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From prima donna to teacher. Two female pioneers in singing education in the Nineteenth Century: Virginia Boccabadati and Matilde Esteban

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From *prima donna* to teacher. Two female pioneers in singing education in the Nineteenth Century: Virginia Boccabadati and Matilde Esteban

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Abstract

During the 19th-century, the teaching of singing became a career opportunity for the women who had worked in the lyrical stage. The core objective of this article is to present two *prime donne* who, after building a career as successful professional singers, became singing teachers and were pioneers in publishing their methods for female voice education. This research is based on the review and analysis of documentation, mostly historical. By looking at the biographies of the Italian singer, Virginia Boccabadati (1830-1922) and the Spanish singer, Matilde Esteban (1841-1915), we can discover the context in which their treatises were published and the image they offer of woman as a singer and as a student. By choosing women who were each other's contemporary, but from different countries, helps us to observe the obvious points related to gender determinants that their treatises had in common.

Keywords: gender and music, vocal pedagogy, *prima donna*, singing treatise, 19th century.

De *Prima Donna* a maestra: Dos mujeres pioneras en la enseñanza del canto en el siglo XIX: Virginia Boccabadati y Matilde Esteban

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Resumen

Durante el siglo XIX, la enseñanza del canto se convirtió en una oportunidad profesional para las mujeres que habían trabajado en la escena lírica. El objetivo central de este artículo es presentar dos *prime donne* que, tras desarrollar una carrera como cantantes profesionales de éxito, se convirtieron en profesoras de canto y fueron pioneras en la publicación de unos métodos para la educación vocal femenina. Esta investigación se basa en la revisión y el análisis de documentación, en su mayoría histórica. A través de las biografías de la cantante italiana Virginia Boccabadati (1830-1922) y de la española Matilde Esteban (1841-1915), podemos descubrir el contexto en el que se publicaron sus tratados y la imagen que ofrecen de la mujer como cantante y como estudiante. La elección de mujeres que fueron contemporáneas entre sí, pero de países diferentes, nos ayuda a observar los aspectos relacionados con los determinantes de género que sus tratados tenían en común.

Palabras clave: género y música, pedagogía vocal, *prima donna*, tratado de canto, Siglo XIX.

Consuelo, who wished to gain the affection and esteem of the family which was affording her a temporary refuge in her sorrow and loneliness, understood perfectly that they would receive her far better as a simple musician, Porpora's pupil, and a teacher of singing, than a celebrated prima donna and a favorite of the footlights. She realized that if her history were known, she would have a much more trying position in a simple and pious family, and it is probable that in spite of Porpora's recommendation, the arrival of Consuelo the debutante, the marvel of San Samuel, would have somewhat frightened these good people.

George Sand, *Consuelo* (1842-43: 302-303)

Consuelo, the protagonist of George Sand's novel, represents the paradigm of the *prima donna* who, for various reasons, decides to leave the stage to become a singing teacher. Her intention to hide her past, due to the pejorative connotations it might have for a wealthy family, is in part a reflection of the disdain with which female singers were regarded in the mid-19th-century, whereas education was considered a respectable activity.¹ The professionalization of female opera singers in the 19th and early 20th centuries has been studied by authors such as Roselli (1992), Biddlecombe (2003), Putnam Emerson (2005), Rutherford (2006), Poriss (2009), Cowgill and Poriss (2012) and Henson (2015).²

Although the history of music education has been receiving more attention from gender research in recent years, the role of women as singing teachers in the 19th century has not yet been systematically addressed.³ The main core of this article is to reclaim Esteban and Boccabadati vocal pedagogical activity in the past. To do so, we will present the context in which two *prime donne*, the Spaniard Matilde Esteban and the Italian, Virginia Boccabadati emerged and transformed themselves into teachers. In addition we will detail their biographies, neglected by the specialist literature up to now; and finally, we will spread light on the similarities between their treatises, *Nociones elementales de la Teoría del Canto* (1892) y *Osservazioni pratiche per lo*

studio del canto (1893). At the same time, learning about the professional activity of these artists will enable other girls and women musicians to find a source of inspiration.

This research is based on the descriptive method through the review and analysis of documentation mostly historical. The texts consulted mainly belong to the collections of the Biblioteca and Hemeroteca Nacional de España (Madrid) and the Biblioteca Musicale Governativa del Conservatorio di Santa Cecilia (Roma).

We have no evidence that Esteban and Boccabadati were acquainted either with each other or each other's writings, but by comparing these two singers, their lives and treatises, we can draw certain analogies between two *prime donne* from different countries but same epoch. In the 19th-century few women teachers were able to publish their treatises as we will see hereunder: in Spain we only find Matilde Esteban, and in Italy, Boccabadati's work is one of the few examples of treatises written and published by women. This circumstance has been determinant in the selection of these artists and their writings, to try to establish the extent to which being a woman could condition the characteristics, reception and survival of their treatises.

To comprehend the context in which these two women emerged, we have to bear in mind that, since the creation of the opera, women played a relevant role, even though as Rutherford (2006: 4) has pointed out

bans imposed by various popes since opera's inception in 1597 had ensured that women's access to the stage had been only partial, limited either to countries or states of Protestant denomination or to those (such as Venice) where theatrical practice took precedence over Catholic condemnation. In 1798, the new Roman republic not only rescinded these bans, but also dispensed with the prima donna's main competitor by outlawing the training schools of the castrati, by then seen less as the epitome of artistry and more as the victims of a barbarous tradition. Women henceforth became the focus of most operatic works, and the most significant element at the box office.

In the Europe of the 19th-century the presence of women in the profession of music was increasingly visible, due to various factors. From the sociological point of view, and as L. Clark notes (2008: 9), the process of secularisation in Europe from 1789 meant that

women performers were more familiar figures than they had been when religious authorities excluded them from church choirs, Catholic and Protestant, because of moral concerns about mingling the sexes or letting the alluring qualities in women's voices be heard.

Women's access to advanced level music education is linked to the foundation of music conservatoires in Europe in the 1880s (Bennett, 2008: 52). Previously it was restricted to a familial setting and private music lessons with a singing teacher or to convents (Rohr, 2001: 69-71; Rutherford, 2006, 90-119).

Teaching was a respectable career for a number of the most famous *prime donne* of the 19th-century after they retired from the stage (Rutherford, 2006: 203). Some of them published singing treatises based on their artistic experience. Two examples can be seen in France and United States. The French soprano Laure-Cinthie Damoreau (1801-1863) was a leading figure in the Parisian stage of the first middle of XIX century who taught in Paris Conservatoire in 1849. For her pupils, she published her *Méthode de Chant* in 1849 and *Nouvelle méthode de Chant* (ca.1853) (White, 2018: 144). The American Clara Kathleen Rogers (1844-1931) known as Clara Doria taught in Germany. She published *The Philosophy of Singing* (1893), a treatise which not only describes the technical aspects of the voice but also expression and emotion in singing (Rutherford, 2006: 95-96).

In the case of Spain, in spite of the artistic prestige and social esteem female vocalists were held in during the 19th-century, no female vocal teachers were included in the Regulations of the Music Conservatory of Madrid of 1857 (despite the fact that most of the students were female and that female professors were present but their role as teachers was limited to piano, sight reading and harp classes) (Hernández Romero, 2011). Apart from the conservatoires, singing lessons in private academies or at home were an important employment option for female teachers (Morales Villar, 2019).

Most of the treatises on singing were written by men who had never set foot on the stage, while the women- in order to publish their teaching methods- had to extensively justify their artistic worth. Even then, their works continued to be largely undervalued and overlooked: as the Morales Villar (2008) study of these types of works between 1799 and 1905 shows, in contrast to the 52

treatises published by men in Spain, only one woman (the famous zarzuela singer Matilde Esteban) succeeded in having her work published there.

This disadvantageous position for women in the area of treatises on singing in Spain was not an isolated event in 19th-century Europe. Oddly enough, although the balance of the situation in Italy was not much more satisfactory, the first singing method written by a woman that we have on record was *Grammatica o siano Regole di ben cantare* by Anna Maria Pellegrini Celoni (1780-1835), published in 1810 in Rome. Despite this early female contribution, it would not be until the last decade of the 19th-century that other female Italian teachers would publish their treatises on singing. It is difficult to count the total number of Italian methods for the teaching of singing, given the vast number of texts published in the 19th-century and their different types, but only five women are known to have managed to get their works published: Anna Maria Pellegrini Celoni, Maria Melia, Ernesta Werther, Teresina Colli and the *prima donna* Virginia Boccabadati (Beghelli, 1995).

Of the other European countries France alone stands out, here numerous treatises on singing and *vocalizzi* were written and published by female teachers and singers, such as the above mentioned Laure Cinti-Damoreau, Claire Hennelle, Joséphine Mainvielle-Fodor (1789-1870), Mathilde Marchesi, (from German origins but who lived and published in France), Caroline Brun, and Rosine Laborde (1824-1907).⁴

All these women who published singing treatises form part of the history of singing together with many others who still deserve to be studied, such as the authors we will study hereunder.

Matilde Esteban and Virginia Boccabadati: from the stage to the classroom

With opera all the rage in the major European cities, an extraordinary admiration arose for the singers. The aficionados claimed that without its prima donnas and protagonists, opera would lose all its interest (Poriss, 2015: 2).

For women learning to sing entailed two divergent paths: for the propertied classes it was a social distinction, whereas for women from poorer backgrounds, it could present a professional opportunity. Therefore there was

a demand for specialist training that women could access as students and, once the teaching became widespread, as teachers.

Matilde Esteban and Virginia Boccabadati achieved a certain amount of fame from their teaching, giving classes in prestigious centres. They were also able to publish their theories on singing in two treatises that were primarily devoted to their female students in Spain and Italy respectively, each published just one year apart. A comparative analysis of their treatises can reveal if there were any peculiarities in common and how these two treatises show their author's ideas on teaching. Despite their relevance to the history of singing, no monograph exists on either of them, so we present their biographies which we have compiled from a review of historical sources and newspapers of that era.⁵

Virginia Boccabadati (?1830 - Torino, 1922) also known as Gazzuoli-Boccabadati, died at almost one hundred years of age and with her full mental faculties intact, according to the obituaries published in the newspaper *La Stampa*. Virginia was the daughter of a famous soprano, Luigia Boccabadati, whose surname she retained in the art world.⁶ She had three sisters, Augusta, Cecilia and Cesare, who were also singers. She learned the art of singing from her mother, although she also declared herself a pupil of the composer Gaetano Donizetti.⁷ Her début performance was in *Linda di Chamounix* by Donizetti, at the Teatro Massimo in Palermo, three years before the death of her mother in 1847. It seems that she left the stage for a while, to marry Count Carignani of Turin, who in the words of Virginia was “a good-hearted man who tenderly loves me and my Gigietto”, a son she had previously and of whom we know little (Rutherford, 2006: 197-202). But, when her husband's businesses fell into ruin, she went back to singing to support the family: she was the “breadwinner”, just like her mother.⁸ Luigia not only provided for her children, but also supported her ex-husband, a small impresario, and Virginia had to do the same when the businesses of her husband, Count Carignani failed (Rosselli, 1995: 69). Carignani, who was a fairly successful painter, drew the figurines that would serve as the models for her opera costumes. Virginia performed regularly with the renowned baritone Varesi, also her brother-in-law,⁹ with whom she shared great success in *Rigoletto* by Verdi. She was an excellent Violetta in *La Traviata* by Verdi, as attested to in a

newspaper column at that time, in which Boccabadati was compared to Maria Piccolomini, another of the great *prime donne* of that era:

Virginia Boccabadati had to contend with the powerful legacy left to us by María Piccolomini - eminent star of Verdi's operas - who, in Carignano, transported the Turin audiences to heights of enthusiasm unprecedented in theatrical events. She had to overcome the terrible prejudices of such a deep first impression in the human heart and destroy the reputation of foolishness that some might ascribe to her. In short, she had to surpass, in some way, the splendour of her predecessor. And Virginia Boccabadati was a complete success. Frantic applause broke out for her in the pause of the first act, to the point that everyone called for an encore; and this second time, calmer, this pleasant artist sang with even greater grace and more exquisitely, solidly supported by the tenor, Sarti. Thereafter, the audience's enthusiasm was unrelenting. Piccolomini's gentle legacy blended with the sweet, new sensations that Boccabadati, in each phrase and each accent, reawakened in our spirits, and so the applause was infinite, and the testimonies of admiration, affection and appreciation were resounding, expressed with cheers, clapping, and with wanting to see her on the stage countless times; and the artist was tearful with emotion: she could barely believe her success, as if it were a dream. In the first act, Boccabadati was not as joyous and ingenuous as Piccolomini; in the second act, she did not reach Piccolomini's dramatic heights, but in the third act, she was sublimely believable, too real you might say, so strong was the passion with which she interpreted Violetta's death. The audience, deeply affected and moved, showered her with ovations (*La Stampa*, September 13, 1922: 7).

One of her last performances was at the grand opening of the Teatro Rossini in Pesaro, during which an infamous band of thieves burgled her family home. Due to this incident, her husband became sick and died shortly after. This situation, coupled with various vocal illnesses (that the singer attributed to a piece of nutshell she swallowed when eating an almond cake) led her to swap the stage for teaching in order to support her family, first in Turin and then at the *Liceo di Pessaro*, where she taught for 16 years.¹⁰ In her

old age, she retired to the *Regio Convitto delle Vedove e nubili di civile condizione* in Turin.

Boccabadati's vocal technique, learned from her mother Luigia, was exquisite, according to the newspaper columnists and music critics. Concerning her part in the opera *La Sonnambula* by Vincenzo Bellini at the Teatro Argentina in Rome, the columnist of *L'Italia Musicale* wrote that “This young artist, who blends an extremely pleasant voice an exquisite singing method and an expressive dramatic accent, promises to become, within a very short time, one of the most beautiful ornaments of the lyrical theatre” (*L'Italia Musicale*, 1850: 339). According to a columnist of *La Stampa* (August 12, 1922: 4) Boccabadati felt a predilection for the female roles of the operas of Bellini and Donizetti, compared to the much “rougher” female protagonist of Verdi:

The artist's greatest triumphs were the operas of *La Traviata* and *Rigoletto*. However, oddly enough, she preferred the heroines of Donizetti and Bellini. In the melodies of these composers she found the delicate sweetness and romantic sentiment that was in her temperament and that she preferred to play, and declared that Verdi was rougher, too strong in the creation of his female characters.

In declaring so, Boccabadati was following a common opinion held by some critics about Verdi's scores, which lack of melodiousness to favour dramatization (Zicari, 2016: 312). Nevertheless, in spite of this notice by the columnist of *La Stampa*, a letter by Virginia to Ferrarini is preserved in which, speaking about *La Traviata* she reflects her interest and understanding towards this opera:

you cannot imagine how much philosophy, how much delicacy there is in this *cara musica*. There are some phrases that move one tears, some moments in which one feels oneself overwhelmed by the most profound sadness; in the first act one experiences a false cheerfulness, while in the third the contrast between the situation of an almost dying woman and the cheerful shouts of the revellers that pass by on the street is so strange, that I have really had to weep on the stage in truth (Rutherford, 2006: 198).

Among her students were the famous singers Anna Maria Pettigiani (died 1954) and Sofia Scalchi (1850-1922), who achieved success outside of Italy, especially in London (Marchesi, 1996: 448).

Even though Virginia Boccabadati was very famous as a singer, her pedagogical labour is not very well known. This is also the case of the Spaniard Matilde Esteban y Vicente. She was born in Salamanca on 14 March 1841 and her earliest musical studies were between 1850 and 1854 in the Artistic Society of the Union of her hometown under the teacher Benito Rodriguez (Saldoni, 1868-1881, vol. 2: 110-111).

Given her obvious artistic skills, and following an event held in the aforementioned Society to showcase her talents, Matilde moved to the Music Conservatory of Madrid, where she started singing classes with Professor Francisco Frontera de Valldemosa in 1854. Matilde Esteban was outstanding here, being awarded second place in 1857 for singing in the Conservatory contest, which was reported on by the press (*La España*, August 27, 1857: 2). She completed her musical training in other subjects such as harmony, accompaniment, declamation and Italian, and remained in the Conservatory until 1860.

Matilde Esteban was a great performer of *zarzuela grande* in three acts, a genre that flourished in Spain particularly, between 1851 and 1868.¹¹ While she was still a student at the Conservatory in 1859, she made her *début* in Madrid with the work *El estreno de un artista* (*Premier of an Artist*) by Joaquin Gaztambide in the role of Sofia and “given the warm reception she received from the audience, the company signed her up for four years or consecutive seasons” (Saldoni, vol. 2: 111). In the 1860-61 and 1861-62 seasons, Matilde Esteban played the roles of *Dama Joven* and *Tiple* for the *Teatro de la Zarzuela*, which belonged to the entrepreneur and singer Francisco Salas.¹² Intense artistic activity flourished in these years, with the premiers of important *zarzuelas*.

Her successes as the leading role of *Tiple* occurred, according to Cotarelo and Mori (1934: 678) in the principal theatres in Spain: Salamanca, Cádiz, Málaga, Sevilla, Bilbao, Valladolid, Barcelona and Valencia, among others.

Her retirement from the stage was due mainly to the “deterioration” of the *zarzuela* genre with the arrival of the so-called *Género chico* in 1868,

characterized by its short length (one act), less serious tone and lesser quality in the treatment of voices (Casares, 2006: 968). From that moment, Matilde Esteban spent her professional life teaching singing. In October 1881, she opened a Music Academy for women in Madrid, at Santo Tomé street. Matilde was always sensitive to the lack of economic means of some of her students, as demonstrated by the publicity distributed by this private centre, which specified that “three free places were reserved in the Singing class for young ladies whose organisation and other conditions allowed them to devote themselves to the lyrical theatre genre, although they were lacking financial resources” (Esteban y Vicente, 1892: 15).

Music theory, piano and singing classes were taught in Matilde Esteban's Music Academy:

The first two are run by well-known teachers and the last by Mrs. Esteban herself, whose studies, authentic talent and excellent character traits guarantee in advance the success of this new Music Academy to render great services to families. Lessons at home will also be given (*Crónica de la Música*, September 28, 1881: 6).

Years later, she went on to head a singing and piano academy, where musical evenings were held in which students of both specialities performed a repertoire that was fashionable at the time (E. M. de V., 1892: 357).

Meanwhile, Matilde Esteban was also appointed as the singing teacher at AEM *Asociación para la Educación de las Mujeres*, (Association for Women's Education), an institution that promoted women's access to education in Spain (Sánchez de Andrés, 2011: 9). The press reported on the performance levels reached by the students of the Association's music section in the end-of-course exams and concerts. Among the teachers of the various specialities, Matilde Esteban's teaching in the singing classes stands out because of promising young talents were trained in the lyrical genre. The *El Día* newspaper (1898) reviews the début of the student, Amelia García Balle, in the Parish Theatre, despite the fact that the purpose of this training was to “show off their philharmonic skills in their family and social settings”.

National press reported on Esteban's death on 1 February 1915, detailing that she had retired from the stage more than thirty years before, after having

triumphed in Madrid theatres as Circo, Apolo and Jovellanos, sharing the stage with the best male singers of the day.

The treatises of Esteban and Boccabadati: The art of teaching women to sing

Only one year apart, the two treatises written by Matilde and Boccabadati were published in Spain and Italy and had female vocal education as their main subject. The first, was entitled *Nociones elementales de la teoría del canto* (Salamanca, 1892) by Matilde Esteban and was aimed at her students of the Association for Women's Education. According to the press, it was an “essential booklet for students of singing, which demonstrates the accomplished talent of its author” (*La Ilustración*, 1892: 357). A year later, *Osservazioni pratiche per lo studio del canto* (1893) by Virginia Boccabadati was published in Pesaro for the students of the Rossini Music Conservatory (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Front page of *Nociones elementales de la teoría del canto* (1892) by Matilde Esteban y Vicente. Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, MC^a 9879/31 and Front page of *Osservazioni pratiche per lo studio del canto* (1893) by Virginia Boccabadati. Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale. Firenze, 7635.22.

There are obvious concurrences between these two contemporaneous treatises on singing, which reveal the connections between Italy and Spain in regard to women's access to singing education. The first aspect that demands attention is that the target audience of these manuals were the students of the institutions in which the authors taught classes, suggestive that these teachers “should” only give classes to women. This gender separation in singing classes was very common in the 19th-century (Perelló, 1930: 6) and there was a reasonable explanation for it, in part, because the teachers frequently served as vocal models to their students. Today, continuing in this tradition, some singing students believe that choosing a teacher of their same vocal type will help them in the technical learning process and with the performance of the repertoire.

The treatises of Esteban and Boccabadati are also similar due to their short length and eminently theoretical nature. Thus, *Nociones elementales de la teoría del canto* is a short-length work (14 pages), published by Matilde Esteban to serve as a teaching aid for her singing classes. It is arranged into four chapters, in which the author deals with the main technical concepts of singing education: 1) Breathing, 2) Voice emission - its registers, 3) *Filatura* - Intervals - Agility, and 4) Vocalizations.

Virginia Boccabadati's work, *Osservazioni pratiche per lo studio del canto* comprises 31 pages, presented as a brief introduction entitled “Scuola di Canto per Donne. Qualità per esservi ammesse” and four chapters that the author arranges into the four years of singing studies.

In the two treatises, the teachers' theories about vocal technique and the repertoire performance were the result of their previous experiences on the stage. This adds even more value to the theoretical and practical concepts and to the performance proposals appearing in these manuals, because they derive from the teachers' own experiences as artists. In this sense we can highlight Esteban's description of the proper emission of the sound, where she indicates larynx and tongue position, and mouth disposition (Esteban, 1892: 7).

Boccabadati begins by dedicating the work to her composition students, who seem to be the ones who encouraged her to write her “piccolo lavoro” (little work) or “questo lavoretto” (this little work) (Boccabadati, 1893: 31). From this, we can deduce two circumstances: first, she uses the excuse that it

was not her idea to write, but that of her composition students; during 19th century only a few women dared to write (Šalinović, 2014: 224).

Secondly, that she feels she must exhibit modesty, as a female writer, because it is just a “little work”. The lack of a recognizable tradition of female music theory makes writing almost a heresy against what is supposedly decent and lawful for a woman to do. Clara Schumann thought she was the first woman to compose music because, although there had been other female composers in history, she did not know them.¹³ The lack of awareness about the female tradition is one of the main reasons why feminist critics have deplored the lack of creations by women in all areas of art and human knowledge.¹⁴

Like Boccabadati, Matilde Esteban (1892: 3) refers to her work as being “of modest proportions” and the justification for writing it is more ambitious, because this time she uses her prestige as an excuse. On the front cover of the work, it mentions her profession, training, curriculum and achievements. This is a step forward, because although she feels obliged to reaffirm her role, Matilde is aware of her value as an artist and theoretician.

Both books were aimed at women: they are by and for women: “clase di canto per donne” (singing lesson for women). In fact, the two treatises only describe female voices. By reading them carefully, we can infer various conclusions about women's thoughts on the artistic profession and their role within it. Boccabadati talks about the qualities that women must exhibit in order to be accepted. Most interesting of all are her criticisms about the risks if one decides to dedicate herself to an artistic life: if she is a “figlie del popolo” (working class girl) she will lose the habit of manual work, and if she does not succeed on the stage, she will find it difficult to return to domestic life. In the case “delle signorine di condizione più elevate” (of ladies of upper class) starting music studies will endow her a dubious reputation that will have a negative effect when seeking a suitable partner to marry (Boccabadati, 1893: 7).

In contrast, the appraisals that Matilde Esteban (1892: 12) makes on the usefulness of music education are very odd. In the singer's words, music can serve the students as “consolation for your pains, entertainment for your loved ones and, perhaps, glory in the pages of art history”. Here we find a subtle hint on the use of art for personal release and enrichment (albeit in an intimate way, still linked to the domestic and private spheres, but that reveals a new

conception of the self). Women's music education in 19th-century Spain was still a “type of adornment”, in other words, for the “entertainment of loved ones”. And, lastly, Esteban declares that it could be “art”: Esteban had been a *prima donna* and knew that a woman's *status* on the stage was unequalled by and could even exceed that of her male colleagues. These ideas on the role that music had in the lives of women relate to the commentaries that appeared in the published materials promoted to women, such as etiquette manuals and girls' magazine (Solie, 2004).

Another inference we may draw from reading the two treatises is the importance of the female model: in the case of Boccabadati (1893: 29) she presents us with a selection of examples of female singers who must be taken as role models: *soprani* María Malibran (1808-1836), Adelina Patti (1843-1919), Fanny Tacchinardi Persiani (1812-1867), Anna Maria Pettigiani (?-1954), Regina Pinkert (1869-1931); *mezzosoprano* Borghi-Mamo (1829-1901); *contralti* Pesaroni, Marietta Brambilla (1807-1875), Maria Anna Alboni (1826-1894), Barbara Marchisio (1833-1919), Sofia Scalchi (1850-1922) y Erminia Frezzolini (1818-1884). In an era when the means of reproducing music were still scarce and imperfect, this list is no more than a posthumous tribute to some of the great divas, as if she wanted them to be part of the tradition in some way and to offer them a place in history, given the ephemeral nature of their art- in essence she was defending their value. This enumeration resembles that of *Queens of Song* (1863), a book by the Irish artist Ellen Creathorne Clayton, who received the obligation of writing these biographies for the young women (Cowgill and Poriss, 2012: xviii). Many of the *prime donne* in the list by Boccabadati had an entry in *Queens of Song* except those that due to their age were not consolidated artists by the time of the publication of that book. The awareness of its exemplary nature can also be observed with Esteban, when she says that she hopes the treatise will be “useful to others like us” and “to our very dear students” (Esteban, 1892: 14). The distribution of both treatises seems to have been limited to the students of each author, although the Italian perhaps had more luck, given the greater number of copies saved and her geographical location.¹⁵ Both were acknowledged by the press at the time, something that was almost certainly due to the influence they still had as successful singers. Of Boccabadati's treatise, critics praised the clarity and practicality of the short treatise and

completely agreed with Boccabadati about the fact that the singing teacher should be a professional singer

Rarely has a booklet come to my attention that is simpler than the one entitled “Practical Observations for the Study of Singing”, by Virginia Boccabadati. And it is one of the few cases in which the modesty of the title is not betrayed by the emphasis in the explanation of the text. The contents of the brief treatise are in fact no more than practical observations, pronounced by means of this perfect knowledge of the subject matter that distinguishes a teacher of Boccabadati's talent, who was one of those singers that cannot be found today.

Those few words, said with the utmost simplicity, are worth a lot more than a hundred treatises; Boccabadati says it clearly, that for method it is a question of using that which is most suited to the student's nature; but for the art of singing, the true method, after natural intuition (which cannot be disputed, because you can be born a singer), is without a doubt the teacher. The practical performance of a competent singer can express in five minutes what could not be written in ten chapters; and that is why we fully agree with the author's advice that the teacher must be a highly-regarded song artist. Otherwise the first key element of teaching would always be missing, just as a painting teacher can be no one else but a painter! And yet another system is being followed for singing: it is being taught by people who have never sung! But!...

For all these reasons, we recommend Boccabadati's treatise to you, a truly established Italian authority, and who has had this opportunity to put the truth of her words on the map with undeniable facts, insofar as the students who have graduated from her singing class at the Pesaro Music Conservatory are those who know how to sing (*Gazzetta Musicale di Milano*, June 8, 1893: 421).

On the other hand, Matilde Esteban's treatise provoked interest and acclaim from the press being evaluated as a worthy work, given its author's training and experience, despite it being referred to as an “obrita” (minor work):

We have received a copy of the small work entitled *Nociones Elementales de la Teoría del canto* by Matilde Esteban y Vincent, a

teacher of this subject in the Association for Women's Education, a Student of the Royal Music Conservatory of Madrid, and first soprano in the theatres of Madrid, Barcelona, Seville and beyond. Mrs. Esteban divides her work into four chapters, which study the four main aspects the art of singing. Throughout this work, the author reveals a perfect knowledge and mastery of the subject, as well as an exceptional background for teaching it (*El telégrafo Español*, May 17, 1892: 224).

Despite the kindness of the critics, a certain condescending tone is perceptible, as the following column in *España y América* by Sánchez Pérez demonstrates. Although he spoke about “the brilliant artist”, the use of terms such as “bright girl” and “pleasant artist”, are diminutive descriptions that would certainly not have been used if the author of the treatise had been a man (Sánchez Pérez, 1892: 206).

Conclusions

In the 19th century, singing constituted a prominent part of the education of women of high society, aristocracy and royalty, although it could also become the profession and the means of survival of those who belonged to a more modest social level (Morales Villar, 2019:103).

The foundation of music conservatories in Europe and the opening of private academies gave women access to formal singing studies. In addition to artistic careers, women could also develop teaching activities, as a socially accepted livelihood. Most of the women who developed a professional musical activity, did so in the field of official or private teaching, in many cases abandoning performance (Hernández Romero, 2016: 489). This is the case of the singers who are the subject of this research, who had developed an artistic career as successful singers.

Virginia Boccabadati and Matilde Esteban are two personalities forgotten by the history of music education. It is paradoxical that the *prime donne* would know how to use vocal technique and interpretative resources on stage in the same way as male singers, yet did not enjoy the same credibility in the academic sphere. This situation meant that the number of singing methods written by women in the 19th-century were far fewer compared to the number

of publications written by males. In few cases, women were able to publish singing treatises that were based on their artistic experience, at a time when the edition of didactic material for musical education increased (Garde Badillo and Gustems Carnicer, 2017: 55). That is why the treatises of Boccabadati and Esteban and their special features must be made public.

Despite the geographical distance, there are significant similarities between both treatises, which take the authors' artistic experience and their personal way of understanding vocal technique as their starting point: the short length, their pioneering nature, the need to justify their writings, the currency of their contents, their feminine approach toward female singers and the “condescending” reception they received from critics. These similarities were no doubt partly influenced by gender issues, which have also determined that these methods, which helped many women of their era learn to sing, have been neglected and pushed out of the spotlight of singing education. Although these treatises had limited dissemination in their time, they have highlighted the principal role that women played in the pedagogy of singing, and at the same time, have let their voices be heard again.

Notes

¹ On the moral view of women singers see: (Roselli, 1995: 67) and (Cowgill and Poriss, 2012: p.28).

² Investigations have been conducted into the professionalisation of opera singers during the 19th and early 20th centuries: John Roselli, *Singers of Italian Opera: The History of a Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); George Biddlecombe, “The Construction of a Cultural Icon: The Case of Jenny Lind”, in Peter Horton and Bennett Zon (ed.), *Nineteenth-century British Music Studies*, vol. 3, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 45-61; Isabelle Putnam Emerson, *Five centuries of women singers* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2005); Susan Rutherford, *The Prima Donna and Opera, 1815-1930* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Hilary Poriss, *Changing the Score: Arias, Prima Donnas and the Authority of Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Rachel Cowgill and Hilary Poriss, *The Arts of the Prima Donna in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Karen Henson, *Opera Acys: Singers and Performance in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). To understand the origins of the prima donna see Wendy Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence: Opera and Women's Voices in Seventeenth-century Venice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004) and C. Steven la Rue, *Handel and his singers. The creation of the Royal Academy of Operas, 1720-1728* (Oxford: Oxford Clarendon Press, 1995).

³ About women who publish on singing treatises there is no systematic study: K. Kearly's thesis presents us with five separate singing methods written by women and published in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, without setting them in the context of the tradition of vocal pedagogy.

The works of Lilli Lehmann (1848-1929), Luisa Tetrazzini (1871-1940), Mathilde Marchesi de Castrone (1821-1913), Blanche Marchesi Caccamisi (1863-1940), Pauline Viardot-García (1821-1910) and Jenny Lind (1820-1910) are quoted. At no point is reference made to the treatises of Virginia Boccabadati and Matilde Esteban, the subject of this study: Kandie K. Kearley, *A Bel Canto Tradition: Women Teachers of Singing During The Golden Age of Opera*, (master's thesis, University of Cincinnati, 1998).

⁴ Claire Hennelle, *Rudiments des Chanteurs ou Théorie du Mécanisme du Chant. De la Respiration et de la Prononciation* (Paris : Chez J. Meissonnier, 1843); Laure Cinti-Damoreau, *Méthode de chant* (Paris: au Ménestrel, ancienne Maison A. Meissonnier Heugel et C.^{ie} Editoeurs, ca.1849); Josephine Mainvielle-Fodor, *Réflexions et conseils sur l'art du chant* (Paris: Perrotin, 1857); Mathilde Marchesi, *École Marchesi. Méthode de chant théorique et pratique en trois parties* (Paris: L. Grus, 1887); Caroline Brun, *Exercices Préparatoires à l'Art du Chant* (Paris: V. Durdilly & C.^{ie}Editeurs, 1889); and Rosine Laborde, *Méthode de Chant* (Paris: Henri Lemoine& C.^{ie}Editeurs, 1899). To prepare this list, we consulted the manual catalogue of the Music Section of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris, and as a result of the research into French female singing teachers and their treatises that we carried out in 2010 and 2014 also in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (Département de la Musique).

⁵ In the case of the biography of Matilde Esteban y Vicente, her teaching activity has not been studied until now and her date of death was not known. We found this in an obituary published in a newspaper of that time (*Heraldo de Madrid*, 1915).

⁶ With regards to Virginia Boccabadati, it should be noted that the news was always linked to biographies about her mother, Luigia Boccabadati. See: Elizabeth Forbes, "Luigia Boccabadati" in *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan Press, 1992), vol. 1, 509; y *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, Volume 10 (1968) [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/luigia-boccabadati_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/luigia-boccabadati_(Dizionario-Biografico)) [accessed Jan. 15, 2022].

⁷ It seems that Donizetti was a frequent guest at the home of Boccabadati and taught her sister Augusta the role of Maria de Rohan, and Virginia attended the classes, see *La Stampa*, August 1, 1922.

⁸ The term "breadwinner" was already used in the 19th-century with regard to women and the music world. Thus, Louis Lombard, in his book *The Art Melodius* (1897) an essay in which the author explores different ideas on the state of music of his time. He highlights how music could be an ideal means for women to make a living, among other things because young ladies preferred female to male teachers, because female educators received the same salary as their male colleagues and could do the job as well as them, (although his comments refer to North America).

⁹ Felice Varesi (Calais 1813-Milan 1889) was one of the most famous baritones of his era and the prototype dramatic baritone. He began his collaboration with Verdi in *Ernani* and *Due Foscarini*, although he was best known for his roles in *Macbeth* and *Rigoletto*.

¹⁰ We were able to find out the exact date of her appointment in Pesaro thanks to the review appearing in *La Stampa* newspaper dated 8 April 1882, which refers to the *sindaco* (mayor) making the announcement the day before. We found the news of her retirement in 1898 in *Le Monde artiste. Théâtre, musique, beaux-arts, littérature* (Paris) 1898: "La grande cantatrice Virginia Boccabadati, a résigné ses fonctions de professeur de chant au Lycée musical Rossini, de Pesaro. Le bruit court que de nombreuses concurrentes convoient la succession de Mme

Boccabadati, et parmi elles plusieurs artistes dont la carrière fut exceptionnellement brillante, telles que Mmes Galetti-Gianoli et Antonietta Fricci, puis Mmes Riccetti, Boetti, etc”

¹¹ The premier of Francisco Asenjo Barbieri's *Jugar con fuego* (Playing with fire) in 1851 represents the birth of the first modern *zarzuela* in three acts, called *zarzuela grande*, which remained in vogue until the late 19th-century coinciding with the *Género chico* (*little genre*) that emerged in 1868 (Cortizo, 1999-2002, vol. 10:1145-1154).

¹² In the genre of the Zarzuela the “Dama Joven” (Young Lady) is a vocal type that comes from the theatre and refers to the principal actress (Pedrell, 1894: 129). The term “Tiple” refers to the female voice in any of its registers, and it is not usually used the Italian terminology of the soprano, mezzosoprano or contralto (Casares Rodicio, 2006, vol. 2: 942).

¹³ These were the words that Clara wrote in her diary in 1839: “I once believed I had creative talent, but I have given up this idea: a woman must not wish to compose there never was one able to do it. Am I intended to be the one? It would be arrogant to believe that. That was something which only my father tempted me in former days. But I soon gave up believing this. May Robert always create; that must always make me happy”, cited in Marcia J. Citron, *Gender and the musical canon* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 57.

¹⁴ To understand how this circumstance influences education and culture see López-Navajas (2021). For a music perspective of the lack of works by women in the musical canon see Ramos-López (2003).

¹⁵ Of Esteban's treatise, it seems that only one copy has been preserved in the Biblioteca Nacional de España, with the catalogue number MC^a 9879/31; of Boccabadati's treatise, there are copies in the Libraries of the Naples, Venice, Milan, Palermo and Rome Conservatoires at least, as well as in the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale de Florencia.

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