

# **POP STAR TO OPERA STAR: LABOUR, SKILL AND VALUE IN MUSICAL PERFORMANCE**

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## **Author Biography**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The British TV show *Pop Star to Opera Star* (2011) was a contribution to a well-worn reality TV genre in which people are challenged to undertake a professional activity in which they have no prior experience. In this article I examine the way in which popular challenge programmes such as *Pop Star to Opera Star*, which suggest that highly skilled activities can be ‘faked’ with no more than a few days training, stage what art theorist John Roberts describes as ‘the generalised deskilling of labour under capitalism’. And I argue that in particular, the historical transvaluation of musical performance skills throughout the capitalist era exposes the contradictions that are inherent in both social and cultural constructions of the value of labour under capitalism.

**Keywords**

Musical skill; virtuosity; labour theory of value; mechanization; post-fordism;  
affective labour.

## ***POP STAR TO OPERA STAR: LABOUR, SKILL AND VALUE IN MUSICAL PERFORMANCE***

### **I**

The British TV show *Pop Star to Opera Star*, which completed its second series on ITV in 2011, was a contribution to a now well-worn reality TV genre in which people are challenged to undertake a professional activity in which they have no prior experience - such as equestrian show jumping, ballroom dancing or orchestral conducting. Previous examples have included programmes with the self-explanatory titles *In at the Deep End* and *Faking It*. The programmes vary to the extent that the participants are sometimes TV presenters, sometimes 'ordinary' people and sometimes 'celebrities' (as in the case of *Pop Star to Opera Star*), but the programmes are usually aspirational to the extent that the activity being undertaken is assumed to require a high degree of skill, and often to carry economic or social cachet.

In this article I want to examine the way in which popular challenge programmes such as *Pop Star to Opera Star*, which suggest that highly skilled activities can be 'faked' with no more than a few days training, stage what art theorist John Roberts describes as 'the generalised deskilling of labour under capitalism'. (Roberts 2007: 81) And I will argue that such programmes thereby also uphold a dominant ideological mantra of neoliberalism that since wealth in advanced economies is no longer dependent upon mass manual labour, class distinctions based upon modes and relations of production have been abolished as well. In a programme like *Pop Star to*

*Opera Star* distinctions between high and popular culture are also, as a result, apparently dissolved in both form (the programme itself, which popularises a ‘high’ art form), and content (the narrative in which popular music performers appear to be able to attain within a few weeks skills for which high art performers have to labour for years). Taking the presentation of musical performance skills in a programme like *Pop Star to Opera Star* as being indicative of broader valuations of labour and skill today, I will track historically how cultural representations of musical skill have reflected changing societal valuations of labour and skill throughout the capitalist era.

## II

The success of popular challenge programmes in achieving their ideological purpose may be measured by the response to *Pop Star to Opera Star* from the guardians of class-based cultural distinction (Bourdieu 1984), prompting some predictable squeals of outrage from the defenders of opera as high art. In advance of the first series the opera critic of the right-wing *Daily Telegraph* newspaper, Rupert Christiansen, previewed the programme in an article entitled ‘TV won’t make any pig’s ear the next Domingo’, explaining that ‘Pop performers like Kym Marsh, Darius Campbell and Alex James will be trained and “mentored” to sing opera arias, *without, I trust, the benefit of microphones.*’ (Christiansen 2010a. My italics). I will return to that last admonition, since it is a crucial component of the conservative valuation of musical skill. Writing again after actually watching an episode of *Pop Star*, Christiansen headed his article ‘Popstar to Operastar [sic] makes me sick’, and dismissed the programme as ‘sheer dumbed-down tripe.’ (Christiansen 2010b).

Christiansen has been inveighing against the popularisation of opera for many years. In a review of a 2002 Wembley Stadium concert by popera star Russell Watson, he complained about Watson's use of a microphone, and asserted that 'what must be firmly objected to is the way that the word "opera" is dragged into the equation.' (Christiansen 2002). His objection is clearly based on the desire to preserve the distinction between popular culture and opera as 'high' art. But, in fact, it was only in the later nineteenth century that opera assumed the mantle of high art, (Levine 1998), a number of cultural theorists noting the tendency for art forms like opera to be 'sacralized' during this period as a response to the growth of commercial popular culture (Locke 1993). Thus, in the first decade of the twentieth century it was determined that the Metropolitan Opera in New York would be run as an 'artistic' rather than 'commercial' institution, in response to a rival operatic venture by the impresario Oscar Hammerstein, who believed that opera was 'the most elevating influence upon modern society after religion'. (Di Maggio, 1992: 34-35).

The conservative hysteria about 'dumbing down' (see Mosley 2000) has clearly been whipped up by the cultural elite in panicked response to the manifest evidence that what passes for high art can so easily be commercialised. Christiansen's fetishisation of the unamplified voice as a marker of authenticity in opera is crucial here, since it is clearly part of a broader conservative reaction against the widespread dissemination of art through technologies of mass reproduction (Gans 1974). Within a mechanically reproducible culture, cultural distinction is maintained by the distinction between original and copy; as Walter Benjamin put it, 'the presence of the original is the prerequisite of the concept of authenticity.' (Benjamin 1973: 222). For Christiansen, singing without microphone clearly signifies 'original', offering the promise of auratic exclusivity based on authentic skill rather than

electronically enhanced fakery. But as cultural theorist John Frow has written about the widespread commodification of high art today, which he labels ‘High Pop’, ‘High Art’ has become entirely a component of large-scale industrial production; no longer a craft, it finds its place as a niche market amongst others in the world of mass production. It is no longer possible in good faith to oppose an “authentic” aesthetics of the signature to a “commercialized” aesthetics of the brand.’ (Frow 2002: 71).

I don’t intend to rehearse the ‘liveness’ and authenticity debate again here (see Auslander 1999). Suffice to say that it is a crucial, but on many counts vulnerable, aspect of high art distinction. Instead I want to look at the way in which Christiansen’s obsession with the unamplified operatic voice, and the authentic musical skill that it supposedly guarantees, should be understood in relation to changing valuations of labour and skill under pre-industrial, industrial and post-industrial capitalism. And I want to suggest that, in particular, the changing status of musical performance skills during these eras exposes the contradictions that are inherent in both social and cultural constructions of the value of labour under capitalism.

### **III**

In a society in which the majority of people are subject to Roberts’s ‘generalised deskilling of labour’, and in which in many fields of cultural production craft skills have been replaced by technological means of production, acoustic musical performance remains one of the few apparently un-cheatable artistic skills. To gain such skill, musicians train painstakingly to perfect a technique that must then be presented as effortless. In this respect musical performance clearly exemplifies the

two faces of value in a capitalist economy. On the one hand, according to the labour theory of value of classical economics, value is attached to a commodity according to the amount of labour that has gone into producing it. Hence the value attached to handcrafted products over those that have been mass produced. But the other side of the equation is, as Marx made clear, that the labour that went into the production of the commodity must be concealed: the commodity must present itself as pristine - unbesmirched by social relations. (Marx 1976: Vol. 1, 125-177). High status art forms such as opera that are now also thoroughly commodified must hold these two positions in some sort of precarious balance, engaging in a striptease that both reveals and conceals the labour that went into producing them. They do so by propagating the idea that the artistic skill that is the product of routine and mechanical labour (the hours of training and practice that constitute its real cost, and hence, by one marker, its value) is in fact the natural and spontaneous expression of individual, expressive artistry, which is supposed to transcend mere technical facility and the labour that went into attaining it.

Popular challenge programmes such as *Pop Star to Opera Star* take the second part of the proposition at face value by suggesting that ‘individual expressive artistry’ is all you need. In doing so they clearly endorse the subsumption of affective modes of labour in late capitalist economies, and the requirement that the worker in an increasingly fluid labour market be able to offer what the French political theorist Pierre Rosanvallon calls the brand of ‘personality’, rather than any particular specialist skill. (Rosanvallon 2011: 8). I shall return to the specific ways in which this works in a programme such as *Pop Star to Opera Star* at the end of this article, but first we need to chart the historical transvaluations of musical labour and skill from the early-modern era to our day.

## IV

Musical performance is work like any other, and its valuation as work has always depended upon broader societal valuations of labour. But musical performance is also ‘representation’ of work, employing Jacques Attali’s formulation that all music between the Renaissance and the era of technological reproduction falls under the category of representation: music that *represents* the ideal model of social order and social behaviour as spectacle, rather than directly modelling social order and behaviour through ritual. (Attali, 1985). In the era of music as representation, composers and performers model representations of musical labour, and signify its value through musical forms that foreground different aspects of musical technique and skill.

Musical skill itself did not become identifiable as a distinct (and hence representable) and quantifiable (and hence commodifiable) possession until the early-modern era, in line with the broader recognition of the idea of professional skill as a personal ‘property’ that was enshrined legally, in Britain at least, in a statute of 1563. (Rule 1987: 105). In the pre-modern period, musical knowledge and skill were judged to be a common possession belonging to the craft as a whole rather than to the individual. (Brown, 1989: 142-164). The commodification of musical skill was established with the development of opera houses as public performance venues from the mid-seventeenth century, and with the subsequent emergence of a star system of singers. Performers’ skills were often valued more highly than those of composers, and from the later seventeenth century there was an almost direct correlation between the number of notes that opera singers could pack into their arias and the ducats or



guineas they were paid. In 1720 the great castrato Senesino accepted 3,000 guineas for two opera seasons in London (Milhouse and Hume 1993: 34), at 1,500 guineas a season significantly more than the £1,000 fee reported as Handel's remuneration for organising a whole opera season, including the composition of a new opera, ten years later (Milhouse and Hume 1993: 37).

It was also at the beginning of the eighteenth century that the modern use of the term 'virtuoso' to denote a technical musical specialist rather than a generally cultivated enthusiast became prevalent. However, in the early eighteenth century the concept of musical virtuosity still retained the connotations of its etymological origins in moral *virtu*, the classical and Renaissance concept of will and fortitude. Thus, in 1703 the term *virtuosité* is derived from *virtu* in a French dictionary of music, which describes virtuosity in these terms: 'That superiority of spirit, of application or of ability, which allows us to excel, whether in theory or practice.' (Brossard, 1703: 'Virtu', n.p.). Also acknowledging the value of practical skill, the German composer and theorist Johann Mattheson in his *Der brauchbare Virtuoso* of 1720 paid tribute to '*virtuosi pratici*' alongside more academic theorists (Jander: 'Virtuoso'). This valorisation of practical skill is a clear reversal of the classical denigration of forms of labour based upon merely practical knowhow, which had also prevailed throughout much of the Renaissance. And it is evidently related to another key term of the emerging bourgeois economic order, 'industry', which by the eighteenth century had come to mean more than its original reference of 'skill, ingenuity or dexterity' (i.e., closer to what we now mean by virtuosity) to denote, in addition, 'diligence or assiduity... close and steady application ... exertion, effort' - in other words: hard work (Williams 1976: 137-9; Moretti 2013: 31).

The transvaluation, and consequent commodification, of technique as hard work in eighteenth-century musical performance is evidence of an emerging relationship between artistic labour and the new labour theories of economic value that the early advocates of capitalism such as John Locke and Adam Smith were propounding at the same time. ‘For ‘tis Labour, indeed, that puts the difference in value on everything’, Locke insisted (Locke 1960: 296), and Smith expands:

The real price of every thing, what every thing really costs to the man who wants to acquire it, is the toil and trouble of acquiring it. What everything is really worth to the man who has acquired it, and who wants to dispose of it or exchange it for something else, is the toil and trouble which it can save to himself, and which it can impose upon other people.’ (Smith 1961: vol.1, 34).

Eighteenth-century musical virtuosity must be understood as the display of toil and trouble at precisely that historical moment in which labour is being thus valued as the source of wealth. Operatic singing, in particular, demonstrates will and effort rather than spontaneity and freedom. ‘To be a virtuoso’ suggests opera historian John Drummond, ‘was not an act of Romantic rebellion, it was an image of absolute control.’ (Drummond 1980: 144). Mattheson makes this clear when he links such control to moral virtue in his comprehensive musical treatise *Der vollkommene Kapellmeister* of 1739, writing that ‘The affections of men are the true material of virtue, and the latter is nought but a well-ordered and prudently-moderate affection. It is true that those among the affects of which nature has given us the majority are not the best, and certainly must be curtailed or reined in.’ (1995: 15; translation 1981: 104 [modified]). This is, of course, a tired commonplace that goes back to Plato’s

*Phaedrus*, with its image of reason as a charioteer striving to control the horses of passion. But in the context of Mattheson's own typically Cartesian attempt to taxonomise musical affects, the suggestion that they also need to be 'reined in' offers a way of reading baroque vocal *fioritura* as an effort to master and aestheticize the impulses of nature - the wayward passions that reason seeks to control and guide, just as John Locke's colonist brings value to the untamed, and supposedly unvalued, wilderness of America by making nature productive through his labour. (Locke 1960: 303-20). The very term 'division' that was used to describe the ornamentation of baroque music suggests the rational, quasi-mathematical understanding of such ornamentation, which is always kept within strict rhythmic bounds. Adorno considered musical virtuosity of this kind to be a kind of sacrificial sadism: a symptom of the more general domination of nature in modernity. (Adorno 1998: 66).

Eighteenth-century bourgeois culture manifestly valorises hard work, whose rewards are advertised unequivocally in Hogarth's series of prints entitled *Industry and Idleness* (1747). At the opening of *Robinson Crusoe*, Robinson's father urges his son to lay aside his wayward desire for adventure, advising him, as Robinson reports, that I had 'a prospect of raising my fortune by application and industry', and contrasting the virtues of middle class industry to 'the pride, luxury, ambition, and envy of the upper part of mankind.' (Defoe 1985: 27-8). In the *Encyclopédie* Diderot similarly repeatedly praised hard work and honest craft over the unproductive *rentier* basis of aristocratic wealth and luxury. In his entry for 'Craft' (*Métier*) he writes: 'This name is given to any profession that requires the use of the hands... I do not know why people have a low opinion of what the word implies; for we depend on the crafts for all the necessary things of life.' (Diderot 1765: vol.10, 463).

But the work ethos of Diderot is clearly based on an ideal of craft labour that has not yet been alienated by what John Roberts identifies as ‘the subordination of handcraft to [mechanical] technique.’ (Roberts 2007: 3). Marx finds this subordination already taking place in the eighteenth century when he suggests that it is the division of labour in pre-machine manufacture ‘which gradually transforms the workers’ operations into more and more mechanical ones, so that at a certain point a mechanism can step into their places.’ (Marx 1973: 703-4). He concludes that the technical division of labour in both pre-industrial and industrial production has a fundamental and widespread impact upon workers, insisting that ‘The process of separation is developed in manufacture, which mutilates the worker, turning him into a fragment of himself.’ (Marx 1976: Vol.1, 482). In 1776 Adam Smith, having advocated the productive benefits of the division of industrial labour in his famous passage on the manufacture of pins in *The Wealth of Nations*, also acknowledged the cost of such methods to the worker:

The man whose whole life is spent in performing a few simple operations, of which the effects are perhaps always the same, or very nearly the same, has no occasion to exert his understanding or to exercise his invention in finding out expedients for removing difficulties which never occur. He naturally loses, therefore, the habit of such exertion, and generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become. (1961: vol.2, 302-3).

What Smith recognises here is the effect of the split between mental and manual labour, the latter which is rendered merely mechanical. In *History and Class Consciousness* Lukács identified all modern forms of technical virtuosity as aspects of

a specialisation that divorces technique from the broader expressive or ethical faculties of the human being, concluding that ‘The specialised “virtuoso”, the vendor of his objectified and reified faculties [...] lapses into a contemplative attitude vis-à-vis the workings of his own objectified and reified faculties.’ (Lukács 1971: 100). In his essay ‘The Indian Jugglers’ of 1828, the English romantic critic William Hazlitt is transfixed by the effortless virtuosity of circus performers, capturing precisely Lukács’s sense of the self-objectification of the jugglers’ skills: ‘Yet it costs nothing to the performer, any more than if it were a mere mechanical deception with which he had nothing to do but to watch and laugh at the astonishment of the spectators.’ (Hazlitt 1998: 67). But in the end Hazlitt finds that the jugglers’ ‘mechanical dexterity is confined to doing some one particular thing, which you can repeat as often as you please’ (1998: 69), and describes the tasteless and vulgar mechanical deception of the popular mountebank, contrasting his precision exercises to the ‘ethereal, evanescent, refined, sublime part of art that filters nature through sentiment.’ (1998: 71).

In one passage in his essay on the jugglers Hazlitt includes musical performance alongside dancing, riding, and fencing as ‘external graces, which are to be learnt from others, and which are easily displayed to the admiration of the beholder.’ (1998: 72). In later eighteenth-century music, showy musical virtuosity, now also seen as no better than technical dexterity, is indeed increasingly represented as empty display, divorced from meaning, sentiment or truth. Mozart makes this clear in his characterisation of the duplicitous Queen of Night in *Die Zauberflöte* (1791). Her manic *coloratura* is mere music-box tweeting, mechanical and insincere, a symptom of a society increasingly based upon modes of production in which, in the words of Marx, machine production has led to ‘the conversion [of the worker] into an

automaton.’ (Marx 1976: vol.1, 548). In general, in much music of the later eighteenth century we can see a distinction being made between simplicity, which implies authenticity and sincerity, and virtuosity, which implies alienation, insincerity or mechanisation (or, in the case of opera reformers such as Francesco Algarotti, aristocratic ‘luxury’, which, as we have seen, is equally anathema to the bourgeois ideology of honest craft and industry). (See Feldman 2007: 218-9). The new ideal is expressed in the famous preface to Gluck’s opera *Alceste* (1763), a diatribe against the tyranny of singers and their displays of vocal prowess:

When I undertook to write the music for *Alceste*, I resolved to divest it entirely of all those abuses, introduced into it either by the mistaken vanity of singers or by the too great complaisance of composers, which have so long disfigured Italian opera... I have striven to restrict music to its true office of serving poetry by means of expression and by following the situations of the story, without interrupting the action or stifling it with a useless superfluity of ornaments... (Strunk, 1952: 674-5).

For a composer such as Gluck the musical corrective is simply to write in a direct and expressive style that offers no opportunities for decoration. Mozart also conveyed the view that Italian-style display militated against emotional truth in a letter on the composition of one of Constanze’s arias in *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* of 1781, in which he writes ‘I have sacrificed Konstanze’s [sic] aria a little to the flexible throat of Mlle Cavalieri, “Trennung war mein banges Los”. I have tried to express her feelings, as far as an Italian bravura aria will allow.’ (Anderson 1985: 769). But Mozart had a more complex understanding of the dialectic of authenticity and

alienation than Gluck and the other operatic reformers of his era, and was not willing to reduce his musical language to Gluckian blandness in the quest for truth. In Mozart's operas virtuosity is deployed as a rhetorical topic rather than simply being rejected outright, and in his later operas Mozart often directly figures vocal display as alienation or insincerity. Consider not only the Queen of Night, but also the Donna Anna of 'Non mi dir' (*Don Giovanni*), an aria sung to fend off the pressing demands of Anna's fiancé after the death of her father, in which the prolonged and vapid coloratura on the word 'forse' ('perhaps' – not a word that would conventionally be given musical attention) betrays her fear of emotional commitment, and effectively delays it. Or the Fiordiligi of 'Come scoglio', (*Così fan tutte*), also sung to repel an importunate suitor, where the effortful *fioritura* protests Fiordiligi's virtuous resolve just a bit too much.

Gluck and Mozart offer varying critiques of virtuosity as mechanized technical labour in the name of nature and truth, which reflects a widespread tendency during the course of the eighteenth century to distinguish between mechanical and non-mechanical labour. Thus Barbara Maria Stafford notes how 'the growing caste of professionals responsible for the later eighteenth-century theorization of the crafts distinguished themselves from pedestrian "mechanics".' (1994: 134). In *Robinson Crusoe*, Crusoe's father indeed distinguishes middle-class 'application and industry' from 'the miseries and hardships, the labour and sufferings of the mechanick part of mankind.' (Defoe 1985: 28). But as Stafford suggests, the distinction became increasingly difficult to sustain without adding some further mystification: 'Invisible quality of mind, not visible agility, was requisite for the generation of impalpable ideas and etherealised *je ne sais quoi*.' (Stafford 1994: 134). Such a process is clearly evident in the tendency from the mid-eighteenth century for musical theorists to

endorse the necessity of technical skill, but to insist, like Hazlitt, that technical prowess on its own could never be sufficient; it had to be endowed with expressive truth and artistry. Hence Mattheson's attempts to distinguish the *je ne sais quoi* of art, endowed by nature, and mere craft, insisting that 'free arts do not tolerate the bonds of a handicraft, and the academic rungs of scholars are of a very different nature than the weaver's spools and the joiner's benches [...] Nature's gifts cannot be acquired through toil and diligence as can other qualities.' (Mattheson 1995: 255 & 259). The fetishisation of the child prodigy, which emerges in the 1760s with the cult of the young Mozart, is a clear exemplification of this new belief that musical talent is naturally endowed rather than artificially acquired.

And the musical performer was increasingly expected, as Hazlitt required, to convey sentiment as well as skill. In 1753 C.P.E Bach, representative of the new school of musical Sensibility, dismissed keyboardists 'whose chief asset is technique.' (Bach 1951: 148). And seeking to bridge the division of mental and manual labour that underpins merely technical skill, Bach argued that musical interpretation demanded spiritual effort as well as manual technique. The keyboardist should 'play from the soul, not like a trained bird', and ornament should serve as a vehicle of feeling (Bach 1951: 150).

Capitalist societies based upon industrial production cannot afford to devalue mechanical labour altogether. Instead they must re-invest such labour with authenticity. During the romantic era musical virtuosity is increasingly associated with authentic subjectivity and emotional truth in this way. Whilst for some critics the great violinist Paganini's technical fireworks were no more than elevated juggling, for Franz Liszt Paganini's technique was 'a means not an end', the end being that of expression (Samson 2003: 80). And virtuosity no longer signifies self control and



submission. Instead it is transfigured as spontaneity: individual expressive freedom bursting through the dams of formal social and musical constraint. Listen to an aria by Rossini or Bellini. Rossini's passionate flurries of *fioritura* are unruly outpourings that can no longer be held in check. Where the virtuosity of the baroque singer is contained as strict divisions within the rigid boundaries of rhythm, harmony and bar phrasing, romantic virtuosity escapes such restrictions, the fluid vocal line often unshackling itself from the underlying rhythmic or harmonic structures. Norma's liquid *coloratura* in Bellini's 'Casta diva' (*Norma*, 1831) floats waywardly and unpredictably above the more regular melodic lines and harmonic periods of the orchestra and chorus. For Liszt, the greatest romantic virtuoso, virtuosity is transcendence of material limitation; his *Études*, in the form of exercises usually designed for developing aspects of technique with little musical interest, are rebranded as 'Transcendental' studies. Yet virtuosity is also truer to nature, according to Liszt, who constructed a gypsy genealogy for his own virtuosity on the grounds that gypsies were closer to nature (Samson 2003: 81-2). Note for note you get your money's worth from a virtuoso like Liszt. But the hours of practice, the bleeding fingers, are kept well backstage so that technique can be presented as the natural expression of spontaneous inspiration (or even, in the case of Paganini, demonic possession).

As composer-performers Liszt and Paganini can also present their virtuosity as direct expression rather than simply decoration added by a secondary agent – a model of the romantic vision of unalienated labour by those who still own the means of production. But Heinrich Heine saw through the trick, characterising Liszt's 'technical perfection' as possessing 'the precision of an automaton', the effect of what was, for Heine, 'the instrumentalisation of the human being' and 'the victory of the

mechanical over the spiritual' (Heine 1997: 435). For Heine, Liszt's piano was a monster that no longer served as an extension of the human subject's physical capacities, as did technologies – productive or artistic - in the age of pre-industrial manufacture. Instead it illustrated Marx's analysis of the machine in the 'Fragments on the Machine' in *Grundrisse*, where Marx writes of the modern machine that it is 'Not as with the instrument, which the worker animates and makes into his organ with his skill and strength, and whose handling therefore depends on his virtuosity. Rather, it is the machine which possesses skill and strength in place of the worker, is itself the virtuoso, with a soul of its own in the mechanical laws acting through it.' (Marx 1973: 693-4). The result, as Marx and Engels stated in the *Communist Manifesto*, is that the worker is now 'an appendage of the machine'. (Marx 1969: 55).

Moreover, many commentators were concerned that early nineteenth-century music was itself suffused with the ethos of the machine. Critics found Rossini's music machinic and formulaic (in particular the famous crescendos); his opera *La gazza ladra* was described by one critic as a 'noisy mechanical display' (Esse 2009: 62). Wagner also repeatedly commented on the 'mechanical movements' of the nineteenth-century orchestra in his essay on Beethoven, recognising that the 'apparatus of orchestral production' was all too similar to industrial machinery. (Wagner 1896: 74-5). It was partly for this reason that Wagner constructed a covered pit in his purpose-built opera house at Bayreuth, ensuring that the industrial-scale sawing and pumping of the massed orchestral players was concealed from the audience, thus creating the 'mystic gulf' that transported the audience to the supposedly unalienated human world of the drama. Another form of pseudo-humanisation is found in the role of the orchestral conductor, which only emerged in the romantic period. The division of labour in the nineteenth-century (and modern)

orchestra means that the orchestral player, like the factory worker, knows only his or her own part in the whole, which s/he must deliver slavishly, without the improvisatory freedom of earlier musicians, according to an externally determined tempo. Like the capitalist managerial class described by François Guéry and Didier Deleule in their 1972 book *The Productive Body*, only the conductor has any overview of the whole musical work and its interpretation, and can therefore ‘make it seem as if those who “know” by overseeing and supervising the work process are the source of surplus-value, rather than those actually doing the labour.’ (Intro. Barnard, P. and Shapiro, S. 2014: Kindle location 221). And it is the conductor who thus offers the audience the illusion of human mastery of the machine, conveying through his (almost always his) bodily movements an emotionalised production of sound for which he is the charismatic conduit.

But despite such ruses, the romantic artist is always haunted by the fear that technical skill may, after all, be no more than mindlessly mechanical: Kleist’s marionette who is more graceful than any human dancer could be; the mechanical nightingale in Hans Christian Andersen’s story ‘The Nightingale’, who replaces the real nightingale in the emperor’s affections. In E.T.A. Hoffmann’s story ‘The Sandman’, Nathaniel is infatuated with Olympia, unaware that she is a doll. He listens to Olympia singing: ‘The artificial roulades seemed to Nathaniel the heavenly rejoicings of a soul transfigured by love’ (Hoffmann 1982: 113). Are the roulades artificial because they are produced by a doll? Neither the reader nor Nathaniel knows at this point that Olympia is a doll, so perhaps they are artificial because such roulades are *always* artificial? When the truth is revealed, destroying Nathaniel, young men in the town insist that henceforth their sweethearts sing and dance in a less than perfect

manner, and, in a kind of Turing Test, that they should speak in such a way as to give evidence of real thinking and feeling behind their words (Hoffmann 1982: 121).<sup>1</sup>

This romantic dualism concerning musical virtuosity reflects a broader uncertainty about the status and value of labour in modernity. Hard work is extolled – it has to be so – and there was no shortage in the nineteenth century of evangelists for ‘the gospel of work’, who promoted work as, in art historian Tim Barringer’s words, ‘a benchmark of value encompassing the economic, the moral, and the aesthetic.’ (Barringer 2005: 1). And they had their musical equivalents, like the early nineteenth-century pianist Carl Czerny, pupil of Beethoven and teacher of Liszt, who similarly commends the bourgeois work ethic in his regime of piano exercises, claiming that ‘Industry and practice are the Creators and Architects of all that is great, good and beautiful on the earth.’ (Samson, 2003: 21). But as historian Neil Davidson notes of the fortunes of the labour theory of value in the writings of post-Revolutionary bourgeois theorists in France, ‘even those theories with which they had once boldly taunted the defenders of feudalism – above all the law of value – became more problematic once the imperative became less about demonstrating the unproductive nature of feudal retainers and more about denying that the working class was the only source of value in production.’ (Davison 2012: 103). In other words, to impute the fundamental value of capitalism to the labour of those who actually produce the wealth was a risky strategy – hence the tendency to attribute the virtues brought by labour to the individual (e.g. Samuel Smiles’s *Self Help* of 1859) rather than to the economic system as a whole.

Moreover, the fact that in modern industrial and bureaucratic societies labour fragments, alienates and dehumanises simply can’t be ignored. The upper classes can transcend the alienating effects of labour because others carry out the dirty work for

them. The middle classes preserve a sphere of authenticity by maintaining a separation between the alienated public sphere of work (in which even non-industrial labour increasingly assumes the rationalised production ethos of the factory) and the supposedly autonomous, private sphere of home and family. Thus ‘for the private person’, writes Walter Benjamin, ‘living space becomes, for the first time, antithetical to the place of work’ (Benjamin 1978: 154), although, of course, the bourgeois paterfamilias’s illusion of his transcendence of material necessity and labour at home is invariably sustained by the concealed labour of women. In the bourgeois home thus liberated from instrumental labour, as Adorno described in his *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, playing chamber music allowed the celebration of labour as creativity in its own right, as ‘purposeless efficacy... a production process without a final product.’ (Adorno 1976: 86). As Marx observed, playing the piano is certainly a form of labour, but it is not ‘productive’ labour until it is commodified, and can therefore claim a degree of autonomy. (Marx 1973: 305n). The bourgeois investment in musical performance as a sphere of autonomy and authenticity also demands a public musical style which downplays technical virtuosity, and its imputation of being mechanical, in favour of more interior or humanised forms of music. An operatic role by Wagner, or a piano concerto by Brahms, are no less demanding than a virtuoso aria by Rossini or a piano showpiece by Liszt. But they foreground a different model of labour: heroic effort and stamina rather than dazzling technique, which is how labour is usually represented in later nineteenth-century art and literature.

## V

Writing about theories of posthumanism Katherine Hayles argues that the humanist ideology of autonomous subjectivity, in which so much was invested in nineteenth-

century musical performance, 'may have applied, at best, to that fraction of humanity who had the wealth, power and leisure to conceptualise themselves as autonomous beings exercising their will through individual agency and choice.' (Hayles 1999: 286). For Adorno, this meant that the only honest form of music in the modern age was that which 'refuses to communicate the homely traces of the humane, [which stems] from a correct perception of the reified alienation and depersonalisation of the destiny imposed on mankind. [...] Every self-righteous appeal to humanity in the midst of inhuman conditions should be viewed with the very greatest suspicion.' (Adorno 1998: 256 & 265). For Adorno this is an inherently tragic situation. But for those artists who celebrate modernity, the machine and mechanised labour themselves come to be seen as the motors of progress and modernity, exemplified in the creeds of Fordism and Taylorism, adopted alike by capitalists, communists and fascists. Siegfried Kracauer's brilliant essay of 1927 on the perfectly synchronised routines of the Tiller Girls (appropriately characterised by Kracauer as 'mass ornament') suggested their relationship to the conveyor-belt production modes of Taylorism-Fordism (Kracauer 1995: 75-88), and the dance historian Mark Franko has shown how in New Deal and Communist affiliated dance programmes in the USA in the 1930s the limitations of the individual human body are transcended in communal machinic effort, as also in the Biomechanics of the Soviet theatre director Meyerhold, or the quasi-mechanical modes of theatre performance explored by Oskar Schlemmer and his colleagues at the Bauhaus. (Franko 2002). In his 'Manifesto of Futurist Dance' Marinetti, the founder of Italian Futurism, celebrates the body as a collection of pistons and levers (Rainey, Poggi, Wittman 2009: 236), and in his 'Manifesto of Dynamic and Synoptic Declamation' he sought deliberately to dehumanise the human voice. (Rainey, Poggi, Wittman 2009: 221). In music there is a

similar celebration of the machine by composers such as Stravinsky, the Futurist musician Russolo, the Soviet composer Mosolov, and George Antheil, composer of the score to accompany Léger's film *Ballet Mécanique* of 1924. And there is in music by these composers an inevitable dehumanisation of the musical performer, who is reduced to the status of a machinic executant – something that Schoenberg actively sought when he applauded the advent of the mechanical player piano as the antidote to the unreliability of the human performer. (Schoenberg 1975: 326-239). This widespread celebration of the machine within artistic modernism is undoubtedly one of the chief reasons why modernist music is such anathema to the bourgeois music lover, who is heavily invested in that supposed humanity offered by music that Adorno so fiercely critiqued as a lie.

But if much early twentieth-century art was now celebrating mechanisation, machine production was in turn looking to art. The new scientific management of work, writes labour historian Anson Rabinbach, 'replaced moral exhortation with experiment and argument [...] ultimately giving rise to a new discipline: the European science of work.' (Rabinbach 1990: 6). Amidst the plethora of studies of labour and productivity in the later nineteenth and early twentieth century, of which Taylorism was only the best known example, industry drew upon scientific investigations of musical performance for ways of improving industrial performance. The economist Karl Bücher (1847-1930), for instance, applied studies of the variety and flexibility of musical rhythm to mechanised labour with the aim of rendering such labour less rigid, more adapted to natural human rhythms, and hence more productive. (Erlmann 2010: 290). In late capitalism, however, the creative and affective powers attributed to art have been co-opted even more extensively into the new forms of service labour that characterise post-Fordist economies, a further revaluation of skill and labour that is

represented culturally in popular challenge programmes such as *Pop Star to Opera Star*.

## VII

In their study of the management strategies of post-Fordist capitalism, Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello suggest that late capitalism has absorbed many of the critiques of the Taylorized management of labour within Fordism, apparently offering workers the autonomy and flexibility demanded by such critiques, which often draw on artistic creativity as a model of autonomous, unalienated labour. Post-Fordist capitalism also co-opts demands for a more personalised engagement with work, which is transformed into ‘affective’ labour. As Boltanski and Chiapello explain, ‘The traditional Taylorization of work undoubtedly consisted in treating human beings like machines. But it did not make it possible to place the most specific qualities of human beings – their emotions, their moral sense, their honour, and so on – directly in the service of the pursuit of profit.’ (Boltanski and Chapello 2005: 466). But this move to affective labour is also allied to an increase in the casualisation of labour in post-Fordist capitalism, dubbed by Pierre Bourdieu as ‘flexploitation’ (Ross 2009: 16-21), which leads labour theorist Andre Gorz to argue that, in John Roberts’s paraphrase, there has been ‘an irreversible decline not just in labour skills, but in labour as a source of social identity for workers’. (Roberts 2007: 207). As Richard Sennett has noted, the official labour policy of today’s ubiquitous neoliberal regimes ‘is based on the assumption that rapid change of skills is the norm.’ (Sennett 1998: 96). Although this might apparently seem to heal the over-specialisation of human faculties created by the original division of labour, it in fact creates a serial fragmentation that is



clearly even more damaging to the worker's sense of identity. Moreover, in contemporary Western societies the outsourcing of production to developing countries means that conventional labour is pushed to an even further remove from the commodity that is consumed, so that the Western consumer may now pretend to herself that the commodity is produced without human effort altogether, allowing the prevailing ideology that there are no longer any 'workers' or class distinctions in late capitalist societies.

Popular challenge programmes like *Pop Star to Opera Star* reflect this demotion, or occlusion, of skill and labour in post-industrial societies by devaluing the deep skills of craft labour, pretending that they can be attained with no more than the most cursory effort – a model of the flexible adaptation that the modern worker is supposed to command. This devaluation is in part a cheeky populist de-mystification of those kinds of middle-class professionalism, such as medicine, law or architecture, that rely upon, on the one hand, the acquisition of knowledge or skills that can only be gained through a legitimated professional training, and on the other, a kind of esoteric, charismatic know-how that is supposedly unique to the individual expert, rendering such expertise doubly unquestionable by the lay person, and thereby commanding double economic value in the market.<sup>2</sup> This kind of professional value is also what the classically trained musical performer reflects back to her well-heeled professional audience: the evidence of labour and expertise – the hard-earned technique – whose reification and alienation is transcended by the personal 'artistry' of the individual performer. For operatic singing, it is the voice 'without the benefit of microphones' that is clearly the touchstone of such value for the elite who can still afford to appreciate 'authentic' artistic skills. Addressing a wider audience who may well be excluded from such authenticity, as both producers and consumers, challenge

programmes slyly undermine this equation, offering the copy as a simulacrum of the original, and presenting the ersatz qualities of ‘talent’ and ‘personality’ (indicators of the widespread subsumption of affective skills in the late capitalist workplace) as a substitute for the kind of costly technical skill that carries cultural capital. Challenge programmes pose the question: ‘Can you tell the difference between the real thing and its counterfeit?’. The professional critic like Rupert Christiansen *can* tell, of course; he knows that the aria has been lowered by a fifth to make that ‘top C’ in ‘Nessun dorma’ possible. But if no one else can spot the difference, then the art snobs are paying through the nose for forms of labour and artistry that have been shown to be as worthless as a pile of bricks in the Tate. More fool them.

But High Pop cannot afford to dispense with value and distinction altogether. The markers of High Art, however demystified, are essential to the cachet of High Pop products: the Metropolitan Opera’s famous flirtation with Muppet diva Miss Piggy was presented not as a lowering of values but as the marketing of opera as ‘high-class art for the masses’. (Weiner 2002: 87). If something can be attained *too* easily it loses its value altogether: the scene in popular challenge programmes in which the neophyte learning her new craft is reduced to tears is therefore obligatory as a minimal token of effort and struggle. And to ensure that the struggle is worth the candle other signifiers of cultural distinction must be kept in view too. The presentational paraphernalia of *Pop Star to Opera Star* therefore offers signifiers of grandness: glitzy chandeliers, a huge curving staircase. The series one judges included Lawrence Llewellyn Bowen, a TV interior designer who, with his flowing locks and floppy velvet suits, clearly signifies posh and arty.<sup>3</sup> Bowen is a foil to the cunningly chosen Meatloaf, who upholds the down-to-earth, no-nonsense values of popular culture, although also endorsing that mysterious quality of ‘va va voum’, as the opera-

singer mentor to the pop stars Rolando Vilazon puts it, without which, apparently, no amount of mechanical technique can make a star. Occasionally the shot cuts away to show us celebrities in the audience such as the classical actor Dame Judi Dench, who are clearly there to endorse the cultural status of the programmes.

But the works performed are revealing in other respects. Opera is almost always Italian, occasionally French, and German only if the tunes are very good indeed, or the words are in Italian (Mozart). Indeed the ‘Italianicity’ of opera (to use that useful term coined by Roland Barthes) means that the popular song ‘O sole mio’, much beloved of Luciano Pavarotti, qualifies for inclusion. Opera is thus presented as extravagant and showy, rather than as high-minded and serious – the very truth that the Opera as High Art crowd wishes so desperately to conceal. But note too that one of the core constituents of exclusionary distinction in opera is maintained to preserve some mystique: singing in the original language. And it is surely significant that the first series was sponsored by Anglian Home Improvements – just the right moniker for a programme that is all about the politics of cultural self improvement.

*Pop Star to Opera Star* is highly knowing in the way that it manages to cock a snook at the high cultural capital of opera, and the professionalism that goes with it, whilst preserving enough markers of cultural distinction to ensure that opera retains sufficient value to be rebranded as High Pop. But the real work of TV challenge programmes of this nature lies in their post-Fordist promotion of charisma as a substitute for skill or experience. Which is not to say that the pop singers who are transformed into opera singers lack skill or experience in the first place, but that they are deliberately deskilled in relation to what they know best so that all they have left is their charisma. The French political theorist Pierre Rosanvallon has argued that in a flexible labour market in which employees have to offer ‘personality’ as a brand that

allows them to move nimbly from one position to another, ‘everyone implicitly claims the right to be considered a star, an expert, or an artist.’ (Rosanvallon 2011: 8).

Programmes like *Pop Star to Opera Star*, and even more clearly TV talent shows or reality shows like *Big Brother*, cannily endorse this ideology, suggesting that we are all now eligible to join the new democracy of talent rather than having to be born into the aristocracy of genius, or being condemned to the dreary graft of ‘mechanick’ labour.

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<sup>1</sup> The gendering of the mechanical, here as elsewhere, as female should be noted – as Barbara Maria Stafford has observed, female labour is often represented as ‘mechanical doing without knowing’. (Stafford 1994: 215).

<sup>2</sup> This typically populist suspicion of closed professions such as law and medicine has a long historical lineage in forms such as *commedia dell’arte*, and in the caricatures of a nineteenth-century satirist like Daumier. The denigration of “experts” by right-wing populist politicians in the recent EU Referendum in the UK was a particularly injurious instance of this prejudice.

<sup>3</sup> In the second series Bowen’s role as posh dandy was taken by the fruity-voiced, waistcoat wearing actor Simon Callow.

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