Dance and the Female Singer in Second Empire Opera

SEAN M. PARR

The scores of many of our contemporary composers resemble elegant women on the boulevard: they wear too much crinoline. In the daylight, they constitute quite a substantial outfit, and beautifully colored. Close up, en déshabillé, at the piano, they are phantoms inflated by wind and sound.

—Jacques Offenbach, 1855

In this polemic against the extravagant music performed in some of the most prestigious and established midcentury Parisian opera houses—the Opéra-Comique and the Théâtre-Lyrique—Offenbach describes a puffed-up style that he himself would appropriate and satirize in his later opéras bouffes. The criticism reveals Offenbach’s evident envy and resentment of the success of other composers, his view that opéra comique was overreaching its bounds as a genre, and a shrewd awareness of the spectacular and the frivolous spirit of Second Empire Paris. This was the decadent era when avoiding boredom was the prime directive. It was also an era of urban modernity: of new parks and boulevards, cafés-concerts and balls, world exhibitions and horseracing, and of technologies such as dioramas, panoramas, and the general and specific illumination [gaslighting and spotlighting], which allowed a new spectacular Paris to come to life at night, with lit streets, shop windows, arcades, and theaters.

1Offenbach wrote a series of articles in order to pry open a space for his own theatrical efforts. He was frustrated by his failure to get his stage works accepted. It was later that year—during the Exhibition season of 1855—that he finally achieved success, founding the Théâtre des Bouffes-Parisiens theater and producing his entertainments there. For more on Offenbach’s agenda and his writings on music of his time, see Everist, “Offenbach: The Music of the Past and the Image of the Present.”
Such was the force of the image of a Paris dedicated to pleasure that Offenbach would later ridicule it in La Vie parisienne (1866, libretto by Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy): “pleasure until you’re out of breath—yes, that’s life in Paris!”

It might be tempting to leave Second Empire opera at that, but Offenbach’s disparagement also provides several allusions suggesting that the seemingly frivolous and spectacular often mask serious issues. To be on the boulevard during the modernizing renovations of Emperor Napoléon III and the Prefect of the Seine, Baron Haussmann, was to be at the heart of Paris, on a structural thoroughfare observable to all passersby. Thus, to be on the boulevard was to be watched, especially when elegantly dressed. Crinoline, a stiffened petticoat or rigid steel framework supporting the shape of a woman’s dress, reached its maximum dimensions in Second Empire Paris, making fashion an unmistakable spectacle of its own. And finally, the reference to women both impugns the music as feminine and, importantly, reminds us that it was the female singer who, “inflated by wind and sound,” gave voice and body to those phantoms.

The female singer dominated the French operatic stage at midcentury, but not by means of her costume. Her crinoline was more musical than visual, but still as attention-grabbing as boulevard garb, even permeating the prose of Gustave Flaubert’s first and last novels. In Madame Bovary (1856) the sounds of a barrel organ reveal the omnipresence of a feminine music that awakens swirling thoughts of dancing: “Tunes played in the theatres, sung in drawing-rooms, danced in the evening under the starlight, echoes of the world . . . without end went round in her head and, like a dancing-girl over the flowers in a carpet, her thoughts, leaping with the notes, swayed in dream after dream.” In L’Éducation sentimentale (1869), such music when sung evokes a sense of a young woman possessed: “Above their heads a roulade burst forth: Mme. Arnoux, thinking herself alone, amused herself by singing. She produced scales, shakes, arpeggios. There were long notes that seemed to hold themselves suspended: others tumbled down rapidly like the drops of a cascade: and her voice, coming through the shutters, cut into the great silence and rose to the blue sky.” These examples from Flaubert reveal how such musical enticements can be alluring and perhaps even dangerous, as Emma discovers when the increasing velocity of her waltz with the Vicomte whisks her dress upward, incites dizziness, makes her gasp for air, and finally leads her to drop her head on his chest. Employing some provocative prose as an astute observer of society, Flaubert highlights the popularized sensual effects of the dance and singing on women. His writing also evinces a certain preoccupation with speed. This preoccupation is found in the writing of many other contemporary French novelists and, as David F. Bell has suggested, resonates with burgeoning technological advances in transportation and communication. It even influences the structure of the actual prose, in serialized novels and in the technique of “accelerating narrative.”

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2“Du plaisir à perdre haleine / Oui, voilà la vie parisienne” (act V, sc. 8). Offenbach also satirized the frivolous culture of his contemporaries in Orphée aux enfers (1858) and even mocked Emperor Napoléon III and absolute power in his La Grande-Duchesse de Gérolstein (1867).

3The image of music in the Second Empire was primarily vocal, not instrumental. Delphine Mordey refutes the teleology that the infamous frivolity of the Second Empire led inexorably to mortifying defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, observing how music critics constructed the idea of such inevitability in order to break with the culture of vocal music. For more on composerly and critical reactions to the opulence of Second Empire musical culture, see Delphine Mordey, “Auber’s Horses: L’Année terrible and Apocalyptic Narratives,” this journal 30 (2007), 215–29; and “Dans le palais du son, on fait de la farine”: Performing at the Opéra during the 1870 Siege of Paris,” Music & Letters 93 (2012), 1–28.


The demand for speed could also be inferred from a musical analogue to the literary trend: the vogue for melismatic dance arias—solo operatic pieces performed by coloratura sopranos and classified by their particular social dance assignations (see Table 1).

Although Siegfried Kracauer has explored the era’s “trivial” music—Jacques Offenbach and operetta—I hope to tell another part of the story by exploring the operatic portrayal of youthful, feminine sensuality in the context of dance and emergent modernity in midcentury Paris.7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Opera</th>
<th>Composer</th>
<th>First Performer</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1852</td>
<td>“C’est moi”</td>
<td>bolero</td>
<td>Le Carillonneur de Bruges</td>
<td>Albert Grisar</td>
<td>Marie Félix-Miolan (Caroline Carvalho)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1855</td>
<td>“Ah! che assorta in dolce incanto”</td>
<td>waltz</td>
<td>insertion aria</td>
<td>Luigi Venzano</td>
<td>Josefa Gassier-Fernandez</td>
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<tr>
<td>1855</td>
<td>“Merci, jeunes amies”</td>
<td>bolero</td>
<td>Les Vêpres siciliennes</td>
<td>Giuseppe Verdi</td>
<td>Sophie Cruvelli</td>
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<tr>
<td>1856</td>
<td>“Danse, fillette, la castagnette”</td>
<td>bolero</td>
<td>La Fanchonnette</td>
<td>Louis Clapisson</td>
<td>Carvalho</td>
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<tr>
<td>1859</td>
<td>“Ombre légère”</td>
<td>waltz</td>
<td>Le Pardon de Ploërmel</td>
<td>Giacomo Meyerbeer</td>
<td>Marie Cabel</td>
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<tr>
<td>1859</td>
<td>“Ah! Valse légère”</td>
<td>waltz</td>
<td>Faust [arrangement]</td>
<td>Charles Gounod</td>
<td>Carvalho</td>
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<tr>
<td>1859</td>
<td>“J’entends ma belle”</td>
<td>waltz/tyrolienne</td>
<td>Un Mari à la porte</td>
<td>Jacques Offenbach</td>
<td>Lise Tautin</td>
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<tr>
<td>1860</td>
<td>“Il Bacio”</td>
<td>waltz</td>
<td>insertion aria</td>
<td>Luigi Arditi</td>
<td>Marietta Piccolomini</td>
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<tr>
<td>1864</td>
<td>“O légère hirondelle”</td>
<td>waltz</td>
<td>Mireille</td>
<td>Gounod</td>
<td>Carvalho</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1866</td>
<td>“Je suis Titania”</td>
<td>bolero/polonaise</td>
<td>Mignon</td>
<td>Ambroise Thomas</td>
<td>Cabel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1867</td>
<td>“Je veux vivre”</td>
<td>waltz</td>
<td>Roméo et Juliette</td>
<td>Gounod</td>
<td>Carvalho</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1867</td>
<td>“Conduisez-moi vers celui que j’adore”</td>
<td>waltz</td>
<td>Robinson Crusoé</td>
<td>Offenbach</td>
<td>Marie Cico</td>
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In fact, two dance genres—the bolero and the waltz—became associated with melismas. Coloratura dance arias often feature a type of musical quickening—particularly in their virtuosic codas—that forges a connection between coloratura and the female body. As both Walter Benjamin and Kracauer have documented, Second Empire Paris etched its signature into all patriots and Savages: The Music of France’s Lost Empire,” Musical Quarterly 95 [2012], 36–70, in which Rosenberg explores how a quest to publish a collection of French folk music reflects a sense of institutionalized nostalgia; and Flora Willson, “Classic Staging: Pauline Viardot and the 1859 Orphée Revival,” Cambridge Opera Journal 22 [2010], 301–26, in which Willson observes how revivals and ideas of the classique inform our understanding of an operatic culture in which Parisian critics seem invested in preserving a perceived chasm of taste separating Offenbach’s operettas from true opéra.

7See Siegfried Kracauer, Jacques Offenbach and the Paris of His Time, trans. Gwenda David and Eric Moshacher (New York: Zone Books, 2002). Originally published as Jacques Offenbach und das Paris seiner Zeit (Amsterdam: Verlag Allert de Lange, 1937). Two recent studies have explored how the Second Empire also looked to the past for musical inspiration: Ruth E. Rosenberg, “Among Com-
the phenomena it inspired. In this article I will situate the genre of coloratura dance arias as part of the notorious “joy and glamour” of the Second Empire, particularly with regard to women, singing, and dance. The female singers of these arias were certainly objectified in a problematic manner, but they were also “envoiced” wielders of a compelling musical power.

WOMEN AND MELISMAS AT MIDCENTURY

The prima donna, a star female opera singer, has historically been a fractured identity, one divided between two poles—that of the dangerously seductive siren and that of the innocent songbird. Susan Rutherford has noted this polarity, but has also emphasized how real prima donnas complicated the stereotype. She writes that “the prima donna provided a powerful—and disturbing—example of women’s capabilities beyond the domestic confines.” Such a disturbance was intensely felt in midcentury Paris when coloratura sopranos triumphed over all other singers at the opera house.

Of course, the idea that a performer, even a female performer, had significant influence over the final operatic product was not new. Coinciding with Europe’s first feminist strides, female singers of bel canto operas held sway over many aspects of operatic production. Rutherford characterizes the early nineteenth century as their golden age: “Women’s greatest freedom on the operatic stage occurred between approximately 1800 and 1840. At this juncture, the prima donnas enjoyed their most powerful moment in operatic history: they influenced compositional practice; they determined musical and dramatic interpretation; and they affected management decisions about the running of the opera house, the content of the season, the employment and use of other artists, and so forth.” In midcentury Paris, expertise in coloratura was the surest gateway through which a singer could attain the status of prima donna. Sopranos who specialized in coloratura and extreme high notes garnered the largest salaries and greatest acclaim. A typical first singer, a première chanteuse, could earn 6,000–40,000 francs per year at the Opéra-Comique. The Belgian soprano Marie Cabel [1827–85, plate 1] was the highest-paid première chanteuse at the Opéra-Comique in the period, but leading singers at the leading houses in Paris could expect 25–30,000 francs per year. One French soprano, Caroline Carvalho (née Marie Félix-Miolan, 1827–95, plate 2), could even earn 20,000 francs in one evening. I will return to Carvalho and Cabel later, but it is here worth comparing their earnings to the wages of washerwomen, female retailers, and schoolteachers, whose annual salaries were less than 500 francs.

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9To be “envoiced” is to be empowered by singing—a term coined in response to Catherine Clément by Carolyn Abbate in “Opera, or, the Envoicing of Women,” in Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship, ed. Ruth A. Solie [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993], pp. 225–58. I should note that I have taken Joan Scott’s formulation of gender as “knowledge about sexual difference,” a knowledge that is relative and that takes institutions and social organization into consideration. I also view women as a historical category, one that allows us to think about the representations of women in the past as potentially informing the present, constructing gender. See Joan W. Scott, Gender and the Politics of History [New York: Columbia University Press, 1999], p. 2.


11Ibid., p. 162. For more on the idea of the female performer as final arbiter during this period, see also Hilary Poriss, Changing the Score: Arias, Prima Donnas, and the Authority of Performance [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009].


Successful female singers were already anomalous because of their financial independence. Opera was a site of female power, offering women possibilities for artistic gains and fame as well as financial autonomy and career security. In this latter sense I view singing as “work.”14 Because singing professionally in France usually meant joining the roster of an opera theater, such as the Opéra, Opéra-Comique, or the Théâtre-Lyrique, singers worked fully as company members, with contracts listing annual salaries and detailing the positions.

The first waves of feminism in France were made during the 1830s and 40s, peaking at the time of the Revolution of 1848. Socialist publications such as La Femme libre, La Femme de l’avenir, and La Femme nouvelle advocated women’s rights—arguing for marriage reform and proclaiming the dowry system to be little more than a national prostitution scheme. They

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14Joan Scott has addressed two kinds of women workers, those femmes or filles isolées who worked for a pittance in urban centers such as Paris (these workers were often implicitly associated with prostitutes) and those who were merchants, working long hours in manufacturing centers. See Scott, Gender and the Politics of History, p. 142. Victoria Thompson has observed that traditional ideas of men working in public, political functions and women working in private, familial functions were both reinforced and called into question during the Second Empire. See Victoria Thompson, The Virtuous Marketplace: Women and Men, Money and Politics in Paris, 1830–1870 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), pp. 9–10.
also demanded women’s access to education, authorship, political rights, and divorce. However, the collapse of the Second Republic in 1852 saw a related decline in political activism and a turn to cultural activism. Famous examples include George Sand, who retired to her country estate in Nohant to advocate for non-violent revolution through several literary works, some autobiographical in nature, and Victor Hugo, whose self-imposed exile allowed him to pursue his political agenda, which included scathing attacks on the Second Empire such as his poetry collection *Les Châtiments* [1853]. Another relevant example is that of women’s rights activist Jeanne Deroin [1805–94], who had run for election to the Second Republic’s legislature but was imprisoned after Napoléon III’s successful 1852 revolution. After her release from prison, she published a women’s cultural journal, *L’Almanach des femmes*, which ran for two years. The journal contained articles that were written to appear non-political. Its contents included reports and essays on several topics: the American antislavery movement and the U.S. women’s rights convention of 1848, international dress reform, professional women (such as a Polish doctor, a French botanist, Italian musicians, and Harriet Beecher Stowe), a consideration of love as separate from sex, women violinists, including one who had just won second prize at the Conservatoire; daycare; the advocacy of vegetarianism; animal rights; and an argument that the definition of “womanhood” need not include the obligation of motherhood.\(^{15}\)

Overt political advocacy for “women’s rights” and related issues disappeared from the press under Napoléon III. As Robert Tombs has noted, Napoléon III’s authoritarian Empire “silenced feminist voices” beginning in the 1850s, at a time when American and British women were crucial forces in the fight against slavery.\(^{16}\)

\(^{15}\)I am grateful to Suzanne Cusick for bringing this journal and Deroin to my attention. For more on *L’Almanach des femmes* and Deroin, see Bonnie S. Anderson, *Joyous Greetings: The First International Women’s Movement, 1830–1860* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2000].

\(^{16}\)Robert Tombs, *France 1814–1914* [Harlow, UK: Longman/ Pearson Education, 1996], p. 171. The strongest French feminist voices published their works outside of France. One of these, Jenny P. d’Héricourt, wrote strongly in her

Parisian sopranos with voices of great power and range might seem incongruous when considered in the context of an imperial rule that quieted the speech of other female voices. The fact that women’s access to musical education [singing lessons in particular] increased exponentially in the early nineteenth century partially explains their resilience under the Second Empire.\(^{17}\) The uniqueness of the operatic stage and the sopranos themselves, who were admired by Napoléon III and his regime, tell the other side of the story. For sopranos were women who had to be loud on stage for practical reasons, and they were admired for their vocal athleticism and leaps into the sonic stratosphere, much to the chagrin of the bitter Hector Berlioz who dubbed them part of a “Lapdog School.”\(^{18}\)

\(^{17}\)By establishing a new system of music education with the Paris Conservatoire in France and then Italy, Napoléon Bonaparte made it possible for women to access a wider range of voice teachers. With greater educational access and freedom to perform on stages throughout Europe, female singers were finally able to make substantial inroads in the opera profession. By the end of the nineteenth century, women were, on the whole, better singers than they were in the eighteenth century, with wider ranges and broader expressive possibilities. Of course, women did sing on many stages throughout Europe before the nineteenth century, and many did so very virtuosically, in operas by Handel, Hasse, and Mozart in particular. However, the decline of the castrato and the increase in educational opportunities as well as access to stages in the Papal states greatly broadened the possibilities for female singers and greatly heightened the demand for them. For more on early-nineteenth-century pedagogy and the Conservatoire model that propagated throughout France and Italy, see chap. 1 of my *Melismatic Madness: Coloratura and Female Vocality in Mid-Nineteenth-Century French and Italian Opera* [PhD diss., Columbia University, 2009], pp. 22–58.

\(^{18}\)Berlioz often complained about the state of lyric theaters in France, lamenting particularly the fact that opera was oriented toward singers, that performance priorities dominated composition, and that the singer’s concerns outweighed the inspiration and principles of the composer. He thought that the majority of singers were not capable of singing expressively with good style. Berlioz’s copious and entertaining writings reveal his attitude toward performers. For him, the root causes of the deplorable state of French opera were the impresarios, the excessive size of
Berlioz’s derogatory label is indicative of the fact that the craze for coloratura singing had reached a kind of apex in midcentury Paris. Historically speaking, coloratura became a peculiarity over the course of the nineteenth century, and its apparent disappearance is one of the most striking shifts in operatic style. But coloratura also became gendered. Early in the century, in bel canto opera, singers of both sexes—castrati, female sopranos and altos, tenors, and basses—were expected to have the vocal facility to sing coloratura. By the mid-nineteenth-century, coloratura was primarily the provenance of the female singer.

Indeed, as Berlioz implies, Parisian sopranos were the period’s greatest exponents of this vocality. The fact that Berlioz singled out certain singers (Cabel, Carvalho, and Anna-Caroline de Lagrange) as exceptions to the horrors of the “Lapdog School” allows us to conclude that the art of coloratura was perpetuated through the performances of those exceptional sopranos who seemed to have had a special penchant and talent for melismas and high notes. This should not surprise us, since, as Heather Hadlock has pointed out, “the performer always ‘breaks character’ in a coloratura showpiece: her singing is so breathtaking and strenuous that we cannot avoid acknowledging the particular woman doing it. In such moments the prima donna plays only herself.”

Thus when sopranos sang coloratura in midcentury Paris, they called attention not only to the virtuosic singing style itself but also to themselves as individual, female singers.

**Boleros**

Just as individual sopranos were responsible for perpetuating and extending the art of coloratura, so too were individual female dancers the source of the craze for Spanish dances in early-nineteenth-century Paris. When Théophile Gautier exclaimed that “Spanish dances exist only in Paris” he referred to a process by which Parisians donned the costume of Spanish style, exoticizing their subject. In midcentury Paris, the one musical type that could reliably convey everything “Spanish” was the bolero. The dancer Fernanda Lefebre gallicized the bolero when she and her troupe visited Seville in the

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21One of Berlioz’s specific gripes about the craze for high notes and coloratura was that so many sopranos attempted, but failed to reach the high pitches. Although Cabel, Carvalho, and Lagrange were part of the craze, Berlioz allowed that they actually did reach their destinations with accurate intonation.


The bolero was originally a popular genre in Spain, but also became part of a tradition of social dances cultivated as stage dances in the theatrical escuela bolera (the “bolero school”). Fanny Elssler brought the cachucha and bolero from commercial French theaters to the stage of the Opéra for the first time in 1836 in the ballet-pantomime Le diable boiteux. In the 1830s, Dolores Serral further popularized the dance with sensational performances at the Opéra carnival balls and at the Théâtre du Palais-Royal and the Théâtre des Variétés. The passionate Serral was the leading exponent of the bolero and cachucha, according to Gautier, who described her in particularly suggestive language: “She weaves her arms as though swooning from love, and bends back her head as if intoxicated by the scent and unwilling to bear the weight of the large rose that blooms in the mass of her black hair. Her body curves with a nervous shiver, as if she were turning on the arm of her lover, then she sinks down, brushing the floor with her arms while still playing the castanets, only to spring up, quick and alert as a bird, darting a sparkling laugh at her partner.”

By the time the bolero reached Parisian opera audiences, it already appeared to blend domestic and foreign cultures, and to some it even seemed more French than Spanish. Kerry Murphy has observed that the bolero was danced everywhere in popular music venues in Paris, such as salons, but that in Spain the bolero was not danced in the ballroom. James Parakilas even suggests that Chopin learned about writing polonaises from his Parisian exposure to the bolero, because of the rhythmic similarities between the two dance genres.

In addition to connoting a sexually charged atmosphere, the bolero also had distinct associations with femininity. The term itself most likely derives from the verb volar, meaning “to fly,” and from the name boleras, given to the Gypsy women who first danced it. Originating in the courts and theaters of Spain in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the bolero rapidly became a popular dance and remained so, spreading throughout Europe during the nineteenth century. The dance probably derived from the seguidilla, which features similar accompanying rhythms and movements as well as the same sung verse form. After absorbing steps from the fandango, tirana, and cachucha, the bolero emerged featuring a very quick tempo along with the two-verse form. Danced in many combinations of couples, the bolero often consisted of alternating solo and couple-dancing. The solo, often performed by a woman, is characterized by complicated steps and fast movements including leaps and bell kicks. In a solo version or section, the female performer can also accompany herself with castanets, and, importantly, with singing, often a melismatic vocalise.

In the French popular imagination, Spanish dance represented Spain. During the Second Empire, Spanish presence in Paris intensified because of Napoléon III’s Spanish wife, the Empress Eugénie. As a result, many arrangements of boleros, tiranas, and Andalusian songs were published and popularized by the many Spanish composers and performers who resided in Paris. Spanish songs were often performed in the musicologies of the day, but they were also part of the music of the times, with a particular emphasis on the genre of tango. This was due to the influence of the tango, a dance that was very similar to the bolero and cachucha in terms of the music and the steps.

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28The earliest boleros took on characteristics very similar to the traditional polonaise rhythm. See Parakilas, “How Spain Got a Soul,” pp. 150–51.
29For more on the dance’s origins, its manifestations, history, and associations with Spain, see Marina Grut, The Bolero School: An Illustrated History of the Bolero, the Seguidillas, and the Escuela Bolera: Syllabus and Dances (Alton, UK: Dance Books, 2002).
salons, most notably those written by Eugénie’s voice teacher, Sebastián Iradier. French composers naturally picked up on this vogue for all things Spanish and proceeded to take advantage of the taste for boleros especially. Boleros became a crucial component of a stereotypical or even false couleur locale and—along with waltzes and polkas—were frequently present in opéras comiques of the Second Empire.  

Spanish dance was one of the most prevalent signifiers of the exotic at the Opéra-Comique. Alluring whether choreographed or sung, the bolero was part of the visual spectacle, libretto, and music of exotic-themed operas, but as Hervé Lacombe has claimed, before Carmen (1875) there was a clear distancing effect evident in these exotic scenes, a particularly problematic effect in the case of the exotic woman. The woman evincing Spanish color was reduced in midcentury opéra comique to mere entertainment or divertissement for the audience, whether it was laughing at or criticizing the exotic spectacle. At the same time, when women began to sing boleros as solo arias in the 1850s, their performances often stopped the show because audiences demanded encores. Prominent examples confirming the vogue for the operatic bolero aria are found in operas such as Henri Reber’s Le Carillonneur de Bruges (1852) and Louis Clapisson’s La Fanchonnette (1856). The role of Fanchonnette in particular illustrates the connection between coloratura and the bolero (ex. 1). 

Even Verdi realized the wisdom in acquiescing to Parisian taste. The most famous example, and the one that became especially popular as both an insertion aria and as a concert showcase, is the bolero from his Les Vêpres siciliennes (1855), commissioned for the Paris Opéra in 1852. Interestingly, as in Rigoletto and La traviata, there is exactly one moment of coloratura in Les Vêpres siciliennes, in this case, Hélène’s act V bolero, “Merci, jeunes amies.” Hélène’s bolero is the second of three atmospheric pieces that begin the final act of the opera. Set in the luxurious gardens of Montfort’s palace in Palermo, the three pieces are all seemingly celebratory, each rejoicing after Henri has submitted by calling Montfort his father at the end of act IV, thereby guaranteeing clemency for the prisoners who had been sentenced to death. Hélène sings of her gratitude for the well wishes and is transported to joyous delirium because her chance for marriage has been saved. Of course, the joy is premature; the joining of the two in matrimony is actually the cue for the French to be massacred. There is no staging or prescribed dancing for Hélène, so we do not know if the soprano danced as well as sang. The original livret de mise en scène indicates that Hélène should move to the front of the stage to sing her aria, but that is the extent of the stage directions for her. 

Like most boleros, “Merci, jeunes amies” is in AAB form. Like the sung sections of Spanish boleros, the vocal entry is preceded by the

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31 Murphy observes a backlash against this casual orientalizing, as too common to actually give a sense of place. See Murphy, “Carmen: Couleur Locale or the Real Thing?” p. 309.
33 The idiomatic bolero rhythm is found throughout this example—see ex. 1, mm. 9–11.
Example 1: Coloratura excerpt from Fanchonnette's bolero aria, Clapisson's La Fanchonnette (1856).
sharply marked bolero rhythm, and the verses are introduced and separated by instrumental interludes. The instrumental ritornello consists of two iterations of the paseo phrase, with a processional or promenade character, first played loudly and thickly with brass punctuations and then softly with only strings and winds. The strings then establish the basic underlying bolero accompanimental pattern at a pp dynamic, allowing the soprano to enter "avec grâce." The first half of the A section is primarily syllabic, with characteristic chanteuse légère grace note figures, and ends by lingering on the word "merci,” which leads into a transition to A major and coloratura mode, heralded by a trill. The second half of the A section uses the ornaments of the first half as well as staccato articulation and glides up a fourth to heighten the delirium of the "Rêve divin!” refrain. This switch to coloratura and "delirium” mode is striking, not only musically but also textually. As Andreas Giger has observed, a change in poetic meter from six to eight syllables reflects the change in Hélène’s focus from the reality of her wedding day to expressing delirium and joy. The delirium is heightened by the focus on a syncopated turn-shaped pattern in the coda that mirrors the dance steps and reflects Hélène’s dizzy state of elation (ex. 2, mm. 2–4). A very lengthy scalar descent is perhaps the surest sign of Hélène’s irrational happiness (mm. 7–8). Crazed, ascending turns (mm. 9–13) wend their way upwards in preparation for a trill that leaps unexpectedly back up to high C♯ with a staccato cascade, descending over two octaves (mm. 14–18). Finally, Hélène finishes on a prolonged trill followed by a leap up to a².

Various modifications of the last phrase in traditionally performed cadenzas culminate with a sustained high E (e³) that further heightens the cadential, climaxing effect. Such an interpolated high note would have been much more likely heard when the aria was performed as a concert piece or as an insertion aria, particularly because “Merci, jeunes amies” is Hélène’s last aria in a lengthy and taxing role that lies primarily at a lower tessitura. This bolero was often singled out in the press as a musical jewel ("ce bijou musical") for its freshness, charm, and show of vocalization. The original interpreter, Sophie Cruvelli (1826–1907), was lauded for her powerful voice, her striking ornaments, and her final cadenza. Cruvelli’s high range was compared to that of Marie Cabel, suggesting that Cruvelli’s bold cadenza ("audacieux point d’orgue") might indeed have flown up to that high E.

As the musical evidence intimates, there is indeed an alignment between the bold physicality of the bolero dance and the agility and extended high range of the requisite female vocality in the aria. Although the popularity of bolero arias most likely peaked late in the Second Empire, with Philine’s "Je suis Titania" in Ambroise Thomas’s Mignon (1866, with Cabel premiering the role of Philine), the popularity of other fast dance-based arias, such as the waltz ariette, persisted throughout Europe for the remainder of the century.

**The Vertiginous Valse**

It is one thing to sing a dance aria. It is quite another thing to actually dance while singing the aria. And yet, that is exactly what Marie Cabel did when she portrayed Dinorah in the

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35 Verdi’s bolero was sometimes referred to as a polonaise in the contemporary French press. As mentioned earlier, the two dances have similar rhythmic patterns.
36 Andreas Giger, *Verdi and the French Aesthetic: Verse, Stanza, and Melody in Nineteenth-Century Opera* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 27. Giger also points out that Verdi scanned the verse against some tonic accents in the bolero, in order to better convey the dance feel and local color. Ibid., p. 122.
37 The reception of the bolero suggests that it was a welcome moment of lightness for the audience, who consistently demanded it be encored. Such was its difference in musical affect that the act was deemed to be lacking in stylistic unity and elevated character ("Le cinquième acte manque d’unité de style et d’élévation de caractère"). P.-A. Fiorentino, *Le Constitutionnel*, 15 June 1855, rpt. in *Giuseppe Verdi*, *Les Vêpres siciliennes: Dossier de presse parisienne* (1855), ed. Hervé Gartioux (Heilbron: Musik-Edition Lucie Galland, 1995), p. 43.
38 The jewel comment is in F. Baudillon, *Le Messager des théâtres et des arts*, 17 June 1855, ibid., p. 140.
39 The note about Cruvelli’s cadenza is in E. Viel, *Le Ménestrel*, 17 June 1855, and the comparison with Cabel is in Maurice Bourges, *La Revue et gazette musicale*, 17 June 1855, both reprinted (ibid., pp. 128 and 131 respectively).
1859 premiere of Giacomo Meyerbeer’s *Le Pardon de Ploërmel* at the Opéra-Comique. Although largely forgotten today, Meyerbeer’s rather curious opera does contain one hit number: Dinorah’s Shadow Song, “Ombre légère,” a showpiece waltz aria. Also part of a full-blown mad scene near the beginning of act II, the aria is remarkable in many respects: it has enjoyed a continuous performance tradition in concert to this day; it is extremely virtuosic, demanding vocal athleticism and even moments of ventriloquism; and it is also one of the first moments of specific illumination on the operatic stage—arclight was employed to produce Dinorah’s shadow, with whom she sings and dances. Most relevant here is the staging of the aria as noted in the original *livret de mise en scène*. Nineteenth-century staging manuals of-

Example 2: Coloratura from Hélène’s bolero, “Merci, jeunes amies” from Verdi’s *Les Vepres siciliennes* (1855).
The waltz genre was even more popular than the bolero in midcentury Paris. It was the first ballroom dance in which couples danced in closed position, with bodies aligned and eyes in fixed contact with each other. Because of this new intimacy, and especially because of its dizzying and sensual effect on women, the dance became notorious. Its notoriety was already established early in the nineteenth century, as indicated by Lord Byron's famous criticism (or subversive celebration) of the waltz, “The Waltz: An Apostrophic Hymn” [written under the pseudonym Horace Hornem, Esq.], which centers on the blatantly public exhibition of sex occasioned by the dance. This connection between the waltz, the sexual, and women during the nineteenth century has been observed by several scholars, all of whom confirm the dance's pan-European notoriety as a dangerous combination of exhilaration and vertigo for women.

The waltz held the potential for moments of arousal and physical abandon because of the tight embrace and sweating bodies. The dance itself consists of double circular movement. The couple dances clockwise in smaller circles that spiral around the dance floor in a larger, counterclockwise circle. In addition to requiring couples to lock eyes as they dance in order to minimize dizziness, the constant spinning, as Eric McKee has remarked, almost forces the dancers “to construct an intensely intimate and private world within a crowded public space.”

The dance thus disciplines a temporary relaxation of the boundaries between self and other. For Molly Engelhardt:

The constant circling of the waltz provided a means for summoning libido, taking pleasure in each (re)turn, while the rhythm and tempo of the music simultaneously worked to “manage” or regulate the movement. This might also explain part of the mystery of the transformative power of dancing: waltzing allows the dancer to reexperience something identical over and over, which provides a means of escaping into the realm of fantasy . . . [and] indulge in looking, being looked at, getting dizzy, and abandoning themselves to the realm of fantasy because the libidinous atmosphere occasioning it was, at least at that moment, contained by the rhythmic and spatial boundaries of the dance.

The physicality of the waltz was part of its allure, and as the nineteenth century progressed, waltzes increased in tempo, requiring ever-more stamina, and a fluidity of motion. Such was the difficulty of these speedier waltzes that the velocity could split the dance floor socially, dividing the space between those that could keep up and those that could not.

That dance genres had strongly feminine associations in the nineteenth century is a historical commonplace, but Maribeth Clark also remarks that in France women were blamed for the emerging glut of published concert and salon music inspired by dance music first heard in the ballroom. She suggests that there was thus an alignment between female taste and choreography at midcentury and that the waltz and the quadrille were seen as injurious to more
established genres. Of course, these compositions were mostly simple works, intended for the private sphere, and for the domestic music-making woman, in particular. The transition from these types of pieces to dance arias, integrated into the operatic work, relied on a vital connection between dance genres and melismas and, as I will explain, on the efforts of one soprano in particular.

We might therefore set up a parallel, as Engelhardt has suggested, between the emergence of modernity with its ever-accelerating pace of change and the dancing body with its increasing velocity, quickening pulse, and the corresponding dizziness and build-up of internal heat. The symbiotic relationship between social and stage dancing that Engelhardt emphasizes might also be extended to the composition of dance music and French opera. Certainly dance as a central social practice had been evoked historically in exuberant triple-time orchestral or choral waltzes. But there are fundamental points of correspondence between dance and coloratura. Coloratura is the aural analogue to the visible movement of dance, complete with constant circling and a corresponding dizzying effect. There is even a parallel between teaching the waltz and teaching coloratura, with physical exercises that prepare for constant rotation in a manner comparable to vocalises that prepare sopranos for lightning-quick melismas and excursions into the sonic stratosphere.

Many sopranos were trained for this type of singing, but no soprano contributed more to the waltz aria genre than Caroline Carvalho. As I have suggested elsewhere, Carvalho wielded a certain amount of authority as a powerful coloratura singer who, after she wed Léon Carvalho and helped him become director of the Théâtre-Lyrique, catalyzed the waltz aria as a genre and even ensured its inclusion as an integral part of the operatic “work.” Carvalho’s career and influence go beyond even what most contemporary female singers could have aspired to. Indeed, the example of Carvalho may belong in the category of cultural advocacy for female ingenuity and authorship, since she was marked by her public prominence and creator status and thus possibly served as a symbolic voice of artistic authorship. Carvalho’s role in cultural production includes possible, if steadfastly private, participation in the management and artistic direction of the Théâtre-Lyrique.

She parlayed her vocality’s distinctive qualities into artistic, cultural, and financial power for her husband at the theater, a situation that raises interesting questions about the nature of their marriage [particularly considering that Léon was not only general director there, but

47 Ibid., p. 32.
48 The waltz does have a lengthy association with opera as explored by both Yaraman and Elvidio Surian, who locates the beginnings of the association in late-eighteenth-century Paris with André-Ernest-Modeste Grétry’s Richard-Coeur-de-Lion [1784], as well as Martin y Soler’s Una cosa rara [1786] and the conclusion of act I in Mozart’s Don Giovanni [1787]. See Elvidio Surian, “Turn and Turn About: Waltz-walzer-valse—le tre carte di credito erotico dell’opera lirica,” EIDOS Rivista di Arti Letteratura e Musica [1991], 30–45, at 35–36. These examples consist primarily of onstage waltzing choruses or of offstage, diegetic music.
49 A connection between the waltz and one of the coloratura soprano’s sobriquets—the nightingale—was described in 1833 by the German journalist, dramatist, and theater-director Heinrich Laube: ‘only in the steadily whirling girls’ heads can one distinguish the stream of dancers. The couples waltz intoxicated through all the accidental or intentional obstructions, wild delight is let loose. . . . The start of each dance is characteristic. Strauss begins his quivering preludes . . . ; the Viennese takes his girl low on his arm, they ease themselves in the most wonderful way into the heat. One hears a whole while longer the long-held chest notes of the nightingale with which her song begins and ensnares the senses, until suddenly the warbling trill splutters out, the real dance begins with all its raging velocity, and the couple plunge into the whirlpool’ [quoted in Andrew Lamb, “Waltz [i],” in Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online, http://www.oxfordmusicionline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/29881 [accessed 23 May 2012]].

51 In my earlier article, I noted that it is of course challenging to establish Caroline Carvalho’s actual involvement in the management of the Théâtre-Lyrique, particularly because there was substantial posthumous resentment of the pair’s participation in matters now considered composerly territory. I have found that while Léon was the official director, Caroline was sometimes called the directrice of the theater. See, for example, J. D’Ortigue, Le Ménessetel, 27 March 1859. She also organized benefit concerts and instigated role choices, as well as aria insertions and modifications. T. J. Walsh attributes much of Léon’s success as well as that of the Théâtre-Lyrique to Caroline. See Walsh, Second Empire Opera: The Théâtre Lyrique, Paris 1851–1870 [London: John Calder, 1981], pp. 69–82.
also often the stage director of the productions in which she performed). She also trafficked in a type of signature number, the waltz aria, that coupled the instrumentalized voice with the most sexually suggestive of the nonexotic dances popular in Paris in the period.

What makes Carvalho different from other women who gained power through opera is the magnitude of her powers. Following in the footsteps of prima donnas (and pedagogues) Laure Cinti-Damoreau and Pauline Viardot, Carvalho was the highest paid French singer of her generation. Although other female singers had reached the same monetary heights, her status as a French woman and as a creative artist and star marks her as outstanding in the context of women’s rights and roles in midcentury France. With the aid of her husband, she was able to create more roles than any of her contemporaries. She became known for many of these premieres, such as Fanchonnette (in which she sang the bolero aria mentioned earlier) and Topaze in Victor Massé’s La Reine Topaze (1856), in addition to the repertoire roles and revivals she sang, including Mozart’s Pamina, Zerlina, and Cherubino. With her Gounod creations, Carvalho took on an even more explicitly collaborative, creative position, establishing the new waltz aria genre and integrating her prodigious vocal skill with a growing sense of expressivity in her acting. It was this integration of vocal and expressive virtuosity that led to her identity as a créatrice.

Gounod composed three exemplars of the genre for Carvalho—“Ah! Valse légère,” based on the violin melody of his waltz chorus from act II of Faust (1859), “O légère hirondelle” in Mireille (1864), and “Je veux vivre” in Roméo et Juliette (1867). These waltz ariettes are all in rondo form and evince many of the musical traits that McKee and Sevin Yaraman correlate with the physical movements of the waltz: the obvious triple meter and um-pah-pah accompaniment; melodic arches and valleys that represent rotating dancers with beginning and ending points that are nearly the same; a springing away from the melody’s first note by means of appoggiaturas, rests, or grace notes, corresponding to flings and pivots; and pulsating waves of neighboring motion that mirror twirling. The ariettes’ fanfare openings and climactic coloratura-codas all contain musical details affirming the above corollaries. In character and affect they also bear a striking resemblance to each other.

The fanfare openings (exs. 3–5) function as noise-killers, announcing the start of a showpiece for the première chanteuse. The opening cadenza that Juliette sings immediately following the fanfare is a further indication of this build-up of anticipation. The springing away from the first note of the melody is particularly apparent in grace notes of “O légère hirondelle” (m. 21) and “Je veux vivre” (m. 15). In each of the three cases, there is a sense of melodic acceleration joyfully sweeping into the soprano’s higher range. Pulsating waves of stepwise motion are present throughout, but especially in the codas (exs. 6–8, see pp. 119–20). These cascades of coloratura represent ecstatic sighs that accumulate energy toward the final thrust into the highest vocal range. The texts of the ariettes only further deepen the ambience of abandon and youthful, feminine sensuality: “Ah! Valse légère” speaks of a mad, intoxicating waltz, full of rapturous pleasure; “O légère hirondelle” paints the picture of an agile swallow on a mission to communicate an intensely joyful

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52 I have not found another example of such a mutually beneficial marriage between opera singer and theater director in the period. Mezzo-soprano Pauline Garcia married Louis Viardot, a writer and director of the Théâtre Italien, but he left his position to be her manager. Most marriages featured one partner more prominently than the other. In the case of the Carvalhos, both were esteemed and helped each other in numerous ways.

53 Carvalho is perhaps most immortalized not for her contributions to the waltz aria genre, however, but for two even more persistent cultural benchmarks: first, as the original performer of Gounod’s “Ave Maria,” a meditation on Bach’s first Prelude in C, BWV 846; and second, as the probable historical inspiration for the diva Carlotta in Gaston Leroux’s The Phantom of the Opera (1910). A connection between Leroux’s Carlotta and Carvalho has been most strongly articulated by Cormac Newark in his Opera in the Novel from Balzac to Proust [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011].

54 Carvalho created five Gounod roles: Marguerite in Faust (1859), Baucis in Phidémon et Baucis (1860), Sylvie in La Colombe (1860), the title role in Mireille (1864), and Juliette in Roméo et Juliette (1867).

James Parakilas, “Disrupting the Genre: Unforeseen Personifications in Chopin,” this journal 35 (2012), 165–81, at 167 and 170. It is interesting that bodily experience dancing the waltz was considered essential for composing in the genre, at least according to Franz Liszt’s admission that “since I’ve hardly danced even half a waltz in my entire life, I also refrained from composing them.” Introduced and quoted in Rena Charnin-Mueller, “From the Biographer’s Workshop: Lina Ramann’s Questionnaires to Liszt,” trans. Susan Hohl, in Franz Liszt and His World, ed. Christopher H. Gibbs and Dana Gooley [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006], pp. 361–423, at 405.
Example 4: Fanfare opening of “O légère hirondelle” from Mireille (1864).

toire works, only women performed coloratura during the second half of the nineteenth century. The female singer of coloratura dance arias also presents a quandary of sorts as an idealized vision and voice, since she is simultaneously objectified and admired.

**Coloratura as Modern**

The paradox of the female singer is similar to that of the female dancer, who “was both art and artist, object and agent.”57 Like female dancers, these sopranos were simultaneously objectified in a problematic manner and empowered by their command of coloratura. The inherent visual spectacle of dance, whether social or stage, was also present in the opera house, where audiences could gaze in wonderment at sopranos like Carvalho, Cabel, and Cruvelli as they ensnared listeners with their vocal acrobatics. At the same time, social and artistic circles were increasingly divided by ability and specialization. In the dance world, the progressively growing difficulty of the waltz changed the dynamic of the dance floor from an activity in which everyone participated into a social divide between those that do and those that do not. In the world of opera, the vocal pyrotechnics of coloratura in Second Empire Paris divided sopranos into those that do melismas and those that do not, making the coloratura soprano a specialized vocal category.

The success of these coloraturas might belong to an art that serves consumers as well as

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artists. If we consider the world of opera in Second Empire Paris to be its own kind of marketplace, coloratura dance arias were certainly bankable commodities, drawing excited crowds to repeat performances. The opera house was also a meaningful space of social display, where singers attracted the attention of the higher classes. The Emperor Napoléon III was himself an avid fan of all three of the sopranos mentioned in this article. It was in his Second Empire that coloratura as a singing style was commodified, and even feminized and eroticized, while consumption itself became feminized. In the context of Second Empire Paris,

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58 The idea that art served the consumer in Second Empire Paris is discussed in Alain Plessis, The Rise and Fall of the Second Empire, pp. 125–31.

59 According to Victoria Thompson, midcentury Parisians were preoccupied with establishing and maintaining a “virtuous marketplace,” “one in which making money would be seen as an honorable pursuit, one in which self-interest accorded with the public good, one in which freedom did not degenerate into license.” For her, “the way in which...
then, one could also suggest a connection between the sonic and the visual, between coloratura and other expressions of extravagance.

While Napoléon III dazzled the French populace with his “spectacular politics,” evidenced not only by the Second Empire’s technological

even the infant Prince Impérial made a point of attending Carvalho’s performances in particular and bestowed upon her a diamond pin after her triumph in Massé’s La Reine Topaze. See Walsh, Second Empire Opera, p. 78. Haussmann also lauded Carvalho’s singing. See Le Ménéstrel, 20 March 1859. One might say that Carvalho was a parvenu woman during the reign of a parvenu Empire.
advancements but also by lavish celebrations and pageantry, French coloratura sopranos promoted sonic spectacle with their bolero and waltz arias.60

Their use of coloratura—taking an older singing style and making it new—is thus an emblem of the modern in the mid-nineteenth century. The ideology of modernization, particularly in the Second Empire, encouraged mechanization, capital investment, conspicuous consumption, and a confluence of burgeoning freedoms and continued constraints. In a way, such an ideology provided the perfect climate for nurturing a modern conception of an old style of singing: coloratura as both a traditional pillar of *bel canto* singing and a new and luxurious expression of the feminine. In the context of the history of opera, then, coloratura could be seen as a symbol of the opportunities and the dangers of modernity for women. Just as Haussmann’s program of modernization was an amalgam of the old and the new, the constructive and destructive, so too did these coloratura sopranos retread old operatic territory in new ways, providing sonic symbols of the female body, thereby claiming a significant space for the individual soprano while also raising the level of scrutiny for all female singers.61

Sopranos performing coloratura dance arias thus signaled an emergent femininity and, at the same time, suggested the collateral power of the female voice. In providing virtuosic, powerful expressions of femininity, these arias established a new sense of female vocality in the aural imagination of the Second Empire. Much more than Offenbach’s excessive crinoline or Berlioz’s yipping lapdogs, melismas at midcentury acted both creatively as the virtuosic voice of the female voice. In providing virtuosic, powerful expressions of femininity, these arias established a new sense of female vocality in the aural imagination of the Second Empire. Much more than Offenbach’s excessive crinoline or Berlioz’s yipping lapdogs, melismas at midcentury acted both creatively as the virtuosic voice of the female voice.

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60The Emperor was known for holding dazzling receptions and balls with decadent food at celebrations opened to the wealthier bourgeoisie at the Tuileries and at Compiègne. For an exploration of Napoléon III’s imperial celebrations, see Matthew Truesdell, *Spectacular Politics: Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte and the Fête Impériale, 1849–1870* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). The Second Empire has also been derided for its more operatic and scandalous escapades. See, for example, John Bieman, *Napoleon III and His Carnival Empire* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1988).

61For more on this sense of “haussmannization,” see Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, “Haussmann’s Paris and the Revolution of Representation,” in *Paris as Revolution*, pp. 115–51.
of the female singer and socially as the musical manifestation of the dancing female body.

Abstract.
A vogue for coloratura dance arias began in the 1850s. This emerging genre combined melismatic singing with two hugely popular social dance genres: the bolero and the waltz. Scholars have observed an association between these social dances and a certain euphoric feminine sensuality, but the connection between this youthful ebullience in dance and virtuosic female vocality has been largely ignored. Dancing was notorious in the nineteenth century because of its dangerously arousing and vertiginous effects. As dances increased in speed and difficulty, so too did the singing of sopranos in midcentury Paris. In exploring relationships between dance, femininity, and singing, this article situates coloratura dance arias in the Paris of Napoléon III’s Second Empire, a city sometimes condemned for its decadent materialism or dismissed because of its political impotence, in spite of its cultural, architectural, and technological importance.

I argue for a connection between coloratura and the female body in precisely the era when the venerable singing style became the almost exclusive domain of the female singer and, simultaneously, reached its apogee in a Paris devoted to all the joy and glamour it could afford. Specific performers such as Marie Cabel and Caroline Carvalho were key to the success and even creation of these dance arias. These sopranos were certainly objectified in a problematic manner, but they were also “envoiced” (Carolyn Abbate’s term) as wielders of a compelling musical power: coloratura. In providing virtuosic and luxurious expressions of femininity, these coloratura dance arias established a new sense of female vocality in the aural imagination of the Second Empire. Keywords: coloratura, Second Empire, Paris, waltz, bolero, soprano