

Mirroring Cuzzoni: A Practitioner's Aesthetic Protest

By Victoria Hodgkinson

Foto: Tord F Paulsen

Abstract

In this paper I will explore the conceptual underpinnings and artistic processes behind two new works written for me by composer Geoffrey King; 'Little Siren of the Stage' and 'Cuzzoni's Letter'. These pieces make central the historical identity of female performer Francesca Cuzzoni, for whom Handel constructed roles well known in our contemporary operatic canon. This work forms part of my PhD research at the Royal Academy of Music in which I examine female performing identity across time, using Handel's opera seria as a case study. In this article I question what contemporary operatic practitioners can learn about their identities via mirroring and centralising the historical performer's influence over the historical, usually male, figure of the composer. At the crux of this paper is a discussion around what working with the voices of historical female performers can tell us about ourselves within the discipline of operatic performance today.

Keywords

Female performers, opera seria, artistic practice, new music

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Introduction

This paper explores the artistic processes and conceptual thinking behind two new works written for my voice and Baroque ensemble by composer Geoffrey King: 'Little Siren of the Stage' and 'Cuzzoni's Letter'. These pieces were commis-

sioned as a part of my PhD at the Royal Academy of Music in which I analyse female operatic performing identity across time using Handel's opera seria as a case study. The two works focus on the identity of historical singer Francesca Cuzzoni, for whom Handel wrote roles notable in today's operatic canon such as Cleopatra from *Giulio Cesare* and the title role from *Rodelinda*. I explore how the act of music making itself can provide a useful tool for reframing historical narratives and thereby promoting reconsideration of female performing identities in opera.

Handel's Opera Seria as a Case Study

In my research work to date, Handel's opere serie have provided ideal mate-

rial as they allow me to draw historical and contemporary connections between performing identities across time within one repertoire. This idea of shaping and reshaping historical material in the present is analogous to my own craft which involves interpreting historical repertoire, often with the artistic purpose of finding present day relevance to my depictions. Therefore, the way in which I work with Handel's opera seria in my research corresponds with the practical requirements of my artistic practice as a trained interpreter of historical music. It is my aim to bring to the forefront issues of unconscious bias in the industry associated with the aesthetic status quo and address the impact this can have on female performers today. I can then question what the future could look like if we challenge prevailing myths associated with the repertoire.

Crucial to this paper is the fact that Handel's opera seria offers me a network of historical performer identities to engage with. We know that the singers Handel worked with were vital to the composition and formation of

his operatic literature. Behind every work there are pentimenti¹ impressions of historical performers whose artistic voices are no longer central in the vocal interpretation of the repertoire. Therefore, I ask: how can the original female singer, for whom Handel wrote notable roles, influence and inform our practice as operatic practitioners today? In a practice I call 'historical mirroring' I will question what it is we gain as contemporary operatic singers if we reflect the historical identities of the original, in this case female, performer over the historical, often male, composer as a starting point for our artistry.

This desire to understand more about the historical female performers who worked with Handel was led by my early reading which revealed to me how little we know about many of these women in their own words. At this preliminary stage, I wondered to what extent this lack of self-definition resulted in a stereotyping of female singers in today's industry. Therefore, at the crux of my research is a discussion around how we collectively remember and value female performers,

questioning historical composer and performer hierarchies in addition to hierarchies of how women are placed and viewed through cultures of patriarchy associated with the established musical canon.

Historical Mirroring: A Concept

My concept of 'historical mirroring' originated from reading Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (Woolf, 1929/2019) in which she writes that **"Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size"** (Woolf, 1929/2019, p. 53). This statement prompted me to question who I was reflecting in my own practice as a performer, and I wanted to find an artistic method which would enable me to better analyse the components that influence the construction of my sound and body in this repertoire, delving deeply into how my own artistry might have been formed as an extension of patriarchal aesthetics and ideals.

Anna Bull's (2019) work investigating questions of class and gender in classical music training in England observes how gender inequality can become enacted and entrenched through localised and standardised training practices. She draws on a similar descriptive metaphor in using the term 'gendered mirroring' (Bull, 2019, pp. 122-123) when discussing the impact of traditional rehearsal models on young female singers. She observes,

As a singer, watching the conductor and being 'played' by him resembles this experience of looking at an interactive mirror, and yet for the young women in the group this meant seeing in the mirror a male body which they could never hope to match perfectly. Indeed, accounts of postural corrections from a few of the young women suggested that women's bodies were, in this practice, inherently in need of correction to try to more accurately mirror the perfect humanity of the white male body of most conductors (Bull, 2019, p. 123).ii

Bull's work encourages a critical awareness of how the prevalence of standardised aesthetic ideals in classical music can continually reinforce in-

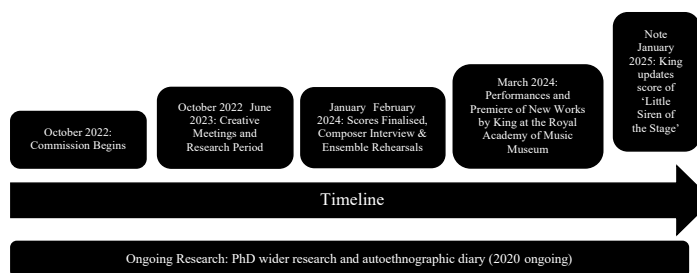
equalities. Woolf and Bull's exploration of 'mirroring' speak conceptually and practically to the binaries and hierarchies through which we can engage with and reconstruct historical classical musical content as artists today.

As a response to this, the two contemporary commissions by King central to this paper seek to shift this historical mirror both thematically and aesthetically. Here, we move the mirror away from the historical composer of Handel and instead choose to reflect the historical female singer, Francesca Cuzzoni. We also question throughout how the more intricate aesthetic choices we make can reflect a less standardised aesthetic 'appropriateness', asking how the performer can regain a multifaced sense of agency.iii

Research Methodologies and Timeline

The research period explored in this paper spans almost two years of my PhD project from late 2022 to early 2024. Below you can see a timeline:

Timeline depicting the general research period for this paper.



The methods used involved analysis of various sources including notes from creative meetings and a semi-structured interview with the composer, my autoethnographic diary, rehearsal recordings, and a live performance of the works at the Royal Academy of Music Museum in March 2024 with Baroque ensemble, using a historical harpsichord from the museum collection. I will reference quotations from the composer interview and sections of my autoethnographic diary to provide evidence of my artistic processes and developments in thinking throughout the research period.

[Please note that the score excerpts for King's 'Little Siren of the Stage' in this article are taken from an updated version of the score in early 2025. Although the score extracts provided in this article come from outside the research period stipulated, all the analysis and principles remain unchanged.]

Initial Proposal October 2022

Prior to meeting with the composer Geoffrey King in October 2022 I had prepared an aria commission proposal which had both practical and conceptual requests. The practical requests related to the suggested ensemble size (voice, two Baroque violins, and continuo consisting of harpsichord, archlute and cello), timing for the piece (five minutes) and pitch (A=415). My vision for the format of the new work was to respond to the layout of a da capo aria, echoing a historical musical format that 18th century Handelian singers worked with.

In addition to the practical requests, I also provided the composer with a

brief outline of some of the conceptual intentions I had for the work. These related to my aims better to understand the artistic experiences of historical singers for whom Handel constructed vocal literature:

New Work Concepts, 2022: iv

Reflecting the past through commissioning contemporary aria repertoire for Baroque ensemble.

Echoing 18th century approaches to understanding vocal individuality through this process. This will be achieved via a process

which understands the voice and the performer without a contemporary Fach v label, so often applied to operatic artists today and anachronistic to Handel's repertoire.

vi

Offering a contemporary musical work that would provide new insights into the past.

At this early stage of the project my main aim was to learn more about what it would feel like to embody an aria written for my voice and dramatic presence. I felt that this process would echo the experiences of the historical Handelian singers who often worked with individually crafted vocal repertoire. Evidence of this can be found in C. Steven LaRue's *Handel and his Singers: The Creation of the Royal Academy Operas 1720-1728* in which he analyses the professional processes and dynamics within a formative period of creation for Handel's opera seria (LaRue, 1995). He writes of the singer's significance in the creative process for the composer, concluding, "For Handel, therefore, the cast provided the starting-point for the creative process, and not its end" (LaRue, 1995, p. 190).

To me, this idea that the 18th century Handelian singer was vital to the formation of an operatic work, and essentially higher up the creative 'food chain', was antithetical to my contemporary experiences in mainstream operatic training of historical repertoires to date which had been driven by an understanding that my role in the presentation of the operatic canon was not to 'create' but rather to 're-create' (Taruskin, 2009, Chapter 4). What is more, the hierarchy, or lack thereof, of the 18th century opera seria composer and performer dynamic referenced by LaRue was unfamiliar within my 21st century context as an interpreter of historical operatic literature where I find myself more accustomed to the ingrained feeling of being artistically subordinate to the overbearing weight of Handel, the historical 'genius'.^{vii} I wanted to know more about this 18th century relationship between composer and performer and question these ideas through the act of music making itself, to assess what challenging my inherited hierarchies could release for me artistically.

An example of my own early grappling with these ideas is outlined in my autoethnographic diary. In January 2022 I sketched out my initial impressions after reading LaRue's (1995) text.

I have been thinking so much recently about our role as singers. As our agency in this repertoire [opera seria] is so very changed and shifted. What I want to ask is...what is the difference between creation and re-interpretation? How has our role in the repertoire shifted and in turn how have our identities remained unchanged with historical singers? If our role has shifted surely then too should the way in which we are perceived (author autoethnographic diary excerpt, 20 January 2022).

The extract outlines my frustrations with the practice of having type-casts applied to me in the context of interpreting historical operatic roles. I wanted to explore whether music written for my personal identity could help me to step out of the aesthetic expectations of the opera canon and to experience a greater sense of individual agency.

Jessica Walker, who is concerned with the present-day agency of singers, researches through new music collaboration to assess how a singer today might regain a sense of equality within the collaborative process (Walker, 2015). In her thesis, Walker references the ideal of the historical singer's agency in the creative process and why this power dynamic has shifted from the Baroque to the present day. She suggests this is a product of the reorganisation of the contemporary operatic industry whose primary business it is to restage canonical operatic work. She writes,

...it is not the 'voice' of the singer that is typically heard in the collaborative process of opera production today. The director as auteur, a possible outcome of the attempt constantly to breathe life into an historic canon of works, has re-calibrated the collaborative hierarchy in opera. [... T]here has been shift in focus from the performers to the director, reflecting the fact that most opera produced today is not new work (Walker, 2015, p. 2).

Here, the "voice" denotes something holistic, pertaining to the creative identity of the singer as a complex whole. Like Walker, I initially wanted to assess if the collaborative process within new music would help me understand something more about creative agency and simulate an experience which could imitate the processes experienced by Handel's singers. My hypothesis was that the original female singers for whom Handel crafted operatic roles would have experienced a heightened sense of freedom over their output. What I would find, however, is that this hypothesis failed to take into consideration the long-standing systemic inequalities associated with gender in society, enacted and entrenched in historical contexts, and represented in the resulting art that portrays them. Again, using historical mirroring as a metaphor, my initial idea for the composition presented at the proposal stage in October 2022 would only represent a shard of glass, not the full mirror through which to reflect the historical world in which Handel's opera seria were formed.

Composer/ Performer First Creative Meeting 13 October 2022

The initial proposal was shared with composer King who was the ideal collaborator for this project due to our mutual interest in working with and through historical content. King (2024) has also been influenced by camp aesthetics, commonly through forms of vocal music, thereby reflecting my concern for exploring aesthetics outside the perceived status-quo in classical music. In our first creative meeting on 13 October 2022, we discussed our shared artistic priorities, with King observing that he wished to "write music of an imaginary or even fake past" (composer paraphrased quotation, creative meeting 13 October 2022).

This early-stage statement from our conversation is worth highlighting as it represents an initial desire to peer through the historical content we inherit as classical musicians and to find stories which we feel better reflect our contemporary artistic identities. Although King and I would come to find that we were often searching for historical truths and realities rather



Figure 2. Pablo Bronstein, Molly House, 2023. (Ink and acrylic on paper, artist's frame, 120.2 x 146.2 x 6 cm / 47.3 x 57.6 x 2.4 in) © Pablo Bronstein. Courtesy the artist and Herald St, London. Photo by Andy Keate.

than 'fake' pasts, what was certainly required of us at this early stage of artistic creation was a mutual need to 'imagine' – an imagining beyond the historical records associated with today's artistic canon, recorded primarily by a patriarchal, white and chronological mode of recording history, and bring to the forefront 'lesser-valued' and thereby 'lesser-heard' stories.

An artwork that reminds me of this exact idea of historical re-imagining, which I would later see at the Tate Britain in early 2024, is 'Molly House' by the artist Pablo Bronstein. Here, Bronstein depicts the façade of an 18th century London building and makes exterior the imagined visual interior of Molly Houses, a place for homosexual men to gather in 18th century London. viii Bronstein is imagining an alternative

version of history, where the concealed is revealed, turning a received 'truth' inside out and distorting the 'historical mirror'.

Similar to Bronstein's work, it was the intention for our composition to serve as a reimagined historical reflection, making central a story that had been sidelined and reconfiguring our received relationship with history; our approach would encourage a method of engaging with historical thinking which is rhizomatic in nature, where methods of meaning-making stretch out like complex webs (White, 2012, pp. 168-173). King prompted me to provide further insight into a historical female figure who would inform the narrative and text-setting of the work. Whilst my initial proposal only outlined a need to replicate the 'processes' of historical singers, he wanted something more

specific to inform the narrative, text and world-building element of the new music.

Focus: Francesca Cuzzoni May 2023

Composer responses to scholarship

After the initial period of research, the composer and I decided to focus the piece on Francesca Cuzzoni. Cuzzoni is a historical singer who has been influential within my wider PhD work as I sing and record Handelian aria repertoire written for her voice; I assess contemporary casting trends associated with influential roles written for her and I also interview contemporary performers who are commonly cast in these roles today. I respond to contemporary scholarship which addresses the singer rivalry between Faustina Bordoni and Francesca Cuzzoni and I

conceptualise the impact this history can have on a contemporary practitioner, using myself and my artistic experiences as a case study. Here I will offer an overview of the types of materials shared with the composer which provided an artistic starting point for the two new works by King: 'Little Siren of the Stage' (2024-25) and 'Cuzzoni's Letter' (2024). These materials can be split into two main sections: insights into concepts stemming from recent scholarship and a section on primary and secondary sources from the 18th century and the 20th and 21st centuries.

Influential scholarship

Francesca Cuzzoni is predominantly remembered for her rivalry with fellow singer Faustina Bordon.

This rivalry climaxed on the London stage in 1727 in a production of Bononcini's *Astianatte* wherein the public spurred the two women onstage to physical violence, breaking the dramatic structure of the opera (Aspden, 2013, p. 5). Here was an incident in which the women's professional roles and artistic achievements were debased by spectators. Many scholars have addressed the issue of rivalry and the impact it had on the agency of performing women (Aspden, 2013; Nussbaum, 2010; DeSimone, 2013 & 2017). In the case of Cuzzoni, Aspden (2013) looks

at the rivalry between Cuzzoni and Bordon as a phenomenon socially constructed through industry (opera companies and patron alliances) and media (18th century print culture and celebrity) and outlines female performing rivalry as part of a wider culture of mythologising women and thereby controlling their identities. Early in my artistic research, Aspden's work helped me to start to question the root of my own inherited culture in today's industry and engage with a more critical self-reflective practice.

Aspden's (2013) scholarship doesn't exist in a vacuum but is part of a series of publications around the 2010s which are all engaging in a reframing of historical female performing identities and which look at the issues of rivalry. Indeed, DeSimone's (2013) thesis *The Myth of the Diva: Female Opera Singers and Collaborative Performance in early Eighteenth-Century London* and Nussbaum's (2010) *Rival Queens: Actresses, Performance, and the Eighteenth-Century British Theater* both reframe the act of pitting theatrical women against each other during the period as a way of controlling and undermining the newfound reach public women had on the London stages (see also DeSimone, 2017).

Evidence of my early grappling with these concepts can be seen in an

extract from my autoethnographic diary in 2021, predating the commissioning of the new work. Here I start to unravel the framework through which I comprehend my own constructed identity in opera as something pre-determined, systematic and unyielding. I wrote,

...giving voice to Cuzzoni is important to me as we don't have [adequate] existing first-hand accounts from her as a performer... I wonder if I can shed light on her experiences kinaesthetically and with[in] the umbrella of research through artistic practice ... In my mind mythic representations arise through the lack of artist led dialogues and indeed one of the factors I feel myself pushing against in this PhD is mythic representation. As myth blurs these historical singers' identities, I feel myself that I step into a practice and tradition where there is a distinct lack of importance placed on the holistic artistic identity of the female operatic singer (author autoethnographic diary excerpt, 7 October 2021).

As a contemporary practitioner, the historical reframing found in recent gender-conscious musicology has enabled me to develop critical awareness of operatic trends that can curtail women's self-determination in opera beyond the confines of often heavily gendered archetypes. This awareness

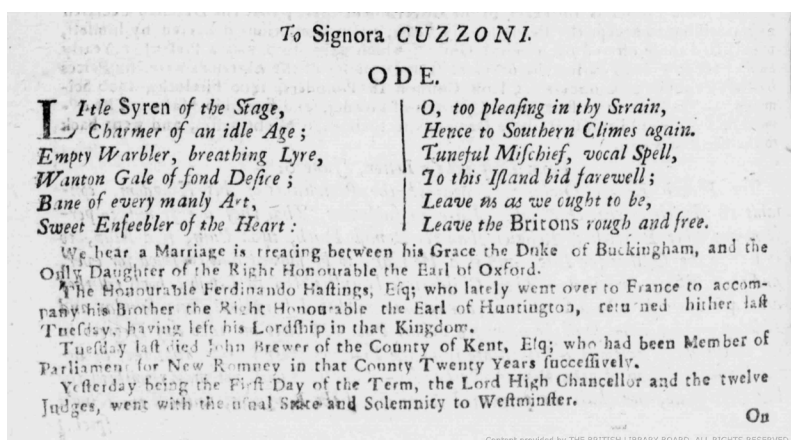


Figure 3. To Signora Cuzzoni, Ode. Stamford Mercury. 1724. A page of a newspaper
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has impacted how I view and perceive today's industry, allowing me to assess both similarities and differences between the 18th and 21st centuries in the context of my own practice. Cuzzoni is not a forgotten woman but rather a woman whose identity requires reassessment across disciplines, both historically and artistically.

Source materials shared with composer

I sent a selection of primary and secondary sources to the composer to offer an array of options for the nar-

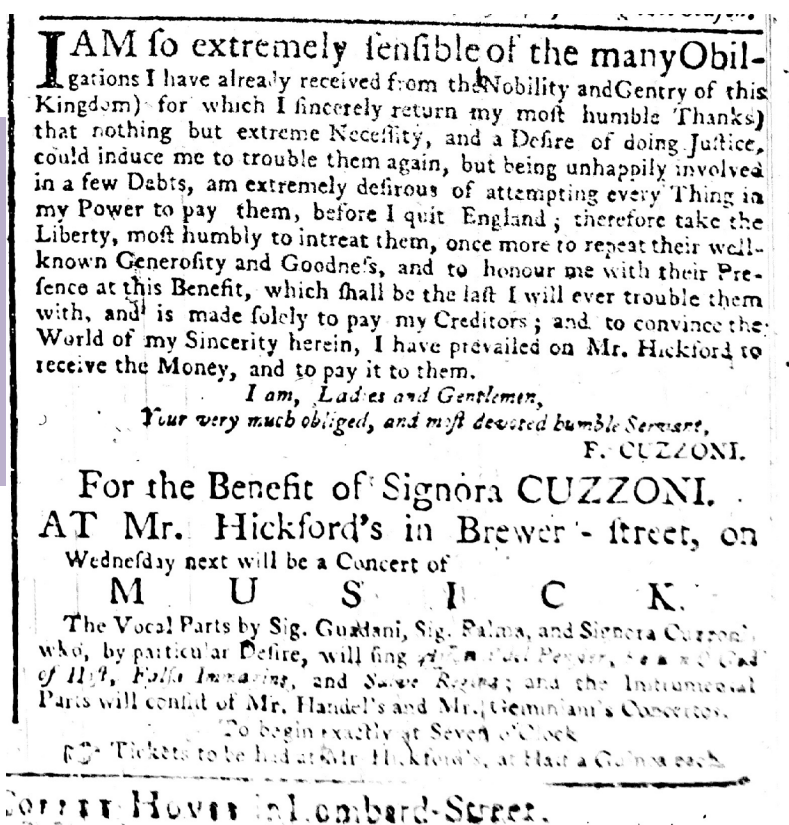
set two 18th century sources to music. The first text, set within the context of an aria with Baroque ensemble, was a poem entitled 'To Signora Cuzzoni, Ode' printed in the Stamford Mercury on 11 June 1724 (Figure 3). King then decided to compose a second piece in which Cuzzoni's own words were to be spoken over contemporary instrumental music scored for Baroque ensemble. The spoken text comes from the 1751 newspaper the General Advertiser (Figure 4) where Cuzzoni appears in a rare occurrence in her own words.

Working with the Scores

Research period: January - March 2024

By early 2024 I had received a first draft of the scores and secured an opportunity to perform the pieces in March 2024 at the Royal Academy of Music Museum with an 18th century keyboard instrument from the collection forming part of the performing ensemble. During February 2024 I conducted a semi-structured interview with the composer to better understand his aesthetic priorities, visions and processes behind the compositions. I also recorded detailed reflections from two rehearsals

Figure 4. Francesca Cuzzoni, General Advertiser. 1751. A newspaper with text on it. Image © the author



rative contents and text-setting of the pieces. Spanning 18th century newspaper clippings to 21st century audio recordings, these sources were obtained through my research into Cuzzoni in The British Newspaper Archive, The British Museum online collections and on contemporary streaming platforms.

By June 2023 the composer responded with the decision to

King elaborated on the reason for this contrast between singing and speaking, writing to me in an email that "I'm thinking that way the audience can't really help but really hear – really hear – her words and then she (you) takes ownership of the things said about her by styling them" (composer quotation, email correspondence, 6 June 2023).

with the ensemble which were audio captured. In the following section of this paper, I will analyse the symbolic elements within King's settings and use my findings from the interview and reflective material as supporting evidence. I will also include insight into the performance context for the pieces, weaving into my analysis the symbolic implications of using a (truly) historical harpsichord and my cura-

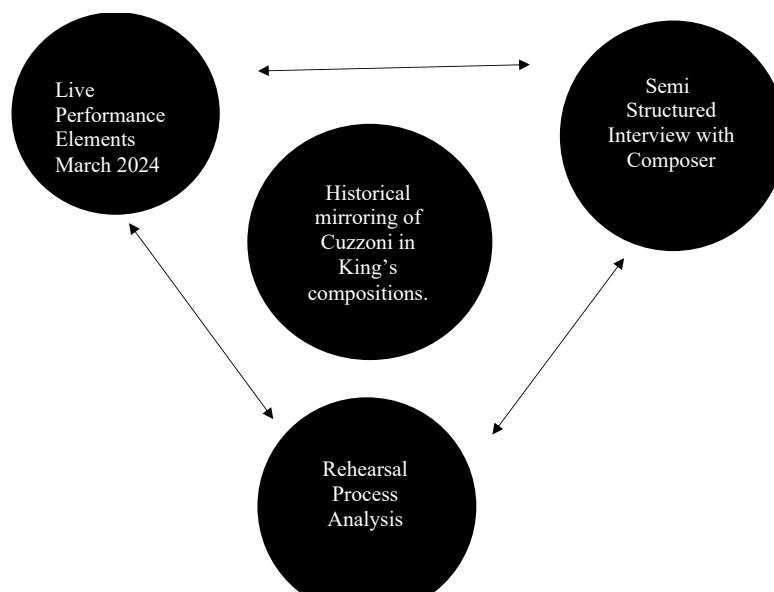


Figure 5. Methodologies and Analysis Model. Note: Interacting methodologies for the analysis of the two new works by Geoffrey King.

torial decisions to display 18th century scores for audience members to view. Above is a diagram capturing the interlinked elements which will contribute to my analysis.

Analysis: 'Little Siren of the Stage'

In the following section I analyse how features of King's compositional process and my artistic interpretative decisions set up a 'historical mirror' for Cuzzoni. I start with a textual analysis of the 'Ode' to Cuzzoni ("To Signora Cuzzoni, Ode", 1724), bringing to the fore misogynistic tropes that I associate with the text, followed by analysis of how the composer and I work with complex and layered 'time displacements', distorting the historical mirror through smaller acts of aesthetic protest.

Figure 3 Text Transcribed:

To Signora Cuzzoni, Ode. Stamford Mercury. 1724.

Little Syren of the Stage,

Charmer of an idle Age;

Empty Warbler, breathing Lyre,

Wanton Gale of fond Desire;

Bane of every manly Art,

Sweet Enfeeblers of the Heart:

O, too pleasing in thy Strain, ix

Hence to Southern Climes again.

Tuneful Mischief, vocal Spell,

To this Island bid farewell;

Leave us as we ought to be,

Leave the Britons rough and free.

("To Signora Cuzzoni, Ode", 1724)

Inserting the 18th century 'Ode' to Cuzzoni into the structure of a contemporary musical work positions me as performer in an overlap of time, offering a performing space in which I can create new meanings. In singing the text, I hope to start to break the portrayal of women in opera across time and engage in an act of musical reclaiming. Perhaps most obviously provocative for a modern singer is that Cuzzoni is referred to as a siren, a term which positions her as something otherworldly, dangerous or even sullied. It also links Cuzzoni to her female Italian

vocal predecessor, the courtesan, who were also commonly referred to in 17th century Italy as sirens (Gordon, 2006, p. 185).^x Thus, as I sing the word siren within this piece, the historical mirror through which I peer extends yet further back in time.

When specifically related to female singers, the application and reapplication of the label siren entrenches hierarchical value systems in the way in which female performing identities are viewed. C.N. Lester's (2019) research into the historical female composer and performer Barbara Strozzi speaks of the effect that this type of labelling has on how we culturally value and perceive historical singing women: "This image, of the woman musician as seductive, dangerous siren, is completely at odds with the canonical figure of the genius, "pure" male composer" (Lester, 2019, p. 37). Here, the instilled binary between the "pure" figure of male composer as creator and the identity of singer as impure vessel speaks to a collective cultural trend, stemming from antiquity; such systematic thinking can be seen referenced in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, where "male" is aligned with principles such as "good", "light" and "straight" and "female" is affiliated with "bad", "darkness," and "bent"

(Aristotle, 350 B.C.E./1998, p. 20).^{xi} This type of enduring thinking associated with the gender binary places women in a de-centralised position, reinforcing a binary through which performing operatic women have come to be categorised.

Moreover, the language within the rhyming couplets of this poem seems to further entrench

Cuzzoni as a subject of what we would now call the male gaze, a term coined by Laura Mulvey during the 1970s. An example can be seen in “Bane of every manly Art, Sweet Enfeeblers of the Heart” (“To Signora Cuzzoni, Ode”, 1724). This line makes the male poetic voice and perspective very clear and, coupled with the misogynous term “bane” - synonyms being “plague” and “curse” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d., Synonyms 1 & 2) - successfully silences Cuzzoni, rendering her less able to self-lead cultures of meaning-making in a way that Mulvey would recognise:

Women then stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning (Mulvey, 1975/2009, p. 433).

Turning to the music, King and I both filter acts of musical reclaiming through the more intricate aspects of our craft. King encourages a holistic reflection of the historical figure of Cuzzoni through constructing a work which combines compositional elements referencing multiple historical contexts. The scoring itself is imbued with an overlay of historical references, consisting of my operatically trained voice set amongst an array of historically informed Baroque instruments. A further element was added for the premiere,^{xii} in which we used a 1787 Burkat Shudi and John Broadwood harpsichord, linking us sonically to a remnant of sound from the 18th century.^{xiii} The ensemble’s instrumentation aims to convey to the listener prismatic references to history through which we hoped to encourage a more complex relationship with historical perception for both audiences and

performers. Furthermore, the composer has included a ‘time displacement’ in the harmonic language of the piece. Although the aria proposal requested that the pieces reflect Italianate 18th century operatic writing, in this composition King chose to allude to the tonal landscape of an even earlier generation of composers. The following extract from our semi-structured interview gives insight into the musical era referenced:

This piece references English music-making before Handel comes on the scene ... Purcell and his group... and one thing that really excites me is actually how tonally unstable things are, like the idea of tonality hadn't really crystallised yet in the way it has by the time we even see Handel, and so it's also kind of kaleidoscopic in its tone centre, but it does tend to be fairly rhythmically grid-like... (composer interview extract, 8 February 2024)

Here, King references the tonal fluidity that can be evident in the counterpoint of Purcell’s epoch and which has

the potential to evoke an aural message of uncertainty to listeners and performers. This places the satirical poem, which is so certain, singular and condemning of Cuzzoni, into a musical environment which is conveying nuance. King’s fluid tonality transforms a satirical poem into something deeply serious and provides an artistic environment in which I grapple with Cuzzoni’s mythic identity, searching for truth whilst singing.

The marking at the beginning of the piece ‘Rough and free’ (Figure 6) is taken from the end of the poem, “Leave us as we ought to be, leave the Britons rough and free” (“To Signora Cuzzoni, Ode”, 1724). King’s statement from our February 2024 interview gives insight into the aesthetic priorities this marking encourages:

I definitely want this to be freely sung, certainly not metrical especially when you are unaccompanied at the start. The rough side of it speaks to the fact that I don't want you to worry about trimming all of the corners off of the

Figure 6. Little Siren of The Stage, Score Excerpt. King, 2025. Image © the author

Score

little siren of the stage

geoff king

VERSE 1 Rough and free ♩ = c.54





Figure 7. Little Siren of the Stage, Score Excerpt. King, 2025. Image © the author

big jumps... they should feel big and effortful I think (composer interview extract, 8 February 2024).

Here, King asks for a vocal style that is both flexible in terms of timing, particularly at the beginning of the piece when I enter alone (Figure 6), and, critically, less manicured and even in tone. The large vocal jumps King refers to in the quote above can be seen in Figure 7, specifically in the vocal movements between bars 42-43, where the voice descends in a major seventh.

Throughout the 2024 rehearsal period, I contended with the meaning behind this stylistic marking 'Rough and free'. I find it almost impossible to read this marking outside of the context of the poem. Even though here it appears fragmented and isolated at the beginning of the score (Figure 6), within the context of the poem these words

reference a historical truth much more sinister, pertaining to the xenophobia experienced by Italian singers, and continental musicians at large, during the era (DeSimone, 2017, p. 76). The Bel Canto style I inherit from singers such as Cuzzoni, conditions my voice to move seamlessly and smoothly through vocal registers (Koestenbaum, 1994, p. 167). With this knowledge, I then question if by rejecting my Bel Canto vocal training in favour of a vocal style 'rough and free', am I then also rejecting Cuzzoni's artistry? I am, in truth, comfortable with my inability to fully achieve a 'rough and free' approach, as my rejection of this marking has two constructive out-

comes. Firstly, in utilising my trained Bel Canto voice I bypass the composer's intention and feel I am establishing a direct line of gaze to Cuzzoni. I initiate an uninterrupted 'female' gaze between this historical woman and myself, my trained vocal quality becoming a sonic portal to the past, linking us both. Secondly, by doing this, I then elevate myself psychologically to the status of a co-creator. Breaking with hierarchies associated with how I have been conditioned to view myself as a performer (particularly as subordinate to the composer) then further mirrors a historical truth about Cuzzoni which this poem and the myths surrounding her fail to acknowledge, that she was a primary artistic force within the creation of Handel's opera seria. As I make this decision, I am faced with my own inherited bias towards myself as a performer. Who gives me the authority to make this decision? But in this small act of protest, I challenge myself to take artistic control. For me, only after reinstating historical performers as important artistic forces in my own imagination can I then reaffirm the artistic agency I have over my own body. Nothing is created in isolation, and I am linked to the historical women who came before me.

A further 'play of time' within the work emerges from a structure found within Baroque vocal music. This is the piece's dramatic momentum and tactus which represents a use of time which is more traditionally linear. King speaks of the inspiration taken from the da capo aria format, and in doing so, transfers agency to the performer:

The repetition is my provocation to you, because in the same way that da capo arias really force you to think about what you are doing when you go back to the A section dramatically and repetition is idiomatic ... but it's [also] a tricky thing because it does sort of run contrary to a lot of the ideas about how drama progresses

now (composer interview extract, 8 February 2024).

The dramatic arc of the piece uses rhetorical repetitions of the po-

“I find it almost impossible to read this marking outside of the context of the poem ”

em's text. This allows me to vary my rhetorical delivery and cultivate a self-led psychological transformation throughout the piece. For example, the first utterance of the poem is monodic (Figure 6), the second vocal entrance is perhaps more anxious as the texture is thicker in the ensemble and the strings are added to provide 'a bit of edge' (Figure 7), and the final and third entrance of the poem is more fragmented (Figure 8), which I take as possibly denoting an exhausted acceptance. As the composer offers a format in which I can work with an increased rhetorical agency

In echoing a primary function of the da capo aria, which encouraged the performer to assert rhetorical agency, King simulates the concept behind a historical musical structure to create new meaning. Haynes recognises the significance of this artistic process exactly by stating that a contemporary engagement with the conceptual application of rhetoric would allow for the erosion of the hierarchies established in Romanticism between composers and performers (Haynes, 2007, p. 166). He also suggests a possible outcome of engaging with older rhetorical devices in today's musical milieu by stating

Engaging with historical concepts and theatrical tropes could run the risk of further entrenching a historical narrative. However, King's conscious manipulation of how contemporary and historical elements interact convey kaleidoscopic messages that take us into a more abstracted realm, leaving space for ambiguity. Here, we take a mythic, singular and flattened message about the identity of Cuzzoni and, as it filters through this aria structure, find her refracted into a more prismatic view of history.

Analysis: 'Cuzzoni's Letter'

I am so extremely sensible of the manly Obligationsxiv I have already received from the Nobility and Gentry of this Kingdom (for which I sincerely return my most humble thanks) that nothing but extreme Necessity, and Desire of doing Justice, could induce me to trouble them again, but being unhappily involved in a few Debts, am extremely desirous of attempting every Thing in my Power to pay them, before I quit England; therefore take the Liberty, most humbly to intreat them, once more to repeat their well-known Generosity and Goodness, and to honour one with their Presence at this Benefit, which shall be the last I will ever trouble them with, and is made solely to pay my Creditors; and to convince the World of my Sincerity herein, I have prevailed on Mr. Hickford to receive the Money, and to pay it to them.

I am, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Your very much obliged, and most devoted humble Servant,

F. Cuzzoni.

(Cuzzoni, 1751)

King's second work is a short, contrasting piece where spoken voice is heard over Baroque ensemble. The text originates from the 1751 newspaper the General Advertiser in which Cuzzoni is requesting financial support from the nobility and gentry. It was published around the time of her final performance in London and is, significantly, an extremely rare occurrence in which Cuzzoni is heard in her own words (Kettledon, 2017, p. 116). The presence of this text within our overarching perfor-



Figure 8. Little Siren of the Stage, Score Excerpt. King, 2025. Image © the author

in performance, I too am emulating Cuzzoni, whose craft was rooted in a rhetorical delivery of the da capo aria. In mirroring historical concepts through musical structures, the composer and I re-create meaning within the framework of our inherited musical craft.

that "To recognize its former importance, and to cultivate it once more and benefit from its inspiration, would represent the discovery of something new in our culture" (Haynes, 2007, p. 183).

Cuzzoni's letter

Geoff King



Figure 9. Cuzzoni's Letter. Score Excerpt. King, 2024. Image © the author

mance is meaningful for two reasons. Firstly, it acts as a stark contrast to the way in which Cuzzoni is mythologised in the previous piece. Instead, here we perceive a performing woman facing a very real predicament. Although we are hearing Cuzzoni in her 'own words', what this text really speaks of is the society from which she comes. It is an excerpt of text that tells me very little about the individual and more about the wider gender-biased social structures faced by professional independent female musicians during the era. David Kennerley's work sheds light on the fact that it was only in the 19th century that women were admitted as members to the Royal Society of Musicians.^{xv} In Cuzzoni's generation there were no support structures available to independent female musicians whilst, conversely, there were funds being established for male musicians and their wives (Kennerly, 2018, p. 54). Therefore, this instance in which we see Cuzzoni pleading for financial support is not an isolated one. Kennerley writes that these social structures "...acted as a

significant force mitigating against music as a career for independent, unmarried woman to pursue, thereby reinforcing male control, power and authority within the music profession" (Kennerley, 2018, p. 54). Cuzzoni is, as both female and performer, silenced and subsidiary. Although a common sign-off during the era,^{xvi} speaking aloud Cuzzoni's last words "...most devoted humble Servant..." (Cuzzoni, 1751) feels particularly jarring as a modern performer given this historical context.

As with the former piece, this composition utilises musical and conceptual time displacements to encourage a complex consideration and reflection of Cuzzoni's identity. The ensemble begins with a descending tetrachord, evocative of sorrow or loss in Baroque vocal music such as Barbara Strozzi's 'Che si può fare' or Monteverdi's 'Lamento della Ninfa' which both begin in a similar way to King's piece (Figure 9). Here he sets a lamenting landscape in which, if one's ear is attuned to this early Baroque idiom,

we are poised for the sung vocal entrance. But it doesn't appear in this piece. Indeed, there is no scoring for the voice at all, nor is the text provided and written in any place on the score. There is merely a mutual agreement made between performer and composer that the text will be recited within the act of performance. Cuzzoni and I have been extracted from the confines of the score. Have we been written out or offered the freedom to express ourselves outside the notated structure in which we usually create? If it is social structures that have made Cuzzoni paradoxically voiceless, does extracting the voice from the confines of the score mirror an alternative view of the past? Do we extract Cuzzoni from this structure, and thereby offer critical insight?

In this piece, I decide when to use my voice and which part of the text to perform. By operating outside a clear tactus, I am given a freedom of choice as a performer with which I am less familiar. As a result of the

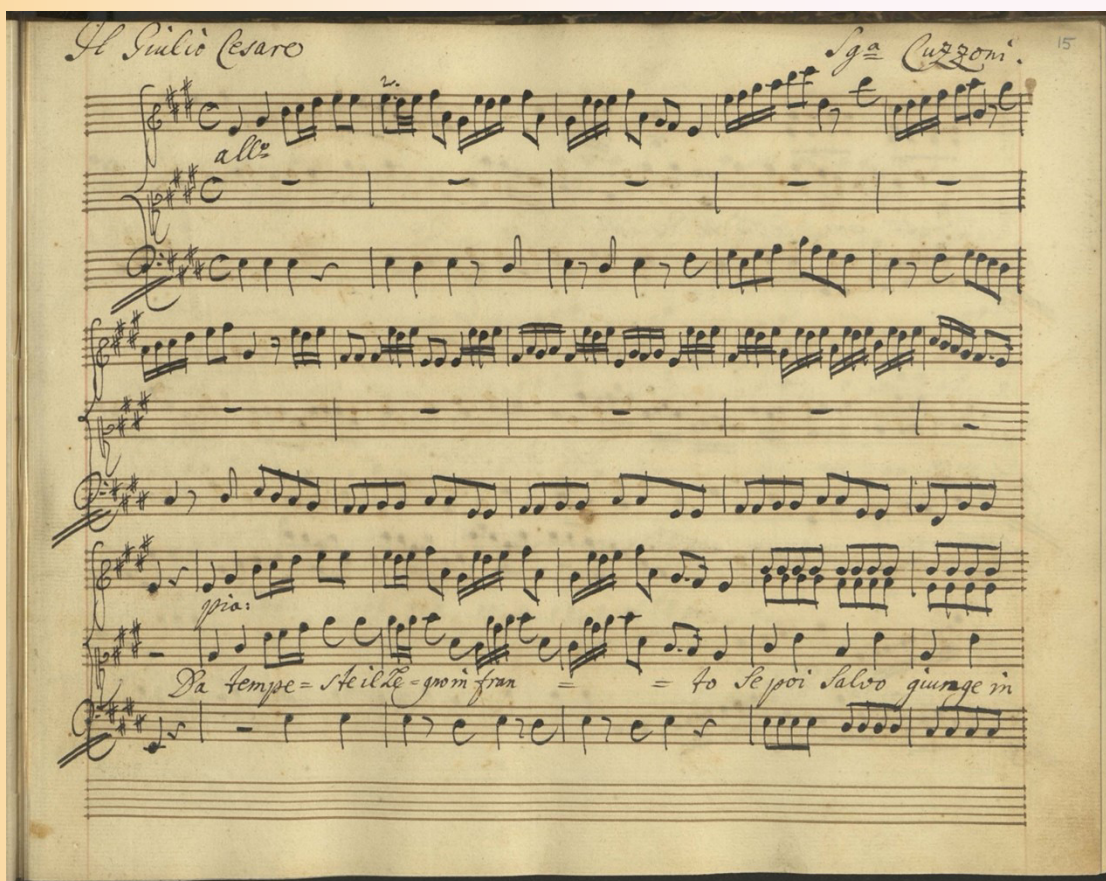


Figure 10. Handel's *Da tempeste il legno infranto*, Giulio Cesare (c. 1740) Image reproduced with permission from the Royal Academy of Music, London

unpredictable entrances of the text, the ensemble engages in more active listening to the vocalist, making the voice-user central within the creative act. Crucially, however, with the qualities of my aesthetically rawer spoken voice the listener is undeniably encouraged to consider me as the performer in the present. The impact of the 'untrained' voice entering at will shatters the sense of time, suggesting a moment of contemporary realisation. In the case of our premiere in March 2024, I added a further overlapping historical element for the audience by displaying two 18th century scores in which Cuzzoni's name appears in ink on the top right-hand corner and encouraging audience members to view them as they left the event. One of the scores shows her name scribbled above the notorious aria 'Da tempeste il legno infranto' sung by the character of Cleopatra in Handel's *Giulio*

Cesare (Figure 10). My aim was to present a series of references to time through Baroque musical idioms, the historical words from Cuzzoni, the 18th century scores displayed in glass cabinets and the presence of my spoken voice, all interweaving to offer a blurred view of history, full of uncertainty rather than fact.

Research Conclusion

In setting up a historical mirror to Cuzzoni, I engage in a reckoning with my own inherited artistic identity as a female opera singer. This work is about taking the 'mirror' I engage with when going to sing, which as Woolf identifies is often "... reflecting the figure of man at twice it's natural size" (Woolf, 1929/2019, p. 53), and inverting the image, thereby protesting the received status quo. Through the act of mirroring Cuzzoni, what I have realised is how blurred

and imperceptible she is as a recipient of my own 'female' gaze due to the inequalities associated with how history has been recorded. In truth, she isn't a role model for me, she can't be, because I know nothing about her. She is another woman I must search for as I also continually search for my own operatic identity today beyond stereotypes, beyond typecasts and beyond categorisations. In this project, I have explored new aesthetic frames, not to dismiss current industry approaches to the repertoire, but because I don't always feel that they reflect who I am as an artist. I am also curious about the artistic identities which are being excluded and/or lost. What this process has revealed to me is the urgent need to record, reassess, reframe and value the complex voices of female operatic performers, and thereby to make central our vital contributions as female vocalists to the process of musical creation.

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Figures

Figure 2

Bronstein, P. (2023). *Molly House* [Ink and acrylic on paper]. Herald St, London, United Kingdom. <https://www.heraldst.com/pablo-bronstein>

Figure 3

[Unknown author] (1724, June 11). *To Signora Cuzzoni, Ode*. [published in] Stamford Mercury, 1724. [Photograph]. The British Newspaper Archive. <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000253/17240611/010/0006?browse=false>

Figure 4

Cuzzoni, F. (1751, May 20). [Advertisement regarding London benefit concert] General Advertiser, 1751 [Microfilm]. The Burney Collection, Vol.4 (Burney 443.BB), The British Library, London, United Kingdom. Photograph of microfilm taken by the author.

Figures 6-9: contact composer directly for scores

King, G. (2025, Jan. 29). *Geoffrey King – Composer*. <https://www.geoffkingmusic.com>

Figure 10

Unknown scribe. (c.1740). Songs in Giulio Cesare: and various songs by Handel (and Porpora and Veracini). William Savage / R.J.S Stevens Collection, (GB-Lam MS140 F15R) Royal Academy of Music Library, London. <https://lib.ram.ac.uk/cgi-bin/koha/opac-detail.pl?biblionumber=69490>

Endnotes

ⁱ In the visual arts this means figures in the painting that have been painted over at a point in history and can reveal shadowed impressions on the surface of the work.

ⁱⁱ Here Bull (2019) is also drawing on the work of Coleman (2013).

ⁱⁱⁱ Graham outlines a multifaceted and intersectional conceptual framework for understanding the complexity of a singer's vocal identity (Graham, 2019, p. 11).

^{iv} The initial wording of these concepts have been updated from the original proposal to clarify their meaning.

^v I was concerned with the limiting aspects of the Fach system on singer identities today. For literature on this system see: (Kloiber et al., 2019) and (Boldrey, 1994). For literature on a practitioner navigating the Fach system see: (Festev, 2016).

^{vi} Importantly, I did not list my contemporary Fach label or voice-type in this proposal, encouraging the composer to respond to me as an individual.

^{vii} For feminist criticism of the gendered concept of 'genius' see: (Battersby, 1989).

^{viii} For more on Molly Houses in 18th century London see: (Peakman, 2024).

^{ix} In the 1724 Stamford Mercury newspaper ("To Signora Cuzzoni, Ode", 1724) sourced on The British Newspaper Archive this line is printed "O, too pleasing in thy Strain". Wierzbicki (2001) sources this poem and here this line is printed as "O, too pleasing is thy Strain" (p. 183). He references Hogarth (1838) who also prints the same text (p.413). Both texts point to Ambrose Philips as the author of this poem written around the time Cuzzoni first leaves England after the 1727 'rivalry'. Yet, the 1724 version I have sourced predates these events and attributes no author.

^x Not solely used to refer to courtesans, Gillet also tells us that in the 17th century Milton relates the voice of Italian singer Leonora Baroni to that of a siren (Gillet, 2000, p. 142). This descriptor, stemming from Homer, endures and is also used throughout 19th century Britain to refer to professional female singers. Gillet tells us that even by this point in history "Famous women singers were often referred to as sirens ..." (Gillet, 2000, p. 142).

^{xi} Carson (2025) tells us that Aristotle is referencing The Pythagorean Table of Opposites (p. 10).

^{xii} Royal Academy of Music Museum, Keyboard Gallery, 7 March 2024.

^{xiii} Important to our experiences of 'time displacements' the harpsichord is not a 'revival' instrument it is an 'original' 18th century instrument; its core materiality acts as an 18th century 'passage' in performance. The restoration it has been subject to offers insight into the further time 'negotiations' that the instrument poses in working with it. This instrument received restorations in 1992 by Darryl Martin and 2012 by Miles Hellon (Cobbe & Nobbs, 2014, p. 122). Further restorations were made by Ben Marks and Christopher Nobbs in 2015 (unpublished restoration report consulted with Christopher Nobbs in person, 24, April 2025). From speaking with Nobbs in April 2025, I gained an understanding that these recent restorations were concerned with reversing the effects of earlier interventions and that it is important to approach the instrument without preconceptions. Conceptually this tells me that the history the instrument offers is complex and layered; knowledge of the restoration encourages me as a performer to engage in an informed and active listening, learning from the instrument when working with it.

^{xiv} In the 1751 General Advertiser newspaper (Cuzzoni, 1751) the text is printed with the following spelling: "Obligations". We made the decision to update the spelling and pronunciation to "Obligations" for performance purposes.

^{xv} Kennerly notes that after being initially excluded from the Royal Society of Musicians (RSM), women musicians set up the Royal Society of Female Musicians (RSFM) in 1839-1840. The RSM amalgamates with the RSFM in 1866. However, Kennerly writes: "Although women could now be members, they faced restrictions not imposed on male members" (Kennerly, 2018, p. 66).

^{xvi} Historical Handelian singer Anastasia Robinson's two rare letters can be seen in LaRue's text where she also uses this sign-off. (LaRue, 1995, pp. 125-126.)