The Paradox of the Castrato

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January 16, 2012
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“He sings well, one has to say: he’s lively and expressive, but one feels there’s something missing…”¹

At the end of an aria or the lowering of the final curtain, the Italians gave full rein to their enthusiasm and appreciation: they stood up, applauded loudly, and “threw verses to the castrato in homage…”² Even the most impoverished Italians were known to forego their daily bread to witness the arias of the castrato, a reflection of their baroque taste for life. The immense popularity of the Italian castrato is told of in myth and legend. Although very little is known about the lives of these mythic singers, it cannot be doubted that they had tremendous impact on Baroque opera in the 17th and 18th centuries. Historians have called the castrato: “the single best known Italian export on the Continent” during the time period.³ But reports of eunuch singers have been referenced throughout history, not solely on Italian soil.⁴

In Italy, the popularity of the eunuch was uniquely inspired by a desire for soprano voices, while remaining within the constraints of Saint Paul’s long-standing prohibition against the use of female voices within the church. Although falsettists were used initially in place of sopranos, castrati soon supplanted their weaker voices. With the growth of opera, the castrato took on a role beyond the church. The second published opera, Euridice written by Ottavio Rinuccini and composed by Jacopo Peri, is evidence of this. His opera constructed roles specifically

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² Barbier, 80.
⁴ The term “castrato” is synonymous with the terms “musico,” “eunuch”, “evirato,” “spagnoletti.” For the sake of clarity I will refer to men castrated for the purposes of singing in Italy as “castrato” or “castrati” unless quoted by a source or noted otherwise.
for castrato voices. Indeed, “every single eminent composer of the era incorporated castrato voices” into their music. 5 It has been computed that seventy percent of all male opera singers in the eighteenth century were castrati.6 The prominence of the castrato in opera would only grow throughout the 17th century as the public reacted with “frenetic acclaim” to their voices, which would eventually receive international attention.7 The number of castrato in Italy during the 17th and 18th centuries is estimated to be upwards of four thousand Italian boys castrated each year at the height of opera in 1720’s to 1730s. 8 Boys were commonly castrated between the ages of eight and ten. The operation never involved complete “ablation,” most did not even involve removal of the testes.9 The procedure was not considered by the public to be severe; recovery commonly took two weeks time.10 This said, few castrated boys achieved the fame of renowned castrato Farinelli of Andria. Less than fifteen out of hundred castrated boys would make even enough money to support their impoverished families.11 The castrato was beloved by the public, both by men and women. “However well one knew the fellow’s natural sex, one felt all aglow and quite madly amorous of him” stated the famous Italian author and adventurer, Giacomo Casanova, when describing the castrato.12 Exactly what attracted the public to these artists is debatable. The castrato is described by Scholar Barbier as, “the trinity—man, woman and child.” His voice, “bridged the gap between masculine and

7 Scholz, 276.
8 Finucci, 253
9 Finucci, 245. Given opium and induced into coma, the boys were immersed in ice baths or milk baths. Common practices were severing the vas deferens, much like in a vasectomy, or cutting/twisting the testicles to atrophy.
feminine” creating a “unique link between God, music and mankind.” But this examination is not comprehensive, for the castrato was not simply a celestial link; he was also notably an emblem of the erotic and sensual. The popularity of the castrato in 18th century Italy was due to the castrato’s uniquely paradoxical nature, viewed both as sexual and spiritual. While the prominence of the castrato highlighted a desire for the unusual, the eventual extinction of the castrato reflects a return to naturalism with the end of the Baroque period. Nonetheless, the castrato left a lasting impact on European music.

The castrato was renowned throughout Europe for clear and piercing timbre, and a range far exceeding the quality of falsettists and the natural range of women. Italian writers testify to the divine qualities of the castrato’s voice, one of which stated, “No hyperbole, no excess of the poetic pen can suffice to praise such merit." Most castrati had ranges exceeding three octaves. The renowned Farinelli could reach from the note C2 up to the D above C5. Castrati trained for six to ten years studying vocal technique. One castrato Caffarelli documented his daily regimen: 1 hour of singing difficult pieces, 1 hour studying letters, 1 hour singing exercises in front of the mirror, and in the afternoon a half hour of theoretical work, half hour of singing improvisation, a hour of counterpoint with the cartella and an hour studying letters. Study focused on breathing, to strengthen the muscles controlling inhalation and exhalation. These boys were largely recruited from impoverished families, hoping to give their sons a chance to escape poverty and achieve brilliance by being castrated. In reality, few castrati actually ended

13 Barbier, 17.
14 Heriot, 14.
15 Barbier, 90.
16 Scholz, 276.
17 Barbier, 48.
18 Barbier, 53.
up on the operatic stage: some voices did not survive the effects of castration, others were excessively low or unpleasant. In the end it was as Charles de Brosses, a French writer, reflected: “[a] totally unprofitable deal.” This phenomenon was driven by deindustrialization, high taxation, war, plague and extreme drought in the seventeenth century that left many families impoverished. Families without financial means for the procedure and vocal schooling would commonly make contracts with a skilled teacher. Students would promise to pay a portion of their earnings in the future, in order to pay for the cost of castration and years of musical education with a mentor, usually a cleric. It was believed that “a boy’s throat was more valuable to him than his testicles.” Records remain of young boys pleading for the operation out of fear of losing the quality of their voice. One young boy, Silvestro Prittoni, begged the Duke of Modena, “to be made to be without those instruments” that might cause his voice to break. Sadly, only the top one percent of castrati would gain entry into the greatest European opera houses. The majority of castrati were recruited to sing in churches. The unlucky ones ended up singing in third-rate choirs, living both impoverished and sterile for the rest of their lives. Where these operations occurred is open to speculation. English musicologist Dr. Charles Burney traveled about Italy in the late 18th century seeking the answer to this very question. He found that “every single city says it is not there, but names some other place,” perhaps out of shame or fear of punishment and excommunication.

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19 Barbier, 82.
20 Finucci, 230.
21 Rosselli, 152.
22 Rosselli, 151.
23 Rosselli, 154.
24 Barbier, 83.
25 Rosselli, 144.
research concluded that castrati were firmly associated with the city of Naples, but that the operation was performed throughout Italy.26

Beyond musical talent, the castrati arguably were equally prized for their unique physicalities. A new desire “for the unusual started to inform a semiotics of masculinity that proclaimed the…sensuality of the effeminate, the magic of the artificial” supporting their rise in popularity.27 “Men and women of the baroque era fainted with pleasure at the disturbing beauty not only of their voices but of their entire being.”28 These “beings” suffered disproportionately long arms and legs to torso length, had infantile penises, and underdeveloped prostates due to their lack of androgen stimulation.29 This can be seen in artistic caricatures of castrati in the time period.30 Suffering from hypogonadism the castrato also lacked axillary hair and beards. They developed more subcutaneous fat than the average man, and developed the sexual traits of women.31 However shocking or grotesque these descriptions may be for the modern reader, these physical abnormalities only increased public attraction to the castrato in 18th century Italy. The sexual ambiguity of the castrato was, in reality, one of their strongest attributes.32 The Italian writer Casanova stated, “This Castrato had a fine voice, but his chief attraction was his beauty…On the stage in woman’s dress…he was ravishing, a nymph, and incredible though it may seem, his breast was as beautiful as any woman’s…”33 Scientists of the day did not believe that genitalia demonstrated a clear-cut sign of gender difference. Instead, they thought, gender could be constructed according to the humoral system. By adjusting

26 Ibid.
27 Finucci, 5.
28 Barbier, 137.
29 Peschel, 582.
30 See appendix.
31 Ibid.
32 Barbier, 92.
33 Ibid.
physical heat, such as assuming the features and functions of the other, people were believed to spontaneously switch genders.\textsuperscript{34} Doctors confidently explained cases such as that of Marie Germain who became a man after running after a pig (due to an increase in humoral heat), or those of Rosselli describing how young boys suffering the “bite of a wild boar” or “swan” in which they became women spontaneously.\textsuperscript{35} Gender was not seen as concrete, but rather adaptable and subject to change. This said, the Italian audience did not ignore the castrato’s unique physical traits. Unlike any other singer of the day, the castrato was both physically and vocally unique. But the castrati represented much more to Italian audiences than a man with unique physicalities and vocal talents. The castrato was a distinctive emblem of sexuality.

In the 17\textsuperscript{th} and 18\textsuperscript{th} century, the castrato came to represent the erotic, driven by a growing belief in the sexuality of boyhood and the, “the erotic correspondence between voice and virility, vocal cords and sexual cords.”\textsuperscript{36} The castrato was often linked with perpetual boyhood, an erotic concept at the time. Because the castrato “never experienced the final burst of vital heat that would have taken him to full masculinity,” he was viewed as equivalent to a perpetual boy.\textsuperscript{37} Because boys were associated with promiscuity in Italian culture, the castrato was considered predisposed to being “ensnared in the womanish pursuits of love.” In other words, he was an eternal lady’s man.\textsuperscript{38} Oddly enough, castrati were viewed as more sexual than non-castrated men and wildly attractive to Italian women. Everywhere they went, crowds of women went into frenzies. A

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{34} Finucci, 6.
\item \textsuperscript{36} Finucci, 243.
\item \textsuperscript{38} Freitas, 205.
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castrato, Ferri, was documented being given a priceless emerald ring by a generous admirer when he arrived in Florence.39 One particular castrato, Marchesi, was particularly adored by the female sex. Women wore medallions with his portrait on their necks, arms and sewn into their shoes.40 One of the lasting testaments to the fame of the castrati are the hoards of stories recounting affairs and courtships between themselves and nobility. One is that of the castrato Siface, who was murdered on the road for having an affair with the countess Elena Forni. For this reason, it did not appear that castrati lacked heterosexual love affairs or sexual impulses.41 Such frequent affairs and relationships with women encouraged the perception of the castrato as erotic. At a time when pregnancy was dangerous, sex with a sterile man was believed to be without consequence. The roman poet Juvenal remarked, “so smooth, so beardless to kiss, and no worry about abortions!” with regard to sexual acts with eunuchs. 42 Frequent sexual deviancy between castrati and lay people were discouraged by papal bans on the marriage of castrati and women. Pope Sixtus V wrote in a letter to the bishop of Novara his hypothesis: that “women who marry [eunuchs] live not chastely but instead are joined carnally.” He went on to argue that castrati evoke lasciviousness in women. While the public regarded castrati as promiscuous and sexually deviant, traits that only increased their appeal, they were also, paradoxically, regarded as spiritual figures.

The castrato was connected with the spiritual, because of the historical context through which the practice entered Italy. The integration of castrati into Italy was largely

39 Barbier, 137.
40 Barbier, 138.
41 Peschel, 583. The question of the potency of Castrato is controversial, but not impossible because of testosterone producing cells on the spermatic cords.
42 Finucci, 277.
created by church practice.\textsuperscript{43} While the earliest records of castrati in Western Europe date to the 16\textsuperscript{th} century, Byzantine castrati had been performing in churches for centuries. The Spanish were also noted for their “spagnoletti” singers, who were hired by the Italian Duke of Ferrara to sing in his chapel. By the end of the fifteenth century “treble voices were sung by the Spanish castrati…yet only a century later, the first Italian castrati gradually replaced the Spaniards in the choirs of Rome…”\textsuperscript{44} In this way the practice of hiring castrati to sing in church choirs spread west and into southern Italy and Sicily because of support by religious figures. The church, notably Bishop Ambrose of Milan, was impressed by these Byzantine singers and encouraged the practice in Italy as early as the 4\textsuperscript{th} century.\textsuperscript{45} These “high angelic voices were a pivotal component of sacred music [in Italy] for centuries.”\textsuperscript{46} Monasteries as sacred as Monte Casino contained castration centers. The Sistine chapel was renowned for their talented castrati voices. Even into the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, castrati were singing in St. Peter’s Basilica. Although the Vatican tried to avoid using the expression “castrato” and referred to these singers instead as the “Spanish falsettists,” they were likely undeclared castrati.\textsuperscript{47} Historically, the church had a conflicting relationship with castrati. The church did not reject castration wholly: they accepted Aquinas’s view that “humans were caretakers…of their bodies.”\textsuperscript{48} Some theologians even argued that castration was an “ideal course,” encouraging purity and preventing licentiousness.\textsuperscript{49} Still, they attempted to distance themselves from the practice. The church later condemned castration, but in name only. Evidence remains that the

\textsuperscript{43} Rosselli, 147.
\textsuperscript{44} Michel Poizat, \textit{The Angel’s Cry” Beyond the Pleasure Principle in Opera} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 115.
\textsuperscript{45} Scholtz, 273.
\textsuperscript{46} Scholtz, 272.
\textsuperscript{47} Rosselli, 146.
\textsuperscript{48} Rosselli, 151.
\textsuperscript{49} Rosselli, 150.
practice was still supported. Pope Benedict XIV advised in 1748 against a proposal that
castration should be forbidden by all bishops.\textsuperscript{50} Churches continued to accept castrati into
their choirs arguing that “church authorities had no reason to intervene in the operation
itself” or not accept “children who were operated on by necessity.”\textsuperscript{51} Further evidence is
that the majority of young castrati continued to study under teachers associated with the
ecclesiastical institution.\textsuperscript{52} Even when pursuing fame on the operatic stage, castrati kept
up their church connections and sung in the highest churches in Italy.\textsuperscript{53} Photos of the
Sistine Choir taken in 1898 show that still seven castrati remained.\textsuperscript{54} The last castrati in
the twentieth century were concentrated in ancient church choirs in the “heart of Catholic
Christendom.”\textsuperscript{55} Inarguably, the rise of the castrato and the practice of castrating young
boys was encouraged by the church, tying the castrati with the spiritual.

Musical philosophy of the day also associated castrati with the divine. The
prevailing Doctrine of the Spheres elevated these singing eunuchs to god-like levels.
Music was believed to be of “divine origin and essence.”\textsuperscript{56} Curiously, throughout history
and higher pitches have been associated with the sky, heavens and holiness even before
music was written on the staff.\textsuperscript{57} Diatonic, chromatic and enharmonic scales were
similarly compared to the Holy Trinity: diatonic, representing the Father, the chromatic

\textsuperscript{50} Rosselli, 151.
\textsuperscript{51} Poizat, 117-118.
\textsuperscript{52} Rosselli, 160. Barbier, 10.
\textsuperscript{53} Somerset-Ward, 66.
\textsuperscript{54} Wikipedia contributors, "Castrato," Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia,
\textsuperscript{55} Rosselli, 179.
\textsuperscript{57} Poizat, 129. Explanations why this association exists range from theories that birds and higher pitched
creatures live in the sky to terminology regarding “head voice” and “chest voice.” For a fascinating
exploration into the association between higher pitches and the physical sky consult Poizat’s text.
the Son, and the enharmonic representing the Holy Spirit. Particularly, in a society that was “intensely hierarchal-minded” higher voices were comparable to the nine orders of angels that surrounded the Holy Trinity. With the castrato’s tone compared to the “clarity and purity of crystal” he associated himself with the holy. The voice of the castrato was formed largely with the aim to rid the voice of individualities and smooth away distinctiveness to create a unifying tone and vowels. It was considered less humanistic and more divine. The castrato was commonly described to have an “angel’s voice” and divine qualities. Foreigners were documented screaming, “God’s creation dissolved into a man-made brew!” upon hearing these men sing. One composer, Allessandro Scarlatti, upon hearing the castrato Francischello perform wrote that he could not believe that “a mortal could sing so divinely” and wondered if an angel had assumed a mortal form. In this way, the castrato marked a connection for mankind between God and everyday citizens. As the castrato emerged in the 17th and 18th century as an operatic figure, these religious roots remained. Castrati were still considered by the public to be “angelic,” and irrevocably spiritual.

Castrati were viewed by the public as both a symbol of spirituality and sexuality, a paradox, which increased their allure. The public was enthralled with this creature, which was both god-like and carnal. Religious scholars such as Gerardus van der Leeuw suggest that there is “a fundamental and natural relationship between religion and

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58 Allen, 205.
60 Barbier, 122.
62 Barbier, 90.
63 Scholtz, 289.
64 Barbier, 90.
65 Barbier, 17.
sexuality” that endures throughout time.66 The audiences of the Baroque era were not repulsed by these contradictory qualities, but rather “enjoyed illusion,” believing that “nothing…could detract from the physical pleasure procured by a few moments of enchantment.”67 Musically, the Baroque period was a time of artistic exploration, driven by a society that had an insatiable appetite for the “different.” The castrato’s decline at the end of the 18th century reflects a change in tastes. The ‘ideal voice’ no longer was the voice “prized for its pure, mythological, static, disembodied and universal character but rather for the “grainy, powerful, bodily and individual[ized]” voices that expressed the qualities of the singer.68 Audiences responded to the voice of castrato, Giovanni Velluti, in the late 1820’s with increasing disdain. The Examiner called his singing both like, “a peacock’s scream” and the sound of a “machine.”69 Atlas criticized the artificiality of his tone and acting.70 Furthermore the London Magazine went so far as to compare his singing to a steam engine.71 The castrati had to compete with the new opera buffa, comedic opera, that was more realistic, less artificial, and generally not demanding the high ranges of castrati.72 A shift in musical tastes was not the sole factor that signaled the decline of the castrato. A growing number of citizens began to embrace enlightenment principles of promoting a more humane society. Writers of the enlightenment began to argue that, “the practice of emasculation [was] unworthy of a modern, enlightened society” which aided their decline.73 But the shift in opinion was gradual, and at times

67 Barbier, 73.
68 J.Q. Davies, 274.
69 J.Q. Davies, 298.
70 J.Q. Davies, 299.
71 Ibid.
72 Somerset-Ward, 65.
73 Barbier, 224.
contradictory. Rousseau wrote in his *Dictionary of Music*, “In Italy there are barbarous fathers who sacrifice nature to money and permit their children to undergo this operation, merely to give pleasure to cruel voluptuaries who cultivate these poor creatures’ voices” but later upon hearing the castrato Carestini sing he “took back everything he had said against Italian opera” since it was an “ecstasy as he had never felt.” As the enlightenment progressed, interest in biology spawned a greater respect for the natural qualities of the human voice. Geno-song, or the organic voice, was viewed as increasingly superior to the pheno-song, ideal phonation, of the 18th century. No longer was a voice that mimicked the radiations of the divine spheres desired. The final factor that spelled the end of the castrato was the increasing performance of women in opera. Part of this trend was inspired by the notion that women were more naturally imbued with the gift of singing soprano than men. In this way, “women took up where the male musico took off” and were said to have “driven [the male soprano] underground.” Still, the official end to the castrati did not come until the early 20th century when on St. Cecilia's Day, the 22nd of November in 1903, Pius X issued his *motu proprio*, *Tra le Sollecitudini*. The document instructed that: "Whenever ... it is desirable to employ the high voices of sopranos and contraltos, these parts must be taken by boys, according to the most ancient usage of the Church." But even as the period ended and people stopped seeking the inhuman allure of the castrato, human desire for the paradoxical did not

74 Poizat, 118.
75 J.Q. Davies, 275.
76 J.Q. Davies, 280.
79 Ibid.
diminish. As one can see, this fascination with the divine and erotic continues into the present.

The last living castrato, Moreschi, and the only castrato recorded on tape can still be heard on an old gramophone recording. The voice of Moreschi is eerie, unlike the sound of a modern male falsettist or any counter-tenor that the modern mind can dream up. However fascinating, the recording is of poor quality and was recorded past the singer’s prime. In this way “we cannot hear castrato voices” the recording only “hint[s] at a sound now lost.” For this reason, the voice of the angelic castrato is the subject of mystery. In 1994 filmmakers produced the film Farinelli under the direction of Gérard Corbiau. The director made the controversial choice to blend the voices of a female soprano and male countertenor digitally to create the voice of the castrato Farinelli. As this example illustrates, there is a mysterious element to the castrato: his voice is not comparable to anything found in the natural world. Although the castrato has been silenced, the paradox he was built upon exists in the modern world. Humans continue to be entranced by those that are paradoxically sexual and pure. One such example is the pop singer Michael Jackson who received worldwide recognition both in life and death. He embodied both the boyish charm and promiscuous character that drew onlookers with his frequent pelvic thrusts and wild dancing. Just like the castrati of 18th century Italy, his unique physical appearance increased his fame as the subject of gossip, setting him apart from other singers. However barbaric sexual castration may be to the modern reader, the society that encouraged this practice is still very much the same. Modern women still struggle with the paradox reflected by castrati of fulfilling both the ideal of chastity and promiscuity in a world that demands both. Although, the voices of castrati can only be

80 Rosselli, 143.
heard in the annals of history, the human curiosity for the sexual and spiritual continues to be reborn in the modern world.
Appendix

Figure 1

Caricature of a castrato (unknown artist) illustrating the unique physical qualities of the castrato: long extremities and increased height. Pietr O. Scholz “Eunuch and Castrati: A Cultural History.

Figure 2

Figure 3
Caricature of the famous castrato Farinelli in a theatre performance with Francesca Cuzzini and Jacob Heidegger in London. Note the unique physicalities of the singer as the result of castration. Drawing by Marco Ricci (about 1730). Pietr O. Scholz “Eunuch and Castrati: A Cultural History.”
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