

## Two Books on 19th century Singers

By Russell Burdekin

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Kenneth Stern, *Giuditta Pasta: A Life on the Lyric Stage*. (Palm Springs: Operaphile Press, 2011), <http://www.operanostalgia.be/html/Pasta.html>

Susie Timms, *Therese Tietjens: Last rose of Victorian opera*. (County Collegiate, 2016). <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Therese-Tietjens-Last-Victorian-Opera/dp/0955066778>

Kenneth Stern's book appears to be the first book in English devoted to Pasta and was a very pleasant surprise. Stern has a background in lecturing on opera and wrote the Grove entry for Pasta so clearly is *au fait* with his subject. Overall, it was an easy and absorbing read that took the reader through a straightforward chronology of her life, with three final chapters summarising her life, her artistry and her voice. Aside from a little repetition – we learn several times that Mozart was not one of her favoured composers – the author has kept his eye firmly on his subject. One valuable feature was the number of quotes from letters, diaries, newspapers etc.. Not only did this provide a first-hand, multifaceted view of the singer but gave variety to the text and really brought to life such events as her first performance in England of Mayr's *Medea in Corinto*. The book is well supported with over 1000 references and came over as a reliable and authoritative source. Except for a few typos, I noticed nothing obviously incorrect, although I made no attempt to cross check. There are a number of appendices including lists of performances and her 1826 contract with the King's Theatre in which she was guaranteed £1000 for her benefit, more than a labourer might earn in 20 years. Given that it is a very well-produced hardback book of almost 600 pages, including an extensive index, \$49, while not cheap, does not seem exorbitant (it worked out at under £50 with postage using [abebooks.co.uk](http://abebooks.co.uk)). The only slight drawback is that the printing has not done full justice to the many illustrations.

The other book, on the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century soprano Therese Tietjens, was altogether less successful. Timms has already produced one book on Titiens (as she was called in that account) in 2005 but this one is more detailed, although often straying outside its remit. Timms must have devoted an enormous amount of effort in researching it but for some reason has chosen to make little use of supporting references and direct quotes or to provide a bibliography. One also suspects that there is a certain amount of fictionalisation. For example, at Tietjens' London debut, it is stated that "Each time her powerful voice soared above the orchestra she seemed to grow in stature and confidence" (p.31-32) but there is no indication as to whether this is a paraphrase of someone's comments or the author's imagined presence at the event. The result is a book that cannot claim to be an authoritative history but is too detailed to read easily as a fluent, "popular", account. It is a nicely produced paperback and the price comes in at just under £20 from Amazon.