

Athenaeum Society
Submitted by Mark Schweizer
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Mister President, Mister Secretary, Dr. Rowlett and members of the Athenaeum Society. After listening to and enjoying immensely the papers over the past year I have come to the conclusion that I have been brought among you to bring some semblance of culture into your midst... To enlighten you on some of the intricacies of music appreciation ... And to finally bring to an end your blissful ignorance in a 30 page paper (with musical examples) entitled Vocal Ornamentation Practices in Early Opera: 1637-1742. (*Gasp of horror and groans from the audience.*) Just kidding! Well partly kidding. A paper like that would guarantee permanent expulsion as well as possible disfigurement in almost any lecture hall in the country. So although the subject is still opera, I have chosen to title my paper on the 150 year reign of the operatic male soprano

Loosing Your Marbles or A Cut Above

I have spent a goodly portion of my musical career involved in that art form called opera, a genre viewed as enchantment by a few but as capital punishment by so many others, and I have decided to offer you a view which few have seen (or dared contemplate). A journey, if you will, into the very bowels of 17th century music drama only to emerge to glance upward at its seamy underbelly and inhale the stench of musical corruption. There will be those of you who writhe in disgust. There will be those of you who will have to leave the room. There is no shame in that. We are, after all, just men. Men who are striving to enrich our meager lives ... to bring some intellectual meaning into our existence. And so, without further flowery introductions — I offer you THIS ... the actual subject of my paper.

We are about to listen to a recording of the voice of Alessandro Moreschi - born in 1858 and died in 1922. He was the featured soloist at the Sistine Chapel for many years and these recordings were made in 1903. Although once the possessor of a beautiful voice, Moreschi was not a great performer - and remember - this is a man in his mid-forties that we are hearing. A man, definitely past his prime, as all church sopranos pass their prime - but a man who is important in music history because this recording is the only aural record of the "surgically altered" or "castrato" voice.

In listening to this recording it may be well to remember that Alessandro Moreschi was trained in traditions of singing that have long since disappeared, and so some of his vocal technique may sound rather unusual to the modern ear. It should be pointed out that many of Professor Moreschi's seemingly imperfect vocal attacks are actually grace notes, executed upward from below the note. These accents were commonly used for emphasis in the school of singing in which Moreschi was trained. (*Play recording: Ave Maria - Bach/Gounod*)

Let your women keep silence in the churches," St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians. And he echoed the injunction in his epistle to St. Timothy: "Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over men, but to be in silence." St. Paul, in the view of contemporary theology, meant simply that women should not participate in theological disputation, or presume to teach men. He is not thought to have been unappreciative of women's contributions to the early Christian communities. But the interpretation of the Church of Rome was absolute, and women were forbidden, accordingly, not only to speak in church, but also to sing. Delighted, possibly with the ensuing serenity, the Church extended the prohibition to the theater also; and this later restriction endured, in Rome, at least, well into the 18th century.

The absence of the female voice in the music of the church was accommodated easily enough in the relatively simple strains of the Gregorian Chant of the Middle Ages. One could make do with men and boys. But with the added complexity of the multiple-voiced song in the 15th century, it was discovered that boy's voices were not strong enough to hold up the treble lines and that the musicianship required for performing such exacting music was such that the boys, by the time they had acquired it, were either boys no longer or had, at best, no more than a year or so to go. Obviously this was a problem which offered itself a rather singular solution - A drastic surgical procedure which one writer of the day rather thoughtfully terms "the singular disadvantage of castration."

I'd like to mention, at this point, a rather unique group which appears in Florence, Italy in 1573 — The Florentine Camarata.

A Camarata is a typical Renaissance intellectual club which were popular throughout Italy. These were groups of men that had a like interest and that met periodically to discuss ideas and present papers to each other. (Sounds pretty scary, doesn't it?) The Florentine Camarata was that group which was interested in drama and music. This group met for 17 years at the home Giovanni Bardi, a rich Florentine and from 1573 to 1590, these men talked about and discussed how the expressivity of music defined their culture. They were most enthralled with Greek drama and the possibility that Greek drama could have been sung. The Florentine Camarata, over the course of their discussions, eventually - in effect - invented the art form — for better or worse — which we call opera. And it is one of these men, Jacopo Peri, who has the distinction of writing the first opera in 1600. This was a new and exciting art form for people without cable and believe it or not, people loved it.

By the middle 1600s, there was no escaping opera. It was everywhere, and every self-respecting city and aristocratic court came to have at least one opera house. (Rich noblemen liked to show off by having two or three.) The late 17th century and the first half of the 18th was the time of what one historian calls the "fullest flowering" of Italian Baroque opera. Also flowering - vocally, at least, if in no other way - was that singer peculiar to the period - one might even say unique - known as the castrato.

The practice of castration is as old as mankind. In earlier times it had been inflicted as punishment or imposed upon slaves to make them suitable as companions, tutors and servants to highly placed females and as guardians of harems. It was sometimes used as a ritual sacrifice and has figured in the beliefs of certain religious sects. But it had never before been used systematically to preserve a boy's treble voice into manhood. It probably happened by accident (someone carelessly stepped on a rake or something), but somewhere along the way it was discovered that castrated boys could develop into remarkable adult singers, with voices that combined the bright clarity of their boyish sound with the muscle and lung power of a grown man. The castrati also came to be known by other, more euphemistic terms, such as *evirati*, which is Italian for "unmanned." (Nowadays we talk about "unmanned space probes," but that's not quite the same thing.)

The castrato represents what might be considered the ultimate example of putting art before common sense. You wanted to be careful in those days in Italy if you were a boy with a beautiful singing voice. If you didn't watch out, you might find that someone had designs on your musical future - designs of which you might not entirely approve, not that anyone would give you very much choice in the matter. (The practice continued into the next century and spread to other parts of Europe: as a young boy in Vienna, Haydn was once a likely candidate, until his father stepped in and put a stop to the idea. We can presume that Haydn wasn't thrilled with the prospect either.)

There are two principal types of emasculation not including marriage or attending a National Organization of Women rally. The more severe, involving the removal of all the genital parts, and usually inflicted as punishment, was often fatal. The other, a bilateral orchiectomy, involves the removal of the testes only. It was the later operation that was performed on boys destined to become singers — before puberty, and usually between the ages of seven and twelve. Some boys were castrated in infancy during the earliest years of the practice on the assumption that castration alone would make them good singers. Later on, they had to display both voice and musical talent before a decision for castration was made.

Despite the proclamation found in Isaiah (56: 3-4)

Let not the eunuch say: Behold I am a dry tree,. For thus saith the Lord to the eunuchs: They that shall keep my sabbaths, and shall choose the things that please me ... I will give them an everlasting name which shall never perish.

castration itself was never sanctioned by the church. Indeed, the operation was punishable by death, and any association as an accomplice to such surgery called for excommunication. But the church's attitude seems to have been that the victim, once the deed was done, might as well be encouraged to serve the church and himself in the most profitable field open to him. Unofficially, most of the church hierarchy - including several popes - were ardent opera fans and enjoyed nothing more than listening to the castrati strut their stuff (or what

was left of it, anyway). Besides, they needed a steady supply of castrati to sing in the church choirs.

Since the castratos earnings could be enormous — in the church, initially and later in opera — there grew up a flourishing black market. Impoverished parents sought out surgeons or did the job themselves in the hope of securing a comfortable old age supported by a famous castratos fortune. At the time during the 18th century when the castrati reigned supreme, it is estimated that as many as 4000 boys were castrated in Italy each year. Very few of them became either rich or famous. An English traveler visiting Rome in 1705 leaves us with the following description of castration as it was performed in Italy at that time.

A boy's testicles were removed, he writes, "by putting the patient into a bath of warm water, to soften and supple the parts, and make them more tractable. Some small time after, they pressed the jugular veins, which made the party so stupid and insensible that he fell into a kind of apoplexy, and then the action could be performed with scarce any pain to the patient; and this was generally done by the mother or nurse in the most tender infancy."

There is no way of determining how frequently this comparatively simple operation was performed by parents or relatives rather than surgeons, Most accounts speak of surgeons, but parents were frequently too poor to be able to afford a surgeon's services. The illegality of the deed, as well as the parent's involvement inspired many an inventive excuse. Many boys arrived at the doors of the church who were said to be the victims of unfortunate farming accidents, or of getting mumps at an inconvenient age, or any number of other deceptions. One castrato in 1800 was said to have been bitten by a wild pig, and another attacked most grievously by a pet goose — an attribution more treasurable for its imagery than its candor.

By one estimate, nearly 70 per cent of all male opera singers in the 18th century were castrati. That's a lot of farm accidents. The worst of it was that it was all a big gamble. Only a small minority of those castrated actually developed into first-rate singers. Most became mediocre at best, while some were no use at all. You might say they just weren't cut out for it. What to do with the duds became something of an embarrassing problem. Many were allowed to enter the priesthood, though the church had to bend its own rules to allow them in. It seems that, technically, if a priest's vow of celibacy is to have any merit, the church figures he has to be giving up something that's really worth worrying about. The sophists solved the problem, says the 18th-century German traveler Johann von Archenholz, by deciding that it was "sufficient for such a priest to have his amputated genitals in his pocket, when he approaches the altar."

The vocal consequences of castration went well beyond the mere perpetuation of a boyish treble. The child continued to grow and so did his voice, or at least his physical powers to exploit the voice he already had. The mature castrato was a soprano or alto with all the physical resources of a grown man, although there was, of course — as one castrato wistfully expressed it — "something missing."

Although the physiological effects were unknown at this time, it was known that one of the keys to the virtuoso castrati voice lay in bone plasticity. The absence of testosterone in the male results in a definite alteration of bone structure long after normal closure time. This resulted in the castrato's lengthened period of rib growth and the added powerful diaphragm and chest muscles, aided by long hours of breathing exercises resulted in an abnormally enlarged chest cavity and lungs. This characteristic coupled with the rigid training discipline to which he was exposed would enable him to sustain a tone for a minute or more — far beyond the capacity of a normal singer - male or female. The mature castrato was very tall (for the day) with abnormally long limbs and digits, a lack of musculature (except in the chest area) and in a surprising number, the appearance of an almost womanly breast. Casonova, writing from Rome in 1762, thus describes a castrato whom he saw at the Aliberti Theater:

"In a well made corset, he had the waist of a nymph and, what was almost as incredible, his breast was in no way inferior, either in form or beauty, to any woman's. Though I knew the negative nature of this unfortunate, curiosity made one glance at his chest, and an inexpressible charm acted upon one, so that you were madly in love before you realized it. To resist the temptation, or not to feel it, one would have to be as cold and earthbound as a German."

Women were eventually allowed to sing on the opera stage, but the castrati continued their dominance of the genre. In fact, the whole situation got so ridiculous that at least one young woman spent several years

masquerading as a castrato under the name Bellino, just so she could have a performing career. A woman pretending to be a man singing like a woman. (Historian Angus Heriot tells us that she was able to carry off the deception "with the aid of an instrument which she taped to her body in the appropriate position." He doesn't say what kind of Instrument - maybe some kind of flute.) By 1760 or so, she was able to resume her career under her own name and sex. How do we know all this? Simple. Casanova writes about her in his diary: she was one of his many lovers. Apparently he had a thing for castrati — real and imagined.

Charles Burney, the music historian of the period, thought the whole idea of castrati very barbaric, and states, rather smugly, that the English were far too civilized to allow castration in their country. (They weren't, however, above importing a few Italian castrati to give opera audiences a thrill.) The French disapproved entirely. In English church music, as well as in opera, the high male vocal lines were given to the counter-tenor, who gets his top notes by training and practice, not surgery. People who don't know any better sometimes think that counter tenors and castrati are the same thing. But there's a vast difference - or *vas deferens* - between the two. Burney, at least, was sympathetic. (Among other things, he discounts the rumor that castrati were unable to utter the letter 'r'.) He was also among the first to point out the discrepancy between the official and actual attitudes to ward the castrati at the time. "I inquired throughout Italy," he writes, "at what place boys were chiefly qualified for singing by castration, but could get no certain intelligence. I was told at Milan that it was at Venice; at Venice that it was at Bologna; but at Bologna the fact was denied, and I was referred to Florence; from Florence to Rome; and from Rome I was sent to Naples. The operation is most certainly against the law in all these places, as well as against nature; and all the Italians are so much ashamed of it, that in every province they transfer it to some other." This might be called the 17th-century equivalent of the modern "not-in-my-back-yard" syndrome. But despite an official ambivalence, the fact remains that the castrati became the most important - I'm tempted to say seminal - singers of Baroque opera. Crowds thrilled to the sound of their voices. Women swooned and had to be carried out of the theater. "One God! One Farinelli!" shouted one enthusiastic Englishwoman upon hearing that singer's London debut in 1734.)

Women, in fact, had reason to swoon. Despite a common misconception (pardon the pun) many of the castrati - except maybe the ones who'd been attacked by pigs - remained sexually functional. The surgery that produced the voices by severing the seminal ducts left the rest of the sexual machinery intact. The fact that they couldn't produce children only made them the more attractive as lovers. This was, after all, before the era of safe sex. Homosexuality does not seem to have been more common among castrati than among un mutilated men and the effects of castration upon their sexual appetites seem to have been various. The operation that deprived the castrati of the power of procreation, apparently deprived them neither the pleasure nor the possibility of engaging in unfruitful intercourse. Since they could not achieve real or full sexual satisfaction, modern endocrinology takes a skeptical view of many of the legends of their sexual prowess. It seems not unlikely that some of them, at least, reacting to a consciousness of inferiority, saved their egos by simulating a greater degree of sexuality than was biologically possible.

Women sought them out, impelled, no doubt, by various combinations of curiosity, lust, compassion and security from conception. Since the castrato could only bring an immature organ to such an intimacy, there were doubtless many deviations to normal sexual intercourse. The love affairs of the castrati were, nevertheless, numerous, often with women of high birth and position, and accounts of many such affairs are among the more amusing and bizarre scandals of the 17th and 18th centuries.

The castrato known as Caffarelli, (most of the castrati took stage names and all of the most famous ones were best known by only a single name - not unlike Madonna or Prince - an incompleteness that somehow seems appropriate): Caffarelli, while carrying on an affair with a certain noble woman in Rome, narrowly escaped capture when surprised by her husband. and had to hide out all night in a disused cistern. His lover then had to hire bodyguards to protect him from the thugs her husband had hired to kill him.

The castrato Consolino found a more devious solution. He carried on a longtime affair with his lover without her husband ever finding out: Consolino would arrive at her house dressed in one of his elaborate stage costumes and her husband just assumed it was one of her better-dressed lady friends come for a visit.

The castrato Zambinella found a similar situation of mistaken identity rather more inconvenient: a French

sculptor, Balzac tells us, made advances on Zambinella, thinking the castrato was a woman. He would not relent and eventually the singer's patron, an Italian Cardinal, simply had the persistent Frenchman killed.

The best castrati became as famous in their day as any rock superstar of today. They had groupies and adoring fans, they lived like princes and commanded ridiculously large sums of money for their performances.

Some of them were arrogant beyond compare: they thought they were a cut above the competition. Luigi Marchesi, for example, insisted on making his first entrance on horseback, descending from a hill. It didn't matter if there weren't supposed to be any hills or horses in the opera: if you wanted Marchesi you got him his hill and his horse or he didn't sing.) Carrying a sword, shield and lance, and wearing a helmet with plumed feathers at least a yard high, Marchesi would make his grand entrance singing one of his favorite arias - written especially for him by his friend Giuseppe Sarti. Many singers had such favorite tunes, which came to be known as *arie di baule*, or "suitcase arias," because the singer would carry them with him from performance to performance.

Caffarelli was not much better. He was once actually thrown in prison, says the official report, for disturbing the other performers, acting in a manner bordering on lasciviousness with one of the female singers, conversing with the spectators in the boxes, and refusing to sing in the ensembles with the others."

Probably the most famous of the castrati, and certainly one of the least obnoxious, was Carlo Broschi, who was known as Farinelli. Farinelli, born in 1705, studied in Naples and after a successful career of more than 15 years, Farinelli retired at the tender age of 32 to Spain, where he spent the next decade doing little more than singing for the Spanish king, Philip V to soothe the royal depression. In fact, if we're to believe Burney, he sang the same four arias every night for nearly ten years.

Philip died in 1746 and was succeeded by Ferdinand VI, whom Farinelli continued to serve until Ferdinand followed suit in 1759. The new king, Charles III, didn't care much for castrati. "Capons are for eating," he once said, rather unkindly, and pensioned Farinelli off to a villa in Bologna, where he spent his final years in luxurious comfort.

By this time the castrati had been toppled from their position as the favorite opera voice, although there were a few remaining over the years. Mozart wrote opera parts for castrato (including a character, interestingly enough, called Sextus). So did Rossini and Meyerbeer. Even Wagner considered transposing the Parsifal role of Klingsor for castrato. Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart, believe it or not, once wrote a Broadway musical based on a book called *The Son Of The Grand Eunuch*. (Just how the Grand Eunuch could father a son is not quite clear.) It centers on the problems of a young man who has no interest in following in the family business - at least not if it means losing the family jewels. He spends much of the time running around avoiding men with large knives. Towards the end of the second act, when the boy is being taken away for the deed to be done, Rodgers wrote a big triumphal march, into which, just for the heck of it, he threw in a few bars from Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker Suite* and was always gratified to hear a few chuckles from the audience.

It may be hard to understand these days, but the castrati evidently were impressive in their musical delivery. Just listen to this 19th-century music critic: "What singing! Imagine a voice that combines the sweetness of the flute, and the animated suavity of the human larynx - a voice which leaps and leaps, lightly and spontaneously, like a lark that flies through the air and is intoxicated with its own flight; and when it seems that the voice has reached the loftiest peaks of altitude, it starts off again, leaping and leaping still with equal lightness and equal spontaneity, without the slightest sign of forcing and on and on and on ...

The castrati reigned supreme on the musical stage for over 100 years, however the cost was great. Tens of thousands of mutilated boys lived out their lives, not in the theater, but destined for a life of drudgery and indignity in a church which could barely tolerate their existence. Or worse. "Nothing in Italy is so contemptible as a eunuch that cannot sing", one statesman noted. But sing they did and if we were to hear them we might cry out, as did the Italian public "*Viva la cotello!*" Long live the knife!