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Pauline Viardot as Salonnière

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ABSTRACT: Pauline Viardot was one of the foremost opera singers of her day, praised by audiences, critics and peers for her vocal abilities and dramatic sensibilities. Attracted by her musicality, her intelligence and the range, flexibility and quality of her voice, the biggest names in nineteenth-century European musical life hastened to enlist her talents. As a practicing composer, producing 150 original songs and 200 vocal arrangements across her lifetime, Viardot cultivated the careers of aspiring composers whose work she admired. At the same time, she nurtured a studio of pupils who were introduced in her salons to a circle of influential friends and colleagues drawn to the great *salonnière*. The descriptions of Viardot's salon contained in this article form part of a larger body of research committed to investigating Viardot's vocal pedagogy. My contention is that as useful as the Garcia family's inherited pedagogical tools were to Viardot the teacher, it was in her salon that her pupils learned their most valuable lessons, through performance practice and industry connections.

KEYWORDS: *Pauline Viardot, Parisian salon, salonnière, soirée musicale.*

Introduction

My first memory. A very well-lit salon, many ladies and gentlemen lined up, seated in tight rows – a large, lit chandelier. Under the chandelier, a table; on that table, a small child's chair – on that small chair, a little girl. A play is being performed in a puppet theatre. The characters, at least those who make them move, are singing quartets intermingled with dialogue. The artists are: Manuel Garcia *père*¹, Manuel Garcia *fils*,² Madame Garcia and my sister Maria Félicité Garcia. I am the heroine of the party. I perfectly remember that in the first row of spectators in front of me, one could see heads of the Dukes of Wellington and Cambridge. I was four years old³ (cited in Poriss, 2017, 30-31).

THE little girl of this recollection would grow up to be Pauline Viardot-Garcia (1821-1910), one of the most renowned opera singers of the second half of the nineteenth century. The description depicts

what must have been the young Pauline Garcia's earliest experience of a Parisian salon. The "heroine of the party" could have had little notion of the part she would later play within the salon phenomenon: first as a performer in others' salons, then as the hostess of her own.

As a performer, Viardot was admired for her musicianship, her intelligence, her powerful personality onstage and off, and the range, flexibility and quality of her voice. As such, she attracted the biggest names in nineteenth-century French musical circles, many of whom composed with her in mind. Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921) wrote his *Dalila* for her, Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) his *Alto Rhapsody*, Charles Gounod (1818-1893) his *Sappho*, Hector Berlioz (1803-1869) his *Orphée*, Didon and *Cassandre*, and Giacomo Meyerbeer (1791-1864) his *Fidès*.

As a composer, Viardot's impressive output included 150 songs, 200 vocal arrangements and a number of piano and chamber works⁴. There can be little doubt that her compositional skills and experience allowed her to maintain a relationship with her musician friends more equal in nature than that of mere muse or interpreter. Indeed, Viardot's musicianship, which she attributed to the influence of her father Manuel Garcia I⁵, saw her collaborating with experienced colleagues like Berlioz, as well as cultivating the careers of aspiring composers like Charles Gounod, Jules Massenet (1842-1912) and Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924).

These figures and many others besides comprised Pauline Viardot's inner circle of friends, mentors and mentees. From the age of 27 until the end of her long life, Viardot nurtured her "circle" through her salon, bringing composers and performers together, the latter often interpreting works by the former. A particular feature of the Viardot salon was that many of the performers were her pupils. It is the thesis of my current research that for Viardot this was not just a case of convenience, nor of serendipity, but rather a conscious effort on her part to provide her pupils with essential performance practice, and to introduce them to influential figures from the musical and artistic life

of nineteenth-century France. In this way, the spheres which made up Viardot's life - circle, studio and salon - were brought into alignment.

Pauline Viardot's Background and Training

Pauline Viardot was the youngest member of a musical dynasty headed by Manuel del Pópulo García (1775-183) and his second wife Joaquina Stichès. Of Spanish descent, with links to the Italian *bel canto* tradition of performance and pedagogy, this was a family for whom "genius appeared to be inherited" (Franz Liszt, 1859, cited in Hall-Swadley, 2013). According to Camille Saint-Saëns "music was in the air they breathed" (Saint-Saëns, 1919, 146).

García I was an operatic tenor particularly associated with the works of Mozart and Rossini. He was also a prolific composer, with nearly 70 stage works and a similar number of songs to his name (Radomski, 2000, 762-782). Rossini declared of his friend that "if his *savoir faire* had been in proportion to his talent and knowledge, he would have been the premier musician of his age" (Héritte-Viardot, 1913, 4). García's offspring were similarly destined for fame in the musical world.

The eldest daughter, Maria Garcia (1808-1836), known after her marriage as La Malibran, was a celebrated contralto. She achieved operatic stardom at an early age and experienced a stellar career that ended only on her tragically premature death at 28.

The eldest son, Manuel Garcia II (1805-1906), began his professional life as a baritone, performing with his family in the Americas⁶, before abandoning his operatic career to concentrate on vocal pedagogy and research (Garcia 1847a, 1847b). He became the most famous voice teacher of his time, with an impressive list of high-achieving pupils.

Both performer and teacher roles were combined in the personage of García I's youngest and allegedly favourite child, Pauline.

Recognising his daughter's talents, García I took great care that Pauline received a rigorous musical education. Her formal training began at the age of four with organ lessons, then continued with counterpoint and composition classes at the Paris Conservatoire under Anton Reicha. She was sent to Franz Liszt for piano lessons, and by the age of eight she was accompanying her father's voice lessons.

García taught singing to all three of his children (Radomski, 2000). He was rumoured to be a harsh teacher, at least to Manuel and Maria. On

the other hand, Saint-Saëns reports Viardot as saying that "neither she nor her sister was abused by their father". Rather "they learned music without realizing it, just as they learned to talk" (Saint-Saëns, 1919, 6)⁷. Ferris claims "her proud father [García I] was wont to say, whenever a buzz of ecstatic pleasure over the singing of Mme. Malibran met his ear, 'There is a younger sister who is a greater genius than she'" (Ferris, 1891, 55).

García I's skills as a composer were of great benefit to his teaching. In a letter to her friend, the conductor Julius Rietz, Viardot wrote: "It was my father who taught me music - when, I have no idea, because I do not remember the time I did not know it. I have several great portfolios full of solfeggios, canons and airs written for me... Whenever I want to practise airs which are difficult and really useful to me, I return to those which my father wrote when I was ten years old - I sang them but very little worse then, than I do now" (cited in Baker, 1916, 34-36)⁸. Although only 11 years old when he died, Viardot had benefitted from at least three years' exposure to her father's teachings (Kearley, 1998, 96).

Following her sister Maria's death, Pauline was persuaded by her mother and her bereaved brother-in-law, the violinist Charles de Bériot, to strive for a career as a singer. Building on Pauline's early exposure as both pupil and accompanist in Manuel *père's* studio, her mother⁹ and brother¹⁰ took over her vocal development.

Pauline was also an autodidact (Ferris, 1891, 51). Having greeted her change in circumstances with the words "Ed io anche son cantatrice!" (Schoen-René, 1941, 126), Viardot approached her training with customary diligence. According to one of her pupils, "With ardor [Madame Viardot] began to work on the *solfeggi* which Don Manuel had written out for her sister's training. When there was no more to be learned from these, Pauline composed others for herself on the same pattern... Schubert, for whose work her father had shown a fervent enthusiasm, became Pauline's first great love in music. She copied all his songs and used them for her *solfeggi*" (Schoen-René, 1941, 125)¹¹.

The hard work paid off, and in November 1838 Pauline made her Parisian concert debut at Madame Caroline Jaubert's salon. The 17-year-old Pauline Garcia's entry into musical life was welcomed by Alfred de Musset, as well as by fellow critics Léon Escudier and Théophile Gautier, all of whom pronounced her worthy of her sister's mantle. In what seems a ghoulish re-enactment, Pauline made her operatic debut in 1839 in the same role and in the same city as her sister - as

Desdemona in Rossini's *Otello* at Her Majesty's Theatre in London.

Pauline Viardot's Studio

If Garcia I's teaching prepared Pauline for a career as an opera singer, it also furnished her with exercises and instructions that would allow her to teach from a relatively young age. Saint-Saëns lamented that Viardot "spent half her life in teaching pupils, and the world knew nothing about it" (Saint-Saëns, 1919, 146-148). Her teaching career began in 1848, whilst she was still an active performer. During this time, she organised her contracts so as to spend six months teaching and six months performing (Schoen-René, 1941, 51, 138), before fully committing herself to the teacher's role following her official retirement from the stage in 1862 (Fitzlyon, 1965, 371). Viardot continued her teaching activities until just three days before her death in 1910. She therefore taught for a total of 62 years, more than double her time as a performer, and her studio produced pupils whose artistry would delight European and American concert- and opera-goers of the next generation.

The Parisian Salon

According to David Tunley, Parisian salons of the nineteenth century were "presided over by colourful and (usually) very cultivated women of mature years, many of whom devoted their entire energies to their little 'courts'" (Tunley, 1997, 6). Some notable *salonnières* of nineteenth-century Paris included the Countess Marie d'Agoult, who hosted Rossini, Berlioz, Chopin, Paganini, Liszt, Malibran, Viardot, Giuditta Pasta, Henriette Sontag and Adolphe Nourrit; Princess Christina Belgiojoso (Bellini, Rossini, George Sand, Stendhal, Alfred De Musset); Princess Metternich (Wagner, Liszt, Gounod, Saint-Saëns, Viardot) and of course, Viardot herself (Leung-Wolf, 1996, 259-266).

Pauline Viardot's Salon

In 1848, ten years after her operatic debut, Pauline Viardot was a successful mezzo-soprano with an international career, based in Paris. She and her husband Louis purchased a house at 48, rue de Douai in the fashionable 9th arrondissement (Kendall-Davies, 2013, 310). It was there, as Saint-Saëns reminisces "during the [Second] Empire the Viardots used to give in their apartment on Thursday evenings really fine musical festivals, which my surviving contemporaries still remember (Saint-Saëns, 1919, 148).

Saint-Saëns' reference to this historical and political moment in France's history is significant. Louis Viardot's republican sympathies had created problems for the Viardots in the past, and when in 1852 the Second Empire was declared, Viardot "found herself unofficially banned from France's operatic houses" (Escobar, 2012, 18). According to Saint-Saëns, "the disdained star consoled herself by shining in the salons" (Saint-Saëns, 1900, 149-150).

Viardot hosted her first Parisian salon from 1848 to 1863. In 1863 the family re-located to Baden-Baden, a move largely motivated by Louis' disenchantment with France's political regime. Pauline established her second salon at the Villa Viardot in Baden-Baden, running regular Sunday *matinées* from 1863 to 1870. The outbreak of the Prussian War precipitated a short residency in London, whence the Viardots returned to Paris in 1871 after a ten-year absence from France. Here Pauline presided over her third salon from 1871 to 1883¹². In 1883, following the deaths of her husband Louis and her long-term companion Ivan Turgenev, Viardot moved to an apartment on the Boulevard Saint-Germain, where she remained until her death, continuing to welcome guests to her musical *soirées* (Schoen-René, 1941; Johnson, 2004).

The guests to Viardot's salon were drawn not just from the musical sphere but also from literary, artistic and political domains. Regular frequenters of her salon included musicians Berlioz, Gounod, Saint-Saëns, Fauré and Rubenstein, statesmen Wilhelm I of Prussia and Otto von Bismarck, the writers George Sand, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and of course her lifelong companion and ardent admirer, the Russian novelist, poet and playwright, Ivan Turgenev. These were the audiences to whom Viardot's more senior students were introduced as young artists, presenting standard repertoire as well as their teacher's own compositions in the form of art songs and operettas.

Viardot's belief in her pupils' pedagogical development through performance practice was such that she made considerable changes to her various residences in order to mount her musical *soirées* and theatrical productions. During the 1850s, renovations and additions were made to the rue de Douai residence, indeed her prized organ room was a converted greenhouse (Everist, 2001, 172). In Baden-Baden a theatre was built in the grounds of her villa, where she, her students and family members produced *opérettes de salon* of her own composition on libretti by Turgenev. The operettas most frequently performed were *Le Dernier Sorcier*, *L'Ogre*, and *Trop de Femmes*. According to Melinda Johnson, one of the principal

objectives of these operetta performances was to provide stage experience for Pauline's most advanced students (Johnson, 2004, 73).

There are numerous primary source descriptions of Viardot's salons in Paris and Baden-Baden. Many accounts remark on the physical features of the rue de Douai salon: the drawing room with Pleyel piano, the picture gallery and the Cavaillé-Coll organ, housed in a purpose-built room designed by Viardot:

The salon was furnished in a very severe style, no cumbersome trinkets, lots of space. The furniture, lacquered in white and covered in light-coloured silk, was pushed against the walls. To the left of the piano two steps led to a picture gallery which received daylight from the ceiling. There were the organ and a small number of paintings of great value, including an excellent portrait of Turgenev from the brush of Kharlamof, perhaps the best available of the great Russian writer. A movable partition separated the salon from Louis Viardot's office (Viardot, 1973?, 2).

Madame Jeanne Mairet's account:

M. Viardot had added to the original building a picture-gallery, a delightful room, a step or two lower than the salon. Here, many of the music-lovers, the men especially, congregated. The drawing-room was not very large, and the piano took up a great deal of space. Once ensconced in a chair, there was not much chance of moving before the end of the evening (Mairet, 1908, 309).

Finally, Saint-Saëns:

From the salon in which the famous portrait [of Pauline Viardot] by Ary Scheffer was hung and which was devoted to ordinary instrumental and vocal music, we went down a short staircase to a gallery filled with valuable paintings, and finally to an exquisite organ, one of Cavaillé-Coll's masterpieces...I had the honour of being [Madame Viardot's] regular accompanist both at the organ and the piano (Saint-Saëns, 1919, 148-149).

Other diarists remarked on musical features, in particular Viardot's own performances. One of the pieces Saint-Saëns had the honour of performing with Viardot was Schubert's *Der Erlkönig* (The Erl-King), "of which she made a terrible and

fascinating creation of the highest degree" (Saint-Saëns, 1900, 149-150). Viardot was renowned for her dramatic interpretation of this Lied, and several accounts of her performances exist. Princess Metternich wrote:

Happily, Madame Viardot-Garcia, the famous singer and incomparable artist whom today only Lilli Lehmann resembles, at least as far as vocal range and style are concerned, was present. With her customary goodwill, she came to my aid and asked Liszt to accompany her in "The Erl-King". I won the day! Yes, I heard "The Erl-King", sung by Mme Viardot and accompanied by Liszt. I can state that it would be very difficult not to retain for the rest of one's life a magnificent and powerful impression of this (Metternich, 1923, 103).

Madame Jeanne Mairet described her own experience:

It was when Mme. Viardot herself consented to sing, which did not often happen, that her guests were really content. To use the artistic jargon, there were "holes in her voice," and no one knew it better than she—but who thought of any flaw in the instrument? The great artist carried her hearers away with her in a whirlwind of passion, of sentiment, of horror, or pity. Music with her, as it had been with her sister, was alive, vibrating, all conquering. One evening she sang "The Erl-King." At the end, there was a moment of absolute silence before the frenzied applause broke out (Mairet, 1908, 309-310).

It could be argued that in her salon appearances, Viardot acted as a performing mentor to her pupils, modelling for them the musical, stylistic and dramatic skills she had acquired over the course of a thirty-year career.

According to Jeanne Mairet, Madame Viardot's salon was "a social as well as intellectual and musical centre" (Mairet, 1908, 309-310). My current research contends that there were secondary but equally significant consequences, both pedagogical and professional in nature. My thesis argues that as useful as the Garcia family's inherited pedagogical tools were to Viardot the teacher, it was in her salon that her pupils learned their most valuable lessons.

NOTES

¹ Garcia the Elder, or Garcia I.

² Garcia the Younger, or Garcia II.

³ Musicologist Hilary Poriss has uncovered this opening paragraph in the manuscript of Pauline Viardot's unfinished and unpublished autobiography, now housed in the Houghton Library at Harvard University.

⁴ See Escobar, Angelica Minero. "Enriching the French romance: Pauline Viardot-Garcia's early cosmopolitan songs (1838-1850)." PhD diss., Rutgers The State University of New Jersey-New Brunswick, 2012; Waddington, Patrick. *The Musical Works of Pauline Viardot-Garcia (1821-1910): A Chronological Catalogue*. 2013. https://dspace.ucalgary.ca/bitstream/1880/49849/1/Viardot_catalogue_2013.pdf.

⁵ "It is incredible what my father wrote in the way of masses, symphonies, detached pieces, unaccompanied quartets, etc." (Letter from Viardot to Julius Rietz, 15th June, 1859, cited in Baker, 1916, 34-36).

⁶ The Garcias' 1825 tour to New York and Mexico famously introduced Italian opera to America. It was in New York that Maria met her husband, François Eugène Malibran. For more information on this tour, see Rogers, F. (1915). "America's First Grand Opera Season", *The Musical Quarterly*, 1:1, 93-101 and Biba, O. (2006). "Da Ponte in New York, Mozart in New York", *Current Musicology*, (81), 109.

⁷ Another of Manuel's pupils, the Countess de Merlin, reported Garcia as saying that he had never had cause to "exercise harshness" with his youngest and favourite daughter, Pauline, since she could be "led by a silken thread" (Merlin, 1840, 9-10). Ferris adds extra information: "Pauline can be guided by a thread of silk," [Garcia] would say, "but Maria needs a hand of iron" (Ferris, 1891, 51). In addition to her compliance, Pauline was known in the family for her industriousness, which earned her the nickname "the ant".

⁸ Although admiring her father's capacity for composition, in other parts of this letter Viardot criticises her father's compositional haste, the unequal quality of his output and his lack of discrimination in his choice of libretti and poetry.

⁹ "Mme. Garcia firmly declined [Pauline taking lessons from Rossini, suggested by French tenor and former Garcia *père* pupil Adolphe Nourrit], and said that if her son Manuel could not come to her from Rome for the purpose of training Pauline's voice, she herself was equal to the task, knowing the principles on which the Garcia school of the voice was founded" (Ferris, 1891, 51).

¹⁰ "She studied...the art of singing with her father and mother, but principally with her brother Manuel" (quotation from Viardot's obituary cited in Baker, 1915, 350).

¹¹ Nicholas Žekulin, contrastingly, describes Pauline Garcia at this time as "the quick if originally reluctant pupil" (Žekulin, 1989, 2).

¹² When in Paris, the Viardot family also maintained a country home at Courtavenel (1844-1873) and at Bougival (1873-1883).

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