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Abstract

This thesis explores the role of prima donnas in the Tulsa Opera in the mid-20th century and how women both onstage and offstage were essential to the development of the Tulsa Opera Company and American opera at large. I rely on the framework of Lawrence W. Levine to examine the development of cultural hierarchies in America in conjunction with the establishment of opera in America. An examination into the origins of opera in Tulsa demonstrates how important that elite women and women in managerial roles were to the creation and evolution of the organization. They were key to securing funds and establishing a business model which allowed them to import outside talent, specifically prima donnas from the Metropolitan Opera. The prima donnas were key to elevating the performance quality of the Tulsa Opera, demonstrating the integral role of women in early American opera. This is especially notable when reflecting on 19th-century stigmatization of prima donnas resulting in sexualization and lack of respect for the profession as it diverted from the feminine ideal of remaining in the domestic sphere. An examination of the representation of Tulsa's visiting prima donnas in the 20th-century popular press shows how this earlier stigma has been transformed in many respects, ultimately leading to prima donnas being highly respected for their craft both in Tulsa and throughout the country.

Introduction

The Tulsa Opera Company provides an interesting look into prima donna culture's role in the development of opera in America and how that role is transformed or reinforced in the 20th century. The examination of prima donna culture in Tulsa and at large demonstrates how instrumental women were to the development of opera in Tulsa and to the entire early American operatic scene. To come to this conclusion, it is important to first understand the origins of opera in America and how its European origins impacted its cultural reception. Lawrence W. Levine explores this in his book, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*.[1] The lasting impact of Europe on opera in early America led to the evolution of highbrow and lowbrow cultural classifications. This leads to the conclusion that opera is not just a form of entertainment in America, then, but a representation of social status. This idea is true in the broader scope of early American opera and is demonstrated in the history of the Tulsa Opera Company as well.

The Tulsa Opera Company originated in the early 20th century, and they strove to match the highbrow status of operas such as the Metropolitan Opera (the Met). They were able to successfully flourish into a professionalized company with the help of women in roles on the board and onstage. Three women were key to the creation and evolution of the Tulsa Opera Company: Bess Gowans, Maud Lorton, and Jeanette Turner. Gowans had the idea to form Tulsa's very own opera company following an incredibly successful performance featuring guest opera stars from New York. She gathered approval from local musicians to form the organization and served as accompanist for many years. Lorton used her elite status in society to financially support the company in its earliest stages, making it possible for the board to bring in notable stars and focus on productions rather than spending time procuring adequate funds. Lorton was a

[1] Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

member of the board as well serving as Patron of Arts. Finally, Jeanette Turner was instrumental in the professionalization of the company through her tireless efforts to network and publicize the company. She was a savvy businesswoman who worked hard to research how other prominent opera companies were operating, and she took that information back to Tulsa so that they could reach the level of companies like the Met. Gowans, Lorton, and Turner all demonstrate how important women were to the development of the Tulsa Opera Company in administrative roles. The women onstage in the Tulsa Opera Company's productions also contributed heavily to the success of the organization.

Prima donnas, or the leading ladies in opera, were crucial to the development of opera as a cultural force in Tulsa and on a national scale. These female vocalists faced heavy stigmatization in the 19th century (although they were exempt from this judgment in the 18th century). They were sexualized and objectified for putting themselves in the spotlight on a recurring basis, and they were directly contradicting the 19th-century feminine ideal of remaining in the domestic sphere. When they reached the 20th century, they were able to transform elements of this stigma, although some of it remained. The popular press in Tulsa, New York, and at the *Opera News* magazine held prima donnas in high regard for their vocal abilities, signifying a shift from their previous scrutinization. The press did, however, highly emphasize their bodies and appearance which demonstrates the pervasive attitude of objectification toward these female vocalists. Despite this, however, the press publications on their fashion and lifestyle occurrences demonstrate how they have transformed their previously negative reputation and become inspirational figures in society. Because of this transformation of the 19th-century stigma, I argue that women in administrative roles and onstage were essential to the formation of the Tulsa

Opera Company and to the development of opera in early America which signals a societal shift in attitude toward prima donnas and powerful women.

OPERA IN AMERICA AND ORIGINS IN TULSA

Opera in America

Opera is one of several cultural traditions adopted from Europe that was adopted throughout the country. America lived in Europe's shadow in many respects while it was developing into its own independent country, and this is reflected in the nation's cultural development. Americans "retained a colonial mentality in matters of culture and intellect" even in the mid- to late-1900s which manifested in deep reverence for art of European descent (especially opera) and limited appreciation of uniquely American art forms such as Broadway revivals.[2] American art was largely rejected. Lawrence W. Levine famously argued that European art was elevated as superior, and this status elevation led to a growing rift between social and cultural classes in America. Levine observed that the American public classified genres such as Broadway, folk songs, and popular music as "lowbrow" culture, in contrast to European cultural products such as opera, which were viewed as "highbrow" culture and thus perceived as worthy of higher levels of respect. This hierarchy played a large role in shaping the landscape of American culture.

Opera found its hub in New York, which set the standard for the performance of the art form across America. If Europe was the pinnacle of opera globally, New York fulfilled that same role in the United States, albeit on a smaller scale. As opera's American audience grew, prominent European opera stars were brought to New York opera companies to showcase the highest level of performance possible. This dynamic is repeated in the relationship between the Met and the Tulsa Opera—New York imported singers from Europe, the most prominent opera location worldwide, and the Tulsa Opera imported singers from New York for the same reason.

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[2] Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 2.

The European singers brought to New York were well-versed in the art form and served an educational purpose not only to American performers, but to American audiences still learning to appreciate the performance practice. In addition to importing individual opera stars into New York opera company productions, Europe would send entire touring troupes to America to share the art of European opera. These companies would tour, performing in both English and Italian. The Garcia family, hailing from Europe, visited New York City to perform Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia* in 1825. Manuel Garcia, the head of the household, established his opera career in Spain before moving to Paris, and ultimately to Naples to perform Italian opera.[3] His wife, Joaquina, was also a gifted opera singer, and this gift was passed along to their three children, although only one of them had publicly performed opera prior to their trip to New York. They traveled to America toward the end of Manuel's career in hopes of making adequate income and training the two children who had not yet begun their operatic careers.[4] The family's participation in the Rossini production at New York City's Park Theatre allowed New Yorkers to gain access to the elite and previously inaccessible art form of Italian opera. Additionally, the Pyne and Harrison English Opera Company "first performed in New York, Philadelphia, and Boston in 1854 and in the fall of 1855 left on a six-month tour that took it to Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Louisville, New Orleans, Mobile, St. Louis, Indianapolis, Washington, D.C., and Richmond."[5] The breadth of locations the company visited is notable. Some of these cities would have been more likely to be associated with opera in early America such as New York, Philadelphia, and Boston, but others would not have been considered hubs of "highbrow" culture. It was important that these touring companies visited cities where opera may not have

[3] John Dizikes, *Opera in America: A Cultural History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 3.
[4] Dizikes, *Opera in America*, 4.
[5] Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow,* 89.

been as prominent of an art form because it allowed them to experience high-level operatic productions. This exposure allowed opera companies to continue to develop in small towns in America such as Tulsa and serves as a reminder that, although New York is emphasized as one of the primary locations of opera in America, New Orleans had the nation's first opera company, and regional operas existed throughout the country. Unlike the Garcia Troup in New York, there is not a singular opera company known for introducing opera to New Orleans. Opera found its origins in the theater on St. Peter's Street with amateur performers putting on relatively high-level productions. They were able to perform "contemporary French opera, music more demanding than the simple songs and accompaniments of English ballad opera," the operatic genre that was more accessible to American performers and audiences at the beginning of opera's reign in America.[6] The *Tulsa World* underscores the New Orleans Opera company, stating that their company as well as the Northwestern Opera company "like Tulsa Opera, use imported stars with local singers," and that one of their imported stars from New York believes "that these regional companies have played a great part in increasing appreciation of opera in America."[7] This is certainly true for the Tulsa Opera, a company who achieved quick success through savvy business operations and performance quality through a mix of local talent and guests from the Met.

Tulsa Opera Through the Years

The Tulsa opera scene came to fruition in the early 20th century and eventually flourished into a high-quality, professional opera company. The presence of opera in Tulsa was established far before it was ever given a name or organized into a legitimate institution. The popularity of touring opera companies was a catalyst for the development of small town opera houses—cities

[6] Dizikes, *Opera in America*, 25.
[7] "Arrival of 3 Stars Speeds Rehearsals for 'Rigoletto'," *Tulsa World*, April 24, 1956.

and towns wanted to be able to host these prominent touring groups.[8] This was the case in Tulsa when an opera company came through town and Tulsa was graced with its first opera production, *Faust*, soon after the city's establishment in 1898.[9] The original performance venue was the Epperson Opera House until the Grand Opera House was built in 1906. After the Grand Opera House was destroyed by a fire in 1920, a more prominent venue, the Tulsa Municipal Theater, opened in 1914.[10] Eventually, the growing popularity of opera in Tulsa led to the Chamber of Commerce pledging $30,000 a year to support annual opera seasons. This only lasted a short time, however, before the Great Depression negatively impacted the financial landscape of Tulsa and jeopardized the success of the opera scene. Despite these financial headwinds, the dean of the University of Tulsa School of Music, Albert Lukken, was able to support opera in Tulsa by putting on a production of *Aida* in 1933 and instating an outdoor opera series in 1934.[11] After this series, opera was not at the forefront of society's focus as World War II raged on, and productions halted.

In the 1940s, a pianist in the Tulsa area by the name of Bess Gowans served as the catalyst for the introduction of a local opera company. She was a well-respected accompanist and music educator in Tulsa and served in leadership roles in many music organizations in the city. She coordinated concerts at the Philbrook Museum of Art, and one of these concerts, held in 1948, featured guest opera singers Ralph and Ione Sassano. The reception to the concert was so positive that it renewed the collective desire to start a local opera company.[12] In fact, it was Gowans's idea to start a local company following the concert's success, and other Tulsa

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[8] David William Cholcher, "Opera in the Oil Patch: A Comparative History of Opera and the Petroleum Industry in Tulsa, Oklahoma and Houston, Texas" (M.A. thesis, University of Arkansas, 1995), 9.
[9] Jack A. Williams and Laven Sowell, *Tulsa Opera Chronicles* (Jack Williams and Laven Sowell, 1992), 11.
[10] Williams and Sowell, 12.
[11] Williams and Sowell, 14.
[12] Williams and Sowell, 14.

musicians enthusiastically agreed. Following the Sassanos' tremendous success in Tulsa, the singers were asked to remain in the city to help get the city's first opera company off the ground, and Gowans served as accompanist for this fledgling organization. Her influence was instrumental to the formation of the opera company and shows how important the roles of women were to growing opera as an American cultural practice. It was eventually called the Tulsa Opera club and formally incorporated in 1948, when they began work on their first production as a company, *La traviata*. After hiring Gerald Whitney as conductor and attracting a large group of willing chorus members, the production was a hit among local Tulsans. However, it became apparent that secure funding sources would be pivotal to maintaining the livelihood of the company, and the appointment of prominent local figure Maud Lorton to the Board of Directors, formed in 1949, would ensure such funding. She and her husband, Eugene Lorton, were the owners of *Tulsa World*, and Maud specifically was known for financially backing the arts. She pledged $1000 to support the new organization in exchange for a board position labeled Patron of Arts.[13] She was a powerful social force with the potential to garner much-needed funds in the future, but she was also known for being strong-willed and spontaneous in business decisions. She was, however, equally known for her kindness to those around her. The board decided to accept her decisive and individualistic leadership methods on the board because of how influential her funds and connections would be to the development of the company. Lorton's impressive financial and managerial support of the company demonstrate that women, especially elite socialites, played major roles in the development of opera in America. The leadership of the board and contributions of Lorton led to many impressive performances by the newly developed organization.

[13] Williams and Sowell, 18.

After more years of successful productions and a growing presence in the Tulsa area, the name was altered in 1951 from Tulsa Opera Club to Tulsa Opera, Inc. as the use of the word "club" had a "connotation of amateurism" and was "inappropriate for an organization striving to be recognized as a legitimate regional opera company."[14] Two years later, the expectations of the opera company rose higher and higher, and it became evident that there were not enough available Tulsa locals with the training required to fill the lead roles in the major operatic productions that the audiences were demanding. By revamping the Board of Directors, Maud Lorton aimed to gain enough financial backing to bring in outside talent who could meet the musical demands of the city. In 1953, the company put on its first production with outside talent, *Madama Butterfly*, and it was a raging success financially and artistically. They brought in Metropolitan singers Tomiko Kanazawa, Giulio Gari, and John Brownlee, and from New York City Opera, they brought in Lydia Ibarrando and George Tallone. In addition to importing stage talent, this was the first year a director had been brought in from a larger company. Anthony Stivanello, also from New York, was hired to do the staging and would remain with the company in this role for twenty years.[15]

This period marked a shift in focus as the company looked increasingly to New York for inspiration in both programming and talent while also keeping the local audience in mind. The board of the Tulsa Opera aimed to program popular operas that would be high-grossing productions while still keeping their roots firmly planted in Tulsa by casting local singers. This approach to programming is demonstrated in a *Tulsa World* article from 1954 regarding programming *La boheme* and *La traviata*, two highly popular productions. The stated rationale when making these selections included that "the board wished to present operas which were

[14] Williams and Sowell, 20.
[15] Williams and Sowell, 25.

popular and which were in the current repertory of the Metropolitan Opera company" and the "desire to select an opera which would provide a proper balance between imports and local talent."[16] In its coverage of their production of *Faust* in 1955, the *Tulsa World* noted that although "Tulsa Opera has limited its productions to the most popular of the standard opera none has aroused the wide interest which is being shown in the forthcoming production of the Gounod masterpiece."[17] The claims presented in this and other articles further prove how much Tulsa Opera's profitability came from aligning their programming with popular productions of companies like the Met while also demonstrating how important it was to the company to highlight their local talent in each production. The 1954 article continues to say that "it is Tulsa Opera's policy to provide an outlet for singers and dancers of outstanding talent in the Tulsa area and to assure as much local participation as is consistent with uncompromising standards of quality."[18] The company took great pride in their local chorus members, and for good reason. The chorus received raving reviews from both critics and the stars who worked with them. Nell Rankin claimed that "Tulsa has a national reputation as being not only a cultural and musical center of the Southwest, but an operatic center" due to the high standard of performance the company is able to uphold.[19] A 1955 review of opera rehearsals leading up to a performance asserts that "Tulsa Opera singers can match the professionals when it comes to long and steady rehearsal hours" and that "a number of them have been conditioned in professional careers," some of whom have "studied music, some have masters degrees, some are studying now, some are teaching."[20] The impressive musical training of the Tulsans in the company contributed to the

[16] "'Traviata' and 'La boheme' Next Opera Presentations," *Tulsa World,* May 16, 1954.
[17] Maurice de Vinna, "Faust," *Tulsa World,* October 16, 1955.
[18] "'Traviata' and 'La boheme'."
[19] Sabra Smith, "Glamor of 'Carmen' Much Like That Of Singer Who'll Portray Role Here," *Tulsa World,* April 10, 1957.
[20] "Opera Rehearsals Stepped Up—Stivanello Coming Sunday," April 21, 1955.

company's performance quality and allowed them to adequately support the talent of their visiting stars. In fact, the article further claims "the chorus has received national recognition as one of the best trained choruses in the country."[21] As a small opera company, albeit one that was developing rapidly, it is particularly notable that the chorus of amateur musicians was at a quality deemed worthy of national praise. Furthermore, it speaks volumes to the mission of the company that, while maintaining high performance standards for the chorus, there is a standing invitation for Tulsa residents to join. It was an impressive feat that the board successfully managed to select both culturally relevant productions for profitability while at the same time including sufficient local talent. Eventually, the strategy of casting a combination of prominent Metropolitan stars and proficient local performers raised the company's performance quality from amateur to professional.

Once the organization was designated a professional opera company and had developed a strategy of bringing in star performers for lead roles, it was more crucial than ever to have a secure source of funding. This led to the company's next major milestone: the creation of an Opera Guild in 1955 to take care of fundraising activities as well as educational outreach. This led to the beginning of a great Tulsa Opera tradition, namely student matinee performances in which the productions would be held specifically for middle and high school aged students to acquaint the younger generation with opera.[22] Another milestone in this decade was the appointment of Jeannette Turner as the Manager of the Tulsa Opera in 1959 following her six-year tenure as the board's secretary. In fact, Turner was the only paid employee of the Tulsa Opera from 1959 until 1974.[23]

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[21] "Opera Rehearsals."
[22] Williams and Sowell, 26.
[23] Cholcher, "Opera in the Oil Patch," 33.

Crucially, during Turner's tenure, the board established the Tulsa Opera Ball (first occurring in 1961). The ball was created in large part by William Baden, president of the board of directors from 1959 to 1973. The ball raised up to $35,000 annually by the end of Baden's term as president which accounted for over half of the budget for one production per season.[24] The budget increase allowed by this fundraiser was no doubt instrumental in the next accomplishment of the company reached in 1962. The Met was the location of a strike in 1962, meaning their stars were up for grabs by other opera companies willing to pay them. With its infusions of funding as the result of the ball, the Tulsa Opera was able to recruit five Metropolitan stars for their spring production of *The Barber of Seville*. These stars included Roberta Peters, Cesare Valleti, Frank Guarrera, Salvatore Baccaloni, and William Wilderman in addition to Dino Yannopolous as director.[25] Apart from Baccaloni, whose career was coming to a close, all of these stars would return to the company for future productions. This star-studded cast marked a great accomplishment for the company.

Turner managed the company for another decade before announcing that she would step down from her administrative duties. She was involved in the search for a new manager, a process that brought in Ed Purrington, whose tenure began in 1975. Purrington had held positions with the Santa Fe Opera prior to this appointment. While Turner may have left her position, her presence in the history of the company remains strong to this day. Out of all the contributions she made to the Tulsa Opera, one particularly notable contribution helped support this research. She wrote many letters to the board during her involvement with the company which provide a deeper understanding of the inner workings of the board.

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[24] Cholcher, "Opera in the Oil Patch," 35.
[25] Williams and Sowell, 34.

Jeanette Turner's Letters and Influence

Turner's letters are a valuable indication of her passion for and investment into this rapidly growing opera company which ultimately resulted in its widespread success locally, nationally, and internationally. Her contributions, in conjunction with those of Bess Gowans and Maud Lorton, demonstrate how instrumental women were to the development of opera in America. She writes at length about her efforts to contribute to the organization, and reading through the available letters provides an important look into her role on the board. The first letter was written on June 6, 1961, two years following her appointment as manager. She went on a business trip to Chicago to study the set-up of the Chicago Lyric Theatre and to hopefully procure costumes for future productions in Tulsa. On a mission to build connections and further the wellbeing of the organization, it was promising that "everyone [she] contacted was most interested in the Tulsa Opera, cooperative in every way and very gracious and willing to answer questions about everything from the financial aspects to the technical problems."[26] She spoke on the phone with the General Manager of the Chicago Lyric Theatre, Carol Fox, and gleaned valuable insight into their fundraising model (they had a fulltime fundraiser with two assistants) and the programming for their fall season. Turner, in her efforts to spread the news of the Tulsa Opera, took "a supply of [the] *Cavalleria rusticana* and *Pagliacci* programs with [her] and left a copy in each of the offices [she] visited" on her tour of the theatre and accompanying business offices.[27] She learned that the Chicago Lyric kept their costumes in an air-conditioned space year-round to maintain them and that, despite some being owned by the insurance company and some being owned by the theater, they would be able to rent from them. She examined costumes for *Rigoletto*, *Turandot*, *Carmen*, and *Aida* for potential rentals to Tulsa. She generally spoke

[26] Jeannette Turner, Memo to Board of Directors, June 6, 1961, 1.
[27] Jeannette Turner, Memo to Board of Directors, June 6, 1961, 1.

highly of the costumes available from the Chicago Lyric and was impressed at their plentiful resources as "each room… had two floors of costumes."[28] She was told that the Chicago Lyric traditionally rented to universities, but they would be willing to consider extending this opportunity to opera companies. The costumes had to be rented as an entire set, and costumes were priced at $10 per unit, meaning the total cost was $10 a costume for the designated number of costumes in the set for the production. For a production such as *Turandot*, requiring 225 costumes, that quickly becomes a hefty sum of money, especially when inflation is taken into account to try to understand the financial strain it could put on a small independent company. This letter is important to understanding the role of Turner in the opera company as she was dedicated to researching an aspirational peer institution to secure professional costuming for Tulsa.

The next letter in the archives was written on March 25, 1964. This letter was much more expansive and demonstrates her continued passion and drive as well as the growth of the company as a whole. The letter was written following the spring production of *Lucia di Lammermoor* which was not Tulsa Opera's best-performing production financially. Turner writes that they earned $19,000 on tickets for this production, less than the $22,800 of ticket sale earnings from *Tosca* the previous fall and $19,310 for *Le nozze di Figaro* the previous spring. She explains the marketing strategies the company used to generate more ticket sales, including having board members purchase them to give away, posting notices on boards for discounted tickets, and having volunteers advertise both via phone calls and in booths. Despite these efforts, ticket sales were lackluster, and this unfavorable outcome informed the board's programming decision for the next production. Turner claims that "almost certain sell-outs are the *Aida*s,

[28] Jeannette Turner, Memo to Board of Directors, June 6, 1961, 2.

*Carmen*s, and *Boheme*s," so the board selected *Aida* to make up for the loss in revenue.[29] The letter demonstrates the active participation of the board in marketing and programming, and shows that productions that the board determined were higher-grossing were performed more frequently. My data confirm the sentiments of Turner's letter, showing that *Aida* was repeated 2 times as was *Carmen*, and *La boheme* was repeated three times.

Turner's letters also give us insight into the board's management purview, which was extensive. Turner describes the production committee's meeting which covered topics such as casting for *Aida* that fall, the potential to switch the traditional performance schedule from Thursday and Saturday productions to Friday and Sunday productions, and discussion of the upcoming *Hansel and Gretel* winter production, still in the tentative planning stages. 1964 was the first year of the *Hansel and Gretel* tradition, and seeing the beginning stages of this in Turner's board memo indicates that they had no idea at this point that it would become a beloved local tradition. It was "intended to be a yearly Christmas gift to the city, much as Tulsa Ballet's *Nutcracker* is now given," but after its four productions over a five-year period, the logistics of the show became too overwhelming and the production was sold.[30] Following discussion of *Hansel and Gretel*, Turner includes correspondence regarding the casting of Danny Kaye in the production. She concludes the letter with news of Bonnieray Elsey, a Tulsa singer who flew to New York for an opera audition, and a section of acknowledgments to various notable members of the community and the organization. Turner demonstrates in this letter her continued commitment to participating in visionary plans, many of which were paramount in raising the level of the company's professionalization.

[29] Jeannette Turner, Memo to Board of Directors, March 25, 1964, 2.
[30] Williams and Sowell, 38.

A final letter, written on January 26, 1966, describes a winter journey to Italy that she undertook to study opera management at its highest level. Remarkably, Turner flew to Italy alone, demonstrating the lengths she would go in her efforts to professionalize the Tulsa Opera. Turner, always looking to establish further connections among noted professionals (as evidenced in her letters), reads a letter on her first flight from tenor James King indicating that he was "eager to come to Tulsa to sing with Tulsa Opera, but is booked solidly through 1968."[31] On her next flight, she encountered the wife of tenor Nicolai Gedda, from whom she learned that La Scala would be putting on a production of *Faust*, coincidentally in close proximity to the Tulsa Opera's upcoming *Faust* production in the spring. As was her habit, she handed his wife some programs for the Tulsa Opera, always eager to expand knowledge of the fledgling company.

The next leg of her journey was focused on securing international talent that would soon be imported to Tulsa. She attended Elinor Ross' debut in *La Forza Del Destino* in Venice. Ross would soon be performing in the Tulsa Opera's fall production of *Turandot* as the Princess, and she was the subject of many favorable reviews for this performance according to Turner. Later in her trip, Turner attended a performance of *Lucia di Lammermoor* at which she was allowed to remain backstage during the first act and visited with performer Anna Moffo. She then attended a dress rehearsal of *Faust* at La Scala following her encounter with Nicolai Gedda on the flight to London which allowed her to take notes that would benefit future Tulsa Opera productions. She attended the opening night of the production as well and was able to meet with Signor Nicola Comunale at the AlItalia offices and was able to "thank them for their many courtesies to Tulsa Opera and especially for handling so many communications for us on *L'Elisir D'Amore*."[32] Turner was, in many ways, a modern-day impresario. She served as a highly effective

[31] Jeannette Turner, Notes on Mid-Winter Opera Excursion, January 26, 1966, 1.
[32] Jeannette Turner, Notes on Mid-Winter Opera Excursion, January 26, 1966, 3.

international liaison, tirelessly promoting the Tulsa Opera while securing the kind of overseas talent that would help to establish its reputation nationally.

Turner's letters help us understand the strategies which the board employed to raise the status of the Tulsa Opera company, and her centrality in the success of the board's vision. They also demonstrate how instrumental women in leadership positions were to the professionalization of opera companies in America. The reason the Tulsa Opera Company felt the need to increase the company's professional status in the first place, however, requires contextualization. Opera occupied an elevated social position in America, but the ability for a provincial city like Tulsa to live up to a European ideal was not guaranteed. Imitating the standards of European opera with regards to performance quality, audience behavior, and production selection, would be a challenge. The following section will place this dynamic in context of American cultural hierarchies during the 20th century.

Opera and American Cultural Hierarchies

Opera and the arts in general were not just a form of entertainment in America, but a demonstration of social status. In his widely influential book *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, Lawrence W. Levine argues that American culture developed a strict hierarchy in which high status cultural products ("highbrow" culture) were consciously separated from low status ones ("lowbrow" culture). His arguments illuminate the influence of Europe on the perception of highbrow culture, the behaviors necessary to participate in highbrow culture, and how cultural development of the arts intersected with the growth of America as an independent nation.

Levine presents the idea of highbrow and lowbrow classifications as the result of "the tendency to equate the notion of culture with that of hierarchy so that to examine closely the

manner in which the hierarchy of culture was erected, or to challenge the reason behind the hierarchy's parameters, was translated almost inevitably into an attack on the idea of culture itself."[33] This is, in essence, saying that culture became synonymous with hierarchies, and that social hierarchies were a pillar of American culture. This approach was detrimental to accessibility of the art form and had to be navigated and challenged in order to allow opera to spread throughout America outside of highbrow circles. Opera specifically was seen as "more of a symbol of culture than a real cultural force" and "less a center of entertainment than a sacred source of cultural enlightenment."[34] It raises the question of how deep cultural classifications go. Did early America truly believe that opera was essential to uphold one's cultural status to their core, or was the mere appearance of enjoying opera enough to maintain one's position in society? Was enjoyment of high art a demonstration of authentic highbrow living, or was it a façade manufactured to create a divide and strategically place some lucky members of society in a higher class? While there may not be a definitive answer to these questions, it is evident through remnants of early America that these classifications were valued by members of high society. Because of this level of importance, opera and the other highbrow arts underwent a process of sacralization which elevated them to elite status in America.

Sacralization of opera and the arts was a process which saw the evolution of art from a hobby or form of entertainment to an indispensable element of society. It "endowed the music it focused upon with unique aesthetic and spiritual properties that rendered it inviolate, exclusive, and eternal."[35] This process was what fueled the increasing separation between highbrow and lowbrow approaches to art and culture. It also brought about more distinction between

[33] Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow,* 7.
[34] Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow,* 104.
[35] Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow,* 132.

professional and amateur music-making, as professional music-making became so highly valued as a form of public entertainment that amateurs participating in music as a hobby were no longer necessary. This led to a decline in parlor music by the end of the 19th century in favor of attending professional performances. The decrease in amateur music also held implications for attitudes toward popular American music as the two often worked in tandem. There was a rising "urge to deprecate popular musical genres" in the sacralization process and if this instrumental and opera music was "divine, then it followed that other genres must occupy a lesser region."[36] Not only does the elevation of opera change its rank to high art, then, but it demotes historically popular American music to a lower stratum of society. The demotion of some art forms in conjunction with the elevation of others led to the ultimate fragmentation of culture and implementation of order as a synonymous act to implementing high culture in society. In Levine's words, the culture's fragmentation "was manifest in the rise of professionalization" such as the decline in amateur music making as discussed prior.[37] This divide in culture may have been an attempt to implement order upon lowbrow members by those who associated themselves with highbrow art. It was important to maintain order to organize the distribution of culture and the methods of appreciation of said culture. Because of this, order and culture became intertwined and the two shared a mutually beneficial relationship. Opera became a large component of implementing this social order, and maintaining social order also extended to the governance of audiences through both programming choices and audience behavioral norms.

Catering to American Audiences

As opera was spreading throughout America, audiences were learning how to enjoy the art form, but alterations in presentation were necessary to appeal to American audiences. It was

[36] Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow,* 136.
[37] Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow,* 207.

an art form that "was simultaneously popular and elite" because "it was attended both by large numbers of people who derived great pleasure from it" and "by smaller socially and economically elite groups who derived both pleasure and social conformation from it."[38] We see the beginnings of cultural distinction at play in this approach to analyzing the attendance of operas. For some attendees, it was a simple piece of entertainment that they could enjoy every so often to enrich their day-to-day lives. For others, it was taken seriously as a cultural phenomenon that separated them from other, less privileged members of society. This led to debates about how opera should be enjoyed and appreciated. Some argued that it was acceptable to Americanize opera to appeal to local audiences, while others believed opera should remain untouched and in its native, European form. One element of Americanization present in opera performances historically was the insertion of popular songs of the day to supplement or replace arias. This is similar to the concept of *aria di baule* which originated in the 18th century and persisted into the 19th. *Aria di baule* is the interpolation of popular arias from other operas into a production, but this performance practice had slightly different motivations from the inclusion of popular music in operas in America. Rather than attempting to exercise control over the composers, the insertion of popular songs was directed at the audiences. These songs could guarantee mass crowd appeal with recognizable songs in English, and this would ensure adequate audience enjoyment amid the more challenging operatic scenes presented in foreign languages. Another form of alteration made to operas in America was the art of parody. Operas were subject to parodies or burlesques which were seen as trivializing the original piece of art. Examples include a parody of Bellini's *La sonnambula* as ballet pantomime in 1837, Rossini's *La gazza ladra* parodied as *The Cats in the Larder* in 1840, and Verdi's *Ernani* presented as *Herr*

[38] Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow,* 86.

Nanny in 1849.[39] All of this was done to render opera more accessible and enjoyable to American audiences, yet for some, the practices called into question the quality of American culture and taste. Opera purists also stressed the importance of performing opera in its original languages rather than presenting more accessible English translations.

As one may expect given the endurance of America's "colonial mentality" after independence, operas in European languages were seen as more culturally elite. Language became an important status indicator of opera—this means distinctions in cultural status were made not only between those who attended operas and those who did not, but also within the already high-status group of opera attendees. If one attended an opera in Italian, for example, they were elite compared to someone who went to an English adaptation of the same production. In fact, "opera in Italian came to signify the Old World pretensions and effete snobberies that so frequently angered playgoers and served as a catalyst for numerous theater riots of the first half of the century."[40] Audiences who wanted the production to appeal to American entertainment values rather than maintain European authenticity were angry when they could not understand productions, and this led to disruptive theater behavior in an effort to pressure companies to conform to their desires. These reactions did not help audiences' cases when it came to claims that American audiences were not as elite and intelligent as European audiences of operas. There was also an air of elitism expressed by those who were equipped to enjoy foreign language operas. In 1862, the Lockport Daily Journal of Lockport, NY published a commentary on opera which claimed that "the Anglo-Saxon tongue is not better adapted to the real spirit and soul of vocal music" and that "music is never quite so witching as when it takes on a foreign air."[41] This

[39] Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow,* 92.
[40] Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow,* 94.
[41] Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow,* 100.

is a clear reflection of the colonial mentality (which took European superiority for granted) and this popular perspective on the language of opera made the task of creating accessible opera for Americans while still maintaining cultural credibility increasingly difficult. The emphasis on the higher caliber of foreign language operas persisted and strengthened throughout the 19th century, and by the end of the century opera was no longer an easily accessible part of the broader culture, and instead leaned toward exclusive foreign language productions in opera companies such as the Met, institutions governed by the desires and tastes of their wealthy, highbrow patrons.[42]

The control that the wealthy socialites exerted on opera contributed to the genre's elitism. This group of patrons felt that opera was a genre that was more intellectually sound than others and more worthy of their attention. The increasing exclusivity of opera events led to it being "performed in isolation from other forms of entertainment to an audience that was far more homogenous than those which had gathered earlier."[43] These audiences were described as the "galaxy of fashion and beauty," the "beauty, taste, and fashion of the city," and "the high minded, the pure and virtuous."[44] Elite women shaped opera as a highbrow pursuit. In particular, the Metropolitan Opera House's rebuilding period following an 1892 fire kept women in mind in the design process. The new boxes did not have "curtains, latticework, or shutters," making them public viewing, and women were the box's contents on display as the typical box was comprised of two women seated in front of four men.[45] Additionally, opera was a popular avenue to showcase attire and jewelry, and the Met knew this when they repainted the walls cream after the fire initially. The color was not ideal to put jewelry on display, so they repainted the walls gold

[42] Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow,* 102.
[43] Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow,* 101.
[44] Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow,* 101.
[45] Dizikes, *Opera in America,* 285.

and maroon to serve as a better showcase for elite women's finest jewels.[46] Not only did wealthy patrons have control over the country's most prominent opera houses, then, but socialite women were afforded special influence over the highbrow artistic sphere. The public was beginning to articulate the thought that opera was a higher form of art than others and that it was necessary to have a "cultivated audience" to appreciate these productions.[47] This description of audiences was held by both the patrons themselves and by media outlets as well as visiting musicians. Important elements that could be the distinguishing factors between a "cultivated audience" and a lowbrow audience were audience behavior and audience attire with motivation for such judgment stemming from the cultural makeup of early America.

American Audience Behavior and Attire

Opera as a highbrow art form demanded a specific set of behaviors and extravagant, ornate attire to properly participate in the cultural practice. Early America was characterized by high levels of immigration, contributing to the idealized cultural "melting pot" that has become a founding legend of American society, but these highbrow attributes were not immediately accessible to them. As one may expect, those who immigrated to America were not always greeted with open arms, and the world of opera looked down upon those who were not acculturated to the highbrow customs that had developed around the art form. Culture became "one of the mechanisms that made it possible to identify, distinguish, and order this new universe of strangers."[48] Culture was treated as the backbone of America and was the standard by which immigrants were judged. They either assimilated successfully into the culture or were placed lower on the totem pole of society because they failed to meet the standard. This assimilation

[46] Dizikes, *Opera in America,* 285.
[47] Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow,* 102.
[48] Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow,* 177.

placed a heavy emphasis on all of the arts, but especially on opera, one of the highest forms of culture in early America. While some elements of this cultural divide were motivated by disdain for new immigrants to America, there was also a divide between Americans who were seen as less societally developed and those who were more attuned to highbrow culture. The increasingly glaring divide between highbrow and lowbrow culture led to judgment of the habits of lowbrow members of society by those who felt they were more culturally refined. These elites "transform[ed] public spaces by rules, systems of taste, and canons of behavior of their own choosing."[49] These standards of behavior prompted commentary when they were absent. Audiences perceived as uneducated culturally would demonstrate many unfavorable behaviors such as talking, laughing, shouting, leaving early, flipping through programs, spitting tobacco, and more during opera productions. It reached a point at which opera houses had to post notices reminding patrons of acceptable behaviors. Other annoyances to patrons included a popular wardrobe item of the 19th century, large hats, specifically worn by women trying to show their status through their accessories. Eventually, Oscar Hammerstein, an impresario of multiple opera houses in his time, had to write to a patron directly to request that she refrain from wearing such distracting hats as they blocked the views of patrons around her. The hats were only one element of the emphasis of fashion of opera patrons. The *Tulsa World* maintained a section called "Woman's World" weekly, and during opera season this section would highlight the fashion choices of society members as well as who they were attending the opera with. In fact, in 1961, the upcoming *Rigoletto* production was "being heralded by the problem women always ask, 'What Shall I Wear'," and the newspaper provided "representatives from the Tulsa Opera guild [who were] modeling fashions from Brown-Dunkin as suggestions for those who plan to dress

[49] Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow,* 177.

elegantly for the occasion."[50] This supports the notion that those who placed themselves firmly in the highbrow category of society felt that they knew best how to act and dress to appreciate high art, and felt the need to make sure they successfully blended into the elite cultural class. It also shows how desirable it is to join the elite opera crowd, and how important fashion was to help patrons achieve this elevation in status. There was also the goal in Tulsa of being well-dressed and well-known enough to be written about in the "Woman's World" articles highlighting the most notable fashions of the evening. Not only did patrons aim to gain positive recognition, but they needed to make sure to blend in, a difficult task that could easily misfire, as the example of the ornate, extravagant hats demonstrates.

The emphasis on status in 19th-century American opera would be hard to overstate. Elite women played a key role in opera's emergence as a highbrow art form. Within the Tulsa Opera company, Jeanette Turner's efforts to professionalize the company reflect these values through her high-society fundraisers, her extraordinary efforts to bring European standards of programming to Tulsa, and her success in bringing European vocal talent to a smaller city. Additionally, Bess Gowans's instrumental participation in the origins of the opera company was the reason Tulsa has an opera company at all. Finally, Maud Lorton's invaluable financial and administrative support of the company allowed it to flourish in its early stages with little concern for the financial status of the organization. These three women demonstrated on multiple occasions how important women were to opera's development in early America. The actions taken by these women and others taken by the board were instrumental in the increase in status of the company in keeping with emerging American attitudes toward opera as a highbrow art.

[50] "For a Night at Tulsa Opera," October 22, 1961.

The Tulsa Opera company was transformed into a bustling opera company through the importation of Metropolitan stars and incorporation of incredible local talent. The casting decisions combined with the programming of popular and challenging operas made the Tulsa Opera company a name worth knowing. While many elements contributed to the increase in status of the company, one of the most prominent was surely the high-level prima donnas who took the stage.

PRIMA DONNAS: A CULTURE OF CELEBRITY

A major strategy employed by the Tulsa Opera board to elevate the level of professionalism of the company was to import vocal talent from more established institutions. In many cases, this involved first contracting the top-billing female lead, commonly referred to as the prima donna. Male vocalists were contracted by the Tulsa Opera as well, but to specifically examine the role of women in the Tulsa Opera and in early American opera, they will not be discussed in this document. This chapter will examine the role of the prima donna in the 19th century on a general scale and how prima donnas have evolved into the 20th century in Tulsa specifically. I argue that prima donnas face much of the same objectification and emphasis on appearance that they faced in the 19th century, but that they were able to transform their overall reception as they moved into the 20th century. I demonstrate this through analysis of popular press publications on the Tulsa Opera's visiting prima donnas.

Who are Prima Donnas?

Prima donnas are a unique set of female celebrities specific to opera, but they can easily be compared with female celebrities today. Women and female-presenting individuals are a historically objectified demographic, and when they are in the public eye, they are subject to gender-based critique and stereotypes. Before analyzing the role of the prima donna in society, a basic understanding of the mid-19th and 20th century American feminine ideal is critical (this ideal is pervasive throughout both centuries). The feminine ideal in a general sense indicated a duty to a male partner prioritized above herself—a woman must be chaste prior to marriage, domesticated, and dedicated to building a home and a family to allow the husband to further his career. It celebrates the "private, nuclear family and the moral bond between women and children" and praised "domesticity and child-centered motherhood as the apex of womanly

fulfillment."[51] In stark contradiction, prima donnas stood center stage with a focus on themselves and their career "demonstrating musical prowess, financial independence, sexual freedom—and eliciting in return praise and monetary reward."[52] By their nature, then, prima donnas violated their perceived natural femininity upheld by societal ideals through their powerful careers. This is especially pertinent when considering that operatic productions are rife with sexual content for their female leads, drawing attention that was certainly not desired by women who embodied the contemporary feminine ideal. The growing presence of women in strong lead roles contradicted their previously ascribed roles in society because it demonstrated their capabilities outside of the domestic sphere. For centuries, the home had served as a socially acceptable location for women's music-making, as it was a protected stage where women lacked innate power. The increase in strong female leads onstage took them out of the domestic bubble and landed them in new territory. While the increased presence of prima donnas onstage goes against the feminine ideal, male audiences were undoubtedly eager to gaze upon beautiful, talented women for hours on end, contributing to the interest in putting more prima donnas in the spotlight. Although my primary examinations in this research lie in the 20th century, it is beneficial to explore Susan Rutherford's text, *The Prima Donna and Opera, 1815—1930,* to gain a richer understanding of the cultural phenomenon of prima donnas. Rutherford provides an in-depth profile of the prima donna ranging from their cultural perception to their education and professional life. She discusses contradictory perceptions of the prima donna in the 19th century, from being perceived as a "*proto-feminist*, a role model of female endeavour and achievement" to being regarded "at best with uneasy admiration, and at worst with open hostility."[53] Rutherford further groups the

[51] Nancy M. Theriot, *Mothers and daughters in nineteenth-century America: the biosocial construction of femininity* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2015), 17.
[52] Susan Rutherford, *The Prima Donna and Opera, 1815-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 33.
[53] Rutherford, *The Prima Donna*, 35.

perceptions of prima donnas into three categories: "*demi-mondaine*, professional artist and exalted prima donna."[54] *Demi-mondaine* translated from French means a woman who is considered to be part of the demi-monde, a class of women perceived to have doubtful moral and social standing.[55] This near-dismissal of the singers' value as it relates to their social class contrasts the perception of them as a respectable professional, and further contrasts the view of prima donnas as exalted prima donnas, the embodiment of the dramatic vocalist stereotype. These categories were often overlapping in the perception of any given individual and persistent through time. Rutherford's account of how prima donnas were presented to the public suggests an interesting correlation between these prima donnas and sirens from Greek mythology.

Sirens in Greek mythology were women akin to mermaids who used their beautiful singing voices to lure sailors into the ocean to their deaths. It was the goal of many Greek heroes to subdue the sirens in order to reach their destination and defeat their foes, but only some achieved this because of how fatally intoxicating the siren's song could be. The comparison between prima donnas and these Grecian villains rests on the negative end of the spectrum of prima donna perception much like their placement in the *demi-mondaine* classification. Rutherford notes that opera was "regarded by critics as symbolizing precisely a kind of feminised musical seduction" not unlike prostituting oneself on stage.[56] The seductive nature of opera, either implicitly through the act of donning dramatic makeup and costumes and drawing the audience in or explicitly through highly sexualized roles in productions, lends itself well to the siren analogy. Further contributing to the negative perceptions of prima donnas is their depiction in popular media. In the 19th century, prima donnas were prone to frequent literary

[54] Rutherford, *The Prima Donna*, 31.
[55] "Demimondaine," Merriam-Webster, last modified February 21, 2023, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/demimondaine.
[56] Rutherford, *The Prima Donna*, 38.

representation, and this representation took both positive and negative forms. Rutherford mentions *Phantom of the Opera*, a well-known production, as one such instance.[57] The depiction of Christine's seduction by the Phantom is a clear depiction of men aiming to exercise influence over strong, talented women in order to keep them from being too independent and self-sufficient. When women in opera become too self-sufficient, their fates may become deadly in an effort to subdue them.

Catherine Clement explores opera's attitudes towards women through plot analyses of popular European art forms. She identifies the high demographic of women in operas who die, often at the hands of other men. She inquires: "what awarenesses dimmed by beauty and the sublime come to stand in the darkness of the hall and watch the infinitely repetitive spectacle of a woman who died, murdered?"[58]. She explores how common and alarming the pattern of women's murder at the hands of a man has become in opera, and how audiences have seemingly grown to love the spectacle without interrogating the deeper meaning. Clement selects Carmen as an example of an operatic woman who meets a tragic end. She is a woman who, while a seductress when needed, is willing to say no to a man at the end of her story, and she pays the ultimate price for her romantic rejection.[59] Clement identifies the origins of Carmen's downfall: "she takes the initiative in lovemaking" by seducing Don Jose, therefore acting like a man, a role she is not permitted to take on.[60] This results in her untimely murder rooted in an effort to save Don Jose from a tarnished image resulting from Carmen's rejection, and Clement astutely observes that "the man's image, damaged by pure and simple jealousy, that can bring on all the

[57] Rutherford, *The Prima Donna*, 45.
[58] Catherine Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 47.
[59] Clément, *Undoing of Women*, 49.
[60] Clément, *Undoing of Women*, 52.

deaths in the world."[61] This is not unique to operatic plotlines, then, but a telling commentary on the threat men experience when faced with a defiant, headstrong woman, much like the prima donnas who would portray Carmen. Clement observes that operatic women confronted with this fate are often foreigners through not only geographical means, but through "a detail, a profession, an age no longer said to be womanly," an idea that certainly rings true for prima donnas.[62] Their profession makes them foreign to the feminine sphere and the greater social hierarchy and therefore poses a threat to men that leads to attempts to subdue prima donnas. The primary method in approaching prima donnas in media was not always to defeat, however, but to transform.

If women vocalists began as sirens, it was often the goal to transform them into songbirds. The songbird classification evokes the domestic sphere of feminine music-making which was preferable to the act of putting oneself in the spotlight for all to admire. Rutherford explains that "musical expertise was in effect a visible sign of gentility—the middle-class appropriation of perceived aristocratic values."[63] Further, the work that went into domestic music performance was viewed as appropriate work for women to complete during the day in addition to other domestic tasks. It was an asset to the home as women could learn instruments such as the piano to provide "simple background music to a family evening [and to] dazzle visitors with technical and musical accomplishment."[64] This domestic realm of music making allowed women to fulfill the feminine ideal by proving their value as entertainers within the home without crossing boundaries into the world of professional performance where they could be ogled by eager audience members. If the domestic songbird represented the idealized role for women in

[61] Clément, *Undoing of Women*, 52.
[62] Clément, *Undoing of Women*, 59.
[63] Rutherford, *The Prima Donna*, 48.
[64] Rutherford, *The Prima Donna*, 49.

music, it is clear how their participation in lead operatic roles diverts from this expectation. In opera, prima donnas are certainly not in the background, and actively work to gain as much attention and recognition as possible in their stage roles, working to establish enough rapport with colleagues and audience members alike to gain power in the profession.

19th-Century Training for Prima Donnas

Before these 19th-century female singers could develop into successful prima donnas who took center stage in operatic productions, they had to receive the proper education. There were two primary avenues of education that prima donnas could choose between: private tuition, or conservatory training. Each option posed benefits and challenges, yet both could produce talented female vocalists. Private tuition was a less intensive option as it was not part of a larger conservatory curriculum. However, finding a good teacher was challenging as many teachers were sought-after not because of their expert pedagogy, but because of their connections to prominent opera companies.[65] Singers had to discriminate between switching tutors until they found one who they felt was effective enough, and remaining with one teacher long enough to eventually reap the benefits of an education that they perhaps were not initially responsive to. It was common for prima donnas to believe the teachers were not good enough for their abilities and to switch between tutors, indicating there were flaws on both ends of the private tuition relationship.[66] Some singers chose the route of private tuition because they did not believe they needed intense levels of training. Prima donnas often believed that their "vocal skills were evident in the cradle," that their gifts were natural and innate, and that "tuition only polished already present abilities."[67] Because of this, they did not need the rigorous coursework found in

[65] Rutherford, *The Prima Donna*, 92-93.
[66] Rutherford, *The Prima Donna*, 101.
[67] Rutherford, *The Prima Donna*, 102.

schools, but rather opted for lessons to refine their technique. If singers wanted more effective teachers whose qualifications they could be sure of, however, conservatories were a sound option.

Conservatories presented singers with high-level education but posed challenges for female students as access was not equal between the sexes with regards to well-rounded education. Female students were often relegated to domestic training in the early 19th century as supplementary courses in school while boys were taught core subjects such as math and reading.[68] Despite this challenge for female students, the appeal of conservatory training cannot be understated. Performing in productions by these schools allowed for potential press coverage and reviews that were not available to students of private tutors and is only one of multiple distinct advantages. [69] Additionally, success within the conservatories could fast track a prima donna's path to professional work. Toward the end of the 19th century, the Opera in Paris awarded contracts to those who won contests at the Paris Conservatory. In fact, the regulations of the Opera "in 1879 enabled it to have prior claim on the students at the end of their studies" above rival opera companies.[70] This was especially appealing to aspiring prima donnas whose goals were to be in the leading roles of famous opera company shows. The combination of higher-quality training than private tuition and added opportunity for early professional success led many prima donnas to take the conservatory route, including many of the stars that graced the stage of the Tulsa Opera. Some of the prima donnas who performed notable roles within the Tulsa Opera had a combination of private and conservatory training, such as Dorothy Kirsten, while some had exclusively private studio training, such as Elinor Ross. Each one of these

[68] Rutherford, *The Prima Donna*, 103.
[69] Rutherford, *The Prima Donna*, 107.
[70] Rutherford, *The Prima Donna*, 108.

famous prima donnas, however, was able to find success on local, national, and, in some cases, international stages. Further opportunity to compare the lives of prima donnas is evident when we examine the careers of imported prima donnas from companies such as the Met, New York City Opera, and the San Francisco Opera to prima donnas who were based in Tulsa full-time. Before providing profiles of some of the particularly noteworthy prima donnas, it is helpful to examine the data surrounding their careers with the Tulsa Opera.

Talent, Local and Imported: Insights from Tulsa Opera Archives at University of Oklahoma

Before exploring the training and careers of some of Tulsa's finest imported prima donnas, it is necessary to understand the boundaries of my research as dictated by archival material housed at the University of Oklahoma. I will examine the Tulsa Opera company between the years 1954 and 1968. The data which contributed to my research can be found in Appendix A through Appendix E. I discuss the contents of each Appendix before moving into the holistic conclusions the data allowed me to make about prima donna culture's presence in the Tulsa Opera.

Appendix A includes the most overarching table of data found in my research. It includes the names and corresponding roles of every prima donna who sang with the Tulsa Opera during my focus period. As evidenced in the table, there was an extremely wide breadth of prima donnas starring in Tulsa Opera productions during this time. My research focused on prima donnas who sang with the company more than once in a lead or supporting role. These figures appear in Appendix C, which highlights all prima donnas with recurring roles as well as the opera company with which they were primarily associated in this period. It should be noted that many of the visiting prima donnas sang with multiple opera companies, so they cannot be fully

designated to one company, but the popular press aided in identifying their primary place of work. This data reveals the prominence of artists from the Met imported by the Tulsa Opera. Of the twenty-one prima donnas with recurring lead or supporting roles, eight of them hailed from the Met. The remaining imported stars were from NYC Opera (Muriel Greenspon) or the San Francisco Opera (Lorraine Calcagno and Dorothy Warenskjold). While correlation does not equal causation, it is also interesting to note that the three imported stars from companies other than the Met have very little published in the popular press about them. This would be expected of the *New York Times* since they were singing primarily outside the region, but also holds true for *Opera News* who reported nationally. This publication may not have chosen to write as much about stars from the San Francisco Opera when they had plenty of material on the Met. Another notable conclusion to be drawn from this table is that, while the imported stars did perform on many occasions with the company, Tulsa local Virginia Lee Anderson had the highest number of recurring lead or supporting roles by a large margin. She performed in these roles nine times with the next highest number of roles being five. The prima donnas who sang in five recurring roles were also Tulsa locals: Dorothy McCormick, Marilyn Chapman, and Marija Kova. Most of the imported prima donnas sang four of fewer recurring roles. Out of the imported prima donnas, Roberta Peters sang the most times, holding four roles in this period, which is notable due to the extreme levels of her fame. The magazine *Opera News* is not the only indicator of fame, but as one of the most prominent operatic magazines, it is a helpful tool for determining what is popular. In *Opera News*, Roberta Peters was featured more often than any of the Tulsa Opera prima donnas in this period. The fact that Tulsa Opera was able to recruit her to perform this many times is a testament to their quality and their availability of resources. They budgeted

effectively to be able to pay the price that fame demanded, and they ran a company whose shows were of a high enough quality to adequately support such a famous opera star.

Not only did the Tulsa Opera import their opera stars, but they imported one of their longest running conductors as well. Appendix B serves a similar function to Appendix A in detailing every year of my focus period and the productions, but rather than focusing on the prima donnas, it highlights the conductor of each production. Appendix D highlights figures who conducted more than one show with the company in my focus period. Carlo Moresco conducted the highest number of recurring productions by a large margin, conducting 17 shows in this period. He hailed from Philadelphia where he worked with many different companies. The other two conductors leading recurring productions, Kenneth Schuller and Gerald Whitney, were both Tulsa locals, and conducted significantly fewer productions.

Regarding the productions, Appendix E details the programming of the company throughout my focus period. As I demonstrated in Chapter 1, the Tulsa Opera took programming very seriously as their selection of operas was important to bringing in enough money to sustain the company while it worked to grow into a more prominent role nationally. An article from the *Tulsa World* cited in Chapter 1 highlights productions such as *La boheme*, *Aida*, and *Carmen*, and another mentions *Faust* as a fan favorite as well. Appendix E supports this as *La boheme* was performed three times during my focus period, and *Carmen*, *Faust*, and *Aida* were each performed twice. *Hansel and Gretel* was performed most frequently of all. The production headlined the newly created winter season as of 1964 and became a winter tradition for the Tulsa area for the duration of its tenure on their repertoire list. Their repertoire was also selected to align with the popular repertoire of the Met (as I showed in Chapter 1), and in my discussion of the prima donnas imported from the Met, I will highlight roles that prima donnas performed in

both venues. To gain an understanding of some of the New York prima donnas brought to Tulsa, I have crafted biographical introductions to their careers to demonstrate their notability as performers and their participation in Tulsa.

The data highlights Elinor Ross as one of the most prominent starlets of the Tulsa Opera. Ross was one of many imported prima donnas during this period of the Tulsa Opera's history who had recurring lead roles in productions. She performed as a lead in three shows: *Il trovatore* in the spring of 1959, *Un ballo in maschera* in the fall of 1959, and in *Turandot* in the fall of 1966. Out of all the prima donnas with recurring roles who traveled to Tulsa from prominent outside companies, the highest number of recurring roles in this time period is three, and only four of these prima donnas joined the company in that capacity. Ross hailed from New York and had a non-traditional path to opera stardom. She originally studied at Syracuse University with the goal of a career in medicine but pivoted to her ultimate career in opera before that goal came to fruition.[71] She was a member of the studios of three vocal pedagogues, William Herman, Stanley Sontag, and Leo Resnick, with Herman serving as her principal teacher. Resulting from this instruction, she made her professional debut with the Cincinnati Opera in 1958 in the role of Leonora in *Il trovatore*.[72] After an illustrious stretch of time touring opera houses both in America and abroad, she made her debut with the Met in 1970 in Puccini's Turandot singing the title role.[73]

Another notable prima donna who, like Ross, studied under William Herman was Roberta Peters. Peters sang a lead role in productions over a wide range of years within my focus period:

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[71] "Elinor Ross," Elinor Ross, accessed January 18, 2023, https://www.elinorross.net/.
[72] Brian Kellow, "Elinor Ross, 93, Who Possessed a Dramatic Soprano of Uncommon Warmth and Beauty, has Died," *Opera News*, March 7, 2020, https://www.operanews.com/Opera_News_Magazine/2020/3/News/Elinor_Ross,_Who_Possessed_a_Dramatic_Soprano_of_Uncommon_Warmth_and_Beauty,_has_Died.html.
[73] "Elinor Ross," Elinor Ross, accessed January 18, 2023, https://www.elinorross.net/.

Lucia di Lammermoor in the spring of 1958, *Il barbiere di Siviglia* in the spring of 1962, and *L'elisir d'amore* in the fall of 1965. Peters began her career with the Met at age 19 with no prior performance experience and remained on their roster for over 40 years.[74] Her career was, similarly to Ross's, based in America with notable performances abroad.

Contrary to the career paths of Elinor Ross and Roberta Peters, prima donnas Gianna D'Angelo and Dorothy Kirsten went down the conservatory path for their training with private training interspersed as well.

Dorothy Kirsten's collaboration with the Tulsa Opera during this time began in 1958 with a lead role in *Madama Butterfly* in the fall and concluded with a return in the fall of 1963 to star in *Tosca*. She had one fewer leading role than Ross and Peters in this period, but they were in the minority during this window of time to possess three recurring leading roles with the company. Her slightly more limited appearances as a lead with the Tulsa Opera are no indicator of her success, however. She was a conservatory student at Juilliard before studying in Rome where she received private instruction.[75] Her career spanned many prominent opera companies—she made her debut with the Chicago Opera Company in 1940, made her New York opera debut with San Carlo Opera Company in 1944, and sang with the Met intermittently for 30 years.[76]

The final prima donna who was brought into the Tulsa Opera Company during this time who has bountiful information available on her life is Gianna D'Angelo, another vocalist who went through conservatory training. She studied at Juilliard just as Kirsten did and made a similar pilgrimage to Italy to study with Giuseppe de Luca and Toti dal Monte. She made her debut in Rome in 1954 and later debuted with the Met in 1961.[77]

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[74] Laura Kuhn, *Baker's Dictionary of Opera* (New York: Schirmer Books, 2000), 604.
[75] Kuhn, *Baker's Dictionary*, 391.
[76] Kuhn, *Baker's Dictionary*, 391.
[77] David Hamilton, *The Met Encyclopedia* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 99.

Gender and The Professional Life of the Prima Donna

Prima donnas, while appearing to lead glamorous lives singing centerstage in extravagant costumes, faced many obstacles because of the stigmas surrounding their profession in the 19th century. The more prominent their careers became, the larger the targets that were put on their backs. In the early 19th century, women reached their peak in the operatic field as it was at its most "feminized" state. Rutherford explains this condition of opera as resulting from "its fluidity, the lack of fixed boundaries, its responsiveness to individual circumstances and conditions" as well as "irrational, emotional, wayward."[78] This definition is reflective of the societal perception of women at the time—fickle, malleable, and irrational. Although the definition of the state of the field as feminized employs negative connotations about women, the state of opera itself benefitted women. Because it was more malleable and unstable, women were able to gain concrete control over the field with regards to the business elements of being a performer as well as control over compositional aspects of the music. The newly inherited power of women in the field regarding business and management was the result of continually evolving methods of contracting and negotiating the status of performers. One such method was *convenienze*, a series of professional codes concerning topics such as billing, roles, fees, and privileges.[79] The codes evolved to provide prima donnas with more and more power, something that was not typically societally encouraged for women to have, reinforcing the idea that prima donnas contrasted the idealized woman. Some of the elevation given to prima donnas revolved around billing order (the order in which names were listed in advertisements for shows and in programs for productions). If a name was higher on the list, they were likely to be perceived as more famous or more talented than those beneath them. In the Classical era, when the focus in opera switched

[78] Rutherford, *The Prima Donna*, 162.
[79] Rutherford, *The Prima Donna*, 163.

from castrati singers to women, they took over the top billing spots for productions. This was the case until the eventual switch to listing names by role, a shift made to "avoid the continual tittle-tattle" and the irrationality of stars who would become deeply upset if the billing order was not structured in their favor.[80] Billing spots were only one instance of the hyper-elevation of the status of prima donnas. In general, convenienze played a large role in delegating power to artists, but this would change over the course of the 19th century. Because of the power these singers had, they began exercising it over many of their collaborators, including composers. They were often seen as a nuisance to composers and protested to alter compositions to better showcase their individual abilities.[81] One such instance of prima donnas exercising their power over composers was through an operatic tradition referred to as *aria di baule*.

Prima donnas had power over everyone in their dominion, and composers were certainly not exempt from their vast influence. Prima donnas often had one primary goal in mind in their performances: to show off their vocal abilities. To establish their careers, extend contracts, and attract audiences, prima donnas needed to prove that their voices were irreplaceably virtuosic. One method used by these prima donnas to accomplish their goal was aria insertion. The arias to be inserted were not part of the original composition of the opera, although they could be pulled from other works by the same composer. They did not have to be the product of the same composer, however, and often were pulled from completely unrelated operas. These arias were referred to as *aria di baules*, translating to "trunk arias" because of "the cumbersome luggage that singers stuffed with costumes, props, and most important for this context, musical scores of their favorite arias."[82] These arias could be inserted anywhere within an operatic production, but

[80] Rutherford, *The Prima Donna*, 164.
[81] Rutherford, *The Prima Donna*, 171.
[82] Hilary Poriss, *Changing the Score: Arias, Prima Donnas, and the Authority of Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3.

one such moment that vocalist could capitalize on were *cavatinas*, or entrance arias, which came to serve an important dual function. Hilary Poriss writes that "not only did [they] introduce characters into the context of the opera, but [they] also provided them a solo opportunity with which they could showcase their glorious voices."[83] The concept of using aria interpolation to showcase a prima donna's vocal capabilities was present in countless productions by many vocalists, and these insertions had the potential to make lasting alterations to operas. This is another demonstration of how powerful the influence of women was on the development of opera in general, and how much control they once had in the operatic sphere. One such change was spearheaded by Maria Malibran and her aria insertions in Vincenzo Bellini's *I Capuleti e i Montecchi*.

Malibran was viewed as a trailblazer for her innovative alterations to the final scene of Bellini's opera inspired loosely by Romeo and Juliet. She took on the pants role of Romeo in an 1832 production and made the bold choice to replace all of Bellini's music in the final scene with music from the corresponding scene from Nicola Vaccai's *Giulietta e Romeo*, an opera similarly based on the Shakespeare play.[84] She did this each time she took on the role, at least five times following her alteration's debut, setting a precedent of how the opera could be expected to play out. Beginning in 1833, prima donnas followed suit and performed the opera as Malibran had done rather than as written by Bellini. The Vaccai ending allowed for further expressivity on the part of the vocalists when compared to Bellini's arias which is part of why it was so often chosen.[85] Another reason prima donnas may have taken after Malibran's performance is because her prominence as a performer inspired competition in prima donnas. If they took on the pants

[83] Poriss, *Changing the Score*, 38.
[84] Poriss, *Changing the Score*, 103.
[85] Poriss, *Changing the Score*, 121.

role and sang it as Malibran did, they were eligible for direct comparison, opening up the door to either match her abilities or, ideally, exceed them.[86] In fact, "nearly two-thirds of all productions that occurred between 1833 and 1857 featured the Vaccai ending."[87] This led to Ricordi publishing a score of the opera with Vaccai's music included as an appendix, paying homage to Malibran's performance practice.[88] The publication of a score encouraging a different ending from the composer's intent is a demonstration of just how powerful prima donnas can be. It is important to note that Malibran was not the first prima donna to ever sing the ending of Bellini's opera in this manner, but rather Santina Ferlotti did so in a benefit performance in 1831.[89] However, Malibran was a more notable prima donna than Ferlotti, and her wide-reaching fame led to the aria interpolation being associated with her rather than Ferlotti. This proves that prima donnas had power over the music as a result of their fame as well as their innovative performance decisions and their consistency in their commitment to them. Cases such as this raise the question of whether the prima donna or the composer had the right to make the final call regarding how an opera should be executed. The concept of aria interpolation is a part of the bigger historical debate regarding what a work of art truly was: the performance, or the composition.[90]

When these prima donnas interpolated their own arias with no governance from the composers or impresarios, the work of art was completely at the mercy of the performance. The insertion of any aria the singer desired to showcase her own talents illustrates the unwavering power these prima donnas possessed over opera. While this remained the case in 18th century

[86] Poriss, *Changing the Score*, 125.
[87] Poriss, *Changing the Score*, 104.
[88] Poriss, *Changing the Score*, 105.
[89] Poriss, *Changing the Score*, 106.
[90] Rutherford, *The Prima Donna*, 176.

performances implementing this technique, but as the mid-19th century approached, the tides began to turn for composers and their role in defining a work of art.[91] In the early 19th century, impresarios began to limit the freedom of female vocalists through their contracts with regards to which arias they could insert and at what point of the production this could be done. One such example detailed by Poriss is Giulia Grisi's contract at the Teatro la Fenice in 1833 in which the impresario wrote that it was "forbidden for Signora Grisi to insert pieces of music without special permission from the impresario" and that she must "execute the parts in the manner in which they will be distributed by the impresario."[92] This was an increasingly common clause in contracts until, eventually, alterations were permanently governed by a new standard clause in contracts in 1870. This newly developed clause stated that the vocalist "must perform the parts as the author composed them" and "must perform his part even if it was previously performed by another artist," which would have changed performance practices surrounding roles such as Malibran's alterations of the tomb scene.[93] Prima donnas who took on that role would have been banned from making Malibran's same alterations unless the impresario expressly authorized it. Looking to the 1830s, composers began dictating where in operas it may be appropriate for singers to insert arias, demonstrated by Paisiello's libretto for *La molinara* which left a blank space to indicate that an aria should take place, but the piece may be selected by the performer. Poriss suggests that this could be viewed as the composer resigning themselves to the fact that prima donnas will insert their own arias regardless of permission, but it may also be seen as "a vague attempt on the part of the composer to assert an authorial voice over his work."[94] This marking both acknowledges the unwavering power of prima donnas over performances while

[91] Poriss, *Changing the Score*, 19-20.
[92] Poriss, *Changing the Score*, 18.
[93] Poriss, *Changing the Score*, 19.
[94] Poriss, *Changing the Score*, 14.

attempting to shift this power back in favor of the composer. Efforts such as these helped composers regain their authority over their compositions. Their new approach indicates an acceptance of the performance practice and their intentions to implement it to their advantage. It is these evolutions on behalf of the impresarios and composers that served as a catalyst for a shift in power from performer to composer/manager over the progression of the 19th century, limiting the impact of prima donnas on the operatic field. Despite their decrease in influence, however, prima donnas were still very much prominent cultural figures, and this was especially true for the prima donnas who graced the stage of the Tulsa Opera. Despite their decrease in compositional influence, prima donnas continued to maintain a stronghold over the art form. The Tulsa Opera serves as an example of how crucial prima donnas were to the institution's commercial success and to the board's efforts to gain national recognition.

Prima Donnas in the Popular Press: Gender, Power, and Fan Culture

An important vehicle contributing to prima donna culture moving into the 20th century which demonstrated their social and musical power is the popular press on both the local and national levels. It provided prima donnas with a platform to allow fans to keep track of their careers and allowed them to feel more connected to prima donnas as people. I have focused on three sources from the popular press: the *New York Times*, the *Opera News*, and the *Tulsa World*. The *New York Times* is helpful when examining the stars of the Met as it published articles about their performances in their primary opera company. The *Tulsa World* is crucial to following the events of the Tulsa Opera as it provides a local timeline of the progress and reception of each production. The *Opera News* provides important insights into opera culture at large and the relationship between the Tulsa Opera and the national operatic scene. This magazine began publication in 1936 and is still in print today, although it has undergone some mild

transformation over the years. It was published by the Metropolitan Opera Guild and places particular emphasis on the goings-on of the Met, although it also details other performances, festivals, and various engagements that Metropolitan stars take part in outside of their company. The website states that the magazine's "editorial content includes profiles of up-and-coming singers as well as established artists of the present and past" which rings true given the information we have on the prima donnas included in this research thus far.[95] The editors of the issues examined here were *Opera News*'s first editor, Mary Ellis Pelts, who served in the position until 1957, and Frank Merkling who took over the position until 1974. The magazine was published weekly until 1972 during the opera season in New York, and the frequency of the publication is an immediate demonstration of the high demand of the public for all content opera-related. Opera clearly had audiences waiting impatiently for more updates on not only the productions themselves, but the individuals who performed them, and the countless features written about the prima donnas who starred in the Met show how much of an impact these women had over their captive audiences. Fan culture itself was the reason that these women had such a stronghold over their cult followings.

Within fan cultures, audiences create deep parasocial bonds with performers in any medium. These parasocial relationships are perceived to be shared on both ends (that of the fan and the performer) but are realistically only representative of the fan's feelings toward the celebrity.[96] The concept of fan's relationships to their idols is the subject of Karen E. Shackleford and Cynthia Vinney's book, *Finding Truth in Fiction.* They discuss fan culture primarily in 21st century media, but the concepts are applicable to any time period. They present the idea that fans

[95] "About Opera News," Opera News, last modified 2023, https://www.operanews.com/operanews/templates/Utilities.aspx?id=14256.
[96] Loarre Andreu Perez, "Fanship as parasocial relationships: an outlook on the model for strategic management of fan communication" (PhD diss., University of Oklahoma, 2021), 11.

form meaningful relationships with celebrities which are remarkably similar to the relationships they possess with their peers. It is, however, important to examine the psychology of this connection to understand the ultimate power that performers have over their adoring fans. This relates to the psychological process of "person perception," studied in social psychology. Psychologists "try to understand how we use clues from people's appearance and behavior to form impressions and make social judgments, such as who they are and what we can expect from them."[97] This process is accomplished through two psychological approaches: top-down, and bottom-up. The top-down approach involves "applying our own internal understanding of people to the new individual: our stereotypes, our past experiences, and our assessment of the person's current motives."[98] The bottom-up approach involves "scanning for clues in the individual's outward appearance and presentation, including facial, bodily, and vocal cues."[99] These methods have a central goal of determining whether someone is a threat, but this is altered when applied to the process of evaluating performers. Actors who portray fictional characters are often exempt from the threat evaluation because their characters cannot pose a threat to the audience, allowing viewers to "be more empathically connected to people we either would not normally encounter or would avoid in real life."[100]

Person perception prompts more passionately devoted connections from audience member to performer which encourages a cultlike reverence for the performer as with the case of prima donnas in opera. Audience members see the prima donna on stage and develop preconceived notions of the performer even though they are playing a role, and these are oftentimes applied to the perception of the performer themselves. Fans also cultivate a higher

[97] Karen E. Shackleford and Cynthia Vinney, *Finding Truth in Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 64.
[98] Shackleford and Vinney, *Finding Truth,* 64.
[99] Shackleford and Vinney, *Finding Truth,* 65.
[100] Shackleford and Vinney, *Finding Truth,* 65.

admiration for celebrities such as prima donnas due to their levels of attractiveness. To succeed in a performing field, especially acting, there is an innate, unspoken rule that one must be pleasant to look at, except in the case of typecasting less desirable characters. This attractiveness is heightened when compared to people they may know in real life, and it allows fans to further distinguish the celebrity from their peers and colleagues. Attractiveness is an important trait when building bonds with others, so much so that social psychology stipulates that "physical attraction is the one and only factor that predicts whether two people will want to pursue a relationship."[101] When applied to prima donnas, this means that fans hold even more reverence for them as their attractiveness in combination with the perception built from their stage roles will strengthen the parasocial bond. The sanctity of the relationship between the fan and the prima donna is not impenetrable, however. When fans see publicity about the performer and their real-life experiences, people "make judgments about actors' motives, personalities, and even their sanity," impacting the parasocial relationship.[102] Individuals such as prima donnas hold great power over audience members because of this bond, but publications can essentially "pop the bubble" that patrons have crafted around their idols and place them back in the context of the real world. The media coverage of the actors themselves allows fans to go through the same social analytical processes as they do when meeting people in their everyday lives to try to understand the celebrity as an individual. This, then, explains why the coverage of prima donnas in *Opera News* helped to build a thriving fan culture surrounding opera. It allowed patrons to gain a glimpse into their daily lives outside of their stage roles and feel as though they had a stronger connection to the prima donna. This coverage allowed prima donnas to gain a stronghold over all their fans, especially, in this case, the Met stars who sang in Tulsa to gain

[101] Shackleford and Vinney, *Finding Truth,* 68.
[102] Shackleford and Vinney, *Finding Truth,* 66.

power over audiences there. It allowed the Met prima donnas to bring their powerful influence to the then small city of Tulsa which did not yet possess local talent at their level, and boost publicity of the quickly growing opera company.

Opera News had a running section in each volume which advertised the programming of various opera companies in the U.S. This recognition surely increased the turnout for these companies, but also likely indicates that the companies had to be noteworthy enough to include. One such mention was in a 1958 issue which announced the programming of *Lucia di Lammermoor* with Roberta Peters. The inclusion of such high-profile prima donnas (Peters was a regular in the publication) may have also aided in getting the company featured in the magazine. Indeed, the announcement goes on to say that "the former amateur opera club has grown to a major civic institution in less than ten years."[103] This statement from such a notable publication demonstrates the success of the strategies that the Tulsa Opera board implemented to boost their national profile through programming, recruiting of big-name stars, and the professionalism of general operations. Its programming was also advertised in a 1963 issue of the magazine, advertising its productions of *Tosca* with Dorothy Kirsten and *Lucia di Lammermoor* with Gianna D'Angelo. This was done once again in 1964, advertising the Tulsa Opera's productions of *Aida* with Lucine Amara, *Hansel and Gretel*, and *La boheme*. In this same issue, the company is featured as they "announced [their] Grand European Tour for May and June, with twelve performances planned in visits to Lisbon, Barcelona, Milan, Rome, Vienna, Munich, Paris and London." A tour of this proportion is already indicative of the high level of the company as it evolved over the years, but the value of this tour being featured in such a high-profile publication surely also boosted turnout for these performances, helping the opera company gain international

[103] "Names, Dates, Faces," *Opera News*, March 10, 1958, 2.

recognition. The inclusion of Metropolitan prima donnas did not solely boost ticket sales temporarily, it raised the quality of the company on a national scale through the increased quality of performance.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, coverage of the Tulsa Opera in *Opera News* only highlighted the imported Metropolitan prima donnas, and even then, not every prima donna made the cut. There were five prima donnas who were regularly featured in the publication: Roberta Peters, Dorothy Kirsten, Gianna D'Angelo, Lucine Amara, and Nell Rankin. Jean Fenn did have one feature in 1964, but she was not a regular occurrence in the volumes examined for this research. Interestingly, Roberta Peters, one of the most prominently featured of the five prima donnas listed, performed with the Tulsa Opera four times within the 1954—1968 period, one of the highest numbers of recurring roles held during these years. Gianna D'Angelo performed with the company three times during this time among only four others sharing the same frequency, and the rest each performed in two shows during this time. The fact that the Tulsa Opera was able to secure the participation of such high-profile prima donnas up to four times within a fourteen-year timeframe is a testament to the company's increased professionalization. This was evidence that the Tulsa Opera's board's strategy when contracting prima donnas and programming high-selling operas was successful in boosting the reputation of the company nationally. It is also notable that the stars they brought to the company were joining the company as individuals unlike the touring companies of early American opera. This allowed the prima donnas to essentially become a part of the local company and raise the status of that organization, rather than visiting as part of an already well-established group and boost that reputation instead. In this way, the individual visiting stars allowed the Tulsa Opera Company to develop as its own authentic local

organization with the help of the visiting prima donnas' fame to professionalize the company further.

The coverage in *Opera News*, the *New York Times,* and the *Tulsa World* paint a detailed picture of the perception and impact of prima donnas in popular culture with regards to their vocal ability, body image, fashion, and lifestyles. Each publication provides ample evidence of the impressive vocal ability of prima donnas. There was no shortage of positive reviews of prima donnas' performances, and even in the reviews that had pieces of critique to offer, there was rarely a review without some complimentary statement. This is an interesting transformation of the 19th-century stigmatization of prima donnas as they are evidently held in higher regard for their abilities in the 20th century. These reviews of vocal ability are dominated by the stars of the Met with only very rare mentions of the performances of Tulsa Opera's local singers. One such star was Nell Rankin of the Met who performed on numerous occasions with the Tulsa Opera. Rankin's most notable feature in *Opera News* during this time surrounded her vocal training and was in equal measure showcasing her teacher and the prima donna herself. The motivating factor behind this appears to be Rankin's writing about her teacher's vocal methods—the author explains that she was writing a book at the time of publication. Rankin began studying with her teacher, Jeanne Lorraine, at age 13. Much of the author's conversation with Rankin details her teacher's pedagogy, and this is an indication that Rankin's voice is powerful enough to warrant desire of audiences to learn how she developed it. Rankin credits Lorraine entirely for her vocal success in many varying roles including Santuzza and Carmen, the two roles which she performed in Tulsa. The end of the interview turns to inquiries about Rankin's performance as Santuzza in the Met broadcast the week of this article's publication. It would be the first broadcast of the company by a mezzo soprano in the history of the opera house, a notable marker

of success for Rankin.[104] This feature was published in 1960, one year before Rankin performed the same Santuzza role in Tulsa, meaning Tulsa was able to get a taste of how the production was performed at the Met.

Speaking more directly to Rankin's vocal talent, the biography included in the magazine's advertisement for their 1964 broadcast of *Lohengrin* explains how Rankin "has charged the stage with a long series of dramatic portrayals" including singing Carmen in London, a role she sang in Tulsa as well.[105] This reputation for dramatic roles applies to her performance of Santuzza as well, and the fact that Tulsa was able to feature Rankin in two of her more prominent dramatic portrayals, while surely a difficult logistical feat with her rise to fame, is hugely beneficial to the company overall with regards to raising the quality of performances. It is also demonstrative of the fact that Tulsa was interested in acquiring prima donnas for roles in which they had already built reputations, aligning the company with more established organizations in the process. One other notable mention of Rankin in *Opera News* is a review of her performance in the Philadelphia Grand Opera's production of *Aida* in 1957. The critic writes that "Nell Rankin stopped the show with her judgment scene."[106] This is another of many examples of how powerful of a vocalist Rankin proved to be in various dramatic roles, and how shrewd and savvy Tulsa was to recruit her to perform with the company on a recurring basis. Of her performance in the Tulsa Opera's production of *Carmen* in 1957, the *Tulsa World* publishes an article asserting that "Bizet must have had Nell Rankin in mind when he wrote Carmen."[107] Another article about the production writes that "Nell Rankin is a serious and highly endowed

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[104] Gerald Fitzgerald, "Method Singer," *Opera News*, January 30, 1960, 14-15.
[105] "Lohengrin," *Opera News*, February 1, 1964, 18.
[106] Martha Wagner, "Philadelphia," *Opera News,* December 16, 1957, 13.
[107] Sabra Smith, "Glamor of 'Carmen' Much Like That Of Singer Who'll Portray Role Here," *Tulsa World,* April 10, 1957.

artist who has determined to be the greatest 'Carmen' of her time and we are ready to concede that she has succeeded."[108] It is important that her reputation is so highly regarded in Tulsa because it means that she is fulfilling the purpose of imported stars as intended by the board—to sell tickets and increase the production quality of the company. Rankin made her mark on the Tulsa Opera and at the Met, and her features in the popular press play an important role in cementing her stardom.

Another prima donna whose vocal abilities were highly acclaimed across publications was Dorothy Kirsten. In *Opera News*, Kirsten was featured in the "Names and Faces" section in 1962 to celebrate her 100th performance as Cio-Cio-San in *Madama Butterfly*, a role she held with the Tulsa Opera in their 1958 production only a few years prior.[109] An opera star holding any role for 100 performances is impressive, and the fact that this role became one she specialized in and she performed it in Tulsa makes her performance in Oklahoma especially important—they got to see one of her specialties on the local stage. In the batch of reviews of Kirsten available from the *New York Times*, only one is critical, and this was in 1962 for a production of *Jersey Butterfly* which occurred only days after Kirsten cancelled a radio event due to illness, indicating that a full recovery may not have been made.[110] She was a valued member of the Met, however, so much so that they honored her 25th anniversary with the company with a production of *La boheme* with Kirsten starring as Mimi.[111] In a later production of *Jersey Butterfly* in Trenton, Kirsten redeemed herself with *New York Times* critics saying she "remains something of a technical marvel," that "she handled the more dangerous parts (including a

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[108] Maurice de Vinna, "Nell Rankin Rated Greatest 'Carmen'—Others Acclaimed in Opera Production," *Tulsa World,* April 12, 1957.
[109] "Names," *Opera News,* December 29, 1962, 4.
[110] Ross Parmenter, "A Familiar Cast Sings 'Butterfly'," *New York Times,* October 17, 1962, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.
[111] "Met will honor Dorothy Kirsten," *New York Times,* February 6, 1971, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

somewhat gingerly handled high option at the end of her entrance) with casually professional aplomb," and that she "was full of authentic visual and dramatic detail."[112] These highly complimentary reviews over the years indicate Kirsten's high level of vocal talent in the eyes of critics from multiple publications, making her participation in Tulsa Opera productions more noteworthy.

Roberta Peters was another prima donna whose vocal abilities were heralded in the popular press. In 1965, a review of her performance in *Lucia* published in the New York Times states that "Miss Peters was uneven. She always sang with grace and control, but at odd moments her voice was remote, and except in the Mad Scene, tense at the very top."[113] Just one year later, however, a review published about her performance in the same production notes that "Miss Peters, in particular, seems to have developed a more theatrically effective approach to her part, and she sang with her accustomed fluency."[114] It could be that Peters simply improved with time, or it may be the case that her performances were polarizing among critics. Whatever the case may be, her talents were significant enough to draw the attention of the Tulsa Opera as they looked to bring in the best talents from New York. She was a prominent feature of multiple *Opera News* articles in addition to her presence in the *New York Times*. In 1963, she was featured for her vocal virtuosity with a review stating that "highest vocal honors go to Roberta Peters, whose Queen combined the scintillating and the sinister" about her performance of Mozart's Queen of the Night.[115] In 1965, Peters had a page-long feature on her coloratura career in January of 1965. The feature details the versatility of Peters' voice in many different roles,

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[112] John Rockwell, "Opera: Jersey 'Butterfly': Dorothy Kirsten Sings Title Role With Opera Theater in Trenton," *New York Times*, February 25, 1973, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.
[113] Eric Salzman, "Roberta Peters in Lucia at Met," *New York Times*, February 19, 1962, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.
[114] Raymond Ericson, "Stadium Offers Enjoyable 'Lucia'," *New York Times*, August 6, 1966, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.
[115] Frank J. Warnke, "Salzburg Tradition," *Opera News*, November 16, 1963, 30.

especially roles that have precedents set for voice types that contrast that of Peters. One such case is in Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* in the role of Rosina, which was traditionally sung by a mezzo-soprano whereas Peters was a coloratura soprano. Max de Schauensee writes that "facing this hurdle, Miss Peters again carried the day with one of her best interpretations," that "anyone seeing her piquant Rosina will not give himself over to lamentations," and that "there are many (including myself) who prefer the bright, youthful tone and the sparkling ornamentations that bring glamor to a role which can become mature and heavy in the mezzo version."[116] De Schauensee goes on to write that "one of the surest barometers in determining the worth of an artist can be found in the recording field" and that "one of the major recording companies has shown its enthusiasm for Miss Peters by casting her as the heroine of its complete versions of *Barbiere*, *Rigoletto* and *Lucia*."[117] Her involvement in these recordings in addition to many more prove, in de Schauensee's determination, that she is a highly valuable artist as a result of her vocal abilities.

Two final prima donnas who were highlighted for their voices in the popular press were Gianna D'Angelo and Lucine Amara. In the *New York Times*, D'Angelo was lauded as singing "with delightful self-confidence, almost triumphantly—and with good reason. Her pitch was faultless, and she could perform all the niceties of the coloratura with accuracy and control" in her debut performance with the Met. [118] Another review from the following year of her second role with the company reinforces the success of D'Angelo's performance prowess. It details how "her voice had the clarity and luminosity that marked it before," how "she also produced some exceptional phrasing, linking together some phrases unexpectedly or making a lightning-quick

[116] Max de Schauensee, "Coloratura," *Opera News,* January 9, 1965, 27.
[117] de Schauensee, "Coloratura," 27.
[118] Raymond Ericson, "Gianna D'Angelo Makes Debut at 'Met'," *New York Times,* April 6, 1961, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

echo effect," and how her "singing goes hand in hand with her acting." The critic's only complaint is that "there are times when her use of gesture is a shade fussy," but they clarify that "this is a minor detail in a total achievement of high quality."[119] Overall, D'Angelo is presented in an extremely favorable light on merit of her voice alone. The same can be said for Lucine Amara who was the subject of multiple features in *Opera News*. She became well-known for her performances of various in *Aida*, the title role of which she would sing with the Tulsa Opera in 1964. An article entitled "New Faces on the Nile" was published in a 1959 issue of the magazine walking readers through up-and-coming stars who would be taking the stage in the Met production of *Aida*. It details how Amara worked her way up the ranks of *Aida* roles, first singing an offstage Priestess in the opening night of the 1951-52 season. Fast-forward to the year of publication of this article, Amara had sung her opening night as the title role in *Aida*, and the feature is highly complimentary of Amara's blossoming career. Amara reflects on her first performance in *Aida* as a member of the chorus compared to her performance in 1959 with the Met. The feature is summarized succinctly with its closing sentence: "just beginning to hit her stride, Lucine Amara still seems to be the soprano with a future."[120] She evidently made quite a musical impact throughout her career to be appointed to such a prestigious role as Aida, and for a prima donna who is only in the beginning stages of her career and only recently breaking out into stardom, this feature is especially beneficial to continuing that momentum. It is especially interesting to note the timeline of her performance in the titular role because 1959 is five years before she took the role in Tulsa. This meant that, by 1964, she would have been even more well-known for her performances in this opera, making her an even more sought-after star. Further,

[119] Raymond Ericson, "Met Introduces Gianna D'Angelo As Lucia in Season's Last Week," *New York Times,* April 18, 1962, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.
[120] Gerald Fitzgerald, "New Faces on the Nile: Amara and Uzunov," *Opera News,* November 28, 1959, 10-11.

this relates to Shackleford and Vinney's assertions about fan culture as a prima donna reprising a role they are known for allows the audience to associate them with the character and form deeper connections as a result. Another mention in *Opera News* explains how "she joined the Company in 1950, rapidly rising from short roles to leading assignments. Among other accomplishments, the soprano has sung on four opening nights."[121] The number of opening nights she has performed in is a testament to not only her talent, but the ability of her name to draw an audience at the beginning of a show's run with the company. Additionally, the emphasis on her rapid rise through the ranks of the company speaks to her sheer talent, especially considering that her career began in many chorus and background roles in San Francisco, meaning that she was not necessarily raised in the spotlight from the onset of her career. Her vocal ability carried her on her path of stardom which resulted in Amara being evidently well-favored by the company and by Tulsa Opera.

Until this point, the copious number of reviews of performers' vocal ability has been centered on the stars imported from the Met. This makes sense for multiple reasons—*Opera News*, as a national publication, only focuses on the biggest names in opera, so locals from Tulsa likely have not reached a level of celebrity which allows them to be featured in a similar capacity. The more interesting case is why the local stars are not featured in the *Tulsa World*. One could argue that they should be highlighted prominently in the local newspaper as it is a vehicle to highlight local happenings, including the performances of Tulsa residents. This is the case on very rare occasions, such as the review of Fall 1955's *Faust*. The review discusses how "Siebel's Flower Song won the Dodee Brockhoff applause almost as warm as that given the famous artist

[121] "Turandot," *Opera News,* January 16, 1965, 20.

with whom she was cast," and how "Marjorie Di Profio was equally well received as Martha."[122] Both Brockhoff and Di Profio are local talent and receive praise as complimentary as that received by imported stars, but this is one of very few occasions in which local talent even receives individual mention in a review. In other years when local prima donnas are cast in leading roles (classified for my purposes as any role outside of the chorus), such as 1961 when local prima donna Virginia Anderson was cast as Countess Ceprano in *Rigoletto*, the most recognition she received was in an overarching quote about the local talent stating that "three other gifted Tulsans again show that the Tulsa Opera chorus can provide comprimarios worthy of any operatic stage."[123] While highly complimentary, Anderson does not receive the level of fame or attention that the imported stars do. This is likely connected back to the original purpose of hiring these Metropolitan prima donnas: to provide better publicity for the company. With stars whose names are known on an international level, their inclusion in a headline alone may be enough to market a show, an important consideration for a growing opera company. This evidently worked for the Tulsa Opera as it began to reach more national and eventually international acclaim as evidenced by its inclusion in *Opera News*, but it does neglect its local talent in the process, even with their vocal ability being perceived as equivalent to the international stars. This raises an important point about the situation of prima donnas, then. Their fame and impact are not solely about their vocal ability once they have made their big break, but rather their social influence through their appearance, fashion choices, and influential lifestyles.

While the primary element of a prima donna's career highlighted should be vocal ability as it is what catapulted them to fame, body image and appearance plays a dominant role in most

[122] Maurice de Vinna, "Production of 'Faust' by Tulsa Opera Underscores Reasons for Its Acclaim," *Tulsa World,* October 21, 1955.
[123] Maurice de Vinna, "Rigoletto Dazzles Audience Here," *Tulsa World,* November 3, 1961.

reviews or promotional materials leading up to a prima donna taking the stage in both national and local publications. This echoes Rutherford's sentiments about 19th century prima donnas and the sexualization and objectification they faced as young women in a professional industry governed and patronized by men. Even with complimentary comments in the popular press regarding the appearance of prima donnas, the emphasis on body and beauty is not necessarily positive as it places more worth on the visual appeal of these female vocalists rather than solely focusing on their performance abilities. Interestingly, reviews of performances touch on body image and appearance quite frequently in addition to discussing the voices of prima donnas. The *New York Times* says of Elinor Ross, Metropolitan prima donna, that "in so far as looks and acting were concerned, Miss Ross made a very acceptable Aida. Her singing, however, was something of a disappointment." [124] The review leads with commentary about her appearance and seems to frame Ross's worth as being reliant on her appearance as her vocal performance was not satisfactory enough to deem her worthy of praise. She did receive a positive review of her vocal abilities two years later when she reprised the role at the Met, and that one makes no mention of her appearance, perhaps because her voice was perceived as more impressive and did not need to rest on any other attribute as a result. The commentary on her body can be perceived as negative, then, as it takes attention away from the vocal performance itself and enables audience objectification of the prima donna. Another case in which appearance is presented before making mention of vocal ability is a Tulsa World article pre-dating Nell Rankin's performance as Carmen with the Tulsa Opera. It leads with stating that "Carmen is full of life… a beautiful woman. Flashing eyes, a brilliant smile" and goes on to state that "no better words

[124] Allen Hughes, "Elinor Ross Sings First Aida at Met," *New York Times*, December 24, 1970, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

could be found to describe the woman who will sing the role."[125] The structuring of articles with appearance presented first prior to examining one's performance capabilities gives an impression that a prima donna must be attractive to be worthy of further reading about her. Attractiveness is a necessary component to draw patrons to a performance—if the prima donna is pretty enough, people will attend to ogle her for the extended length of an opera production, but not on the merit of her voice alone. This is not always a positive scenario, especially if the prima donna is striving for positive attention surrounding her vocal talent and is instead met with commentary on her body and appearance. The emphasis on the attractiveness of prima donnas supports the fact presented by Shackleford and Vinney that attractiveness is one of the most important qualities in the process of forming a relationship, whether it be a deeply personal relationship or a parasocial one with a celebrity. There is also evidence that appearance of prima donnas can be viewed as enough to earn the admiration of patrons regardless of vocal ability. In a 1961 article about *Rigoletto* at the Tulsa Opera, the *Tulsa World* review assets that Gianna D'Angelo "made such an appealing Gilda that had she sung like a screeching owl the audience would have loved her."[126] The use of the term "appealing" leads to an interpretation that the reviewer is complimenting D'Angelo's attractiveness in the role. This leads to an overall implication that her voice possesses no level of importance to her perception by the patrons so long as she is appealing to look at on stage, implying that a prima donna is ultimately nothing more than a sexual object for the audience to enjoy. This could also support the notion that attractiveness is necessary to form parasocial bonds with these prima donnas as dictated by fan culture. A final occurrence of leading an article with an attention-grabbing line about appearance arises in a *Tulsa World* article advertising Eva Likova's performance with the Tulsa Opera in their production of the *Bartered*

[125] Smith, "Glamor of 'Carmen'."
[126] de Vinna, "Rigoletto Dazzles."

Bride. It leads with stating that "for the beauteous Miss Likova, a Czech, the Thursday, Friday and Saturday night presentations of the Smetana opera will be in the nature of an anniversary."[127] The description of her appearance is completely unnecessary to convey the larger point surrounding the anniversary of her Tulsa appearance, but it increases her value as the subject of patrons' objectification and is therefore important for marketing.

This same article about Likova transitions into another element of the emphasis on appearance: the fixation of audiences and authors with blonde women. Later in the article, it states that Likova is "blond, gracious, and with contagious enthusiasm," and in the context of the sentence, it is evident that the inclusion of the word "blond" is meant to be another positive attribute of Likova's, as if a different hair color would not have matched the worthiness of the other two sentiments expressed in the quote.[128] Adding to the impression that blondes are more highly favored in the popular press, especially as it pertains to prima donnas, an article about Graciela Rivera and an upcoming performance of her with the Tulsa Opera quotes her as saying "some day I'm going to try a gold dust effect on [my hair] for highlights. I might do that here in Tulsa" following a discussion about her hair being long and dark.[129] This quote insinuates that the gold dust on her hair, imitating blonde highlights done with hair dye, would make her hair more exciting and beautiful, and that it would be a special privilege for the Tulsa Opera audience to witness her attempt at achieving that effect. The most explicit piece of evidence supporting blonde prima donnas receiving special preference in the popular press, however, comes from another *Tulsa World* article about Eva Likova. The very first line reads "if it is true that gentlemen prefer blonds, they will love the beautiful, golden blond Eva Likova of New York City

[127] Margaret Smith, "'Bartered Bride' Recalls Debut in Prague for Young Soprano Who Will Sing Leading Role in Her Second Tulsa Appearance," *Tulsa World*, May 12, 1954.
[128] Smith, "'Bartered Bride'."
[129] "Petite Soprano at Home in Gilda Role in 'Rigoletto'," *Tulsa World*, April 25, 1956.

in the title role [of *Bartered Bride*]."[130] This is a clear example of sexualizing and objectifying a prima donna, and in this case it is done on the sole premise of her hair color. It makes no mention of her vocal ability or her credentials other than the fact that she is part of a prominent opera company, and instead draws readers in with a detailed description of how attractive she is perceived to be, no doubt in an effort to attract patrons to the upcoming production. The fixation of the popular press on the attractiveness of blondes and specifically on blonde prima donnas serves to further emphasize that their worth is not solely rooted in their vocal ability, but in what they can offer the audience in terms of visual enjoyment through sexualization of women on stage. While prima donnas were able to transform their 19th-century stigmatization regarding respect for their abilities, the sexualization and objectification elements of that stigma were still present in the 20th century. This is the case with comments in the press about body size as well.

The popular press places strong emphasis on the figures of prima donnas, and particularly in praising them on being small or getting smaller between performances. One *New York Times* review of Gianna D'Angelo describes her as "slim, tall, and exceedingly pretty" and hopes that "the other two new singers prove as satisfactory and intriguing as she was," but the second portion of the quote was not made in relation to any statements about her vocal ability.[131] This leads to the implication that the reviewer simply hoped that the other new singers would be as attractive as D'Angelo, and that D'Angelo's attractiveness is a large part of what made her so worthy of praise and acknowledgement in the popular press. Not only does it emphasize the importance of her attractiveness, but it actively equates being slim with being attractive, upholding a notion that to be smaller is to be more desirable. This sentiment is echoed in an *Opera News* article about Lucine Amara which emphasizes that in her *Aida* title role opening

[130] Billie Traxton, "'Bartered Bride' Rehearsal Entertaining for Cast, Crew," *Tulsa World*, May 12, 1954.
[131] Ericson, "Gianna D'Angelo Makes Debut."

night performance, she was "twenty pounds slimmer than at her unseen debut" as an offstage chorus member.[132] There is no reason for the inclusion of this quote in the *Aida* feature other than to emphasize that Amara is even more desirable now as a slimmer prima donna in the titular role. Finally, the *Tulsa World* article on Graciela Rivera mentioned earlier opens with the line "Graciela Rivera, a petite soprano who thinks it is an advantage to be short 'because I match the tenors'" which reinforces the preference of being a small, petite woman rather than taller or larger figured.[133] With the impact that prima donnas have on the public because of their fame, it is exceedingly harmful for reviewers and reporters to emphasize the appealing nature of being slim as it can only contribute to a perceived public need to lose weight to be as attractive as these cultural figureheads. Not only is the responsibility on the authors of such articles, but it rests on the shoulders of the prima donnas for playing into these stereotypes as well, evidenced in the quote from Rivera in which she states an explicit preference for being smaller and shorter. The potential negative effects of articles such as these on body image of women who are fans of these prima donnas cannot be overstated. However, with as strong of a potential negative impact as these articles may have pertaining to body image, publications about prima donnas can have plenty of positive impact as well, especially in the fashion industry.

Designers were evidently well-aware of the impact of prima donnas on society and used this to their advantage. Dorothy Kirsten was the subject of a feature in *Opera News* about the celebration of her fiftieth *Tosca* performance in 1958. It states that "Edith Head, award-winning Hollywood designer, created a new second-act gown for the prima donna: royal garnet velvet, trimmed in diamonds and topped by a full-length cape of the same material, lined in gold

[132] Fitzgerald, "New Faces," 10-11.
[133] "Petite Soprano."

lamé."[134] The information about this dress is valuable to cultivating an understanding of Kirsten's influence. The notion that a Hollywood designer would design a gown specifically for an opera prima donna indicates that Kirsten had risen to the same level of fame as Hollywood stars, a notoriously famous demographic, whereas opera can generally be described as a more niche form of entertainment. As a point of reference, Edith Head's designs were also worn by celebrities such as Audrey Hepburn, Ginger Rogers, and Grace Kelly on multiple occasions in popular films.[135] To expand upon this, the materials used to create the dress would have been incredibly expensive—the diamonds alone would send the value of the gown skyrocketing. This implies that the designer felt that Kirsten was a worthwhile candidate for such an exquisite gown because of her fame and talent. Finally, the designer choosing to design such a glamorous dress for Kirsten's second-act performance shows the designer's faith in Kirsten's influence over audiences. Designers have celebrities model their designs in the hopes of selling more of their designs, and Edith Head's decision to design for Kirsten proves her undeniable influence socially. This transforms the 19th-century stigma as society sees prima donnas as admirable social icons who they should aim to imitate in their own style of dress. Like Kirsten, Roberta Peters was featured in the magazine on account of her clothing.

Peters was featured in the magazine's "First Night Finery" section unique to the 1963 issue. To an opening night, she wore a "peach-brocade original by William McHone and a voluminous mink cape by Leo Ritter. The soprano's coiffure, by Mr. Kenneth, is set off by diamond clips and large drop earrings from Tiffany."[136] While distinguished from Dorothy Kirsten as these items were not stated to have been designed for Peters, it is still notable that the

[134] "Names, Dates, Faces," *Opera News*, March 17, 1958, 3.
[135] Allison P. Davis, "30 Fantastic Movie Costumes by the Legendary Edith Head," *The Cut*, October 28, 2013, https://www.thecut.com/2013/10/30-fantastic-movie-costumes-by-edith-head.html.
[136] "First Night Finery," *Opera News*, October 19, 1963, 15.

brands and designers were mentioned. This indicates the desire of the public to know what she is wearing because she is an influential public figure and demonstrates her influence over the market as a social icon. The same can be said of Eva Likova on a smaller scale in a *Tulsa World* feature. It describes Likova's outfit at length, saying that she "was dressed attractively in a beige boucle blouse with rhinestone and pearl trim around the neckline and a brown wool pleated skirt. Her emerald earrings sparkled in the bright lights when she tossed her head as she sang a duet with George Tallone."[137] While this commentary is less specific than the prior examples, the high level of detail the author takes the time to dive into demonstrates strong local interest in Likova's style. By describing each item at length without mentioning a designer, it allows Tulsa residents to purchase items that match the description and feel as though they are dressed exactly like Likova, even if the items they obtain are from a different store or designer, empowering them to feel connected to her. The impact prima donnas have over the public is not only evidenced in features surrounding their fashion choices, but also in articles that demonstrate that they are real people just like their fans.

The popular press took care to write articles about prima donnas that showed elements of their lifestyle outside of their operatic careers which enabled audiences to build better connections with them, at least in the perception of the fans. One of the most prominent features of Dorothy Kirsten from *Opera News* was her multi-page photo spread entitled "The Stars at Home." This segment featured photos of many aspects of her home along with detailed descriptions. Kirsten "lives on a flower-banked hillside overlooking the Pacific, like the heroine of Puccini's opera [*Madama Butterfly*]," and "her house is even Japanese in feeling." [138] This feature provides an important intersection between depicting Kirsten as a woman just like

[137] Traxton, "'Bartered Bride'."
[138] "The Stars at Home: Dorothy Kirsten," *Opera News,* March 27, 1965, 15.

anyone else while still connecting her resolutely to her operatic career. This connects to Shackleford and Vinney's points about fans connecting to celebrities by associating them with their roles. Because Kirsten's home connects her explicitly to her role of Cio-Cio San, fans can continue to deepen their perceived relationship with Kirsten that has resulted from her portrayal of this role. In discussing the similarity between the presentation of her home and the opera, it appeals to fans' interest in her performance in the *Madama Butterfly* production. It also presents an image of Kirsten that has an unwavering connection to opera—even in her home life, she will still be perceived as a prima donna by the public rather than as a woman possessing a completely different life outside of her career. While achieving this purpose, the article also firmly situates her in the home, the accepted feminine sphere, helping to present her as the ideal woman despite her powerful performance career that may conflict with that image. By presenting her as a woman who maintains a beautiful, well-decorated home, it lets the public know that prima donnas are still representative of important elements of the feminine ideal and its connection to homemaking. This element allows this feature to make powerful claims surrounding gender without ever explicitly stating them. Additionally, this feature connects to readers as many people would experience opera from their home through phonograph broadcasts such as the weekly Sunday broadcasts done by the Met. It lets audiences know that opera can appropriately intersect with the home and reinforces that appreciating opera from the home is just as worthy and encouraged as patronizing performance venues. This is all demonstrative of the impact that prima donnas have over their loyal fans.

Another demonstration of prima donnas' social influence is shown in the February 13th issue of *Opera News* in 1965 which writes that "Roberta Peters, who sings Despina and Lucia

this week, 'Talks to Teens in the February issue of *Seventeen* magazine." [139] Her feature is one that presents her not as a Metropolitan prima donna, but as a relatable maternal figure for teens everywhere. She discusses the use of the phrase "overnight success" and how it downplays the grueling process to achieve a so-called "big break" in any field. In Peters' case, she discusses how she had to leave school for private tutoring and how she "regret[s], even today, all the things [she] missed when [she] was a teen-ager."[140] She writes about how challenging the uphill battle was until she reached her goal of singing opera professionally, and inspires young teens by explaining how they likely have peers who are on a similar journey of chasing their dreams. She says that "chances are they're not winning any popularity contests. Their clothing and hairdos aren't up to the minute, they don't get around as much and maybe don't even date often. But honestly, don't you envy them?"[141] Peters seems to be asserting that it is necessary to dispose of the trivial elements of ideal gender and fashion in order to eventually achieve monumental success. Her hard work and determination are used as a tool to inspire teens everywhere, and *Seventeen* is a staple magazine for young adults meaning that she was reaching a broad audience. It is important to note two things about this magazine feature. The first is that Peters had reached such a status of celebrity that she was in demand of popular culture magazines which had nothing to do with opera. Her social influence alone was desired as she was more of a cultural enigma of influence rather than seen as solely an opera singer. The second element of this feature that is quite important to the interpretation of prima donnas is that Peters is being used as a role model for teens. This contradicts the 19th century perceptions of prima donnas outlined by Rutherford as sexual, untamed beings who had no sense of femininity or morals. The stigma of

[139] "Names, Dates and Places," *Opera News,* February 13, 1965, 5.
[140] Roberta Peters, "Roberta Peters Talks to Teens: The Seven-Year Cinderella," *Seventeen Magazine,* February 1965, 146.
[141] Peters, "Roberta Peters," 172.

the performing, independent woman defying her innate feminine nature was decreasing, and prima donnas could be seen as any other hard-working man could. Peters not only defied the stereotype of her career but established herself as a cultural force to be reckoned with.

The popular press was undoubtedly an important vehicle in providing the prima donnas associated with the Tulsa Opera with the fame that accompanies their classification. If having high levels of social impact is a cornerstone of the prima donna role, the publications in question make it evident that the imported stars from the Met fit the role accurately. They are used as vehicles for social impact through the detailing of their fashion and appearance, shaping what should be desirable for those reading the articles and watching the performances. Prima donnas are also used as cultural figureheads who can inspire the lifestyles of their fans through features in national publications, making them more than just an opera singer, but a celebrity akin to any film star. Finally, they are awarded this status largely on the merit of their vocal ability, as they could not reach the level of stardom many of them possess without their raw talent. Even if select articles and reviews focus more on other elements of prima donnas, their vocal abilities are highly praised across all publications examined here, proving that their celebrity is not undeserved by any means. By capitalizing on the psychological processes of fan culture and the shrewd method of the Tulsa Opera board's targeting of prominent Metropolitan prima donnas, the Tulsa Opera company was able to build both their local audience and their national reputation.

Conclusion

There is little doubt that prima donnas and elite women were crucial to the development of the Tulsa Opera company in 1954—1968. The 19th-century stigmas previously surrounding prima donnas are upheld in some ways by the data I explored related to the Tulsa Opera and transformed in others. Prima donnas' still faced objectification through pervasive commentary on their body throughout all popular press sources I examined. However, they were also held in high regard by the popular press for their vocal abilities and served as cultural figureheads through their fashion and lifestyle influence. In particular, the *Seventeen Magazine* feature on Roberta Peters allows insight into how the role of prima donnas shifted from a negative social label to a figure worthy of inspiring young girls on a national scale. This demonstrates a clear transformation of 19th-century attitudes toward prima donnas as the stigma was replaced with appreciation for their profession. The presence of New York prima donnas in Tulsa were also reflective of the successful managerial strategies of the Tulsa Opera board.

The board was able to successfully elevate the level of professionalism of the opera company through the artistry of the performers, the shrewd programming choices, and savvy budgetary maneuvers. This would not have been possible without Jeanette Turner's research into the methodology of other successful opera companies and her commitment to bringing these techniques to Tulsa to bring the city into the national operatic landscape. The successful imitation of the Met's strategies allowed the company to gain national recognition as well as the inclusion of their prima donnas. Additionally, the work of Bess Gowans was critical to the creation of the company and the early rehearsal process as she served as the accompanist for the organization for many years. Finally, Maud Lorton's financial contributions cannot be understated—without her commitment to the company, it would have been difficult to recruit the

talent that they did and to ultimately reach their high level of professionalization. These three women prove how important women in administrative roles were to the development of the company. Further, they show that women in leadership roles, in tandem with prima donnas on stage, were essential to the development of opera in America as well as the increased performance quality of the Tulsa Opera Company. The freedom of women to take on these roles and possess such notable influence indicates the shifting power dynamics of American social and cultural hierarchies.

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Appendix A

Year	Dates	Title	Prima Donnas	Roles
1954	May 13, 14, 15	*The Bartered Bride*	Eva Likova	Marie
			Marjorie DiProfio	Kathinka
			Rose Martin	Agnes
			Virginia Whitaker	Esmeralda
1954	Nov. 4, 6	*La traviata*	Marguerite Piazza	Violetta
			Dorothy McCormick	Flora
			Virginia Whitaker	Annina
1955	Apr. 28, 30	*La boheme*	Nadine Connor	Mimi
			Joan Francis	Musetta
1955	Oct. 20, 22	*Faust*	Dodee Brockhoff	Siebel
			Helen Greco	Marguerite
			Marjorie DiProfio	Marthe
1956	Apr. 26, 28	*Rigoletto*	Dorothy McCormick	Countess Ceprano
			Graciela Rivera	Gilda
			Virginia Lee Anderson	Giovanna
			Josephine Clark	Giovanna
			Pope Economou	A Page
			Marjorie DiProfio	Maddalena
			Joan Draughon	Maddalena
1956	Nov. 1, 3	*Aida*	Claramae Turner	Amneris
			Herva Nelli	Aida
			Martha Roberts	A Priestess
1957	Apr. 11, 13	*Carmen*	Joan Marie Moynagh	Micaela
			Nell Rankin	Carmen
			Marcelle Bolman	Frasquita
			Ruth Thorson	Mercedes
1957	Nov. 7, 9	*Tosca*	Licia Albanese	Floria Tosca
			Mary Ellen Fox	A Shepherd
1958	Mar. 27, 29	*Lucia di Lammermoor*	Roberta Peters	Lucia
			Dorothy McCormick	Alisa
1958	Nov. 20, 22	*Madama Butterfly*	Lillian Marchetto-Patacchi	Suzuki
			Dorothy Kirsten	Cio-Cio-San
			Dorothy McCormick	Kate Pinkerton
1959	Mar. 19, 21	*Il trovatore*	Elinor Ross	Leonora
			Dorothy McCormick	Inez
			Jean Madeira	Azucena
1959	Nov. 5, 7	*Un ballo in maschera*	Peggy Bonini	Oscar
			Martha Lipton	Ulrica
			Elinor Ross	Amelia
1960	Mar. 17, 19	*La boheme*	Dorothy Warenskjold	Mimi

			Eva Likova	Musetta
1960	Nov. 3, 5	*La traviata*	Anna Moffo	Violetta
			Janet Duval	Flora
			Virginia Anderson	Annina
			Mary Lou Atkinson	Annina
1961	Mar. 16, 18	*Cavalleria rusticana*	Nell Rankin	Santuzza
			Nancy Holland	Mamma Lucia
			Jean Sanders	Lola
		I Pagliacci	Sonia Stolin	Nedda
1961	Nov. 2, 4	*Rigoletto*	Virginia Lee Anderson	Countess Ceprano
			Gianna D'Angelo	Gilda
			Nancy Holland	Giovanna
			Phylistice Hudson	A Page
			Harriet Senz	Maddalena
1962	Mar. 15, 17	*Il barbiere di Siviglia*	Roberta Peters	Rosina
			Lorraina Calcagno	Berta
1962	Nov. 1, 3	*Carmen*	Karol Loraine	Micaela
			Gloria Lane	Carmen
			Virginia Lee Anderson	Frasquita
			Marta Perez	Mercedes
1963	Mar. 14, 16	*Le nozze di Figaro*	Lee Venora	Susannah
			Gladys Kriese	Marcellina
			Mildred Miller	Cherubino
			Marguerite Willauer	Countess Almaviva
			Connie Barker	Barbarina
1963	Nov. 7, 9	*Tosca*	Dorothy Kirsten	Floria Tosca
1964	Mar. 12, 14	*Lucia di Lammermoor*	Gianna D'Angelo	Lucia
			Virginia Lee Anderson	Alisa
			Dorothy McNabb	Alisa
1964	Nov. 6, 8	*Aida*	Mignon Dunn	Amneris
			Lucine Amara	Aida
			Janice Yoes	A Priestess
1964	Dec. 18, 19, 20	*Hansel and Gretel*	Marija Kova	Hansel
			Lee Venora	Gretel
			Rosalia Maresca	Mother
			Janice Yoes	Sandman
			Virginia Lee Anderson	Dew Fairy
1965	Mar. 12, 14	*La boheme*	Jean Fenn	Mimi
			Arlene Hempe	Musetta
1965	Nov. 5, 7	*L'elisir d'amore*	Virginia Lee Anderson	Gianetta
			Pamela Scholes	Giannetta
			Roberta Peters	Adina
1965	Dec. 10, 11, 12	*Hansel and Gretel*	Marija Kova	Hansel

			Dorothy Coulter	Gretel
			Muriel Greenspon	Mother
			Karen Kribbs	Sandman
			Shirley Murray	Dew Fairy
1966	Mar. 10, 12	*Faust*	Karen Kribbs	Siebel
			Pamela Scholes	Siebel
			Lucine Amara	Marguerite
			Lorraine Calcagno	Marthe
1966	Nov. 3, 5	*Turandot*	Jean Fenn	Liu
			Elinor Ross	Turandot
1966	Dec. 16, 17, 18	*Hansel and Gretel*	Marija Kova	Hansel
			Joy Clements	Gretel
			Muriel Greenspon	Mother
			Marilyn Chapman	Sandman
			Dodee Brockhoff	Dew Fairy
1967	Mar. 16, 18	*La traviata*	Beverly Sills	Violetta
			Theresa Treadway	Flora
			Sharon Kay Edgemon	Flora
			Marilyn Chapman	Annina
1967	Nov. 2, 4	*Madama Butterfly*	Margaret Roggero	Suzuki
			Renata Scotto	Cio-Cio-San
			Marilyn Chapman	Kate Pinkerton
1968	Mar. 21, 23	*Don Pasquale*	Gianna D'Angelo	Norma
1968	Nov. 7, 9	*Rigoletto*	Kay Fulcher Cox	Countess Ceprano
			Virginia Anderson Torres	Countess Ceprano
			Roberta Peters	Gilda
			Marilyn Chapman	Giovanna
			Suzanne Tips	A Page
			Marija Kova	Maddalena
1968	Dec. 13, 14, 15	*Hansel and Gretel*	Marija Kova	Hansel
			Lee Venora	Gretel
			Muriel Greenspon	Mother
			Marilyn Chapman	Sandman
			Dodee Brockhoff	Dew Fairy
			Kay Fulcher Cox	Dew Fairy

Appendix A. Prima donnas of the Tulsa Opera from 1954 to 1968.

Appendix B

Year	Dates	Title	Conductor
1954	May 13, 14, 15	*The Bartered Bride*	Gerald Whitney
1954	Nov. 4, 6	*La traviata*	Gerald Whitney
1955	Apr. 28, 30	*La boheme*	Gerald Whitney
1955	Oct. 20, 22	*Faust*	Gerald Whitney
1956	Apr. 26, 28	*Rigoletto*	Gerald Whitney
1956	Nov. 1, 3	*Aida*	Gerald Whitney
1957	Apr. 11, 13	*Carmen*	Gerald Whitney
1957	Nov. 7, 9	*Tosca*	Kenneth Schuller
1958	Mar. 27, 29	*Lucia di Lammermoor*	Kenneth Schuller
1958	Nov. 20, 22	*Madama Butterfly*	Kenneth Schuller
1959	Mar. 19, 21	*Il trovatore*	Giuseppe Bamboscheck
1959	Nov. 5, 7	*Un ballo in maschera*	Carlo Moresco
1960	Mar. 17, 19	*La boheme*	Anton Guadagno
1960	Nov. 3, 5	*La traviata*	Carlo Moresco
1961	Mar. 16, 18	*Cavalleria rusticana*	Carlo Moresco
		I Pagliacci	Carlo Moresco
1961	Nov. 2, 4	*Rigoletto*	Carlo Moresco
1962	Mar. 15, 17	*Il barbiere di Siviglia*	Carlo Moresco
1962	Nov. 1, 3	*Carmen*	Carlo Moresco
1963	Mar. 14, 16	*Le nozze di Figaro*	Carlo Moresco
1963	Nov. 7, 9	*Tosca*	Carlo Moresco
1964	Mar. 12, 14	*Lucia di Lammermoor*	Carlo Moresco
1964	Nov. 6, 8	*Aida*	Carlo Moresco
1964	Dec. 18, 19, 20	*Hansel and Gretel*	Carlo Moresco
1965	Mar. 12, 14	*La boheme*	Carlo Moresco
1965	Nov. 5, 7	*L'elisir d'amore*	Carlo Moresco
1965	Dec. 10, 11, 12	*Hansel and Gretel*	Carlo Moresco
1966	Mar. 10, 12	*Faust*	Carlo Moresco
1966	Nov. 3, 5	*Turandot*	Carlo Moresco
1966	Dec. 16, 17, 18	*Hansel and Gretel*	Carlo Moresco
1967	Mar. 16, 18	*La traviata*	Carlo Moresco
1967	Nov. 2, 4	*Madama Butterfly*	Carlo Moresco
1968	Mar. 21, 23	*Don Pasquale*	Carlo Moresco
1968	Nov. 7, 9	*Rigoletto*	Carlo Moresco
1968	Dec. 13, 14, 15	*Hansel and Gretel*	Carlo Moresco

Appendix B. Conductors of the Tulsa Opera from 1954 to 1968.

Appendix C

Prima Donna	Number of Lead/Supporting Roles with Tulsa Opera	Opera Company
Virginia Lee Anderson	9	Tulsa Opera
Dorothy McCormick	5	Tulsa Opera
Marilyn Chapman	5	Tulsa Opera
Marija Kova	5	Tulsa Opera
Roberta Peters	4	Met
Marjorie DiProfio	3	Tulsa Opera
Dodee Brockhoff	3	Tulsa Opera
Elinor Ross	3	Met
Gianna D'Angelo	3	Met
Muriel Greenspon	3	NYC Opera
Pamela Scholes	2	Tulsa Opera
Lucine Amara	2	Met
Janice Yoes	2	Met
Jean Fenn	2	Met
Karen Kribbs	2	Tulsa Opera
Lorraine Calcagno	2	San Francisco Opera
Dorothy Warenskjold	2	San Francisco Opera
Nancy Holland	2	Tulsa Opera
Kay Fulcher Cox	2	Tulsa Opera
Nell Rankin	2	Met
Dorothy Kirsten	2	Met

Appendix C. Number of Lead and Supporting Roles of Recurring Prima Donnas with the Tulsa Opera from 1954 to 1968.

Appendix D

Conductor	Number of Shows with Tulsa Opera	City Based In
Carlo Moresco	17	Philadelphia
Gerald Whitney	6	Tulsa
Kenneth Schuller	3	Tulsa

Appendix D. Number of Shows Conducted by Recurring Conductors of the Tulsa Opera from 1954 to 1968.

Appendix E

Title	Year	Dates	Conductor
Hansel and Gretel	1964	Dec. 18, 19, 20	Carlo Moresco
	1965	Dec. 10, 11, 12	Carlo Moresco
	1966	Dec. 16, 17, 18	Carlo Moresco
	1968	Dec. 13, 14, 15	Carlo Moresco
La traviata	1954	Nov. 4, 6	Gerald Whitney
	1960	Nov. 3, 5	Carlo Moresco
	1967	Mar. 16, 18	Carlo Moresco
La boheme	1955	Apr. 28, 30	Gerald Whitney
	1960	Mar. 17, 19	Anton Guadagno
	1965	Mar. 12, 14	Carlo Moresco
Rigoletto	1956	Apr. 26, 28	Gerald Whitney
	1961	Nov. 2, 4	Carlo Moresco
	1968	Nov. 7, 9	Carlo Moresco
Faust	1955	Oct. 20, 22	Gerald Whitney
	1966	Mar. 10, 12	Carlo Moresco
Aida	1956	Nov. 1, 3	Gerald Whitney
	1964	Nov. 6, 8	Carlo Moresco
Carmen	1957	Apr. 11, 13	Gerald Whitney
	1962	Nov. 1, 3	Carlo Moresco
Tosca	1957	Nov. 7, 9	Kenneth Schuller
	1963	Nov. 7, 9	Carlo Moresco
Lucia di Lammermoor	1958	Mar. 27, 29	Kenneth Schuller
	1964	Mar. 12, 14	Carlo Moresco
Madama Butterfly	1958	Nov. 20, 22	Kenneth Schuller
	1967	Nov. 2, 4	Carlo Moresco

Appendix E. Repeated Productions and Corresponding Conductors from 1954 to 1968.