

Beyond the Notes Lecture Series: Before Adele, Beyonce, Katy, Nicki and Taylor:
Handel's Duelling Divas Cuzzoni and Faustina

Abstract:

Diva rivalries and diva beefs are omnipresent in popular music culture today. Taylor vs. Katy, or Nicki vs. Iggy become headlines, and fans pore over the lyrics of their songs to see who dissed whom. The goal, or at least the practical effect of these rivalries is to drum up interest in the artists and their songs, and thus to increase revenue.

There is nothing new in this. Rival divas have featured on European stages for centuries, and the motivation has often been the same: to stimulate sales. In this paper I discuss one of the most famous diva rivalries in the history of opera, the competition between Handel's celebrated sopranos Francesca Cuzzoni and Faustina Bordoni. The two, who were called the Rival Queens from the moment they first performed together in London in 1726, were frequently portrayed and mocked in English pamphlets, plays, satirical engravings and operas in the 1720s and 1730s. This paper explores these sources and shows how the term "rival queens" came to have a life of its own, becoming a code term for Italian opera singers and their flaws.