

## The Demands of Art

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If you talk to any artist, regardless of his particular art, you will always hear about the unreasonable demands the art form places on its practitioners. Opera singers are no different in this regard. You need a memorable voice, impeccable musicianship, acting and characterization skills, enormous stamina, and vernacular diction in several languages. It takes as much time and as much money to get a singer ready for the stage of the Metropolitan Opera as it takes to train a surgeon. Indeed surgeons play a crucial role in tonight's paper as I discuss those singers who can truly be said to have given their all for the demands of art: yes, I will talk about the castrati singers who dominated the opera stage during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. I trust that tonight's topic won't cause any of our Club's members to shrink in horror.

The use of males for soprano or alto parts pre-dates the castrati. In the Catholic countries, females were not allowed to sing in church choirs. The soprano and alto parts were provided either by boys or by men singing falsetto. For any Boomers in the room, I should point out that falsetto singing was not invented by The Four Seasons during the 1960s. More likely it dates from the mid sixteenth century.

You can also provide male soprano and alto voices by the expedient of castrating pre-pubertal boys to prevent their voices from changing to the deeper ranges normal in adult men. This practice became widespread in Italy. The precise nature of the procedures used to castrate young boys was not well documented, even during the height of the practice. Almost all descriptions agree that the boys were put into a hot bath, and liquor, opiates and arterial compression acted as anesthetic. Some say that a knife made small slits in the bottom of the scrotum and the testicles were removed entirely. Others report that the knife was used to cut the connective tissues, seminal glands and spermatic ducts so that the testicles atrophied in situ. Still others report that the testicles were simply crushed without cutting. In any case, boys died regularly during or after the procedure.

Pre-pubertal castration brings a number of anatomical consequences in its wake. It leaves the victim with an infantile penis, no beard growth, pronounced fat deposits especially in the buttocks, hips and breasts, abnormally long arms and legs, and an underdeveloped prostate. (This latter may seem more blessing than curse to gentlemen of a certain age.) Most importantly to our story, the vocal cords remain at pre-pubertal length, leaving the vocal range of a woman. They retained the vocal cord flexibility of a child, which gave them a very wide vocal range. Their rib and joint cartilage remained pliable, so the ribs and lungs grew abnormally large: enormous breath capacity supported the high vocal register.

Doing this to young boys hardly passes today's standards of informed consent. Remember, this happened to them at ages six to eight, maybe up to ten, but well before puberty. Many of the castrated boys were orphans or the children of the poor. Poor parents permitted this, swayed in some instances by cash, sometimes by the prospect that a surplus son would get a musical education they could not otherwise afford. They could take some comfort in Pope Clement VIII's declaration that creating such singers for church choirs was *ad honorem Dei* (to God's honor). Some families held the hope that their

son would become one of the rich celebrity singers on the opera stage. This last hope was a long-shot. Modern estimates are that as many as four thousand boys fell victim to the knife each year, yet even at the height of their popularity, only about eighty or a hundred castrati had major operatic stage careers, while many more sang in small opera houses or church choirs of varying size and quality throughout Italy.

The experienced judges I use for the Metropolitan Opera auditions remain acutely aware of how much the voice changes well into the singers' twenties and thirties. You can only imagine the range of variability as a ten year old voice matures. So what happened to those with a castrati range, but not an excellent musical voice? Up to half of them became priests or monks. The Italian scholar Salvatore Giacomo wrote, "No other road remained but the priesthood: [as a result the church had] an infinite number of priests whose.... misfortune made it definitely impossible for them to be unfaithful to their vows of chastity." Others became street singers, singing for tips from passers-by.

The Italians themselves had ambivalent attitudes towards the entire enterprise. They used a variety of euphemisms to refer to the castrati: *evirati* (unmanned), *voci bianchi* (white voices), or sometimes simply *i musici* (the musicians). Even before the legal framework began to discourage the practice, the boys presented to the church choirs and conservatories often came accompanied by some story to explain their anatomical situation. Popular explanations seemed designed to make the alteration either an accident or a medical necessity. Examples regularly recorded include an unfortunate encounter with a goose, a serious disease whose fatal end could only be prevented by surgical castration and other equally improbable inventions.

Performing a castration was punishable by excommunication, yet two castrati were acknowledged among the Papal Chapel singers in 1599. The sharp increase in the number of castrati around 1600 came about because Pope Clement VIII preferred the castrato voice to the falsettists. By the mid-eighteenth century as many as 70% of male opera singers were castrati. When a castrato petitioned Pope Innocent XI for permission to marry on the grounds his operation had been done poorly, the pope responded, "*che si castrati meglio*," that is, let him be castrated better.

The Englishman Charles Burney toured Italy in the 1770s to investigate Italian music and asked where this practice took place. The Italians all attributed the production of castrati to some geography other than theirs. He finally reports:

I enquired throughout Italy 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 against the law in all these places, as well as against nature; and all Italians are so much ashamed of it, that in every province they transfer it to some other.

In 1794 Albergati Capacelli wrote, "In speaking against castrati I inveigh against their profession, their state, and the unworthy principle... The time has come to stop sacrificing these wretched victims." Giuseppe Parini wrote "You Italian Father, it is not error but vice that pushes you into this ghastly

business." Yet, when acclaiming a fine aria by one of the *musici*, Italian audiences would shout "*Evviva il coltellino!*" which means "Long live the little knife!"

When the French invaded and occupied Italy early in the nineteenth century, they largely ended the practice. With the Bourbon restoration in 1815, castrati were once again being produced for Papal State choirs. Changing musical tastes generally ended the use of castrati in opera by 1830, although they remained as singers in church choirs until the late nineteenth century. Pius X formally banned castrati from the Papal Choir in 1903.

Musical performance is perhaps the most ephemeral of all art: how are we to capture the sound of the fleeting human voice? How do opera lovers of today gain some insight into what the castrati actually sounded like? Their performances depended on a mix of their unique vocal instrument, their rigorous musical training and the singing techniques and ornamentation they used. There are several ways we can try to recapture their art.

We have contemporary descriptions of their voices in letters and reviews. Here is a sampling of first-hand accounts of those hearing castrati:

- "The voice to be sure is neither a man's nor a woman's, but is more melodious than either."
- "Clear and penetrating as the choirboys and a good deal louder" although "with something dry and sour about it."
- "Brilliant, light and full of impact..."
- "Very beautiful, resonant and even throughout his range.... He is also able to make a crystalline trill and to raise the trill up by six or seven notes in a row without interruption."

You can buy a CD of the castrato, Alessandro Moreschi, the last castrato to sing in the choir of the Sistine Chapel. The recordings were made in 1902 and 1904 when he was a bit past his vocal prime and the recording industry was in its infancy, recording his voice on shellac disks. He sang only in churches and never sang opera. While this recording may give us some idea of the sound of these singers, we might well say what the castrato Pauluccio said of himself, "*si manca qualche Cosa*" - that is, "there is still something wanting."

Cecilia Bartoli has released a CD appropriately called *Sacrificium* and subtitled "The Sacrifice of hundreds of thousands of boys in the name of music." In this performance she brings her beautifully trained mezzo voice to repertoire originally written for castrati. She carefully researched the literature to create as accurate a rendition as possible. The CD is accompanied by extensive notes, almost a book, on the entire phenomenon of this art form. Well worth a listen.

There are a number of wonderful operas written when castrati were often the *primo uomo*. For example, Handel's opera *Giulio Cesare* requires three castrati, including Giulio himself. For this as well as for more obvious reasons, a modern artistic director trying to stage this opera can't, if you will pardon the expression, just cut the parts. In a complete reversal of the days when the castrati would play female characters in an opera, for many years after their disappearance the castrati roles were sung by woman sopranos or mezzos.

The counter-tenor voice gives modern directors an option and audiences a glimpse into this lost voice. Counter-tenors are male singers whose natural voice lies in a lower range, but who sing with a highly developed falsetto technique. This singing style had endured for centuries and stayed alive after the castrati particularly in male "altos" in the English choral tradition. This voice began to once again appear in solo parts in the first half of the twentieth century. Benjamin Britten wrote the counter-tenor part of Oberon in his opera *Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1960, thus once again adding the counter-tenor voice to composers' repertoire. We are fortunate to have a number of very talented counter-tenors active today. One of the best is David Daniels, a CCM alumnus, who gave a recital there several years ago which some of us heard. The availability of Met quality counter-tenors has restored a number of wonderful operas written during the era of the castrati to the modern operatic repertoire.

Professional musicologists have examined some of the scores of Handel and other composers of the era for clues. Handel acted as impresario as well as composer. He used the singing talent at hand in his revivals of his successful pieces. Thus, in the 1742 performance of *Messiah*, he used a bass voice for the aria "But who may abide the day of his coming." When he revived *Messiah* in 1750, he rescored the aria for the castrato Gaetano Guadagni. Ironically today we sometimes hear the castrati version of the aria now simply transposed and sung once again by a bass voice. Both scores still exist, so musicologists can gain some insights from how Handel changed the aria in going from one voice to another and what he added to take advantage of the castrato techniques. For example, Handel almost doubled the length of some lines to use the legendary breath and sharply increased the tempo to allow for vocal fireworks. These analyses lie well beyond my musical background, but help the professionals.

One of the best suggestions for experiencing the art of the castrati is to enjoy the bel canto composers who either wrote for castrati or at least had direct experience of the voices and style of famous castrati. Mozart and Rossini were among the last composers to include castrati parts in operas. Bellini personally learned the theory of singing from the castrato Girolamo Crescentini. As the castrati faded from the stage these composers carried over this unique style into their writing for female roles in the bel canto repertoire. These operas can be heard today sung by very fine voices. This repertoire gives another clue.

In sum, audiences once enjoyed a unique singing voice produced by a barbaric procedure, a rigorous training, and a mannered style of singing - a voice that ruled the opera stage for two hundred years. Modern audiences will never be able to directly experience this vocal phenomenon. We find ourselves in the same situation as the castrati themselves: what is lost simply cannot be recovered.

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