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The Phenomenal Side of Operatic Performance: The Implications of Promotion Strategies on Cinematic Representations of the 21st Century

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During recent decades, scholars have paid attention to the ways in which marketing strategies surrounded the participation of professional opera singers in 1930s/1940s Hollywood films. Opera singers used cinema to promote themselves as film stars, while Hollywood, in turn, made use of real-life celebrities in order to market films containing opera to a wider audience. Recent cinema, just like films from this earlier period, reflects cross-promotion strategies between cinema and the classical music industry through the participation of professional opera singers. When considering these singers' audio-visual appearances and the roles their performances play within the film plots, some films reveal interesting connections with the historical predecessors. This article investigates the use of cross-marketing strategies in three recent films and queries the broader tropes they adhere to through the configurations of the singers' performances and their roles in the fictional situations. Through exploring these films, I argue that they promote a representation of opera that combines two specific tropes in the process of marketing. An audio-visual display of the singers as real-life celebrities points to an elaboration of the aspect of singer promotion seen in films from the 1930s and early 1940s. Beyond this, the more recent trope of associating opera with an audience listening with rapt attention is included, which casts the opera singer in a new light and enhances this bodily promotion of the singer.



Introduction

In 2016, the film company Paramount published a music video on YouTube featuring the Russian soprano Aida Garifullina singing Léo Delibes's 'Bell Song' from the opera *Lakmé* (1883).¹ The video promoted the singer's debut album (*Aida Garifullina*, 2017), which included this aria alongside other operatic highlights. The release of the promotional video coincided with the premiere of the film *Florence Foster Jenkins* (Stephen Frears, 2016), which itself contained an abbreviated version of the same performance. In the film, Garifullina plays the part of the historical soprano Lily Pons, and her physical appearance as Pons is the same as it is in the music video. Moreover, she appears in the same venue (Hammersmith Apollo in London, which, in the film, represents Carnegie Hall in New York City) (Anonymous, 2016).² The simultaneous releases of the singer's performance of the 'Bell Song' is clearly a promotional strategy in support of a rising star. However, this approach can also be viewed as the marketing of a film centred on opera, pointing to possible synergies between the cinematic and classical music industries (cf. Smith, 1998: 186–187).

The casting of a professional singer in the character role of a singer, enabling the real-life singer to perform music from their live and recorded repertoire, is a strategy of cross-promotion between popular music and film industries that has been used since the late 1970s (Smith, 1998: 197). Indeed, similar practices surrounded the appearance of professional opera singers in early Hollywood films. Recent research has drawn attention to the way opera singers exploited cinema in order to promote themselves as film stars, while Hollywood, in turn, made use of the real-life celebrities as a means of marketing films containing opera to a wider audience (Bombola, 2018; Everett, 2019).

In this article, I discuss two other recent films featuring professional opera singers—*The Immigrant* (James Gray, 2013) and *To Rome with Love* (Woody Allen, 2012)—in addition to *Florence Foster Jenkins*. I explore how this phenomenon of cross-promotion is used in modern-day cinematic promotion and the ways in which this affects the image of opera as depicted by contemporary cinema. The three films provide interesting case studies because this aspect of their marketing strategies appears to be somewhat concealed or veiled; the singers do not appear as themselves but in character roles of historical and/or fictional characters. However, they appear on-screen in operatic performances for extended periods, all of which take place at crucial moments in the plots. By taking recent research on intersections between opera and cinema, and

¹ The music video was released on behalf of UMG (Universal Music Group) and Decca Music Group Ltd. and it was recorded together with London Metropolitan Orchestra (directed by Terry Davies).

² On the video's connection with the film, see also Salazar (2017).

opera singer promotion via cinema, into consideration—especially that undertaken by João Pedro Cachopo (2014) and Gina Bombola (2018)—I show how the films illuminate broader tropes surrounding opera–film encounters. I begin by outlining short contextual backdrops to the relationship between opera and cinema and to the appearance of professional opera singers in film; I then explore the three recent films’ audio–visual configurations of the singers’ performances and the functions of the performances in the fictional situations. I argue that the films draw upon established tropes in the process of marketing through the visualization of singers and listeners. The aspect of singer promotion seen in films from the 1930s and early 1940s is expanded and connected with a more recent trope where the opera performance is associated with an audience listening with rapt attention. This implies that new dimensions have been added to the marketing strategies, which, in turn, affects the image of opera and opera singers presented by cinema of today.

Contextual Backdrops

The relationship between opera and cinema

The relationship between opera and cinema, though longstanding, has changed over time through various opera–film encounters. In the silent era, operatic scores (together with pantomime and melodrama) served as a guiding influence for the music accompanying the moving images, and the operatic voice was used as a means of creating emotional intensity (Ladd, 2018: 30). At the same time, the technology of cinema was used both in the production of opera shorts and in the recording of entire operas (a screen version of Richard Strauss’s *The Cavalier of the Rose* was recorded in Austria 1926), even though both required separation from voice and body (cf. Joe, 2013; Ladd, 2018). Turning to more recent opera–film encounters, opera produced for film and television in the 1970s and 1980s (opera films), show how opera could be subsumed by the medium of film through, for example, visualizations concealing singing, or, conversely, a sense of opera’s spectacular quality could be enhanced through editing (cf. Cachopo, 2014; Citron, 2010). Sitting in a slightly different space from filmic adaptations, recordings of live performances place the attentive spectatorship as an important aspect of operatic presentation. Recent scholarship has shown how, in video recordings of live opera performances, producers generally create a sense of ‘here and now’ through a visualization that tries to capture the specific ‘aura’ of excitement among the audience in the opera house during this kind of performance (Cachopo, 2014: 323; cf. Morris, 2010).

Similarly, in several feature films from the 1980s and 1990s, in addition to acting as a dramatic device in Mafia films, such as *The Untouchables* (Brian De Palma, 1987)

and *Godfather III* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1990), opera singing performed in a staged setting in an opera house or mediated via gramophone is combined with receptive rapture. Whereas live recorded performances attempt to recreate the atmosphere of a collective musical experience located in a specific time and place, with predetermined rules and rituals, in cinematic versions the presentational sense of a live audience engaging in a communal activity is generally less important. Instead, in the films from the 1980s and 1990s the experience of opera singing serves the plot, evoking a combination of wonder and/or emotional depth. João Pedro Cachopo (2014: 323) has pointed to how listening to this kind of song via technological mediation is associated with a ‘feeling of distanced wonder’ in the films *Diva* (Jean-Jacques Beineix, 1981), *Fitzcarraldo* (Werner Herzog, 1982), and *E la Nave Va* (Federico Fellini, 1983).³ Marc A. Weiner (2002) and Marcia Citron (2010; 2011), in turn, have shown how in *Moonstruck* (Norman Jewison, 1987), *Pretty Woman* (Garry Marshall, 1990), *Philadelphia* (Jonathan Demme, 1993) and *The Shawshank Redemption* (Frank Darabont, 1994) listening to opera singing in opera houses or via gramophone becomes associated with transcendence and/or interiority through the audio-visual configuration.

The professional singer in Hollywood film with focus on the 1930s and early 1940s

Professional opera singers have participated in films throughout cinema’s history. Famous examples include Enrico Caruso’s showcasing of himself in silent film in the 1920s; the Metropolitan Opera soprano Grace Moore’s success in the musical film *One Night of Love* (Victor Schertzinger, 1934); the tenor Mario Lanza acting the part of Enrico Caruso in *The Great Caruso* (Richard Thorpe, 1951) and Luciano Pavarotti starring as a famous Italian opera singer in *Yes, Giorgio* (Franklin J. Schaffner, 1982).⁴ Besides promoting themselves, the involvement of singers in cinema has often been seen as a way to disseminate opera music and operatic singing to a wider audience and to attract new audiences to the opera houses. Pavarotti, for example, mentioned making opera available to more people via film as a motivation for his participation in cinema in the 1980s (Klemesrud, 1981). According to William A. Everett (2019: 272), Metropolitan Opera stars participating in cinema in the 1930s, such as the baritone Lawrence Tibbett and Moore, were guided by ‘the dual purpose of developing their own careers and bringing operatic-style singing to wider audiences through a decidedly popular medium’.

³ On this kind of representation in *Diva*, see also Levin (2002: 121–132).

⁴ On this phenomenon, see for example Joe (2013), Wilson (2019) and Everett (2019).

The connections between professional opera singers and cinema have also been of interest to the film industry. Real-life celebrities could be advantageous to production companies, since they can catalyse box office appeal for films containing opera music. Gina Bombola (2018) notes that the use of what was called ‘good music’ (music from the Western art music canon, including opera) in cinema was a debated issue among producers and marketers of Hollywood productions in the 1930s and early 1940s. The debates centred on the idea of Western art music promoting utopian qualities (more specifically as having the ‘power to enrich lives’) on the one hand, and the notion of this kind of music as elitist (appealing to ‘upper-class individuals’) on the other (Bombola, 2018: 153 and 163).

The disputed cultural position of Western art music (for example, opera) affected the production and marketing of films containing this kind of music and that were intended for a general audience. Attempts to drive audience appeal were supported by film studios’ engagement of well-known Metropolitan Opera singers, such as Moore, Tibbett and the soprano Lily Pons, and through an attractive ‘filmic presentation via screen-plays, framing within the plot, and cinematography’ (Bombola, 2018: 157–158). In the films of the 1930s, featuring singers from the Metropolitan Opera, staged settings with effective costumes and décor were means by which to make opera excerpts entertaining and appealing, together with captivating music and singing (Everett, 2019: 279; 288).⁵ A film that shows these devices and that became a box office success was *One Night of Love* (1934), starring Moore (Everett, 2019: 279).

According to Everett (2019: 275), the films from the 1930s featuring Moore, Tibbett and the tenor José Mojica promoted the overarching message that opera ‘was not just for the wealthy elite but, rather, could be enjoyed by anybody’. This is reinforced by the fact that the choice of music was based on its expressive qualities as well as on familiarity to a wider audience.⁶ Moreover, the performances often took place not only in ‘a formal opera house setting’ but also for a ‘mixed class audience’ in, for example, popular venues such as vaudevilles and burlesques (Everett, 2019: 273–275).

Promotion of opera singers in recent decades

Cinema’s role in opera singer promotion has been revealed by several films in the last few decades, where singers appear as fictionalized versions of themselves performing music, usually from forthcoming or recent album releases. In conjunction with the

⁵ On cinematic devices used to feature a vocal performance (in this case of popular music) in films of the 1930s, see also Neumeyer (2000: 37–62).

⁶ For example, the singers performed not only ‘operatic selections’ but also songs from operetta and contemporary popular music (Everett, 2019: 273–275).

release of the Russian soprano Anna Netrebko's second solo album *Sempre Libera* (2004), she appeared in the film *The Princess Diaries 2* (Garry Marshall, 2004), performing the final part of 'Sempre Libera' from Giuseppe Verdi's *La Traviata* (1853). In the film, she sings briefly at a garden party, where she is showcased as a real-life celebrity by one of the fictional characters introducing her as 'opera's new rising star Anna Netrebko'. This cameo is in line with a kind of marketing that Clemens Risi (2016) has pointed to in a recent study of how Netrebko has represented herself in various media. Risi (2016: 151) observes that, at the start of her career (beginning around 2002), this singer was 'marketed according to the rules of the pop market' through, for example, 'photo layouts in magazines' and 'appearances on television shows'.

A similar method of using cinema as a marketing tool is shown in the American mezzo-soprano Vivica Genaux's brief performance of a fragment from 'Ombra Fedele Anch'io', featured in *Idaspe* (Riccardo Broschi, 1730), on stage in the film *Fracture* (Gregory Hoblit, 2007). The aria to which the extract belongs was included on an album with songs from the repertoire of the castrato singer Farinelli, which Genaux had released some years before (*Arias for Farinelli*, 2002). Turning to the 2010s, the South Korean lyric coloratura soprano Sumi Jo ends the film *Youth* (Paolo Sorrentino, 2015) with a complete performance of 'Simple Song # 3', composed specifically for this purpose by the American composer David Lang. Two years following the film premiere, Jo's performance of the song was released together with the soundtrack from the film (*Paolo Sorrentino – Music for Films*, 2017).

Another recent instance of this promotional strategy is Plácido Domingo's appearance in the third season of the Amazon Prime series *Mozart in the Jungle* (Paul Weitz, 2016). Here, Domingo is featured performing the duet 'Là ci darem la mano' from W. A. Mozart's *Don Giovanni* (1787) alongside Monica Bellucci (the voice was recorded by Ana María Martínez) playing an opera diva.⁷ According to Michael Cooper (2016), Domingo saw the performance as an opportunity to reach out to a new audience. Cooper (2016) draws attention to how Domingo used television as a promotional tool, observing that there are 'now far fewer opportunities for classical artists to appear on television', making the offer to sing in the series attractive for the tenor.

Whilst these practices appear to be widespread, *Florence Foster Jenkins*, *The Immigrant* and *To Rome with Love*—the three films I address in this article—deviate from the examples mentioned above in interesting ways, since the singers' performances are more extensive and instead of being transitory moments (which is the case in all the examples mentioned above except for *Youth*), they take place at crucial points in the

⁷ These examples are all mentioned by Salazar (2017).

plot. Moreover, although the professional singers play the roles of fictional and/or historical characters, the films highlight the real-life singers of these roles.

The Audio-Visual Appearance of the Singer

Florence Foster Jenkins (2016)

Returning to Garifullina and her performance in *Florence Foster Jenkins*, a key question emerges: how is she depicted as a singer? This film is a biographical comedy about operatic singing. Set in 1944, it is based on the life of the American socialite and amateur soprano Florence Foster Jenkins, who attracted considerable attention in the first half of the 20th century in New York City thanks to her private recitals, at which she (unintentionally) sang arias out of tune (she also had a studio recording made of her singing). Throughout the film, the eponymous protagonist sings well-known opera arias; however, they are tragically sung out of tune by Meryl Streep, who acts the part of Florence. Lily Pons' singing of Delibes's 'Bell Song' at a recital in Carnegie Hall is the only instance of professional opera singing in the film. However, this singing has a crucial role in the narrative, since it is the experience of this performance that rouses Florence's ambition to sing, thereby creating a turning point in her life.

The portrayal of Garifullina in the role of Pons becomes clear through a comparison of her performance in the film with a scene from the film *Carnegie Hall* (Edgar G. Ulmer, 1947), where Lily Pons sings the same aria at a concert in the same venue (in this case, in the real venue). *Carnegie Hall*'s storyline centres on staged performances of what, according to Bombola (2018: 151), was called 'good music' (the Western art music canon) and the historical singer is cast in the role of herself singing the complete aria. Her performance is introduced by shots that emphasize the singer's celebrity status, and this status is explicitly associated with the 'Bell Song'. The opening of the song's initial vocalizing bridges a transition from a poster advertising her concert, where the camera zooms in on the caption beneath the singer's name, 'world's greatest coloratura soprano', to the programme, where it zooms in on the text 'Delibes Bell Song (from *Lakme*)'. The 'Bell Song' ('Où va la jeune Hindoue?' from Act II of the opera) was a popular recital piece for coloratura sopranos in the early 20th century and one of Pons' showpieces. The aria, sung by Pons, was widely disseminated through live concerts, recordings and in films.⁸ It contains virtuosic passages of wordless coloratura; the most impressive being the initial vocalizing, which has an improvisatory character and ends on the extremely high E, two octaves above middle E.

⁸ Pons also performs the aria in the musical film *I Dream Too Much* (John Cromwell, 1935), where she sings it as part of a longer excerpt from the opera *Lakmé* in a staged setting.

In light of this, the choice of Delibes's aria for the scene in *Florence Foster Jenkins* contributes to the representation of the historical singer and recalls an earlier filmic tradition. As in *Carnegie Hall*, the Lily Pons of *Florence Foster Jenkins* is introduced by a poster advertising the concert upon which her name is printed (to the accompaniment of the aria's instrumental prelude). A comparison between the scenes from the two films, above all points to a negotiation of the image of Pons through Garifullina's performance. In *Carnegie Hall*, the aria's initial vocalizing is made into the point of departure for the singer's vocal display through the way her singing of this part accompanies her introduction. Moreover, the singer's performance of the aria's other prominent coloraturas is promoted by medium close-up shots of her face. Throughout the aria, she is presented with the orchestra as a background, and cross-cuts of the audience coincide with pauses in the vocal melody so as to avoid disrupting the film viewer's experience of her singing.⁹ In the abbreviated version of the aria that Garifullina (in the role of Pons) performs in *Florence Foster Jenkins*, the most prominent coloraturas are instead wholly omitted. The most virtuosic part—the initial improvisatory vocalizing—is cut and the first verse follows directly after the instrumental prelude.¹⁰ Besides the cuts, the aria is transposed down a whole tone to suit Garifullina's lower voice (the aria's main part is presented in A minor instead of in B minor), restricting the dramatic climax of the final cadenza. Furthermore, this cadenza and the other included coloraturas (the vocal line's imitation of bells in the refrain following each verse) are performed to a slower tempo than in the earlier film.

Not only the vocal expression but the visualization is of great importance for Garifullina's appearance as the historical singer. In her recent work on concepts of divadom, Karen Henson (2016: 20) has argued that since the technological innovations in the 19th century, the visual element plays a decisive role in how the audience conceives of the opera singer at the expense of the 'pure power of the voice and the vocal expression'. In *Florence Foster Jenkins*, together with the visualization, the coloraturas that are retained in the version Garifullina performs communicate a seductive and alluring character rather than a means of showcasing the singer, as in *Carnegie Hall*. Whereas Pons performs the aria in a fixed posture, mostly clasping her hands against her breast, Garifullina gently follows the music with her body and repeatedly lays her head back, to one side, smiling with glimmering eyes. Her facial expression is enhanced

⁹ On the importance of a contracted professional singer to be audio-visually promoted through a complete performance, see Neumeyer (2000: 48–49).

¹⁰ Only this verse's first two lines are then included in the performance, directly followed by the refrain closing the second verse (accordingly, the first verse's third and fourth lines, the following refrain and the entire second verse are omitted) and then the vocal cadenza following this refrain, which ends the aria's first part.

by close-up shots of her face seen slightly from below, which are included in the cross-cutting together with wide shots of her and the orchestra (see **Figure 1**). She wears a long, lustrous dress that resembles the dress Pons wears in the earlier film. However, she has wholly bare arms and thereby shows more skin than her predecessor. Moreover, instead of wearing small flowers in a coiffure, as Pons did, a larger flower at one ear frames her flowing hair.

Garifullina's appearance suggests the ambition to make opera 'accessible, entertaining, and visually appealing' for a contemporary film audience, which, though executed through different means in 1930s films, was similarly important in these scenes (Bombola, 2018: 157; cf. Everett, 2019: 279; 288). Such presentation can be related to the notion of 'popular hearing', which Risi (2016: 153) makes use of in order to capture the way in which Netrebko represents herself in line with the pop market. The concept is borrowed from the scholar of popular culture Hans-Otto Hügel, and means that the visualization contributes to produce an 'entertaining, popular form of hearing' (Risi, 2016: 153). Quoting Hügel, Risi (2016: 153) writes that 'in popular hearing, "the communication of music through the performative gestures of the soloist relieves the ear. The eye becomes a second musical sensing organ, and allows a de-concentrated, de-intensified form of hearing which can engage and disengage itself"'.

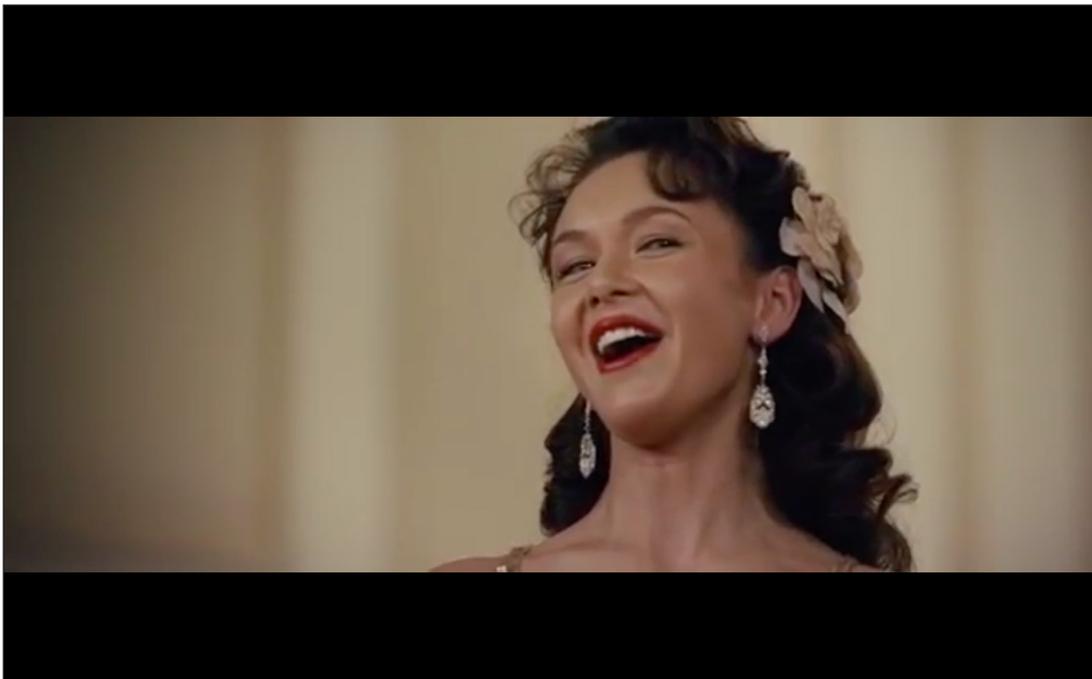


Figure 1: Aida Garifullina in the role of Lily Pons singing Léo Delibes's 'Bell Song' from *Lakmé*. Screenshot from *Florence Foster Jenkins*, directed by Stephen Frears (2016).

The communication of Garifullina's song through the visualization is particularly interesting if considered in conjunction with the images and music videos published on her official website: her image in the film scene promotes her in a way that is closely aligned with the representation of the real-life singer constructed through this site. As with many of her predecessors using cinema in order to disseminate opera to a wider audience, Garifullina noted in an interview that she wants to 'expand the boundaries' by using digital technology so that 'as many people as possible love opera' (Schmid, 2017). Besides participating in popular contexts, such as the 2018 FIFA World Cup opening ceremony when she sang the song 'Angels' together with Robbie Williams, she releases music videos of her performances on YouTube, with some of these also being published on her official website.

Garifullina's website can be seen as presenting an 'accretion of texts and signs', which, according to Francesca Vella (2017: 245) in connection with Jenny Lind's celebrity status, comprises an 'individual's celebrity'. Borrowing the words of Richard Dyer, Vella (2017: 243) posits that the celebrity is 'the result of a "whole media construction"' and its 'rhetoric of immediacy and authenticity'. Garifullina's website presents a combination of close-up shots of the singer's face looking alluringly into the camera and medium close-up shots of her in fashionable attire, often in seductive postures (Garifullina, 2021). According to the interview with the singer, she has posed for Russian *Vogue*; and this dual status as a supermodel and opera singer appears to guide the representation of her through the site's images and music videos (Schmid, 2017). She is often photographed and filmed in places 'away from the stage', just like her older colleague Netrebko (see Risi, 2016: 151). Images of her in public places (such as hotels) are combined with images that convey closeness and immediacy through a more private environment (such as outside in a garden).¹¹ Dyer (2002: 79), investigating film stars, has argued that the star phenomenon in this manner 'depends upon collapsing the distinction between the star-as-person and the star-as performer', in the sense that images reveal 'the personality or type-of-person of the star'.¹²

Furthermore, the promotion video based on Garifullina's performance for the film is published on the site and thereby accentuates its construction of her as celebrity. The video is an extension of the audio-visual communication created in the film scene, since here Garifullina performs the aria's first part in its complete form (the initial vocalizing, the two verses with refrains and the cadenza ending this part). The initial improvisatory vocalizing with which Pons shows off her vocal capacity in *Carnegie*

¹¹ On the importance of closeness for the representation of celebrity, see Risi (2016: 152–153).

¹² On this phenomenon, see also Cloutier (2018: 189–214).

Hall is thereby included. However, just like in the film, the aria is transposed down a whole tone and the coloraturas are performed to a slower tempo, which downplays the virtuosic character of the vocalization. Instead, the song is appealing to the film viewer through the visualization of the singer's attire, gestures and facial expression. In his exploration of *Netrebko*, Risi (2016: 157) concludes that this singer 'in performance was often nothing but a version of herself ... completely subsumed by her own image, and all of her images and poses'.¹³ In a similar manner, the film role of Pons appears, to a large extent, to be subsumed into the image of *Garifullina* as a seductive model, which is emphasized in her own marketing and promotional materials.¹⁴

The Immigrant (2013)

James Gray's *The Immigrant*, like *Florence Foster Jenkins*, contains one actual operatic performance, although the film is permeated by opera music. Throughout the film, fragments of music from various operas underscore the action. This music, however, is heard in the background and is, for the most part, relatively unobtrusive as the film is characterized by sound effects and silence.¹⁵ The scene containing the operatic performance stands out precisely because opera music is dynamically foregrounded here, being performed 'live' in the fictional situation. The music performed is the tenor solo initiating Giacomo Puccini's love duet 'Ma come puoi lasciarmi' from the third act of *La Rondine* (1917).

Through its placement in the plot, the performance indirectly creates associations of opera with what Bombola (2018: 163) calls a 'power to enrich lives'. The scene marks a turning point for the film's protagonist Ewa (played by Marion Cotillard), since she thereafter handles her miserable condition in a new way, taking her life in a new direction. The film, which is modelled on the history of Gray's grandparents, Russian Jews immigrated to America, is set in 1920s New York (Perez, 2014). It narrates the story of Ewa, who escapes her home in Poland together with her sister Magda; they arrive at Ellis Island, New York, as immigrants searching for a better life. Whereas Magda is almost immediately quarantined because of illness, Ewa manages to avoid being deported through the help of Bruno, who she meets on Ellis Island. Together with

¹³ On letting a role be subsumed by the singer, see also Rutherford (2016: 11–23).

¹⁴ On the website (*Garifullina*, 2021), *Garifullina's* voice is characterized with the words 'depth, warmth and tenderness' and its execution is described as one of 'taste, style, restraint, and severity in its emotionality'.

¹⁵ In an interview, the director describes how he was inspired to make the film when attending a performance of Puccini's short operas *Il Trittico* (1918) at the Los Angeles Opera, where *Suor Angelica* had made a particularly strong impression on him and he characterizes the film as 'a verismo opera written for an actress'. As well as modelling the film's narrative on *Suor Angelica*, the director wanted to give the film an "'operatic" feel', by which he meant that it should be marked by emotional sincerity (NG, 2014).

Bruno, however, Ewa has to make a living as a prostitute performing on vaudevilles and burlesques, which makes her suffer not least because of her Catholic faith. Before the scene containing the operatic performance, Ewa has been deceived by relatives and is back at Ellis Island to be deported. Searching for her sister, she attends a vaudeville given for detainees, which, together with a magic show, contains a performance by the famous tenor Enrico Caruso. The importance of this moment for Ewa is indicated by the words the illusionist Orlando addresses the audience with when introducing the singer: ‘Don’t give up hope! The American Dream is waiting for you’.

According to the director, the performance was based on a real performance given by Caruso at a concert for an audience of immigrants on Ellis Island (NG, 2014). Its presentation in the film as part of a vaudeville, also containing a magic show, for a general audience forges associations with popular entertainment, connecting this with cross-promotion practices of the 1930s (cf. Everett, 2019: 273–275). The illusionist Orlando introduces the famous tenor with the words ‘I give you the great Caruso’, whereafter the singer receives standing ovations. The tenor solo initiating Puccini’s love duet then functions as a showpiece for the singer; it is extracted not only from the opera but also from the duet.

In addition, just like Pons’ performance in *Florence Foster Jenkins*, this performance is appealing for the film viewer as the director combines the emotionally intense passage of Puccini’s tenor solo (the main male character, Ruggero, implores his beloved, Magda, not to leave him) with shots of the singer surrounded by lanterns spreading a golden light. In an interview, Gray said that he and the cinematographer Darius Khondji wanted to create a beautiful film and that this intention motivated how they made use of sounds and visuals (Perez, 2014): for example, they recurrently and subtly let the sound of Christmas bells feature on the soundtrack, and characters are often lit from below, like Caruso in the opera scene, which gives them ‘an angelic appearance’ (Perez, 2014).

The shots of the singer also highlight the real-life singer of the film role, namely the famous Maltese tenor Joseph Calleja. In the scene, the singer is dressed in full evening dress, shot from below and in sepia tones. This visualization creates an archaic impression and serves to represent the role of Caruso. By considering the images of Calleja published on his official website, however, it can be concluded that the scene also promotes him in accordance with how he is represented online (see Calleja, 2021). The landing page of Calleja’s website presents him in similar attire to the film scene; he wears a dark lounge suit with a white shirt and black tie. Moreover, the site shows images of his face in profile, in medium close-ups from below; these are images that communicate high status. Similarly, the beginning of the song in the scene is synchronized with a medium close-up shot of him seen from below (see **Figure 2**) and



Figure 2: Joseph Calleja in the role of Enrico Caruso singing Giacomo Puccini’s ‘Ma come puio lasciarmi’ from *La Rondine*. Screenshot from *The Immigrant*, directed by James Gray (2013).

a close-up shot of his face in profile follows the song’s most intense part. Through this visualization, the intense music of Puccini’s solo is also communicated in a way that gives the singer impressive status.

The cross-marketing between cinema and the classical music industry, indicated by the scene, is also in line with how Calleja promotes himself on his website: namely as a *crossover* artist (‘an opera singer singing popular songs or vice versa’, Everett, 2019: 287). On his website (Calleja, 2021), he is presented in videos where he performs not only ‘O Sole Mio’ but also ‘Strangers in the Night’.¹⁶ Moreover, he maintains that his role model is Mario Lanza—the American crossover tenor and film star of the 1940s and 1950s—who, like Calleja, played the role of Caruso (in *The Great Caruso*) (Roddy, 2011).¹⁷ In the film scene, Orlando’s introduction of Caruso with the words ‘I give you the great Caruso’ serves to associate Calleja with Lanza through an allusion to this earlier film. The premiere of *The Immigrant* was also predated by a release of an album where Calleja performed Lanza’s favourite pieces (*Be My Love – A Tribute to Mario Lanza*, 2012).¹⁸

¹⁶ The site also highlights the fact that Calleja’s singing is included on the soundtrack of the film *No Reservations* (Scott Hicks, 2007), where he sings Verdi’s ‘La Donna è Mobile’.

¹⁷ According to Roddy (2011), Calleja was inspired to be an opera singer when he saw Lanza in this role.

¹⁸ The following year he also participated in a CD album of Verdi’s *Simon Boccanegra* (2013) and released a solo recital disc: *Amore* (2013), which contained a combination of opera arias, film music and songs in a popular vein.

Although it was in line with his live and recorded repertoire (his third solo album, *Joseph Calleja – The Maltese Tenor* (2011), includes many of Puccini’s most famous tenor arias), Calleja had not recorded the particular solo performed in *The Immigrant* before. The film can be viewed, therefore, as a cross-promotion opportunity to showcase both Calleja and new musical material. These marketing techniques surrounding Calleja in *The Immigrant* are also deployed in *To Rome with Love*.

***To Rome with Love* (2012)**

In Woody Allen’s *To Rome with Love*, opera is presented as something positive and familiar, using the stereotype of opera as an everyday occurrence for Italians.¹⁹ The film consists of four storylines taking place in Rome; one of which focuses on opera. It narrates how Jerry, a retired American opera director (played by Allen himself), seizes the opportunity to revive his career when meeting his daughter’s future father-in-law: the undertaker Giancarlo, who sings opera in the shower. Aside from the stereotype of opera and Italians, a device used to motivate (and legitimize) the several instances of opera singing in the narrative episode is irony.²⁰ Film scholar Giacomo Boitani (2015: 76) has shown how Allen, in the film, combines conventions of American comedy with elements from the satirical film genre, ‘comedy Italian style’ (as exemplified by Federico Fellini’s *Boccaccio ’70*, 1962), in which a characteristic trait is the ironic portrayal of ‘Italians’ social habits’. When Jerry discovers the undertaker’s vocal capabilities, Giancarlo, in the shower, excels at the vocal climaxes of ‘E Lucevan le Stelle’ (*Tosca*, 1899) and ‘Nessun Dorma’ (*Turandot*, 1926), excessively holding out the final high note of ‘Nessun Dorma’ on the word ‘Vincerò’. This vocal showcasing creates a comic image of the singer; a representation which is reinforced when it later transpires that the undertaker is dependent on the shower to be able to sing at all.

In Allen’s film, however, the principal target of irony is celebrity and the storyline about Giancarlo presents a caricature of the Italian tenor. When turning the shower on, the undertaker’s physical appearance, although completely naked, transforms into the impressive pose of a star performer, adding a comic edge to the Italian tenor’s showpieces.²¹ Moreover, the performances are often characterised by wide shots, which makes the shower stand out as a subversive and comical element against conventional surroundings. According to Boitani (2015: 75) this creates cartoon-like exaggerations, ‘blending the realistic and the surreal in ways that also may occur in films by Federico

¹⁹ On similar ways of making use of this stereotype, see Everett (2019: 279).

²⁰ On how the opera aria may interfere with the story of a film in a problematic way through its formal integrity and vocal song, see Joe (2013: 32).

²¹ On posing as ‘someone else’s self expression’, see Risi (2016: 157).

Fellini'. In a longer scene featuring staged excerpts from Ruggero Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* (1892), Giancarlo's appearance as the opera's tragic main character, Canio, completely naked in a shower cubicle to the sound of running water, in this way contrasts against an otherwise traditional setting where the rest of the characters wear historical costumes.

The moment in this scene that particularly serves to manifest the visual side of Giancarlo's performance is his singing of 'Vesti la Giubba'. In this widely quoted aria, Canio expressively laments his fate as a deceived husband at the same time as he prepares for playing the clown (Pagliaccio) on stage.²² The segment opens with a wide shot showing Giancarlo in the shower cubicle singing the aria's first line ('Vesti la giubba e la faccia infarina') in front of a mirror, encircled by shining bulbs, in the middle of the frame. Thereafter, the shot moves to a medium close-up of his face singing the next three lines in the shower, set against a dark background, surrounded by shining bulbs and lanterns. An intensifying cut to the famous passage 'Ridi, Pagliaccio, sul tuo amore infranto!' is then enhanced with a dissolve into a medium close-up of him expressively reinforcing his singing of this emotionally charged passage and vocal climax through facial expression and gestures. This visual display of the singer at the aria's most intense moment, and at the start of the vocal climax, is significant. In the other scenes analyzed in this article (besides *Carnegie Hall*, which is a film about musical performances), the camera avoids the singer's face at vocal high points.²³ While singing, Giancarlo looks at himself in the mirror and appears to interact with the image of himself. With soap and water pouring over his face instead of tears, he fixes his gaze intensely upon himself and performs the most passionate parts with mouth wide open and impassioned gestures (**Figure 3**). It is a communication of musical intensity through what Henson (2015: 7) describes as 'plays of physiognomy' in relation to the late 19th century. Besides contributing to an audio-visual spectacle, this depiction of gestures and facial expressions shows how the singer playing the role of Giancarlo negotiates the role of the caricature and promotes his acting skills.

In this staged scene, shower singing is also comically juxtaposed with the high drama of the conclusion to the second act of the opera, where Canio stabs his wife Nedda and her lover Silvio to death. Giancarlo as Canio performs the deeds with tragic grandeur naked from inside the shower, every now and then washing himself (**Figure 4**). Furthermore, having spoken the scene's famous last words 'La commedia è

²² He sings the aria's most famous parts (the first four lines, which are directly followed by lines seven and eight; the intensifying transposition of the motif on 'Ridi, Pagliaccio' and the vocal climax).

²³ With the performance of 'Amor ti Vieta', for example, the aria's final climax is synchronized not with a medium close-up shot of Armiliato as Giancarlo but of Jerry expressing his astonishment in a comical way. Immediately thereafter, the shot shows the singer in medium close-up completing the performance.



Figure 3: Fabio Armiliato in the role of Giancarlo singing Ruggero Leoncavallo's 'Vesti la Giubba' from *Pagliacci*. Screenshot from *To Rome with Love*, directed by Woody Allen (2012).

finita!' followed by the full orchestra bursting into the final climax, Giancarlo picks up the bath brush and scrubs himself resolutely. The director has, however, exchanged the final orchestral climax of the original score for an orchestral version of the vocal climax of the aria 'Vesti la Giubba' (coinciding with the words 'Ridi, Pagliaccio, sul tuo amore infranto'), which would be better known to a wider audience.

The casting of a professional singer in the role of Giancarlo is another device in the film by which Allen both appeals to a wider audience and refers to the 'comedy Italian style'. According to Boitani (2015: 76), directors of the historical film genre made use of popular Italian stars in order to maximize 'the commercial impact of a release'. In accordance with the genre's conventions, Allen casts a well-established opera singer in the role of Giancarlo: the Italian tenor Fabio Armiliato.²⁴ When asked about the film, Allen has said that it was custom-made for the company distributing his films in Rome and that he was lucky to find Armiliato, who had lived in New York for a period and thereby spoke English (Radish, 2012). Through this connection to New York, however, Armiliato might also have been recognized not only by the Italian but

²⁴ In one of the film's other storylines he casts the famous Italian comedian Roberto Benigni as the main character.



Figure 4: Giancarlo (played by Fabio Armiliato) as Canio stabbing his wife and her lover to death in the second act of Ruggero Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*. Screenshot from *To Rome with Love*, directed by Woody Allen (2012).

also by some of the American audiences, as he had performed leading tenor roles at both the Metropolitan Opera and the New York City Opera (Plotkin, 2017).

This marketing of the film through a real-life singer also serves, as in *Florence Foster Jenkins* and *The Immigrant*, to promote the specific singer. In the film's performances, Armiliato appears in a way that resembles the manner in which he is represented on his official website (Armiliato, 2021). The long, dark curly hair and dark beard characterizing him in the film are important traits by which he is promoted in various operatic productions presented on the site. Moreover, on the site's front page, an image from the film showing Armiliato as Giancarlo and Allen as Jerry alternates with images of Armiliato in the role of various opera characters, contributing to cross-marketing. The role of Giancarlo gave Armiliato the opportunity to appear as a vocal performer throughout a narrative episode, and with the exception of the excerpts from *Pagliacci*, he selected which pieces to perform (Duchen, 2013). He could therefore choose music that aligned with his brand, which resulted in the combination of Puccini's most widespread tenor arias ('Nessun Dorma' and 'E Lucevan le Stelle'), and in 'Amor ti Vieta', from Umberto Giordano's *Fedora* (1898), arranged for piano and voice, which is an aria widely circulated (often as an encore). Armiliato has himself mentioned operas from the Verismo era as one of his specialities, performing these many times in staged

productions of the complete operas (see Plotkin (2017) and Armiliato's official website). Furthermore, in the same year the film was premiered, Armiliato released a solo album (*Recitar!*, 2012), which contained all of the four arias he sings (partly or completely) in the film—'Amor ti Vieta', 'Vesti la Giubba', 'Nessun Dorma' and 'E Lucevan le Stelle'—together with other operatic highlights.

The Visualization of the Listener

Accordingly, the three films convey similarities with cross-promotion practices of the 1930s and early 1940s through the presentation of the opera singers in a positive light, with familiar and/or captivating music and appealing audio-visual configurations. Furthermore, this analysis has explored how the marketing of singers is elaborated in the recent films through presentations that are in line with how they are represented on their official websites. Beyond this, it can be noted that the films also reference broader tropes surrounding opera-film encounters through a visualization of listeners. Addressing recent intersections between opera and cinema, Cachopo (2014: 315) observes that 'opera has long relied upon a quite picturesque set of fans and devotees'. Such a reliance is very much evident in these three films. In *To Rome with Love*, despite the unconventional element in the staging during Giancarlo's performances, the cross-cutting also shows shots of absorbed listeners. This discrepancy between the singer's and the audience's behaviour is also highlighted with the performance of the aria 'Amor ti Vieta', which is performed as a solo piece together with a pianist. The camera is stationary throughout the main part of the piece and shows the singer (who performs naked under running water in the shower) and the pianist on stage in a wide shot, which emphasizes the shower as a strange set piece. While singing, Giancarlo is soaping and shampooing himself, and, with the aria's second stanza, he takes up the bath brush, scrubs himself, then holds it against his breast, giving it the role of the beloved he sings about (in the aria Count Loris declares his love for Princess Fedora). Instead of reinforcing the comical effect of these spectacular traits, however, the cross-cutting contains shots of the audience listening with rapt attention, with a close-up shot revealing listeners that are obviously affected by the performance (see **Figure 5**). Moreover, a burst of applause follows the vocal melody's sustained final note. The performance's particular effect is also marked through a change of the opera director Jerry's behaviour, from restless nervousness during the prelude to astonishment.

In *The Immigrant*, the opera singing even appears to contribute to a moment of temporary transformation for the listening protagonist. As Ewa attends the vaudeville in order to find her sister, she is initially searching among the audience and pays little attention to the magic show taking place on the stage. When Caruso begins to sing,



Figure 5: Listeners affected by Giancarlo's performance of Umberto Giordano's 'Amor ti Vieta' from *Fedora* in the shower. Screenshot from *To Rome with Love*, directed by Woody Allen, 2012.

however, his singing grips her attention completely. The cross-cutting during the performance frequently shows her among the audience of detainees, all absorbed by the singing. Together with this visualization, the dynamic foregrounding of opera music, in combination with the medium close-up shots of the singer, creates a moment of suspended time where the reality of the fictional situation is transcended. Borrowing the words of Weiner (2002: 76–77) who analyzes a similar situation in *Philadelphia*, the combination of music and image during the song 'represents a shift from the predominant realism' which has characterized the film so far 'toward a different mode of presentation, one reliant on visual and acoustical metaphors suggesting interiority'.

This aesthetic technique of creating the impression of suspended time and an internal, transformative moment for the listener through a mode of audio-visual presentation, deviating from the realistic action, is also present with the operatic performance in *Florence Foster Jenkins*. By comparing the scene to Weiner's (2002: 79) observations of *Philadelphia*, it can be noted that during Pons' singing 'time appears to move ever more slowly' as Florence increasingly immerses herself in the performance. As the lyrical vocal line transforms into the final coloratura passage, the camera zooms in on her face, which has an expression of wonder; the camera movement becomes

faster when the singer reaches the final high note. When the final chord is completed by the orchestra and the vocal line fades out, the camera becomes briefly stationary and shows Florence's face in close-up, which creates a moment when time 'seems to stand still' before the audience's applause, when Florence is seen wiping away her tears (Weiner, 2002: 79) (see **Figure 6**).

The scene's association of opera singing with wonder and with a transcendental experience evoking strong emotions resembles the trope conveyed in films from the 1980s and 1990s (Cachopo, 2014; Citron, 2010; 2011; Weiner, 2002). Weiner's study (2002: 82) includes not only *Philadelphia* but also *The Shawshank Redemption* and he shows how the audio-visual configuration associates listening to opera with a combination of interiority and transcendence of particularity. In *The Shawshank Redemption*, the listening even unites a whole prison—wardens and prisoners alike. Accordingly, opera singing is not only shown to captivate devotees: it also has universal appeal. This idealizing of opera is also examined by Cachopo (2014: 324), who suggests that the use of opera as a marker of universalism and/or of a lifestyle, seen in feature films from the 1980s, indicates a celebration of opera through equating it 'with an aural vestige of erudition amid popular culture'.



Figure 6: Florence's face in close-up while Lily Pons' song fades out at the end of Léo Delibes's 'Bell Song'. Screenshot from *Florence Foster Jenkins*, directed by Stephen Frears (2016).

Final Reflections

This exploration of the three recent films has shown that the cross-marketing strategies of the 1930s and early 1940s, pointed to by Everett (2019) and Bombola (2018), is not only pertinent for cinema of today but that it is elaborated upon substantially through visual codes and cues. Besides promoting the real-life singers behind the fictional characters, the visualization adds a new dimension to this marketing through the trope of attentive spectatorship. The films' adaptation to this ideological turn in opera-film encounters—associating opera singing with the rapt listener—casts the opera singer in a new light. At the same time, the transcendental experience that generates strong emotions (which in the films from the 1980s and 1990s is connected to song as a sonic entity, or as a means of representation in a staged setting) is, in these three recent films, connected to the singer's presence as a real-life singer, which implies a shift of focus to specific singers' bodily appearances.

Aside from being central in the presentation of opera in the films, the bodily promotion of the real-life singer serves to enhance the role of the films in representing the singer as a celebrity; they manifest one of the many ways in which an opera singer is a celebrity for their audience. The opera singer's connection with various physical and textual objects are of importance to the audience member's imagination and 'possession' of them in this way by collapsing the distinction between the star-as-person and the star-as-performer.²⁵ By tapping into the representation of the real-life singers conveyed on their official websites, the presentation of Garifullina, Calleja and Armiliato in roles of historical and/or fictional characters surrounded by receptive rapture can be similarly seen as one way in which the audience member may imagine and 'possess' the marketed celebrity opera singer of today.

²⁵ As discussed by Eleanor Cloutier (2018), who shows how these objects may be a contributing factor in collapsing this distinction.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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