"It ain't over until the fat lady sings"

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Some quotes may be hard to date, but the above expression can be dated to exactly 10th March 1976, when the sports journalist Ralph Carpenter used it to describe his desperation at the loss of an important game by his favourite team. Carpenter may not have known a lot about opera, but he seemed to have a feeling that the real ‘end’ is when Wagner’s Valkyrie, armed with a shield and sword, sings herself into eternity.

So, where does the idea that opera singers have obesity stem from? History is full of examples of singers, both male and female, who are considerably overweight. In the 19th century the opera house audience put more emphasis on singing ability than appearance, and so overweight singers were the norm. But, on the other hand, a certain degree of credibility is essential as it is difficult to imagine Violetta in La Traviata or Mimi in La Bohème appearing on stage coughing, singing and eventually dying of tuberculosis, yet obese.

Nellie Melba is an interesting example of an opera diva with a weight problem. Her real name was Helen Porter Mitchell; she was born in a suburb of Melbourne and took her stage name from her hometown. Melba was one of the great stars of her time and even had a crater on the planet Venus named after her. Later in her life, pictures show a middle-aged lady with obesity.

Melba’s gastronomic interest brought her into the fine cuisine cook books because of two dishes. When she visited London, Melba’s favourite place to dine was the Savoy Hotel. The restaurant’s head chef, Escoffier, even dedicated a dish to her. Escoffier created Pêche Melba: peeled and purged ripe white peaches in vanilla syrup, covered with a purée of strawberries on a bed of vanilla ice cream. Melba Toast was actually first designed for Marie Ritz, the wife of the Savoy Hotel’s manager. By placing thin slices of bread into an oven to dry, Escoffier made a type of toast for Madame Ritz when she was trying to lose weight as the thin bread was made into a crunchy toast with fewer calories. After the age of 30 Melba was always trying to be thinner and the toast eventually bore her name. The problem with Melba Toast, however, was that it was often used to spread pâté or cheese on top, counteracting the low caloric approach as was originally intended.

Melba’s life was full of the conflicts that one would connect with truly great divas. Behind the stage there were intrigues, complications, negotiations, accusations of contract breaches, jealousy and all the ingredients that the public would associate with the world of opera.

Though the years did not diminish Melba’s personality, they took their inevitable toll on her physical being. Melba became increasingly overweight and critics commented that by the age of 60 much of her physical attraction had gone. Portrait painters found that outside the stage she was “definitely

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dumped” and had even a “rather commonplace look”. In fact, one portrait of Melba uses another woman as a model for the diva. The painter’s friend had a housekeeper, who he thought was an elegant, tall and dignified lady - traits the painter thought a diva should have. The housekeeper did not, in fact, at all resemble Melba.

The great Caruso sang at the New York Metropolitan in 1910 and the critics were merciless: “One cannot avoid noticing that Mr Caruso, who obviously has not spent his last summer trying to reduce weight, seemed to be an incredible appearance”. Despite this, everybody enjoyed hearing him sing.

In more recent times, a well-known opera singer, Deborah Voigt, lost the title role in Strauss’s Ariadne on Naxos as she could not fit into the black dress that was seen as a prerequisite for the role. Voigt accepted the criticism, had bariatric surgery, lost 35 kilograms and made a great comeback, although with a different repertoire. Pictures online now show her as a very slim lady.

Monserrat Caballé is literally one of the great opera sopranos. She was mostly known for her bel canto singing, above all for the operas by Bellini, Rossini, Verdi and Donizetti. When her voice changed with age she focused on more dramatic characters such as Norma and Tosca. Her technique has been described as superb and among other characteristics she was infamous for her pianissimos, which were breath-taking. “Over-indulgence” appears as a description of her later years, photos showing her to be clearly overweight. However, Caballé had an unusual fate and went to prison in Spain because of tax evasion.

Maria Callas was another of the great opera singers of the 20th century and, like Caballé, her repertoire was bel canto. Her voice was exceptional and could easily be recognized as it was so distinct. In the early years of her career, Callas was not only a heavy woman, but she was also tall. With a height of 174 centimeters and weight of 91 kilograms, she had an imposing stage presence. Eventually Callas realised that she had to do something about her weight as she became more and more uncomfortable which affected her singing.

Over the course of 1953 and early 1954, Callas lost almost 36 kilograms, turning herself into what someone called "possibly the most beautiful lady on the stage". After such a dramatic weight loss, the public now viewed Callas as an "astonishing, striking woman" who looked as though she had been born into that 'slender and graceful figure'. Various rumours spread regarding her weight loss methods, ranging from strange diets to tapeworm ingestion, however Callas countered these accusations and stated that she lost the weight by eating a sensible low-calorie diet.

Some believe that the loss of such body mass made it difficult for her to support her voice, triggering the vocal strain that became apparent in the late 1950s, while others believe the weight loss brought out a new 'softness and femininity' in her voice, as well as greater self-confidence.

Luciano Pavarotti was undoubtedly one of the greatest tenors of our time. He had a very normal upbringing; he played soccer, worked as a teacher and later as a clerk in an insurance company. He made enough money to take singing lessons and became a superb tenor. He was called “the King of high C” since he was said to be the first who managed all high Cs in Donizetti’s opera La fille du régiment. With time Pavarotti became incredibly obese, weighing up to 160 kilograms. However, in 2006 he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, a tumour well known to be associated with obesity. Despite several operations Pavarotti died, weighing 69 kilograms.

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Singers with obesity: an obsolete concept?

The list of opera singers with weight problems could be much longer and only a few examples are given here, but the debate continues. Are voices and music what mainly creates the performance or is appearance just as important? In a press statement the Covent Garden Royal Opera House concluded: Any product is a mixture of musical, dramatic and visual impressions and every casting means that both voice and appearance must be evaluated for a certain character.

Is there a reason why a greater body mass might improve a singer’s voice? Some have argued that body size affects the diaphragm muscle and aids respiration. It has even been argued that singing releases cell structures emitting appetite regulating hormones, making energy restriction even more difficult for singers. However, most experts tend to agree that the life of any artist on the stage is a stressful life. Weight problems could be a reasonable reaction to these extreme demands. It is not easy to go to bed with just a cup of tea and a biscuit after a great show. Is it only natural to wind down with food and wine to relax after a stressful day?

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JOHN SWALES LECTURE

We are pleased to announce that this year’s John Swales Lecture was delivered by Professor Neil Poulter, from Imperial College London (ISH Immediate Past President).

The John Swales Lecture (inaugurated in April 2012) is an initiative of The Department of Cardiovascular Sciences, University of Leicester, UK to honour the memory of Professor John Swales. He played a pivotal role in developing medical education and in improving health care in the city and county, was a leading Leicester-born medical academic and the first Professor of Medicine at the University of Leicester.

Pictured left: Professor Thompson Robinson - Head of the Department of Cardiovascular Sciences, University of Leicester
Pictured right: Professor Neil Poulter