given a voice, the girl who wants to become a singer must...be possessed of a determination to succeed that consumes her every other thought." Her fans not only wrote her in abundance, they mailed a plethora of letters to fan magazines about her too. *The Motion Picture Magazine*

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<sup>358</sup> Turk, *Hollywood Diva*, 196-198, 203; "Previews: *Maytime*," *Hollywood* (May 1937): 12; Delight Evans, "An Open Letter to Jeanette MacDonald," *Screenland*, Vol. 35 (June 1937): 19.

exclaimed in 1935: “If we should print all of the letters in praise of Nelson Eddy and Jeanette MacDonald, we would have room for nothing else in the entire magazine!” She left the movies in the mid-1940s to give preference to (in the words of one fan magazine) “domesticity (with husband Gene Raymond), concert tours and just resting her weight on the base of her spine.” Instead of decreasing, her fan mail continued to grow during her absence from films, encouraging her to return to make more pictures. One article proclaimed: “Tons of fan mail convinced Jeanette MacDonald and MGM that she couldn’t retire.” As her comeback film in 1948, she appeared in *Three Daring Daughters* with Spanish pianist and conductor, José Iturbi. MacDonald also appeared in many truncated adaptations of her movie operettas by composers like Victor Herbert and Sigmund Romberg on the radio. Like many great opera stars, she also made recordings for RCA-Victor. In a reversal from the norm, she used the movies to springboard herself into a career on the operatic stage during the 1940s after studying with German dramatic soprano Lotte Lehmann.<sup>359</sup>

A combination of media-powered celebrity and opera-based cultural capital gave singers like Farrar, Moore, and MacDonald greater power and freedom in their lives than those who were merely either actresses or sopranos. At a time when burlesque was a popular entertainment and even the legitimate theater was still somewhat frowned upon, operatic singing provided women with a profession that was not only acceptable but was

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<sup>359</sup> Turk, *Hollywood Diva*, 195-269; “How the Readers Rate Them!,” *Motion Picture Magazine*, Vol. 49-50 (September 1935): 18; John Maynard, “Look Who’s Back!,” *Motion Picture Magazine*, Vol. 85-86 (May 1949): 48-49, 72-74.

even prestigious.<sup>360</sup> It also allowed them greater economic independence, control over their careers, and, because the press often hung on their words and actions, an occasional platform for their ideas. They used this platform to advise and encourage their young female fans, who had dreams of following in their footsteps. Instead of a petulant, arrogant, and foolish stereotypical “prima donna,” Farrar in particular was a strong, independent woman who charted her own course both in films and on the operatic stage. Movies greatly increased the exposure of the public to Farrar and her acting styles and role interpretations. In turn, these films influenced views about her, transformed her image, and greatly increased her popularity. Her success on the movie screen emboldened her to break past the boundaries of acceptable behavior on the operatic stage. She brought the aggressiveness and energy of her film portrayals back to the more staid opera world to reactions of both shock and delight, illustrating Farrar’s ability to successfully cut across different media and venues, changing each a little in the process.

Later “talkies” with Moore and MacDonald in the 1930s no longer evinced such transgressive characters as the ones Farrar had portrayed. These sopranos played obedient and, in some cases, idealized women in their movies. They lost the rougher “edge” of Farrar’s performances. Their movies replicated some of the dominant discourses in society about women, instead of challenging or simply stepping past them. Although operatic movies sometimes reinforced negative or inaccurate stereotypes, they also provided greater opportunities for female performers like Farrar to, at times, present affirmative, boundary-breaking images of women. Farrar’s onscreen characters, even when they had clearly unflattering attributes, were always independent and strong. The

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<sup>360</sup> For more on women performers in burlesque see Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*. Although Allen discusses subversive elements of burlesque performance, especially in its later years burlesque primarily displayed women as sexual objects.

1910s and 1920s were an important time of change for both women and the movie industry. At this time, the “open” moviemaking system characterized by diverse filmmakers and numerous inexpensive movie productions was giving way to the more “closed” and concentrated big studio system. The movies in a time of transition offered an outlet for someone like Farrar to reflect some of the changes taking place over women’s role in society and in their personal lives. Farrar added her own interpretive touches, especially in *Carmen*, to stress independence and liberation. Farrar through her portrayals onscreen and onstage provided transgressive characterizations to opera’s new and expanding publics.

## CHAPTER IV

### The Great Caruso: Opera, Italians, and the Mass Media

Opera began as an Italian musical form.<sup>361</sup> Since the earliest years of the United States, Italians were associated with the arts, especially music.<sup>362</sup> Many of the first Italian immigrants found work as music teachers and piano and violin instructors. Thomas Jefferson was among the many prominent Americans of his era to utilize the services of Italian music teachers for his family. He admired Italian musicians greatly, and as president, hired Italians to form the first American military band, which later developed into the United States Marine Band. One early Italian immigrant, composer Filippo Traetta, established the nation's first conservatory of music in 1803 in Boston. Not all Italian musicians, however, were as prominent or successful as Traetta. Itinerant Italian musicians numbered among the first public musical performers in many American cities.

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<sup>361</sup> Opera first developed at the end of the sixteenth century in Florence as an attempt to recreate ancient Greek dramatic performances, which many scholars of the time believed had been sung. Advances in research on the remarkable capabilities of the human voice influenced the type of singing that these new musical dramas required. As a part of the Renaissance emphasis on the re-creation of ancient thought and culture, opera soon spread throughout Europe. A multinational array of composers began working in the nascent genre. Even after other countries took up the art form, however, Italian opera continued to dominate most of the world's opera houses. Roger Parker, *The Oxford Illustrated History of Opera* (Oxford University Press, 1994), 3; John Dizikes, *Opera in America: A Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 13, 37.

<sup>362</sup> Jerre Mangione and Ben Morreale, *La Storia: Five Centuries of the Italian American Experience* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 24; Luciano J. Iorizzo and Salvatore Mondello, *The Italian Americans* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980), 30

Americans could often enjoy Italian musicians, especially organ grinders, guitarists, and mandolinists, playing operatic arias on street corners and other public spaces.<sup>363</sup>

Numerous Italian musicians had already settled and worked in the United States before Italian opera began to gain a foothold after its introduction to the American public in 1825.<sup>364</sup>

The coupling of Italians and music presented a challenge to Americanization during the Romantic era. Many American artists and literary figures of the nineteenth century believed that America needed to “Italianize” its culture. Proponents of this “Columbus cult” promoted Italian artistic values in the United States. They believed that an Italianization of American music would allow Americans to produce great works of music on par with Italy’s. To this end, numerous Americans journeyed to Italy to learn from Italian art and culture.<sup>365</sup> Before the mass migration of Italians, the larger American cultural perception of them was primarily positive. Americans typically viewed Italians as bearers of culture and civilization.<sup>366</sup>

By the middle of the 1840s, multiple Italian opera companies toured the country each year.<sup>367</sup> As in Italy, those who did not have access to or could not afford to attend the performances of these troupes frequently became familiar with operatic music by other means, including band and instrumental concerts and performances of popular entertainers. The pervasiveness of operatic sheet music likewise suggests its frequent use

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<sup>363</sup> Mangione and Morreale, *La Storia*, 24.

<sup>364</sup> Katherine K. Preston, *Opera on the Road: Traveling Opera Troupes in the United States, 1825-60* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 101-104.

<sup>365</sup> Iorizzo and Mondello, *The Italian Americans*, 31, 264.

<sup>366</sup> Mangione and Morreale, *La Storia*, 25. Germans overshadowed Italians in the regard during the late nineteenth century as a Wagner craze swept the nation. For more on this, see: Joseph Horowitz, *Wagner Nights: An American History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

<sup>367</sup> Preston, *Opera on the Road*, 100; Mangione and Morreale, *La Storia*, 24; Joseph P. Cosco, *Imagining Italians: The Clash of Romance and Race in American Perceptions, 1880-1910* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 6.

in American homes and other amateur venues.<sup>368</sup> Thus, before the great migration of Italians in the late nineteenth century, Italian opera was solidly ensconced in American society. Although relatively few in number, early Italian immigrants to the United States had made an imprint on America's cultural life. This imprint would only increase as larger numbers of Italians immigrated to America, often with their musical heritage firmly in tow.

The mostly positive public image of Italians shifted as late nineteenth-century immigration sparked nativism and the numbers of Italian immigrants grew.<sup>369</sup> One observer at the time specifically noted in *Putnam's Magazine* the "discrepancy between the Anglo-American respect for Italian culture...and disparagement of Italians themselves."<sup>370</sup> While the early Italian immigrants to the United States had often been musicians, teachers, and artists, later immigrants usually held far less respected jobs. In fact, in 1910, while Italian immigration was high, Italians were the lowest paid workers in the nation. They received on average a weekly pay of \$10.50 (compared to \$10.66 on average for African-Americans).<sup>371</sup> In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Italians occupied a position in society in between blacks and whites of northern European heritage in many parts of the United States. Southerners, in particular, sometimes segregated them from the native-born population. Instead of bearers of art and civilization, Americans more frequently began to see Italians as innately savage and

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<sup>368</sup> Preston, *Opera on the Road*, xiii, 307-308.

<sup>369</sup> Iorizzo and Mondello, *The Italian Americans*, 263.

<sup>370</sup> Quoted in Preston, *Opera on the Road*, 180.

<sup>371</sup> Mangione and Morreale, *La Storia*, 451.

criminal. Hollywood and television later implanted this stereotype farther into the American psyche.<sup>372</sup>

In short, the idea of Italians as poor, criminally inclined immigrants coexisted with public discourses that figured Italians as the premier opera singers in the United States. We can see this tension play out in the life of Enrico Caruso, the most legendary singer of the early twentieth century and a singer especially famous for his recording career. A good example of these competing discourses occurred when a policeman arrested Caruso at the Central Park Zoo in New York City for allegedly improperly pinching a woman. Caruso, the darling of New York City cultural elites who applauded and lauded him at the Met and in high society, was nonetheless portrayed negatively in the press and was described by the arresting officer as a “dark” and “foreign-looking” man. Opera made his “Italianicity” more appealing, while his “Italianicity” made him more of a lowly target in society.<sup>373</sup>

In *Working Toward Whiteness*, David Roediger discusses Italians’ “in-between” position in American society in the early twentieth century. He argues that they only became “white” gradually over time due to various political shifts, the Immigration Act of 1924, the “Great Migration,” housing restrictions, and discrimination against blacks within organized labor, among other reasons. Likewise, Matthew Frye Jacobson describes the ways in which Americans of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century

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<sup>372</sup> David R. Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America’s Immigrants Become White* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 58, 72-78; Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 56-62; Iorizzo and Mondello, *The Italian Americans*, 263, 267, 273.

<sup>373</sup> In the United States opera was part of the cultural connotation of what Barthes termed “Italianicity,” along with other markers of Italian identity as commonly understood within society. Barthes elaborates: “*Italianicity* is not Italy, it is the condensed essence of everything that could be Italian, from spaghetti to painting.” He uses this concept to make analysis of cultural signs and their larger meanings easier. Roland Barthes, “Rhetoric of the Image,” *Image – Music – Text*, Trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 32-51.



considered many immigrants groups, including Italians, as members of different races separate from the Anglo-Saxon majority. In focusing on an 1891 New Orleans mob that lynched eleven Italians, whom they accused of conspiring to murder the Irish police chief, Jacobson illustrates how society labeled Italians as foreign and dangerous. This began to change only with the passage of immigration restrictions in 1924, which slowed the flow of new immigrants and encouraged assimilation, and especially with the Civil Rights Movement of later decades. In opposition to the growing unity of blacks in support of civil rights, a more monolithic concept of “whiteness” replaced earlier discourses of separate European “races.” Thomas Guglielmo agrees with the existence of an early twentieth-century distinction between color and race. However, utilizing extensive primary sources, he argues that Italians were considered “white” as soon as they immigrated—indeed, that their color was one of the main reasons they were allowed to immigrate in the first place. This classification gave them special privileges that racial minorities did not have and made it easier for them eventually to assimilate into the larger white population. At the same time, Italian immigrants still suffered much discrimination as foreigners from Southern Europe. Guglielmo explains that Italians “could be considered racially inferior ‘Dagoes’ *and* privileged whites simultaneously.”

In recounting the story of Italians’ shifting and multivalent position in American society, these scholars pay hardly any attention to the effects of music and technology on Italian-Americans’ position in society and their sense of themselves and their culture. Instead, they focus primarily on important political and social events and movements, thereby ignoring a major aspect of immigrant experience in the United States. These scholars all agree that Italians were seen as inferior to Anglo-Saxons and other northern

Europeans in the early twentieth century. The “star power” of Italian opera singers and the cultural representations of great opera singers as Italian indicate that, in at least one elite field, Italians were often assumed superior to Anglo-Americans.<sup>374</sup>

Much of the analysis of Enrico Caruso’s life and career ignores his key position in the Italian-American community and how that relationship fit into larger discourses surrounding Italians and opera.<sup>375</sup> As a community, Italian-Americans especially admired and supported Caruso and they were a fundamental part of his success. They attended his live performances *en masse* when they could afford to do so, but they primarily experienced the tenor’s famed voice through the developing technology of the acoustic phonograph. Caruso’s extraordinary success as a recording artist coupled with his well-received live performances made him the best known Italian of the early twentieth century.<sup>376</sup> His recordings also served to inspire later generations of opera singers, including Italian-American tenor Mario Lanza. As the most famous singer of his day, Caruso, whom the press frequently named an exemplar of specifically “Italian” singing, helped to reinforce the connection between Italians and opera that had developed much

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<sup>374</sup> Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness*, 58, 72-78; Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 56-62, 93-95; Thomas A. Guglielmo, *White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago: 1890-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2003.

<sup>375</sup> For a good example, see David Suisman, *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in American Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

<sup>376</sup> In a similar fashion, Italian conductor Arturo Toscanini used the mass media to increase the popularity of opera and, in doing so, helped to reinforce the connection between Italians and opera. As the most famous conductor of his day, Toscanini utilized radio, recordings, and eventually television to spread his fame and his art. Unlike most conductors who direct symphony orchestras in concert halls, Toscanini spent much of his career conducting the NBC Symphony Orchestra on radio and television. Successful marketing and the use of mass media turned him into a cult figure, who received frequent accolades as the “the priest of music” and “the greatest musical interpreter who ever lived.” The example of Toscanini illustrates the power of the mass media to create new celebrities and to determine the artistic standards and qualities that are considered “great.” Toscanini conducted and recorded a variety of music, which largely consisted of proven “masterworks” of the past and frequently included Italian operas. After the death of Caruso, Toscanini became the most famous Italian in the United States. His intense popularity in the music world helped to reinforce the longstanding association of Italians, opera, and prestige. Joseph Horowitz, *Understanding Toscanini: A Social History of American Concert Life* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987).

earlier in Europe and later spread to America. Caruso and his personal connections with the Italian-American community inspired not only certain images in popular culture, but also promoted and solidified the actual ties that existed between Italians and opera in the United States.<sup>377</sup> Both contemporary reviewers and later cultural representations, including *The Great Caruso*, repeatedly stressed the tenor's Italian background. The image of the Italian opera star that Caruso exemplified was prominent in other popular films and shows from the silent movie era through the 1950s. The cultural representation has survived, although somewhat less prominently, into more recent decades.

Media technologies promoted new forms of cultural identification and reinforced and revised old ones. William Kenney argues that the phonograph served as a pluralistic means of spreading less known music, as well as a method of creating and reviving memories. The phonograph was, he asserts, a “memory machine” for making new collective and personal memories and recalling old ones. This function helped to create and mold group identities among listeners. Recorded music reconfirmed, but also concurrently blurred, racial, regional, gender, and ethnic identities.<sup>378</sup>

In analyzing African-American music during the Great Migration, Lawrence Levine also illustrates how recordings helped to preserve folk traditions. Black work crews, he notes, typically sang and reworked songs that they heard on blues records in lieu of their traditional local songs. Even though these recordings disrupted the oral transmission of music, blues records also drew from those same African-American folk traditions. The most important effect of records, Levine argues, “was to allow millions to

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<sup>377</sup> Mangione and Morreale, *La Storia*, 308.

<sup>378</sup> William Kenney, *Recorded Music in American Life: The Phonograph and Popular Memory, 1890-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

continue to possess and millions more to repossess a body of tradition which otherwise must surely have perished in the conditions of modern industrial life.”<sup>379</sup>

Kenney’s and Levine’s analyses have important implications for understanding the relationship of different ethnic groups to opera. For Italian-Americans, opera remained an important form of entertainment long after opera’s sacralization, in large part because of the impact of media technologies, which helped to revive old cultural traditions while at the same time introducing new ones. Although opera had no real chance of dying out like African-American traditional music might have, the increasing assimilation of white ethnics during the twentieth century meant that opera may potentially have disappeared as a part of Italian-American vernacular culture. Mario Lanza and the neighborhood where he grew up, for example, illustrate the vernacular uses of opera recordings in the Italian-American community after the process of assimilation had already begun in earnest. The mass media helped opera to remain an integral part of the identities and culture of Italian immigrants and their descendants.

Italian-Americans were part of the larger nationwide audience that gained cheaper and easier access to opera through new media technologies and lower cost products, many of which did not require English proficiency or even literacy. Because of this accessibility, the phonograph and other mass media strengthened the association between opera and predominantly working-class Italian immigrants, most of whom could not otherwise afford to attend opera performances with any frequency. In this way,

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<sup>379</sup> Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 231-232. See also James Cook on the re-appropriation of commodified cultural products. James W. Cook, “The Return of the Culture Industry,” in *The Cultural Turn in U.S. History: Past, Present, Future*, eds. James W. Cook, Lawrence B. Glickman, and Michael O’Malley (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 231, n. 24.

technological and commercial transformations at least partially counteracted opera's sacralization and the highbrow cultural exclusivity that accompanied it.

Discourses about Italians in American society were multivalent and contradictory. Because of the esteem and popularity of opera, the cultural association of Italians and opera provided an alternative image to common depictions of Italians as uneducated peasants and violent mobsters, at a time when a complex set of circumstances, including cultural ones, were helping to "whiten" them. Even while American society looked down on Italian immigrants as poor and criminally inclined, it also looked up to them for an essentialized version their culture. Dissonances existed between the perceived Italian culture of highbrow institutions and the actually existing Italian-American cultural practices on the ground. Caruso traversed both of these cultural worlds with their concomitant positive and negative attributes. This connection between Italian-Americans and opera, both in actuality and in cultural representations, provided their community with prestige and a part of their culture with general popularity throughout the nation. At the same time, however, opera also stood as one marker of Italian-Americans' cultural bonds and community, setting them apart as separate and different.

### **Opera and the Italian-American Experience**

In the late nineteenth century, social and intellectual elites of the nation's largest cities exerted the most influence over the country's opera houses; nonetheless, a great variety of people continued to attend opera performances, even after opera's sacralization. Italian immigrants, in particular, attended whenever they reasonably could,

even though the ticket prices were often difficult to afford.<sup>380</sup> Italians frequently experienced opera in different ways and venues outside of the increasingly upscale opera house. Italian immigrants continued to attend operas, but typically in less expensive, ethnically segregated venues within their own neighborhoods.<sup>381</sup> These sorts of ethnic theaters usually catered to a variety of entertainment tastes, including showings of Italian operas. Puppet shows provided the cheapest and most popular form of entertainment for the Italian-American community, and poor Italians who could not afford opera tickets instead enjoyed *Opera dei Puppi* (puppet opera). Italian-American social groups, such as the Sons of Italy, also frequently provided immigrant communities with free band concerts that featured operatic music.<sup>382</sup>

The strong connection between opera and nationalism in Europe, especially in Italy, encouraged Italians to view opera as an inherent part of their culture and their identity. This perception did not change when they left their homeland or when elites began to expropriate the art form. The operatic scene in California provides a good example of the continuing connection of Italians in America to opera. Significant numbers of Italian immigrants arrived in California in the middle of the nineteenth century during the Gold Rush. Larger numbers came soon after to work in agricultural jobs. Italian farmers and fishermen, in particular, successfully established themselves in northern California in the second half of the century.<sup>383</sup> By 1900, Italians constituted the largest foreign-born group in California. San Francisco alone claimed 35,000 Italian

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<sup>380</sup> For more on ticket prices during this era, see Chapter 1.

<sup>381</sup> Steven Ross, *Working Class Hollywood: Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 15.

<sup>382</sup> Mangione and Morreale, *La Storia*, 314, 308.

<sup>383</sup> Erik Amfitheatrof, *The Children of Columbus: An Informal History of the Italians in the New World* (Boston: Boston, Little, Brown, 1973), 193, 196.

residents.<sup>384</sup> By the mid-nineteenth century, traveling Italian opera companies made frequent stops in the city. Seats at many operatic performances, however, cost two dollars or more, and Italian workers often could not afford these prices. Sometimes Italians would find other ways to view opera performances, as Johnny Ryan, a callboy at Macguire's Opera House in San Francisco, explained in 1917:

The greatest butters-in on grand opera are the Iytalian [*sic*] fishermen. They know their music, but haven't the price. Whenever we want singers for the chorus and hadn't time to train them, we used to go down to the wharf and get Iy-talian [*sic*] fishermen. You'd find every one of 'em knowing their scores and singing 'Erani' [*sic*] and 'Traviata.' You could use a limited number, but every evening they'd crowd in at the stage door. "I'm in the chorus!" "I'm in the chorus!" they'd say. We'd know they wasn't, but we'd let them in when no one was looking.<sup>385</sup>

Even with high ticket prices, Italian immigrants frequently constituted at least a part of the audience for traveling opera troupes—often the most enthusiastic part—as well as for permanent opera houses of the time.<sup>386</sup> However, social elites were the most powerful element in many opera houses, especially in the fancier and more expensive houses, across the country. Few opera companies could succeed without elite support. For example, an Italian opera troupe, the Del Conte Opera, came to Los Angeles in 1897 from Mexico City, but lacked the prestige to attract members of high society to its performances. A reviewer at the time noted numerous Italians and Mexicans in attendance at the troupe's performances; yet these immigrant groups were not sufficient to keep the company from having to move to a new city. Nonetheless, Italians throughout

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<sup>384</sup> Maxine Seller, *Ethnic Theatre in the United States* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983), 261.

<sup>385</sup> Pauline Jacobson, "Napoleon of the Theaters," *San Francisco Bulletin* (August 18, 1917), 3.

<sup>386</sup> Amfitheatrof, *The Children of Columbus*, 196.

the West helped to make opera the most popular form of entertainment in the region by the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>387</sup>

Much of the interaction that Italian immigrants had with opera in the nineteenth and early twentieth century came outside of formal opera houses. After the establishment of a permanent Italian theater, the *Circolo*, in San Francisco in 1905, working-class Italian immigrants in California had a cheaper and more accessible year-round opportunity to enjoy performances. Antonietta Pisanelli Alessandro, established the theater soon after she first arrived in the city from Italy. She presented a different opera every night. In addition, her theater offered a variety of entertainment besides operas, including dramas, farces, and songs. The *Circolo's* immigrant audiences especially favored operas by the ever-popular Giuseppe Verdi. According to journalist J. M. Scanland, the public hummed or whistled along with operatic numbers. In general, audiences responded enthusiastically. Scanland described the importance and function of opera for the immigrants: "Italians look upon opera as a necessity and also strictly as an amusement." Music critics like Scanland expected an educated audience to be more conscious of opera as art, and not mere "amusement." Yet, he also recognized how fundamental opera was in the Italian community.<sup>388</sup>

Sometimes opera played a role in other types of entertainment in San Francisco and elsewhere. Farfariello, a popular Italian comedian, sometimes performed parodies of famous singers, including Caruso and those who performed at the *Circolo*. As late as the Great Depression, when ethnic theater in general had already begun to wane, a Works

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<sup>387</sup> Michael Saffle, ed., *Music and Culture in America, 1861-1918* (New York: Garland, 1998), 308-309; Amfiteatrof, *The Children of Columbus*, 196.

<sup>388</sup> Maxine Seller, "Antonietta Pisanelli Alessandro and the Italian Theater of San Francisco: Entertainment, Education, and Americanization," *Educational Theatre Journal*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (May 1976), 206-219; Seller, *Ethnic Theatre*, 263.



Progress Administration document listed Alessandro's theater as the "dominant social institution" of the city. Alessandro's *Circolo* theater reflected the eclecticism that characterized much of nineteenth-century ethnic theater and entertainment, while demonstrating that the process of sacralization of opera that began in the late nineteenth century was never absolute. A more mainstream San Francisco venue, the Washington Square Theater, also displayed great variety in its programming. Operas appeared alongside performances of Shakespeare and other classic plays and modern melodramas at the theater.<sup>389</sup>

Although many Italians attended live operatic performances, especially in large cities, by the twentieth century most Italian-Americans' exposure to opera came not from opera houses, Italian theaters, puppet shows, or band concerts, but rather from new, developing forms of technology, including the player piano, phonograph, and movies. These inventions provided a much larger audience with a repeatable, more accessible alternative to the opera house or theater. In the late nineteenth century, player pianos became popular among Italian immigrants, allowing them to hear piano transcriptions of operatic arias and ensembles with ease. Many Italian-Americans, well versed in the leading Italian operatic repertoire, would sing along with their player pianos. More significantly, the invention of the phonograph revolutionized the ways in which listeners consumed opera. By the first decade of the twentieth century, access to operatic music widened considerably with this invention.<sup>390</sup> No figure, within or outside of the opera world, was more integral to the early growth in popularity of the phonograph than Italian

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<sup>389</sup> *Ibid.*, 258-263, 266, 268; Mangione and Morreale, *La Storia*, 313.

<sup>390</sup> *Ibid.*, 308.

operatic legend, Enrico Caruso, the most prominent opera star of his time and perhaps all time.<sup>391</sup>

### **Enrico Caruso: The Italian Opera Singer**

The dominance of Italian opera with its focus on melody and the cult of the singer meant that opera singers in the United States retained much of the star status and glamour that they had long had in Europe. Metropolitan Opera general director Heinrich Conried recognized this phenomenon in a 1905 article for *Leslie's Monthly Magazine*, in which he noted, "rightly or wrongly, the American opera-goer is still more concerned about the singers than about the operas which are presented to him."<sup>392</sup> Among the opera singers popular on the American stage in the first half of the twentieth century, Caruso was the undisputed king. Audiences typically greeted his performances with intense enthusiasm and adulation. *The New York Times* noted that Caruso's performance at the end of the 1912-1913 Metropolitan Opera season precipitated "wild scenes" within the prestigious opera house, as the Met patrons repeatedly called Caruso out for curtain calls and for the tenor to say a few words before he left for Europe for the summer break.<sup>393</sup> In keeping with Caruso's status as a celebrity, the press paid inordinate attention to his love life and fashion sense. Both *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* deemed one instance when the tenor daringly wore dark purple evening clothes a newsworthy story.<sup>394</sup>

Caruso's salaries were astronomical for his time period. By 1906, only three years after

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<sup>391</sup> "Caruso's Singing Apparatus," *The Literary Digest*, 10 Sept 1921, 29; "Enrico Caruso, 1873-1921," *Voice of Victor* (October 1921) 16: 187.

<sup>392</sup> Heinrich Conried, "Grand Opera in America," *Leslie's Monthly Magazine*, Vol. LIX, No. 3 (January 1905): 243.

<sup>393</sup> "Caruso and Farrar Speak at Opera," *New York Times* (April 19, 1913): 11.

<sup>394</sup> "Caruso Sets a Fashion," *New York Times* (August 29, 1909): C3; "Fashion Set By Caruso," *The Washington Post* (August 29, 1909): 14.

his Met debut, Caruso became the highest paid male singer in the Met's history.<sup>395</sup> In 1914, he made a minimum of \$2,500 per performance, at a time when the average weekly salary in the United States was a mere \$12.<sup>396</sup>

Although Caruso's fame was widespread, Italian-Americans were typically the singer's most devoted fans. In a 1919 article entitled "Most Idolized Singer," *New York Times* critic James Gibbons Huneker glowingly reviewed Caruso's fifteen-year career at the Metropolitan Opera. Huneker also enthused about a recent "popular demonstration" at the Met: "The occasion might be called without exaggeration an apotheosis of Caruso."<sup>397</sup> Many of New York's Italians had not gotten tickets to the performance. This did not prevent them from celebrating Caruso's triumph. Huneker described the scene in front of the opera house: "Outside on Broadway stood a motley mob of Italians, poor, enthusiastic melomaniacs. The police kept them moving, but they always got back to the central attraction—Caruso, 'Da Carus'! He singa, da Carus'! Magnifico Carus'.' Can one add a word to this involuntary tribute?"

Not only would Caruso's Italian-American fans frequently wait outside for him during his performances, they would often also greet him whenever he arrived in their town. *The Chicago Daily Tribune* described one such scene in 1910. Around one hundred Italians packed the lobby of Caruso's Chicago hotel and waited excitedly for his arrival. According to the *Tribune*, they surrounded him, reaching for his hand and eagerly

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<sup>395</sup> The Met paid him \$115,000 for the 1905-1906 season, an extraordinarily high salary for the time period. Franklin Fyles, "Mozart Has a Libel Case Against Elihu Root's Niece; Caruso Paid \$115,000 a Year," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (March 25, 1906): 11. The next season the Met increased Caruso's salary to \$200,000 per annum. "Caruso Gets \$200,000 A Year," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (May 23, 1907): 1; "Fabulous Salaries of Operatic Singers," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (April 18, 1909): B3.

<sup>396</sup> Michael Walsh, "When Tenors Were Gods," *Time Magazine* (July 18, 1994) <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,981126,00.html?iid=chix-sphere>; Enrico Caruso, Jr. and Andrew Farkas, *Enrico Caruso: My Father and My Family* (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1990), 357; Dizikes, *Opera in America*, 398.

<sup>397</sup> James Gibbons Huneker, "Most Idolized Singer," *New York Times* (March 23, 1919): 3.

praising his singing. One of these enthusiastic admirers exclaimed to the *Tribune's* reporter via a translator that he knew how magnificent a singer Caruso was, because he had heard Caruso sing before.<sup>398</sup> Italians were common sights in the cheap gallery seats during Caruso's appearances. In 1905, during his first visit to Chicago, the press noted that a thousand people who wanted tickets for the performance had to be turned away, the "most unhappy" of which were several hundred Italians who wanted to buy seats in the gallery but were unable to do so.<sup>399</sup> As in Chicago, the Italian population of San Francisco was tremendously excited when Caruso first visited their city to sing. His initial visit to the city became nationally noteworthy for other reasons, however, when he made headlines by being caught in the San Francisco earthquake of 1906.<sup>400</sup>

The strongest Italian-American display of support for Caruso came not during any of his performances, but rather during the so-called "monkey house incident" of 1906. A policeman named James J. Kane arrested Caruso near the monkey cage of the Central Park Zoo for inappropriately touching a woman's hip.<sup>401</sup> The policeman and the initial newspaper accounts focused on Caruso's Italian foreignness. Kane told reporters that he had been keeping an eye on the "foreign looking man," when he saw Caruso allegedly commit the crime in question. He also noted that Caruso displayed a "peculiar foreign habit" of putting his cane in his overcoat pocket in a certain way.<sup>402</sup> *The Chicago Daily Tribune* described Caruso as "a short, stout man of dark complexion."<sup>403</sup> *The Washington Post* in similar terms, but with greater stress on the darkness of his skin, described him as

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<sup>398</sup> "Italian Tenor Seen from His Own and Another's Viewpoint," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (April 4, 1910): 3.

<sup>399</sup> "Singers Who Took Part in Presentation of La Gioconda at Auditorium," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (March 25, 1905): 5.

<sup>400</sup> Amfitheatrof, *The Children of Columbus*, 196.

<sup>401</sup> Newspapers varyingly reported the officer's name as "Kane," "Cain," and "Caine."

<sup>402</sup> "'Monkey Did It, Not I:' Caruso." *Chicago Daily Tribune* (November 18, 1906): 3.

<sup>403</sup> "Caruso Jailed for Mashing," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (November 17, 1906): 1.

“a short, stout man of very dark complexion.”<sup>404</sup> In its initial report on the matter, however, *The New York Times*, the most important newspaper in the city where Caruso was most renowned, refrained from discussing any aspect of his nationality or ethnic appearance.<sup>405</sup>

The overwhelming and often lurid press coverage of the incident and subsequent trial elicited a variety of reactions.<sup>406</sup> Many women and native-born Americans found the incident offensive; others appeared only to consider it titillating. Italians, on the other hand, supported Caruso, either because they considered the accusation false or believed his alleged actions not to be a crime, but rather an example of silly American “puritanical” modesty.<sup>407</sup> Italians attended Caruso’s trial in large numbers, as a show of support for the tenor. Convening the trial on November 22, the court brought five counts of improper conduct against Caruso. One reporter described the rowdy scene as Caruso arrived at the courthouse:

There probably were 800 persons standing in front of the courthouse when Caruso drove up in a closed cab. As the great tenor stepped from his cab, off went their hats and up went a chorus of “Bravo, bravo, Caruso,” from the Italians in the crowd. A number of Americans send back this answering cheer: “Monkey house, monkey house, monkey house, Caruso.”<sup>408</sup>

*The New York Times*, noting that most of the audience in the courtroom consisted of Italians, described in vivid detail a similar response that greeted Caruso’s departure after court adjourned:

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<sup>404</sup> “Caruso A Prisoner,” *Washington Post* (November 17, 1906): 1.

<sup>405</sup> “Signor Caruso, Tenor, Arrested in the Zoo,” *New York Times* (November 17, 1906): 1.

<sup>406</sup> The print media frequently publicized celebrity scandals. Exposés that featured shocking tales about performers were common by the early twentieth century. Charles L. Ponce de Leon, *Self-Exposure: Human-Interest Journalism and the Emergence of Celebrity in America, 1890-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 215-216.

<sup>407</sup> Quoted from a New York Italian language newspaper in: Howard S. Greenfeld, *Caruso: An Illustrated Life* (New York: Putnam’s, 1983), 79.

<sup>408</sup> “ ‘Twas the Woman, Whimpers Caruso,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (November 22, 1906): 1.

Caruso's friends surrounded him as he went through the lane made by the police in the great throng. The officers had to push and shove and shout at people everywhere to make room. On the stairs the crowd was so great that Caruso was almost shoved down the steps as the curious swarmed behind him. When he saw the mob in the hall below he drew back, seemingly in fear. He was relieved, however, in a minute, for there was a shout.

“Viva Caruso! Viva! Viva!”

Enthusiastic Italians took up the cry. Then it died out as Caruso went toward the door with Herr Conried, and long, loud hisses were heard from the stairway behind him. The mob surged forward through the front doors.

“Viva Caruso-o-o! Viva! Viva Italiano! Viva!”

And again the hisses followed.

Into a waiting cab the singer stepped with Herr Direktor of the opera. Once again the foreigners shouted.

“Viva Caruso! Viva! Viva!”

The carriage drove off with a crowd of young Americans following, shouting derisively, yelling, whistling, and hooting.<sup>409</sup>

A similarly chaotic scene reoccurred the following day as the trial reconvened.<sup>410</sup>

On the third day of the trial, the police commissioner arguing the case for the prosecution called Caruso a sexual pervert “best excluded from society of decent people.” He also turned his ire on the largely Italian audience in the courtroom. When asked why the woman who accused Caruso never appeared at the trial, the commissioner argued that she did not want to face the “curs and dogs, perverts” such as those in the courtroom. Several audience members hissed at him in response. He responded by calling them the “scum from the lazaretto of Naples.” The following day, a friend of Caruso's publicly criticized the commissioner for his derogatory remarks about Italians. Upset Italians gathered at the Italian Savings Bank in New York's “Little Italy” neighborhood to discuss these insults. After many speeches, they passed resolutions condemning the police commissioner, who in their opinion “willfully, maliciously, and without

<sup>409</sup> “Caruso in Court,” *New York Times* (November 22, 1906): 1. Also see for a briefer description of this scene: “Woman in White; Caruso Faces New Accuser,” *Los Angeles Times* (November 23, 1906): 11.

<sup>410</sup> “May Get ‘Mrs. Graham’ To Face Caruso To-Day,” *New York Times* (November 23, 1906): 1; “Woman Faces Him,” *Washington Post* (November 23, 1906): 1.

justification, descended to the depths of abuse and vilification, and not only upon said Mr. Caruso, but also upon the public, principally composed of Italians.”<sup>411</sup> In spite of the racialized proceedings, the absence of the accuser, and the sensationalized coverage, the judge found Caruso guilty and fined him ten dollars.<sup>412</sup> After the trial, a diverse group of Italians in St. Louis, including wealthy and working-class immigrants, passed resolutions of their own accusing the New York police and courts of unfairly persecuting Caruso. The trial, they argued, was a travesty. Their words suggest that they saw the tenor’s prosecution as an insult to all Italians. They remained firm in their belief that Caruso was “a creditable reflection upon his country and his countrymen” and noted that the “past conduct of Caruso has been of that uniform high order that characterizes the life and deeds of every true Italian gentleman.” They closed by asserting that they “resent in the bitterest terms the action of the court, which upheld against Caruso, charges which we believe were without foundation in fact.”<sup>413</sup>

The strikingly different attitudes that Italians and native-born Americans had over the monkey house incident reveal some of the continuing tensions that sprang from Italians’ “in-between” status. Italian-Americans showed intense loyalty to the most famous performer of their most beloved art form. They considered his prosecution to be representative of their own mistreatment in United States. In the eyes of some Americans, even the greatest of Italian celebrities and the most respected of singers was just another Italian with the criminal “slum” characteristics allegedly typical of his “race.” Both sides saw Caruso’s struggle in ethnic/national terms.

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<sup>411</sup> “Caruso Did It, Says The Judge,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (November 24, 1906): 1; “Caruso Convicted But Will Appeal,” *New York Times* (November 24, 1906): 1; “Caruso Appeal Is Ready; His Singing Not So Sure; Italians Denounce Mathot,” *New York Times* (November 25, 1906): 1.

<sup>412</sup> “Caruso Did It, Says The Judge,” 1; “Caruso Found Guilty,” *Washington Post* (November 24, 1906): 1.

<sup>413</sup> “Sympathy Vote in St. Louis,” *New York Times* (November 29, 1906): 2.

Articles questioning whether Caruso would continue singing in New York followed the end of the trial.<sup>414</sup> As these reports filled the newspapers, Italians in New York sent numerous notes of sympathy to the tenor at his hotel.<sup>415</sup> Even with the encouragement of his fellows, Caruso feared that the response at his next run of performances would be negative. Ironically, the press created enough of a stir over the incident that seats for *La Bohème* with Caruso sold on the street for much higher prices than usual.<sup>416</sup> As one reporter noted of his first performance after his conviction:

Caruso's compatriots thronged the lobby before 7 o'clock, and swarmed a block from and up Broadway. Many of them were unable to obtain admission... There were 300 more of the tenor's compatriots in the rear of the gallery, and they were his friends to a man. There was the same harmony on the part of the women, who were uncommonly numerous among the standers... Women in the parterre boxes showed their approval with a freedom they rarely exhibit, handkerchiefs waved in the orchestra, and the standers gave expression to such outbursts as "viva, Caruso," and "viva Italia."<sup>417</sup>

The wealthier box holders held their applause until after Caruso's first aria, but the Italians in the audience gave the tenor an ovation when he appeared onstage. Caruso responded with tears. Met general director Conried called the performance and the audience's response Caruso's "vindication."<sup>418</sup>

The singer attempted to repay the loyalty of America's Italian community with acts of kindness and generosity. He performed benefits and gave donations to the Italian Benevolent Institute and its hospital in New York, the Society for Italian Immigrants, Italian war refugees, and returning Italian emigrants, among others. One special

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<sup>414</sup> "Caruso May Not Sing," *Washington Post* (November 25, 1906): 3; "Caruso To Face Public; Tenor Eager To Sing Wednesday," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (November 26, 1906): 3; "Court Grants Caruso An Appeal of His Case," *New York Times* (November 27, 1906): 1.

<sup>415</sup> "May Close Monkey House After Caruso Incident," *New York Times* (November 26, 1906): 3.

<sup>416</sup> "Caught Like Caruso," *Washington Post* (November 27, 1906): 1.

<sup>417</sup> "Caruso Triumphs and Is Inspired," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (November 29, 1906): 1.

<sup>418</sup> *Ibid.*; "'Mrs. Graham' Found; Opera Cheers Caruso," *New York Times*. (November 29, 1906): 1; "Tears, Then Song," *Washington Post* (November 29, 1906): 1.



performance of *La Bohème* for the Italian Benevolent Institute and Hospital took place in the Metropolitan Opera auditorium, which was decorated with Italian flags expressly for the occasion. During the performance, the orchestra played both the Italian and U.S. national anthems.<sup>419</sup> Flags greeted Caruso again when he arrived in Washington, D.C. for a World War I benefit for Italian war refugees. “Enrico Caruso, the celebrated tenor,” the *Washington Post* reported, “was greeted with the waving of hundreds of American and Italian flags when he arrived at Union Station yesterday. A thousand of Caruso’s countrymen and many others were on hand to greet him.”<sup>420</sup>

Besides benefits and charity work, individual Italians on occasion profited from Caruso’s generosity. In 1915 a group of Italian-American miners from Colorado visited him. They pooled their resources together, hoping to pay him to sing a private concert for them, since they did not have tickets for his next performance and could not afford the prices of the scalpers. Caruso sang for them for hours, while refusing any pay.<sup>421</sup> His friendship with the Italian-American community in combination with his live and recorded performances strengthened the ties between Italian immigrants and opera.

The press also reinforced the association of Caruso and his Italian heritage. *The New York Times* praised Caruso’s debut in Verdi’s *Rigoletto* and remarked on his Italian background: “He is an Italian in all his fibre, and his singing and acting are characteristic of what Italy now affords in those arts...Mr. Caruso appeared last evening capable of

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<sup>419</sup> “Music and Musicians,” *Washington Post* (March 18, 1906): A4; “Government Sues the Lake Shore; Caruso Helps Immigrants; Tenor Donates \$4,000 to the Society Which Aids Italians,” *New York Times* (March 12, 1907): 5; “Metropolitan Benefit Nets \$6,500,” *New York Times* (January 8, 1910): 9; “Caruso Sings at Benefit,” *Washington Post* (October 25, 1914): R3; “Caruso Gets Gold Medal,” *New York Times* (January 5, 1910): 7; “Caruso Aids War Refugees: Cables \$10,000 to Italy’s Prime Minister,” *New York Times* (November 14, 1917): 13; “Caruso in ‘Tosca’ at Italian Benefit,” *New York Times* (December 14, 1917): 11.

<sup>420</sup> “Caruso Greeted With 1,000 Flags,” *Washington Post* (May 20, 1918): 7.

<sup>421</sup> Mangione and Morreale, *La Storia*, 308.

intelligence and of passion in both his singing and his acting, and gave reason to believe in his value as an acquisition to the company.”<sup>422</sup> In January 1904, a couple of months into Caruso’s first season at the Met, a few newspaper music critics reflected back on the impact that the new tenor had thus far made with the company. One of these critics penned an article solely about Caruso, who he noted had been a great success that season. The critic, in particular, described the hero worship that had already begun to develop at the Met around the new tenor (Caruso was especially a hit, the reviewer observed, with “matinee girls”).<sup>423</sup> Another reviewer, who also focused on Caruso at the time, praised the singer and asserted that he is a “pure Italian tenor.”<sup>424</sup> A third critic writing in January 1904 mentioned Caruso’s Italian origins several times throughout the article and equated some of the characteristics of his singing to his nationality. The reviewer saw Caruso as an essentially Italian singer:

Mr. Caruso is an Italian, and he could not, if he would, belong to any other nation, or sing in any other way than Italians sing. He can pour out a melody with an intensity of passion that carries immediate conviction; but his impulsive Italian temperament leads him sometimes to excesses and exaggerations, to faults in taste, that mar the perfect enjoyment of his most exalted moments.<sup>425</sup>

By the next year, regardless of any qualifications about his greatness, *The New York Times* already recognized that Caruso, the Italian singer, was “the most popular of all tenors.”<sup>426</sup>

### **Prestige and Popularity via the Phonograph**

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<sup>422</sup> “Opera Season Opens With Great Eclat,” *New York Times* (November 24, 1903): 1.

<sup>423</sup> “Enrico Caruso,” *Current Literature*, Vol. XXXVI, No.1 (January 1904), 28.

<sup>424</sup> Lewis M. Isaacs, “The Music Season in New York,” *The Bookman: A Review of Books and Life* (January 1904), 494.

<sup>425</sup> Richard Aldrich, “Of Music and Musicians,” *New York Times* (January 31, 1904): 23.

<sup>426</sup> “The Curious Superstitions of a Famous Tenor; Signor Enrico Caruso, of the Golden Voice, Confesses to His Weakness Over the Luncheon Table,” *New York Times* (November 12, 1905): SM3.

Opera experienced a boom in the early twentieth century that the phonograph helped to spur. “One of the most important contributing causes to this really remarkable development, in my opinion, has been the phonographs, which have familiarized people with the operas and made them want to hear the music sung from the stage,” one reporter noted. *Town and Country* described the larger effect of the phonograph: “That valuable instrument has done more to popularize operatic music in America than all the Toscaninis and Gatti-Casazzas that were ever imported from Italy. And through the phonograph Caruso has become a household friend all over the country.” Records acted as advertisements for singers, often increasing attendance at their live performances.<sup>427</sup> Recordings especially sparked an increase in Caruso’s popularity on stage. From a well-publicized but moderately received Met debut, Caruso quickly grew to legendary status in the United States. Calvin Child, the Manager of the Recording Laboratory for Victor Talking Machine Company, noted in a letter to a colleague in England that the whole opera season in New York City revolved around Caruso. Caruso was afflicted with laryngitis at the time and the Metropolitan was suffering because of it to the point of withdrawing previously scheduled operas. Child added, “He and Geraldine Farrar are the only two artists that are able to draw full houses” at the Met.<sup>428</sup> When Caruso suffered from a long-term illness, Met subscriptions plummeted. Some people only subscribed to

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<sup>427</sup> “Forty-Five Weeks of Popular Opera Seem Assured,” *New York Times* (April 20, 1913): SM10; “Cinematograph with Words,” *Observer* (June 30, 1912): 11. A writer for one picture magazine claimed that “never has interest in high-class music been so rife as now.” “Echoes from the Stage,” *Pictorial Review*, Vol. 7, Is. 5 (February 1906): 52; “Notes of the Week,” *Town and Country* (November 11, 1911): 14.

<sup>428</sup> Calvin Child, Letter, Louis Homer Papers, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Box 25, Folders 3-7 - Victor Talking Machine Company (contracts, royalties, letters), Folder 3: 1906-1915.

the season to hear Caruso.<sup>429</sup> The press even referred to a successful opera performance with a wildly boisterous audience as a “Caruso night.”<sup>430</sup>

Because the press frequently named Caruso an exemplar of specifically “Italian” singing, his renown helped to reinforce the connection between Italians and opera in the popular imagination. He also strengthened the actual ties of Italian-Americans to the operatic traditions of Italy. His fame spread among the Italian-American community, as well as the general population, primarily through his phonograph recordings for the Red Seal Victor label.<sup>431</sup> The prestige and acclaim of his Red Seal records provide a stark contrast to the opprobrium he received during the monkey house incident. During that scandal, many non-Italian citizens viewed him as the threatening “other.” By comparison, Caruso’s records were lauded and collected by large and diverse swaths of American society. His position as the most successful and one of the most respected early recording artists shows another more positive and less disparaging aspect of the Italian-American experience.

Thomas Edison invented the first phonograph in 1877. At first, small independent companies proliferated in the recording market, but by the early 1900s the “big three” record companies, Victor, Columbia, and Edison, dominated the industry.<sup>432</sup> In 1902 an agent for the most successful of the phonograph and music producers, Victor Talking Machine Company, Fred Gaisberg, scoured Europe for opera singers to record primarily for his company’s American market. He signed Caruso, a young Neapolitan tenor whose

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<sup>429</sup> Robert Grau, “The Caruso Situation and Our Opera Policy,” *Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine*, Vol. LIX, No. 3 (March 1912): 233.

<sup>430</sup> “Farrar Throws a Bouquet,” Farrar Collection, LOC, Box 28, album (Lister).

<sup>431</sup> Mangione and Morreale, *La Storia*, 308.

<sup>432</sup> A. J. Millard, *America on Record: A History of Recorded Sound* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 24-25, 50; Suisman, *Selling Sounds*, 13, 9.

star was rapidly rising in the opera houses of Europe. Caruso's earliest recordings came out around the time of his Covent Garden debut in London and created excitement over his performances, helping to spread his fame and renown within the opera world.<sup>433</sup>

Caruso would continue to record successfully for Victor until his death in 1921, quickly becoming the company's most popular recording artist.<sup>434</sup>

Acoustic recordings, like the ones Caruso made in the early twentieth century, were not always very exact or of authentic sound quality. The violin, for example, presented a number of basic problems for the phonograph. Early recordings changed the way violinists played. The poor recording ability of the acoustic phonograph encouraged a much stronger and more frequent use of vibrato than was common in the nineteenth century, and the quietness of the standard violin promoted the use of Stroh violins with amplifying horns in the industry.<sup>435</sup> Because of the lack of accuracy in the recording of instruments, "in the early days of recording the voice was the primary consideration," as Geraldine Farrar once noted.<sup>436</sup> Yet, problems still existed for singers too. American soprano Mary Garden wrote in her autobiography of how she "loathed" her records, citing the restrictive nature of the early acoustic recording process, especially the limitations of where and how to stand and act in relation to the recording horn. She recalled the procedure of making records as "mental and physical agony."<sup>437</sup> Mezzo-

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<sup>433</sup> John Bello, "Enrico Caruso: A Centennial Tribute," 1973, Rosa Ponselle Papers, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Box 14, Folder 3 – Enrico Caruso [exhibit catalogue]. Although Caruso had made mostly successful debuts in many prominent European houses at this time, it was not until after his Met debut that his celebrity rose to phenomenal heights. The Met subsequently became his "home" opera house, where he sang the most often.

<sup>434</sup> "How a Man with an Idea Made Millions in Twelve Years," *New York Times* (Aug 28, 1910): SM9.

<sup>435</sup> Mark Katz, *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 86-93.

<sup>436</sup> Farrar, *All Good Greetings*, 53.

<sup>437</sup> Mary Garden and Louis Biancolli, *Mary Garden's Story* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1951), 233-234.

soprano Louise Homer had both praise and criticism for the young medium. In one letter written to the Victor Talking Machine Company, Homer enthused over the “perfection” and “fidelity” of the new Victor records and the opportunity that the records’ repeatability would provide students. Later on in another letter, however, she discussed a recording that she had rejected, which had been “exceedingly difficult to make because it was SO high and so VERY low, and they did not know, at that time, how to make recordings of those big arias with such a big voice as mine was - without ‘scratching’ or ‘blasting.’”<sup>438</sup> Caruso’s voice, on the other hand, sounded surprisingly natural on the primitive equipment, which was undoubtedly part of his success in the medium.<sup>439</sup> After making his first recordings for Gaisberg, Victor’s British affiliate, the Gramophone Company, sent Caruso a complementary record player. In a thank you note, Caruso asserted that the effect of the machine is “so magnificent that some of my friends have had the impression that they heard me sing while I was engaged in conversation with them.”<sup>440</sup>

The popularity of Red Seal Victor records rested in part on the care which the company and singers put into their creation. Calvin Child at Victor was especially known for his high standards. He worked on all of Caruso’s records after 1905. During recording sessions, the two men would start with an experimental recording, which they would then analyze and discuss before cutting the actual record.<sup>441</sup> Victor officials worked with opera

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<sup>438</sup> Louise Homer, Letter to Victor Talking Machine Co. (addressed to “Gentlemen”), September 15 (no year listed), Louise Homer Papers, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Series 1 – Correspondence, Box 21, Folder 1 - Letters regarding recordings; Louise Homer, Letter to Mr. Seltsam, June 26, 1937, Louise Homer Papers, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Series 1 – Correspondence, Box 21, Folder 1 - Letters regarding recordings.

<sup>439</sup> Bello, “Enrico Caruso: A Centennial Tribute.”

<sup>440</sup> Caruso and Farkas, *Enrico Caruso: My Father and My Family*, 359.

<sup>441</sup> William R. Moran, “Discography of Original Recordings,” in Caruso and Farkas, *Enrico Caruso: My Father and My Family*, 603-604. Caruso and Child got along very well together on a personal level too.

singers to produce recordings acceptable to both parties. For example, in letters from mid-1927 Louise Homer wrote to a Mr. Cairns of Victor discussing her records. She felt that the take that the evaluation committee picked of one of her recent records was not the best she recorded. In another instance, she preferred take three of “Serenade” because of the greater legato of her singing, but she agreed to accept the Victor committee’s preference for take two, since she could “find nothing to object to” in it. Homer did not always disagree with Victor’s evaluation committee. About her take of “Calm as the Night,” Homer enthused: “I think this is an exceptionally good recording of my voice, and it has given me greater personal pleasure than any of my records have ever done.”<sup>442</sup> Duets between Homer and Caruso had to be approved by both singers, and in keeping with the times Homer’s husband also evaluated the recordings.<sup>443</sup>

Victor could make complaints too in an attempt to create a better product. When Calvin Child felt that Homer’s records were not of high enough quality, he asked her to redo them. Records could also be rejected not only because of flaws in the performances but also because of the quality, or lack thereof, of the song itself. Victor rejected one of Homer’s recordings because the music of the song was not “attractive” enough.<sup>444</sup> Child wrote to an associate that it took four years to get a recording of the “Miserere” from *Il Trovatore* with Caruso and Frances Alda to the level of quality that everyone wanted

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Child referred to Caruso as a “beloved friend” after the tenor’s death. “Caruso Records are Imperishable,” *New York Times* (Aug 4, 1921): 3.

<sup>442</sup> Louise Homer, Letter to Mr. Cairns, Louis Homer Papers, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Series 1 – Correspondence, Box 21, Folder 1 - Letters regarding recordings.

<sup>443</sup> C. G. Child, Letter to Louise Homer, January 7, 1911, Louise Homer Papers, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Box 25, Folders 3-7 - Victor Talking Machine Company (contracts, royalties, letters), Folder 3: 1906-1915.

<sup>444</sup> C. G. Child, Letter to Louise Homer, February 10, 1911, Louise Homer Papers, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Box 25, Folders 3-7 - Victor Talking Machine Company (contracts, royalties, letters), Folder 3: 1906-1915; Louise Homer, Letter to J. S. Macdonald from Victor Talking Machine Co., Louise Homer Papers, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Box 25, Folders 3-7 - Victor Talking Machine Company (contracts, royalties, letters), Folder 5.

before releasing it. Caruso had rejected the first two versions recorded of the song and only accepted a new take with a different soprano and the addition of the Met chorus.<sup>445</sup>

Because of the success and quality of his recordings, Caruso's reputation preceded him to the United States. To many people "Caruso" was not the man himself but his records. These records offered listeners a symbolic and reified representation of Caruso. The qualities that they perceived in his recorded voice colored and influenced the public discourse about the singer. The buzz that his records created made his Met debut a bigger event than it otherwise would have been, illustrating how recordings could directly influence people's interest in and reaction to operatic stage performances. In anticipation of Caruso's upcoming debut, Met general director Heinrich Conried, soon after first arriving in New York, purchased two of Caruso's records and a phonograph on which to play them.<sup>446</sup> Caruso's records not only enabled his talent to become known to the Met's general director, they also allowed listeners to appreciate him who otherwise would not have had the opportunity to do so. *Outlook Magazine* noted upon his death that his recordings helped ensure his lasting fame:

Thousands who never saw Caruso heard him. People who were never within hundreds of miles of the Metropolitan or any other place where he sang have listened repeatedly to his voice caged in a phonographic record. Caruso has not only sung for the people that sat in the boxes of the golden horseshoe, but has sung in the tenements of the great cities, in boarding-houses, in the best rooms of farmers' dwellings, in mining camps, in college dormitories, in seaside cottages and mountain cabins. No other great tenor of the past could have sung to such a multitude...though he himself is gone, his voice remains.<sup>447</sup>

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<sup>445</sup> C. G. Child, Letter to Sydney W. Dixon of the Gramophone Company, January 25, 1910, Louise Homer Papers, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Box 25, Folders 3-7 - Victor Talking Machine Company (contracts, royalties, letters), Folder 3: 1906-1915; Tom Vilella, "Caruso: The Tenor of the Century," *Le Grand Baton: Journal of the Sir Thomas Beecham Society*, Vol .12 (September 1976), 3-18, Rosa Ponselle Papers, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Box 13, Folder 15.

<sup>446</sup> "'Parsifal,' \$10 A Seat," *New York Times* (August 21, 1903): 9.

<sup>447</sup> "Caruso, Phonography, and Art," *Outlook* (August 17, 1921): 597.



As this passage suggests, society types, poor immigrants in the tenements, and almost everyone in between loved and admired Caruso. Reaffirming this point, *The Chicago Daily Tribune* described the audience at a memorial concert for Caruso: “From all walks of life they were; the push-cart vender rubbed elbows with the box-holder at the opera<sup>448</sup> . . . Had it been for the President of the United States, there could hardly have been more of an outpouring than there was for the Enrico Caruso memorial concert.”<sup>449</sup>

Because of his recordings, when Caruso died his art did not die with him. His records continued to be popular in the Italian-American community and among opera lovers of all backgrounds. While he was still ill, *The Washington Post* reminded readers: “His marvelous voice is known to millions, and will be known by millions now unborn, thanks to the phonograph.” Several press reports averred that Caruso’s voice would be immortal because of his recordings. One focused on the usefulness of his records, noting that they would allow future singers to “study his marvelous technique.” When he was sick with his final illness, Caruso received hundreds of letters from well-wishers who had only heard him on the phonograph.<sup>450</sup> One writer even composed a poem about how the tenor’s voice would continue to live on.<sup>451</sup> His death also stimulated a boom in sales of his records, as well as of phonograph machines. A shop girl, who was interviewed, likened the demand for his recordings to the Christmas shopping rush and thought that

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<sup>448</sup> Push-cart vending was a common profession among poor, urban Italian immigrants at the time.

<sup>449</sup> Edward Moore, “15,000 Crowd Into Ravinia Park to Attend Memorial for Enrico Caruso,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (August 8, 1921): 17. See also, “Rich and Poor at Bier Weep for Wonder Singer,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (August 4, 1921): 3.

<sup>450</sup> “Enrico Caruso,” *Washington Post* (February 18, 1921): 6; “Caruso Records are Imperishable,” *New York Times* (August 4, 1921): 3; “Caruso is Not Dead,” *The Literary Digest* (August 20, 1921), 36-38; Ronald Webster, “Luckily Caruso Can Be Heard and Not Seen On the Phonograph,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (January 10, 1915): E1-2; “Enrico Caruso, 1873-1921,” *Voice of Victor*, Vol. 16 (October 1921): 187.

<sup>451</sup> “Rippling Rhymes: Canned Voices,” *Los Angeles Times* (September 3, 1921): II4; “Chats with Visitors: Caruso a National Figure,” *Washington Post* (February 20, 1921): 30.

perhaps some people feared the stores would run out of his recordings. His records could be heard playing all over New York City.<sup>452</sup>

Even after death, Caruso influenced many singers, including Fred Scott, an opera singer in movies of the 1930s, who had been inspired to sing by listening to his mother's Caruso records.<sup>453</sup> Popular post-war Hollywood tenor Mario Lanza similarly noted on numerous occasions that he became a singer after listening to his father's operatic records as a child. Lanza, an Italian-American from South Philadelphia's Little Italy neighborhood, grew up surrounded by operatic music.<sup>454</sup> Although a prominent recording artist in his own right, the story of how he became a singer well illustrates the influence of Caruso's records in the Italian-American community.<sup>455</sup>

In the early 1930s, RCA (Victor's successor company) tried to stimulate sales in South Philadelphia by installing a phonograph and huge amplifying horn in a music store across the street from the Lanza residence. The store played Italian operatic recordings, especially those of Caruso, so loudly that neighborhood passers-by could listen in the streets and the Lanzas from their home. Later Mario's father bought a phonograph of his own because, in his son's words, "he loved music, and he didn't have to make any excuses for it." The boy's parents would listen to the phonograph after dinner at night.

When his parents were out, he put on Caruso's records and sang along with them. His

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<sup>452</sup> "The Golden Voice," *Wall Street Journal* (August 6, 1921): 2; "Caruso Records are Imperishable."

<sup>453</sup> "Old Phonograph Set Goal," *Los Angeles Times* (June 22, 1930): B9. Even Caruso's rivals noted how influential he was. John McCormack "was quite candid in stating that he had absorbed more knowledge by listening to Caruso sing than he had acquired from his teachers." Bello, "Enrico Caruso: A Centennial Tribute."

<sup>454</sup> One article noted that many "Spanish-speaking peoples...claim him for their own," because Lanza was also a quarter Spanish. Both of his parents had immigrated directly from Italy though. Joseph Steele, "Encore!" *Photoplay* (c. 1951-52), 62+, Constance McCormick Collection, Mario Lanza, Cinematic Arts Library, University of Southern California, Volume 1/1, Compiled November 5, 1997.

<sup>455</sup> Lanza also listened to popular Italian tenor Beniamino Gigli's records as a child. He later found a patron, Sam Weilter, who insisted he study with Gigli's voice coach, Enrico Rosati. "Life with Lanza," *Modern Screen* (c. 1952-53), 64-5, 85+, Constance McCormick Collection, Mario Lanza, Cinematic Arts Library, University of Southern California, Volume 1/1, Compiled November 5, 1997.

family could not afford singing lessons, but Lanza later told reporters that he learned how to sing from the phonograph. No performer was as important to the boy as Caruso. In one interview, Lanza recalled: “He’s always been my idol, you know. I come from a very poor Italian family. Poor as our neighborhood was, though, there was this tremendous appreciation of operatic music. Everybody managed to buy records. I really learned to sing from listening to my Caruso records.” The interviewer asked him when he first learned to sing from these recordings. “Oh, I was about 5 when I started,” Lanza replied.

In another interview, Lanza asserted that at the age of seven he had once listened to a Caruso record twenty-seven times in a row. More than one reporter noted how the young tenor imitated his singing idol, even in the stylish fashions that he wore. Lanza, with the pretentiousness he was known for, believed that he was born to be Caruso’s successor.<sup>456</sup> He never lost his admiration for Caruso and his records. One *Photoplay* article asserted that Lanza owned one of the largest collections of Caruso records. Another article told the story of how the tenor proposed to his wife at an Italian restaurant with Caruso records playing in the background. After their marriage, the Lanzas, by their own admission, spent four or five hours each night before bed listening to favorite recordings by Caruso, Beniamino Gigli, and other opera singers.<sup>457</sup>

Lanza’s story illustrates the key role that operatic recordings played in the vernacular culture of Italian-American communities in the late 1920s and 1930s, a time

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<sup>456</sup> *Ibid.*; Howard Thompson, “Lanza, the Bonanza; Comedy and Melodrama,” *New York Times* (May 6, 1951): X4; “Million-Dollar Voice,” *Time Magazine* (August 6, 1951). <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,856898,00.html>>; “Comeback for Lanza,” *Time Magazine* (October 11, 1954) <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,936458,00.html>>; “Mario Lanza Music With Muscles,” *Look* (c. 1951-52), Constance McCormick Collection, Mario Lanza, Cinematic Arts Library, University of Southern California, Volume 1/1, Compiled November 5, 1997.

<sup>457</sup> Steele, “Encore!”; “The Mario Lanzas,” *Screen Guide* (c. 1950-51), 70-73, Constance McCormick Collection, Mario Lanza, Cinematic Arts Library, University of Southern California, Volume 1/1, Compiled November 5, 1997; “Life with Lanza.”

when the process of assimilating Italians into the white mainstream had already begun. One reporter for *Modern Screen* wrote in the 1950s about Lanza's boyhood neighborhood: "And because South Philadelphia was mostly Italian, their music was the operas, played casually at home on a gramophone [*sic*], or hummed to babies by their mothers."<sup>458</sup> As this reporter and Lanza himself noted, opera was an important part of the community culture of Philadelphia's "Little Italy." It was something that bound the residents of the neighborhood together, and they in turn passed it on to their children. Opera flourished in the area—but primarily through records played on the streets for the whole neighborhood or in people's private homes. Some were not content merely to listen; many sang along with the recordings or even, like Lanza, used them as a form of voice instruction.

Caruso and those who followed after him were not the only ones to benefit from his recordings.<sup>459</sup> Victor Records, through vigorous ad campaigns, attempted to legitimate musical recordings and their company by publicizing and transferring to the phonograph the cultural value that society conferred on opera singers. In particular, Victor's marketing emphasized opera singers' prestige, while equating them with the recordings they made. The company wanted to make Caruso and other prominent recording artists synonymous in the public mind with the Victor phonograph. The company hoped to raise its own reputation in much the same way that soon thereafter Cecil B. DeMille used opera to make movies more prestigious. In particular, Victor

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<sup>458</sup> Henaghan, "Wonderful Madman."

<sup>459</sup> As David Suisman notes, "No other company had ever promoted a single artist so heavily as Victor did Caruso, and no performer had ever benefited so completely from professional mass media promotion. Caruso was Victor's signature artist, and his success became Victor's. He was the modern music industry's first star, and echoes of his voice resounded throughout American culture long after he was gone." Suisman, *Selling Sounds*.

designed large-scale ad campaigns around its specially named and priced Red Seal catalogue. These ads stressed the respectability and quality of Red Seal recordings of “serious” artists and music. Victor especially banked on Caruso’s general familiarity to the public and the extensive publicity he received in the press, while Victor’s records and ads at the same time greatly increased Caruso’s fame and renown.<sup>460</sup> Advertisements boldly displayed his name and frequently his picture.<sup>461</sup> At first, Victor charged significantly more for a Red Seal record than for standard recordings, as part of the company’s effort to treat classical records as something special and higher quality and thus more expensive. In response to growing competition from Columbia Records, however, Child decided to drop the prices of typical Red Seal Victor records from \$2 and \$3 to \$1 and \$1.50. “I really believe that it will mean a great increase in our Red Seal record orders and sales to bring the records of these big artists down to a popular price,” he wrote.<sup>462</sup> In keeping with his reputation as the world’s greatest opera singer, Caruso earned enormous profits for his recordings. In 1904, the tenor claimed that he was receiving \$10,000 a month on royalties from his record sales.<sup>463</sup> By 1919, Victor guaranteed Caruso a yearly salary of \$100,000, plus any additional royalties above that amount. For each record, Caruso received ten percent of the retail sale price.<sup>464</sup>

Although Caruso’s success was the most stunning, many of his operatic colleagues, including Geraldine Farrar, Luisa Tetrazzini, Amelita Galli-Curci, John

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<sup>460</sup> Suisman, *Selling Sounds*, 91, 101-104.

<sup>461</sup> For examples see: Display Ad 2, *The Washington Post* (April 28, 1906): 2; Display Ad 41, *Los Angeles Times* (April 26, 1905): III.

<sup>462</sup> Calvin Child, Letter to Sydney W. Dixon, Gramophone Co. England, May 12, 1919, Louise Homer Papers, New York Public Library, Box 25, Folders 3-7 - Victor Talking Machine Company (contracts, royalties, letters), Folder 3: 1906-1915.

<sup>463</sup> Walsh, “When Tenors Were Gods.”

<sup>464</sup> Letter C. G. Child to Gramophone Co, Louis Homer Papers, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Box 25, Folders 3-7 - Victor Talking Machine Company (contracts, royalties, letters), Folder 4.

McCormack, Titta Ruffo, and Giuseppe de Luca, also recorded for Red Seal Victor, which as in Caruso's case helped to spread their fame throughout the nation and world.<sup>465</sup> At the end of the nineteenth century, acclaimed legitimate singers would not record for the phonograph.<sup>466</sup> In 1906, the Berliner Staatsoper banned its singers from making records for fear that they would wear out their voices. Periodically the press fretted about how damaging recording might be for Caruso. One reporter for the *Los Angeles Times* suggested that the phonograph was murdering Caruso's voice for profit.<sup>467</sup> Caruso, disregarding such fears, first brought prestige to the phonograph, which encouraged more musical figures also to record.<sup>468</sup> Many of the most prominent of these singers were Italians and, as in Caruso's case, Victor promoted the legitimacy and importance of these singers through their advertisements. Via the phonograph, they received fame, wealth, and respect. Unlike the common negative image of Italians in American culture in the early twentieth century, Italian opera singers were highly esteemed and valued.

### **Italian Opera Singers in the Media after Caruso**

After Caruso's death in 1921 there was speculation regarding who would be the next Italian representative of the operatic world. For the most part, Italian lyric tenor Beniamino Gigli assumed Caruso's lighter parts at the Met, while the Italian spinto

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<sup>465</sup> Other important opera singers who recorded for Red Seal Victor include: Mattia Battistini, Alma Gluck, Giovanni Martinelli, Nellie Melba, Beniamino Gigli, Ezio Pinza, Marcella Sembrich, Marcel Journet, Tito Schipa, Emma Calvé, Antonio Scotti, Johanna Gadski, Pasquale Amato, Emma Eames, Emilio de Gorgorza, and Lucrezia Bori. For more see: Samuel Holland Ross, *The Victrola Book of the Opera* (Camden, N. J.: Victor Talking Machine Co., 1919).

<sup>466</sup> "How a Man with an Idea Made Millions in Twelve Years," *New York Times* (August 28, 1910): SM9.  
<sup>467</sup> "Doom Opera Via Phonograph," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (April 26, 1906): 1; Julian Johnson, "Shall We Lose the Caruso Voice?" *Los Angeles Times* (November 27, 1908): I15; Robert Grau, "The Caruso Situation and Our Opera Policy," *Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine*, Vol. LIX, No. 3 (March 1912): 233.

<sup>468</sup> "Caruso Recording Anniversary Observed," *Musical America* (February 1, 1954): 15.

Giovanni Martinelli took on many of his more dramatic roles.<sup>469</sup> The tenors also had successful and prestigious recording careers for Red Seal Victor like Caruso. In addition, they both had important roles to play in the movie industry's transition to sound. From the earliest days of silent film, moviemakers attempted to match moving pictures with sound recorded on phonograph cylinders and records. In 1896 a German studio released a filmed duet from an operetta that had synchronized sound. Eight years later, Thomas Edison, who expressed a belief in the democratizing force of the phonograph, made a version of Wagner's *Parsifal* with accompanying records to be played during the film.<sup>470</sup> Producers attempted to synchronize numerous other short films of operatic scenes with sound on records. Moviemakers made eighty such films in the first decade of the twentieth century alone, although these early efforts were plagued with problems and difficulties. Even a record of Caruso was synchronized to the image of a singer in costume in 1908.<sup>471</sup>

Warner Brothers and its subsidiary Vitaphone led the way in the development of talking pictures. On August 6, 1926, a year before the premiere of the well-publicized "talkie," *The Jazz Singer*, the studio debuted the first feature film with fully synchronized sound effects and a score performed by the New York Philharmonic, *Don Juan*, starring John Barrymore. Some short musical films played before the movie, in order to illustrate

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<sup>469</sup> Caruso and Farkas, *Enrico Caruso: My Father and My Family*; "Opera King is Dead! Long Live -----?" *Chicago Daily Tribune* (August 3, 1921): 3; "Question of Successor to Caruso Stirs World," *Los Angeles Times* (August 3, 1921): 11; "Rich and Poor at Bier Weep for Wonder Singer," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (August 4, 1921): 3; "Martinelli May Succeed Caruso at Metropolitan," *Washington Post* (August 4, 1921): 1; "The Case of Gigli," *New York Times* (April 1, 1923): X5. Gigli resisted such comparisons. He repeatedly told the press: "I don't want to be another Caruso; I just want to be Gigli." Beniamino Gigli, *The Memoirs of Beniamino Gigli* (London: Cassell, 1957), 121. In a letter published in *Musical America*, Gigli elaborated on his feelings: "To speak of Caruso's successor is a sacrilege, profanation of his memory, violation of a tomb sacred to Italy and the entire world." Quoted in Caruso and Farkas, *Enrico Caruso: My Father and My Family*, 344-345.

<sup>470</sup> Richard Fawkes, *Opera on Film* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 2000), 8; Millard, *America on Record*, 2, 4; Marcia J. Citron, *Opera on Screen* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 26.

<sup>471</sup> Fawkes, *Opera on Film*, 9-10, 23.

the artistic quality of the Vitaphone process. The first short subject showed the New York Philharmonic performing the overture to Wagner's opera, *Tannhäuser*. Giovanni Martinelli appeared in the next short singing the aria, "Vesti la giubba," from *I Pagliacci*. Warner Brothers paid him \$25,000 to sing the one song on film. They also hired other Met singers (for much lower salaries), including the sopranos Marion Talley and Anna Case. Between 1926 and 1930, Martinelli made an additional fourteen Vitaphone short films, singing mostly operatic arias and scenes, including numbers Caruso popularized from *Aida*, *Carmen*, *La Juive*, *Martha*, *Il Trovatore*, and *Faust*. The year following Martinelli's sound film debut, Beniamino Gigli also began appearing in Vitaphone shorts singing operatic pieces, including scenes from *Cavalleria Rusticana*, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, and *La Gioconda*. He joined popular Italian baritone, Giuseppe de Luca, in a filmed version of the Pearl Fishers duet and the quartet from *Rigoletto*. De Luca also recorded "Largo al factotum" from *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* on his own. These early talking films of prominent Italian opera singers helped to raise their profile throughout the nation, as they in turn promoted the new hybrid medium.<sup>472</sup>

Italians did not have a lock grip on opera in the first half of the twentieth century; non-Italians, such as Geraldine Farrar, Feodor Chaliapin, Nellie Melba, and later Lawrence Tibbett (who likewise appeared in movies) and Jussi Björling, also enjoyed great success and fame in the opera world. Yet, Italians retained a position of special prominence over the course of the twentieth century. Many of Caruso's contemporaries, including popular baritones Titta Ruffo and Antonio Scotti, continued performing successfully after his death. Another acclaimed singer in the 1920s was Italian-American

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<sup>472</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-36, 40, 219, 225; Roy Liebman, *Vitaphone Films: A Catalogue of the Features and Shorts* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2003), 12, 15-22, 360.



soprano, Rosa Ponselle, who said of the deceased tenor: “Caruso that tremendous human being, he’s really responsible for all I am today.” He had heard her sing and thought she showed great promise. He encouraged Met general manager Giulio Gatti-Casazza to hire her, and the next year she made her debut at the Met in a performance of Verdi’s *La Forza del Destino*. Caruso played her Alvaro, three years before his death. Like Caruso, Ponselle recorded extensively, but they never performed together, since she was under contract to Columbia Records.<sup>473</sup> Not only Caruso and his contemporaries and immediate successors, but later Italian singers such as Licia Albanese, Giuseppe di Stefano, Franco Corelli, Carlo Bergonzi, Mario del Monaco, Renata Tebaldi, Renata Scotto, Mirella Freni, Ettore Bastianini, Tito Gobbi, Piero Cappuccilli, Luciano Pavarotti, and numerous others had lucrative recording careers and became widely known. Italians were not only over represented among opera’s greatest stars; during the 1924-1925 season, sixty-eight of the 105 members of the Met chorus had Italian names.<sup>474</sup>

The success of Italian opera singers in the United States and Italian-Americans’ enduring support of opera sustained the association of opera and Italians after Caruso’s death. In Grace Moore’s 1934 hit film, *One Night of Love*, one Met patron praises Moore’s character, an American soprano. Another operagoer who is unfamiliar with her replies, “You can’t fool me. Opera singers have to be Italian.” This link remained so strong that soon after the United States entered World War II in 1941, President Franklin Roosevelt, when asked if he planned to intern Italian citizens in the United States, replied: “I’m not worried about Italians. They’re just a bunch of opera singers.”<sup>475</sup> Many Americans viewed non-Italian opera stars as somewhat anomalous. On a 1937 radio show

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<sup>473</sup> Bello, “Enrico Caruso: A Centennial Tribute”; Dizikes, *Opera in America*, 408.

<sup>474</sup> John Rosselli, *Singers of Italian Opera* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 207.

<sup>475</sup> Fawkes, *Opera on Film*, 25.

starring Bing Crosby, the most successful popular singer of the day, Irish tenor John McCormack joked with his Irish-American host about this mindset. Encouraging the popular baritone to try his hand at opera, McCormack noted that since he himself succeeded in the opera world, Crosby would not even need to change his name to an Italian one. Some American singers in fact assumed Italian stage names in hopes of furthering their careers. Most prominent among these was Met baritone Richard Bonelli, whose real name was Richard Bunn.<sup>476</sup>

### **The New Caruso and Post-war Americanization**

By the Cold War era, Italians were largely becoming assimilated. No more did opera play such a key part in the vernacular culture of their communities, which were often no longer populated by immigrants and their children, but by their grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Their growing temporal distance from Italy and new dominant discourses that arose during and after World War II lead to Italian-Americans' increased integration into the mainstream culture. The cultural products of this era, including *The Great Caruso*, often stress this type of Americanization. Yet, at the same time, movies continued to associate Italian-Americans with opera. This served as a “memory machine”

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<sup>476</sup> *Ibid.*, 42. This was true in the nineteenth century too. Met bass Frank Nash changed his name to Franco Novara for his opera career. John Rockwell, “The Met Plans Its Centenary,” *New York Times* (June 19, 1983) <http://www.nytimes.com/1983/06/19/arts/the-met-plans-its-centenary.html>; Villella, “Caruso: The Tenor of the Century.” Likewise the Met’s General Manager in the late 1930s and 1940s, Edward Johnson, a Canadian of Irish and Welsh descent, performed as a tenor under the name Edoardo di Giovanni. Fawkes, *Opera on Film*, 42; Victoria Etnier Villamil, *From Johnson’s Kids to Lemonade Opera: The American Classical Singer Comes of Age* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004), 28. Some singers like American tenor Mario Chamlee (born Archer Cholmondeley) changed only their first names to Italian ones. Other American singers kept their birth names while performing in the United States but used Italianized versions in Europe. For example, Charles Hackett became Carlo Hackett and Frederick Jagel went by Federico Jaghelli. Villamil, *From Johnson’s Kids to Lemonade Opera*, 32. This trend was not limited to the English speaking world. Catalán bass, Josep Lluís Moll, took the Italian stage name Fortunio Bonanova. Antoni Nadal, *Estudis sobre el teatre català del segle XX* (L’Abadia de Montserrat, 2005), 46.

of sorts (to borrow William Kenney's term), which heped to keep the recollections of old traditions alive.<sup>477</sup>

The most famous and successful of all opera related films was the 1951 MGM musical *The Great Caruso*, which dealt with themes of operatic acclaim, Italianicity, and assimilation. Enrico Caruso's life and career inspired this loosely biographical picture. His image as the king of opera lingered long after his death. One reporter described the Caruso legend: "After twenty-three years, the world continues its idolatry at the shrine of the great Caruso, tenor of tenors, whose baroque figure was solidly built upon the framework of immensity—enormous voice, electrifying personality, intoxicating aura of omnipotence."<sup>478</sup> The American public's long memory of Caruso, in part, aided in making this film about him a remarkable success. The movie also owed much of its popularity to its star, Mario Lanza, whom the press repeatedly compared to Caruso.<sup>479</sup>

Before he appeared in movies, Lanza, like his idol Caruso, signed a contract to record with RCA. A high-ranking figure in the company flew from New York City to Los Angeles to hear him. The official agreed to pay the tenor a \$3,000 signing bonus, the first time RCA used a payment to entice a singer to sign with the company. Lanza agreed to a

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<sup>477</sup> George Lipsitz also discusses this sort of collective ethnic memory through the mass media in *Time Passages*. George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990).

<sup>478</sup> "Music; The True Legend of Enrico Caruso," *New York Amsterdam News* (January 26, 1946): 7.

<sup>479</sup> "Big Voice in A Flat," *Movie Life* (December 1949), 53, Constance McCormick Collection, Mario Lanza, Cinematic Arts Library, University of Southern California, Volume 1/1, Compiled November 5, 1997; Jim Henaghan, "Wonderful Madman," *Modern Screen* (circa 1950-51), Constance McCormick Collection, Mario Lanza, Cinematic Arts Library, University of Southern California, Volume 1/1, Compiled November 5, 1997; Howard Thompson, "I Fractured 'em," *Motion Picture Magazine*, Vol. 81-82 (September 1951): 44-45; "National Promotion Campaign From Ralph Wheelwright, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios," Jesse L. Lasky Papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, Box 1, Folder 2: THE GREAT CARUSO -- promotional material 1951, 27-30.

ten-year contract with ten per cent royalties guaranteed.<sup>480</sup> By 1950 he had his first million-selling record, “Be My Love,” which he introduced in his second film, *The Toast of New Orleans*. Although ostensibly a popular number, the repeated opening strain of the song was an expanded version of a section of Delilah’s “Mon Coeur” aria from the French opera, *Samson et Dalila*.<sup>481</sup> By the time his best-known film *The Great Caruso* came out, Lanza was one of the top three most successful performers of any genre for RCA. The company mounted one of its biggest advertising campaigns to sell Lanza’s new album based on famous Caruso recordings. A promotional booklet for the film suggested that all music dealers and disc jockeys should be allowed to see the movie in advance “regardless of whether they feature popular or classical music.” The four records that Lanza had in release at the time sold an impressive 45,000 copies a week in the wake of the movie’s popularity.<sup>482</sup> Lanza had also appeared on the radio, including on the Schaeffer Beer program and the Great Moments in Music show, before he had made his first film. He continued to perform on the radio after he became a Hollywood star, even having his own show on CBS. Taking full advantage of the mass media, he later appeared on CBS’s television station.<sup>483</sup>

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<sup>480</sup> Mike Tomkies, “Mario Lanza: His Voice was in One Place...His Soul in Another,” *Motion Picture* (November 1971), Constance McCormick Collection, Mario Lanza, Cinematic Arts Library, University of Southern California, Volume 1/1, Compiled November 5, 1997; Thompson, “I Fractured ‘em,” 65.

<sup>481</sup> Ralph P. Locke, “Constructing the Oriental ‘Other’: Saint-Saëns’s ‘Samson et Dalila,’” *Cambridge Opera Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (November, 1991), 299-300.

<sup>482</sup> Henaghan, “Wonderful Madman”; “National Promotion Campaign From Ralph Wheelwright, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios,” 3-4; Photo caption, *Movie Life* (c. 1951-52), Constance McCormick Collection, Mario Lanza, Cinematic Arts Library, University of Southern California, Volume 1/1, Compiled November 5, 1997.

<sup>483</sup> Henaghan, “Wonderful Madman”; “Life with Lanza”; Thompson, “I Fractured ‘em,” 65; Tomkies, “Mario Lanza: His Voice was in One Place...His Soul in Another.”

*The Great Caruso* became one of the biggest hits of the year.<sup>484</sup> The film even inspired albums of re-released Caruso's recordings that made the late tenor, three decades after his death, the second best selling classical artist of the year (following Lanza himself).<sup>485</sup> Lanza's fame soared to such heights after the movie's release that he was often subject to mob scenes of rowdy fans. At the start of one concert tour, the fire department had to clear out a large crowd of mostly young women trampling merchandise and shoving each other trying to get to Lanza at an autograph signing. In another city on the tour, Lanza's fans broke a window trying to reach him. Later, in Pittsburgh, two girls from the throng of people around Lanza were taken to the hospital for injuries. Lanza described his fans: "They go for your handkerchief. They go for your buttons. They rip at your lapels. They try to kiss you." The police frequently had to control the crowds around the singer.<sup>486</sup>

Not only did *The Great Caruso* make the Italian-American Mario Lanza one of the most popular and acclaimed Hollywood stars of the 1950s, the movie helped to perpetuate the Caruso legend, including his real-life connection with the Italian community. The film focuses on Caruso's roots in Italy and his positive association with Italians and Italian-Americans. Beyond the early scenes of his childhood in Naples, the movie shows him hiring his old friends from Italy to give them jobs and to have them nearby. It also depicts well Italian-Americans' admiration of Caruso, especially in the character of Tullio. These scenes, in particular, touch on some significant aspects of

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<sup>484</sup> Mae Tinee, "Mario Lanza Makes a Big Hit as Caruso; 'THE GREAT CARUSO,'" *Chicago Daily Tribune* (May 7, 1951): B5; Richard Griffith, "Lanza Hit With Public as Caruso," *Los Angeles Times* (May 21, 1951): B9; Roland L. Bessette, *Mario Lanza: Tenor in Exile* (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1999), 109-110; Ken Wlaschin, *Opera on Screen: A Guide to 100 Years of Films and Videos Featuring Operas, Opera Singers and Operettas* (Los Angeles: Beachwood Press, 1997), 227, 282-283.

<sup>485</sup> "New Records," *Time Magazine* (February 18, 1952)  
<<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,822142,00.html>>.

<sup>486</sup> "Million-Dollar Voice."

Caruso's real life, including the devotion and support that he received from the working-class, Italian-American community. The movie, however, contains some deliberate misrepresentations that suggest the tenor had severed his ties to Italy and become an assimilated American by the end of his life. These distortions served the purpose of post-war American democratic ideology. The changes the movie makes to the legendary tenor's history pinpoint some of the shifts in attitudes towards Italians and opera that had taken place since the tenor's death.

Many ethnic communities in the 1950s turned to cultural representations and entertainment to reconnect with their ethnic pasts. This collective ethnic memory manifested and sustained by popular culture provided a way of coping with and legitimizing rapidly spreading post-war suburbanization and Americanization.<sup>487</sup> Stories from popular culture of working-class Italian and Italian-American singers achieving fame and success may have provided viewers with themes reminiscent of their own move from urban poverty in often ethnically segregated neighborhoods to post-war suburban affluence. Popular representations of opera as a part of Italian-American heritage may have played a role in reconnecting Italian-Americans to an ethnic past. On the other hand, post-war movies, like *The Great Caruso* and other Mario Lanza films in particular, primarily promoted the acceptance and integration of Italians within larger white American society. *The Great Caruso* focuses on Caruso's fictionalized transition from Italian to American, as he makes his career at the Met and marries an Anglo-American woman. The character of Tullio in the movie especially highlights this American theme. Tullio takes umbrage at Park Benjamin's accusation that he is just "a stupid foreigner." In the movie he supports and loves Italian opera and Italy's greatest celebrity, Caruso. He

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<sup>487</sup> Lipsitz, *Time Passages*, 39-42.

has not rejected these aspects of his cultural heritage; yet, he also proudly proclaims his American identity when he says of Benjamin, “I’m as good an American as he is.”

Caruso and opera could, the movie suggests, connect Italian-Americans to their heritage, while providing no obstacles to full integration and Americanization. Thus, the film encouraged and promoted the powerful post-war ideologies of Americanization, assimilation, and integration of European immigrant groups.

In the film, Caruso’s career largely becomes Americanized, as other opera houses fade into the background and the Met becomes the center of Caruso’s musical universe. In real life, the Met did become the principle house at which Caruso worked. However, his career varied a great deal more than the movie would indicate. When not singing at the Met, Caruso still performed frequently in the opera houses of Europe and occasionally Latin America. In particular, he appeared at the Teatro Colón in Buenos Aires, a city with a large Italian population. He also performed before large crowds in Mexico and Cuba late in his career after becoming an international celebrity.<sup>488</sup> The film elides these other venues from the story. It also ignores Caruso’s continuing connection to his homeland that endured until the end of his life. During his final illness, Caruso returned to Naples, where he died.<sup>489</sup> The movie indicates that he had long before separated from his birthplace and that he died in New York City, his new home. An early

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<sup>488</sup> Caruso and Farkas, *Enrico Caruso: My Father and My Family*, 232-239, 255; Rosselli, *Singers of Italian Opera*, 189; Greenfeld, *Caruso: An Illustrated Life*, 154-155, 158-161. For example, once in 1919 he sang before a crowd of almost 25,000 people in a bullring in Mexico. Greenfeld, *Caruso: An Illustrated Life*, 155. Mayra Montero wrote a novel loosely based on Caruso’s time in Cuba. Mayra Montero, *The Messenger: A Novel* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2000).

<sup>489</sup> “Caruso Visits Ship; Off To Italy Today,” *New York Times* (May 28, 1921): 9.

script outline stressed, “Caruso was the kind of immigrant who had a fanatical love for America.”<sup>490</sup>

More significant to the story of the fictional Caruso’s Americanization is his marriage to an American wife. In real life as in the film, Caruso’s father-in-law, Park Benjamin, opposed the marriage. Nonetheless, in the movie, Park Benjamin appears to be a stronger obstacle and a more negative character than he was in actuality. By turning Benjamin into a villain, the film makes the uniting of the Italian singer who made good and the daughter of the wealthy Anglo elite a heroic and celebratory event.<sup>491</sup> Early studio synopses of books on which the movie was based elaborated on Benjamin’s objections: “Dorothy was of early American stock, Caruso came from Italian peasants.” Although unblessed by her father, the movie shows their marriage as a happy one.<sup>492</sup> The birth of a daughter, Gloria, solidifies this filmic union. Caruso dotes on his new daughter, as the real Caruso did. However, the emphasis that the film lays on Caruso’s American child comes at the expense of his Italian children, Rodolfo and Enrico, Jr., who were born out of a tempestuous relationship Caruso had with an already married Italian soprano, Ada Giachetti. In the United States, Caruso always referred to her as his wife, and it was not until she left him in 1908 for his chauffeur that the press discovered that they had never really been married. Although the press reported copiously on the relationship and its rancorous dissolution, the movie totally ignores it and the children it produced.<sup>493</sup>

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<sup>490</sup> Sonya Levien, “Outline (THE LIFE OF CARUSO),” September 26, 1949-February 23, 1950, Turner/MGM scripts, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, 11141167.f-G-975.f-975, 115.

<sup>491</sup> “Didn’t Want Caruso For His Son-In-Law,” *New York Times* (August 22, 1918): 11; “Papa Raps Caruso,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (December 1, 1918): A1.

<sup>492</sup> Lydia Remsten, Readers synopses of Dorothy Caruso’s books *Wings of Song* and *Enrico Caruso: His Life and Death*, Folder 1, MGM Collection, The Great Caruso, Archives of Performing Arts, Cinematic Arts Library, University of Southern California.

<sup>493</sup> “Mme. Caruso Elopes,” *Los Angeles Times* (July 5, 1908): 11; “Wife Leaves Caruso?” *New York Times* (August 13, 1908): 1; “Caruso Told His Wife To Go,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (August 14, 1908): 5;



Perhaps unsurprisingly, Caruso's Italian family detested the movie. Enrico, Jr.'s family sued MGM for making it without their consent. Caruso's grandson, Enrico III, explained that the film "gives the impression that Caruso arrived in the U.S. almost an unknown, that America launched him, glorified him and was responsible for his success. The picture denationalizes my grandfather."<sup>494</sup> Although the film focuses attention on Italians, Caruso's Italian family understood that it represented a tale of Americanization and a distortion of history. The real Caruso married an American and spent much of his career in New York, but he never rejected his homeland, kept his Italian citizenship, and often lived outside of the United States. In keeping with the film's pro-American changes, Lanza also stressed to reporters his own Americanism, even saying that he would like to "punch...fancy Italian opera singers" who sneer at Americans. He insisted, "I'm a good one hundred percent American Philadelphia wop and I can sing better than any of them!" One reporter insisted the singer was "exploding" with love of America.<sup>495</sup>

The changing cultural perceptions of Caruso are to some extent intertwined with the shift in the popular image of Italian-Americans over the first half of the twentieth century. Prior to World War I, Italian-Americans principally lived in their own urban,

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"Caruso Very Glad Wife Has Eloped," *New York Times* (August 14, 1908): 1; "Caruso Glad Wife Eloped," *Los Angeles Times* (August 15, 1908): 11; "Caruso Searches in Paris," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (August 23, 1908): 5; "Caruso is Unknown in Paris Crowds," *New York Times* (August 23, 1908): C1; "Leaves Caruso Alone," *Washington Post* (January 29, 1909): 3; "Husband Sues; Names Caruso," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (May 15, 1910): A2; "Caruso A Correspondent," *Washington Post* (June 19, 1910): 6; "Caruso Bares Love Romance," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (July 19, 1910): 1; "Tenor's Tale of Love," *Washington Post* (July 20, 1910): 5; "Mme. Giachetti Held," *New York Times* (January 8, 1911): C4; "Caruso in Tears at Slander Trial," *New York Times* (August 22, 1912): 4; "Tells Plot Against Caruso," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (October 26, 1912): 2; "Prey of Defamers, Asserts Caruso," *New York Times* (October 26, 1912): 6; "Tried to 'Bleed' Caruso," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (October 27, 1912): A1; "Ask Prison Terms For Four In Caruso Defamation Suit," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (October 29, 1912): 14; "Caruso Wins Slander Suit," *Los Angeles Times* (October 29, 1912): 11; "Caruso in Tears Again," *New York Times* (October 29, 1912): 4; "Caruso Wins Suit Against Defamers," *New York Times* (October 30, 1912): 4. Also see: Caruso and Farkas, *Enrico Caruso: My Father and My Family*.

<sup>494</sup> "Caruso v. Caruso," *Time Magazine* (May 5, 1952)

<<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,820815,00.html>>.

<sup>495</sup> Henaghan, "Wonderful Madman."

ethnic enclaves and were chiefly influenced by their own culture. During the war, increasing numbers of Italian-Americans began the process of assimilation. All Italians in the United States military who served during the war automatically received U.S. citizenship. Italian immigrants or sons of Italian immigrants constituted approximately 12% of the United States army during the war. Nonetheless, a backlash against immigrants, especially from Southern and Eastern Europe, occurred in the post-war years, culminating in the Immigration Restriction Act of 1924, which severely limited the levels of Italian immigrants.<sup>496</sup> The dwindling numbers of first-generation immigrants arguably diluted memory of the traditions of the old country. In addition, during the Prohibition era, already established stereotypes of an innate connection between Italians and crime became more pronounced. The stereotype lived on in the popular gangster movies of the 1930s and beyond.

World War II helped to mitigate this negative image. Although Italy, an Axis power, remained an enemy of the United States, most Americans focused their attention on defeating Germany and Japan, which they saw as more serious threats. In the popular culture of the time, the “bad guys” were overwhelmingly either German or Japanese. Ezio Pinza, one of the most famous Italian opera singers of the 1940s, was interned briefly in 1942 because he reportedly had boasted at a dinner party that he was a friend of Mussolini’s. Compared with Japanese-Americans, however, the government interned relatively few Italian-Americans during the war, suggesting their significant integration into the larger American populace by that time.<sup>497</sup>

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<sup>496</sup> Mangione and Morreale, *La Storia*, 340.

<sup>497</sup> Iorizzo and Mondello, *The Italian Americans*, 273; Sarah Goodyear, “When Being Italian was a Crime,” *Village Voice* (April 11, 2000), <<http://www.villagevoice.com/news/0015,goodyear,13994,1.html>>.

Indeed, the popular perception of Italians improved over the course of the war years. Italian-Americans joined the military in large numbers, as they had in World War I. Altogether over half a million Italian-Americans served in the armed forces during the war.<sup>498</sup> Two of the most famous celebrities at the time were also Italian-Americans: singer Frank Sinatra and baseball player Joe DiMaggio.<sup>499</sup> Counterbalancing its depictions of Italian gangsters, the movie industry began to portray ethnic Italians as loyal Americans. During the war years, Hollywood tried to make motion pictures that could unite the nation.<sup>500</sup> War movies often featured multi-ethnic groups of soldiers and sailors, including stock Italian-American characters. When radio reigned as the primary form of popular home entertainment, one show from the 1940s, *Life with Luigi*, highlighted the new concerns of the era. Luigi and his fellow Italians in Chicago struggle to become Americans. They comically, but admirably, study various aspects of American popular culture, hoping to emulate what they see, and they continually reaffirm their patriotism. Luigi repeatedly sings the words: “America I love you. You like a papa to me.”<sup>501</sup>

Italian-American society grew more diverse and Americanized in the post-war years. Even Ezio Pinza, in spite of being interned during the war, found new fame in

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<sup>498</sup> Mangione and Morreale, *La Storia*, 341.

<sup>499</sup> Iorizzo and Mondello, *The Italian Americans*, 276. Although a celebrated sports hero well known across the country, DiMaggio did receive some jeers at games and angry letters after the United States entered the war, until he enlisted in the army in early 1943. After the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, his Italian-American fans quit bringing Italian flags to wave at his games, as they had often previously done. His parents, Italian citizens, had to register as “enemy aliens.” Lawrence Baldassarro, *Beyond DiMaggio: Italian Americans in Baseball* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), 182-183. The classification of all Italian citizens as enemy aliens, however, was short lived. During a congressional committee hearing, a U.S. Senator even criticized the registering of DiMaggio’s parents in this manner. The government reclassified Italians as “friendly aliens” on Columbus Day 1942. Roger Davis, *Concentration Camps North America* (Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing, 1993), 75; Bertjian Verbeek and Giampiero Giacomello, *Italy’s Foreign Policy in the Twenty-First Century* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011), 31.

<sup>500</sup> Marcia Landy, “Movies and the Fate of Genre,” in *American Cinema in the 1940s: Themes and Variations*, ed. Wheeler Winston Dixon (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 95.

<sup>501</sup> Iorizzo and Mondello, *The Italian Americans*, 273, 276-277; Lipsitz, *Time Passages*, 39-75.

*South Pacific* on Broadway and several television appearances. He also starred in the 1951 Hollywood films, *Mr. Imperium* with Lana Turner and *Strictly Dishonorable* with Janet Leigh, as well as appearing with other opera singers in *Carnegie Hall* (1947) and *Tonight We Sing* (1953). MGM's trade publication, *The Lion's Roar*, noted the Italian bass's sex symbol status and general popularity.<sup>502</sup> The trend toward suburbanization and upward mobility led to a breakdown of traditional ethnic ties and communities and amalgamation into larger white society. The polarization of the Cold War also promoted Americanization. In keeping with the new ethos of the times, the Production Code Administration had the word "wop" deleted from script of *The Great Caruso*.<sup>503</sup> As the country vilified the bigotry of the Nazis, many Americans believed they had to show themselves to be more tolerant, accepting many immigrant groups into the mainstream.<sup>504</sup>

*The Great Caruso* was the most popular of a bevy of opera related movies that Hollywood produced from the silent era through the 1950s. Many of the opera singers portrayed onscreen were Italians or Italian-Americans. This association between Italians and opera holds fast, whether one is discussing silent films such as *My Cousin* (1918) starring Caruso or films of more recent decades, including the 1982 comedy *Yes, Giorgio* with famous tenor Luciano Pavarotti or the 1987 comedy *Moonstruck* with popular stars Cher and Nicolas Cage. As with the gangster films of the 1930s, later films also sometimes focused on Italian characters and stereotypes. *The Godfather: Part III*, for

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<sup>502</sup> Fawkes, *Opera on Film*, 229; "METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER -- BIOGRAPHIES -- PLAYERS -- SERIES I: EZIO PINZA," *Lion's Roar*, No. 1213 (1952): 9-10.

<sup>503</sup> Robert Vogel, Letter to Joseph Breen, "The Great Caruso," Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration Records, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, Production Files.

<sup>504</sup> Old stereotypes, however, had not (and still have not) fully died out. Even a year after *The Great Caruso*'s release, one woman wrote to the *Motion Picture Magazine*: "I have a suggestion to make about Mario Lanza. There'll probably be a lot of indignant protests about it, but here it is. Why not have Mario star in a gangster's role? I think he would make a very good gangster." Elizabeth Becknell, "Interesting Letters: Okay, Lanza, Drop the Gun," *Motion Picture Magazine*, Vol. 81-82 (January 1952): 56.

example, released in 1990, conflates two Italian stereotypes: an affinity for crime and opera. Hollywood movies continue to portray opera as part of ethnic Italians' cultural heritage.<sup>505</sup>

The continuing Italian-American connection with opera, in reality and in cultural representations, had reciprocal effects for both the Italian community and for opera's position and meaning in society. Italian-Americans took advantage of the alternative opportunities via the mass media to experience opera, a genre that they considered a part of their vernacular culture and local communities. The Italian relationship with opera complicates ideas of elite control of the genre. The prestige, acceptance, and broad popularity of Italian opera and opera singers, as well as specific cultural messages (as in *The Great Caruso*), eased and encouraged Italians' integration and Americanization. Shifts in society and within ethnic communities over time influenced the history of Italian-Americans' connection to opera. From the early days of the republic, American culture associated Italians with music. Through the middle of the nineteenth century, this perception was largely a positive one. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, many Americans blamed immigrants in part for a perceived cultural disorder that led to the sacralization of culture in reaction.<sup>506</sup> Even after opera largely became sacralized, Italian immigrants and their children and grandchildren continued to attend opera performances and utilize opera in the media, providing an important exception to the dominance of the native-born social elites over opera in the United

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<sup>505</sup> The 1946 Christmas classic, *It's a Wonderful Life*, provides an example of growing sympathetic depictions of Italians in the movies. In the film, the "bad guy," Mr. Potter, disdains local working-class Italians, but the hero, George Bailey, goes out of his way to help the poor Martini family.

<sup>506</sup> Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 171-177.

States. Italians also produced many of opera's most popular singers, including the "Great" Caruso. The Italian community supported their opera singers wholeheartedly and even stood by Caruso during his most controversial moments, and he helped them in return.

The story of opera and its twentieth-century American uses complicate Italian-American history. Caruso came to prominence soon after the rise of celebrity journalism.<sup>507</sup> The fascination that the print media had with him helped to spur his fame. Reports—sometimes gushing—of his preeminence in a respected field elevated him to a prestigious and popular place in American culture, and not just among opera fans. Caruso provided a positive picture of Italians to many Americans, who idolized him as the greatest singer of the day, but his image remained ambiguous and multivalent. The same press that put him on an artistic pedestal sensationalized the monkey house incident and fixated on other scandals and gossip in the tenor's life. The negative aspects of his public image, however, were contrasted and tempered by the prestige and broad popularity of his Red Seal Victor recordings, as well as his reputation for artistic excellence. Caruso's collaboration with Victor was fruitful for both parties. Fred Gaisberg noted, "Caruso's records made the phonograph," while at the same time, "It secured his immortality"<sup>508</sup>

Daniel Boorstin wrote in *The Image*: "The very agency which first makes the celebrity in the long run inevitably destroys him." Although true in many instances, Caruso's example show that gossip and scandals can be tempered by a star's overall image to create a lasting legacy. Perception of talent, unique ability, and justified prestige can, in certain cases, mitigate bad publicity. Although indicative of society's biases, the

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<sup>507</sup> For more on this, see Chapter 2.

<sup>508</sup> Bello, "Enrico Caruso: A Centennial Tribute."

negative coverage of the monkey house incident and the tenor's love life did not seriously damage his reputation. He died one of the most praised and lauded celebrities of any sort in the early twentieth century.<sup>509</sup> In the wake of fame and scandals, Caruso's image both reinforced and challenged important cultural representations of Italians—in his well-publicized life, recorded voice, and enduring, almost mythical legacy.

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<sup>509</sup> Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961, 1987, 2012), 63.

## CHAPTER V

### **Opera's Night at the Movies: Reconstituted Publics and Working-Class Discourses in the Classic Hollywood Era**

Lines of carriages unloaded over 3,000 people at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City on the evening of Monday, October 22, 1883. Even with three entrances on Broadway, 39<sup>th</sup>, and 40<sup>th</sup> Streets, the crush of people was overwhelming and the lines into the new house moved at a snail's pace, giving onlookers ample time to view the fashionable dress and dazzling jewelry of the attendees. The Vanderbilts and the Astors, stockholders in the house, arrived and went to their private boxes. Celebrities like author Henry Irving also entered for the performance. The tickets for this opening night performance were quite expensive by the standards of the day, limiting access for members of the working class. The Met had auctioned off tickets for this inaugural performance. Patrons bid a tremendous \$60 to \$180 for box seats. Orchestra seats sold for \$35 for the best views and \$14.50 for the poorest locations. Even the cheapest seats in the Family Circle in the top balcony sold for an overpriced \$3. The house sold no inexpensive standing room tickets. "Persons of moderate means are forbidden, by the prices of admission, to intrude themselves," one *Washington Post* reporter asserted. "The Temple of Wealth has been opened, formally dedicated to the worship and glorification



of money.” In total, opening night receipts brought in an impressive \$16,000 to \$20,000 for the new company.

At 8:30 the curtain rose on a new production of Gounod’s *Faust*. For most of the night, the audience was lackluster in its response to the performance. One major exception to this coolness came after soprano Cristina Nilsson’s “Jewel Song.” After the aria, the Swedish soprano received a piece of gold jewelry in the shape of a wreath from an audience member. The singer held the box down for the public to see and then sang an encore of the aria to the gold wreath. The audience exploded with appreciation and excitement. Over the next few days the newspapers either celebrated or panned the house’s architecture, complained about its acoustics, and gossiped about the rich and famous in the opening night audience. Most reviewers expressed disappointment with the performance itself. The poor performance, however, was not very significant to many because, as one reviewer described this “social” event: “The audience was apparently more interested in surveying the house and seeing who was there than in listening to the music.” Another reviewer complained that it was hard to hear the voices clearly in the cavernous auditorium, but, he explained, that was no great matter “as those who go to the opera merely for music are an inconsiderable minority.”<sup>510</sup>

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<sup>510</sup> “The Metropolitan Opera House: Auction Sale of the Seats and Boxes for the Opening Night,” *New York Times* (October 13, 1883): 4; “The New Opera-House: First Performance,” *New York Times* (October 23, 1883): 1 [reprinted in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*]; “The Operatic Season Opened by the Rival Companies,” *Washington Post* (October 14, 1883): 3; “Current Comment,” *Washington Post* (October 14, 1883): 4; “The Performance,” *New York Times* (October 23, 1883): 1; “Music: The Metropolitan Opera House,” *The Critic* (October 27, 1883): 88 in *American Periodicals*, 435; “Goings on in Gotham: A new Temple of Wealth,” *Washington Post* (October 28, 1883): 1; “Music: First Nights at the Opera,” *The Independent* (November 1, 1883): 10, in *American Periodicals*, 35. Another opening night reviewer added about the Met’s audience: “The high-dizened, select populace is very apt to wear a bored aspect except when a Patti or a Nilsson or a Schalchi or a Campanini breaks in for moments upon its apathy at the crisis of an aria. The interest in opera is at least three parts social to one part musical.” Montgomery Schuyler, “The Metropolitan Opera-House,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, Vol. 67 (June 1, 1883): 877-889.

Perhaps of all the opera houses erected in the United States, the Metropolitan Opera was the most strongly connected to its local elite families who viewed a night at the opera as primarily a social occasion. Before the founding of the Met, opera had already become a focal point for high society in New York. In the post-Civil War years, the so-called “Knickerbocker aristocracy” of prominent New York families from the old mercantile elite held positions of influence over the New York Academy of Music, the key operatic performance venue in New York City in the post-bellum years prior to the creation of the Met.<sup>511</sup> According to the sensibilities of high society, however, the Academy of Music had a fatal flaw. Opera boxes at the time conferred social standing on their owners, but the Academy did not contain enough prestigious private boxes for all the wealthy families who wanted them. *Nouveau riche* industrialists led by William H. Vanderbilt decided to remedy this situation by building a new opera house that better fit their needs. Members of “old wealth” families soon joined them, illustrating the new domination of the Gilded Age industrialists in New York society.<sup>512</sup>

The Metropolitan Opera was built with its wealthy patrons in mind. It had a lavishly decorated interior, but the designers paid little attention to the quality of the house’s cheapest seats. Only one quarter of the seats in the cheapest section of the house, the Family Circle, had a full view of the stage. More significantly to the investors in the house, however, it contained four box tiers consisting of 122 private boxes, compared to thirty at the Academy of Music. The original stockholding families at the Met first reserved two full tiers of boxes for themselves and then began to plan their agenda for the

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<sup>511</sup> Ronald L. Davis, *A History of Music in American Life, Volume II: The Gilded Years, 1865-1920* (Huntington, NY: Robert Krieger Publishing Co., 1980), 35.

<sup>512</sup> Sven Beckert, *The Monied Metropolis: New York City and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie, 1850-1896* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 247.

new company. Most of the stockholders were merchants, bankers, and Wall Street investors, who each subscribed \$20,000 with no hope of future profit. One reporter at the time insisted that a full quarter of the stockholders were investors who had amassed fortunes without “the rendering of any equivalent to society.” For its first several decades, an association of wealthy box owners ran the Met. The most prestigious row of boxes at the Met was known colloquially as the “Diamond Horseshoe,” and the owners of these boxes held particular power at the opera house. The Met soon grew to be by far the most prominent and influential opera house in the country and influenced larger attitudes about opera throughout the country.<sup>513</sup>

Wealthy Gilded Age elites created prestigious and extravagant institutions, such as opera houses like the Met, in large part for their social function. Unlike the local community opera houses of the nineteenth century that hosted a wide variety of entertainments for all strata of society, prominent urban opera houses like the Met were limited in their potential publics by their high-class reputations, expensive tickets, and limited seating. Wealthy box owners with the aid of the press helped to create an aura of high society, wealth, exclusiveness, and glamour around such a “high-culture” institution as the opera house. The Met did not prohibit poorer people from attending performances, but those who were not well-off had to sacrifice more to afford an opera ticket and sat in the worse seats in the house. Unlike the wealthy box owners, they also had very little influence in the running of the opera house and its artistic and business choices. Motion

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<sup>513</sup> “Opera Stockholders,” *New York Times* (October 21, 1883): 8; Schuyler, 877-889; John Dizikes, *Opera in America: A Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 214-218. Dizikes describes the Diamond Horseshoe as “the thirty-five boxes in the first and most prestigious tier of boxes, the ownership circle constituting, self-proclaimed but unchallenged, the top tier in the social hierarchy of New York City.” Some of the most prominent families represented in the Diamond Horseshoe were the Morgans, the Vanderbilts, the Knickerbockers, and the Astors. *Ibid.*, 284.

pictures and other forms of mass media, however, displayed a different attitude towards opera. Taking the view of opera as entertainment rather than art or social capital, opera movies hailed broader publics than the big city opera house.<sup>514</sup> Hollywood attempted to appeal to audiences from all walks of life and backgrounds in order to maximize attendance and thus profits. Movie tickets were cheaper than tickets at the opera, and movie theaters were far more common than opera companies. Unlike the limited seating at live opera performances, opera on the big screen appeared all across the country, even in suburban and small-town theaters that would rarely see an opera troupe visit. The broader publics that moviemakers intended for their products had little in common with the audiences at the Met and heralded a transition to new social meanings of opera for new groups of people.

Beyond sporadic empirical evidence, specific audiences for all of these numerous opera films are difficult to pinpoint and almost certainly shifted over time. Many opera films, however, are inscribed with certain messages that potentially signify their intended spectators. The category of movie “spectator” developed between 1907 and 1917, a time during which the influence of opera on film was already evident. As Miriam Hansen explains, the shift in moviemakers’ focus toward intended spectators rather than random audiences, “is defined by the elaboration of a mode of narration that makes it possible to anticipate a viewer through particular textual strategies, and thus to standardize empirically diverse and to some extent unpredictable acts of reception.” Hansen further

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<sup>514</sup> As he posited the existence of cultural capital, Bourdieu also argued that social capital represented “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition.” Membership in the small group of elite box holders at the Met conferred a certain level of social capital. Even attendance alone had social value for many, as coverage of the opening night of the Met showed. Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John Richardson (New York: Greenwood), 241-258.

describes spectators as “the hypothetical point of address in filmic discourse” and notes that after the birth of the movie spectator “the moviegoer was effectively invited to assume the position of this ideal spectator created by the film” through “a mode of narration” geared to attract and produce an expected reaction from specific types of viewers.<sup>515</sup> Creators of opera films utilized such textual strategies in attempts to draw certain groups into the movie theaters.

Several discursive themes reoccur frequently throughout opera films. Examining these themes helps to elucidate how spectators of opera films differed from opera house audiences such as those at the Met, as well as how opera was used and viewed differently in the medium of film. The themes of these movies may not have reflected what all audience members or stratified society in general thought, but they are what Hollywood believed the spectators they were targeting would sanction and accept. These inscribed messages frequently focus on working-class themes and characters and at times challenge the highbrow, elite, and upper-class status of opera that was common in the nation’s major opera houses. The working class were the most likely to respond to and identify with such messages. These messages suggest that these movies’ primary intended spectators were members of the working class and those who sympathized with them, illustrating a key distinction between the audiences of opera films and live opera. Opera films often attacked the same people to whom opera companies were most trying to appeal in order to gain financial support. The shift in opera’s intended spectators and, likely, actual empirical audiences provided Americans with an alternative understanding of a putatively high-culture form. They showed that opera could be popular entertainment

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<sup>515</sup> Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 2, 4, 16, 23.

geared towards workers and that it did not have to be the possession of only a few cultural elites separated from the masses.

Michael Denning in his interpretation of the class-oriented political and social natures of dime novels argues: “The contradictions raised and resolved in popular narratives draw their ideological charge from the materials they use, whether or not the individual writer or reader is conscious of this at a particular moment. These materials – genres, conventions, stock characters, uses of language – are all charged with the political content of everyday life.” Denning thus argues that dime novels embody social consciousness and are “contested terrain.” His examination of these books leads him to perceive symbolic class conflict in dime novels. Although white collar workers produced them within the mechanisms and confines of the culture industry, through a form of what Denning terms “ventriloquism,” dime novels still contained the “class accents” of the workers. The producers of these popular, inexpensive books included repeated themes and character types that would ideologically resonate with the working class. They also accented dime novels as working class in the manner in which they marketed them.<sup>516</sup> Steven Ross in his study of the silent-era film industry presents a declension narrative as Hollywood studios pushed working-class filmmakers out of business and limited messages and themes geared toward workers.<sup>517</sup> Opera movies, however, show that Hollywood did continue to make films with working-class themes and resonances well after the 1910s. Even with the larger trend away from movies made by members of the

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<sup>516</sup> Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (New York: Verso, 1987, 1998).

<sup>517</sup> Steven Ross, *Working Class Hollywood: Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

working class, Denning illustrates how the culture industry itself could create products accented by the ethos of the workers.

The formulaic nature of the “classic style” film and Hollywood’s heavy reliance on genres and pre-established conventions, as well as specific repeated narrative strategies intended to appeal to certain audiences, made the movies of the era similar to the earlier dime novel. Many of the messages inscribed in the operatic movies of the early to mid-twentieth century express positive working-class themes, although in an attempt to appeal to broad audiences these movies soften or avoid a full-fledged focus on themes of class conflict or revolt. Studio publicity departments would also sometimes accent these films, or the stars performing in them like Mario Lanza, as working class. These movies intended for mass audiences often attack the highbrow, elite, and upper-class status of opera common in the nation’s major opera houses, and like many dime novels they frequently associate opera with working class heroes, illustrating the unexpected complexities of operatic discourses in American culture.

Analyzing this sort of opera related discourse is necessary for understanding transformations in opera’s publics across times and forms. In his essay “Publics and Counterpublics,” Michael Warner argues that a public is “space of discourse” formed by the discourse itself and, therefore, that “publics do not exist apart from the discourse that addresses them.” As publics are brought together solely by the cultural expression or display in which their members all participate however inattentively, to understand the public for a specific cultural form or text, you must examine the discourse that hailed that public. Publics, however, are not merely imaginary textually created entities. Publics have actual social bases; the use of familiar forms and specific paths for the circulation of

the discourse among actual groups of people is a prerequisite for the creation of publics. These preexisting forms and pathways of circulation limit and select the peoples that are able or likely to become members of any given public. A cultural text can attempt to shape the limits of its circulation via its discourses, idioms, vocabulary, forms, etc. However, individual interpretations of cultural texts are never fully uniform regardless of the manner in which a public is hailed as a supposed singular entity. The process of creating or interpolating publics in conjunction with the individual, often conflicting subjectivities of the members of each public is thus unstable and provides for unexpected results and opportunities.<sup>518</sup> The form and circulation of opera in the movies and other mass media helped to reshape potential publics for opera as a cultural form, providing new openings for different sorts of discourses surrounding opera and new potential reactions to it. Examining the discourses, within their institutional context, that helped to create the publics of opera films and other media can tell us more about the reconstitution of those publics and the reconfiguration of opera's meanings.

### **Pathways of Circulation**

The pathways of circulation—the production, distribution, and exhibition—of the Classic Hollywood opera movie structured the contours and possibilities of opera movie publics at least as much as the discourses of the films themselves. The Classic Hollywood era in movie history roughly corresponds with the flourishing of “modern mass culture” characterized by standardization, social homogenization, Americanization, and perhaps

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<sup>518</sup> Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 67, 72, 87, 91-93, 106, 114-115; Miriam Hansen, “Early Cinema, Late Cinema: Transformations of the Public Sphere,” in *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*, ed. Linda Williams (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 140, 144-146.



foremost Fordist economic models.<sup>519</sup> In keeping with larger trends, the motion picture industry was a key part of this modern mass culture. The so-called “Big Five” American studios, MGM, Paramount, Warner Brothers, Fox, and RKO, dominated the era. They largely controlled not only the domestic markets, but also the worldwide supply and distribution of movies. Each of the studio’s parent companies operated on a vertically integrated business model. These companies owned studios to produce movies, distribution companies, and theater chains for showing their final products. The five major studios owned only around 20% of the movie theaters in the United States, but these constituted around 80% of the nation’s highly profitable first-run theaters. The chains owned by the majors also shared their output so that each film could receive a nationwide release, regardless of where the studio’s theaters were located that produced it. With this collusion, each studio benefited when any of them had a blockbuster hit. The New York City business offices and the chief executive of each studio supervised and made all major decisions, including having the final say about which movies to film.<sup>520</sup>

Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios, the leading producer of opera-oriented musicals, was set up on one of the most successful business models in Hollywood. Marcus Loew, a son of Jewish immigrants who originally ran a chain of Vaudeville houses, founded MGM’s parent company in 1904. He bought Metro Pictures in 1920 and kept it under the control of his vaudeville company. He soon merged Metro with Samuel Goldwyn’s studio and hired Louis B. Mayer to run the new studio, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

Following the lead of Adolph Zukor at Paramount, Loew incorporated and vertically

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<sup>519</sup> Hansen, “Early Cinema, Late Cinema,” 136-138.

<sup>520</sup> Douglas Gomery, *Movie History: A Survey* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1991), 169; Tino Balio, *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 5, 7-8.

integrated his business. The successful distribution chain of theaters owned by MGM, based originally on Loew's vaudeville houses, was overwhelmingly focused around New York City. Approximately half of MGM's theaters were located in the New York City metropolitan area.<sup>521</sup> As the opera capital of the Americas, residents of New York would likely have been more familiar with opera than the average American of the day. Thus, it is not surprising that those movies largely intended for New York audiences should focus more on opera. Tailoring for New York audiences can also be seen in the urban settings of most of these films, including the frequent use of New York City as a movie setting. In 1929 *The Magazine of Wall Street* noted weekly movie attendance was higher in New York City than elsewhere in the country.<sup>522</sup>

Starting in 1924, Nicholas Schenck took control over Loew's and kept a strict watch over MGM and Mayer, limiting the studio boss's control especially in regard to financial matters. Schenck even read and approved individual movie scripts. Second to Mayer, Irving Thalberg had a great deal of creative control as the studio's central producer of the studio. However, after Thalberg had a heart attack in 1932, Mayor created autonomous production units replacing the central-producer system. Other studios soon followed suit, allowing more personal control and involvement of producers focused on a smaller number of films within their own units. This change also promoted the creation of more distinctive genre styles at the different studios.<sup>523</sup> MGM had become the most famous movie studio in Hollywood by the 1930s and was financially the most

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<sup>521</sup> Douglas Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 58; Douglas Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System: A History* (London: British Film Institute, 2005), 99; Gomery, *Movie History: A Survey*, 171-172.

<sup>522</sup> Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System* (2005), 35.

<sup>523</sup> Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System* (2005), 27, 30, 32, 99-102, 104; Gomery, *Movie History: A Survey*, 171-172; Balio, *Grand Design*, 75-76, 187.

successful studio after Paramount. Under Schenck's leadership, MGM became the only studio not to struggle financially or go into debt through the early years of the Depression. Schenck cut back on the number of films the studio produced, he signed his workers to long contracts, and he preferred cheaper sound stages over location shooting. He also rationalized the studio's script writing process, depended on stars to bolster his films, emulated successful genre trends, and diversified the types of movies the studio released. In the early 1930s, MGM had more hit films than any other studio.<sup>524</sup>

MGM's parent company took over a radio station in 1923 and used it to broadcast live shows from Loew's State Theater and to advertise MGM movies. Other Hollywood studios followed suit, and it became common for Hollywood to utilize radio to promote its stars and advertise its films. Zukor bought a 49 percent share in CBS's radio station in 1927 for this purpose (although he had to sale during the Depression). Warner Brothers even owned its own radio manufacturer. At first studios prevented their contract players from performing on the radio, but by the late 1930s they encouraged such appearances as a form of publicity. In 1942, MGM became the first studio to sponsor a radio program, *The Lion's Roar*, on NBC. The studio used the show to advertise its films.<sup>525</sup> Many of the same opera stars who appeared in the movies also performed on the radio, often with the same stage personas and singing the same variety of operatic and popular numbers. These figures typically shifted their shows to television by the 1950s. Several well-known opera singers, including the singing stars of *A Night at the Opera* and *The Great Caruso*, moved seamlessly from operatic and concert stages, the radio, and the big and small

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<sup>524</sup> Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System* (2005), 99, 104; Gomery, *Movie History: A Survey*, 171-172; Balio, *Grand Design*, 98-101.

<sup>525</sup> Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System* (2005), 31, 107-112; Balio, *Grand Design*, 5, 11; Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 276-277.

screens. Success in one venue or medium provided good publicity for other types of performances.

By World War II, all Hollywood studios were showing profits, but MGM reached its all-time high in 1942-1943. Starting in the early 1940s, Schenck started the policy of making fewer but higher quality, expensive films.<sup>526</sup> In 1948 Loew's filed an application for a future television company. After an anti-trust case, the government forced the company to divest itself of its theaters in 1948. Although Schenck kept the case in the courts until 1956, the ruling also prevented him from purchasing a television station, as he had intended earlier. By the late 1940s, the studio first started showing losses, but the company was buoyed again by the success of its Technicolor musicals. By 1953, damaged by the competition from television, the studio again went into the red. The company changed considerably when Arthur Loew took over control from Schenck in late 1955. With the legal issues out of the way, Arthur Loew soon bought partial interest in some television stations and sold the TV rights for hundreds of MGM films.<sup>527</sup>

Movie executives like Nicholas Schenck especially liked to proceed conservatively, attempting to avoid risk where possible. In part, they did this by relying on already tried and tested themes, plots, and styles, as well as providing a wide range of movies in order to cater to diverse tastes. Operatic musicals fit well into this business strategy, as one popular genre among others. Many classic musicals also reflect this ethos of eclecticism on a more micro level. In most (although not all) instances, these movies did not set off opera as elevating or educational; rather, they depicted opera as part of the normal music culture of the times. In a manner reminiscent of mixed nineteenth-century

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<sup>526</sup> MGM budgeted about \$500,000 for each of their major releases. This was about \$150,000 more than the other studios allotted to their big films. Balio, *Grand Design*, 98-101.

<sup>527</sup> Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System* (2005), 107-112.

entertainments, many musicals freely combined the popular and the classical. Rarely would an opera singer appear in a film without singing a popular song, and on many occasions non-operatic singers would add an aria or classical piece to their movie repertoires. As one reviewer succinctly noted after describing the combination of popular and operatic music in one 1946 film, “Music lovers may select their preference.”<sup>528</sup> This tendency towards cultural intermixing grew more pronounced in the early post-war years.<sup>529</sup>

In keeping with the formulaic nature of mass production, Hollywood developed what many scholars term its “classic” style of filmmaking the early 1930s. This style relied heavily on standardized forms and techniques that also structured the limits of the opera film and promoted certain themes and perspectives. Although this new style built on developments from the silent era when feature films first became popular, it also introduced several new aspects to Hollywood filmmaking. Once a plot proved a success, screenwriters typically utilized variations of it over again several times. Some story arcs and themes reappear throughout the Classic Hollywood era, as movies in general became increasingly formulaic. New technologies influenced these changes, including deep focus photography and improved film stock. Editing became more advanced, as small, shifting shots were now often rapidly interspersed. At the same time, movies and movie scenes grew longer. The movies of the era, increasingly filmed in Technicolor, evinced a “soft” style of cinematography with less contrasts and slightly blurred edges for a less realistic

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<sup>528</sup> Bosley Crowther, “‘Two Sisters from Boston,’ Light Film in Which Metro Hands Jimmy Durante Free Rein Is New Attraction at the Capitol,” *New York Times* (June 7, 1946), 16:2.

<sup>529</sup> Marcia Landy writes: “A striking characteristic of the films produced this year [1949] was the eclectic quality of many of the genres, revealing the fluid boundaries between them.” Marcia Landy, “Movies and the Fate of Genre,” in *American Cinema in the 1940s: Themes and Variations*, ed. Wheeler Winston Dixon (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 224.

look. A key characteristic of the classic style was an effort to create self-explanatory films that needed no outside input to comprehend. This “obvious” style highlighted many plot points in a less ambiguous manner than typical today. Moviemakers often strongly cued their publics to react in certain ways to different aspects of their films.

The advent of sound pictures, and especially the introduction of the movie musical, provided filmmakers with new opportunities to appeal to broader audiences through the use of music. Although some initial sound films did not have any background scores, by the early 1930s a new style of composition developed that would dominate the industry for more than two decades. In particular, scores began to use extra-diegetic background music to aid the narrative and add nuance and mood. Music and sound effects could aid the continuity within the story and make plots easier to follow. Scores became more intricate and detailed, as composers and directors now used sound to advance the story and help develop characters more fully. Certain prolific composers, like Max Steiner and Alfred Newman, created this new style through repeated use in their movies. Their scores often included lengthy segments of music in the symphonic style throughout each movie. Background music stressed certain aspects of the plot and smoothed out transitions between scenes. As had been common in silent films, these scores continued to make use of leitmotifs to cue characters, events, places, and moods. The introduction of sound engineers and boom microphones aided in greater sound quality. By 1932 sound engineers began to record film and dialogue tracks separately, which allowed for greater flexibility and experimentation. For the Deanna Durbin movie, *One Hundred Men and a Girl*, Leopold Stokowski worked with eight different tracks for the sound. Important classical composers not only influenced this new style of scoring,

but as in the silent era, some operatic composers also wrote film scores, including Erich Korngold and Aaron Copland. These changes in moviemaking and scoring helped to shape and provide a framework for the filmic discourses to which audiences of the day were exposed.<sup>530</sup>

Market research first became popular soon after the talkies replaced silent films in Hollywood. This key development in the history of mass culture allowed Hollywood to better identify its audiences and their preferences. The flourishing of market research went hand and hand with the growth of the advertisement industry, as the culture industries began to perceive how such research could be used to promote their products in a more accurate manner. One of the most important gauges of American preferences, the Gallup poll, started in 1935. By 1937, the Office of Radio Research began taking telephone surveys of radio listeners with market concerns in mind. One such survey showed that 11.9 per cent of radio users listened to opera, a higher percentage than for several popular shows of the day. By the late 1930s, the Nielsen Company used tapes to record what families listened to on the radio in order to track larger patterns of usage. The company's representatives were even told to check the houses that Nielsen monitored to see whether families owned any of the commodities advertised on the radio.<sup>531</sup> By 1945, one survey showed that 87 per cent of Americans had working radio sets. Other research showed that people using one form of media were more likely to use other forms. The

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<sup>530</sup> Gomery, *Movie History: A Survey*, 189-192; Balio, *Grand Design*, 109-116, 124-125, 128, 135, 137; James Wierzbicki, *Film Music: A History* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 133, 136-139, 140-145, 154-155.

<sup>531</sup> Sarah E. Igo, *The Averaged American: Surveys, Citizens, and the Making of a Mass Public* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 103, 109, 112-113, 116; Susan Douglas, *Listening In: From Amos 'n' Andy and Edward R. Murrow to Wolfman Jack and Howard Stern* (New York: Times Books, 1999), 136-137.

survey showed that radio listeners, for example, were more likely to go to the movies and vice versa.

Unsurprisingly, the movie industry followed the successful lead of radio into market research. The use of preview film showings were an especially popular way of gauging audiences' reactions to major elements in each movie. MGM was the leading Hollywood studio in analyzing its audiences. Irving Thalberg, who produced many of MGM's top hits in the 1930s including *A Night at the Opera*, frequently liked to test audience reactions before a film's release. He would analyze the responses from these pre-release screenings and often had parts of pictures re-shot afterwards based upon audience preferences. One wartime survey of audiences showed that musical comedies were the most popular film genre. On the basis of this report, MGM executives shifted their focus to producing more musical comedies. They used market research more generally to decide how to promote their films. The studio's press books and campaigns, as well as advertisements in magazines, newspapers, and on the radio and television, were based on what research showed would appeal to large numbers of viewers. Studios additionally used exhibitor feedback, opinion polls, fan mail analysis, and theatrical tryouts to gauge audience reactions.<sup>532</sup> Contrary to the case in many opera houses, movie moguls and producers keenly paid attention to what the general public preferred. Even though they retained the final power over what was made and how, popular tastes were more democratically taken into consideration with opera on film.<sup>533</sup>

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<sup>532</sup> Joshua Gamson, *Claims to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 26; Leo A. Handel, *Hollywood Looks at Its Audiences: A Report of Film Audience Research* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1950), 6.

<sup>533</sup> Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, 269-272, 282-285; Balio, *Grand Design*, 75.



Although already starting during the Depression, by the 1940s Hollywood systematically analyzed its audiences. In the 1930s, the working-class remained the single largest group of audience members, as they had been during the silent era, although audiences had become far more diversified by this time through the deliberate efforts of key moviemakers like Griffith and DeMille. By the early 1940s, a slightly larger percentage of the middle class attended the movies than the working class. Many in the upper class attended frequently too.<sup>534</sup> The concerns and priorities of the wealthy tended to be represented either infrequently or negatively in Hollywood's operatic films, perhaps as an attempt to win back some of the medium's declining working-class patronage. Specific audiences for these films, however, are impossible to pinpoint with accuracy. What can be determined with greater assurance is the willingness of audiences to spend money on films with specific types of content, themes, and formats. Although many factors potentially played a role in a movie's success, box-office receipts give some indications as to the public's acceptance of certain filmic discourses.<sup>535</sup> Although not a

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<sup>534</sup> Handel, *Hollywood Looks at Its Audiences*, 104-106; Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, 269-272. By 1939 middle-class whites between the ages of fourteen and forty-five made up the majority of movie audiences. Females attended somewhat more often than males. That year survey takers estimated that 85 million Americans went to the movies each week. Even taking into account that some people went more than once, at least 40 million individuals still saw a movie every week out of a national population of 130 million. Balio, *Grand Design*, 2.

<sup>535</sup> Box-office failure, however, is often a less reliable guide to an audience's receptivity to certain messages, as many of these films were unfortunately poorly made with weak plots largely meant to provide an excuse for the music. Dull stories and shoddy filmmaking likely helped to keep audiences away from some films, regardless of the messages behind the plots. A few examples of reviews (with brief representative quotations) critical of the poor quality of some opera films include: "Every one knows that the story in a musical picture such as this is usually no more than a funnel through which to pour the songs," Bosley Crowther, *The Chocolate Soldier* review, *New York Times* (November 1, 1941): 20:2; "The production at times reaches a deplorable state of high school theatricals," *Rose of the Rancho* review, *Commonweal* (January, 17 1936): 330; "Thus we are left with the music, which anyone can see is the only thing worth serious comment in this more than two-hour film. For the story through which this music is introduced and its performance justified is as hackneyed and maudlin a 'hanger' as ever dripped from a scriptwriter's pen," Bosley Crowther, *Carnegie Hall* review, *New York Times* (May 3, 1947): 10:2; "Whenever the old plot takes water to the point of absolute peril, Mr. Melchior or Miss Powell (and, once, Miss Koshetz) save it with applications of their lungs," Bosley Crowther, *Luxury Liner* review, *New York Times* (September 10, 1948): 19:2; "A weak and spotty story is forgotten amid the splendor of Technicolor

complete explanation for opera's frequent appearance in classic Hollywood cinema, the primary concern of most filmmakers during the golden era of opera in film was moneymaking.<sup>536</sup> Movie studios sometimes proceeded cautiously with opera oriented films, because as one reviewer noted in 1934, grand opera "is not supposed to be box office."<sup>537</sup> When opera films were successful, however, Hollywood listened. While moviemakers also utilized the results of opinion polls and the reactions of preview audiences, a key strategy in their attempt to ascertain what the public wanted was to follow the box-office receipts for their movies and to attempt to repeat any successes.<sup>538</sup> Movies, like *A Night at the Opera* and *The Great Caruso*, that attacked the elitist connotations of opera and configured the genre as ideally "working class" were blockbuster hits. Convinced that these sort of themes appealed to audiences, Hollywood not only repeatedly included these discourses in its (largely standardized) films, the industry also used its publicity mechanisms to promote and "accent" opera movies and stars as working class.

### **A Working-Class Night at the Opera**

In the midst of the opera picture boom of the mid-1930s, the Marx Brothers starred in a hit comedy that incorporates many of the common working-class accented and anti-elitist themes of several opera films. *A Night at the Opera* (1935) on its face seems to be an attack on opera and on the genre of operatic films so popular at the time. It

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and the charm of Victor Herbert's music," American Legion Auxiliary review as qtd. in *Sweathearts* reviews, *Fox West Coast Bulletin* (January 7, 1939); "For while the singing of Jeanette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy is a thing of beauty and among the finest musical experiences the films have to offer, it is also possible to have too much singing and too little story," Jesse Zunser, *Sweathearts* review, *Cue* (December 24, 1938): 47.

<sup>536</sup> Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System* (1986), xi.

<sup>537</sup> "Cinema Success Story," *New York Times* (April 14, 1935): X4.

<sup>538</sup> Handel, *Hollywood Looks at Its Audiences*, 6; Gamson, *Claims to Fame*, 26.

is also a prime example of the opera movie itself. Although a comedy, it contains a small segment from Leoncavallo's *I Pagliacci* and numerous scenes from Verdi's *Il Trovatore*. The screenwriters included most of the key numbers and avoided the lesser-known material from *Il Trovatore*, indicating that they did not intend the music to be mere background noise. The film's creators chose musical pieces, such as the "Anvil Chorus," "Miserere," "Stride la vampa," and "Di quella pira," that would have the broadest appeal among movie audiences, as they had time and again among opera audiences.

*A Night at the Opera*, the Marx Brothers' first film at MGM after a string of financial failures at Paramount, was the biggest box-office success of their careers. It grossed double the receipts of their earlier hit film, *Duck Soup* (1933).<sup>539</sup> The movie received tremendous reviews. Mark Van Doren in the *Nation* described public reactions to the film: "I think I have never seen an audience laugh so long and so hard."<sup>540</sup> Some of the reviews specifically applauded the music in the movie. One *Variety* reviewer hailed Jones' "corking tenor" voice. "Sandwiched between the mad pranks of Groucho, Chico, and Harpo," another reviewer for the *Motion Picture Magazine* noted, "are a number of operatic selections and non-classical songs, which are exceptionally well rendered by Kitty Carlisle—who looks like a future star—and Allan Jones." The writer especially singled out the "prison song from *Il Trovatore*" for praise. The official press book for the film also focused attention on the singers, praising both Carlisle and Jones and the romantic plot of the film. It also insisted that the opera in the movie was as thrilling as the comedy was funny. The press book included other articles specifically on Kitty Carlisle

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<sup>539</sup> Balio, *Grand Design*, 267.

<sup>540</sup> Mark Van Doren, *A Night at the Opera* review, *Nation* (January 1, 1936): 28. Also one trade paper noted at the time that *A Night at the Opera* "probably will go down in history as the best the brothers have contributed to the screen." *A Night at the Opera* review, *Film Curb* (November 1, 1935): 14.

and Alan Jones. In trying to mold the public images of these young singers, these articles stressed Jones' coal miner background and Carlisle's preference for an American movie career to European operatic success. Referencing potential audiences, one reporter noted the film's appropriateness for "a class or mass clientele."<sup>541</sup>

Both the moviemakers and the press attributed much of this success to the largely unprecedented road-tour tryout of the script before filming began. The Marx Brothers toured the country with their co-stars Allan Jones, Kitty Carlisle, mezzo-soprano Olga Dane, and Marx Brothers regular supporting player, Margaret DuMont. The scriptwriters, Morrie Ryskind and George S. Kaufman, accompanied them on the tour. They waited in the wings watching audience reactions to each line and made numerous alterations in the script. The tour followed an old vaudeville circuit, playing several shows a day in vaudeville houses that had been converted into movie theaters. As they performed in movie theaters, audiences for their stage show would probably have resembled audiences for the final film. The movie received a remarkable amount of audience input before its creation and likely reflected the attitudes of sizable segments of the populace at the time. The press book for the movie especially highlighted this innovative live honing process for the film, which it claimed was "something entirely new."<sup>542</sup>

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<sup>541</sup> "Marx Bros. Reach Zenith Of Their Comedy Career In 'Night at the Opera,'" "She Renounced Society for Acting Career," and "He Quarreled with the Great Madame Melba," *A Night at the Opera* press book, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, Core Collection, "A Night at the Opera" file (microfiche); "A Night at the Opera--AAAA," *Motion Picture Magazine*, Vol. 49-50 (1935-36) (January 1936): 40-41; *A Night at the Opera* review, *Film Daily* (October 17, 1935), "A Night at the Opera," Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration Records, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, Production Files, Clippings. The reviews for the film were overall very positive.

<sup>542</sup> "Marx Brothers Tested Picture on the 'Road,'" *A Night at the Opera* press book, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, Core Collection, "A Night at the Opera" file (microfiche); "McCarthy, Hollywood," *MD (?) Herald*, "A Night at the Opera," Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration Records, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, Production Files, Clippings; Harry L. Guss, "Marx Bros.' New Stage Tryout Idea of Film's Scenes: Timing Laughs," *Variety* (April 17, 1935), "A Night at the Opera," Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration Records, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, Production Files; Simon Louvish, *Monkey Business: The Lives and*

The Marx Brothers had become famous at Paramount for their style of “anarchist comedy,” characterized by attacks on the social order and a fragmented plot narrative. The brothers had assimilated much of the style of zany slapstick silent films, especially Mack Sennett’s Keystone Cop comedies, and combined that with the disjointed, sketch-oriented format of vaudeville, where they had begun their careers. They carried much of this anti-authority, slapstick ethos with them when they moved to MGM. *A Night at the Opera* was their first film for their new studio. MGM producer Irving Thalberg added a love plot between Kitty Carlisle and Allan Jones and reduced the number of gags in the film, but he did not alter the Marxes’ chaotic antics and the basic attitude of their typical storylines for *A Night at the Opera*. Their first two films, *The Cocoanuts* and *Animal Crackers*, as examples of their style and attitude, contained mocking attacks on the rich. Their most successful film prior to *A Night at the Opera*, *Duck Soup*, made fun of the government and military. Elites and authority figures of all types were common targets for the Marx Brothers.<sup>543</sup>

In *A Night at the Opera* the Marx Brothers help a young tenor find fame on the operatic stage and unite with a soprano he loves, while wreaking havoc in the process. The main victims of the movie’s parody and ridicule are Mrs. Claypool, a society matron, Rudolfo Lassparri, a temperamental tenor, and the German impresario Herman Gottlieb. Claypool supports the opera, not out of a love of music but as an entrée into high society.

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*Legends of The Marx Brothers* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 1999), 288; Douglas W. Churchill, “News and Gossip from Hollywood: The Marxes as Guinea Pigs for a Stage-Screen Experiment—Recall From Location—Note on ‘The March of Time,’” *New York Times* (October 20, 1935B); “Plucking a Few Notes from Harpo,” *New York Times* (November 17, 1935A). Music was also tested during this tryout stage for *A Night at the Opera*: “In ‘A Night at the Opera’ the principal songsters were Allan Jones and Kitty Carlisle, who tried out one number for three weeks before deciding to cast it overboard. In its place was substituted a new piece called ‘Alone,’ which shortly afterward became one of the song hits of the nation.” “A Marxian Experiment: Groucho, Harpo and Chico, Three Insane Scientists, Test Their Gags,” *New York Times* (July 26, 1936): X4.

<sup>543</sup> Balio, *Grand Design*, 263, 267; Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, 181-184.

Gottlieb pays inordinate attention to Mrs. Claypool merely to get her money to support his opera house. From the opening scene, Mrs. Claypool's primary concern is clear. She chides Groucho Marx's character Otis P. Driftwood: "Three months ago you promised to put me into society. In all that time, you've done nothing but draw a handsome salary." In a smart comeback, Driftwood replies with a reference to the ongoing Great Depression, "You think that's nothing, huh? How many men do you suppose are drawing a handsome salary nowadays?" The audience is cued to laugh at rich Mrs. Claypool's pretensions and at Groucho taking advantage of those pretensions.

However flippant he may act, Driftwood has an almost surefire solution to introduce Mrs. Claypool into society. He convinces her to give \$200,000 to the New York Opera Company, which he assures her will get her into society.<sup>544</sup> Herman Gottlieb, the director of the New York Opera Company, soon joins Driftwood and Mrs. Claypool. The editor of the annotated film script of *A Night at the Opera* describes Gottlieb upon his entrance as "an overwhelmingly pompous man, dressed in tails and white tie, with a goatee."<sup>545</sup> Gottlieb's formality comes under attack almost immediately, as he and Driftwood greet each other by repeatedly saying each other's name and bowing to each other in a ridiculous and exaggerated manner. Driftwood mentions the \$200,000 that Gottlieb wants from Mrs. Claypool for his opera company. As if to accentuate his belief in the foolishness of donating money to opera companies, Driftwood follows this by

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<sup>544</sup> The prestigious New York Opera Company, originally called the Manhattan Opera Company in an early sketch for the movie, is clearly meant to be a parody of the Metropolitan Opera Company. The expected association between the fictitious and real opera companies was obvious enough that one reviewer mistakenly referred to the movie's opera company as the Metropolitan. General Federation of Women's Clubs, *A Night at the Opera* review, *Motion Picture Review Digest*, Vol. 1 (March 30, 1936). The fictional opera company is intended to have as much social baggage as the real Metropolitan, if not exaggeratedly more.

<sup>545</sup> George S. Kaufman, Morrie Ryskind, and James Kevin McGuinness, *A Night at the Opera* (film script) (New York: Viking Press, 1935, 1962), 102.

warning Gottlieb, “And you better make it plausible, because, incredible as it may seem, Mrs. Claypool isn’t as big a sap as she looks.” Gottlieb does indeed make his request for money plausible, playing on her desires to be a success in New York’s high society.

Driftwood assures her that he will use her money to sign Rudolfo Lassparri, “the greatest tenor since Caruso.” After Lassparri is successful, he tells her, “All New York will be at your feet.”

In addition to lampooning opera’s position in upper-class elite society, the movie draws upon the stereotype of the temperamental, egotistic diva-like or “prima donna” behavior of opera singers. These types of singers in the movies typically display a sense of arrogance and superiority over working-class characters, tying in with the view of opera as an elevated and high-status art form. Achieving fame in a prestigious art and having wealthy patrons supporting them appear to inflate their egos and encourage their outbursts. Such opera singer stereotypes typically revolve around sopranos and tenors. Rudolfo Lassparri displays the pompous and volatile nature of the stereotypical tenor. Beyond this, he is even physically violent, a cue that he is the villain of the story. Lassparri arrives at his dressing room back stage in an Italian opera house to find Harpo Marx’s character, Tomasso, wearing several opera costumes, one on top of the other. Angered by this, Lassparri begins to beat Tomasso, a typical Harpo Marx mute character, known for his silly and bizarre behavior. One scholar has likened this violence against Harpo’s character as “the moral equivalent of taking candy from a baby.”<sup>546</sup> To reinforce this negative image of Lassparri, the tenor stops whipping Tomasso only when a soprano whom he likes, Rosa, is watching. Once Tomasso returns to Lassparri’s dressing room,

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<sup>546</sup> Lawrence Kramer, “The Singing Salami: Unsystematic Reflections on the Marx Brothers’ *A Night at the Opera*,” in *A Night in at the Opera: Media Representations of Opera*, ed. Jeremy Tambling, 253-265 (London: John Libbey, 1994), 260.

the tenor's false new friendliness is revealed as a sham, as Rosa and the audience can hear the renewed sounds of Lassparri hitting Tomasso yet again. Thus, later on when Tomasso's hits Lassparri, repeatedly knocking him out, his actions seem justified by Lassparri's own violence. As if his violence is not distasteful enough, Lassparri goes through the entire film with a scornful and overbearing attitude towards all around him.<sup>547</sup>

The movie does not, however, condemn opera singers in general. All that Lassparri is, the movie's other tenor, Riccardo Baroni, is not. Riccardo is cheery and lighthearted and displays none of Lassparri's pomposity. Unlike the acclaimed and successful Lassparri, Riccardo is a poor member of the chorus, who is looking for his big break into stardom. Early in the movie, via Chico Marx's usual stereotypical Italian immigrant character, here named Fiorello, the audience learns that Riccardo is actually the better singer of the two tenors. The moviemakers juxtaposed the bad Lassparri and the good Riccardo in such a way that encourages the audience to side with Riccardo. Thus, it only seems proper that the film should end with Lassparri's downfall and Riccardo's success. Driftwood and his companions Tomasso and Fiorello destroy an opera performance at the New York Opera Company with their outrageous antics. Fittingly, the opera that they decimate is Verdi's *Il Trovatore*, long considered one of the most ridiculous and irrational of all operas.<sup>548</sup> Fiorello and Driftwood kidnap Lassparri in the middle of his key aria. Hoping to save the performance, Gottlieb begs Riccardo to

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<sup>547</sup> The Production Code Administration records indicate that at least one foreign country (Latvia) objected to Lassparri's onscreen violence. The Italian government, in particular, expressed disapproval of the way in which the movie portrayed Lassparri and the other Italian characters. The Breen Office censorship files record: "The release held up by objection of Italian Government that it made fun of the Italian people. These objections were later withdrawn." "A Night at the Opera," March 13, 1936 and May 16, 1938, Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration Records, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, Production Files.

<sup>548</sup> Lawrence Kramer, "Glottis Envy: The Marx Brothers' A Night at the Opera," in *Musical Meaning* (Berkeley, CA: University Of California Press, 2002), 137, quoting Stanley Cavell.



take Lassparri's place. Riccardo and his soprano girlfriend Rosa sing the "Miserere" duet to an immense ovation and then encore the number. Finally, Riccardo is a big success in the opera world.

Riccardo and Rosa's duet is the first instance when the film presents any part of the opera in its normal form without the hilariously destructive interventions of the Marx Brothers. Not every viewer of the film appreciates this happy ending. Wes D. Gehring calls the film "disturbing" because it puts "a rational cause above their [the Marx Brothers'] normal allegiance to pure comic anarchy." "For instance," he continues, "while the film is a delight when it both physically and philosophically undercuts the pomposity of high art (opera), there is a jarring inconsistency, a comic hypocrisy, about the Marxes suddenly allowing the traditional opera production to continue after the right players have been substituted."<sup>549</sup> This is correct only in so far as no distinction is made between "the pomposity of high art" and the art itself.

An early partial draft of the screenplay especially stresses the point that opera can be for everyone and need not be pompous high art. In this short draft, the movie begins in Milan right before a performance of Leoncavallo's *I Pagliacci* at the prestigious La Scala opera house. The opening shots form a montage of various people singing, humming, or playing an operatic aria, presumably "Vesti la giubba" from *I Pagliacci*, which was to play during the initial credits for the film. The script begins with a shot of a street cleaner in "one of the humbler sections of Milan" energetically singing part of *Pagliacci* and then showing off his ticket for the "highest gallery" at the opera that night to a shopkeeper. The shopkeeper then displays his fifteen opera tickets as his numerous children also come in singing. A young captain in the army picks up the shopkeeper's aria, then a gentleman

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<sup>549</sup> Wes D. Gehring, *The Marx Brothers: A Bio-Bibliography* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), 73.

in formal clothes in an “exclusive residential district” hums the aria gently, followed by softly humming young priests. In a restaurant, a piano player takes up the music. The montage ends with the joke that the restaurant is unexpectedly a Chinese restaurant, rather than an Italian one. The story soon moves to the opera house, where the script notes the “poorer, shabbier crowd” at the gallery entrance is even happier than the important looking people at the main entrance. After Lassparri’s big aria, shots of the audience’s “various representative groups” show everybody enthusiastically acclaiming his performance. In this version of operatic society, opera belongs to all different strata of people, but perhaps to the poor people in the gallery foremost for their greater enthusiasm.<sup>550</sup>

Although many have interpreted *A Night at the Opera* as an attack on opera, it is more a critique of the social world constructed in some of the more prominent opera houses rather than opera as an art form. The movie attacks opera only when it is under the control of the Gottliebs, the Claypools, and the Lassparris. By the movie’s end, the Marx Brothers have humiliated and abused Gottlieb, as well as forced him to yield his power over the opera to them and to Riccardo. Although not removed from his position, Gottlieb can no longer bow to the desires of his pompous tenor or his rich patron aspiring to high society. More dramatically, Riccardo’s success destroys Lassparri, who attempts to return to the stage to continue the performance after Riccardo and Rosa’s duet. Instead of welcoming him, the crowd boos him off the stage. Since Mrs. Claypool’s money brought Lassparri to the New York Opera Company, his rebuke is in a way also her rebuke. The movie no longer ridicules opera once Riccardo and Rosa are successes, not because of an

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<sup>550</sup> “A NIGHT AT THE OPERA -- script 1935 (partial script),” (May 21, 1935), Jules Furthman Papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, Box 4, Folder 16.

inconsistency in the plot, but because the film is not primarily ridiculing opera but the Gottliebs, the Claypools, and the Lassparris of the opera world. *A Night at the Opera* suggests that opera must be separated from pompous cultural elites and given to unpretentious working-class characters like Riccardo.

### **The Bobby-Soxers' Caruso and Post-War Opera Discourses**

Many of the themes in *A Night at the Opera* are not unique to that film. Other movies from the 1930s through 1950s also address the socio-economic aspects of opera and shed light on societal attitudes toward the cultural form. MGM's 1949 hit musical, *That Midnight Kiss*, shares some key themes with the Depression-era *A Night at the Opera*. Both movies juxtapose a "good" tenor and a "bad" tenor. The hero of *That Midnight Kiss* is an Italian-American truck driver, Johnny Donnetti (played by Mario Lanza), who has a phenomenal voice. By the end of the film, in a move similar to Riccardo's replacement of Lassparri, Donnetti's gets his first big break by replacing a petulant, arrogant tenor named Guido Betelli, whom one reviewer referred to as "a fat tenor full of Italian temperament" and another called a "caricature of the traditional operatic tenor."<sup>551</sup> Betelli is more a parody of the worst sort of foolish and volatile operatic tenor than an outright villain such as Lassparri. Instead of being physically violent with other people, Betelli destroys inanimate objects and is easily tricked into doing things that are not in his best interest. He is vain and continually sprays his throat

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<sup>551</sup> "That Midnight Kiss," *Photoplay* (circa 1949-50), Constance McCormick Collection, Mario Lanza, Cinematic Arts Library, University of Southern California, Volume 1/1, Compiled November 5, 1997; "That Midnight Kiss" review, *Motion Picture Daily* (August 25, 1949), Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration Records, *That Midnight Kiss*, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, Production Files, Clippings.

with an atomizer. The contrasts between Betelli and Johnny Donetti help to solidify Johnny representation as the down-to-earth, working-class hero of the movie.

As with Lassparri, a society matron hires Betelli on his reputation as a great tenor, but he turns out to be more buffoonish than impressive. The society woman, Abigail Barrett, played by Ethel Barrymore, began a local symphony orchestra, which (as an MGM script synopsis notes) she “rules like a benevolent despot.” Another official synopsis describes her as “a figure of haughty pride,” whom José Iturbi,<sup>552</sup> the head conductor of her orchestra, considers a “selfish, self-opinionated, dogmatic woman who believes that money can buy everything.”<sup>553</sup> She pulls Iturbi out of a rehearsal in order to proclaim her intension to start a new opera company in Philadelphia in order to feature her soprano granddaughter Prudence, played by musical star Kathryn Grayson. Everything appears to go according to this wealthy matron’s plans, except that Prudence finds it difficult to sing a love duet with such a ridiculous figure as Betelli. According to the screenplay, Betelli is “built along traditional lines, weighs two hundred and seventy-two pounds, and has huge, pink jowls.”<sup>554</sup> At a rehearsal, when they sing the “Love Duet” from *Lucia di Lammermoor* together, Prudence refuses to look at Betelli for fear of laughing at him.

The tenor is greatly affront by this, declaring in a fake Italian accent: “I am-a Betelli. You are nobody. You should-a kiss Betelli’s hand that he stands on da stage-a wid you when

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<sup>552</sup> The filmmakers had originally hoped to hire Eugene Ormandy, the head of the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra, for this role. They eventually settled on Iturbi who was best known as a pianist but who also conducted. Iturbi had already appeared in several MGM musicals as himself by this point. Sonya Levien and Tamara Hovey, “‘This Summer is Yours’ Treatment,” October 22, 1947, MGM Collection, That Midnight Kiss, Archives of Performing Arts, Cinematic Arts Library, University of Southern California, Folder 1 of 5.

<sup>553</sup> Frances B. Kopp, “‘This Summer is Yours’ Complete Okay Script Synopsis,” January 6, 1949, MGM Collection, That Midnight Kiss, Archives of Performing Arts, Cinematic Arts Library, University of Southern California, 1; Frances B. Kopp, “‘This Summer is Yours’ Screenplay Synopsis,” October 27, 1948, MGM Collection, That Midnight Kiss, Archives of Performing Arts, Cinematic Arts Library, University of Southern California, 2, 8.

<sup>554</sup> Kopp, “This Summer is Yours -- Screenplay Synopsis,” 3.

you sing.” Later he has a childish fit when a nearby ambulance makes noise when he is about to sing.

In stark contrast to Betelli, Johnny is portrayed without the usual stereotypes about tenors. He appears to be a talented and hardworking young man. As in *A Night at the Opera*, the movie is structured so that audiences are supposed to root for him to succeed. *A Night at the Opera* stresses Riccardo’s lowly status as a chorus member by the way in which key characters, such as Gottlieb and Lassparri, ignore or disdain him. The movie also emphasizes his poverty and that of his friends. Riccardo cannot afford ship fare to New York. He stows away onboard instead, along with his poor friends Tomasso (whom Lassparri has fired) and Fiorello (who had announced earlier, “I don’t work any place”). Although *That Midnight Kiss* does not portray Johnny Donnetti as impoverished or hungry, it does highlight his working-class background. We see Johnny delivering items in his truck, as well as working with his fellow drivers at the depot. This aspect of his life directly ties in with opera. His working-class associates encourage his singing ambitions, and it is at the trucking depot that Johnny auditions for José Iturbi by singing a verse of “Una furtiva lagrima” from Donizetti’s *L’elisir d’amore*. An impressed Iturbi offers Johnny a job, as all his truck driving friends excitedly congratulate him. One outline by the screenwriter notes: “The boys are a little in awe of Johnny when they hear he’s to be starred in the opera.”<sup>555</sup> For the time being, Johnny continues his work as a truck driver. He even learns the aria “Celeste Aida” while making deliveries.

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<sup>555</sup> Bruce Manning, ““This Summer is Yours’ Comp. Outline,” August 21, 1948, MGM Collection, *That Midnight Kiss*, Archives of Performing Arts, Cinematic Arts Library, University of Southern California, Folder 3 of 5, 3. In this early scenario, the truck drivers even hock their trucks in order to support Johnny’s operatic career. As the script became simplified in later versions, this plot development disappeared. *Ibid.*, 7.

When Johnny Donnetti receives rave reviews after his debut concert, Betelli becomes very upset to the point of knocking newspapers out of people's hands. When Betelli next sings with Prudence, he keeps clearing his throat and testing his voice with his ear cupped while she is singing. He has a tantrum when she still will not look lovingly at him while they sing together. Iturbi becomes so flabbergasted with the tenor's treatment of Prudence that he stops conducting and simply leaves the rehearsal. Betelli then resigns after he destroys his dressing room.<sup>556</sup> Johnny quickly replaces Betelli to the joy of Prudence, and the movie shows a short montage of the two singing different operatic numbers together.<sup>557</sup> However, soon complications from their love life cause Johnny to quit. Betelli returns, but he too soon quits again, and to Prudence's surprise Johnny returns to perform in the opera's premiere. They triumphantly reunite both personally and professionally.

While not as radical or zany as *A Night at the Opera*, this movie nonetheless takes opera out of the hands of the ridiculous and pompous tenor and places it in the hands of the deserving working-class singer. *That Midnight Kiss* suggests to its viewers that opera does not have to be just for the wealthy and prestigious, but can belong to a variety of people including workers. Unlike in *A Night at the Opera*, however, those in power in the opera world still retain a large part of that power at the end of the movie. They open the

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<sup>556</sup> In an earlier version of the scenario, both the tenor and conductor resign at the same time. In the final film, the conductor acts with more silent dignity, while Betelli resigns in a much more buffoonish way. Kopp, "This Summer is Yours -- Screenplay Synopsis," 7.

<sup>557</sup> The movie contains a great deal of music and a real variety of different musical genres. In addition to Lanza's operatic numbers, Grayson is given a solo of "Caro Nome" to sing from Verdi's *Rigoletto*. Lanza also sings the Neapolitan classic, "Santa Lucia," and Jerome Kern's popular standard, "They Didn't Believe Me." José Iturbi, then a bigger name than Lanza, played several piano pieces by Tchaikovsky, Chopin, Liszt, and others, and conducted an excerpt from the Overture to Rossini's opera, *Semiramide*. Some of the popular songs in the movie also had classical roots. The Lanza-Grayson duet, "Love Will Be Music," was based on a melody from Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony. "One Love of Mine" also utilized a Tchaikovsky tune. "Prod. 1443, THAT MIDNIGHT KISS, Pre-recordings," MGM Collection, That Midnight Kiss, Archives of Performing Arts, Cinematic Arts Library, University of Southern California.

doors of opera wider, allowing more diversity into their world, rather than giving up their power. At the end of the film, the benevolent but controlling society matron Abigail Barrett still dictates over the artistic scene in Philadelphia, as she did at the film's start.<sup>558</sup>

*That Midnight Kiss* received a lot of publicity, especially focused on introducing Mario Lanza to the public and drawing parallels between his life and his movie character. Articles also stressed Lanza's popularity among young people, referring to him as "The Teen-Ager's Tenor" and the "Bobby-Soxer's Caruso." Nonetheless, in one early profile of Lanza, the writer expressed the fear of finding "a condescending artiste stewing in his own magnificence," but was relieved when he did not.<sup>559</sup> To combat such images, MGM's publicity in particular stressed the singer's working-class background in Philadelphia, the same city in which the movie is set. The studio publicized the story that Lanza had worked as a truck driver in the city, when one day he had to deliver a piano to the Philadelphia Academy of Music while conductor Serge Koussevitzky was rehearsing a concert. Taking advantage of the opportunity, the unknown singer then supposedly sang for the surprised conductor. Koussevitzky reputedly threw his arms around the young tenor and proclaimed: "Here is a truly great voice." Even as part of the publicity for his later film *The Great Caruso*, the studio reused this "Cinderella" story of Lanza's discovery as a piano mover. Lanza later responded to a journalist's query about the veracity of this story: "Hell! I was never a piano mover. Nor was I a truck driver. That

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<sup>558</sup> This distinction may be due to the differing attitudes toward elites during the Great Depression and the Cold War era, when national unity and lack of dissent were more dominant attitudes.

<sup>559</sup> Jim Henaghan, "Wonderful Madman," *Modern Screen* (circa 1950-51), Constance McCormick Collection, Mario Lanza, Cinematic Arts Library, University of Southern California, Volume 1/1, Compiled November 5, 1997.

was all crap publicity!”<sup>560</sup> Instead, he had been a professionally trained singer who auditioned for Koussevitzky in his dressing room after a performance.<sup>561</sup>

The success of *That Midnight Kiss* induced MGM to star Lanza in more opera related films. These new films were more elaborate and contained more numerous operatic segments. In his second film, *The Toast of New Orleans*, Lanza played a poor, early twentieth-century Louisiana fisherman named Pepe, who is discovered by a New Orleans opera impresario and his star soprano, played by David Niven and Kathryn Grayson, respectively. In his native bayou, Pepe sings songs like the “Tina Lina,” a typical MGM musical number that atypically for Lanza contained choreographed dancing. As soon as Pepe arrives in New Orleans, he goes to a fine restaurant in garish clothes and offers to sing “Be My Love,” a popular number that soon became Lanza’s biggest hit. Once Pepe starts work at the New Orleans Opera, however, a music instructor teaches him arias especially popular at that time, including the “Flower Song” from *Carmen*, “O Paradiso,” and “M’appari.” Grayson’s character, Suzette, performs a couple of French bravura arias, and together they sing the “Brindisi” from *La Traviata*. Pepe shows great promise, but Suzette is horrified by his poor manners. He has a tutor to teach

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<sup>560</sup> Such fabrications were commonplace in Hollywood’s celebrity building publicity machine. Publicity departments frequently attempted to mold the image of a star’s private life to match characteristics from his or her onscreen characters, as they did with Lanza and his character in *That Midnight Kiss*. Gamson, *Claims to Fame*, 26, 75-78.

<sup>561</sup> Frank Eng, *Daily News* (Los Angeles) (January 14, 1949), Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, Core Collection, Clippings for *That Midnight Kiss*; “National Promotion Campaign From Ralph Wheelwright, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios,” THE GREAT CARUSO -- promotional material 1951, Jesse L. Lasky Papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, Box 1, Folder 2; Robert Osborne, “Packed Lanza tribute sings legend’s praises,” *Hollywood Reporter* (January 18, 2005), Constance McCormick Collection, Mario Lanza, Cinematic Arts Library, Cinematic Arts Library, University of Southern California, Volume 1/1, Compiled November 5, 1997; Mike Tomkies, “Mario Lanza: His Voice was in One Place...His Soul in Another,” *Motion Picture* (November 1971), Constance McCormick Collection, Mario Lanza, Cinematic Arts Library, University of Southern California, Volume 1/1, Compiled November 5, 1997; William Gammon, “Bobby-Soxer’s Caruso,” *The American Weekly* (November 19, 1950), Constance McCormick Collection, Mario Lanza, Cinematic Arts Library, University of Southern California, Volume 1/1, Compiled November 5, 1997, 26. “Even bobby-soxers cheered his operatic arias,” Gammon exclaimed about Lanza in *That Midnight Kiss*. *Ibid.*



him the social graces, but all the rules make no sense to him. Pepe questions why he has to use the outer fork first instead of having just one fork and saving the dishwasher work. Nonetheless, in order to win the love of Suzette, he becomes a well-dressed gentleman in his manners and deportment. He becomes very stiff and formal and now fits well with the local high society. He is embarrassed when his poor, uncultured fisherman friends visit him. This causes not only his old friends to reject him, but even Suzette feels that he has become too unnatural and unbearable as a proper gentleman. Only when Pepe becomes more aggressive and passionate and less polite and formal during an onstage rendition of the “Love Duet” from *Madama Butterfly* does Suzette change her mind and give in to his advances. The movie makes clear Pepe the opera singer was a better man ignoring the expectations and rules of high society. Lanza’s portrayal of Pepe was so popular that one letter-to-the-editor in the *Motion Picture Magazine* enthused: “Let’s have more Mario Lanza! My friends and I are all great fans of his. Everyone in my neighborhood has gone to see *Toast of New Orleans* and the most popular record in the local hangout is *Be My Love*, by the one and only Mr. Lanza.”<sup>562</sup> Lanza’s great popularity in *The Toast of New Orleans* inspired MGM to feature him in even better films and to help turn the singer into one of Hollywood’s biggest stars.

Preview audiences for *That Midnight Kiss* had shown an even greater excitement over Lanza’s singing of operatic pieces than popular songs. MGM, eager to provide the public with films they were willing to attend *en masse*, greatly increased the operatic numbers in Lanza’s subsequent movies.<sup>563</sup> This was especially true of Lanza’s third and most successful film, *The Great Caruso*, released in 1951. In the film the tenor sang

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<sup>562</sup> “Interesting Letters,” *Motion Picture Magazine*, Vol. 81-82 (May 1951): 14.

<sup>563</sup> Richard Fawkes, *Opera on Film* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 2000), 130-131.

selections from an extraordinarily large number of operas, including *I Pagliacci*, *Tosca*, *Cavalleria Rusticana*, *La Gioconda*, *L'elisir d'amore*, *Aida*, *Rigoletto*, Puccini's *La Bohème*, *Il Trovatore*, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, and *Martha*, as well as numerous Neapolitan songs and classical religious pieces. As with the *Il Trovatore* selections in *A Night at the Opera*, the numbers included in the movie are some of the best-known operatic pieces of all time. The film, loosely based on the life of Enrico Caruso, contains fragments from many of Caruso's most famous roles, but avoids some of his most successful roles from operas that were no longer as popular by the 1950s, such as Leoncavallo's *La Bohème*, Halevy's *La Juive*, Charpentier's *Louise*, and Puccini's *La Fanciulla del West*, among others. Several prominent opera singers from the Met joined Lanza for the film, including Dorothy Kirsten, Blanche Thebom, and Giuseppe Valdengo, all of whom featured with Lanza in a rendition of the sextet from *Lucia di Lammermoor*. Kirsten and Thebom even had solos of their own, and Jarmila Novotna, Lucine Amara, and Marina Koshetz also appeared in the film. Some of the arias and songs included in the movie were almost complete. The sextet and Lanza's "Celeste Aida," for example, were each over three minutes long. Other pieces, however, were very short and combined in montages, in order to fit additional works into the movie. Some musical fragments were less than a minute, including the "Cielo e Mar" from Ponchielli's *La Gioconda*, the "Brindisi" from *Cavalleria Rusticana*, and the Neapolitan song "Torna a Surriento." MGM's calculation of adding more currently popular operatic numbers to Lanza's movies paid off, as *The Great Caruso* became a hit film and garnered strong reviews.<sup>564</sup>

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<sup>564</sup> Roy Pickard, *The Hollywood Studios* (London: F. Muller, 1978), 374; "Prod. 1514, GREAT CARUSO, Pre-recordings," MGM Collection, The Great Caruso, Archives of Performing Arts, Cinematic Arts

“‘The Great Caruso’ Contains More Music Than Any Offering in History of Films,” the official press book for the film enthused. A promotion campaign booklet, after listing all the musical numbers in the film, claimed that the movie contained “the greatest array of singing talent ever assembled on a Hollywood sound stage.” Also stressing the film’s music, the theatrical trailer exclaimed across the screen: “SPARKLING WITH THE SONGS YOU’VE NEVER FORGOTTEN.” Some of the film’s reviewers argued that the music in the movie predominated over any plot and that the story served as an excuse for including tremendous amounts of music.<sup>565</sup> Many articles about *The Great Caruso*, including ones in MGM’s trade journal as well as mainstream newspapers and magazines, discussed the singers who appeared in it, highlighted the number of the film’s arias, ensembles, and songs, and often listed the names of specific musical pieces as selling points for the movie. One writer for the *New York Times* specifically noted that the movie contained thirty-eight minutes of operatic sequences from eighteen operas. Famous gossip columnist Louella Parsons called *The*

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Library, University of Southern California. The pre-recording sheets for the film show that the moviemakers had originally intended to include even more operatic numbers that they later cut, including “O Paradiso” from Meyerbeer’s *L’Africaine* and Rubenstein’s art song, “Napolitaine.” *Ibid.* Perhaps indicating the popular view of famous opera singers like the ones in *The Great Caruso*, Edwin Schallert in the *Los Angeles Times* noted, “The grand total of so-called temperament probably was the greatest ever assembled on any studio set, but [the movie’s director, Richard] Thorpe emphatically declares temperament has never resulted in tantrums.” Then article goes on to quote Thorpe defending the opera singers he directed, “All of these people are workers and well-disciplined.” Edwin Schallert, “It’s All Harmony, Says Director of Opera Stars in ‘Caruso’ Film,” *Los Angeles Times* (October 1, 1950), Constance McCormick Collection, Mario Lanza, Cinematic Arts Library, University of Southern California, Volume 1/1, Compiled November 5, 1997.

<sup>565</sup> *The Great Caruso* press book, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, Core Collection, “The Great Caruso” file (microfiche); “National Promotion Campaign From Ralph Wheelwright, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios”; “The Great Caruso,” *Cue* (May 12, 1951), Constance McCormick Collection, Mario Lanza, Cinematic Arts Library, University of Southern California, Volume 1/1, Compiled November 5, 1997; Richard Griffith, “Lanza Hit with Public as Caruso,” *Los Angeles Times* (May 21, 1951), Constance McCormick Collection, Mario Lanza, Cinematic Arts Library, University of Southern California, Volume 1/1, Compiled November 5, 1997; Bosley Crowther, “What’s in a Name?” *New York Times* (May 20, 1951), Constance McCormick Collection, Mario Lanza, Cinematic Arts Library, University of Southern California, Volume 1/1, Compiled November 5, 1997.

*Great Caruso* a “history-making film” that was bringing “the miracle of music to so many people.”<sup>566</sup>

Many reviews and an occasional letter-to-the-editor complained about the historical inaccuracy of the script.<sup>567</sup> The producers turned to the music figures and operatic numbers in the film to give it validity. Beyond the use of real opera singers, to add greater authenticity, the moviemakers hired Richard Hageman to portray Caruso’s conductor in the film. In real life, Hageman had conducted Caruso during a bond drive during the First World War.<sup>568</sup> Several articles and publicity materials stressed the

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<sup>566</sup> “The Great Caruso,” *Cue*; “The New Pictures,” *Time* (May 21, 1951), Constance McCormick Collection, Mario Lanza, Cinematic Arts Library, University of Southern California, Volume 1/1, Compiled November 5, 1997; Edwin Schallert, “‘Great Caruso’ Festive Screen Musical Triumph,” *Los Angeles Times* (May 30, 1951), Constance McCormick Collection, Mario Lanza, Cinematic Arts Library, University of Southern California, Volume 1/1, Compiled November 5, 1997; Ezra Goodman, “Film Review: ‘The Great Caruso,’” *Los Angeles Daily News* (May 30, 1951), Constance McCormick Collection, Mario Lanza, Cinematic Arts Library, University of Southern California, Volume 1/1, Compiled November 5, 1997; “‘Great Caruso’ Triumph of Drama, Biography and Song,” *The Hollywood Reporter* (April 13, 1951), Constance McCormick Collection, Mario Lanza, Cinematic Arts Library, University of Southern California, Volume 1/1, Compiled November 5, 1997; “The other topnotch film,” *Hollywood Citizen-News* (June 15, 1951), Constance McCormick Collection, Mario Lanza, Cinematic Arts Library, University of Southern California, Volume 1/1, Compiled November 5, 1997; “Blanche Thebom Signed for ‘The Great Caruso,’” *Lion’s Roar* (Brit ed.), No. 1196, Mayfair 8864 (around 1951), 3; “Beautiful Singers in ‘The Great Caruso,’” *Lion’s Roar* (Brit ed.), No. 1196, Mayfair 8864 (around 1951), 3; “Opera is Sweeping Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer,” *Lion’s Roar* (Brit ed.), No. 1203, Mayfair 8864 (around 1951), 4; “The Same Role,” *Lion’s Roar* (Brit ed.), No. 1203, Mayfair 8864 (around 1951), 5-6; Fred Hift, “Coaching ‘Caruso,’” *New York Times* (October 22, 1950), Constance McCormick Collection, Mario Lanza, Cinematic Arts Library, University of Southern California, Volume 1/1, Compiled November 5, 1997; Louella O. Parsons, “First Nighters Hail ‘Caruso,’” *Los Angeles Examiner* (May 30, 1951), Constance McCormick Collection, Mario Lanza, Cinematic Arts Library, University of Southern California, Volume 1/1, Compiled November 5, 1997. The film’s music was apparently popular with the workers at the studio. An article in MGM’s trade journal claimed: “THE GREAT CARUSO company is singing and humming melodies from these musical masterpieces--and so is everyone else on the lot!” “Opera is Sweeping Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer,” 4.

<sup>567</sup> “The Great Caruso,” *Newsweek* (May 14, 1951), Constance McCormick Collection, Mario Lanza, Cinematic Arts Library, University of Southern California, Volume 1/1, Compiled November 5, 1997; No title, *New Yorker* (May 19, 1951), Constance McCormick Collection, Mario Lanza, Cinematic Arts Library, University of Southern California, Volume 1/1, Compiled November 5, 1997; Schallert, “‘Great Caruso’ Festive Screen Musical Triumph”; Goodman; Crowther, “What’s in a Name?”; “The New Pictures”; Hift, “Coaching ‘Caruso’”; “The other topnotch film”; “ASKING-Queries from clients,” *Los Angeles Examiner* (January 30, 1952), Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, Core Collection, Clippings for *The Great Caruso*; Aline Mosby, *The Great Caruso* review, *Daily News* (Los Angeles) (October 17, 1950), “The Great Caruso,” Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration Records, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, Production Files, Clippings.

<sup>568</sup> Schallert, “It’s All Harmony, Says Director of Opera Stars in ‘Caruso’ Film”; “A Memorable Occasion,” *Lion’s Roar* (Brit ed.), No. 1203, Mayfair 8864 (1951), 6.

participation of Peter Herman Adler as head of musical recordings for the film. Adler was then in charge of NBC's TV and radio opera productions. He prepared and conducted the operatic numbers in the film during the week and flew back to New York City on weekends to fulfill his obligations to NBC. Adler told a *New York Times* reporter that at first the crew of the movie was not excited to be on a "high-brow project" but they soon changed their minds and got enthusiastic about it. In a promotional piece for the film, Adler explained his views on opera and its future: "If opera is to really survive in this country, it must be sung by young, personable singers. Artists like Mario Lanza not only have a great opportunity but a responsibility. They are not only stimulating to listen to, they are attractive looking young people who can do more for bringing worthwhile, serious music to the greatest number of people than all the old style, overstuffed singers put together."<sup>569</sup>

In *The Great Caruso*, a negative attitude toward opera's elites is more pronounced than in *That Midnight Kiss*, if not as overwhelming and exaggerated as in *A Night at the Opera*. Caruso, like Johnny Donetti and Riccardo Baroni, is a working-class figure. When the movie begins he is born to parents in a Neapolitan slum in the South of Italy. The early part of the movie dramatizes Caruso's early struggles with poverty. As a young man, he sings for pennies that better off patrons toss to him in a restaurant. This threatens his first romance with a young girl from a bourgeois family, whose father derides Caruso as "a beggar." In an attempt to win the favor of the girl's father, Caruso takes a job under him delivering flour to local businesses. After being fired for inadvertently destroying a cartload of flour, he decides to attempt a career in opera. After making this decision, he

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<sup>569</sup> Schallert, "It's All Harmony, Says Director of Opera Stars in 'Caruso' Film"; Schallert, "'Great Caruso' Festive Screen Musical Triumph"; "Blanche Thebom Signed for 'The Great Caruso'"; "Beautiful Singers in 'The Great Caruso'"; Hift, "Coaching 'Caruso'"; "National Promotion Campaign," 40-42.

proclaims, “I don’t care if I’m ever a divo, just so long as I make a decent living.” From the start he has a much different attitude than pompous cinematic divos like Betelli and Lassparri. Like the tenor hero of *A Night at the Opera*, Caruso begins his career singing in a chorus and works his way up. After he becomes a successful opera singer, the audience learns that the reason he wanted success was not for personal gain and glory, but rather to win over his girlfriend’s father. His fiancée, however, has married another man while he was away. Even with this disappointment, Caruso remains generous and friendly to all around him.

This heroic tenor is juxtaposed against the sort of negative and condescending opera singer as seen in *A Night at the Opera* and *That Midnight Kiss*. At Covent Garden in London, Caruso sings with a soprano, Maria Selka, who exhibits the petulant, rude, and imperious behavior of the stereotypical opera movie diva.<sup>570</sup> When Caruso, already a star, keeps her waiting for two and a half minutes before a rehearsal, she becomes enraged and exclaims: “This could not have happened in Vienna or Budapest. There we have discipline. There we would not permit an artist like myself to be insulted by an Italian upstart.” Once Caruso briskly arrives on the scene with apologies for being late, Selka snidely remarks: “Look at him! Wouldn’t you know he was an Italian tenor?” Caruso replies sternly that he did not understand her joke. Selka insults him about having the manners of a Naples street singer and knocks the hat off his head. Angrily the tenor stamps off muttering in Italian, “La strega...Al diavolo a Maria Selka” (The witch...to

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<sup>570</sup> Maria Selka was originally supposed to be the actual soprano Frieda Heimstadt. The leading screenwriter for the film described Heimstadt in an early draft scenario: “Frieda Heimstadt is in the true tradition of prima donnas - temperamental, arrogant, gracious one moment, a tempestuous hellcat the next. Nevertheless she is a great artist.” Sonya Levien, “Old pages out of September 26, 1949 outline (THE LIFE OF CARUSO),” September 26, 1949-February 16, 1950, Turner/MGM scripts, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, 11141167.f-G-976.f-976, 45-46.

hell with Maria Selka). In the original script, Caruso was to say, “That bi – bi...soprano!” Joseph Breen, the head of the National Censorship Board, however, sent a letter to MGM studio boss Louis B. Mayer noting that the line was “unacceptable,” and Mayer had it removed.<sup>571</sup>

The movie focuses significant attention on the Metropolitan Opera and the power that the rich patrons of the Diamond Horseshoe exerted there in the early twentieth century. When Caruso looks out at the audience gathering before his Met debut, a soprano tells him: “Only the Diamond Horseshow counts. They’re patrons and critics, judge and jury.” These patrons are represented in the movie by Park Benjamin, a wealthy New Yorker, who attempts to derail Caruso’s career in America because of his alleged lack of dignity and class. Eventually, Benjamin disowns his daughter after she marries the tenor against his wishes. Benjamin and his fellow box owners do not clap after Caruso’s debut performance. The rest of the house follows their lead and Caruso’s solo bow is met only with scattered applause. Focusing on the Diamond Horseshoe’s problem with Caruso, one newspaper review proclaims, “Caruso has the exuberance of an Italian peasant.” Enraged at the reaction to his Met debut, Caruso storms into Park Benjamin’s house and declares that he is leaving America.<sup>572</sup>

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<sup>571</sup> Joseph Breen, Letter to Louis B. Mayer, “The Great Caruso,” Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration Records, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, Production Files, 31; Sonya Levien, “The Life of Caruso -- temporary complete screenplay,” May 3-June 2, 1950, Turner/MGM scripts, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, 11151169.f-G-983.f-983.

<sup>572</sup> One partial screenplay elaborates on the Diamond Horseshoe in the film: “Only because the Diamond Horseshoe society of New York, the four hundred who supported the Metropolitan, were harder to please than British royalty. Being only two generations removed from the pioneer ancestors who had made the family fortune, they were even more snobbish than English society. They repressed their enthusiasm for the new tenor because of his plebian appearance, his lack of so-called cultural education, because of his vitality and exuberance that spring from the earth, and which made him appear in their eyes too much of a peasant.” Levien, “Old pages out of September 26, 1949 outline (THE LIFE OF CARUSO),” 56.

Outside the house, however, he meets Benjamin's recently fired valet, an Italian-American named Tullio. Tullio explains that Benjamin fired him because he liked Caruso's performance. He adds that Benjamin had called him "a stupid foreigner," and he exclaims, "I was born in this country. I'm as good an American as he is, and I know as much music." Caruso, surprised, asks Tullio, "You liked Caruso?" The valet responds not knowing that he is speaking to Caruso, "Yes, I did! In the gallery he sounded fine." When Caruso brings up the Diamond Horseshoe, Tullio admonishes him, "There are more seats in the gallery and don't you forget it, mister!" Benjamin's daughter Dorothy uses this conversation to convince the tenor to remain in New York. She tells him, "This country is full of people, and most of them sit in the galleries. Sing for them Mr. Caruso and you'll like America."

Inspired by this conversation, Caruso returns to the Met to appear in Puccini's *La Bohème*. Before the first performance, Met general manager Giulio Gatti-Casazza urges Caruso to be more dignified in his manner because that is what the Diamond Horseshoe prefers. After he adds that Caruso should take his hands out of his pockets, the tenor stands up to him and exclaims: "Sorry Gatti. Last time I tried to play the gentleman, but I am no gentleman, so I do what you tell me. But today I learned something: America is full of people who sit in the galleries and I can sing for them. Tonight I play a man who is cold, without a penny and hungry. Up in the galleries, they know this man. I know this man too. He keeps his hands in his pockets whether the Diamond Horseshoe likes it or not!" Caruso performs in the way that he feels is authentic. Even the Diamond Horseshoe applauds him after a fellow opera singer, the distinguished Jean de Reszke, stands and claps for him. As the applause grows, the entire house including the galleries gives him a



rousing ovation. To stress the theme of singing for the people, later in the film Caruso discusses a police badge that he had received from the New York Police Department. He tells one of his colleagues, “Of all my medals, this is the most important. It is not from a king or a queen, like the others, but from the people I sing for.”

Different versions of the script for *The Great Caruso* help to elaborate on major themes in the film. A very early outline by Harold Rhoden written half a decade before the movie came out stresses anti-elitist themes and strengthens Caruso’s ties to the working class. In this outline, Caruso labors in a factory to pay for his voice lessons. The outline also describes Caruso: “He ridiculed stuffy, high brow, arty opera singers and often played practical jokes right on the opera stage.”<sup>573</sup> A later, much longer outline by screenwriter Sonya Levien, which shows Caruso to be a very generous man, contains a montage of newspaper reviews of Caruso’s Met debut. The supposed *New York Sun* review for the film stresses the singer’s connection with the common people: “Mr. Caruso’s passionate singing in ‘Aida’ brought the gallery to its feet, but the connoisseurs (sic) in the Diamond Horseshoe refused to thaw. This new tenor is primarily a singer of the people. The nights Signor Caruso sings, they crowd the theatre, the sidewalks, the streets.” In the movie, the entire audience gives tepid applause to Caruso’s debut, suggesting that the poorer people in the galleries, who in fact liked Caruso, were afraid to go against the wishes of the Diamond Horseshoe.

In another scene of Levien’s outline, Anna (later named Louise Heggart in the movie and played by Met soprano Dorothy Kirsten) derides Park Benjamin for his criticism of Caruso. “Every time he sings there is a waiting line round the block,” she

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<sup>573</sup> Harold Rhoden, “CARUSO -- Outline from Harold Rhoden,” October 9, 1946, MGM Collection, The Great Caruso, Archives of Performing Arts, Cinematic Arts Library, University of Southern California, Folder 1 of 4 (one page).

reminds him, but he snaps back with contempt, “The gallery.” Later at the back entrance a huge line tries to get into the opera house, even though a sign informs them that the gallery is sold out. “All of New York’s ‘Little Italy’ seems to be there,” Levien notes. At that night’s performance of *La Bohème*, the galleries explode with applause. To celebrate afterwards, Caruso calls together his dresser, valet, agent, and accompanist. He wants to take them out to dinner, but Anna whispers to him that he cannot take his servants to a fine restaurant. He insists that they are not his servants but his assistants and friends.<sup>574</sup>

Box-office receipts and news reports suggest that audiences loved *The Great Caruso* and thus, were more likely to be open to its messages. At the movie’s premiere, audiences broke into spontaneous and enthusiastic applause at the end of each of Lanza’s musical numbers. A *Boxoffice* review quoted a woman from a Cleveland motion picture committee: “Any picture that can cause a preview audience, including two motion picture critics, to applaud at its conclusion, is a superlative production. I just returned from New Orleans and Houston and in both cities there were long lines of both young and old people at the theatres to see this inspiringly beautiful picture.” The review also noted that *The Great Caruso* is “a picture which appeals to the class trade as well as the masses.” Some members of the movie-going public let their opinions be known via letters. One of the film’s screenwriters, William Ludwig, said that MGM had received more letters from the public making suggestions about the film than for any other movie in the history of the studio. When the *Hollywood Citizen-News* published a letter complaining about

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<sup>574</sup> Sonya Levien, “Outline (THE LIFE OF CARUSO),” September 26, 1949-February 23, 1950, Turner/MGM scripts, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, 11141167.f-G-975.f-975, 69-70, 72, 81, 84, 92.

Lanza and the movie, the paper received a huge outpouring of anger directed at the letter writer. One columnist published quotes from some of the irate letters.<sup>575</sup>

*The Great Caruso* became one of the biggest hits of the year and perhaps the most influential opera movie of all time. It benefited from tremendous publicity and press coverage, including promotion on the radio, pitches geared towards classical music lovers and music teachers, students, and organizations, piano ad campaigns, and even a dish called “Spaghetti ala ‘The Great Caruso’” for restaurant menus.<sup>576</sup> Overall, it was a success from the time of its release, doing great business throughout the country in first-run movie houses. Small town and suburban second and later run houses also benefited from the massive advertising for the film’s first-run showings. *The Great Caruso* was “held over in almost all of its playdates,” one newspaper article observed. Another noted that the two local showcase theaters in Hollywood held the movie over for an unusual four weeks, despite a general box-office slump at the time. The film was 1951’s fourth highest grossing film. It made ten million dollars at the box office in its first year after release. By 1956, MGM’s corporate records show the movie, which had cost \$1.85 million, made a net profit of \$4 million. Jesse Lasky, as associate producer of the film, received a Boxoffice Blue Ribbon Award for May 1951 because of the movie’s great

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<sup>575</sup> Crowther, “What’s in a Name?”; Parsons, “First Nighters Hail ‘Caruso’”; Richard Lipscomb, “‘Great Caruso’ Applauded at Plush Premiere,” *Hollywood Citizen-News* (May 30, 1951), Constance McCormick Collection, Mario Lanza, Cinematic Arts Library, University of Southern California, Volume 1/1, Compiled November 5, 1997; Velma West Sykes, “Metro’s ‘The Great Caruso’ Wins May Blue Ribbon Award,” *Boxoffice* (June 9, 1951), Constance McCormick Collection, Mario Lanza, Cinematic Arts Library, University of Southern California, Volume 1/1, Compiled November 5, 1997; Mosby, *The Great Caruso* review in *Daily News*; Sidney Skolsky, “Hollywood Is My Beat: The Mail Bag,” *Hollywood Citizen-News* (July 21, 1951), Constance McCormick Collection, Mario Lanza, Cinematic Arts Library, University of Southern California, Volume 1/1, Compiled November 5, 1997.

<sup>576</sup> “National Promotion Campaign,” 6-15; “THE GREAT CARUSO -- awards and program 1951,” Jesse L. Lasky papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, Box 1, Folder 1; Griffith, “Lanza Hit with Public as Caruso.”

success. To have been such a box-office hit, the film must have appealed to a wide variety of different peoples across the nation.<sup>577</sup>

The influence of this movie was so strong that some opera singers cite it as one of the reasons they decided on their profession. Famous tenors José Carreras, Plácido Domingo, and Luciano Pavarotti all recalled the influence that the movie had in their own lives and careers. The movie made Lanza one of the hottest Hollywood stars of the moment. One full-page ad for the film, quoting *Time Magazine*, proclaimed Lanza: “A NEW IDOL! THE HOTTEST SINGER TO HIT THE SOUND TRACK IN A DECADE!”<sup>578</sup> Select arias that Lanza popularized in *The Great Caruso* appear on young Maltese tenor Joseph Calleja’s recently released Mario Lanza tribute album, illustrating the influence that the film continues to have over sixty years after its release. While promoting the film, soprano Dorothy Kirsten declared that “this picture is the greatest thing for opera that ever happened.”<sup>579</sup>

### Sketching the Larger Trend

Numerous additional films from the Classic Hollywood era portray opera singers as poor or working-class people who eventually find success through opera. This was a common enough theme by 1935 that *New York Times* critic Andre Sennwald noted that

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<sup>577</sup> West Sykes; “The other topnotch film”; “Title: The Great Caruso (1951),” AFI Catalogue, American Film Institute (accessed December 26, 2010), <http://www.afi.com/members/catalog/DetailView.aspx?s=&Movie=53618>; Rudy Behlmer, “Be My Love: Mario Lanza’s Greatest Performances at M-G-M (liner notes),” Turner Entertainment Co., 1998, 14; “THE GREAT CARUSO -- awards and program 1951.”

<sup>578</sup> Roland L. Bessette, *Mario Lanza: Tenor in Exile* (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1999), 109-110; Ken Wlaschin, *Opera on Screen: A Guide to 100 Years of Films and Videos Featuring Operas, Opera Singers and Operettas* (Los Angeles: Beachwood Press, 1997), 227, 282-283; Behlmer, “Be My Love”; 19; *The Great Caruso Ad*, *Motion Picture Magazine*, Vol. 81-82 (June 1951): 3. Not all of the people Lanza inspired became great singers, of course. Journalist Mike Tomkies, who later wrote a profile of Lanza, was inspired by the film to take singing lessons for a time, even though he had to travel twelve miles by bicycle to get to his lessons. Tomkies, “Mario Lanza: His Voice was in One Place...His Soul in Another.”

<sup>579</sup> “National Promotion Campaign,” 34-35.

the plot of one opera related film followed the “conventional pattern of operatic success stories.”<sup>580</sup> Even during the silent era, this was a typical plot theme. In the 1918 film *A Woman of Impulse*, soprano Lina Cavalieri played an opera singer who rises from rags to riches. In her third film, *Temptation*, Geraldine Farrar played a poor opera singer who has to contend with a villainous impresario.<sup>581</sup> In the 1934 hit film, *One Night of Love*, Grace Moore played a poor aspiring singer who performs arias for her landlady in lieu of paying rent. In the 1935 Warner Brother’s film, *Stars over Broadway*, tenor James Melton played a singing bellhop who aspires to an operatic career. Mario Lanza played additional working-class singers in some of his other films, including a vineyard worker in *Serenade*. The popular 1944 Best Picture Oscar winner, *Going My Way*, starring Bing Crosby and mezzo-soprano Risë Stevens, also hinted at this theme. In the movie Crosby plays a friendly priest from a rough New York neighborhood. Stevens plays a childhood friend, who becomes a success at the Metropolitan Opera. In one scene, she is shown on the stage of the Met singing the most famous aria from *Carmen*, the “Habanera.” Although her origins are not explicitly stated, the movie infers that she grew up in the same working-class surroundings as the rest of the characters in the movie. In *One Hundred Men and a Girl* (1937), a teenage girl played by Deanna Durbin organizes a symphony orchestra consisting of one hundred unemployed and suffering musicians, including her own desperate trombonist father. Only through her persistence, the orchestra gets a radio sponsor and famed conductor Leopold Stokowski (three years before his appearance in Disney’s animated feature film, *Fantasia*) agrees to conduct them in a special concert. At the concert’s end, Stokowski invites Durbin onstage to sing

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<sup>580</sup> Andre Sennwald, *I Dream Too Much* review, *New York Times* (November 29, 1935): 24:1.

<sup>581</sup> Fawkes, *Opera on Film*, 18-19.

the soprano part of the “Brindisi” from *La Traviata*. The rich people portrayed in the movie are frivolous idiots or only looking out for their own self-interests, while the musicians and especially the plucky teenage soprano are the heroes.

Other films from the era also contrast good, down-to-earth opera singers with stereotypically temperamental, arrogant singers. Made the same year as *A Night at the Opera*, *Metropolitan* follows the questionable career choices of an angry and erratic Metropolitan Opera soprano, Ghita Galin. While she is not the villain of the piece, her prima donna behavior imperils the success of the opera company that she herself founded with hopes of rivaling the Met. At her whim, she repeatedly changes which opera her company is producing. When she hears the baritone’s girlfriend sing an aria well, she becomes enraged and demands that either the girlfriend leave the company or she will instead. When her voice cracks during an aria, she becomes fussy and calls off the performance. A baritone, played by popular Met star Lawrence Tibbett, saves the company. He like Riccardo Baroni rises from the chorus. He is a “regular guy” character, who in his first scene appears carrying fishing gear. As in *A Night at the Opera*, *Metropolitan* attacks opera management, in particular the Met’s discrimination against American singers, who were considered less prestigious than their European colleagues at the time. One reviewer, focusing on this aspect, described the film as “a gay and spirited satire on the social exclusiveness of opera management.”<sup>582</sup>

Hollywood’s distinction between down-to-earth opera singers and temperamental divas is also evident in the 1948 MGM musical, *Luxury Liner*. In this film, legendary

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<sup>582</sup> *Metropolitan* review, *New York Times* (October 18, 1935): 27. For information on the difficulties faced by American singers in real life during this time period see Victoria Etnier Villamil, *From Johnson’s Kids to Lemonade Opera: The American Classical Singer Comes of Age* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004).

Wagnerian heldentenor Lauritz Melchior plays one of two opera singers who accompany each other on a cruise to South America where they are to appear in a run of opera performances. The soprano is very frivolous and annoying; the tenor is friendly and avuncular. Playing upon stereotypes of sopranos, when the captain of the luxury liner questions the tenor, Olaf Erikson (Melchior's character), as to what sort of woman the soprano Zita Romanka is, Eriksen answers succinctly and with a hint of dread, "A soprano." Once the captain meets Zita, she loiters around him to the point of annoyance and always gratingly sings out his name whenever he comes into view. Eventually the captain has to resort to ordering his subordinates to spend time with her instead. In contrast, the movie's characters often seek Eriksen's company. Although open to various audience interpretations, Eriksen's affinity for beer can be read as a sign of his common touch and lack of pretensions. Several times, his character is seen with a large glass of beer in his hand, so often in fact that *New York Times* reviewer Bosley Crowther accused him of looking as if he were "posing for a brewery ad."<sup>583</sup> When asked to sing a song in the ship's dining room, Eriksen chooses a Scandinavian drinking song, which he encourages his audience to join in on. The tenor even helps a young soprano who admires him. He listens to her troubles and offers to sing a duet with her in the ship's dining room, even though she is an amateur and he is a star. Although the movie does not try to associate Eriksen directly with the working class, he exhibits the good humor and lack of pretension of the tenor heroes of other Classic Hollywood pictures.

### **The De-sacralization of Opera**

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<sup>583</sup> Bosley Crowther, "The Screen in Review," *New York Times* (September 10, 1948): 19.

The press book for *A Night at the Opera* contains a short article entitled, “Opera Becomes Fun!” and one of the advertising catchlines for the movie enthused, “Grand Opera That Is Grand Fun.”<sup>584</sup> This sort of comedic movie helped to present opera in a different, often more amusing, manner than typically presented in the opera house. Such films accomplished this not only in the manner in which they combined operatic music with popular music in a mass medium, but also in their themes or cues intended to appeal to sets of spectators different from those who held power within major American opera houses. This appeal was made not only through the inclusion of positive working-class themes and characters, but also through the casual, and sometimes even irreverent, way in which these films deal with opera as an art form. Starting in the mid to late nineteenth century, high art, hitherto fairly fluid in nature, began to become sacralized, a process which “endowed the music it focused upon with unique aesthetic and spiritual properties that rendered it inviolate, exclusive, and eternal.” Society’s elites helped to spearhead this process.<sup>585</sup> One of the appeals of *A Night at the Opera* and of other movies with similar themes is the manner in which these movies in a way de-sacralize opera as a high-class art form. Instead of being sacred and inviolate, opera is freely mixed with comedy and popular music.

*A Night at the Opera* encourages its audience to laugh at people and things normally held in high regard. Instead of paying deference to the prestigious Lassparri, Gottlieb, and Claypool, the movie holds them in disdain and disregard. The Marx Brothers turn many of the operatic numbers into comical scenes, instead of allowing the singers to perform them seriously as they would in an opera house. The brothers even add

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<sup>584</sup> *A Night at the Opera* press book, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, Core Collection, “A Night at the Opera” file (microfiche).

<sup>585</sup> Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 134.



the sheet music for “Take Me Out to the Ballgame” to the score of the Overture to *Il Trovatore*. Movie critics drew attention to this comic irreverence. One reviewer wrote:

Here, at last, is really my kind of opera picture...If a W. C. Fields could be added, too, I think I could enjoy these dramatizations of the more rarified glories of song with proper completeness. It is pleasant to learn, by the way, that I have been right in my suspicion that what the baritones and tenors and sopranos have needed all this time has been to have the scenery dropped about them with the required frequency and for a few of them to be hauled into the wings and carefully trussed up by antic comedians.<sup>586</sup>

Another movie commentator asserted: “Hereafter, when a musical film is threatening to put us to sleep, we shall have the courage to shout: ‘Louder and funnier.’ In ‘A Night at the Opera’ the boys take Verdi for their straight man, ‘Il Trovatore’ for their slapstick, and laughter for their muse...By slugging the tenor, kidnapping the impresario and slipping ‘Take Me Out to the Ball Game’ into the orchestral score, they have made the perfect opera picture.”<sup>587</sup> For those who neither considered themselves highbrows nor aesthetically fully appreciated opera, comedy made the opera in the movie acceptable and even a positive feature. Motion pictures provided exposure to opera even to those who might never have any desire to enter an opera house for a traditional operatic performance.

When this movie came out during the financially challenging times of the Great Depression, class differences became more visible in society than they previously had been. Many artists of all types believed that high culture had to be shorn of its elitist baggage in order to be worthwhile. During this time period, Popular Front theater in New York City promoted the combining of high and popular cultural forms to create works such as “proletarian operas” like Marc Blitzstein’s *The Cradle Will Rock*. Orson Welles’

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<sup>586</sup> Richard Watts, Jr., *A Night at the Opera* review, *New York Herald Tribune* (December 7, 1935): 10.

<sup>587</sup> Andre Sennwald, *A Night at the Opera* review, *New York Times* (December 15, 1935): 7.

popular radio show, *Mercury Theatre on the Air*, also combined the classic and the popular by presenting exciting adaptations of literary classics over the popular medium of the radio, making them palatable to the masses. This adaptation of high art into the mass media did not, however, preclude a certain level of parody and gentle ridicule of Welles for being highbrow. In 1943, for example, Welles was sufficiently integrated into popular culture to guest host Jack Benny's extraordinarily successful radio comedy show for three weeks in a row. Yet, the overwhelming number of jokes written for him on the show poked fun at his prestige, supposed pomposity, and reputation for genius. These highbrow traits were open to good-natured ridicule, but did not fully reflect Welles' actual cultural production, which retained a large and diverse audience base. Welles' willingness to laugh at both highbrow pretensions and at himself, as well as his refusal to treat the classics as staid, unalterable objects, made his radio output more appealing and acceptable to the general public.<sup>588</sup>

Radio and television shows occasionally contained more of this sort of gentle teasing of high-culture figures. Tenor Jan Peerce, for example, made numerous radio and television appearances singing a wide variety of music. Although a popular performer, Peerce occasionally also had fun poked at his position in the musical world as an out-of-touch opera singer. After a long comedic conversation with pop singer Patti Page, Peerce suggested on one radio show from the 1950s that they "sing a song together that both of us can shovel." Page informs him that he means "dig" not "shovel," and they sing the

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<sup>588</sup> Orson Welles, host, *The Jack Benny Show: The Jell-o Program* (March 14, 1943), radio program; Orson Welles, host, *The Jack Benny Show: The Jell-o Program* (March 21, 1943), radio program; and Orson Welles, host, *The Jack Benny Show: The Jell-o Program* (March 28, 1943), radio program. See Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1998) for more on Popular Front culture, Marc Blitzstein, and Orson Welles.

popular piece “Glow Worm.”<sup>589</sup> In a television parody sketch on *The Steve Allen Show*, Peerce and mezzo-soprano Risë Stevens appeared in a send-up of an opera performance. Imitating the style of Metropolitan Opera radio broadcast announcer Milton Cross, comedian Steve Allen begins the show by proclaiming that the Met had cancelled its operatic season that year. “This came as a blow to Opera Lovers,” he continues, “but there is a ray of hope for them: Television.” After a title card with the words “The Television Opera Theatre” flashes onscreen, Allen introduces the opera *La Rocka et La Rolla* by the “celebrated Italian composer, Elivissa Presslia.”<sup>590</sup> Before the curtain rises, he describes the plot, a silly European folk tale that includes peasants, noblemen, and an army of 15,000 chickens. The “opera” begins as Peerce in costume sings a commercial for Papermate pens. The “scene” ends, Allen describes the plot for the following scene, and Peerce and Stevens each sing a commercial. After the introduction of a grand final duet, the two opera stars sing out “J-E-L-L-O,” tying together opera, commercialization, and the mass media. The show makes fun of talented opera singers by having them sing mediocre material and radio programs by turning their obligatory commercials into a joke—yet, nonetheless, cleverly working in actual advertisements. Other television parodies were more directly tied to actual opera, such as one CBS *Camera Three* farce about “Verdi-lovers versus Wagner-lovers.”<sup>591</sup>

Some of the most popular parodies of opera were the *Looney Tunes* and *Merry Melodies* cartoons of director Chuck Jones. Originally created as theatrical short films,

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<sup>589</sup> Radio script from January 1, 1957, Jan Peerce Papers, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Box 21 - Radio Scripts, Folder 20 - “The Big Record” (Patti Page).

<sup>590</sup> Television script, July 29, 1956, Jan Peerce Papers, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Box 21, Folder 30 - Steve Allen Show.

<sup>591</sup> Letter from Stephen Chodorov, March 1, 1964, Jan Peerce Papers, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Box 1 – Correspondence, Folder 10 - Radio, Film & Television, etc.

these cartoons achieved even greater fame on television. In 1949 Warner Brothers released Jones' short cartoon, *Long-Haired Hare*, in which Bugs Bunny feuded with an operatic baritone named Giovanni Jones. The cartoon contains several operatic numbers including the sextet from *Lucia di Lammermoor*, "Largo al Factotum" from *The Barber of Seville*, and Wagner's *Lohengrin* prelude. Bugs also impersonates conductor Leopold Stokowski. The following year Jones made another opera oriented cartoon, *Rabbit of Seville*, which begins at an opera house at the start of a performance of *The Barber of Seville*. Bugs Bunny sings silly English lyrics to the music of Rossini's Overture while shaving (and abusing) Elmer Fudd. At one point Bugs dresses in drag, but at the end in a switch, Elmer enters in a wedding dress to marry Bugs. Bugs instead drops him into a wedding cake marked, "The Marriage of Figaro," playing on the presence of the barber, Figaro, as a character in both *The Barber of Seville* and *The Marriage of Figaro*. By the end of the piece, the cartoon has used opera subversively to create gender confusion and a lot of laughs.

*What's Opera, Doc?* (1957) is perhaps the best-known opera cartoon and Chuck Jones' most ambitious short animation project. Unlike his previous opera cartoons in the straightforward slapstick style of a typical *Looney Tunes* short, Jones gave *What's Opera, Doc?* a much more stylized and artistic look and feel. Instead of his average sixty backgrounds for cartoons of a similar length, Jones and his animators used 104 for this cartoon adding to its complexity. The director also studied film clips of Ballet Russe dancers to get the ballet moves in the cartoon right. Unlike the cheerful, bouncy music from Rossini's comic operas used in earlier opera cartoons, *What's Opera, Doc?* primarily included serious and solemn music from Wagner's *The Ring of the Nibelungen*,

which the cartoon matches with a style of faux profundity. In *Die Walküre*, the second opera in the *Ring* cycle, “The Ride of Valkyries” heralds the arrival of the Valkyrie goddesses who have come to carry the bodies of slain warriors to Valhalla. In the cartoon, Elmer Fudd in a horned helmet repeatedly sings “Kill the Wabbit” to the same music. Once again Bugs Bunny appears in drag as the main Valkyrie, Brünnhilde. In addition to the *Ring*, the cartoon also contains music from other Wagnerian operas, *Tannhäuser*, *Rienzi*, and *Der fliegende Holländer*, as well as some music by Mussorgsky and *Looney Tunes*’ composer Carl Stalling. The National Film Registry later named *What’s Opera, Doc?* one of “the most culturally, historically, and aesthetically significant films of our time.” In elaborating on the intended audiences for these animated shorts, Chuck Jones later wrote: “These cartoons were never made for children. Nor were they made for adults. They were made for *me*.” Nonetheless, many children and adults would have seen these cartoons playing before featured films in movie theaters around the country and later with frequent replays on their television screens at home. These cartoons satirize opera and make it fun and funny, but they also show Jones’ true respect for the art form.<sup>592</sup>

Not only did ridicule and parody diffuse the highbrow and high-class reputation of opera during the Classic Hollywood era, laughter in general could make opera movies and programs more appealing to all audiences and less reverentially serious. *Rose Marie*, an operetta with added operatic numbers released a few months after *A Night at the Opera*, provides a good example of an opera film enhanced by its humor and lightness. One article about the movie dwelt extensively on its comedic aspects. After lauding the

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<sup>592</sup> David Schroeder, *Cinema’s Allusions, Opera’s Allure: The Operatic Impulse in Film* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 223-228; “About Chuck Jones: ‘Animation Isn’t the Illusion of Life; It is Life,’” Chuck Jones Official Site (September 5, 2013), <http://www.chuckjones.com/about-chuck-jones/>.

film's "tendency to humor," the author praised the movie's star, Jeanette MacDonald, for her comedic ability and commented on the plot's funny "freak predicament" of placing a prima donna in a wilderness. *Rose Marie's* humor and eclectic mix of music helped to give the film broad appeal and box-office success. Trade paper reviews particularly made a point of the movie's appropriateness for all strata of American society. The reviewer for *Film Curb* noted the movie's "appeal to all classes." A *Harrison's Reports'* review deemed it "an outstanding production, for the masses as well as the cultured picture-goer," while the *Motion Picture Daily* effused, "With definite appeal for all, the picture should draw even those who are not confirmed movie-goers."<sup>593</sup> Similarly, a *New York Times* reviewer praised Grace Moore for her comedic abilities in her most popular film, *One Night of Love*.<sup>594</sup> Some very positive reviews of the movie *Metropolitan* focus on the humor of the film. One article praised not only the comedy in the picture but also the absence of what the writer considered to be some common failings of operatic musicals. The reviewer approvingly quoted *British Film Institute* critics: "It is as full of genuine drama and natural humour, and of instinct with good taste, and appreciation of the worth of music, as it is free from vulgarity, sentimentality and high-browism."<sup>595</sup>

In an introduction for a television premiere of a new American opera by Douglas Moore, Jan Peerce reminded the viewing audience that the great classical composers of the past wrote their music for the masses. Arguing that opera is entertainment, he asserted that the clichés surrounding opera had to be removed so that audiences could simply

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<sup>593</sup> *Rose Marie* reviews in *New Yorker* (February 8, 1936): 68; *Film Curb* (January 18, 1936): 13; *Harrison's Reports'* (February 8, 1936); and *Motion Picture Daily* (January 10, 1936): 16.

<sup>594</sup> "Besides shining as a successful prima donna in the renditions of several opera arias, Grace Moore, in her new picture, 'One Night of Love,' also proves herself to be quite an expert comedienne." Mordaunt Hall, *One Night of Love* review, *New York Times* (September 7, 1934): 3.

<sup>595</sup> Fawkes, *Opera on Film*, 118; D. W. Buchanan, *Metropolitan* review, *Canadian Forum* (March 1936): 11.

enjoy themselves. Stressing the popularity of opera, he noted that classical music record sales had skyrocketed more than 760% over the previous twenty years. Peerce declared to his TV viewers: “This snobbery about classical music must end!”<sup>596</sup> Such freedom from “high-browism” and snobbery was a major appeal of many of the most successful opera movies and programs of the Classic Hollywood era. One author discussed this new way of treating opera in his review of RKO’s *That Girl from Paris*: “The final impudent gesture of the 1936 cinema is RKO Radio’s tossing of [soprano] Lily Pons to a swing band...No longer are the Metropolitan songbirds sacrosanct, requiring reverential handling and the protracted adulation of script and camera.”<sup>597</sup> These sort of programs treated opera as just another part of popular culture in ways reminiscent of staged opera in the early to mid-nineteenth century, when opera had been more malleable and audiences more equal and diverse.

At the time of the opera film boom of the 1930s, working-class characters, issues, and concerns became more prominent in a variety of American cultural forms, including supposedly highbrow or high-class ones. The messages of these opera movies fit well with the populism of the times to which so many workers adhered. This may help to explain the widespread popularity of many of these films. No doubt in the hard times of the Great Depression, many in the middle class, themselves struggling to maintain their status, would also have approved of films that criticized upper-class, high-society behavior that excluded them. In the post-war years, prosperity returned for many Americans and the middle class grew substantially. Many of the opera films of the post-

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<sup>596</sup> Television script, Jan Peerce Papers, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Box 21, Folder 19.

<sup>597</sup> F. S. Nugent, *That Girl from Paris* review, *New York Times* (January 1, 1937): 29.

war years still attempted to attract working-class viewers, continuing to reuse several of the same themes that appealed to Depression-era audiences. These “rags-to-riches” stories of working-class singers rising to success may have also provided many middle-class viewers with themes reminiscent of their own move from urban poverty in often ethnically segregated neighborhoods to post-war suburban affluence.

Movies and other mass media propagated these themes about good working-class opera singers and bad wealthy opera snobs in movie theaters and homes across the country. In doing so, they appealed to new and larger groups of people with diverse and novel messages about opera. Instead of the Metropolitan’s treatment of opera as sacred and elevated, movies and radio and television programs tried to make opera fun and flexible, often to the point of directly criticizing or parodying the Met and other opera houses like it. They reconstituted opera’s publics, in part, by transforming discourses used to hail newer and broader audiences for opera. Box-office success and accounts of movie theater reactions indicate that audiences to a significant extent responded to this appeal. By rewriting the discourses surrounding opera in the United States, these media helped to shift and enlarge the publics for this cultural form and the variety of messages audiences had the opportunity to take away from it.



## EPILOGUE

### Changes and Trade-Offs

In the early to mid-twentieth century, opera experienced a golden period of popularity in the media. It appeared frequently and in places and manners that would be unexpected today. Its effects were far reaching and varied. By the late 1950s during the nascent rock-‘n’-roll era, however, opera’s position in the mass media began to change in significant ways. Operatic films reached a turning point by the 1960s. They declined in number and importance after the untimely death in 1959 of Mario Lanza, the last of the great movie opera stars, at the age of thirty-eight. Nobody of his stature and fame made a career of singing movie operas again. Lanza’s studio, MGM, released more operatic musicals than any other Hollywood studio. Musical were MGM’s most significant genre from the late 1940s through the mid-1950s but had declined significantly in importance by the end of the decade, as Hollywood tried new means of winning back audiences television had stolen.<sup>598</sup> Since most operatic films of this era were musicals, less opera appeared in the nation’s movie theaters by the start of the 1960s. In addition, Hollywood began to produce new types of musicals, especially filmed versions of Broadway shows, often in flashy Technicolor and cinemascope. Typically the music in these movies was

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<sup>598</sup> Roy Pickard, *The Hollywood Studios* (London: F. Muller, 1978), 371.

more cohesive and less diverse. It became atypical for a film to contain both popular and operatic numbers as had previously been common.

Although Hollywood turned away from opera for the most part by the 1960s, European filmmakers continued periodically to adapt full operas for the screen, as they had done from the first days of the motion picture. In the late Cold War era, several experimented with creating especially artistic or innovative adaptations. Key representative opera movies, some released in movie theaters and others made for television, include Paul Czinner's *Der Rosenkavalier* (1960), Jean-Pierre Ponnelle's *Madama Butterfly* (1974) and *Le Nozze di Figaro* (1976), Ingmar Bergman's *The Magic Flute* (1975), Joseph Losey's *Don Giovanni* (1979), Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's *Parsifal* (1982), and Francesco Rosi's *Carmen* (1984). Italian film director Franco Zeffirelli especially focused on this type of opera movie with his *La Traviata* (1982), *Cavalleria Rusticana* (1982), *I Pagliacci* (1982), and *Otello* (1986), all starring Plácido Domingo. The repeated playing of Caruso records on an old phonograph formed an important part of the plot in German director Werner Herzog's 1982 film, *Fitzcarraldo*. Two 1994 European movies, *Farinelli* and *Celestial Clockwork*, had opera singers as their main characters.<sup>599</sup> By the late twentieth century, Hollywood began to turn to opera once more, although still not to the extent of earlier decades and often in a different manner. American soldiers play a recording of "The Ride of Valkyries" from *Die Walküre* as they attack a Vietnamese village by helicopter in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979). Like previous operatic celebrities, Luciano Pavarotti starred in the MGM movie *Yes, Giorgio* in 1982, but after the film failed at the box-office and critics panned his

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<sup>599</sup> Marcia J. Citron, *Opera on Screen* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 20-68.

performance, the tenor never again acted in a Hollywood movie.<sup>600</sup> The era of professional opera singing movie stars had passed. Opera played a key role in the characterization of major figures in some successful films of the 1980s and 1990s, however, including most prominently *Moonstruck* (1987), *Philadelphia* (1993), and *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), which associated opera with Italian-Americans, gays, and prisoners, respectively. Other movies, like *Pretty Woman* (1990) and *The Age of Innocence* (1993), made attendance at the opera part of the plot and a continuing signifier of wealth.

Like movies, radio also underwent major transformations in the 1950s. With television now a dominant rival, many sponsors began to switch their financial support to new TV programs. Lack of sponsors, in turn, caused radio stations to cancel most of their programs, often replacing them with disc jockeys playing popular music.<sup>601</sup> After the demise of “old time radio” by the early 1960s, opera singers no longer appeared on their own radio shows or as guest stars on music, comedy, and variety programs. The Met continued its full-length Saturday matinee broadcasts, but opera now often appeared only in complete versions on the radio as in the opera house. Some opera singers had their own television shows, but most of these programs ended by the late 1950s.<sup>602</sup> ABC cancelled the classical/operatic music show, *The Voice of Firestone*, in 1959. That same year *The Bell Telephone Hour* made its transitions from radio to television, but in 1968, a year of significant social upheaval and change, NBC canceled that long-running show

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<sup>600</sup> Richard Fawkes, *Opera on Film* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 2000), 191-192.

<sup>601</sup> Susan Douglas, *Listening In: From Amos 'n' Andy and Edward R. Murrow to Wolfman Jack and Howard Stern* (New York: Times Books, 1999), 219-255.

<sup>602</sup> Although as a notable exception, American soprano Beverly Sills substituted for Johnny Carson as the host of the popular *Tonight Show* on several occasions in the 1980s. Other opera singers did sometimes appear as guests on talk shows like the *Tonight Show* during the 1970s and 1980s, but they typically did not perform operatic numbers on these programs.

too. In 1964, *The NBC Opera Theatre* ended its fifteen-year run. *The Ed Sullivan Show*, the most popular program to feature opera singers and classical musicians regularly, went off the air in 1971, as grittier and more socially relevant programming became more common. The Metropolitan Opera's *Live from the Met* series on PBS revived television opera in 1977, but for more limited and often upscale viewers. These full-length live opera broadcasts from the stage of the Met helped bring opera to a new generation of viewers. Nonetheless, this new series was quantitatively and qualitatively different from earlier opera-oriented television shows. NBC had produced its operatic adaptations specifically for television and not for the stage. The success of the Met telecasts also could not approach that of a program like *The Ed Sullivan Show*, and never again were several opera related shows on the air at the same time as in the 1950s. These new performances were shown in complete versions and lacked the diversity of form and format of the earlier shows. Full operas also had a spike in popularity on record, as a new generation of opera stars like Luciano Pavarotti, Plácido Domingo, Mirella Freni, Montserrat Caballé, and Sherrill Milnes began making numerous stereo recordings of operas in the 1960s and 1970s. These recordings, however, were most popular with those who were already opera fans and not the general public.<sup>603</sup>

As the twentieth century progressed, opera houses became less stratified and the power of social elites became less pronounced. During the Great Depression, the Metropolitan Opera suffered financially, as hard times affected its public and patrons. By 1940 the collection of box holders that had owned the Met since its creation sold its shares to a non-profit organization, the Metropolitan Opera Association, breaking much

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<sup>603</sup> John Dizikes, *Opera in America: A Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 480.

of the power of elite families over the Met's administration.<sup>604</sup> In the post-war years, opera houses in America opened up to broader audiences as the nation's populace became wealthier and better able to afford opera attendance. In 1967, at time of flourishing social justice movements, the Metropolitan Opera Company moved into a newly constructed opera house at Lincoln Center. The house had only one tier of boxes for its wealthiest patrons, a drastic decrease from the old house. Instead, the Met began to rely more on single ticket buyers sitting in the balconies and orchestra sections for their audiences. Notably too, the so-called Diamond Horseshoe design of the boxes, which allowed members of high society to watch each other during performances, was not replicated in the new house. Around the time of the Met's move, dozens of smaller opera companies formed across the nation, bringing opera to much more regionally diverse areas.<sup>605</sup> Opera houses today still grapple with the old stereotypes that opera is only for the wealthy and that the art form is too lofty and prestigious for the average viewer to appreciate. Through efforts to utilize popular technologies, modern marketing, and in some places discounted ticket prices, many of America's opera companies are attempting (with varying levels of success) to reach out to new bigger, younger, and more diverse audiences. The dependence of American opera companies on the donations of the wealthy, however, insures that they still retain significant influence over what occurs within those companies to this day.<sup>606</sup>

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<sup>604</sup> Dizikes, *Opera in America*, 435-437.

<sup>605</sup> Dizikes, *Opera in America*, 510-518, 528-535.

<sup>606</sup> It is conceivable that the frequent appearance of opera in popular media for diverse audiences may have at least partially influenced the breaking down of social hierarchies at the Met and other American opera houses over the course of the twentieth century.

At a time when opera had been sacralized and opera houses set apart, opera in the media helped to popularize and, in some ways, transform the art form. One commentator writing in 1915, the year of *Carmen*'s release, argued that both the motion picture and phonograph were democratizing opera by bringing it to new places and allowing better quality productions to be seen outside of major cities. He closed the article: "The time is past when any field of artistic activity is confined to an essentially aristocratic environment. Obviously this is as it should be. Art is for every one who can appreciate it sympathetically and intelligently and not alone for those who happen to be able to afford it de luxe."<sup>607</sup> Another writer early in the century discussed the effects of the phonograph: "[T]he inventors of the devices of what is commonly misnamed 'mechanical music' bring the stars of the opera and of music nearer to the ears and the hearts of the people. No longer is the world of music barred from those who are unable to pay the tribute of the rich."<sup>608</sup>

Even with this popularization, the culture industries did not inevitably turn opera into generic "mass culture" disconnected from its traditional publics. Groups like Italian-Americans and the working class still continued to experience opera—only now they often heard and saw it via the movies, records, radio, and television. Opera and a wide variety of other cultural forms were more easily accessible than ever before. Mass media technologies of the early to mid-twentieth century broke down divisions between different types of culture and diverse publics. The media also opened up new opportunities for opera singers to achieve fame, independence, and cultural capital, including women performers like Geraldine Farrar, who were outside of elite groupings

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<sup>607</sup> E. H. Bierstadt, "Opera in Moving Pictures," *Opera Magazine* (October 1915): 30-32.

<sup>608</sup> "The Democracy of Music Achieved by Invention," *Current Literature* XLII (June 1907) 6: 670.

and whose opportunities were often otherwise limited. The celebrity the media created could have downsides, however, as Enrico Caruso discovered during the biased coverage of the monkey house incident.

In a way, these new media allowed greater access to “high” cultural products by breaking through any class or prestige based boundaries and limitations. On the other hand, the consolidation of these media as big businesses and their entrenchment as culture industries that occurred at the same time limited access to the production of films, records, and shows. Zukor’s integrated business model became the industry standard and a small group of “major” studios came to dominate Hollywood, pushing out a diverse array of small companies and moviemakers and interpreting opera via increasingly market-driven concerns. This in turn restricted the diversity of cultural products available—expanding choices while also limiting them in other ways. Certain groups, in particular, were often restricted in their participation in the democratization of culture. Open homosexuals were absent in Hollywood’s opera movies until late in the twentieth century both as performers and characters, even though opera, and especially “diva worship” of the great sopranos, was significant within urban homosexual culture at the time. Greek-American soprano, Maria Callas, who first rose to fame in the 1950s, was an especially important part of homosexual culture in the years before the Stonewall riots and the start of the gay liberation movements. “Opera queens,” a certain type of devoted gay male opera/diva lovers, were (and are) important figures within many homosexual communities and often make up a large portion of opera’s audiences and most devoted fans.<sup>609</sup>

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<sup>609</sup> Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen’s Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1993), 9-10, 17, 19, 134-137; Mitchell Morris, “Reading as an Opera Queen,” in

As in the case of homosexuals, the emerging culture industries often excluded images of blacks and other minorities as opera singers and the prestige that accompanied that profession. Paul Robeson, the most prominent male African-American classical singer of the twentieth century, had a prolific recording career, but he mainly recorded spirituals, as well as art songs, popular tunes, folk songs, and numbers from musicals. He did not record any operatic arias until the 1950s, after the birth of the modern Civil Rights movement. Because of the highly contentious nature of his anti-colonial and socialistic political beliefs during the Cold War, Robeson also did not appear on American television. He did star in several movies, but only in his British films, significantly, was he allowed to sing operatic pieces onscreen. In the 1936 British film, *Song of Freedom*, Robeson performed a scene as the Caribbean dictator from American composer Louis Gruenberg's opera, *The Emperor Jones*.<sup>610</sup> Similarly, contralto, Marian Anderson, the most successful African-American female singer of the 1920s through 1950s, never appeared in any motion pictures unlike Robeson and many of her white colleagues.<sup>611</sup>

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*Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship*, ed. Ruth A. Solie (Oakland: University of California Press, 1995), 184; David Schroeder, *Cinema's Allusions, Opera's Allure: The Operatic Impulse in Film* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 274-283; George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: BasicBooks, 1994), 351. Koestenbaum devotes a full chapter to the "Callas Cult" in the homosexual community, especially focusing on his own reactions to her as a gay man. Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat*, 134-153.

<sup>610</sup> Allen Lord Thompson, *Paul Robeson: Artist and Activist: On Records, Radio and Television* (Wellingborough: A.L. Thompson, 1998). Robeson did, however, appear on television twice in Britain and once in East Germany.

<sup>611</sup> By the early 1960s, soprano Leontyne Price began to eclipse the fame of Anderson. It is notable too that the mass media provided Price with her start in opera. She made her operatic debut in an NBC-Television production of Puccini's *Tosca* in 1954. Although the station received complaints about her casting, her success in the role helped to promote NBC's televised opera series. "Here and There," *Holiday* (December 1963), 218, NBC Collection, Library of Congress, The History Files, Folder 1221 (NBC Opera 1963-4); James L. Baughman, *Same Time, Same Station: Creating American Television, 1948-1961* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 163-164.



Still, even African-American singers in a pre-civil rights context illustrate how opera in the mass media provided novel mixtures of opportunity and exclusion. This sort of ambiguity and tension can be seen in the Daughters of the American Revolution controversy with Marian Anderson. The Daughters of the American Revolution did not allow Anderson to sing at Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C. because of racial reasons; however, she received large-scale support for an acclaimed alternate concert at the Lincoln Memorial. Because this concert was broadcast over the radio, millions more listeners heard her sing than ever could have at Constitution Hall.<sup>612</sup> While Anderson did not perform in the mass media as frequently as many white singers, she nonetheless had a long and significant involvement in radio, records, and television. Victor Talking Machine Company signed her in 1923 to make recordings of spirituals. From 1935 through 1955, she recorded a wide variety of music, including African-American folk songs, arts songs, and operatic arias. Beginning with her 1952 performance on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, Anderson also appeared on several television programs. In these mass media performances, she typically combined “highbrow,” popular, and folk material that together had a wide appeal.<sup>613</sup> Although limited in his portrayals on the big screen, Robeson was also able to utilize the mass media to his advantage. During World War II, he used the radio to compare the denial of full rights for African-Americans in the United States to the oppression of the fascists Americans were then fighting. In the post-war years, Robeson again used the radio not only to spread his art throughout the United States and Europe, but also to promote political causes, including the CIO, the Progressive Party, and the American Labor Party. Like Anderson, in his radio broadcasts,

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<sup>612</sup> Raymond Arsenault, *The Sound of Freedom: Marian Anderson, the Lincoln Memorial, and the Concert That Awakened America* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009).

<sup>613</sup> Allan Keiler, *Marian Anderson: A Singer's Journey* (New York: Scribner, 2000), 287, 353-379.

Robeson successfully combined a stunning variety of material of differing valences and styles.<sup>614</sup>

Although performers, producers, and audiences were in some ways limited in their choices by the decisions and structures of the culture industries, the mass media nevertheless gave audiences the opportunity to experience opera outside of the social confines and strictures of the modern opera house. At a time when grand opera houses were relatively few in number in the United States and opera companies typically toured in limited areas or for short periods, movies spread opera to thousands of theaters across the country. The phonograph, radio, and television brought it into people's homes. Opera in reality had always been part of American popular culture, but the mass media greatly increased its popularity and accessibility, though often only in fragmented form—cut, reorganized, rearranged, or taken out of context.

The same media that spread opera to larger and more diverse audiences in new forms and formats conversely had a deleterious effect on local theatrical institutions, such as the multi-purpose community opera house. Local opera houses began to decline significantly in the 1920s. By the end of the next decade, almost all had already closed.

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<sup>614</sup> “1944 NBC Radio, WEA, New York,” January 2, 1944, Paul and Eslanda Robeson Collection, Moorland-Spangarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C, Radio Speeches; “1944 WHK Radio Station,” November 5, 1944, Paul and Eslanda Robeson Collection, Howard University, Radio Speeches; “1948 Progressive Party Broadcast of Henry A. Wallace and Paul Robeson, Mutual Broadcasting Co., Hotel Theresa,” October 29, 1948, Paul and Eslanda Robeson Collection, Howard University, Radio Speeches, Progressive Party Broadcast; “Text of Broadcast, Radio Station WMCA, Nov 6, 1950: Labor for Victory,” Paul and Eslanda Robeson Collection, Howard University, Radio Speeches, 1950 American Labor Party. Robeson made many radio broadcasts in the United Kingdom. A British listener wrote to him after one such show: “You’re doing a wonderful job with your songs, helping to break down racial barriers.” Ethel Miller, The Ridgeway, N.W.II, Letter, October 14, 1959, Paul and Eslanda Robeson Collection, Howard University, BBC Radio, listener responses, 1959-1961. To get a sense of the variety of Robeson’s repertoire, on a Christmas program in 1959, he performed traditional African-American songs like “Water Boy,” spirituals like “Swing Low Sweet Chariot,” the operatic aria, “Isis and Osiris” from *The Magic Flute*, English, Scottish, and Irish folk songs including “The Bonnie Earl o’ Moray,” a religious song by Händel, sea chanteys such as “Haul Away Joe” and “Blow the Man Down,” and the Christmas classic, “Silent Night.” Christmas Program, November 8, 1959, Paul and Eslanda Robeson Collection, Howard University, BBC Radio, listener responses, 1959-1961.

The death of the community opera house was due to several factors, including the increasing use of high school auditoriums for local assemblies and the proliferation of family cars, which allowed audiences to attend performances outside of their neighborhoods. Because of the phonograph and radio too, fewer people went out for their entertainment. The foremost cause of this decline, however, was the popularity and inexpensiveness of the motion picture. Movies were cheaper to produce and attend than local performances and events. Not only did they harm small opera houses, films also helped to eliminate touring theatrical and operatic companies (as well as vaudeville acts) that frequently appeared at such houses. Many local opera houses eventually became movie theaters. The history of the Academy of Music in Meaville, Pennsylvania is typical. Built in 1885 at the height of Gilded Age sacralization, its owners changed its name to the Paramount Theatre in 1924 and began exclusively showing movies. Other opera houses were turned into stores, apartments, and storage areas. Many also burnt down or were razed. During the flourishing of mass culture, opera and other entertainments became more disembodied in media and less a part of people's culture within their own neighborhoods. For Italians, in particular, the mass media made their vernacular culture more visible and celebrated, but at the same time it helped to replace face-to-face community connectedness and cultural participation on a larger scale.<sup>615</sup>

Movies and other mass media forms highlight opera's particular role in popular culture and its complex effects in the early to mid-twentieth century, as well as provide us

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<sup>615</sup> William Faricy Condee, *Coal and Culture: Opera Houses in Appalachia* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2005), 154-156, 162-164. Condee elaborates on the effect of the movies on local opera houses: "[T]he most significant factor in the decline of opera houses and traveling productions was the development of the movie industry between 1910 and 1920. Movies were much cheaper to attend, so the people with the lowest incomes left the opera house for the cinemas, leaving the galleries unfilled. Opera houses responded by incorporating film into the entertainment package...or by converting entirely to showing movies. The movie industry also forced this changeover, in that it worked to gain exclusive rights for booking auditoriums, with the goal of driving out live theatrical productions." *Ibid.*, 156.

with a sense of attitudes in American society towards opera. Producers of popular culture, including performers, were able to use to their advantage the “highbrow” signification of opera that had developed in prominent opera houses like the Met. At the same time, they continued in practical terms to treat the genre as another piece of pop culture. These examples from the media indicate how opera could simultaneously be elite and popular. Its meaning and consequences at any given time or place was structured by its medium, venue, format, and quality. Moviemakers like Cecil B. DeMille and Jesse Lasky were able to take advantage of this duality by making operatic films that were both “elevated” *and* popular. Later filmmakers sometimes used opera’s “high culture” connotation merely as a target, while reconfiguring opera as not only popular but also working class. These media show that opera, even as a prestigious art, did not have to be just a social event for the well-to-do, nor inextricably hinged to any single class or type of people. Rather, these films, programs, and recordings illustrate that opera could be the purview and possession of Americans from a wide variety of backgrounds, regardless of class, social station, ethnicity, or gender. The mass media opened opera to new and old publics alike. In the process it transformed the role of opera in American society, while conversely influencing the development of these media themselves.

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