

## Phrenologizing Opera Singers: The Scientific “Proofs of Musical Genius”

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In August von Kotzebue’s comedy *The Organs of the Brain*, the main character, a phrenologist named Rückenmark, makes the following statement:

The question is here not of hearts, but of heads. You know I am passionately fond of music. I will not have any son-in-law who has not a sense for this noble divine gift. No daughter-in-law either. It is unfortunate enough that my own children have such apes’ skulls; therefore have I selected for your brother Edward a young lady who has a head like a triangle. Such are sure proofs of musical genius, and with the aid of heaven, will I find a similar one for you likewise.

According to the doctor’s daughter, however, this “fair lady with the three-corner-head . . . knows [only] one note” and “has not either any tune in her *voice*.” “No matter,” Rückenmark says, “With her organ she may in four weeks become a virtuoso, if she only will.”<sup>1</sup> As this play illustrates, together with numerous caricatures, songs, and carnival scenes, phrenology and its disciples presented strong potential for parody and theatricalization.<sup>2</sup> But phrenologists did pay close attention to musicians, and to singers in particular. Some descriptions from the first half of the nineteenth century

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<sup>1</sup> August Friedrich Ferdinand von Kotzebue, *The Organs of the Brain: a Comedy, in Three Acts*, trans. Henry Capadose (London: Edward Bull, 1838), p. 5; originally published in 1806 as *Die Organe des Gehirns*.

<sup>2</sup> Marc Renneville, *Le Langage des crânes. Une histoire de la phrenology* (Paris: Institut d’édition Sanofi-Synthélabo (Les empêcheurs de penser en rond), 2000), pp. 85–6.

use scientific categories syncretically to explain opera singers' talents, their innate and acquired dispositions for singing and acting, and their effects on audiences. Such discourses reformulate interpretive frameworks such as the well-known theory of the humors, climate theory, or mechanicism, combined with newer research in the fields of electricity, the nervous system, and physiognomy. Distinguishing itself from the last of these, phrenology aimed to read on the surface of skulls the developments of cerebral zones, that is to say of "organs," which, more or less trained by education and combined with other organs, corresponded to various instincts and to affective and intellectual faculties.

Invented by Franz Joseph Gall in Imperial Vienna in the 1790s, "craniology"—renamed phrenology by his assistant and disciple Johann Spurzheim—thus offered a veritable "language of skulls."<sup>3</sup> According to its partisans, this "only true Science of the Human Mind"<sup>4</sup> could explain any aspect of human activity. Phrenological ideas became widespread in Europe over the course of subsequent decades, especially in Britain, where the London Phrenological Society was created in 1823, followed by many others across the country, and in France, where the Société phrénologique de Paris was founded in 1831. Fostered mainly by the medical profession, phrenology was controversial, vigorously debated in nearly every medical, literary, and popular journal.<sup>5</sup> Based as it was on the observation of human types, and geared towards

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> The expression was frequently used at the time to define phrenology—by contemporaries, journalists, and phrenologists themselves; see, for example Joseph Marriott, "Introduction," *Portraits of People with Phrenological Interpretations. Engravings, Lithographs etc., with Text by Joseph Marriott* (1850), p. 4. London, Wellcome Library, Closed Stores Iconographic 584990i.

<sup>5</sup> As D.A. Hinton reminds us, "Science was not—and, of course, is not—a pre-ordained body of knowledge complete and unchanging in its constituent parts;" see "Popular Science in England, 1830–

societal and moral reform, the discipline gave a privileged place to the arts. Although phrenology's links with the fine arts have been the subject of research,<sup>6</sup> its relation to music has been less closely examined, despite the importance of music to the phrenologists' investigations.

When criticizing the philosophy of the sensualists and ideologists, Gall placed music at the top of the pantheon, above all other talents.<sup>7</sup> But music and singing do not appear only in general reflections, inscribed in lists of tendencies and inclinations. They are also the subject of passages in which Gall reflects on the combination of inclinations that foster the development of a singer as opposed to a composer or

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70" (PhD thesis, University of Bath, 1979), p. 388. However, in presenting itself as the "only veritable science," as Roger Cooter has noted, phrenology established itself in opposition to other disciplines, and encouraged the intellectual boundaries that have come to be erected between science and pseudoscience. Roger Cooter, *The Cultural Meaning of Popular Science: Phrenology and the Organization of Consent in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 10–11. This does not mean that the question of the demarcation is of no consequence, or that the term "pseudoscience" does require a philosophical, historical, and sociological understanding: see Massimo Pigliucci and Maarten Boudry, eds., *Philosophy of Pseudoscience: Reconsidering the Demarcation Problem* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> See Laurent Baridon and Martial Guéron, *Corps et arts: physionomies et physiologies dans les arts visuels* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1999). Chapter 4 is dedicated to sculptor David d'Angers and his relationship with phrenology.

<sup>7</sup> See Franz Joseph Gall, *On the Origin of the Moral Qualities and Intellectual Faculties of Man, and the Conditions of their Manifestation* [1825], translated from the French by Winslow Lewis, 6 vols. (Boston: Marsh, Capen & Lyon, 1835), vol. 1, p. 84. Gall gave his first public lecture on the subject in Vienna in 1796 (and pamphlets were published in German), but his lectures were banned by the emperor, and he left for Berlin in 1805 and subsequently toured Europe. His publications on phrenology – the first ones co-authored with his assistant Spurzheim – appeared in French, from 1805.

instrumentalist. The opera singer is a crucial subject because, as an important mediatized figure of the time, the singer stimulated abundant illustrative material—biographical and anecdotal elements, portraits, busts, and prints. The phrenologists thus fueled specific discursive models of observation and enunciation among early nineteenth-century operatic audiences. In order to prove the truth of their assertions, they called on numerous examples, thereby inscribing the singer's body within the complex systems that they refined and defended. Whether through catalogues of remarkable characters in which past and contemporary singers were cited, or through more detailed phrenological studies devoted to specific artists, phrenologists engaged in a selection process that both reflected and nourished the media *doxa* and consensus of the time.

Their reasoning extended far beyond the theatre. When examining the opera singer, rather than relying on observations of vocal and stage technique, phrenologists prioritized the study of personality. Their statements are thus accompanied by discursive accessories that function as physical evidence in the service of a project of consecration. In this article I will show, by highlighting the phrenological and physiological “conditions” necessary for the opera singer, and by linking each particular combination with a type of music, how this little-known discourse on opera singers contributed to the processes of operatic creation and reception. Focusing primarily on French texts (and on a smaller number of English sources), I will demonstrate how new public images of singers were forged that presented them as both exceptional artists and socially normalized individuals.

### **Tune, time, and mimicry: of organs and conditions**

Phrenologists believed that performance required specific physical conditions in the brain. By studying the combinations of different dispositions, they hoped to provide definitive answers regarding specializations in particular genres (singer or musician, operatic or concert singer, comic or tragic).<sup>8</sup> Rather than underlining the mysteries that reigned over musical genius, as many of their predecessors did, the phrenologists pointed to the direct correspondences between sentiments, faculties, and ~~moral and innate faculties~~ and the anatomy of the brain.<sup>9</sup> Their reflections on music tended to begin with the identification of the organ or organs linked to musical talent, and then to proceed with descriptions of the successful combinations of “tune,” “time,” and “mimicry” necessary for an opera singer.

Following observation of humans and animals, Gall ascribed music to the organ of hearing, but refused to recognize any causal link between acuteness of hearing and training. As Spurzheim explained:

There is no proportion between hearing and the faculty of music, either in animals or in man. Many animals hear very acutely, and are yet insensible to music... Hearing cannot produce music, because hearing perceives only tones which are already produced. The first musician therefore began to produce music from an internal impulse, and that music of course he had not previously

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Albert Ellis, *Phrenology and Musical Talent, or The Phrenological and Physiological Qualifications Necessary to Make a Successful Vocalist or Instrumentalist* (Blackpool: “Human Nature” Office, [1896]).

<sup>9</sup> See Robert M. Young, *Mind, Brain and Adaptation in the Nineteenth Century: Cerebral Localization and its Biological Context from Gall to Ferrier* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 11.

heard. Singing birds . . . sing naturally, and without any instruction, the song of their species as soon as their internal organization is active.”<sup>10</sup>

Borrowing from ornithology, Spurzheim’s examples also introduced catalogues of famous musicians in whom the organ of tune is observed: “In Gluck, Haydn, and others, this organ had a pyramidal form; in Mozart, Viotti, Zumsteg [sic], Dussek, Crescentini, and others, the external corners of the forehead are enlarged but rounded.”<sup>11</sup> The individuals mentioned here are predominantly composers, but the works of later phrenologists gave pride of place to singers.

The Scottish physician and writer Robert Macnish, for instance, situated the organ of tune (no. 32) “in the lateral portion of the forehead, outside of Time, and immediately above Order and Number”. Macnish illustrated this position with a portrait of Handel, “in whose head it was greatly developed.”<sup>12</sup> However, he included singers in the list that followed: “It is large in all who have a decided musical genius, such as Glück [sic], Weber, Rossini, Malibran, Catalani, and Pasta”.<sup>13</sup> The prevalence of Italians here is unsurprising given that music is considered by Macnish as a “national talent,” characteristic of Italians and Germans, whereas “the organ in the British head is decidedly smaller, so that, although an individual may now and

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<sup>10</sup> Johann Caspar Spurzheim, *Outlines of the Physiognomical System of Drs. Gall and Spurzheim: Indicating the Dispositions and Manifestations of the Mind* (London: Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy, 1815), pp. 79–80.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 200.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Macnish, *An Introduction to Phrenology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Glasgow: Symington, 1837), p. 140.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

then arise . . . still, as a people, they can never compete with these nationals in musical talent.”<sup>14</sup>

The phrenological albums of the time reinforce this idea. Joseph Marriott’s album, for instance, is made up of 51 portraits that illustrate a variety of propensities, moral sentiments, and intellectual faculties. These images, which serve as “examples to any Author who wishes to write a new work on the only true Science of the Human Mind,”<sup>15</sup> are mostly lithographs and engravings familiar from the press or the shop windows of music sellers.<sup>16</sup> Alongside great politicians, painters, generals, and royalty, two musicians appear: a composer and a singer, Gioachino Rossini and Maria Malibran.<sup>17</sup> The portrait of Rossini illustrates Locality, the geographical and explorative faculty associated with one’s sense of location and memory for places—a recurrent quality in the phrenological recipe for a successful composer. The portrait of Malibran, on the other hand, associates the singer with the faculties of Tune and Time.

The phrenologists did not stop at the identification of a single organ, but recognized various combinations that favored the development of the composer, singer, and instrumentalist. As we read in *The Phrenological Journal* in 1825:

None of the organs is better established, or supported by a larger induction of facts, than that of TUNE, and yet none of them has been more puzzling to Phrenologists, or has been the source of more disputes between them and their adversaries. It has been generally, but erroneously supposed, that this

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 142.

<sup>15</sup> Marriott, *Portraits of People with Phrenological Interpretations*, “Introduction.”

<sup>16</sup> See also Ellis, *Phrenology and Musical Talent*, p. 14.

<sup>17</sup> Marriott, *Portraits of People with Phrenological Interpretations*, pp. 66–8.

faculty comprehends all that is necessary to make a musician . . . Music, like every other art, requires the aid of various faculties. TUNE and TIME, indeed, are the original faculties on which it depends . . . as FORM and COLOUR are the original faculties which go to constitute a talent for painting . . . but it would be erroneous to suppose that the faculties of FORM and COLOUR alone are sufficient to make an eminent painter; or that those of TUNE and TIME alone are sufficient to enable an individual to reach the highest eminence in music.<sup>18</sup>

In Paris, Dr. Giovanni Antonio Fossati (1786–1874) gave pride of place to the singer in these categorizations. A *carbonaro* and fervent phrenologist, very close to Gall,<sup>19</sup> Fossati was Vice President of the Société phrénologique de Paris when in 1834 he presented a paper at the annual meeting entitled “Sur le talent de la musique.”<sup>20</sup> He sought to refine the different categories of musician, and emphasized the particularity of the singer:

If we attempt to appreciate the qualities necessary for singers, we find that the combination in the same individual of different organs, all meant to compete for the same harmonious purpose, is even rarer still—and here the difficulties

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<sup>18</sup> “Music. Madame Catalani, Madame Ronzi De Begnis, Signior [sic] Ronzi De Begnis, and Mr Kalkbrenner,” *The Phrenological Journal and Miscellany*, 2 (1824–25), article 15, pp. 120–1.

<sup>19</sup> On Fossati and his links between *carbonari* and phrenology, see Renneville, *Le Langage des crânes*, pp. 117–19. It was delivered on August 22, 1834, the anniversary of Gall’s death.

<sup>20</sup> Giovanni Antonio Fossati, “Sur le talent de la musique, discours prononcé dans la séance annuelle de la Société Phrénologique de Paris, par M. le Docteur Fossati, Vice-Président,” *Journal de la Société phrénologique de Paris* (January 1835), 93–109.

increase. This is the reason why there is a greater number of instrumentalists than skilled singers.<sup>21</sup>

Highlighting the necessity of possessing “to the highest degree” the organ of time and what he was later to call the organ of music (the relation between sounds),<sup>22</sup> Fossati insisted on the physiological and muscular characteristics of the singer: “He must have in his muscles the same flexibility, the same agility, the same strength as the players of wind instruments; it is absolutely necessary that the larynx, which is his own particular instrument, be properly organized, and that there is no obstacle to correct pronunciation.”<sup>23</sup> The presence of certain organs favorable to musical talent was presented here as indispensable but not sufficient: more than his predecessors, Fossati insisted on “circumstances,” in other words on the innate physiological

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.: “Maintenant, si nous cherchons à apprécier les qualités nécessaires aux chanteurs, nous trouverons que la réunion dans le même individu d’organes différents, destinés à concourir au même but, est plus rare encore, et ici les difficultés augmentent. Voilà pourquoi il y a un plus grand nombre d’instrumentistes que de chanteurs habiles.”

<sup>22</sup> He judged the organ “relation between sounds” incomplete in his *Manuel pratique de phrénologie* of 1845; see Giovanni Antonio Lorenzo Fossati, *Manuel pratique de phrénologie ou Physiologie du cerveau: d’après les doctrines de Gall, de Spurzheim, de Combe et des autres phrenologists* (Paris: G. Baillière, 1845), p. 468. For Fossati, only the organ of music was indispensable for musical talent: the organ of time was important, but not indispensable, and he provides supporting examples (p. 471) from plainsong and Italian opera recitatives.

<sup>23</sup> Fossati, “Sur le talent de la musique,” 98: “il doit avoir dans ses muscles la même souplesse, la même agilité, la même force que les joueurs d’instruments à vent; il faut, de toute nécessité, que le larynx, qui est son instrument à lui, soit heureusement organisé, et que rien n’apporte obstacle à une bonne prononciation.”

conditions that explained the precocity so visible among musicians. He also emphasized the training and education that might sculpt these faculties:

All the singers whom I have just named [including Catalani, Rubini, Tamburini, Grisi, Nourrit, Damoureau], and others too many to enumerate, combine, along with a cerebral organization for music, the conditions of the chest and the larynx necessary in order to succeed in singing; but still, they would be mere mediocrities if they had not completed regular study under the tutelage of good masters. It is certain that they would not have reached perfection without having practiced well-directed exercises.<sup>24</sup>

Fossati's examples were not taken only from catalogues of operatic celebrities, whose craniological forms anyone could easily "verify" by way of widespread portraits or anecdotes. He also drew on his personal experiences, as he was the official doctor of Paris's Théâtre Italien.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 99: "Tous les chanteurs que nous venons de nommer, et plusieurs autres qu'il serait trop long d'énumérer, joignent à l'organisation cérébrale pour la musique les conditions de poitrine et de larynx nécessaires pour bien réussir dans le chant; mais encore ils ne seraient que des médiocrités s'ils n'avaient pas fait des études régulières sous de bons maîtres. Il est certain qu'ils ne sont arrivés à la perfection qu'à force d'exercices bien dirigés."

<sup>25</sup> Francis Trépardoux, "Vincenzo Bellini, son décès à Paris en 1835, étude biographique et médicale," *Histoire des sciences médicales* XXXVI/3 (2002), 295–316, esp. 298, 313; see also Trépardoux, "Éméline et quinine, une thérapie pour sauver Bellini en 1835," *Revue d'histoire de la pharmacie* 90 (2002), 401–26.

Playing as he did an active part in the life of this opera house, it is hardly surprising that Fossati insisted, more than any of his colleagues, on the “indispensable condition” of the singer “in order to succeed in the theater:”

In the musician who must appear on stage, it is desirable that the organ of mimicry, situated in the superior-anterior part of the head, be well developed, at the same time as those of the feelings that the music seeks to express. . . . The talent for mimicry, combined with other qualities, gives the singer an inexpressible variation; his song acquires an expressiveness, an accent of truth that deeply moves you. The singer, if he is himself inspired by the feelings that the music seeks to express, will take hold of your senses and ravish you to the point of ecstasy.<sup>26</sup>

Fossati was so attached to this quality for a singer that he highlighted it again in his article on “secretiveness” (or imitation) in his *Manuel pratique de phrénologie* (1845). Presenting Mlle Rachel as “the perfect model of the organ of mimicry” (see plate 1),<sup>27</sup> the phrenologist constructed a list, or rather a pantheon, including alongside Garrick, Lekain, Clairon, Fleury, and Talma a number of other operatic celebrities:

“Mesdames Pasta, Malibran, and Grisi, on the stage of the Théâtre Italien, have

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<sup>26</sup> Fossati, “Sur le talent de la musique,” 99–100: “Chez le musicien qui doit paraître sur la scène, il est à désirer que l’organe de la mimique, qui est placé à la partie supérieure-antérieure de la tête, soit bien développé, en même temps que ceux des sentiments que la musique veut exprimer. . . . Le talent mimique, joint aux autres qualités, donne au chanteur un relief inexprimable; son chant acquiert une expression, un accent de vérité qui vous pénètrent. Le chanteur alors, s’il est lui-même inspiré par les sentiments que la musique veut exprimer, s’emparera de vos sens et vous ravira jusqu’à l’extase.”

<sup>27</sup> Fossati, *Manuel pratique de phrénologie ou Physiologie du cerveau*, pp. 394–5.

shown a very rare talent for mimicry as well as an admirable talent for singing. M. Lablache must be placed at the very top.”<sup>28</sup> Later on, Lablache’s portrait illustrates the function of time—though “without counting the strong development of several other faculties, he could also serve as an example of the organs of mimicry and of music” (see plate 2).<sup>29</sup> Secretiveness, although a questionable quality because of its presence among individuals adept at lying and theft, is thus redeemed; it is enlisted in the consecration and legitimization of the singer on the theatrical, and more widely the social, stage.

**[insert near here:**

Plate 1: Mlle Rachel, in Giovanni Antonio Lorenzo Fossati, *Manuel pratique de phrénologie ou Physiologie du cerveau: d’après les doctrines de Gall, de Spurzheim, de Combe et des autres phrenologists* (Paris: G. Baillière, 1845), p. 394.

Plate 2: M. Lablache, in Giovanni Antonio Lorenzo Fossati, *Manuel pratique de phrénologie ou Physiologie du cerveau: d’après les doctrines de Gall, de Spurzheim, de Combe et des autres phrenologists* (Paris: G. Baillière, 1845), p. 464 ]

The fame of the subjects referred to thus becomes an explicit part of the phrenologist’s method. Fossati took his assistants with him as witnesses: “As you can see, I prefer, rather than the exposition of a long series of plaster-cast heads, to cite

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 395: “Mesdames Pasta, Malibran et Grisi, sur la scène du Théâtre-Italien, ont montré un talent mimique très rare conjointement à un admirable talent pour le chant. M. Lablache doit être placé en première ligne.”

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 465: “sans compter le fort développement de plusieurs autres facultés, il pourrait servir aussi pour exemple des organes de la mimique et de la musique.”

for you well-known people whose organization may at any moment be verified.”<sup>30</sup>

Publications of the time abound with prints and with dramatic and biographical anecdotes related to operatic celebrities—more than enough to fuel the phrenologists’ approach and the interest of their readers.

The ways in which the phrenologist made full use of portraits and accompanying anecdotes to support his arguments recalls the late eighteenth-century physiognomical approach towards well-known figures, including musicians, analyzed by Annette Richards in her essay on Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach’s extensive portrait collection.<sup>31</sup> Physiognomy took advantage of a new kind of passion for the music-loving collector: the obsession with amassing not only old books and music manuscripts, but also musical portraits. This pursuit went far beyond merely decorative interest. Responding as it did to the great fascination for the human face and the character the face putatively revealed, the portrait collection, according to Richards, became a vital component of the personal library, demonstrating the owner’s knowledge and expertise.<sup>32</sup> Whereas the physiognomist Johann Kaspar Lavater had often asked famous men and women to send him their portraits for him to analyze, phrenologists could find their illustrative material in the press. Yet, as Richards shows, the role assigned to portraiture in the two fields was similar.<sup>33</sup> What matters seems to have been less the “real” face or head than the portrait, which condensed the “truths” of the character and generated the physiognomical or

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 101: “Comme vous voyez, je préfère, à l’exposition d’une longue série de têtes en plâtre, vous citer des personnes connues et dont l’organisation peut à chaque instant être vérifiée.”

<sup>31</sup> Annette Richards, “Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, Portraits, and the Physiognomy of Music History,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 66/2 (Summer 2013), 337–96.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 351.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 357–8.

phrenological reading, placing the subject into a moral narrative that was already known.

Nevertheless, singers' performances remained useful occasions for the development of phrenological theories and the refinement of categories. Let us leave Paris for a moment and make another detour, this time to another phrenological center, Edinburgh in 1824:

The occurrence of the late Musical Festival afforded to the Phrenologists of this city [Edinburgh] an opportunity of making observations on the development of some of the most distinguished musicians in this or any other country. To us this opportunity was peculiarly interesting, as it afforded, to a certain extent, the means, not only of confirming the observations of Drs Gall and Spurzheim with regard to the situation of the organ of TUNE, but of farther verifying a conjecture which has been lately made with regard to the particular combination of organs necessary for the talent of music, and for the successful practice of that charming art.<sup>34</sup>

After making some generic observations, the journalist offers a case study based on an examination of the skulls of a pair of famous singers: "Signior [sic] and Madame de Begnis." For comparison, the anatomical data was set against an analysis carried out on Madame Catalani, "taken several years ago by an experienced Phrenologist of our city."<sup>35</sup> The author even provided readers with a table summarizing the results

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<sup>34</sup> "Music. Madame Catalani, Madame Ronzi De Begnis, Signior [sic] Ronzi De Begnis, and Mr Kalkbrenner", 120.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 123.

of these analyses (see plate 3)<sup>36</sup> claiming that his readers would readily perceive how the anatomical characteristics mapped onto the individual talents of the three singers.<sup>37</sup> For example, “one particular that cannot pass unnoticed: veneration is only moderate in Catalani, and is large in Madame Ronzi de Begnis”. The latter had performed some sacred music at the festival, and the phrenological analysis helped to reinforce (and was in turn supported by) the wider critical consensus about the two singers:

Not having heard Madame Catalani in sacred music, we can of course institute no comparison between them; but if she is less successful, – and it is generally admitted that she is in some degree less eminent in this high species of music, – we are satisfied it must be owing to her moderate endowment of that faculty.<sup>38</sup>

**[insert near here:** Plate 3: “Music. Madame Catalani, Madame Ronzi De Begnis, Signior [sic.] Ronzi De Begnis, and Mr Kalkbrenner,” *The Phrenological Journal and Miscellany*, 2 (1824–25), article 15, p. 124 ]

Giuseppina Rozni de Begnis’s husband, the *buffo comico* Giuseppe de Begnis, presented a propensity for imitation, just as Lablache had done for Fossati; this was seen as not only exemplary, but unique:

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 125–6.

His IMITATION is the largest we have ever seen. . . . With such an endowment of IMITATION, and with large LANGUAGE, SECRETIVENESS, and WIT, it is not wonderful that he equals or excels our best comedians in broad and even farcial humour, and in the volubility and distinctness of his verbal articulation in the most rapid passages. When, in addition to this, we observe that his CONCENTRATIVENESS, SELF-ESTEEM, and FIRMNESS, are all either large or very large, we have an explanation of that power of exerting so many faculties in intense activity, which he exhibits in some of his comic songs and duets, and the ease and spirit with which he dashes them off, giving us all the humour, volubility, and mimickry of Mathews, in combination with correct music.<sup>39</sup>

It is thus no longer a question of establishing catalogues of operatic celebrities united in the same pantheon because of the shared presence of organs indispensable for their talent. It is rather a question of characterizing each personality as a unique combination of certain faculties, each of a certain degree. Fossati explained that “the talent for music, helped or supported by various faculties, manifests itself in different ways because of the differences of these selfsame faculties, and this explains for us the difference of genres.”<sup>40</sup> Fossati drew primarily on composers. He attributed to Alexandre Etienne Choron a propensity for church music because of the presence, “alongside a mediocre organ of music,” of “the organ of religious feeling;” he explained Michele Carafa’s “affectionate music” by the “strong organization of the

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>40</sup> Fossati, “Sur le talent de la musique,” 101: “le talent de la musique, soutenu ou aidé par des facultés diverses, se manifeste différemment en raison de la différence de ces mêmes facultés, et cela nous explique la différence des genres.”

affective faculties;” the “pathetic” music of Vincenzo Bellini arose from an “excessively developed organ for kindness;” the “dramatic” music of Ferdinando Paër from a “strong development of the organ of mimicry.” Genius stood as a separate category that included all prior categories: “I will say only one word of M. Rossini: his enormous head shows that he unites within him all the organs, all the qualities, making of him an extraordinary genius.”<sup>41</sup>

These categories recurred elsewhere. They offer a sort of cartography, associating types of singers with types of song. Alfred Ellis, principal of the British Institute of Mental Science, picked up on this procedure at the end of the century when he associated specific combinations of faculties with “tendencies to a type of music.” For instance, “Amativeness gives the musician a preference for love songs;” “Combativeness gives a preference for musical productions of a martial and war-like character.”<sup>42</sup> Moreover, he asserted:

Phrenology teaches us that just as the seven notes in music produce by combination innumerable tunes, so the . . . phrenological organs . . . by combination reveal to us the cause of the endless variety of vocalists and instrumentalists in existence, for no two musicians are exactly alike, the kind of music rendered depending on the phrenological developments of each individual. For instance, take the vocalist. If tune and mirthfulness are

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.: “Je ne dirai qu’un mot de M. Rossini: son énorme tête vous montrera qu’il réunit en lui tous les organes, toutes les qualités, pour faire un génie extraordinaire.”

<sup>42</sup> Ellis, *Phrenology and Musical Talent*, p. 10.

predominant organs, he prefers comic singing; if tune and veneration are large, sacred singing.<sup>43</sup>

In *Music and Phrenology. A Treatise on Vocalists*, G. H. J. Dutton, “Certified Member of the British Phrenological Association” and author of the self-help book “How to Improve the Memory,” insisted on the same point:

The kind of music we get will depend on the constitution of the singer. Those with large Ideality and Sublimity will sing with taste; if Combativeness and Destructiveness are large, they will sing passionately; if the Social feelings are predominant, you may expect much pathos; if Mirthfulness is large, they will prefer the comic; if Veneration and Spirituality, sacred hymns and songs.<sup>44</sup>

Fossati goes further in his discourse “On the Talent of Music,” which concludes with the utopian and selective dream of a rationalization of talents:

in the conservatoriums and in the music schools, we should first admit only those who are organized for this art, and then that we should classify each student according to his special organization, in order to instruct and train him in the genre that would be appropriate to his own organization. By this method,

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<sup>43</sup> Ellis, *Phrenology and Musical Talent*, p. 14.

<sup>44</sup> George Henry J. Dutton, *Music and Phrenology. A Treatise on Vocalists, Instrumentalists, and Composers, with their Phrenological and Physiological Qualifications* [1890] 2nd edn (Nottingham: Shumach, Hyson Green, [1892]), p. 4.

it is probable that we would have more skilled and more numerous instrumentalists, singers, and composers.<sup>45</sup>

If the phrenologist presents education as crucial, indispensable for cultivating musical talent or even genius, the singer (and the human species in general) is only perfectable within the limits set by his “organization”. ~~his notion of the perfectibility of the singer (and the human species in general) is restricted by.~~ The singer not gifted with the indispensable organs of his or her art is simply an imposter whom society must seek out and expose as soon as possible, by way of its institutions. The social role of the phrenologist thus consists in determining “hierarchies of human types whose differing degrees and kinds of vital force prepared them for distinct roles in society.”<sup>46</sup>

Laurent Baridon and Martial Guéron have identified this posture of demystification more generally among “characteriologists” who believed in the submission of each individual to the dictates of biology. The challenge for the physiognomist is to uncover the social codes and rituals that fabricate “false” signs

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<sup>45</sup> Fossati, “Sur le talent de la musique,” 102: “je conclus: Que dans les conservatoires et dans les écoles de musique, on devrait d’abord n’admettre que ceux qui sont organisés pour cet art, et qu’ensuite on devrait classer chaque élève, d’après son organisation spéciale, pour l’instruire et l’exercer dans le genre qui serait approprié à son organisation. Par cette méthode, il est probable que nous aurions des instrumentistes, des chanteurs et des compositeurs plus habiles et plus nombreux.”

<sup>46</sup> Elizabeth A. Williams, *The Physical and the Moral. Anthropology, Physiology, and Philosophical Medicine in France, 1750–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), see especially “The Doctrine of Human Types,” pp. 94–105, here p. 95.

through conventions.<sup>47</sup> For Fossati it was the ability of the phrenologist to see through such false signs that marked his superiority to those in other, related disciplines:

[Phrenology] differs from physiognomy or pathognomy, in that both these limit themselves to revealing the expression of faculties in a state of activity, that is the expression of human passions and affections that we may, by habit and use, counterfeit and simulate, as actors do; while cranioscopy allows us to know the power of the innate dispositions of an individual, his aptitude for the different instinctive faculties of our species, as well as the scope of his intelligence. If one can fake on one's face anger or joy, benevolence or love, one can never impose a head-shape different from that which one has.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Baridon and Guéron, *Corps et arts. Physiologies et physiologies dans les arts visuels*, p. 9: "les caractérologues qui fondent leur savoir sur l'observation attentive du corps [et] témoignent de leur conviction d'une soumission de chaque individu au biologique, soumission qui entraîne que notre destin ainsi que notre appartenance à telle ou telle catégorie morale sont inscrits dans notre chair. Ainsi, il s'agit invariablement, pour le physiognomoniste, de sonder l'autre, de faire tomber son masque, de déjouer les codes et les rituels sociaux qui fabriquent de 'faux' signes à travers des attitudes de pure convention."

<sup>48</sup> Fossati, *Manuel pratique de phrénologie ou Physiologie du cerveau*, p. 176: "[La phrénologie] diffère de la physiognomonie ou de la pathognomonie, en ce que celles-ci se bornent à vous dévoiler l'expression des facultés en état d'activité, c'est-à-dire l'expression des passions et des affections humaines, que l'on peut, par l'habitude et l'exercice, contrefaire et simuler, comme font les acteurs; tandis que la crânioscopie nous fait connaître la puissance des dispositions innées d'un individu, son aptitude pour les différentes facultés instinctives de notre espèce, ainsi que la portée de son intelligence. Que si l'on peut affecter sur sa figure la colère ou la joie, la bienveillance ou l'amour, l'on ne pourra jamais vous en imposer par une forme de tête différente de celle que l'on a."

This fundamental distinction between phrenology and physiognomy, here illustrated by the figure of the actor, is reinforced by a difference in approach evident in a text inspired by the physiognomy of Lavater. Among the various descriptions inspired by Lavater's essays is Dr Luigi Morando de' Rizzoni's fictitious dialogue, *La Pasta nell'Otello*.<sup>49</sup> It contains an intradiegetic prop—a numbered portrait inspired by physiognomy, clarified by a long commentary used by one character, Ernesto—to demonstrate that Giuditta Pasta is the most gifted actress of her day (see plate 4). Ernesto associates the ancient theory of the humors with contemporary research on the nervous system and the spiritualist physiognomy of Lavater to demonstrate that Pasta's talent does not derive from a beautiful repertoire of poses and movements imitating the exterior signs of passion, but rather from the expressivity and internal sensibility readable on the features of her face.

[insert near here: Plate 4: Giuditta Pasta, in Luigi Morando de Rizzoni, *La Pasta nell'Otello* (Verona: Crescentini, 1830) ]

Ernesto, however, does not seek to explain Pasta's musical genius. He is interested in muscles as well as bones—thus distancing himself from the phrenologists concerned only with the latter; but he also, like Lavater, replaces the Enlightenment assumption of universality with a belief in individuality. Each being is unique and has a form of its own, a “particular character;” there is no spirit without

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<sup>49</sup> Luigi Morando de Rizzoni, *La Pasta nell'Otello* (Verona: Crescentini, 1830). On this topic, see also my *Chanteurs en scène. L'œil du spectateur au Théâtre-Italien (1815–1848)* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2014), pp. 41–51.

incarnation, no exterior without interior. Ernesto's anthropological vision thus clearly distinguishes itself from the materialistic versions of physiognomy that circulated throughout the 1830s.<sup>50</sup>

What Ernesto calls the "musical organ" in the dialogue is not mechanical or anatomical. It is a nerve that, like a muscle, grows through exercises, and depends on "an internal physical structure." Moreover, it is defined (with no further details given) as an instrument in the service of the mind, a gift of nature that must be refined, but which belongs neither to the vices nor to the virtues of the soul, nor even to musical genius. Ernesto concludes his presentation with a formula steeped heavily in spiritualism: "The essence and the seat of human inclinations escapes, and will always escape, human research." Science can only describe isolated phenomena; it is unable to explain their causes, arising from a general, cosmic order, at whose center sits man: "in man, everything fits, and everything is connected."<sup>51</sup> Man, body and soul, form a site of nervous conjunctions, a union of sentiment and action. The role of the scientist is thus limited to observation of the visible signs of the manifestation of the soul. The eye attentive to revelatory detail here allows one to get close to the mystery of a singer's talent, but cannot explain it.

Phrenology, in this understanding of science, is a totalizing, omniscient explanation, based on affirmation and exemplification. It proceeds through a series of

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<sup>50</sup> Indeed, we owe one of the most widespread translations of Lavater's essays in the nineteenth century to Dr. Moreau de la Sarthe; a thoroughly revised and corrected version removed the spiritualist bent by focusing on the influence of its milieu.

<sup>51</sup> Rizzoni, *La Pasta nell'Otello*, pp. 30–1.

answers rather than questions, and thus excludes all possibility of contradiction.<sup>52</sup>

The characteristics of the demonstrative phrenological method come together persuasively in the musical subject: the notorious precocity of musicians reveals their innate faculties and encourages abundant anecdotes. As physical organization in the musician is strongly associated with circumstances and with the rigor and the discipline of education, the risk of error for the phrenologist is minimal. The figure of the opera singer gave rise to categorizations refined by types (of singer, of music, of expression, etc.), which in turn responded to new approaches to classifying singers and the voice. As James Q. Davies has observed, the mechanism of the voice was coming to be understood in terms of invisible processes of the body: “‘Voice’ no longer referred to the myriad sounds available to a well-cultivated organ, but rather ... ‘the voice’—this enigmatic signature— had somatic subsections and acoustic regions, a whole geography of parts.”<sup>53</sup> What really matters here is this “enigmatic signature.” If, as Davies notes and the phrenological method suggested, changes in listening practices had more to do with looking than with listening, what did audiences hear and see in singers when attending an opera? Most likely they perceived a physiological presence rather than vocal types or categories. For Davies, “Audiences increasingly read sounds as traces of something else, as symptoms of an a priori nature, expressions of a truth that has come before”<sup>54</sup>—a truth that the phrenologists claimed to explain.

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<sup>52</sup> D.A. Hinton has claimed that science at this time was understood as a body of indisputable facts, rather than as speculative data, and phrenology fits this picture, see Hinton, “Popular Science in England,” pp. 390–1.

<sup>53</sup> James Q. Davies, *Romantic Anatomies of Performance* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2014), pp. 89–90.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

## **Phrenology and celebrity: Scientific categories as instruments of exceptionalization and normalization**

Aside from the pantheons of remarkable singers that the phrenologists invoked in their general works, certain personalities became the objects of individual phrenological studies. Charles Place, General Secretary of the Société phrénologique and editor of the journal *La Phrénologie*, wrote *Essai sur la composition musicale: Biographie et analyse phrénologique de Cherubini, avec notes et plan cranioscopique*; the Fourierist Michel-Arthur Castle wrote *Étude phrénologique sur le caractère original et actuel de Mr. François Liszt*.<sup>55</sup> These two studies contributed to an institutional star system. Place gave himself the task of “escaping the influences of a great reputation recognized by a majority of contemporaries, of forgetting the common consent to engage in minute analysis of the right to immortality.” Phrenology aspired here to that “High Court we call posterity.”<sup>56</sup> Understanding very clearly what was to be gained—whatever the end results might be—Liszt threw himself into the process with gusto: “Even were you to discover in me a propensity for theft or murder, I would be no less satisfied. Thus you

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<sup>55</sup> Charles Place, *Essai sur la composition musicale: biographie et analyse phrénologique de Cherubini, avec notes et plan cranioscopique*. Lu à la Société Phrénologique de Paris, dans sa séance du 27 mai 1842 (Paris: Bénard, 1842); Michel-Arthur Castle, *Étude phrénologique sur le caractère original et actuel de Mr. François Liszt, suivie d'une appendice de notes contenant des observations analytiques sur divers sujets de philosophie et particulièrement sur l'art et le talent musical* (Milan: Redaelli, 1847).

<sup>56</sup> Place, *Essai sur la composition musicale*, p. 7.

have full and complete freedom, as is appropriate among reasonable and well-behaved people.”<sup>57</sup>

Place’s study of the singer Adelaide Kemble similarly reflected and fed the media *doxa*, but it was also part of a more ambitious validation of the singing profession and—less explicitly—of phrenology. Its demonstration aimed at consecrating and establishing the moral worth of the singer-actor rather than re-evaluating her talents.<sup>58</sup> The study formed part of a speech in 1842, a time when phrenology was experiencing a notable decline in fortune. This helps to explain why a third of the text is devoted to reminding the audience of the importance of the discipline. More strikingly, however, Place inscribes the profession of the actor in a mythology dating back to antiquity, to a time when “faithful, passionate performers, ... [communicated] the enthusiasm and the sacred fire of the crowd ... who applauded the great words of Sophocles, and who had already turned away from the bloody battles of the arena.”<sup>59</sup> Recalling the civilizing mission of the theater is a way of legitimizing the profession—and the effort to do so underpins the entire text. To that end, Place makes use of three members of the same family, the Kembles, “wherein we find united intelligence, beautiful character and a good reputation, and who by their talents, as in their virtues, during a career that in the past has been

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<sup>57</sup> Castle, *Étude phrénologique sur le caractère original et actuel de Mr. François Liszt*, p. 1: “dussiez- Vous même me découvrir des propensions au vol et à l’assassinat, je n’en serais pas moins très satisfait. Ainsi donc liberté pleine et entière, comme il convient entre gens raisonnables et bien élevés.”

<sup>58</sup> Place, *De l’art dramatique au point de vue de la phrénologie*.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3: “des interprètes fidèles, passionnés, [communiquaient] l’enthousiasme et le feu sacré à cette foule ... qui battait des mains aux grandes paroles de Sophocle, et négligeait déjà les sanglantes lutttes de l’arène.”

characterized by the most vile prejudice, were deserving of the approbation of the most important and honorable houses of England.”<sup>60</sup> Adelaide Kemble figures alongside her father Charles and her sister Fanny primarily as an actress rather than a singer.

Concentrating on the modern actor, Place begins by identifying sensibility as the main instrument of the trade. “Is it not a marvelous gift,” he exclaims, “this power given to man of being able to transmit . . . the thought that stirs his brain, and to excite among those around him the enthusiasm that animates him or the tenderness that he feels!”<sup>61</sup> Following in the footsteps of his colleagues,<sup>62</sup> Place sees imitation “at the first rung” of the “faculties that can determine the vocation of the actor.”<sup>63</sup> But imitation is certainly not understood here as an exterior reproduction of the symptoms of the passions. A decade after the posthumous publication of Diderot’s *Paradoxe sur le comédien*, Place affirms that the actor must interiorize and feel the passions to be transmitted:

The actor, whatever may be said of him elsewhere, in order to be great and sublime must momentarily possess the emotions that he seeks to depict;

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 13: “où se trouvent unis, intelligence, beau caractère et bonne réputation, et qui par ses talents, comme par ses vertus, dans une carrière autrefois vouée aux plus infâmes préjugés, a pu mériter les suffrages des plus considérables et des plus honorables maisons de l’Angleterre.”

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 3: “N’est-ce pas un merveilleux don que cette puissance offerte à l’homme de pouvoir transmettre . . . la pensée qui agite son cerveau, et d’exciter chez ceux qui l’entourent l’enthousiasme qui l’anime ou la tendresse qu’il ressent”.

<sup>62</sup> However, Place relativized the “secretiveness” highlighted by Macnish, *Introduction à l’étude de la phrénologie*, p. 49, or by Fossati, *Manuel pratique de phrenology*, pp. 287–8—most likely because this faculty for dissimulation and feigning carried too many negative moral connotations.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 4: “au premier rang ‘des’ facultés qui peuvent déterminer la vocation de l’acteur.”

without them he is cold, he speaks falsely . . . nothing will replace the instantaneousness of the emotions that speech and thought give rise to.<sup>64</sup>

To support his argument, Place cites the cases of Talma, Lekain, and Malibran: a recurrent technique among the phrenologists. In contrast to Fossati or Macnish, Place relies on three busts created by “the precise and skilful chisel of our sculptor M. Dantan.”<sup>65</sup> Not only was Jean-Pierre Dantan a member of the Société phrénologique, but he also knew the theatrical *milieu* and its stars, of whom he created many commissioned portraits.<sup>66</sup> Place thus gives an account, in an article for *La Phrénologie* in 1837, of his visit to the Musée Dantan. The artists “have rendered such services to science,” he writes, “that science keeps a close eye on their revelations: did they not discover, before the philosophers, that the wisdom of a God resides in his vast forehead?... Search then within the artist, for his thought is as fertile as his heart is ardent.”<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 7: “L’acteur, quoi qu’on en ait dit ailleurs, pour être grand et sublime doit momentanément posséder les émotions qu’il veut peindre; sans elles il est froid, il dit faux. . . . rien ne remplacera l’instantanéité des émotions que le débit et la pensée font naître.”

<sup>65</sup> Place, *De l’art dramatique au point de vue de la phrénologie*, p. 9: “dus au ciseau exact et habile de notre sculpteur M. Dantan jeune”.

<sup>66</sup> Laurent Baridon, “Jean-Pierre Dantan, le caricaturiste de la statuomanie”, *Ridiculosa* 13 (2006), 127–43: moreover, in 1834, the masked ball of the Opéra staged a quadrille in which the dancers wore caricature masks made by Dantan after the faces of Rossini, Lablache, Rubini, Carle and Horace Vernet, Cicéri, Vestris, and Paganini.

<sup>67</sup> Charles Place, “Dantan Jeune,” *La Phrénologie*, 18 (30 September 1837), p. 2, col. 2., quoted by Laurent Baridon, “Du portrait comme une science: phrénologie et arts visuels en France au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle,” in C. Bouton, V. Laurand, and L. Raïd, eds., *La physiognomonie: problèmes philosophiques d’une pseudo-science* (Paris: Kimé, 2005), pp. 143–70, online:

This is precisely what Place proposed to do in his text, though the busts give rise to considerations of a biographical rather than truly craniological nature. After discussing the “national type” that seems to appear in the facial traits of Charles Kemble as Dantan sculpted him, Place picks up on remarks similar to those that proliferated in the late 1820s, when the Théâtre-Anglais company, including Kemble, came to Paris to perform Shakespeare in English. Place refers to the “organization, full of energy and sensibility” that makes Kemble “the most powerful interpreter of the masculine, vigorous poetry that Shakespeare created,” his “passionate acting” and more generally “the new expression” of the English actors, their “diction, less correct and studied than ours, but perhaps more communicative,” that “contributed greatly to the literary and artistic revolution from which we are just now emerging.”<sup>68</sup>

Adelaide Kemble occupies the heart of Place’s argument. This singer—of whom Dantan also made a statue—becomes the object of Place’s unequivocal praise:

Miss Adélaïde Kemble is a singer of great renown; her voice, which is comparable to that of the famous Pasta, is a very pronounced soprano, and allows her to take on all the great roles in the operatic repertoire; but what makes her the more admirable still to the finest connoisseurs is her talent for

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[http://hal.inria.fr/docs/00/46/88/99/PDF/La\\_phrenologie\\_et\\_les\\_arts\\_visuels.pdf](http://hal.inria.fr/docs/00/46/88/99/PDF/La_phrenologie_et_les_arts_visuels.pdf) [accessed 19 May 2014]: “ont rendu tant de services à la science qu’elle surveille leurs révélations: n’ont-ils pas trouvé avant les philosophes que la sagesse d’un Dieu résidait dans un vaste front?... Cherchez donc chez l’artiste, car sa pensée est féconde comme son cœur est ardent.”

<sup>68</sup> Place, *De l’art dramatique au point de vue de la phrénologie*, p. 9: “n’ont pas peu contribué à cette révolution littéraire et artistique dont nous sortons à peine.”

expression, which she possesses to the highest degree, and which makes of her a complete actress, the perfect mixture of our Rachel and of Mme Grisi.<sup>69</sup>

Compared to Pasta, Rachel, and Grisi, Kemble thus seems to derive her talent from a unique synthesis of their qualities. The process of celebration and of celebrity derives simultaneously from imitation and from going *beyond* imitation, or rather, from the combination of the traits of the imitated artists—at once encompassing (Kemble is up to the task of *all* the great roles in the repertoire) and unique. Place thus carries out an operation of exceptionalization. What is most interesting is that he begins by discussing musical and theatrical matters before moving on to a physical description that concentrates on Kemble's "average height, but . . . elegant stature" and on her hair of a "brown tone," which is the sign of a "vigorous temperament." He deems her physiognomy "ordinary," but one that nonetheless "renders most striking the anguished emotions that are there depicted, such as the pride she expresses when the passions of the poet take on, in her accents, a new power."

Place carries out no truly phrenological analysis of the bust, contenting himself instead with highlighting "in this mask the suffering of a noble pride repressed in the finale of the first act of *Norma*, when she learns of Pollione's dishonor and treason," and praising Dantan, who was able to make of this head "a perfect type of greatness and beauty." The phrenologist does not back away from idealization, particularly when it allows him to legitimize Kemble as both actress and woman: "The

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 11: "Miss Adélaïde Kemble est une cantatrice en grande renommée; sa voix, qui se rapproche de la célèbre Pasta, est un soprano très prononcé, et lui permet d'aborder tous les rôles du grand répertoire lyrique; mais ce qui la rend encore plus admirable aux grands connaisseurs, c'est le talent d'expression, qu'elle possède au plus haut point, et qui en fait une actrice achevée, mélange parfait de notre Rachel et de Mme Grisi."

benevolence visible at the top of the forehead . . . has added to her character the Christian charity that she puts into practice each day, and the tenderness of heart that has made her the idol of those close to her, and brought such joy to her husband.”<sup>70</sup> The singer thus becomes a normalized bourgeois model.

After this brief analysis of Kemble, focused on her aptness of judgment, observation, and wisdom—which are also moral qualities—Place concludes by focusing on his more general aim: to establish the legitimacy of a “career that in the past was characterized by the most vile prejudice.” Summarizing “the faculties that are essential to the actor,” Place deems most important those that are traditionally the object of the phrenologists, to which he adds “the ensemble of the *intellectual faculties* and the *feelings*” together with “warm and lively blood, and an exquisite sensibility.”<sup>71</sup> Denouncing the “anathema” that had hung over the figure of the actor until recently, and recalling the respect actors enjoyed in ancient Greece, Place triumphantly proclaims:

Dramatic art has once more assumed its rightful place; all roads are open to it; glory, fortune, and public esteem are once again within its reach. Actors too may now cultivate the virtues that bring honor to society: they work and study, and they receive sincere and deserved applause, the only applause that an

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 12: “La bienveillance qui se remarque au sommet du front . . . a ajouté à son caractère cette charité de l’âme chrétienne qu’elle met en pratique chaque jour, et cette tendresse de cœur qui en fait l’idole de ceux qui l’approchent, et le bonheur de son époux.”

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 13–14: “un sang vif et chaud, et une sensibilité exquise.”

honest man seeks, like the expression of that great voice of the people, which has been called the voice of God!<sup>72</sup>

These ways of comprehending operatic artists, so exposed above the footlights of the theatrical stage of the early nineteenth century, punctuate the tradition of an upheaval which, for Michel Foucault, dates back to at least the second half of the eighteenth century, and which is accompanied by the birth of modern medicine. For Descartes, Malebranche, and Le Brun, seeing meant perceiving—understanding by observing surfaces of visibility; on such surfaces one traced universally acceptable categories, not individual truths. The relationship of the visible to the invisible changes from then on. Medical professionals seek to perceive, *en profondeur*, that which is hidden beneath the visible. In the field of knowledge, truth is established by progressing from the known to the unknown, from the visible to the invisible, from exteriority to interiority.<sup>73</sup>

The phrenologist, however, applied a very particular method to his subjects, one that can be related to what Carlo Ginzburg has identified as an “evidential paradigm” focused on “trivial details” rather than on “the most conspicuous

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 15–16: “L’art dramatique a repris son rang; toutes les routes lui sont ouvertes; la gloire, la fortune, l’estime publique, sont devenues son partage. A ceux qui le cultivent les vertus qui font l’honneur des sociétés; à eux le travail et l’étude, et pour eux aussi des applaudissements sincères et mérités, les seuls que l’honnête homme ambitionne, comme l’expression de cette grande voix du peuple, qu’on a dite la voix de Dieu!”

<sup>73</sup> Michel Foucault, *Naissance de la Clinique* (Paris: PUF, 1963), pp. IX–X.

characteristics . . . that are the easiest to imitate.”<sup>74</sup> Focusing on the usually unconsidered details of cranial conformity—in which he reads the morals truths of singers, their instinctive and intellectual faculties—the phrenologist discerns not only a dominant disposition but also combinations that, within a catalogue of types united around a quality, determine sub-types that are themselves divided into further subtypes. The “phrenologized” singer—to use an expression found in Thomas Wade’s 1830 farce *The Phrenologists*<sup>75</sup>—is fully integrated within a system and a category (musicians), which is itself divided into sub-categories (here, of performing artists), before being further divided into further distinctions (opera, concert, or church singer; singer of comedy or tragedy, of expression, of imitation; etc.). In many cases these categorizations aimed to show in what way a specific singer subsumed and transcended the categories—manifesting the distinct sign of genius.

Seldom based on the direct observation of singers’ skulls, and even less on vocal or stage technique, the phrenologists’ approach to these particular subjects—by way of biographical and anecdotal evidence, portraits, busts, and prints—allowed them to further refine their categorizations. The three different traces analyzed by Ginzburg—“symptoms (in the case of Freud), clues (in the case of Sherlock Holmes), pictorial marks (in the case of Morelli)”—converge in the phrenological method: “In each case, infinitesimal traces permit the comprehension of a deeper, otherwise unattainable reality.”<sup>76</sup> The phrenologists thus used their discipline less to engage in

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<sup>74</sup> Carlo Ginzburg, “Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm,” in *Clues, Myth, and the Historical Method*, trans. John and Ann C. Tedeschi (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1986), pp. 96–125, here pp. 96–7.

<sup>75</sup> Thomas Wade, *The Phrenologists: A Farce in Two Acts . . . First performed at the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden. On Tuesday, January 12<sup>th</sup>, 1830* (London: Rogerson, 1830).

<sup>76</sup> Ginzburg, “Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm,” p. 101.

craniological analysis than to devote themselves to what contemporaries knew well, and what historians of music have learned from numerous other sources: Adelaide Kemble, Giuditta Pasta, and Maria Malibran were excellent singer-actresses, the last of them excelling particularly in the art of improvisation;<sup>77</sup> Lablache and De Begnis, in the genre of the *buffo cantante*, were masters in the art of the comic actor; etc. What, then, do the phrenologists teach us that we did not already know? What should we retain from this survey of texts relating to a scientific theory that has long been invalidated, and that would very soon be pushed offstage, to be consulted only as the anecdotal object in a cabinet of historical curiosities?

By affirming that singers did not derive their talent so much from a vocal and gestural repertoire (which imitates the exterior signs of passions), as from an internal organization that might be read on their bodies, the phrenologists accomplished a dual task. They derived from these artists the biographical, anecdotal, and iconographical elements that they used as material proofs—proofs both of musical genius and of their own scientific method. They thus fueled the singers' reputations by associating this "phrenologizing" operation of consecration with a project of legitimization, founded on the moral virtue of the artist. At the same time as their exceptionality was affirmed, singers saw their artistic, social, and moral roles reaffirmed<sup>78</sup>. Phrenologized, the musical genius of the singer was at once exceptionalized and moralized.

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<sup>77</sup> Castle, *Étude phrénologique sur le caractère original et actuel de Mr. François Liszt*, p. 69.

<sup>78</sup> The conception of the roles singers played went in this direction: phrenology could apply its categories, inserting into its catalogue of types the image of Don Juan in order to illustrate *Amativeness* or that of Basile or Bartolo in order to illustrate *secrevity*; see Hippolyte Bruyères, *La Phrénologie, le geste et la physionomie mis en scène et expliqués par 120 sujets, compositions et portraits, gravés sur acier. Dispositions innées. Etudes sur le langage naturel ou l'expression*.

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*Application du système phrénologique à l'observation des caractères, aux relations sociales, à la législation et à l'éducation. Texte et dessins par Hippolyte Bruyères, peintre, beau-fils du docteur Spurzheim. Gravures par les artistes les plus distingués (Paris: Aubert, 1847), particularly Figs. 34 and 43, pp. 317–18 and 325–6.*