

Pauline Viardot: The forgotten diva

Pauline Viardot inspired Brahms, Berlioz and Turgenev, so why is she forgotten?

By Jessica Duchon

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Pauline Viardot-Garcia was more than just the greatest diva of the 19th century. The Spanish-born mezzo-soprano transformed 19th-century opera and song, inspiring everyone from Berlioz to Brahms, and Clara Schumann to the young Fauré. Yet her own compositions have been virtually forgotten since her death in 1910.

An evening of words and music at the Wigmore Hall, staged by Opera Rara, is about to recapture the world of Viardot and her music. Such is the significance of Viardot that the American mezzo-soprano Frederica von Stade will make her Wigmore Hall debut at the age of 60.

Viardot was born in 1821, the daughter of a singer and teacher, Manuel Garcia. Her elder sister was the legendary soprano Maria Malibran. When the latter died aged 28, the burden of this famed family's reputation fell on Pauline's shoulders.

The poet Alfred de Musset heard Pauline sing when she was 17. He compared her voice to "the taste of a wild fruit... Pauline possesses the secret of great artists: before expressing something, she feels it. She does not listen to her voice, but to her heart." He was the first of many who fell in love with this unlikely-looking woman. Pauline was no beauty, but numbered among her admirers Berlioz, Gounod and Ivan Turgenev.

On the advice of her friend George Sand, Pauline married the theatre director Louis Viardot, 21 years her senior. But aged 22, touring Russia, the superstar met the 25-year-old Turgenev and accepted his offer of Russian lessons. It was the beginning of a lifelong passion against which Pauline fought with all her might. She once declared, "Oh, how many bad things I should have done but for that willpower - the almost inseparable sister of my conscience."

Ultimately the situation was resolved in a highly unconventional way, with Turgenev living in something resembling a ménage-à-trois with Pauline and her husband.

Their love, consummated or not, did not kill Pauline or Turgenev. Instead it stoked some vital creative fires. The pair found subliminal satisfaction in

occasional joint efforts, mingling words by Turgenev with music by Pauline, and she inspired some of Turgenev's finest writing. His play *A Month in the Country*, in which a married woman's admirer is cast aside for a younger man, had more than a little to do with Viardot's brief infatuation with Gounod. And his story "The Song of Triumphant Love" involved the mystical conception of a child through shared dreams and the power of music.

Now Viardot's output has its own chance to shine. In Opera Rara's programme, the actress Fanny Ardant serves as narrator, with Georgia Smith's text binding together three singers, a pianist and a cellist. The performance is the brainchild of the TV producer Judy Flannery. "My first idea was to make a documentary about Viardot, because her life is worth celebrating," she says. "She was a household name throughout Europe and Russia, an artist who helped usher in a new era of operatic singing and whose compositions always serve the texts she set." For Flannery, the involvement of Frederica von Stade is a special delight: "She's rather like Viardot herself in her generosity and the way she has helped young artists."

Von Stade says that she has found Viardot's songs a revelation. "Pauline was part of the great Garcia family, which means a lot to most singers because of their reputation for vocal splendour. The songs are a collage of her world and her fascinating friends. You can always feel her affection for music, words and the voice with all its capabilities."

But why was Viardot's music neglected for so long? Georgia Smith suspects that Viardot's early biographers had barely looked at it. "They didn't bother to find out what her compositions were like. One biographer dismisses the laudatory things said about her by Liszt, Chopin, Sand, Meyerbeer and Berlioz as the compliments of her friends. An English biographer says that Pauline didn't take her composing seriously - this about someone who wrote more than 100 songs, four operettas and various chamber works. Her music was forgotten because she was known as a singer and because she went out of fashion. Also, perhaps because she didn't lift a finger to promote it."

If concerts like this can spread the message, Viardot's works could become more well known, and Flannery is considering making a docu-drama. The Viardot revival may start here, but one senses this is only the beginning of a fascinating journey into the past.

Songs of Pauline Viardot, Wigmore Hall, London W1 (020 7935 2141;
www.wigmorehall.org.uk) 27 February