Cambridge Studies in Opera

Kimberly White

Female Singers on the French Stage, 1830–1848

FEMALE SINGERS ON THE FRENCH STAGE, 1830–1848

The study of singers' art has emerged as a prominent area of inquiry within musicology in recent years. This book shifts the focus from the artwork onstage to the labor that went on behind the scenes. Through extensive analysis of primary source documents, Kimberly White explores the profession of singing, operatic culture, and the representation of female performers on the French stage between 1830 and 1848, and reveals new perspectives on the social, economic, and cultural status of these women. The book attempts to reconstruct and clarify contemporary practices of the singer at work, including vocal training, debuts, rehearsals and performance schedules, touring, benefit concerts, and retirement, as well as the strategies utilized in publicity and image-making. Dozens of case studies, many compiled from singers' correspondence and archival papers, shed light on the performers' successes and struggles at a time when Paris was the operatic center of Europe.

KIMBERLY WHITE is a research associate at the University of Montreal. Her research focuses on performers and musical culture in nineteenth-century France, from the popular stages to the opera house.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1910, critic Adrien Bernheim wrote a eulogy for Delphine Ugalde, a Parisian singer who had a long, successful career on the French stage. He declared her a prima donna, and heaped upon her a host of other epithets: excellent actress, superior singer, incomparable musician, and wise counselor to composers, librettists, and directors. And yet, he added, she never became rich. But she worked hard: "she regularly sang three times a week, often four times, and when she appeared in public in the evening, she was not – listen up, young divas! – exempted from the afternoon's rehearsal."[1] The critic's reminiscences of Ugalde betray the influence of well-worn clichés about performers, their work habits, and their value: the overpaid diva who scorns the drudgery of rehearsals, or the artist who toils for the sake of her art, not a paycheck.

What was the work of a singer in the nineteenth century? Many people will rightly argue that a singer's work is her art: her singing voice and acting skills, her body and approach to gesture, her interpretation of particular roles, her creative influence on operatic composition, her improvisations on the score. The study of singers' art has emerged as a cutting-edge area of inquiry in musicological scholarship over the last three decades and has been instrumental in challenging the hegemony of the composer's work with its insistence on the materiality and mutability of operatic creation.[2] My focus here is different. I turn from the artwork onstage to the often invisible labor that went on behind the scenes: what occurred before the singer ever stepped onstage, how she launched her stage debut, what it took to manage a professional career, and what happened when that career came to a close.

Female Singers on the French Stage explores the profession of singing, operatic culture, and the representation of female singers in the early to mid-nineteenth century. Rather than focus on a small group of prima donnas, I present the singer as a waged laborer in the context of her peers by analyzing the lives and careers of almost one hundred performers, from the lead artists to the "failures." Broad study of the singing profession provides a better understanding of the quotidian complications of this line of work. Many of the inequalities among the women's experiences resulted from the strict hierarchical structure at the theaters that replicated class divisions in French society. Focusing on specific operatic institutions reveals new perspectives on the social, economic, and cultural status these artists occupied at a time when Paris was considered to be the operatic center of Europe.

There were three permanent opera houses in the capital during the period: the Académie royale de musique (hereafter referred to as the Opéra), the Opéra-Comique, and the Théâtre-Italien.[3] Each theater was clearly differentiated by genre, language, administration, and roster of singers. The Théâtre-Italien's function as a theater importing Italian opera and composers, and largely recruiting foreign singers, meant that it was administered quite differently from the French stages, with distinct artistic practices and aesthetics.[4] My attention in this book thus falls exclusively on the Opéra and Opéra-Comique.

The institutional and administrative organization of an opera house, in addition to state legislation regarding theater licenses and genre, have a determining influence on singers' careers. The theaters clearly delineated hiring practices, hierarchies within the personnel, opportunities for promotion, and performance schedules, which limited singers' control over their working environment and, by extension, their artistic contributions. The July Monarchy, an almost two-decade period that began and ended with major revolutions, was a time of artistic development that saw the rise of grand opera and the flourishing of opéra comique. It was also a period of institutional reorganization. For much of the preceding period, the Restoration, the Opéra had been managed directly by the Maison du Roi and the Opéra-Comique run as a society of artists. The singers hired in the company led long, prosperous careers, supported by the theaters' strict hierarchies, promotion based on a combination of seniority and merit, contracts that extended to twenty years, and financial stability in the form of guaranteed salaries and retirement pensions. The company system provided the singers with far more stability than the Italian houses, which typically hired performers by the opera or by the season; it also allowed the French stages to produce a large repertoire of new and older operas. Compared with a city like London, which imported most of its opera singers, in Paris the artists on the French stages were predominantly born and trained in France. Impeccable diction and pronunciation were essential for performing the genres of French-language opera (grand opera and opéra comique): the public, at least in the first half of the century, did not tolerate foreign accents.

In the 1830s, life at the theaters began to change. The French stages in Paris were run as franchised entrepreneurships, meaning they were managed by a state-appointed director for personal profit with partial state subvention. Managers became far more competitive and market oriented. Salaries for lead singers increased while job security diminished and retirement pensions vanished, artists were increasingly hired on short-term contracts, and directors became more involved in promotion and publicity. After mid-century, the theater landscape was significantly transformed with the gradual loosening and eventual repeal in 1864 of the licensing system that had governed repertory and operatic conventions from 1806, the appearance of new theaters and genres, and the internationalization of the operatic marketplace.

FACTS, FICTIONS, FANTASIES: SINGERS IN THE PUBLIC EYE

As a social history of singers, this book builds on pioneering work by John Rosselli, Susan Rutherford, F. W. J. Hemmings, and Anne Martin-Fugier, as well as on studies of French opera and institutions.[5] More generally, my methodology is indebted to recent scholarship in French history that has not only restored women to the historical record but also expanded traditional notions of historical significance to acknowledge their lived experiences.[6] Writing about singers, I am keenly aware of the absence of their operatic voices that were so integral to their professional identity and art. I have sought to draw out, wherever possible, writings by the singers themselves to contextualize their experiences in the operatic world and produce a more nuanced appreciation of their diverse struggles.

To reconstruct the day-to-day activities during a singer's career, I have relied on primary sources from libraries and archives in Paris, including administrative papers, royal ordinances and legislation, contracts, and performance and rehearsal schedules, in addition to correspondence and journal reviews kept in artists' dossiers and files of press clippings. The Opéra's archives are vastly more complete during this period than those of the Opéra-Comique, as many of the latter were burned in the fire that destroyed the Salle Favart (the company's home from 1840) on May 25, 1887. This lacuna means that much of the Opéra-Comique's administrative policy on singers has had to be intuited from other documentary sources or based on the few that survived.[7] One of the biggest challenges has been the relative lack of writings by the singers themselves. Singers were rarely interviewed until the end of the century. Most of their correspondence is addressed to the directors, occasionally with draft responses, and their letters are usually concerned with administrative matters – the singers only rarely delve into reflections on their profession. For this reason, one document that has been particularly precious is Delphine Ugalde's unpublished (and hitherto unknown) memoirs.[8] Although the beginning of her career falls right at the end of the period under consideration, her memoirs illuminate many aspects of singers' experiences and theater practices that continued through the middle decades of the century.

The volume of writings about singers is an entirely different matter. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, a host of print genres devoted to performers invaded the market, and the musical press expanded rapidly.[9] Then, as now, operagoers and the general public were keenly interested in the people – particularly the women – who walked the boards and brought the operatic characters to life. Exploring the different types of published material about singers provides us with a better understanding of their cultural presence. To familiarize modern readers with these period documents, I briefly examine three of the most richly illustrative sources – biographical dictionaries and serial publications, the press, and serial fiction – that reveal the extraordinary range

of contemporary attitudes toward female singers. These have been key resources for piecing together historical theater practices as well as contemporary discourse about singers.

In the biographical dictionary, the entries for the women generally emphasized their physical attributes and credited their success to the influence of a protector or the claque. The entry on Laure Cinti-Damoreau in Maurice Alhoy's *Grande biographie dramatique* (1824), for example, summed up her qualities as follows: "Pretty little thing, who has a pretty little voice, a pretty little face, a pretty little foot, a pretty little waist."[10] The Opéra-Comique star Marie-Julie Boulanger owed part of her success to the "Messieurs du lustre," also called the "entrepreneurs de réputation" and otherwise known as the claque.[11] The dictionaries are usually tiny – no bigger than a deck of cards – and cheaply produced. According to Lenard Berlanstein, the dictionaries' promise of scandalous detail were instrumental in the early construction of celebrity: "The marketing formula was to turn an uninformed public into cognoscenti. For the price of the book, the readers could share privileged information about celebrated persons."[12] The *Nouveau dictionnaire théâtral* (1827, rev. 1829) promised 1001 "truths" on performers, and provided their home addresses in the back pages, which, in Berlanstein's words, "held out the promise of a personal encounter."[13]

The biographical serial publication generally had an elevated tone that bestowed more respectability to the literary genre and to the performers themselves. These were typically more luxurious collections with long biographical articles, high-quality paper, and beautiful engravings of celebrated actors and singers in their most famous roles.[14] In the preface to *Galerie biographique des artistes dramatiques des théâtres royaux* (1826), Adolphe Laugier insisted that he would not discuss performers' private lives, nor would he furnish any scandalous details. His selection of performers exclusively from the royal theaters matched his lofty tone, and he directed his book to "men of taste."[15] Authors modified the tone and content of the collection according to the gender of the targeted audience: Edouard Loydreau's more frivolous collection, *Jolies actrices de Paris* (1843), was addressed to *lectrices*.[16] Maria Ines Aliverti credits the biographical serial publication with helping actors achieve a more respectable social status: by emphasizing the excellence of their art, the publications influenced the perception of the performers' moral character.[17] The preface to the *Galerie théâtrale* (1834, rev. 1873) even included a forthright defense of performers from accusations of immoral behavior: "In barbaric times, an unjust prejudice blackened the art of the actor, and, to the shame of our era, we still see this prejudice exerting its influence. And of what crime are they guilty to merit such treatment? … Give back morals [*mœurs*] to the actresses, and what reproach could you make to those who devote themselves to spoken theater?"[18] The hiccup appears at the end: it seems the only thing keeping the theater from being cleared of charges of immorality were the actresses. Some authors pointed to details in the artist's private life to prove her moral character. In Etienne Arago's biography of soprano Julie Dorus-Gras

in *Galerie des artistes dramatiques* (1841), he noted that she never aspired to those "easy triumphs" of Sophie Arnould (an eighteenth-century Opéra singer who was rumored to have enjoyed protection by her influential lovers). He made sure to mention her marriage, and emphasized her modesty and avoidance of intrigue.[19]

Journals and newspapers increasingly devoted column inches to performers. Beginning in the 1820s, Jean Mongredien observes, the press began publishing short career résumés of new singers.[20] The representation of the singers depended on the critic, the journal, and the type of press item. Picking up a copy of one of the music journals, such as *La France musicale* or *La Revue et gazette musicale de Paris*, one might read about singers in a biographical sketch, in a review of a new opera, or, turning to the back pages, in the gossipy *Nouvelles* section. There the tone becomes chattier and we delve into the day-to-day happenings in the Parisian theater world and the rumblings of intrigue in the *coulisses*. The boundary between private and public – even fact and fiction – essentially disappears. In 1843, *La France musicale* announced that director Léon Pillet and Opéra singer Rosine Stoltz, his alleged mistress, were leaving for Le Havre and that Stoltz was rumored to have an indisposition lasting nine months.[21] One might invoke the adage that any publicity is good publicity, and certainly many individuals made careful arrangements to make sure their names appeared and their laurels were crowned in the press. Directors depended on positive reviews of their performers and new works to encourage strong attendance and box-office receipts. Although the *Tout-Paris* (a group of well-connected and influential people who attended the major theater and society events) and professional critics could directly affect repertoire and administrative decisions, André Michael Spies suggests that directors were not simply at the whim of the critic's pen. They often took matters into their own hands and bought glowing reviews.[22]

Around 1840, several journals began publishing biographies of contemporary performers. The critics promoted their definition and expectations of vocal, dramatic, and musical excellence, which played an important role in developing a discourse of professionalism around singers. The biographical series in *La Revue et gazette musicale de Paris*, written by Henri Blanchard, tended toward serious biographies enumerating artists' training, initial successes, repertoire, and vocal and dramatic qualities. Remarks about a singer's offstage activities usually reinforced her identity as an artist. In Blanchard's description of Cinti-Damoreau, for example, he observed that when she attended musical soirées, she went almost immediately to the piano to perform her own compositions.[23]

The series in *La Sylphide*, a fashion journal, struck a different tone. The journal was addressed to *lectrices* from "all the classes of the aristocracy, fortune, and taste."[24] These readers apparently had a taste for performing women. The journal's prospectus promised revelations about successful artists and, true to its word, began a biographical series on performers, "Artistes modernes," in its second issue. In addition to outlines of the artists' lives and careers, the articles contain long passages devoted to the women's

Figure 0.1 Lithograph of Célestine Nathan-Treillet (1815–1873). *La Sylphide*, vol. 1 (1839). Reproduced with permission from the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

beauty and anecdotal material on how they were discovered. In a biography of Célestine Nathan-Treillet, an Opéra singer in the 1840s, Arnould Frémy claimed that she took pains to separate "the woman" from "the artist": once she left the stage, she abandoned her professional persona and took comfort in domestic delights.[25] Nathan-Treillet's personal and physical qualities proved her moral worth, and her professional talent was balanced by a simple homelife with her husband. In short, the singer could safely be admired because she was a respectable woman.

Nathan-Treillet's portrait accompanying her biography reflected her place vis-à-vis the journal's readers (Figure 0.1). She is tastefully but modestly dressed, wearing no jewels except for a necklace, her hair pulled back in a sleek hairstyle. Her expression is serious, even timid. The portraits of the performers in *La Sylphide*'s series – black-and-white lithographs showing the women in simple dress – differ dramatically from the lavish chromolithographs of upper-class women wearing spectacular gowns and elaborate hairstyles. According to Aliverti, portraits of actors in elegant but ordinary dress (rather than in costume) were constructed to emphasize the moral qualities and social aspirations of the performers, "as if they could be assimilated to other portraits of genteel and fashionable persons."[26] The portraits of the singers in *La France musicale* and *La Revue et gazette musicale de Paris* similarly depict the artists "en bourgeois." The

widespread circulation of these images in a variety of journals, along with the biographical articles that explore the individual behind the role, was an important innovation in celebrity culture.

Despite efforts to rehabilitate the image of the female performer, in short stories and novels she still posed a danger to society – particularly to young bourgeois men. Journals and newspapers published stories in serial form, sometimes as a *feuilleton* and thus clearly separated from the other columns, and at other times sandwiched between articles, reviews, and artists' biographies. As Margaret Miner observes, the close proximity with "real" news items meant "these fantastic stories had every chance of being closely associated with – if not actually taken for – everyday pieces of news from the musical world in Paris."[27] Henri Blanchard's "L'actrice et l'étudiant" (*La Revue et gazette musicale de Paris*, 1844) begins dramatically. A doctor is called in to rescue a young man trying to commit suicide. Saved in the nick of time, Jules tells the doctor about his failed relationship with the beautiful actress Palmire. In the story's final installment (appropriately titled "Catastrophe"), Palmire becomes wounded during her performance at the Cirque-Olympique and the doctor is called in to help. He purposely gives bad medical advice and Palmire dies. Reflecting on his decision, the doctor (who reveals himself to be Jules's father) states: "This woman has been a fatal influence on my son; her life is a dangerous mistake of nature. Why would I prolong this error when the consequences of a fortuitous accident could deliver us from it?"[28]

Jules was not the only man ruined by a female performer. In Félix Roubaud's "L'amoureux d'une sirène" (*La France théâtrale*, 1845), Georges de Cahusac abandons his fiancée to have an affair with an Opéra singer, Camille Fel, and he eventually goes insane when he witnesses her infidelity. Camille does not escape punishment: she dies in utter misery and poverty. Set in the eighteenth century, the story refers to historical performers, theater practices, and the *concert spirituel*, thus reinforcing the perception of authenticity.[29] Edouard Monnais's *Portefeuille de deux cantatrices* (*La Revue et gazette musicale de Paris*, 1844–1845) might also have been mistaken as a true story.[30] Set in the 1820s just as Rossini's works were storming Paris, it tells the story of two singers, Clothilde, a prima donna at the Opéra, and Esther, her orphaned goddaughter who also becomes an opera singer. Much of the tale is told in epistolary form as Clothilde and Esther recount their harrowing experiences in the profession.

Many journal articles made it almost impossible to separate the "real" theatrical world from its fictions. Paul Scudo's lead article, "Histoire d'une cantatrice" (*La Sylphide*, 1841), relates the discovery and career of the singer Rose Niva.[31] Only in the final lines does he reveal that he was actually speaking about Rosine Stoltz. Replete with personal details and anecdotes, it is hard to know if the biography is anything more than an embellished story. Even more ambiguous was the series titled "Letters from an actress about the backstage and actors' foyers to Madame the duchess," published on the front page of *La Revue et gazette musicale de Paris* (1840). This series of letters produced what

Marian Smith calls a "hierarchy of proximity," allowing readers to vicariously experience the titillating happenings of the *coulisses*, all the while enveloping the backstage world with mystery.[32] A young noblewoman, forced to seek employment as an actress once her family lost its fortune, writes to her childhood friend about what goes on behind the scenes. Her use of the familiar *tu* gives the impression that the reader has access to a private conversation. The letters gossip about actual singers at the Opéra-Comique, which – besides being potentially libelous – serves to reinforce the stereotypical association of female performers and scandal. The charming Jenny Colon "seems to have decided to continue her respectable role as a married woman," the pretty Mlle Berthault enjoys special benefits at the Opéra-Comique "but she does not overly abuse them," and Mlle Rossi-Caccia "is certain to have excellent roles in all the operas of M. Scribe. If you ask me why, I will tell you that I know nothing, or that you are quite indiscreet."[33]

The wide range of sources on singers in the nineteenth century blends together fact, fiction, and fantasy. My examination of the lives and careers of these artists attempts to reconstruct their experiences as working women in opposition to and in comparison with the public's diverse and manifold perceptions of them. Whereas some chapters focus on details of the profession and others on issues of representation, I am continually concerned with situating the singers within the dynamic discourse that surrounded them.

The book traces the career paths of singers from their first voice lesson to their final performance. The first two chapters present the challenges singers faced in initiating a professional career: overcoming class prejudices that precluded some women from entry onto the public stage, finding a suitable voice teacher in the capital or entering the Paris Conservatoire's prestigious vocal program, and negotiating with critics, directors, and leaders of the claque to make their first debut. Chapter 3 delves into the facets of professional life at the Opéra and Opéra-Comique, predominantly from the perspective of the secondary singer. I examine salaries, contracts, and performing and rehearsal schedules to determine singers' different obligations and the degree of control they exercised over their working conditions. The fourth chapter explores the social and political contexts that shaped women's positions within and outside the theater, concentrating particularly on the competing discourses about female singers and their ability (or failure) to conform to the domestic ideal. The final chapter takes up issues of aging, endings, and farewells, and uses the retirement benefit concert as means to study the singer's role in publicity and image-making during the final moments of her career.

Cultural and historical contexts are critical for writing women's history. Exploring the position of the female singer in Parisian society requires not only an examination of the ways in which she is represented in various forms of discourse, but also a thorough awareness of her day-to-day life and the institutions and policies that structured her reality. The singers' careers, the representation of their achievements, and their social

and professional mobility were influenced by ideologies of gender as well as class. Theater institutions replicated many of the patriarchal structures in the nineteenth-century social order: a powerful administration composed entirely of men, a strict hierarchy that determined artists' salaries, performance opportunities, and degree of control over their labor, and certain contract clauses that discriminated against women. Reviews of women's performances that highlighted their bodies contributed to the sexualization of this class of performers, undermining their talent, skill, and intelligence. The exclusivity and concentration of power in the hands of a few theater administrators meant that those who wanted to have a career depended on influential insiders and well-connected family friends. And yet female singers – even those in the lower ranks – earned far more than women in other industries. Upward mobility within the theater hierarchy was possible, and middle- and upper-ranking female singers earned as much as and sometimes more than their male colleagues. Many women engaged in forthright and bold correspondence with directors and administrators, successfully negotiating better salaries and working conditions. Singers used publicity to their advantage, and shaped their public image through astute career and artistic choices. These women acted on their own behalf, in their own best interests, and – albeit within a limited range of agency – sought successful, fulfilling careers.

1 | Beginnings

In *Les actrices de Paris* (1870), Félix Savard relates an anecdote from a famous singer's childhood. One day, little Marie was singing in the narrow paths in her hometown. A passerby overheard the sound of her voice and approached the young girl. She asked Marie who had taught her to sing. "No one, Madame," Marie responded. Amazed, the woman predicted a brilliant career for the girl Only then did the passerby reveal her identity – she was Pauline Viardot.[1] The budding star was Marie Cabel (1827–1885).

The chance discovery of Cabel's latent talent that happily led to a brilliant career was not an isolated case. If we are to believe the anecdotes from the biographical literature, some of the best-known singers were discovered in the same fashion. As a child, Rosine Stoltz (1815–1903) worked as a laundress with her mother. One day, a music instructor overheard her singing as she carried clothing to her clients. He asked if she would like to study music, but she responded that her family was too poor. "Mademoiselle," he replied, "if you let me see your parents, I could tell them about a school where you would be admitted for free." Not long afterward, she took her place at Alexandre-Étienne Choron's Institution royale de musique classique. She thrived in her new environment and soon took her first steps on the stage.[2] In another tale, the dying composer Carl Maria von Weber discovered Anna Thillon (1819–1903). One evening in London, Weber heard a young girl singing a Scottish air. He entered the home and insisted that Anna be provided an education in music. Her mother replied that professional singing was impossible given her social status, but she thanked the composer nonetheless. Weber's benevolent action turned out to be his last: he died that very night. But his prediction came true. The family lost its fortune and Anna ended up using her talent to embark on a successful operatic career in France and England.[3]

These singers were born stars; all they required was the sanction of a respected musical authority – a prima donna, a vocal pedagogue, a dying composer – to unleash their talent. Such anecdotes engage with the mysterious origins of musical ability and reveal the influence of the Romantic ideology of the artist-genius that supplanted the old paradigm of the musician as craftsman. Were musicians born with their gifts? Did they inherit their talent from their parents? Could anyone be an artist? Henri-Louis Blanchard, who penned dozens of biographies for *La Revue et gazette musicale de Paris*, insisted that "one is born a singer," a statement that allowed the critic to justify star soprano Laure Cinti-Damoreau's entry into the professional milieu as well as famous tenor Gilbert-Louis Duprez's monumental salary.[4] These questions were particularly pressing for biographers as they sought to explain the motivations of certain female

artists who chose to profit from their musical gifts, ideally reserved in the middle and upper classes for an intimate circle of family, friends, and potential suitors. They might be more easily forgiven for crossing class boundaries if by pursuing professional singing they responded to the call of art that could not be ignored.

In many fictional writings, a professional stage career was generally presented as incompatible with middle-class mores. No woman from a wealthy family pursued professional singing unless there had been a sudden reversal of fortune or her parents had died, leaving her orphaned – and therefore without a family to shame. Otherwise, fictional singers were usually born into poverty but used their innate talent to become professional artists, overcoming social and economic hardships. The latter case is so pervasive in the literature that the "street-singer-turned-prima-donna" might be seen as a veritable type. In George Sand's *Consuelo* (1843), the eponymous heroine was raised by her mother and the two sang in the streets throughout Europe to earn a living. Consuelo studied with the composer-pedagogue Porpora and eventually turned her sights to the stage.[5] La Romanina in Mélanie Waldor's "La cantatrice" (*La Sylphide*, 1844) was a "femme du peuple" who became a star singer; she later returned to her origins, forced to sing in the streets to raise money to pay for medical care for her ungrateful lover.[6] Esther Saunier in Edouard Monnais's *Portefeuille de deux cantatrices* (1845) was orphaned. She became an indentured servant for her uncle, and then worked as a laundress. She finally begged her godmother, the prima donna Clothilde, for help, which set her on the path to becoming a professional singer.[7]

The trope was so pervasive that it seemed impossible to avoid it. The rich orphan Inès in Louis Jousserandot's "La Stephana" (*La Sylphide*, 1842) also sang in the streets before pursuing vocal study, despite having enough wealth to bypass this rite of passage.[8] Although these stories reveal the discordance of middle-class values and professional singing, they communicate the concept of an aristocracy of talent and uphold social mobility in a postrevolutionary society. Similar to the rags-to-riches plot archetype, most strongly associated with the American writer Horatio Alger, Jr. (1832–1899), this story line reflects a new myth of the nineteenth century whereby individuals could change their social destiny through hard work or by exploiting natural talent.[9] But could the singer completely transcend her class origins, even once she had established a professional career and made her fortune? Authors remained ambivalent. Several stories ended with the more acceptable vehicle of social mobility for women during this period: marriage.

This chapter explores the beginnings of a singer's career, starting with analysis of the social origins of performers on the French stage. I then examine how a singer's decision to pursue a professional career was constructed according to standardized narratives in the biographical literature, which presented justifications for her entry into the theater milieu. The second half of the chapter turns to the training the women pursued, focusing particularly on the vocal program at the Paris Conservatoire.

THE SOCIAL ORIGINS OF PERFORMERS

Did singers, as these stories seem to suggest, emerge predominantly from the lower working classes? Determining the socioeconomic class of performers during the period 1830–1848 is not an easy task. References to their family origins are either vague or overly theatricalized in the biographical literature, and information is particularly scarce for the secondary singers. Access to vital statistics is further complicated by the destruction during the 1871 Paris Commune of almost all the birth, marriage, and death certificates for Parisians before 1860. Thankfully, beginning around 1835, the registration rolls at the Paris Conservatoire listed the parents' occupations for many students, providing some data on the social origins of those attending the institution.

The Conservatoire trained many of the singers who went on to perform at the Opéra and Opéra-Comique. Those students admitted after a successful audition received, as we will see, an extensive musical education provided free of charge by the state. A description of the families of Conservatoire students in 1835 suggests that they were neither wealthy nor destitute: "The public who attends the Conservatoire's *exercices* are certainly respectable, but they do not boast elegant attire. The women … do not purchase their hats from Herbault; the men do not have their clothing tailored by Staub, nor their canes from Thomassin."[10] Later in the century, the student population became more diverse. Conservatoire instructor Albert Lavignac (1846–1916), in his *Les gaietés du Conservatoire* (1899), claimed that it was not unusual to see "the son of a millionaire with the son of a small shopkeeper, or from the proletariat; the daughters of the intelligentsia, preachers, eminent artists, and writers, with those whose parents had more modest professions."[11]

In the 1830s and 1840s, the student population already demonstrated a rather remarkable diversity, although there were probably no millionaires. More than 180 female students attended the singing classes (*chant*) over the span of eight school years from 1835 to 1843; data on the professions of their father or mother is available for ninety of them.[12] The professions ranged from the wealthy landowner to the peddler. However, clear trends emerge, and most professions were concentrated in six broad categories: *propriétaire/rentier* (landowners/investors) and *négociant* (entrepreneurs); liberal professions and civil servants; military; *boutiquier* (skilled trades); artist-musician; and service and hospitality (Table 1.1).

It is not possible to determine the financial resources of individuals on the sole basis of their profession. As Adeline Daumard argued in her study of the nineteenth-century French bourgeoisie, a single professional category could include a wide range of jobs and incomes, and cannot account for individual specificities such as family fortunes.[13] "Bourgeoisie" is itself a slippery term: the "bourgeois" was frequently defined only by what he was not – neither a noble nor a laborer – and the result, Sarah Maza explains, "was an inevitable lumping together of everyone from the richest banker through intellectuals and professionals to the struggling neighborhood grocer."[14]