Portraits and Poses

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CHAPTER 14

‘It Wasn’t Enough for Me Just to Be a Singer’: (Self-)Representations of the ‘German Prima Donna’ Gertrud Elisabeth Mara

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After hearing the young singer Gertrud Elisabeth Schmeling (1749–1833) perform at the Großes Concert in Leipzig, the Hamburg poet Daniel Schiebeler was inspired to write a ten-stanza poem in praise of her talent. It contains the following lines:1

O you, the honour of your times,
And your country’s ornament!
A faint sound from my strings,
Sublime Schmeling, is dedicated to you.

In sounds that touch the heart,
In sounds full of melody,
The power of feeling teaches you to sing,
And diligence and art embellish it.

Savagery flew from Germany’s sons
But the sound of their language remained rough;
Marry it to your tones,
and it will become as soft as your singing.

Many times the Thames has listened to you,
Enraptured she lingered in her course,
And gave to you the applause
That she usually gives to Faustina.

Your portrait dazzles, your name shines
In the temple, where glory sits enthroned,
The innocent forehead is crowned
With laurel that rewards diligence.

But more than lustre and laurel,
The silent charm of humility adorns you;
While the dunces, seduced by pride,
Value nothing but their own little selves.

The poem, published in 1773, clearly demonstrates to what extent gender and national stereotypes are entangled in Schiebeler’s perception of this exceptional singer, whom Frederick II would, a few years later, appoint to the Berlin opera as the ‘first German prima donna’. As Laurenz Lütteken has argued, the poem should be seen in the context of the debate about whether German could match the emotional depth of Italian in the art of singing. This becomes apparent, for example, from the fact that the German singer is presented as not only equal, but superior to ‘Faustina’, a reference to the Italian singer Faustina Bordoni. Mara’s typically ‘German’ qualities – sensitivity, gentleness, diligence, humility, and innocence – absolve her of any suspicion of arrogance or moral depravity. She thus represents the ideal of the ‘German girl’, omnipresent in German literature of the sixties and seventies of the eighteenth century: unaffected, unspoiled, and sexually innocent. In this respect, she presents a marked contrast to the cliché of the glamorous and proud Italian virtuosa, indulging in a less than reputable lifestyle. Remarkably, in Schiebeler’s poetic portrait, Schmeling’s superiority over Faustina does not arise from an intellectual and artistic competence acquired in the course of long studies, but rather originates from ‘the power of feeling’, in other words, a specifically female emotionality that is considered ‘natural’ and that only needs to be perfected through diligence.

Schiebeler’s homage is a clear example of how representations of persons – be they painted or written portraits – are always simultaneously attributions that expose the thought patterns typical of the period. For several reasons, the example of Gertrud Elisabeth Schmeling, who became known throughout Europe under the name Mara after her marriage to the cellist Johann Baptiste Mara, is suitable for analysis of such attributions in painted and textual portraits: as a singer at the court of Frederick II, she was one of the stars in the eighteenth-century musical world whose personality and private life interested the audience at least as much as her artistic achievements. In Mara’s particular case, three factors intensified public interest: first, as a young girl who had previously performed in an environment marked by bourgeois ideals of virtue, she entered the sphere of the royal court and thus the world of the great divas, a change of context that became a challenge for portraitists and biographers.
Second, she married – against the will of Frederick II – a man who thrilled the imagination in his own right: Johann Mara was not only a brilliant cellist with the court orchestra but also a physically attractive man who, according to contemporary rumours, was the favourite of the homosexual prince and was considered depraved and vulgar. The alliance with this man therefore damaged the previously dominant image of the virtuous young singer: Mara was henceforth perceived as part of a scandalous couple. For example, in a letter to his father dated November 24, 1780, Mozart described how ‘Madame Mara’ had caused annoyance in Paris in the elector’s orchestra with ‘her innate air d’effronterie’ when she tried to impose her husband as her accompanist without respecting the rights of the first cellist of the orchestra. The detailed report ends: ‘if you should know the two people, you can see the pride, rudeness, and true effrontery in their faces.’

Third, Mara was one of the first female singers who set out to live as a freelance artist, thus embarking on a career path that, in her time, was still unusual – even for male musicians. As a singer, Mara thus embodied not only professionalism but also a provocative endeavour to artistic authority and economic autonomy.

In this article, I will first present two painted portraits to show the two opposite types of attribution that also run through the numerous textual portraits of the singer: the ideal-typical virtuous, natural girl and the power-conscious opera singer who fatally chose a disreputable man as her partner. In the second section, I will explain how the tension between these two opposite attributions becomes the subject of textual portraits through which (male) authors reject Mara’s claim to autonomy by turning her life story into a victim narrative. The third section is devoted to anecdotes circulating about Mara, which I understand as miniature textual portraits. Here, I will show that the narrative form of the anecdote itself portrays the singer, because it can only achieve its effect through poignancy. In these anecdotes, Mara’s self-confident confrontations with male colleagues and authorities are turned into the narrative of the obstinate diva, who must be tamed. The final section is devoted to Mara’s autobiography, one of the first ever autobiographies of a female musician. I read this autobiography as an attempt to reappropriate her public image: I argue that Mara responds to the circulating misogynist attributions with a self-portrait that represents her as a competent, powerful woman whose singing expertise is not limited to ‘the power of feeling,’ but owes just as much to determined work and comprehensive training.

Portraits of a German Singer

The image of the childlike, innocent singer in the poem by Schiebeler is also conveyed by an early portrait of Gertrud Elisabeth Mara, painted around 1775 by the famous ‘soul painter’ (‘Seelenmaler’) Anton Graff (1736–1813).7 It shows
the singer at the age of twenty-six. The portrait is based on a likeness dating from 1771, which is preserved in two only minimally different versions. A side-by-side comparison of both works reveals how Graff puts an even stronger focus on the singer’s youthful naturalness in the later portrait, even though Mara had married in the meantime and was no longer a demoiselle. The hair in the 1771 portrait, which is arranged in formal baroque style, is allowed to fall naturally in the later painting and to show its curls. In addition, the formal fur collar of the older painting is replaced by a casually knotted chiffon scarf. Although she had reached a position previously only held by Italian prima donnas, Mara is portrayed, in accordance with the sentimental ideal of beauty, as a ‘German girl’ who has retained her natural childlike charm despite her fast-paced career (Fig. 1).

However, a seemingly completely different woman meets the spectator’s eye in the Mara portrait by the Berlin court painter and later director of the Art Academy Johann Christoph Frisch (1738–1815) (Fig 2). This portrait was painted around 1780, only six years after the Graff portrait. Through his in-depth analysis of the painting, the art historian Hans Ost reached several intriguing
conclusions that are relevant to this volume’s main topic. His starting point is the sheet music that is prominently displayed on the keyboard stand. On closer inspection, it is clear that this is a bravura aria from the opera *Silla* (1753) by Johann Gottlieb Graun (1703–1771), scored with a thorough bass and to be sung presto. Comparing the music on the stand to the original opera score, for which Frederick II himself had supplied the libretto, Ost could ascertain that this is the revenge aria cursing the tyrant Silla, from the second act of the opera.

According to Ost, Fritsch used his painting to deliver a coded message related to an incident that had caused quite a stir in Berlin in the 1770s and that was to become a turning point in Mara’s career. In 1771, shortly after Frederick II had appointed her as the first German prima donna of his court opera and thus had made her one of the highest paid star singers of her time, Gertrud Elisabeth Schmeling met the cellist Johann Baptiste Mara (1744–1808), whom she married in 1773, against Frederick’s wishes and despite Johann Mara’s reputation as an alcoholic and a spendthrift. The king started harassing the couple and even went so far as to imprison Johann Mara, who, it must be said, behaved most unseemly on repeated occasions. After Frederick II finally forbade Johann

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Fig. 2. Johann Christoph Fritsch, *Portrait of the Singer Gertrud Elisabeth Mara* (ca. 1780). Oil on canvas. ©Theaterwissenschaftliche Sammlung, Universität zu Köln. (Plate 38, p. 383)
Mara to go to England for a concert tour with his wife, the couple fled to Prague. Frederick II officially released Johann Mara from his employment in 1780.

Mara and her husband never avenged upon the monarch, as Graun’s bravura aria threatened. Nevertheless, as Ost has argued, the portrait is that of a secret winner. Although Frisch depicted Mara with the insignia of the bourgeoisie – the robe and the powdered wig that were common in bourgeois circles at that time – in an oblique and subtle way, he invokes the traditional pictorial scheme used in the iconography of rulers and statesmen:

Fig. 3. Titian, Portrait of Philipp II, King of Spain (1551). Oil on Canvas. © Museo del Prado, Madrid. (Plate 39, p. 384)
With its life-size representation, the three-quarter turn towards the viewer – one hand on the keyboard, the other on the hip – the portrait conjures up the typical stance of rulers. Portraits of kings or princes with the left hand casually resting on the hilt of the sword, and the right hand positioned on a table with a magnificent helmet or other insignia of rank and power are familiar enough. In the same way, the singer has placed her right hand on the keyboard, with the score of the revenge aria signposting her power: a translation of the pathos found in the portraits that Titian, Rubens and Van Dyck once painted of emperors and kings.  

The well-known portrait of Philip II of Spain by Titian (1551) (Fig. 3) may illustrate this hypothesis. The juxtaposition of the two portraits demonstrates the conflicting images of femininity Gertrud Elisabeth Mara was identified with when her extraordinary career as a ‘German prima donna’ began: on the one hand, (mainly male) contemporaries projected on her ideals of impeccable virtue, naturalness, and sensitivity, while on the other hand, her transition from the bourgeois to the courtly sphere was linked to clichéd notions of the diva as a woman who is highly conscious of her own power and thus dangerous, because she potentially subverts male power structures. The fact that Mara, since her move to Berlin, had enraptured her audiences as a singer and at the same time challenged them as a woman is evident not only in the (few) biographical portraits dedicated to her in the last decades of the eighteenth century but also in the numerous anecdotes that began to circulate about her from the 1770s onwards.

**Early Biographical Portraits**

As Melanie Unseld has shown in her study *Biographie und Musikgeschichte* (‘Biography and Musical History’), musicians were not deemed worthy subjects for biographies until the eighteenth century, which is late compared to other artists. What is more, unlike visual artists, they were not entitled to ‘moral dispensation’ before 1800, which means that if their behaviour had been questionable, they were only worthy of a biography after 1800. What is true for musicians in general is even more so for female musicians. In the early modern period, musicians were only worthy of a biography if their life had been irreproachable and if they had musical learning and erudition. Consequently, female musicians, who in general did not receive lessons in music theory, were effectively excluded from the circle of individuals worthy of a biography. This is borne out by a brief remark by Johann Mattheson, editor of the most extensive collection of music biographies to appear in the early modern period, the *Musikalische Ehren-Pforte* (‘Musical Triumphal Arch’) from 1740: after ‘careful consideration’, he wrote, he had decided against including women in his work.
A more favourable and inclusive picture emerges in the early specialised encyclopaedias. Already in Johann Gottfried Walther’s *Musicalisches Lexicon* (‘Musical Lexicon’) published in 1732, there are individual entries for female musicians.¹⁶ Musical lexicography thus preceded musical biography in the narrower sense; in his *Lebensbeschreibungen berühmter Musikgelehrten und Tonkünstler neuerer Zeit* (‘Biographies of Famous Musicologists and Musicians of Recent Times’), published in 1784, Johann Adam Hiller still did not consider a single woman worthy of a biography. Towards the end of the century, the composer and author Ernst Ludwig Gerber (1746–1819) deemed it necessary to include female singers in his *Historisches und biographisches Lexicon der Tonkünstler* (‘Historical and Biographical Lexicon for Musicians’) (1790/1792), not for their own sake, but because their physical beauty and charming voices had inspired male composers to write outstanding music: ‘Ladies in particular should grace this book, for many a beautiful aria has only been created thanks to a beautiful singer!’¹⁸

While in most entries for female musicians, Gerber provides only brief information about the subject and her music teachers, he presents a far more detailed portrait of Elisabeth Mara,¹⁹ for reasons he does not even try to conceal: Gerber had met the singer in Leipzig in the 1760s and had been deeply impressed by both her musical talent and her personality. He uses the encyclopaedia entry to paint a counterimage to the negative public image that had emerged after Elisabeth’s wedding to and subsequent running off with the infamous Johann Mara.

According to this image, Mara, since her Berlin period, had abandoned the female virtues of humility and modesty, which Schiebeler had emphasised in his Leipzig poem, and was now marked by ‘obstinacy’ and ‘wilfulness’. She even provoked disputes and challenged others in matters of musical competence— not only other female singers but also male composers and conductors. Gerber tries to exonerate Mara by laying all the blame on her husband for the ‘shadows’ that have fallen on her character.²¹ The ‘wilful’ singer, now quite unlike the ideal image of the German girl, had become the victim to the erotic attraction of man who tends to ‘fierceness’.²² Gerber systematically deflects the reproach against the successful singer’s increasing self-confidence, expressed not only in professional decisions but also in private choices, by referring to the bad influence of Johann Mara. The image of the ‘natural’ Leipzig girl with a sensitive heart is thus preserved:

She is not tall in person, nor is she beautiful, but is far from unpleasant in appearance. Rather, in each of her features, her excellent nature radiates, which is captivating at first sight.²³

The music writer and editor Friedrich Rochlitz also rejects Mara’s claim to autonomy with this clichéd story of a fateful encounter between female virtue
and male beauty, described in *Erinnerung an Elisabeth Mara* (‘Recollection of Elisabeth Mara’), from 1802:

She saw him at the theatre of Prince Henry. She was captivated by his beautiful playing. She heard all kinds of strange anecdotes about the bizarre man. Her own slightly bizarre nature made her even more impressed by this. Mara courted her, fierce and impetuous as he was: she hesitated. All her friends advised her against him: she became firmer. The lover urged her with alternatingly tenderness and despotism: she decided and, even against the king’s will, tied her fate forever to his.²⁴

G. E. Grosheim also takes up this topos of the *homme fatal* when he writes in his biography, published in 1823: ‘She saw and heard the truly beautiful man and admirable cellist Mara, and the arrow hit her deeply.’²⁵ Like Gerber, his intention was to prove that the virtuous girl had maintained moral integrity despite all outward appearances:

It is well known that she would better not have entered into this union. She, who had previously enjoyed the love of all, soon made many enemies, who suspected that she was embracing her husband’s way of life and his quarrels. The private life of the two is dealt with here only insofar as to protect the morality of the unhappy woman.²⁶

Also in the correspondence between Goethe and Zelter, there are traces of the narrative of the *homme fatal* and his female victim: ‘Nobly, she [Mara] never spoke of the source of her many sufferings, and that was her husband, the most depraved of all Greeks.’²⁷ The victim narrative long dominated her story: Mara’s claim to authorship of her life, both professionally and privately, was completely ignored, and her consciously made decisions were transformed into an ‘unhappy fate’.²⁸

**The Joy of Storytelling: Mara in Anecdotes**

An anecdote is a ‘short, trenchant story that is told about a real person,’²⁹ usually light-hearted and culminating in a punchline. Within the Enlightenment endeavour for the ‘rediscovery of man,’³⁰ the anecdote experienced a heyday in the eighteenth-century German-speaking world.³¹ To contemporaries, it seemed suitable for ‘representing the character of a person and thus his biography in an appropriate and authentic way.’³² While the anecdote was a popular medium of anthropological reflection in the century of Enlightenment, this form of representation, often scorned as unreliable, played a particularly important, even constitutive role within the history of the biography of
musicians. At a time when monographs (even of male musicians) were still largely non-existent, it formed ‘one of the most constant genres in writing about music’. Unseld therefore sees the anecdote as the germ of biographical writing about musicians, so much so that musician biographies may be said to derive from the anecdote form itself. In *Die Legende vom Künstler* (‘The Legend of the Artist’), to which Unseld refers, Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz revealed so-called ‘biographical “formulas”’ (‘biographische “Formeln”’) that appear in numerous anecdotes about the childhood, youth, and adulthood of artists. These formulas – recurring basic narratives, which together constitute a longer life story – include the early discovery of talent, social ascension, self-education, the child prodigy topos, the amazement of laypeople at the artist’s inexplicable virtuosity, or love as a source of inspiration. In their attempt to work out central elements in the formation of legends about artists, however, Kris and Kurz focus exclusively on male visual artists, so to what extent can the results of their investigations claim validity, first, for musicians and, second, for female musicians in particular? As Unseld has dealt extensively with the first question, I will concentrate on the second one and use the example of Mara to show which specific biographical narratives accompanied the career of this female musician.

The anecdotes circulating about Mara since the eighteenth century, which still appear in the biographies and novelistic accounts of her life in the twentieth century, generally present the well-known biographical formulas exposed by Kris and Kurz. They tell of her early talent, of her rise from poor circumstances, of extraordinary performances as a child prodigy, and of the amazement of the audience at unbelievable virtuoso performances, for example, singing the most difficult arias from a musical score. What is new in the anecdotes about this female artist, however, is at least one further biographical formula that I would like to examine more closely in the following: the combative confrontation with male authorities.

The anecdotes about Mara and her relationship to male authorities, whether secular rulers or superiors in the music business, were initially transmitted orally during the first half of the 1770s, after the singer’s arrival at the court of Frederick II. Gerber’s aforementioned encyclopaedia article from 1790 relates: ‘People tell of the various ways she teased distinguished men around that time. For example, she humorously parodied their works in her cadenzas’. Here, the author alludes to various anecdotes that even now are present in any story about Mara. Elisabeth Mara’s inclination to and indeed her pleasure in confrontations with men who were – in terms of status and competence – actually or supposedly superior to her and in stubbornly asserting her interests, sometimes even appearing impertinent, is indeed a constant in the numerous rumours and anecdotes that circulated about her in various German and foreign newspapers since the 1770s. These incidents have also left their mark in private correspondence.
For example, one of the most famous anecdotes highlighting Mara’s pleasure in competition and provocation tells of her first meeting with Frederick II, who, regarding the proposed engagement of a German singer, is supposed to have said that he would rather hear a horse neighing than a German singer singing an aria. Louis Schneider tells the story of the first encounter, which he claims Mara herself told to his father:

Without a word, he [the king] went to the piano, and seemed to take no notice of her for a quarter of an hour. This aroused the pride of the then twenty-one-year-old girl. She thought of the “horse neighing” and longed for an opportunity to change the unfavourable opinion of the dreaded Royal Art Judge in her favour. But when he would not stop playing the piano, she began to look openly at the paintings on the walls and even turned her back on the king. It is unclear whether the king noticed this or had reached the end of his piano improvisations, but he suddenly waved to the waiting girl [...].

Initially, Mara demonstrated her virtuosity, to the king’s pleasure, but then, during the adagio, she again sought confrontation:

But mischievousness went hand in hand with triumph; she remembered the king’s bad opinion of German singing, and sang the first half of the Adagio so badly, so listlessly and with such forced roughness that the king reluctantly tapped his fingers on the armrest and turned around. That was just what she had wanted. “Forgive me, Your Majesty, something is stuck in my throat, that’s why I sang so badly that one would almost mistake it for the neighing of a horse.”

Another almost farcical story had apparently already been circulating in the English press in the 1790s, before it was condensed into an anecdote by Friedrich Rochlitz in 1824. One day, when Grand Duke Paul of Russia announced his attendance at the opera, Mara called in sick in the morning. The king warned Mara, but she did not react. Since neither the king nor the singer gave in, a showdown took place:

Two hours before the beginning of the opera, a carriage appeared in front of Gertrud’s apartment, surrounded by eight dragoons. A moustached captain entered her room: ‘Madame, I must deliver you to the opera house alive or dead.’ – ‘As you can see: I’m in bed.’ – ‘If there is no other way, I’ll take you and your bed together with me.’ – Begging and defence were to no avail. Gertrud had to get up and get dressed.
But this ‘taming of the shrew’ story would not be an anecdote without an unexpected turn at the end. As if to punish the king, Mara sang with a barely audible weak voice, which, however, she brought to the highest brilliance in the last cadenza to impress the grand duke with her art, despite the unfortunate circumstances:

Gertrud ended this cadenza with such a persistent trillo, from the quietest to the strongest, from the slowest to the fastest change between the two tones, increasing, decreasing again in the same proportion and finally dying, that the delight experienced by the listener was simultaneously compounded by the fear that she would burst her lungs.44

All the early anecdotes and stories about Mara have one thing in common: they revolve around a ‘headstrong’ diva unwilling to acknowledge the prevailing order, who, by virtue of her virtuoso abilities, is able to save situations that would have ended less well without these abilities. It is also striking that, almost without exception, the bad influence of Johann Mara – or more abstractly, the ‘fatal power of love’ – was held responsible for the singer’s behaviour that deviated from the ideal image of the German girl outlined at the beginning. Rochlitz, for example, writes in his Erinnerung an Elisabeth Mara:

Now [after she had married Mara] her peace and contentment were disturbed. She took part in the quarrels her husband used to have with other members of the orchestra, and the more certainly people had predicted all this, the more eagerly she tried to justify her choice, to glorify her husband’s peculiarities, and to enforce his whims. No virtuoso opponent of her husband’s was safe from her – skills. Singing, she parodied and travestised their manners in public, winning the laughs and beating the opposition with trills and cadences. One might complain or advise calmness: but each settled dispute only produced several new ones.45

In this way, Mara’s frequent confrontations with powerful or musically competent men were placed in a purely private context: they were emotionally motivated and were not perceived as the self-positioning of an equally competent woman.

Mara’s Autobiography: A Rectification

Mara did not defend herself against this tendency to adapt her life to the needs of anecdotal narrative until late in life. This was when the anecdotes became common knowledge, distributed by the musical magazine Für Freunde der Tonkunst (‘For Music Lovers’), which was widely read by the bourgeoisie.46 Angered by
Rochlitz’s portrait, Mara, shortly after reading it, decided to write her own life story – one of the first autobiographies ever written by a professional musician. As Mara explains in her introduction, ‘if I had foreseen that people would take such an interest in my biography […], I would long before have published a true account of my artistic life, thereby converting false news into truth’. This remark serves as a justification for her use of the autobiographical mode of writing: it was imperative that ‘fake news’ be corrected. The autobiography was written between 1824, the year that Rochlitz’s portrait Gertrud Elisabeth Mara was published, and 1829, as one can deduce from the correspondence between Goethe and Zelter. It covers the years 1749 to 1793, from her childhood and youth to the years of her greatest international successes, and was first published in 1875. Why it was not completed and published during the singer’s lifetime cannot be reconstructed today. Was she unable to find the peace and quiet to finish the text to her own satisfaction? Was she undecided as to where it should be published? Or did she ultimately simply shy away from calling public attention to her life as a singer with a longer text or even a monograph from her pen – at a time when even autobiographies by male musicians were by no means a matter of course?

Mara’s autobiography can be read as an attempt to reclaim authorship of her own life or, to put it differently, as an defence against the forcing of her life story into the anecdotal narrative frame of male expectations. Thus, her central concern is to counter the circulating stories about the vicious Johann Mara, who put the life of a virtuous girl on the wrong track, with a different picture: Johann Mara was a ‘beautiful and educated man’, ‘full of talent and fine behaviour’, who courted her with perfect manners and even supported her professionally. According to her, she had not been Mara’s victim, but that of envious courtiers who, with Prince Henry and Frederick II, had tried to discredit her. She vehemently defends her headstrong partner choice: ‘It was no wonder that if such a man made every effort to win my heart, I preferred him to all others’.

Mara objects not only to the tendentious stories about her private life but also to a misrepresentation of her career and her professional skills. She contradicts the widespread view that she owes her mastery as a musician largely to men and instead emphasises the importance of female helpers and teachers; furthermore, she defends herself against clichéd portrayals of herself as a ‘self-willed prima donna’ by placing her conflicts with men in the context of professional disputes about competence. This will be illustrated in the following with some examples. Without exception, all of Mara’s biographical accounts refer to her time in Leipzig, when she sang at the Leipzig Großes Konzert under Johann Adam Hiller. Hiller himself writes in his autobiography from 1789: ‘During the four years when she sang here at the Concert […], [Mara found] the opportunity to acquire all the knowledge she still lacked to become a perfect singer’. While Hiller alludes rather discreetly to his own role, Rochlitz presents the encounter with the Leipzig Kapellmeister as a momentous turning point.
in Mara’s artistic life: ‘The time in Leipzig […] was decisive for Elisabeth. She perfected her art under Hiller’s direction.’ He thus describes Hiller’s role in the singer’s training: ‘When Hiller now studied larger vocal pieces with her, with which she was to appear in public, he first explained to her the meaning of the text and the music […]’ Mara’s first biographer, G. E. Grosheim, is even more emphatic: ‘Here [in Leipzig], under the aegis of a great and respected man […] she quickly deepened her musical education.’ Mara herself counters this depiction of Hiller’s role as follows:

Since I have seen in a recent biography how he [Hiller] is presented as speaking as if I had been a mere student, completely dependent upon him, I feel compelled not to grant him even a modicum of credit (as far as my art is concerned). Where would he have found the knowledge to educate such a singer as I was?

In contrast to the authors of the biographical accounts mentioned above, she emphasises her own responsibility for her competences:

Nature has equipped me with all that is necessary to become a perfect singer: health, strength, brilliant voice, great range, pure intonation, agile larynx, a lively, passionate, sensitive character. Nevertheless, I work as if I had none of these. Perseverance and diligence made me a true artist, for it wasn’t enough for me just to be a singer. I practiced singing for at least four hours a day, I looked for arias written by the best masters, which, together with Tosi’s singing method, laid the foundation for my subsequent fame. The remaining lessons were provided by two language teachers, a German writing teacher, a piano teacher and a dance instructor.

The emphasis on self-education, however, is, as mentioned above, a recurring formula in musical biographies, which means that Mara, by presenting large parts of her education as self-taught, puts herself – consciously or unconsciously – in line with male colleagues. The fact that she emphasises her own agency in her education so much does not mean that she denies having had teachers at all; on the contrary, she would rather give credit to renowned teachers ‘than to be called a natural-born artist’. During her time in Berlin and on her own initiative, she took lessons in thorough bass from the ‘renowned contrapuntist’ Johann Philipp Kirnberger (1721–1783), a fact that is mentioned neither by Grosheim nor Rochlitz. Mara then concludes the account of her training and education in an almost mocking manner: ‘I was also acquainted with some learned men who were most kindly interested in forming my mind a little.’

In contrast to the biographies about her, Mara’s autobiography also emphasises the great influence of female helpers on her career – partly because they
gave professional advice; partly because they provided practical support. For example, she tells how a ‘Lady’ in Antwerp lent Mara her own singing master to teach her ‘scales and solfeggio.’

With respect to the influence of professional female musicians, Mara dedicates a passage to the widowed Maria Antonia of Saxony (1724–1780), who had made a name for herself as a composer of operas and a librettist and who brought Mara to the Dresden court in 1767. In Gerber’s, Grosheim’s, and Rochlitz’s biographical accounts, Maria Antonia’s role is reduced to her positive influence on Mara’s initially unflattering appearance. According to these three authors, the elegant electress had taught the inexperienced younger singer refined poses and gestures as well as an appropriate dress style. In Mara’s own narration, however, Maria Antonia is assigned a central role in her musical education:

The electress received me kindly, and when I expressed my concern that I had never appeared on stage, she took it upon herself to teach me. The music was of her own composition. […] The ability to sing recitatives, a skill with which I was still very much unfamiliar, I owe entirely to her. […] Singers can be judged by the way in which they execute the recitatives.

The autobiography highlights the self-confidence she received from her profound musical education – and not only from her training in singing. Mara talks about competing female singers who have not enjoyed such an education and explains that the main reason for her overwhelming success in Venice was her knowledge of harmony, which gave her greater freedom in improvising than her competitor Brigida Banti (1757–1806), who was uneducated in music theory:

This was, I thought, a good opportunity to display my genius and knowledge in harmony; so I had my bravura aria, which left room for improvisation, put in the score, with four open lines, so that I could make four different variations without fear of dissonances. This actually made my triumph in Venice, because Banti, with her beautiful voice and good singing, was not musically gifted, and always sang her arias as she had learned them by heart […].

Finally, let us return to one of the most popular Mara anecdotes, in which eight – sometimes even twelve – dragoons carried her in her bed to the opera to demonstrate to the Russian grand duke all her virtuosity in a single drawn-out trill after a weak vocal performance. Mara has nothing but scorn for this burlesque:

As if half a gendarme had not been enough to carry such a tiny woman as me? The biographer probably wanted to be funny, but did not consider that he made a fool of the great Frederick in doing so.
In Mara’s own account, the story of the extended trill is placed in a completely different context, namely that of musical ability. As illustrated by various examples in the collective volume *Per ben vestir la virtuosa* (‘To Dress Up the Virtuoso’), it was crucial for eighteenth-century opera composers to write their arias in a way that brought out the singer’s best qualities. In acknowledgement of her exceptional musical prowess, Frederick II had granted Mara the privilege to sing some of her own arias in the operas she performed. However, when Johann Friedrich Reichardt (1752–1814) came into Frederick II’s employment in 1775, he took issue with this arrangement and forced Mara to sing his arias instead. Mara comments:

So I had to learn how to sing Mr. Reichardt’s arias. This, however, was not to his advantage, because I sang every single note, but as woodenly as they had been written, and when I came to the cadenza of the bravura aria, I held the note for a very long time, thereby keeping the audience in suspense and finally started singing eight bars of the theme of the aria […], ending with a long trill. Reichardt, who had struck the second-inversion chord, could not dissolve it since his hands dropped. […] One can imagine how Reichardt’s opera failed to please, for if the first singer does not lift the opera, everything is lost.  

In this little counter-narration, Mara clearly expressed her claim of being able to equal or surpass many men in terms of musical competence. In her autobiography, she repeatedly demonstrates that men can profit from her professional competence, for example, in another episode concerning her collaboration with Reichardt:

I took the aria [that Reichardt had composed], went over it, and erased some forty measures – he had the fault of never being able to finish. He exclaimed: ‘My God! I have spent a whole night on it, and a woman like her erases it in five minutes!’

Mara was well aware that the competence demonstrated in such episodes had nothing to do with intuition or natural sensitivity. Rather, it was the result of a comprehensive education and of continuous training. Even so, in the portraits and biographical notices devoted to her, her ‘self-will’ (*Eigensinn*), her ‘tenacity’, and her extraordinary musical knowledge were repeatedly turned into material for spiteful anecdotes with latent and sometimes overt misogynist tendencies. In her autobiography, which she unfortunately did not complete, Mara rectifies widespread falsehoods about her professional and private life. But the crucial concern of this autobiographical project finally lies on a metalevel: Mara writes not only against individual false statements but also against the reality-distorting power of the anecdotal narrations, which constantly forces female artists to
fit into ready-made moulds – of the seduced, innocent girl, of the tamed shrew, of the impertinent diva – but which completely fail in the narration of female professionalism. In a musical culture in which women were only intended to play the role of performing artists, Mara’s claim to competence could not fail to grate. It is not surprising therefore that Friedrich Rochlitz concludes in his Erinnerung an Elisabeth Mara: ‘Mara has always been more masculine than feminine; she never fully conformed, or did not want to conform, to those things that give a woman charm.’
Notes

1. Unless otherwise mentioned, the translations are mine.
5. The opinion that musicians owe their abilities to a God-given, i.e. natural, talent, which must first be brought to perfection through diligence, i.e. through personal effort and willpower, is a frequent topos in the biography of musicians in early modern times. See Wilhelm Seidel, ‘Naturell – Unterricht – Fleiß. Telemanns Lebensläufe und der Geniebegriff des 18. Jahrhunderts’, in Joachim Kremer, Wolf Hobohm and Wolfgang Ruf (eds.), Biographie und Kunst als historiographisches Problem, Hildesheim, Olms, 2004 (= Telemann-Konferenzberichte 14), 90–100.
7. In his Allgemeine Theorie der Schönen Künste, the art theoretician Johann Georg Sulzer states that his son-in-law Graff could penetrate the soul of the portrayed person: ‘I have noticed more than once that various persons painted by our Graff, who has an excellent gift for representing the whole physiognomy true to nature, can barely stand the sharp and sensitive gazes he throws at them; because these seem to penetrate the innermost part of the soul’ (‘Ich habe mehr als einmal bemerkt, daß verschiedene Personen, die sich von unserem Graf [sic], der vorzüglich die Gabe hat, die ganze Physionomie in der Wahrheit der Natur darzustellen, haben mahlen lassen, die scharfen und empfindungsvollen Blicke [sic], die er auf sie wirft, kaum vertragen können; weil jeder bis in das Innere der Seele zu dringen scheinet’) (Johann Georg Sulzer, ‘Portrait’, in Sulzer, Allgemeine Theorie der Schönen Künste, vol. 2, Leipzig, 1774, 920).
9. This is particularly striking in comparison with the portrait of the actress Esther Charlotte Brandes (1746–1786), almost the same age, who poses in the role of Ariadne of Naxos. See Markus Fehlmann and Birgit Verwiebe (eds.), Anton Graff. Gesichter einer Epoche. Für das Museum Oskar Reinhart, Winterthur, Munich, Hirmer, 2013, 189.
10. This portrait, which was long thought to depict the Berlin court actress Auguste Stich-Creliner, could with certainty be attributed to the Berlin painter in the course of


15. Johann Mattheson, Vorbericht zur musikalischen Ehrenpforte, in Mattheson, Grundlage einer Ehren-Pforte, woran der Tüchtigsten Capellmeister, Componisten, Musikgelehrten, Tonkünstler etc. Leben, Wercke, Verdienste etc. erscheinen sollen, Hamburg, Verlegung des Verfassers, 1740, x: ‘Nevertheless, a certain French woman opera singer almost tempted me, because of a considerably good piece of work, to grant her a place in this Ehrenpforte; but after careful consideration it failed to happen’ (‘Bald hätte mich gleichwohl auch eine gewisse französische Operistin verführen, wegen eines beträchtlich-guten Wercks, ihr etwa ein Plätzchen in dieser Ehrenpforte einzuräumen; allein nach reifer Überlegung ist es unterblieben’).

16. The entry for Maria Elisabeth Rings is an example: ‘Ringin (widowed Rhodin), a learned daughter of the famous professor Rings of Frankfurst an der Oder, has not only excelled in poetry, but along with Mathesi also in Latin and French, has been a good musician, and also knew something about painting’ (‘Ringin (verwitwete Rhodin), eine gelehrte Tochter des berühmten Profess. Rings zu Frankfurth an der Oder, hat nicht nur in der Poesie exciellirt, sondern auch nebst der Mathesi die lateinische und Frantzösische Sprache, ist dabei eine gute Musica gewesen, und hat auch etwas in der Mahlerley verstanden’). See also das Frauenzimmer-Lexicon, which refers to the well-known lexicon for women by Gottlieb Siegmund Corvinus (1715, 1739, 1773). See Johann Gottfried Walther and Friederike Ramm (ed.), Musikalisches Lexicon oder Musicalische Bibliothec. Studienausgabe im Neusatz des Textes und der Noten, Kassel, Bärenreiter 2001, 476.


20. ‘Schatten’ (ibid., 858).

21. ‘Heftigkeit’ (ibid., 860).


24. ‘Sie sah und hörte den wahrhaft schönen Mann und bewunderungswürdigen Cellisten Mara, und der Pfeil hatte tief getroffen’ (G. E. Grosheim, Das Leben der Künstlerin Mara. Cassel, in der Luckhardt’schen Hofbuchhandlung, 1823, 20. This seventy-page biography may be considered the first biography on Mara in book form.)

25. ‘Es ist nur zu bekannt, wie wohl sie gethan haben würde, diese Verbindung nicht einzugehen. Sie, die zuvor Aller Liebe genoß, machte sich bald durch den Verdacht, sie nehme an ihres Gatten Lebensart und seinen Zwistigkeiten Antheil, viele Feinde. Das Privatleben Beyder gehört nur in so fern hierher, als die Moralität der unglücklichen Frau dadurch geschützt wird’ (ibid., 19).


30. The conductor Johann Adam Hiller, Gertrud Elisabeth Schmeling’s patron in Leipzig, played no small part in the popularisation of this form of narrative by publishing Anekdoten zur Lebensgeschichte großer Regenten und berühmter Staatsmänner (‘Anecdotes on the Lives of Great Regents and Statesmen’) between 1766 and 1772.

'IT WASN'T ENOUGH FOR ME JUST TO BE A SINGER'


35. 'Nucleus des biographischen Schreibens über Musiker und Musikerinnen im 18 Jahrhundert' (ibid.).


37. Unseld distinguishes a total of fifteen central formulas, which are also important for the biography of musicians. See Unseld, *Biographie und Musikgeschichte*, 123–126.

38. These include the historical novel *Die Primadonna Friedrichs des Großen* ('The Prima Donna of Frederick the Great') by Oskar Anwand from 1930 and the novelistic biography *Die Mara. Das Leben einer berühmten Sängerin* ('Mara. The Life of a Famous Singer') by Rosa Kaulitz-Niedeck from 1929, both of which have been re-edited by Wieland Giebel in 2011 and 2012 (second edition 2015) and have appeared with the Berlin Story Verlag.


40. This bon mot is quoted in almost every account about Mara, but there is no certain proof that Frederick actually uttered it.


44. 'Gertrud schloß diese Cadenz mit einem so ausdauernden, vom leisen bis zum stärksten, vom langsamen bis zum schnellsten Wechsel der beiden Töne gesteigerten, in gleichem Verhältniß wieder abnehmenden und endlich ersterbenden Trillo, daß der Zuhörer, neben dem Entzücken, zugleich die Angst fühlte, es möchte ihr die Brust zersprengen' (ibid.).

45. 'Nun war ihre Ruhe und Zufriedenheit gestört. Sie nahm Theil an den Zwistigkeiten, in denen ihr Gatte stets mit andern Mitgliedern der Kapelle stand, und je bestimmter man ihr alles vorausgesagt hatte, desto eifriger suchte sie ihre Wahl zu rechtfertigen,

Singend parodirte und travestirte sie seine Manier öffentlich, gewann die Lacher, und schlug die Opposition mit Trillern und Kadenzen. Man klagte, man verwies zur Ruhe: aber Ein so beygelegter Zwist erzeugte nur mehrere neue’ (Rochlitz, ‘Erinnerung an Elisabeth Mara’, 485).

46. In total, four volumes were published, which reached three editions by 1868.


48. ‘She wrote to me two years ago: she was in the process of writing her autobiography, since only half of her was known, but by no means the right half – we will see’ (‘Sie schrieb mir vor zwei Jahren: sie sey im Begriff, ihren Lebenslauf zu schreiben, da man von ihr nur Halbes, keineswegs aber das Rechte wisse, was wir denn abwarten wollen’) (Carl Friedrich Zelter to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, about February 22/23, 1831, in Hecker (ed.), Der Briefwechsel zwischen Goethe und Zelter, vol. 3: 1828–1832, 390–393).


50. Ibid., 268.


52. ‘Der Aufenthalt in Leipzig […] war für Elisabeth entscheidend. Sie machte unter Hillers Leitung ihre hohe Schule’ (Rochlitz, ‘Erinnerung an Elisabeth Mara’, 470).

53. ‘Studirte nun Hiller mit ihr größere Gesangsstücke ein, mit denen sie öffentlich hervortreten sollte: so erklärte er ihr erst den Sinn des Textes und der Musik […]’ (ibid., 59).

54. ‘Hier [in Leipzig] war es, wo sie unter der Aegide eines großen und anerkannten Mannes […] ihrer höheren Bildung mit schnelleren Schritten entgegen ging’ (Grosheim, Das Leben der Künstlerin Mara, 11f).

55. ‘Seitdem ich aus einer ganz neulich herausgekommenen Biographie ersehen habe, daß man […] ihn so sprechen läßt, als wäre ich eine von ihm ganz abhängige Schülerin, so sehe ich mich dadurch gezwungen, ihm auch nicht einen Schatten von Ehre (was meine Kunst anbetrifft) einzuräumen. Wo hätte er auch sollen die Kenntnisse hernehmen, eine solche Sängerin, als ich war, zu bilden?’ (Mara, ‘Selbstbiographie’, 258).

56. ‘Die Natur hat mir mit allem, was zu einer vollkommnen Sängerin nöthig ist, begünstigt, Gesundheit, Kraft, brillante Stimme, großen Umfang, reine Intonation, geläufigen Hals, einen lebhaften, leidenschaftlichen, gefühlvollen Charakter; dem ungeachtet arbeite ich eben so, als hätte ich nichts von alle dem; Beharrlichkeit und Fleiß mußten mich also zur wahren Künstlerin machen, denn es war mir nicht genug, bloß Sängerin zu heißien. / Ich übte mich wenigstens vier Stunden des Tags im Singen, suchte also Arien von den besten Meistern, welche dann, nebst Tosis Singlehre, den Grundstein zu meinem folgenden Ruhm legten. Die übrigen Stunden wurden durch zwei Sprachlehrer, einen deutschen Schreibmeister, einen Klavier- und Tänzlehrer besetzt’ (ibid., 259).
57. For example, she also downplays the influence of the singer Paradisi, who is mentioned in many biographies as one of her most important teachers. According to Mara, Paradisi had not given her more than four weeks of lessons (ibid., 256).

58. 'erstrebenswerter als eine Natur-Künstlerin zu heißen' (ibid.).

59. 'berühmten Contrapunctisten' (ibid., 269).

60. 'Ich war auch mit einigen gelehrten Männern bekannt, welche sich gütigst angelegen sein ließen, meinen Geist ein wenig zu bilden' (ibid., 260).

61. 'Scalen und Solfeggiren' (ibid., 253).

62. Ibid., 254.

63. See Gerber, 'Mara (Elisabeth), geborné Schmehling', 858f.; Grosheim, Das Leben der Künstlerin Mara, 13f.; Rochlitz, 'Gertrud Elisabeth Mara', 68f. Mara – as she was a German singer – appears as unfavorably or poorly dressed for important events in many Mara biographies. This can be seen as a topos.


65. 'Ich glaubte hier Gelegenheit zu haben, mein Genie und Kenntniß in der Harmonie am Tage zu legen; ich ließ mir also meine Bravour-Arie, welche offen für Veränderungen geschrieben war, in Partitur setzen, mit vier offenen Linien, wodurch in vier verschiedene Veränderungen machen konnte, ohne zu befürchten, daß ich in der Harmonie anstoßen würde. Dieses machte eigentlich meinen Triumph in Venedig, denn die Banti mit ihrer schönen Stimme und gutem Singen war nicht musicalisch, und sang ihre Arien immer so, wie sie dieselben auswendig gelernt hatte [...] ' (ibid., 291).

66. 'Als wenn nicht ein halber Gendarme genug gewesen wäre, sich einer solchen kleinen Frau als ich zu bemächtigen? Der Biographist hat vermutlich wollen witzig seyn, hat aber nicht bedacht, daß er den großen Friedrich dadurch lächerlich gemacht hat' (ibid., 270).


68. 'Ich musste mich also bequemen, des Herrn Reichardts Arien zu singen. Er gewann aber nichts dabei, denn ich sang sie Note für Note, aber so steif als sie geschrieben waren, und als ich zur Cadenz der Bravour-Arie kam, so hielt ich den Ton sehr lange aus, spannte dadurch die Erwartung des Publicums und fing endlich an, acht Takte vom Thema der Arie [...] zu singen, und endigte mit einem langen Triller. Reichardt, welcher den Quartsext-Accord angeschlagen hatte, konnte denselben nicht auflösen, denn ihm fielen die Hände herunter. [...] Man kann sich vorstellen, daß Reichardts Oper nicht gefiel, denn wenn die erste Sängerin die Oper nicht hebt, so ist alles verloren' (Mara, 'Selbstbiographie', 274f).

69. 'Ich nahm die Arie [die Reichardt komponiert hatte], sah dieselbe durch, und strich einige 40 Takt, sein Fehler war, daß er nie das Ende finden konnte. Er rief aus: "Mein Gott! Eine Sache, worüber man eine ganze Nacht zugebracht hat, streicht eine solche Frau in fünf Minuten." (ibid., 274).

70. 'Mara ist immer mehr männlich, als weiblich gewesen; hat sich nie ganz in das, was eine Frau, ohne andere Verdienste, als weibliche, liebenswürdig macht, finden können oder finden mögen' (Rochlitz, 'Erinnerung an Elisabeth Mara, 488).