The figure of the female singer was the object of intense interest during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the United States. This period, as Elizabeth Johns points out, saw a “national obsession with singing”\(^1\). But, while singers of both sexes were celebrated and discussed, praised and pampered, it was the female singer who attracted the greatest cultural attention. Given contemporary sensitivities about women in public life, some of the debates surrounding this figure were predictable. The singer raised questions about the spaces, private or public, in which a woman might appropriately display powers understood as inherent or God-given. The successful singer was uncomfortably positioned, having, on the one hand, a duty to use a gift perceived to be peculiarly consonant with the feminine and, on the other, experiencing exposure to the extraordinary publicity surrounding popular female singers. But these debates stretched beyond and outside contemporary preoccupations about women’s place. The figure of the female singer, so central to the highly popular performances of the opera, oratorio and lieder of the era, the sound that she made, and its expansive power gave her a further cultural resonance. In this essay, I want to consider how three fictions – Rebecca Harding Davis’ “The Wife’s Story” (1864), Mary Hallock Foote’s “The Fate of a Voice” (1886) and Willa Cather’s *The Song of the Lark* (1915) – address themselves to the figure of the female singer, and the questions of agency and power that this female figure raised.\(^2\)

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2. Rebecca Harding Davis, “The Wife’s Story” (1864), rpt. in *Life in the Iron Mills and Other Stories*, ed. Tillie Olsen, New York: The Feminist Press, 1972, 177-222; Mary Hallock Foote, “The Fate of a Voice” (1886), rpt. in *The Last Assembly Ball and the*
The question of visibility is germane to my discussion. I want to discuss the interesting and unusual way in which the singer’s publicly visible body is visualized and described before going on to consider the disposition of the singer’s body in space. But I will also explore the significance of audibility, the sound made by these female singers and their power to fill space with sound. This too is critical to the significance of this figure.

One of the most striking aspects of the way in which the female singer was represented was the explicitness with which her body was described. Richard Leppart has proposed the general argument that “whatever else music is ‘about,’ it is inevitably about the body”. If the “product” of music “lacks all concreteness and disappears without trace”, the “visual experience of its production is crucial to musicians and audience alike for locating and communicating the place of music and musical sound within society and culture”.

We think of Gilded Age Americans as preoccupied with what Miriam Bailin describes as the “rigid inhibition of physical and emotional exposure”, but bodily power and its public display was the sine qua non of operatic and concert performance. Thus, one of the most pressing questions raised by the female singer during this period had to do with the relationship between the singer herself – this female with a mind, a soul, a career – and the powerful sound made by her body. Was the spirit of the woman projected into her singing or was she marginal to the sound that her body was able to make? As Thomas L. Riis suggests, there was a well-developed discussion of the singer as a kind of vessel, a “performing object, a music box so to speak … a singing body”. But the possibility that the voice produced by physical activity existed...


