

The Social and Sexual History of the
Castrato: Representations of Masculinity
and Casting Implications

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to explore the socio-historical factors that enabled the castrato phenomenon to thrive and the implications of this on representations of masculinity in Baroque opera. More specifically, it seeks to answer whether the castrato's masculinity can be accurately portrayed in modern productions, owing to the inherent shift in the perception of sexuality and gender between the Baroque era and the present day. The figure of the castrato, long associated with liminality and difference, is the product of unique set of social, economic and sexual factors that permitted castration for musical purposes alone. Since their decline during the nineteenth century the concept of the castrato's masculinity has been distorted through the prism of gender binary. By examining their social origins, vocal production and attitudes towards sexuality and gender, this thesis seeks to prove that castrati were the ultimate social construct in the representation of masculinity.

The thesis begins with an introduction and literature review before being formed of four main parts. The first is an overview of the social, historical and economic climate from which the castrato was able to dominate the Italian operatic stage. The second part is concerned with the castrato's voice and physiology, the implications of the castration procedure on the body and how their vocal production can be interpreted on the subject of vocal casting. The third part outlines how gender fluidity, borne out of the principles of Galenic sexual theory, permitted gradations of gender and thus, the castrato, to exist and thrive in Italian culture. By drawing these three areas of scholarship together, this thesis offers a judgement on the extent to which castrati were considered masculine and how this may be portrayed in a modern production. The final part contrasts two productions of Handel's *Giulio Cesare in Egitto*, comparing how masculinity is presented when the title role is cast as either a counter-tenor or mezzo-soprano.

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research. This thesis has not been submitted for any other award, at this, or any other institution. All sources are acknowledged as references.

Introduction and Literature Review

With soft little hands, with flexible bums,
Come, o castrati, unnatural ones!¹

The figure of the castrato haunts the operatic world, their presence long gone but keenly felt in the music we have left to interpret. The castrato is a paradoxical figure, we are told that they were the delight of kings, the play things of the aristocracy, beloved and lauded for their virtuosity and otherness. In the midst of the praise will come a remark, poem, or comment cutting and cruel in its intention, and you are once again reminded that the castrato, for all his skilful virtuosity, was a divisive, complicated reality in a world far removed from our own. This thesis' origins lie in questioning why this social and musical anomaly was ever able to exist, and how an emasculated man could possibly have played the classical operatic hero. As I continued to research it became clear that the origins of the answer lay beyond the music on the page, and began, as so many of these things do, in a unique set of socio-historical conditions that promoted a very different kind of masculinity compared to our twenty-first century understanding of presentations of gender. The castrato is one of many historical phenomena to have died out due to changing values and attitudes, and it would be common place for it to be dismissed and othered as an Italian cultural oddity, the concept of which is uncomfortable in our modern age. Yet, through the mid-twentieth century early music revival, the operatic world was not only confronted with the castrato's existence, but tasked with interpreting it to an audience for whom this perplexing, ambiguous figure disrupted all notions of gender presentation in opera. Through the figure of the castrato academics and audiences alike are challenged to imagine a world in which gender play, sexual ambiguity and liminality were both encouraged and prevalent, evidenced by the overwhelming presence of castrati in

¹ Valeria Finucci, *The Manly Masquerade: Masculinity, Paternity, and Castration in the Italian Renaissance* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2003), 225.

Baroque opera. If the castrato is an uncomfortable figure, it is because he distorts our notions of traditional gender binary through the highly invasive procedure that altered his physiology, voice and our understanding of his biological sex. That this was done for the sake of art is both extraordinary and disturbing.

The first chapter lays the historical foundations from which the phenomenon came. Beginning with the first examples of castration in literature it charts the movement and uses of castration to Spain from where it is believed the practice was exported to Italy. The rest of the chapter is concerned with how, at its peak, 4,000 boys were castrated in Italy per year, and why castration was so uniquely popular in that country in particular. Whilst this chapter is primarily concerned with providing a broad historical outline, it begins to explore how the Baroque masculine identity was effected by rampant poverty, war and the overarching influence of the Catholic Church. It ends by exploring the fascinating link between animal imagery and castration myths, brought together by a social phenomenon in which castration, whilst occurring throughout Italy, could not be properly acknowledged.

Chapter two is based around the voice itself, and is concerned with whether it is possible to reconstruct how the castrato may have sounded. In order to examine this, the physiological changes brought about by castration are explored, along with descriptions of the voice, music, the recordings of Alessandro Moreschi, as well as a technical study into the link between vocal register and timbre. This is drawn together by examining how vocal height became synonymous with presentations of masculinity and finally, given all of the information regarding the construction of the voice, how these roles might be best vocally cast.

The third part of this essay is concerned with challenging the perceived immutability of sex and gender construction from which masculine and feminine is delineated. By exploring the fundamental shift between the one-sex to two-sex model, the chapter aims to prove that castrati were 'men' but fundamentally

diminished by their lack of functioning sexual organs. Much of this understanding is taken from Thomas Lacqueur's theory of gender scale, to which much of the premise of my argument is owed. The final part of this chapter is concerned with how castrati portrayed their gender on stage and how this can be translated into modern performance.

In the final part of the essay I draw together the evidence presented in the first three chapters to proffer how castrato roles may best be cast in modern adaptations of Baroque opera. In it I weigh up the pros and cons of the mezzo-soprano versus the counter-tenor, and discuss how gender binary has distorted our ability to present true gender fluidity. The argument is drawn to a close by contrasting two productions of Handel's *Giulio Cesare* in order to illustrate how modern productions, too caught up in masculine/feminine opposition, respond differently to the castrato character depending on the gender of the singer interpreting the role.

Literature Review

Literature on the subject of the castrato is deeply divided between scholarly publications and populist histories. Whilst the subject has been written about extensively the research that informs much of the academic output is cyclical in nature, based on several key writings from which much of the general historical information about castrati is taken. Angus Heriot's 1956 publication *The Castrati in Opera* is a seminal piece of literature. Split into two halves the book provides a fascinating and well informed overview of the general history of the castrato whilst the latter half of the book, entitled 'Careers of Some Well-Known Castrati' profiles a number of castrato singers. When Patrick Barbier published *The World of the Castrati* in 1988, he appears to have taken the premise of Heriot's original work and updated it, expanding upon his original themes. Heriot's chapter titles include 'Theatrical Conditions' and 'Life and Times of the Castrati', Barbier chooses to call his chapters, 'The Theatre in Italy' and 'Origins and Recruitment'. Both books are fascinating, engaging and

accessible to an interested public, from which a large number of largely accepted facts and figures are taken within the field. The now infamous saying ‘castration done here, clean and cheap’, from Charles Burney’s memoirs seems to have gained traction in the field through inclusion in Heriot’s book.² Incidentally, this is anecdotal, Burney never did find a sign that of ered castration so brazenly. Indeed, many of the facts I have offered in the first chapter of this thesis are drawn directly from these two books, or from other literature that also regularly cites Heriot and Barbier – nowhere else in the field is there such a wealth of easily accessible information. A declaration of flaws must be made at this juncture however. Heriot cites his sources rarely, and Barbier even less so. Barbier’s work, whilst evidently borne out of a great deal of research is almost impossible to verify. I have often wondered whether a whole generation of research into castrati, almost always using Barbier’s book as a reference, is based on largely unquantifiable data.

It is a problem that a new wave of research has tried to address, and to which I am greatly indebted in the writing of this thesis. Both Martha Feldman’s *The Castrato: Reflections on Natures and Kinds*, a 2015 publication under her Ernest Bloch Professorship of Music, and the extremely informative *The Manly Masquerade: Masculinity, Paternity and Castration in the Italian Renaissance* by Valeria Finucci signify a new era in academic writing about the castrato. Finucci’s book, a well-structured exploration into engendering through attitudes towards biological sex and reproduction in the Renaissance culminates in the chapter ‘The Masquerade of Manhood: The Paradox of the Castrato’ in which she argues that castrati, having been ‘mutilated and colonized’ are a ‘sexually neutered anomaly’, the physical embodiment of a new world order that feminised men.³ Whilst I am critical of Finucci’s conclusory points (she compares the sexual fascination with castrati to the fetishizing of a crippled woman, for example) her thoroughly researched and academically accessible

² Angus Heriot, *The Castrati in Opera* (New York: Da Capo Press, Inc., 1975), 43.

³ Finucci, *The Manly Masquerade*, 279.

work is a useful arsenal on the topic of a castrato's sexuality.⁴ Feldman's book is possibly the largest collected resource on the castrato to date. It encompasses the origins of the castrato to span their voice (by far the most, if not only definitive writing I could find on the castrato sound), and psychology, and is an invaluable resource for musical extracts and rare illustrations. It is also frustratingly inaccessible. Unlike Finucci, Feldman does not appear to write in order to reach a specific conclusion, but rather to present a vast array of facts by which the general study of the castrato may be greatly advanced. It is her work on the origins of the castrato that are particularly ground-breaking and presented in the chapters 'Of Strange Births and Comic Kin' and 'The Man Who Pretended to Be Who He Was'. Her work on patrilineal practices in encouraging castration for younger sons is particularly detailed, and from where my information on this topic arises. The information contained within is well worth the exploration but it can appear haphazardly ordered, and at times rushed, there is a typography error in the last paragraph of page 9, for example. It is nevertheless a significant addition to academic research on the topic.

Margaret Reynolds and Susan McClary provide detailed analysis of representations of gender through castrati roles. Both *En Travesti: Women, Gender Subversion, Opera* and *Feminine Endings* are now relatively old publications, released in 1995. Reynold's essay, 'Ruggiero's Deceptions, Cherubino's Distractions' proffers a lesbian reading of *en travesti* roles that relishes what she believes to be the gender anarchy of the eighteenth century. For Reynolds, gender subversion in modern casting enables the message to be subverted, so that heterosexual identity can be deconstructed to offer new sexual readings of cross-cast roles.⁵ McClary approaches the subject via the concept of engendered rhetoric in order to construct masculinity and femininity on stage. Her work is important, as it links the concept of emotional expressivity

⁴ Finucci, *The Manly Masquerade*, 278.

⁵ Margaret Reynolds, 'Ruggiero's Deceptions, Cherubino's Distractions', in *En Travesti: Women, Gender Subversion, Opera*, ed. Corinne E. Blackmer and Patricia Juliana Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 146.

to delineations of femininity.⁶ Though not specifically about the castrato, it can be applied to the field of study, especially when it is contrasted with the work of Dorothy Keyser and Roger Freitas, both of whom begin to link abstract theory to practical application.

Keyser's 'Cross Sexual Casting in Baroque Opera' highlights the pitfalls of modern casting by exploring the castrato as a dramatic convention for which modern staging has no use. She urges the reader to disregard the ambiguity between a singer's gender, their cross-casting or voice and to interact with the performance as though the sound were disembodied, as this, in her opinion, is how a Baroque audience would have perceived the purposed cross-casting.⁷ Roger Freitas' essay, 'The Eroticism of Emasculation' is dismissive of Keyser's work, citing her on page 197 (3 pages in) as an example of scholarship too quick to discount the sexual constructs behind the castrato's gender ambiguity.⁸ Freitas' essay, 55 pages long, is a sizeable and important piece of scholarship. He appears to be the first person to link academic research into the castrato's sexuality to roles performed, and specifically, the connection between youth, emasculation and eroticism as a heady mix that enabled the castrato to become sexually desirable.

These publications, amongst others, are defining and important in the subject of the castrato's social and sexual history, and thus, his masculinity. However, the scholarship is famously disjointed, scattered over different sources with very little to signal an academic, a singer or interested member of the public towards complimentary literature. Even more frustrating is the lack of willingness to engage with the topic of the castrato in a practical, performance centric way. Laura De Marco's polemical article on the unsuitability of the

⁶ Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 39.

⁷ Dorothy Keyser, 'Cross-Sexual Casting in Baroque Opera: Musical and Theatrical Conventions', *Opera Quarterly*, Vol. 5, Issue 4 (1987), 47.

⁸ Roger Freitas Freitas, 'The Eroticism of Emasculation: Confronting the Baroque Body of the Castrato', *The Journal of Musicology*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (Spring 2003), University of California Press, 197.

counter-tenor is an engaging, thought provoking piece of work on the sound that should replace the castrato voice. Despite a clear and impassioned argument in the mezzo-soprano's favour, she announces that how to stage castrato-centred operas 'is not in the purview' of her article despite offering a number of vocal casting suggestions.⁹

It is this disjoint that I try to address through this thesis. Constructions of masculinity cannot be removed from the social and economic factors that encouraged and enabled castration for singing, nor can it be objectified away from the voice itself. The voice in opera is above all the most important theatrical tool at a singer or director's disposal, and it is through the voice, the message or sound that the drama of an opera will be most keenly articulated. Dorothy Keyser's tentative steps towards the link between casting and the use of the cross-cast body as a theatrical tool are as close to applying theoretical discourse with modern casting examples that I have found. This thesis endeavours to make a judgement on a castrato's masculinity and how best to construct this in modern casting, the purpose being to bridge the gap between academic constructs of masculinity and how this might be applied on stage. In the words of Margaret Reynolds, 'once more into the breeches, dear friend'.¹⁰

⁹ Laura E. DeMarco, 'The Fact of the Castrato and the Myth of the Countertenor', *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 86, No. 1 (Spring 2001), Oxford University Press, 183.

¹⁰ Reynolds, 'Ruggiero's Deceptions, Cherubino's Distractions', 143.

Creating Castrati: The Social History that Drove their Existence

The Castrati are a musical and social phenomenon who exist, in modern consciousness, in the shadows of history. Theirs is a history so fascinating and untouchable, so wholly at odds with modern life, that they continue to fascinate and entertain. In both musical and socio-historical study, the figure of the castrato presents us with the uncomfortable truth that not all of history can be uncovered, fully explored, and indeed, understood. As Katherine Bergeron so eloquently writes,

If the truth of history can reside in such empty spaces, those impossible gaps that separate present from past, then the figure of the castrato offers a kind of chilling embodiment of that truth, a poignant testimony to things that can never be recovered.¹¹

Simply, we cannot ask them what it was like, or why they chose (or not, in some cases) to become castrati. There is however an element of their history that can be explored and documented with a degree of certainty, namely the physical act of a boy's castration, and the social and economic reasons that drove the phenomenon. This chapter explores the earliest years of a castrato's life, how and why boys were castrated, and the physiological effects of castration on the voice.

The act of castration is an ancient practice with routes that stretch far into human history, such is the presence of castration in the writings of various cultures, including China, Ethiopia, Ancient Persia, and Greece and later in India and Arabic cultures.¹² Castrated men were termed 'eunuchs', and it is from this ancient practice that castration for musical purposes, and therefore the Italian castrato on which this essay focuses, was brought into being. It is difficult to establish an exact chronology of the use of castration, or with what

¹¹ Katherine Bergeron, 'The Castrato as History', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (July 1996), 167.

¹² Patrick Barbier, *The World of The Castrati: A History of an Extraordinary Operatic Phenomenon*, trans. Margaret Crosland (London: Souvenir Press Ltd., 2001), 6.

trajectory the practice spread between continents. It is clear from documented evidence, however, that castration for eunuchs (for non-musical purposes) had three main social uses. Perhaps its primary purpose was that of torture. During the Shang Dynasty in China (between c. 1700 and 1050 BC) castration was used regularly as a form of punishment of prisoners of war, substituting the use of the death penalty. The duality that castration played in Chinese society (and highlighting their second societal function) is evident in the years between the Shang dynasty and the establishment of the Qing Dynasty in 1644, when eunuchs became popular as palace slaves, and specifically, chamberlains of the King's harem. It is estimated that eunuchs in Chinese society peaked at around this time, with one hundred thousand estimated eunuchs living in China out of a population of one-hundred and thirty million people.¹³ This practice was common in the Muslim world too, where eunuchs were tasked as 'guardians of the bed', overseeing the chastity of the Sultan's wives in the Constantinople harem.¹⁴ Many eunuchs were absorbed into the royal Byzantine Courts and able to rise to significant positions within it; their physical condition allowed them close access to the royal men and, specifically, women of the court without fear of procreation. They were tasked with jobs that were menial and domestic; brushing hair, making beds and relaying messages, nevertheless the intimacy of these tasks and the proximity to authority the position offered meant that the role of the eunuch was one of potential political power despite their social status as slaves. The advantageousness of being a eunuch in a society in which social advancement was all but cut off to you is clear to see.¹⁵

The third purpose of castration was medicinal. The Renaissance is awash with medical manuals on curing various ailments through castration, though most commonly recommended to cure disease or injury of the genital area, castration was often recommended as a cure for certain venereal diseases

¹³ Shih-Shan Henry Tsai, *The Eunuchs in The Ming Dynasty* (New York: SUNY Press, 1996), 11.

¹⁴ Barbier, *The World of The Castrati*, 7.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

too, as well as kidney stones, elephantiasis, epilepsy, gout, madness, pox, the plague, and recommended as a preventative measure for immunity to leprosy.¹⁶ Castration was also the most common curative and preventative measure for the endemic problem of hernias amongst the Italian poor. Limited diet, dirty clothing and hard, physical labour contributed to hernias as a common medical complaint, leading in part to the widespread use of castration for varying medicinal purposes. There is some evidence that hernia procedures were used as a guise in order to castrate young boys for singing. In *The Castrato and his Wife* Helen Berry cites the testimony of an unnamed Spanish surgeon who claimed to have witnessed another hernia surgeon perform a castration on the orders of a local priest.¹⁷ Tentative though the link may be, this anecdote does uncover how medicine and music began to be intertwined during this period and that castration was so common for medicinal purposes that the existence of castration for musical reasons does not seem so alien when viewed in the context of its relative normality in everyday life. As Finucci speculates, ‘the 120 castrati singers in the city of Rome in 1650, when the number of castrations for musical purposes was at its highest, or the 100 in 1694, when the practice started to decline, may have been just an addition – medically unjustified to be sure – of an already established practice’.¹⁸

The origins of castration for musical purposes is almost impossible to uncover with any certainty, partly owing to the secrecy that surrounded the practice. Angus Heriot, author of *The Castrati in Opera*, uncovered an obscure reference made to castration for the preservation of high voice by Dio Cassius in a *Roman History* under Emperor Septimus Severus, but the practice is not eluded to again.¹⁹ The spread of Christianity through Europe provides the most logical explanation for the use of castration for vocal purposes alone. Women were expressively forbidden from singing in Church by dictat of St

¹⁶ Finucci, *The Manly Masquerade*, 250.

¹⁷ Helen Berry, *The Castrato and his Wife* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 16.

¹⁸ Finucci, *The Manly Masquerade*, 253.

¹⁹ Heriot, *The Castrati in Opera*, 9.

Paul, his words ‘mulier taceat in ecclesia’, translated as ‘the woman is silent in church’ being broadly adopted across many of the Papal States. The ban was not officially lifted until Pope Pius IX relinquished the Church’s power over temporal affairs as late as 1870.²⁰

Castration for Music

A possible explanation for the introduction of eunuchs for musical purposes may be traced to the court of Constantinople, where Theodore Balsamone wrote a treatise in defence of eunuchs, in which he eludes to their near constant employment as singers there.²¹ The prevalence of Eunuchs in the musical employ of European courts and churches can then be traced to Spain, which given the Moorish influence in that country and the cultural influence of the dismantled Byzantine empire after the fall of Constantinople, is unsurprising.

It is possible to argue that castration, solely for musical purposes, can be linked to the shift from plain-song to polyphony in late medieval composition. In Andrew Parrott’s essay ‘Falsetto Beliefs. The Counter-Tenor Cross Examined’, he makes a compelling argument for the cultivation of the falsetto voice in response to the expanded scoring of fourteenth and fifteenth century polyphonic music. Between c.1450 to 1500 three part polyphony was expanded to encompass three octaves (22 notes), in contrast to the two octaves (15 notes) that were commonly associated with plainchant and earlier polyphonic writing. Evidence for this, he suggests, can be found in the pitch at which the highest voice part in plainsong and polyphony were expected to perform. The two octave range of earlier polyphony encompassed the natural range of men’s voices, with Parrott placing this range between g” for the top line and a for the bass parts, expressed using the Helmholtz pitch notation method at modern, A=440 pitch. This would suggest that the top line lay

²⁰ Barbier, *The World of The Castrati*, 235.

²¹ Heriot, *The Castrati in Opera*, 10.

within the tenor range. However, the expansion of polyphonic writing both up and down on the staff facilitated the inclusion of two extra top parts. As boys' voices were not used in the performance of written polyphony until the latter half of the fifteenth century, it is suggested that this development in scoring practice enabled the falsetto voice, associated as precursor to the Italian castrato, to develop in the Churches and Courts of fifteenth century Europe.²² This assertion is echoed by Heriot, who writes, 'the elaborate a cappella style, which began to flourish about the middle of the fifteenth century, necessitated a much wider range of voices and higher degree of virtuosity than anything that had gone before'.²³

As musical tastes changed to accommodate the new fashion for higher male voices and more elaborate vocal writing, the solution appeared in the form of Spanish falsettists, famed for their ability to sing far higher than their Italian counterparts. An entry in the first *Grove Dictionary of Music* on the Sistine Chapel describes these falsettists as, 'from Spain, in which country it was extensively cultivated, by means of some peculiar system of training, the secret of which has never publically transpired'.²⁴ As Valeria Finucci in *The Manly Masquerade* points out however, our understanding of castrati as originally being a Spanish phenomenon must be read within the context of the Italians othering themselves from the practice as Eastern and exotic, carried via Spain through that country's cultural association with the Moors. Though this historical narrative may well carry some truth (Venice, with its extensive links to the Orient as a major trade port appears to have used castrati extensively on stage during the early 1600's), the vociferousness with which the Italians blamed Spain for castrati may well have been in response to the complex attitude towards the practice that existed in Italy during this time.²⁵

²² Andrew Parrott, 'Falsetto beliefs: the "countertenor" cross-examined', *Early Music*, Vol. XLIII, No.1 (Feb. 2015), 79-81.

²³ Heriot, *The Castrati in Opera*, 11.

²⁴ George Grove, ed., *A Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Vol. III (London: Macmillan and Co., 1883), 521.

²⁵ Finucci, *The Manly Masquerade*, 238.

Their entrance into the Papal Chapel can be charted towards the end of the fifteenth century, when, in line with the increasing popularity of ecclesiastical polyphony and thus the stratification of vocal parts, voice-types began to be recorded in the Vatican archives.²⁶ Prior to this, the repertoire of the Papal chapel had consisted primarily of chant and falsobordone, an improvisatory technique based on the melody of a Gregorian psalm tone, and used primarily for the recitation of Vesper psalms.²⁷ Without the stratification of vocal parts, the need to list the voice type of singers employed in the Papal Chapels was negated.

Unearthing how falsettists, purporting to be uncastrated men, facilitated and were eventually proceeded by Italian castrati, is far from a straightforward process. There is much speculation, both modern and in writings contemporary to this occurrence, that falsettists may well have been castrati in disguise. Public opinion of castrati during this period was less than favourable, and unsurprising truth considering castrati were not sanctioned for use in an ecclesiastical setting until 1589 by Pope Sixtus V, though they begin to appear in Vatican records from the 1560's.²⁸ It is entirely likely that the term falsettist, whilst having described unmutated men in truth at one time, became a byword for castrato, a term laden with nuance and double entendre.

It is a testament to the difficulty in deducing fact from fiction in this area that such numerous examples are given of 'the first castrato' by researchers in this field of study. Martha Feldman, writing in *The Castrato, Reflections on Natures and Kinds* cites the first castrato to be employed at the Sistine Chapel as Hernando Bustamante, a Spaniard who joined the choir

²⁶ Simon Ravens, *The Supernatural Voice: A History of High Male Singing* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2014), 52.

²⁷ Murray C. Bradshaw, 'Falsobordone', *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press. Accessed April 18 2015,

<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/09273>.

²⁸ Ravens, *The Supernatural Voice: A History of High Male Singing*, 52.

in 1558.²⁹ Further research into the source of this information (no citation is given) leads to Anthony Newcomb in his book *The Madrigal at Ferrara 1579-1597*, educated, though nevertheless, conjecture based on Bustamante's previous employment at the chapel of the Duke of Ferrara, where castrati were known to appear on its payroll.³⁰ Bustamante, a sopranist, is never listed as a castrato at the Sistine Chapel. Another such example is a Spanish singer named Padre Soto, who was first recorded at the Vatican in 1562 and listed as a falsettist, yet described by the writer Pietro Della Valle as one of the choir's earliest castrato singers. This is 37 years before the first officially recorded castrati of the Sistine Chapel Choir, Pietro Paolo Folignato and Girolamo Rossini, at this point sanctioned to enter the employ of the church by Papal decree.³¹ In his book, *The Quest for the Soprano Voice*, Giuseppe Gerbino uncovers further evidence of the admission of castrati to the Papal chapels under the guise of them being falsettists. In 1571 the Mantuan court secretary wrote that a castrato he had been tasked to trace had 'entered the papal chapel', the identity of the singer in question remains elusive.³² It seems likely that Pope Sixtus' 1589 sanctioning of castrati in the chapel was reactionary to an already quietly established norm of accepting them into the choir, rather than an abrupt change to ecclesiastical policy. As Angus Heriot writes, 'it seems likely that the appearance of castrati in considerable numbers around 1600 was to some extent an admission of their existence rather than a completely new introduction'.³³ The likelihood of this is further strengthened by the rate at which castrati were able to dominate the Papal Choirs in Rome and further beyond. Giovanni de Sanctos, the last Spanish falsettist at Rome died in 1625, only thirty six years after the sanctions against castrati were

²⁹ Martha Feldman, *The Castrato: Reflections on Natures and Kinds* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015), 6.

³⁰ Anthony Newcomb, *The Madrigal at Ferrara, 1579-1597* (California: Princeton University Press, 1980), 169.

³¹ Heriot, *The Castrati in Opera*, 12.

³² Giuseppe Gerbino, 'The Quest for the Soprano Voice: Castrati in Sixteenth-Century Italy', *Studi Musicali* Vol. 32, No. 2 (2004), 306.

³³ Heriot, *The Castrati in Opera*, 11.

lifted.³⁴ By this point, the castrati had overtaken Spanish falsettists as the most celebrated members of the numerous Italian chapel choirs.

The reasons for which boys were sent to be castrated in Italy are numerous and complicated, and as with most difficult aspects of history, driven by social and economic hardship. However, to state that castration for musical purposes was primarily for betterment of familial circumstances or indeed, survival, is to simplify the phenomenon. Broadly speaking, the terms by which boys found themselves castrated were thus. Economic necessity, familial wealth management through primogeniture and the strong influence of Catholicism interspersed with a rich tradition of rural folk beliefs.³⁵ No single reason for castration existed independent of another, and the combination of factors this essay will explore will attempt to show why the phenomenon of castration, though not exclusively Italian, dominated that country in particular.

Social Need

The early seventeenth-century brought about a severe, broadly European economic crisis that led, around 1620, to deindustrialisation in Italy, war and plague followed soon after.³⁶ The economic depression and lack of food led to a steep rise in the numbers of monks and nuns, sources varying wildly on the true scale of their employment. John Rosselli, in his influential essay ‘The Castrato as a Professional Group and Social Phenomenon’ states that by the 1670s they accounted for ‘5% of the population in Florence and Catania, for about 9, 10 or 11% in decayed Central Italian towns such as Siena, Pistoia, and Prato; in more populous cities – Venice, Rome, Naples – the proportion was lower but absolute numbers higher, with monks alone numbering well over

³⁴ Heriot, *The Castrati in Opera*, 13.

³⁵ Feldman, *The Castrato*, 7.

³⁶ John Rosselli, ‘The Castrato as a Professional Group and a Social Phenomenon, 1550-1850’, *Acta Musicologica*, Vol. 60, Fasc. 2 (May-Aug 1988), 149.

3000 in Rome, well over 4000 in Naples'.³⁷ Yet, Finucci presents very different statistics, citing research done by Italian historian Pietro Stella in 1979, stating that between 1600 and 1649 two thirds of male and female newborns, and half of all children born between 1650 and 1699 were sent to live some form of religious life.³⁸ Even if one is to assume the true figure sits between these two estimates, the numbers employed directly by the church during this time are startling. The steep rise in ecumenical employment is hardly unsurprising. At a time of economic uncertainty securing a place in the clergy for a younger son or daughter provided for both the child and their family the promise of financial stability and lifelong employment. Giving up a younger child to the church was a matter of 'familial strategy', the burden of marrying off a daughter or finding meaningful employment for a son who did not stand to directly inherit took financial pressure off of families from middling or low incomes.³⁹ In a feudal society affected by economic depression, Italian families could not afford to be sentimental about children without the means to support them. The Catholic church in Southern Europe provided an answer to economic necessity in taking on inflated numbers of poorer children to the clergy, and in doing so, facilitated a secondary, though important social phenomenon. Celibacy, whether through religious vows or in castration as a child, became a socially acceptable form of birth control.

The concept of imposed celibacy on younger children, or indeed, oneself, may seem problematic to our own modern understanding of the right to sexual fulfilment. Yet, as John Rosselli urges, we must 'stand as far away as we can from modern assumptions' in order to understand why celibacy, and therefore, castration, would ever be a desirable choice. To renounce ones sexuality and adopt Christian asceticism became an increasingly popular choice between the years 1600-1750.⁴⁰ Celibacy, in whatever capacity it was

³⁷ Rosselli, 'The Castrato as a Professional Group and a Social Phenomenon', 149.

³⁸ Finucci, *The Manly Masquerade*, 255.

³⁹ Rosselli, 'The Castrato as a Professional Group and a Social Phenomenon', 150.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

practiced, could be viewed as a liberation from the financial responsibility of family life to both your parents and a future generation. Citing evidence from Neapolitan censuses during this period, Rosselli makes a link between an increase in women registered as celibate and the policy of maintaining celibacy in noble families in order to safeguard property. It may be assumed that where there is a documented increase in female celibacy this is indicative of a wider trend amongst land owning families during this period.⁴¹ Furthermore, the practice of celibacy was often tantamount to guaranteed employment by the Church as a priest, monk, or indeed, castrato singer. Though castration may seem drastic to our own modern sensibilities it was for some a practical, sensible solution within the context of a society that practiced castration medicinally and encouraged celibacy for economical reasons. As one eighteenth century observer wrote, castration ‘attracts no notice in a country where the population is huge in relation to the amount of work available’.⁴²

If there is to be one certainty regarding the castration of boys in seventeenth and eighteenth century Italy, it is that the practice, though widespread, was morally and religiously problematic. Officially, the church condemned castration as being against the natural order, and to be proven of providing such a service would render someone excommunicable. Moreover, male castration and eunuch marriage was prohibited in Roman law, by dictat of Pope Sixtus V, in 1587; this was a law valid in most Italian states.⁴³ Anyone concerned with the practice would be liable to civil penalties, the worst being death, depending on the state in which the castration was performed.⁴⁴ However, there is a common misconception that legal prohibition of castration for singing extended to ecclesiastical law, when in fact, it did not.⁴⁵

⁴¹ , G. Delille, *Famille et propriété dans le Royaume de Naples (XVe-XIXe siècles)*(Paris, 1985), 188. As cited in Rosselli, ‘The Castrato as a Professional Group and a Social Phenomenon’, 150

⁴² J.-J. le François de Lalande, *Voyage d’un François en Italie*, VI (Venice-Paris, 1769), 348. As cited in Rosselli, ‘The Castrato as a Professional Group and a Social Phenomenon’, 151.

⁴³ Rosselli, ‘The Castrato as a Professional Group and a Social Phenomenon’, 151.

⁴⁴ Heriot, *The Castrati in Opera*, 42.

⁴⁵ Rosselli, ‘The Castrato as a Professional Group and a Social Phenomenon’, 151.

Thus, the relationship between the Catholic Church and castration was able to exist because it operated within the confines of its own ecclesiastical law and not those of the individual Italian states. Furthermore, there is little doubt that a market existed in Italy for castrated boys, and that despite all protestations of the evils of castration, precipitated by Catholic teaching, the church played a significant role in fostering the phenomenon.

It is possible to argue that the church encouraged castrati into existence not via actively legislating for their rights to exist and perform, but by legislating against women from taking up the performance opportunities that castrati then sought to fill. The first and most commonly cited evidence for this was the ban on women performing in church. This was based on St Paul's letter to the Corinthians, chapter 16, verse 34, 'let women be silent in the assemblies, for it is not permitted to them to speak'.⁴⁶ As Barbier points out, 'the apostle did not demand the presence of eunuchs in Church singing, until then children and men had been sufficient to comply with this rule'.⁴⁷ However, given the vogue for elaborate, polyphonic vocal writing and the presence of Spanish falsettists at the Vatican, it is entirely possible that castration was viewed as a valuable asset to ecclesiastical services, and eventually encouraged in order to meet the vocal demands of the music being written for the Papal Chapel. Even in the face of moral opposition the Church stood firm in its belief that castrati were too valuable to the liturgy to ban (and thus, by association, they condoned and encouraged its practice): in 1748 Pope Benedict XIV advised against an outright ban of castrati by all bishops 'essentially on prudential grounds. It was better to avoid disturbance and work for a compromise that would bring about partial or gradual change'.⁴⁸ That even at the height of the castrati phenomenon the Pope needed to fight on their behalf is evidence of how divided opinion was regarding their existence.

⁴⁶ Barbier, *The World of the Castrati*, 19.

⁴⁷ Barbier, *The World of the Castrati*, 19-20.

⁴⁸ Rosselli, 'The Castrato as a Professional Group and a Social Phenomenon', 151.

Yet, the Pope fought the ban, and in doing so eluded to the importance of the relationship between the Church and castrati despite its public position that castration was immoral. Secondary to this was the ban on women appearing onstage in the Papal States by Pope Sixtus V, just a year later, in 1588.⁴⁹ The ban was not absolute, certain cities such as Bologna, Ferrara and Romagna retained a degree of independence and continued to allow women to perform on stage.⁵⁰ Even Florence, a city that enjoyed a higher degree of autonomy from Rome than most, banned women from performing during the period of Cosimo III. However, women otherwise continued to perform there in the theatres and opera houses.⁵¹ Yet, this particular meddling in state affairs left the Church in a particular quandary, as, in the words of Angus Heriot, ‘in discouraging women for the lyric stage, with the estimable aim of safeguarding public morals, it implicitly necessitated the practice of castration’.⁵² With women banned from appearing on stage this left tenors, basses, falsettists or boys able to play female parts. Castrati presented an answer to the impresarios tasked with casting around the ban, as the vocal range and ability of the castrati was generally considered to be greater than that of the falsettists, and being older, they were able to convey a greater range of expression and feeling in their performances.⁵³ Furthermore, they replicated the vocal range of their female counterparts, which gave a composer artistic licence to write music that was contrasting and more dynamic than that solely written for the typical male range. As Finucci urges, ‘we should attach no political significance to a theatre’s employing a castrato rather than a woman onstage, since the choice depended more on availability and timbre of voice than gender’.⁵⁴ In essence, (and to be explored in further detail later in this essay), the perceived gender of the castrati bore little significance to their casting in roles either male or

⁴⁹ Finucci, *The Manly Masquerade*, 232.

⁵⁰ Heriot, *The Castrati in Opera*, 25.

⁵¹ Finucci, *The Manly Masquerade*, 232.

⁵² Heriot, *The Castrati in Opera*, 25.

⁵³ Barbier, *The World of the Castrati*, 20.

⁵⁴ Finucci, *The Manly Masquerade*, 233.

female. The ban on women necessitated their employment, and in doing so allowed castrati to rise beyond the musically narrow opportunities the church afforded into the possibility of functioning as autonomous professionals. Though the ban on women performing did not call for castrati to take their place, it does appear to have stimulated the supply and demand of castrated boys. The ban on women performing on stage was not lifted completely until 1798.⁵⁵

The Church and Castration

When examining the history of the castrato phenomenon, no single factor is greater than the involvement of the Catholic Church in promoting and recruiting castrati, and thus, enabling the phenomenon to thrive. The most obvious form this took was the policy of actively employing castrati, and eventually, their endorsement of the musical schools that sprung up all over Italy to train the boys for life as professional singers. Feldman correctly remarks that ‘in no case do singing eunuchs seem to have moved decisively beyond the paternalistic, hierarchical contexts of courtly patronage to operate as independent professionals in a modern, money-driven market place as Italians did throughout western and eastern Europe’.⁵⁶ When examining how castrati functioned as successful (and highly paid) professionals in a country with a ravished economy, the binding thread appears to be that the church, having financially incentivised castration for music, provided an environment in which the castrato voice was lauded, sought-after, and therefore commercially viable. As Helen Berry remarks, ‘during the Renaissance, to be able to hear a castrato sing was an elite privilege, a private pleasure reserved for powerful men’.⁵⁷ The castrato voice was a commodity, and on recognising its uniqueness the church sought to protect and maintain castrati for themselves. One such example is Padre Gregorio Allegri’s *Miserere*, a piece

⁵⁵ Heriot, *The Castrati in Opera*, 26.

⁵⁶ Feldman, *The Castrato*, 8.

⁵⁷ Berry, *The Castrato and his Wife*, 16.

written by and for castrati and deemed so remarkable, it was subsequently banned from being performed beyond the Papal Chapel. This only fuelled public interest in castrati, and a highlight for any traveller to Rome was to attend mass at the Vatican, with the expressed wish of hearing the *Miserere* and the castrati who sang it.⁵⁸ One of the greatest endorsements of castrati in the public life of the church is the existence of an opera written in 1668, *La Baldassarra o la Comica del Cielo*, of which Pope Clement IX was the librettist and for which all the female roles were sung by castrati. Performed seven times during his papacy, the Pope did not relent in allowing women to perform in any of the revivals.⁵⁹ As clear and direct an endorsement of castrati as any, given the direct involvement of the head of the Catholic Church.

The importance and power of the Catholic Church in the daily life in sixteenth and seventeenth century cannot be underestimated. Where the church went, the secular world was permitted to follow. Once the precedent had been set for castrati as pinnacle figures in church worship the opera houses and courts quickly followed suit. Demand rose for castrati, and so did their wages, and out of the small but quietly established fashion for castration for church singing rose an industry and phenomenon greater than anything imaginable when the first Spanish falsettists were permitted to the Papal Chapel. In fact, the church had trouble retaining castrati when the theatres provided such fierce, and more financially rewarding competition. In 1765 the size of the choir of San Marco in Venice was reduced by a third in order to provide larger payments to its castrati in order not to lose them to the theatres. The disparity in payments for members of the choir was great. The castrato Gaspare Pacchierotti was paid three-hundred ducats a year, whilst the tenor Ferdinando Pasini and the bass De Mezzo received only one-hundred and fifty ducats.⁶⁰ Despite the ambiguity that surrounded its relationship with

⁵⁸ Barbier, *The World of the Castrati*, 128.

⁵⁹ Barbier, *The World of the Castrati*, 131.

⁶⁰ Barbier, *The World of the Castrati*, 126.

castration, the church was protective and indeed loyal of the castrati it employed, and for the last one hundred years of their existence remained their sole employer. It seems fitting that owing to its direct involvement with castration, the church honoured the sacrifice, and continue to provide employment to castrati long after the fashion for them had disappeared. Castrati were not formally outlawed until as late as 1902 when Pope Leo XIII brought about a papal decree that banned castrati from singing in the Sistine Chapel.⁶¹ A photograph pertaining to 1898 shows that at this time seven castrati remained in the choir. Despite opposition, the Pope came to a tacit understanding with the remaining castrati that they could leave gradually owing to their inability to find other employment. The last, Alessandro Moreschi, was still singing in 1913.⁶²

However, in examining the role of the church in encouraging castration, it must be noted that written evidence has survived because of the long history of archiving documents pertaining to the church, and as such, their involvement with castrati can be far more clearly defined. The narrative of its overwhelming involvement with castration for music is based in truth, but may well be distorted in scale, given the lack of written evidence for the employment of castrati in a secular setting. As Simon Ravens has suggested, ‘almost all the evidence about individual singers takes the form of financial, or contractual documents. And whereas a church singer was a professional who might have had his activities documented, no such paper trail exists for the singers (largely amateur) of secular music’.⁶³ It is important to approach the subject with caution, as in a subject as contentious as castration it is dangerous to assume absolutes, or to lose sight of the fact that in the histories and memoirs from which evidence is taken, the given scale of the church’s involvement may well be an othering of castration’s existence and acceptance

⁶¹ Barbier, *The World of the Castrati*, 126.

⁶² Barbier, *The World of the Castrati*, 239.

⁶³ Ravens, *The Supernatural Voice*, 61.

in Italian culture. It is easy to blame an institution as large as the Catholic Church, and to do so retrospectively, when public favour has turned against the phenomenon.

It must be noted that the church was inextricably bound to castration by a passive, though important aspect of the practice's history. It is, in Feldman's words, the role of 'castration as sacrifice in the properly Catholic sense'.⁶⁴ Like joining the priesthood, to give up a boy for castration in service of music was indeed sacrificial for the child and family concerned. The boy's ability to procreate or lead a sexually normative life were sacrificed with the expressed understanding that the action of castration would allow a musically promising child to better their own, and their family's prospects, through the possibility of a financially rewarding career. Entwined with this was the notion of the child as a sacrifice for and in the service of God, especially when a large proportion of castrati were employed by the Church as a permanent feature of the service. As Helen Berry in *The Castrato and his Wife* observes, [castration] 'when performed so that a boy could remain sexually chaste and offer his body, an unbroken voice, in lifelong service and devotional worship to the church, it could even be framed as a holy sacrifice, and was sometimes depicted as such by contemporary commentators'.⁶⁵ It would not be unsuitable to draw a comparison between the castrated child and the concept of the sacrificial lamb. Catholicism formed a central part of seventeenth century Italian life, the perceived repercussions of such a sacrifice both physical and spiritual, wouldn't, one doubts, have gone unnoticed. The choice to castrate a child is aptly referred to by Julia Prest as a 'noble-if rather extreme-form of piety'.⁶⁶ In this respect, castration may well have been viewed as a religious vocation, closely linked through sacrifice to the orders taken up by priests or monks. The late eighteenth century German journalist W.L. Weckhrlin went as far as

⁶⁴ Feldman, *The Castrato*, 7.

⁶⁵ Berry, *The Castrato and his Wife*, 18.

⁶⁶ Julia Prest, *Theatre Under Louis XIV: Cross-Casting and the Performance of Gender in Drama, Ballet and Opera* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 130.

describing monks as ‘castrati who had not been operated upon’, eluding to the perceived link between the professions.⁶⁷

In this sense, the boy castrato becomes a complete embodiment of the service and sacrifice the Church expected of those who took its Holy Orders. The boys, physically and permanently altered in the service of singing, are given up by their families the Church, the Lord, society and those that ran it because castration offered a genuine and easily accessible solution to families in need, whilst playing into the subtle but ever present concept of sacrifice as a beneficial part of one’s spiritual life. In turn, these boys would grow up as castrati, dedicate much of their professional lives to liturgical music, yet in the process be unable to live normal, heterosexual lives by order of the very Church by which many were employed. Feldman calls this a ‘kind of indirect symbolic imitation of Christ’s passion’.⁶⁸

The concept of such total sacrifice on behalf of a child who cannot have fully understood the implications of their choice is deeply uncomfortable. By its very nature castration had to take place before a boy had reached puberty in order for it to succeed in preserving the voice. However, in doing so, the choice to castrate was made on behalf of a child who having not reached puberty, lacked the self-awareness and sexual impulse to comprehend the physiological and sexual implications of the procedure. There is a juxtaposition of sacrifice as both a noble, spiritual cause, and a deeply uncomfortable element of this period in history from which there was a need to publically distance oneself. The issue lies in what Feldman calls ‘the very Rousseauian notion of the innocence of childhood was lacking, as was a notion of consent predicated on voluntary acquiescence based upon the power to act unencumbered by external forces’.⁶⁹ Feldman’s writing style may seem at times to be overtly florid, but her point is critical to the notion that castration when

⁶⁷ Rosselli, ‘The Castrato as a Professional Group and a Social Phenomenon’, 150.

⁶⁸ Feldman, *The Castrato*, 7.

⁶⁹ Feldman, *The Castrato*, 14.

framed as sacrifice is central to how the procedure came to be justified. This is because canon law required two things in order for a boy to be castrated, medical necessity and the nominal consent of the child.⁷⁰ The deep rooted uncomfortableness lies in the question, can a child ever have truly consented to castration? And if not, how do we read a boy's petition for the procedure and the extenuating forces that must have acted upon them in order to seek out castration for themselves? This is especially true given that medical necessity was almost never truly the reason for castration. Rather, when a boy petitioned to be castrated it was often explained away as an expression of pleasing God, a teacher or patron, framed as a sacrifice or gift on their behalf, and convolutedly mixed up with medical need. The petitions themselves are an extraordinary smokescreen whose purpose it was to exonerate legally anyone who sought the procedure on behalf of their child. As Rosselli urges, 'we need not take the boys' petitions at face value. But they - and their acceptance by rulers - show that for many years castration was almost a routine matter, calling at best for perfunctory concealment.'⁷¹

Excuses

Around 1700 there is evidence that a shift in attitude towards castration began to occur, precipitating one of the most fascinating aspects in its history. A culture of concealment and artifice far greater than had gone before was adopted in order to disguise the true nature of the procedure and the reasons for which it took place. When examining how social attitudes towards castrati effect our understanding of their gender, the excuses with which castration were explained away provide a fascinating insight into how the operation was inextricably tied to the notion of the boys' gender being somehow altered. Excuses for castration became fanciful and steeped in symbolic imagery that linked castration to animals. Sixteenth-century humanist Paolo Giovio cited

⁷⁰ Feldman, *The Castrato*, 14.

⁷¹ Rosselli, 'The Castrato as a Professional Group and a Social Phenomenon', 155.

the bite of a wild swan or pig as a common excuse for castration.⁷² Another common excuse was the fall from a horse, as suggested by Farinelli's Franciscan biographer Giovenale Sacchi in 1784 when he sent out a posthumous questionnaire that sought to uncover the reason behind his voice.⁷³ Another common image is the bite of a swan, castrato poet Loreto Vittori refers to castrati as musical swans in his 1662 comic opera, *La troia rapita*, translated as 'The Kidnapped Pig'.⁷⁴ The vogue for attributing castration to animals was not short lived either. When vocal historian Franz Haböck set about interviewing castrati from the Sistine Chapel in the 1914 every one of them explained away their castration as being from a wild boar or swan.⁷⁵ This phenomenon is interesting for two reasons. The first is the use of animal imagery and mysticism that hints at the social background of the castrati, and the second is the use of overtly 'masculine' activities such as riding, hunting and foraging, to re-tell the castration (and emasculating) story. There is a long history of superstitious beliefs and folklore with animals being central to their narrative. In Carlo Levi's social commentary, *Christ Stopped At Eboli*, he details with vivid clarity how even in the 1930's the link between animals and humans held a mysticism and reverence in some of the more impoverished areas of Italy that seems unfathomable today. Levi devotes a sizeable portion of his book to describing the reverence that surrounds animal and human interaction, and though not directly linked to the subject of castration, gives an important insight into how animal imagery in castration stories would not have seemed so improbable within the context of the society from which they came. On the possibility of human and animal relationships Levi writes, 'anything is possible, where the ancient deities of the shepherds, the ram and the lamb, run every day over the familiar paths, and there is no definitive boundary line between

⁷² Feldman, *The Castrato*, 15.

⁷³ Rosselli, 'The Castrato as a Professional Group and a Social Phenomenon', 155.

⁷⁴ Feldman, *The Castrato*, 15.

⁷⁵ Franz Haböck, *Die Kastraten und ihre Gesangskunst: Eine gesangsphysiologische, kultur- und musikhistorische Studien* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1927), 202-203. As cited by Feldman, *The Castrato*, 15.

the world of human beings and that of animals or even monsters'.⁷⁶ When many castrati would have come from poor, working-class families from the villages surrounding the Papal States, they came from a culture where animals formed a large part of daily life, and were held in reverence and superstition. Levi describes this 'dual nature' as 'horrible and terrifying...yet it carries with it a mysterious attraction and kind of respect, as if it had something divine about it'.⁷⁷ It is entirely probable that a combination of catholic teaching and superstitious beliefs provided an explanation for castration that both hinted at the symbolism of the act, as well as providing a viable obfuscation of human responsibility in the castration of a child. It mustn't be forgotten that wild boars still roam in parts of Italy, having reached an estimated population of one million and are responsible for injury and death, a threat posed to hunters even to this day.⁷⁸ The use of the swan in these stories is also steeped in symbolic imagery. The concept of the swan song, the tradition of the swan singing while dying, holds a particularly poignancy in the context of the death of masculinity during the castration. In Loreto Vittori's previously mentioned work he refers to his colleagues as 'musical swans'.⁷⁹ The swan image is particularly emotive when viewing castration as a liminal act between one life and the next. The swansong also evokes the image of a way of life or concept of masculinity having died when a castration had taken place. The swan, with its long history in literature as delineating death and the feminine can be viewed as a trope in castration stories for the feminising of castrati once the procedure had taken place.

Tied into this concept was the use of animals to promote overtly masculine activities as the reasoning behind the medical need to castrate a

⁷⁶ Carlo Levi, *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, trans. Frances Frenaye (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), 111.

⁷⁷ Levi, *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, 112.

⁷⁸ Nick Squires, 'Italy fears growth in wild boar numbers', *The Telegraph*, Feb 5 2015. Accessed April 3 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/italy/11393007/Italy-fears-growth-in-wild-boar-numbers.html>.

⁷⁹ Feldman, *The Castrato*, 15.

child. Farinelli apparently fell from a horse whilst racing and Domenico Mustafà was bitten by a pig as he worked in an empty field, each accident necessitating the operation.⁸⁰ In these instances the castration has been caused by the child exerting their masculinity, as though hunting, riding or foraging were so bound to the rural Italian understanding of maleness, that to be ‘too’ masculine, and therefore castrated because of some accident pertaining to that act, is the only plausible explanation for the emasculation of castration to have taken place. Where animals held a mythic link to humans, the concept of the castration story as one that was ritualistic, divine and symbolic provides a narrative that removes human responsibility and hints at castration as a kind of metaphysical rite of passage. In these instances the association with animals during castration elevates the castrato beyond an act that could have ‘endangered and lessened him’, owing to reverence and fear with which the human and animal relationship was held, to one who has conquered this relationship and emerged a modified man.⁸¹

Furthermore, the castration stories were beneficial to some castrati who were deeply troubled by the concept of their parents’ involvement. It is unsurprising, given how altered their existence was, that the concept of castration as a financial choice, rather than medical need or unhuman act, would elicit anger from some castrati. When asked one evening at a dinner party as to how he came by his physical ‘imperfection’, Mustafà, in a fit of rage replied, ‘if by chance I learnt at this moment that it was my father who reduced me in this way, I would kill him with this knife’.⁸² The smokescreen of unaccountability, it appears, protected more than just those who carried out the operation.

There is a history of emotionally charged rhetoric that surrounds castration, due, in part, to the notion of castration as imposed sacrifice, and

⁸⁰ Barbier, *The World of the Castrati*, 26.

⁸¹ Feldman, *The Castrato*, 16.

⁸² Barbier, *The World of the Castrati*, 26.

crucially, whether the nature of the sacrifice was warranted. Take, for example, the quotation below from Robert Sayer who in 1602 wrote,

The voice is a faculty more precious than virility, since it is through his voice and his reasoning that man is distinguished from animals. If therefore it is necessary to suppress virility in order to enhance the voice, it can be done without impiety...⁸³

His words leave little doubt that castration was, for some, a worthwhile sacrifice. Yet only a century later, the philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau wrote, 'In Italy there are barbarous fathers who sacrifice for financial gain and hand over their children for this operation'.⁸⁴ The quotation denotes an inherent mistrust in the motives of some families for castration, playing into the concept that the operation was sought on a child's behalf not for their benefit, but for the perceived financial gain of the family instead. Castration for singing was never a truly comfortable topic.

Who, Where, Why

A pattern begins to emerge when one studies how castrations came to be instigated. It appears that the procedure was primarily sought by the parents of a child with the help of a member of the clergy or master of music in the local town from which the boy came. A slight aptitude for music and the potential of a good singing voice were a prerequisite, and all that remained was for the parents, music school or singing teacher to find the money with which to train the child once the procedure had taken place.⁸⁵ One such example from 1650 and uncovered by Rosselli is for 22 scudi to be paid to the ripieno string player (and evidently surgeon) of the Santa Maria Maggiore Church in Bergamo for the castration of one of the choir boys, who was also in attendance at the attached music school. The school petitioned the governing council of

⁸³ Barbier, *The World of the Castrati*, 122, quoting Robert Sayer.

⁸⁴ Barbier, *The World of the Castrati*, 19.

⁸⁵ Heriot, *The Castrati in Opera*, 38.

the Misericordia, the charity in charge of its running, to provide the money.⁸⁶ Another common avenue in which to seek castration was to petition a member of the nobility to provide the money with the understanding that the castrated child would return as a trained adult to live in service of the person who paid for the procedure. The courts of the Duke of Modena kept records of such petitions including the fee of four *doble* for the castration of Silvestro Prittoni 'in conformity with what was done on other occasions by order of His Most Serene Highness'.⁸⁷ The petition was accepted and it appears the child was granted his wish of preserving his voice from breaking. Little information exists pertaining to how the procedure was sought out, as due to the strict laws that surrounded it, the practice was clandestine in nature. In Charles Burney's writings on Italy there is a passage that alludes to the difficulty in ascertaining where castration was carried out. He wrote:

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.⁸⁸

Such was the sense of shame that surrounded the practice that each city blamed another. Despite protestations against it, it is likely that castrations took place all over Italy. There is a common misconception that castrations were primarily centred around Naples when in reality this was likely caused by an overconcentration of *castrati* there due to the high number and skill of the conservatories in the city.⁸⁹ One only has to examine the makeup of the choir of the Papal Chapel to realise that *castrati* did not originate from one city alone. The choir was comprised of thirty-two singers split equally into four parts. Post 1625 *castrati* made up almost 50% of the choir who were, on

⁸⁶ Rosselli, 'The Castrato as a Professional Group and a Social Phenomenon', 154.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Percy A. Scholes, ed., *Dr Burney's Musical Tours in Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 247.

⁸⁹ Rosselli, 'The Castrato as a Professional Group and a Social Phenomenon', 156.

average, 70% Italian (the remaining 30% were Spanish, French and Swiss), and of the Italian singers, the majority originated from the Papal States, with Naples and Tuscany following behind.⁹⁰

A figure widely circulated in the field estimates that approximately four thousand boys were castrated per year in Italy during the height of the phenomenon.⁹¹ This seems an astonishingly high number, and in truth the real figure can never be ascertained. However, the figure may well be more accurate than a modern researcher may care to believe. It is believed that approximately only 10% of castrati possessed a voice that enabled them to be successful in church or on stage.⁹² When one tries to ascertain numbers for active castrati, Rosselli has done some vital statistical analysis of censuses around the turn of the eighteenth century that appears to support John S Jenkins' theory. A 1694 census of all the church singers in Rome shows eighty-seven male sopranos and altos and eighteen maestri di capella (some of whom would have been castrati, though this isn't specified); one must also assume that there were castrati in Rome during this time not on the payroll of the church. A conservative estimate would be that between one hundred to one hundred and twenty castrati were active in Rome around 1650. Though Rome would have undoubtedly been one of the largest employers of castrati owing to the numerous chapels and theatres situated there, there were other important cities in Italy employing castrati at this time. Venice, Bologna, Assisi, Loreto, Parma, Naples, Florence and Milan all employed castrati in the chapel choirs and opera houses.⁹³ Even as a conservative estimate, at the height of the castrato phenomenon around 1650 there must have been several hundred castrati operating as professionals throughout Italy. If only 10% of children being castrated succeeded as professionals, Jenkins' estimation of four thousand boys per year does not seem unreasonable. This problem is eluded to

⁹⁰ Barbier, *The World of the Castrati*, 129.

⁹¹ J. S. Jenkins, 'The voice of the castrato', *The Lancet*, Vol. 351 (June 1998), 1879.

⁹² Finucci, *The Manly Masquerade*, 257.

⁹³ Rosselli, 'The Castrato as a Professional Group and a Social Phenomenon', 157.

in the writings of Prussian historian Johann Wilhem von Archenholz, whose 1791 work *A Picture of Italy* explores the castrato phenomenon. He wrote, ‘the numbers of these victims is so great, that they surpass the want of singers of all kings and princes; for which reason, they have been permitted to take orders; but they can only be secular priests, and are permitted to say mass...’⁹⁴ Furthermore, Archenholz links the Catholic Church back to the topic of castration.

Patrilineal Practice

Beyond the church but inextricably tied to the economic situation in Italy during this period of time was a shift in the way families distributed wealth. Martha Feldman, in *The Castrato: Reflections of Natures and Kinds* remarks on the amazing coincidence ‘between the consolidation of strongly patrilineal practices and the practice of castrating boys for singing’ during the seventeenth century.⁹⁵ Feldman argues compellingly that primogeniture and patriliney form part of the socioeconomic drive to castrate boys in Italy during this time, and that alongside those Catholic ideals of celibacy and sacrifice, castration became a socially acceptable practice in familial wealth control. Her arguments can be summarised as thus. The European social model had long been deeply patriarchal. Male authority was absolute, and this was reflected in family life and political structures. Patriliney refers to the descent, including devolution, via the male bloodline in a family tree of estate and title, its main purpose being to retain or increase familial wealth. Patriliney, as practiced by Italian families during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, was an offshoot of primogeniture, where the first born son was the sole heir to family property. Retaining estates, titles and money within vertical male lines kept wealth and power from leaving a bloodline through marriage or lack of a direct

⁹⁴ Johann Wilhem von Archenholz, *A Picture of Italy*, trans. Joseph Trapp (London, 1791). As quoted in Heriot, *The Castrati in Opera*, 47.

⁹⁵ Feldman, *The Castrato*, 45.

male heir.⁹⁶ This form of descent began to be practiced around 1570, marking a shift in the accruing of a family's power vertically, rather than horizontally.⁹⁷ Previous to this point in time marrying off all of your sons to increase a families power and influence was commonplace, with wide networks of interconnected families a normal occurrence. Yet, with the spread of patriliney in Italy during the seventeenth century, only first born sons were married off, leaving younger children to enter the military or take up ecclesiastical orders. This strategy held two functions; the first was to retain wealth and power through a sole male line, and the second was to control the size of the family unit with which said money and power was to provide for. It is possible to argue that paradoxically, castrated boys became a form of 'male reproduction', whereby they ceased to be a financial burden on their parents, and in turn their career enabled them to financially support a smaller pool of eligible future generations (and their aging parents) owing to their inability to procreate.

Castration for singing offered a genuinely viable career for the children of middle and low income Italian families. Almost as soon as castration had occurred, the boys would enter a system of guardianship and training that lasted until adulthood. Crucially, unlike ecclesiastical life, castrati were free to live a life beyond the shackles of poverty and humility the church required of those who had taken orders. In fact, castration brought with it the possibility of a highly successful and financially rewarding career. The motivation of parents to castrate their sons is not impossible to understand. As Patrick Barbier in *The World of the Castrati* writes, 'no doubt they also hoped that they themselves would benefit from the success that their son would not fail to achieve a few years later. This was an obvious bait, confirmed by the more than distrustful attitude of the adult castrati towards their parents'.⁹⁸ Barbier's statement is laden with sarcasm, and his sweeping, unquantified statement

⁹⁶ Feldman, *The Castrato*, 45.

⁹⁷ Gianna Pomata, 'Family and Gender', in *Early Modern Italy*, ed. John A. Marino (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 69-86. As cited in Feldman, *The Castrato*, 45.

⁹⁸ Barbier, 'The World of the Castrati', 21.

problematic. However, he touches on an important point. Castration was not a last resort, but to some, a desirable path for their child to follow.

Sound and Perception: Imagining the Castrato Voice

Understanding, with any clarity, the musical world the castrati inhabited is an almost impossible task. Musicians and historians are presented with the most unique of challenges: to try to reconstruct the sound of a now extinct instrument using almost entirely non-aural evidence. John Roselli writes frankly in ‘The Castrati as a Professional Group and a Social Phenomenon’ when he states, ‘we should begin by acknowledging how much we do not and probably cannot know’.⁹⁹ The perennial problem of the castrato voice is that so little audio evidence exists to inform us of the vocal power, range and breath control for which they were famed.¹⁰⁰ More than this, it is ‘the grain of the voice’, to use Roland Barthes’ chapter title, the qualities of the sound and the vocal production of it that are lost to us now.¹⁰¹ Reconstructing the sound of antiquated music is by no means a problem unique to the study of the castrato voice. Vocal production, technique and style have naturally changed throughout history, but where the soprano or tenor voice exists in our contemporary consciousness, from which assumptions of historical ‘sound’ may be made, no such contemporary example exists when comprehending the sonority of the castrato voice.¹⁰² Owing to our inability to state, with absolute certainty, that the castrato voice may be ‘reconstructed’, ‘imagining’ the voice in an informed manner seems the most sensible outcome when exploring this topic. By exploring the small amount of existing audio evidence, the physiological makeup of the castrati, music written for them and contemporary accounts of their singing style, we can begin to imagine what they may have sounded like.

One might ask what purpose does it serve to try and imagine the castrato voice when the custom and practices it originated from have so rightly been

⁹⁹ Roselli, ‘The Castrati as a Professional Group and a Social Phenomenon’, 143.

¹⁰⁰ Elisabeth Krimmer, “‘Eviva il Coltello?’ The Castrato Singer in Eighteenth-Century German Literature and Culture’, *PMLA*, Vol. 120, No. 5 (Oct. 2005), 1544.

¹⁰¹ Roland Barthes, ‘The Grain of the Voice’, in *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 179.

¹⁰² Patricia Howard, *The Modern Castrato: Gaetano Guadagni and the Coming of a New Operatic Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 192.

abolished? The potent fascination with this lost sound stems, quite possibly, from its elusiveness, the ‘empty space’, as Katherine Bergeron describes it, in our aural understanding of historical vocal music. Antiquity has afforded us a literary record in the form of music written for the castrati, yet we lack the aural context with which to interpret music written for this voice type. It is both frustrating and fascinating to interpret how the music of the castrati should be performed in a modern context. Furthermore, to understand the castrati phenomenon as a whole, we must first examine them as musicians and singers, the complicated trajectory of their careers and their control over it, before beginning to understand the social, sexual and engendered role they played in society. In order to understand them and their *raison d’être*, we must start with the voice.

A Declaration of Flaws

There is an inherent danger when writing about the castrato to assume that the voice type was a uniform genre.¹⁰³ It is natural that given the physiological similarities of the singers and vocal training techniques they used, some constants would have existed in the vocal qualities of the castrati. This is true for all voice types, given that a singer’s range will dictate certain aspects of vocal production. However, the classification of other voice types does not suppose that being a soprano, mezzo tenor or bass delineates that singers strive for an archetypal sound, or that certain vocal qualities make that voice quantifiably of a specific vocal genre. The German Fach system of vocal classification gives twenty-five categories of voice type, each allowing for the nuances of range, weight, size tessitura and timbre even in the rigidity of a vocal classification system.¹⁰⁴ Yet, much of the discourse that surrounds the sound of the castrati is focussed solely on their ability to sing high and with skilful virtuosity, the notion of which Feldman describes as castrati having become ‘entwined with the sound of a fiery

¹⁰³ Feldman, *The Castrato*, 79.

¹⁰⁴ J. B. Steane, ‘Fach’. *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*. *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press. Accessed March 23 2016, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/O003863?q=fach+&search=quick&pos=1&_start=1#firsthit.

allegro'.¹⁰⁵ There was evidently a breadth of voices under the umbrella term of the castrato, most evident in the further classification of castrati as sopranos or as mezzos and altos. Gaspare Pacchierotti and Gaetano Guadagni, the latter performing the role of Orfeo in the premiere of Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice*, were both mezzo soprano castrati of critical acclaim.¹⁰⁶ It must be assumed that where other voice types encompass a wide range of weight, agility and size of voice, so too did the term castrato.

Attempting to capture the essence of the castrato sound is not a modern, post-castrato phenomenon. So many writers have tried to create a record of the castrato voice via the written word that leaves a plethora of evidence as to what a castrato may have, subjectively, sounded like. This is in itself an interesting, as one must ask the question, was there an object fascination with the sound of the castrato because the voice possessed a distinctive, abstract quality? Or was this fascination, and explanations of the voice's otherworldliness, fuelled by fascination and horror with the castrato himself? Many accounts of their singing exist that seek to capture the beauty and otherness of the voice, and it is not uncommon to read descriptions of the voice that hint at it possessing supernatural or indescribable qualities. It is possible to argue that whilst the voice may well have been distinctive, explanations of the voice's sound may also be attributed to wider social and cultural attitudes towards castrati during this time. If the figure of the castrato was indefinable, then explanations of the voice as such do not seem unreasonable. As such, the voice itself becomes a focus for far more than its sound, as in reading into descriptions of it attitudes towards the voice and castrato figure, the implications of casting these may become clearer.

In broad terms descriptions of the castrato voice fall into two paradoxical categories. The first is perfection, the second is indescribability or the possession of inhuman qualities, though all seek to convey something of the 'otherness' of

¹⁰⁵ Feldman, *The Castrato*, 133.

¹⁰⁶ Heriot, *The Castrati in Opera*, 136.

the voice itself that sets it apart from the soprano or falsettist. It appears that a protracted period of musical training, coupled with their physiological difference provided the right environment to develop this vocal greatness. Considered the greatest singer of his age, Farinelli, born Carlo Broschi, exemplified all of the vocal qualities that castrati were famous for. Take, for example, Giambattista Mancini's description of hearing Farinelli for the first time. 'His voice was considered perfect, beautiful and sonorous in its quality and unparalleled in range. It was perfect from the lowest note to the highest. A like voice was never given to us to hear'.¹⁰⁷ Whilst affirming the esteem in which castrati were held, statements such as this do nothing to clarify the human qualities of the voice or the conditions through which the writer experienced such displays of perfection. This quotation from François Raguenet (written in English by a now unknown eighteenth-century translator), a French contemporary of the castrati and writing in 1702, is typical of the highly adorned praise that describes the voice as unquantifiable. He describes their singing as being 'with a voice the most clear and at the same time equally soft, pierces the symphony of instruments and tops them with an agreeableness which they that hear it may conceive but will never be able to describe'.¹⁰⁸ That the castrati were highly trained singers with a distinctive quality to the voice is a theme that appears universal in praise for castrati, yet this statement is true for any group of professionally trained singers during this time. The musical schools from which the castrati came also permitted tenors and basses to study, all of whom were subject to the same timetable of lessons and practice. In fact, at the Santa Maria di Loreto conservatoire in Naples the dormitories for its students (where the boys both slept and studied) were not divided by voice type and instrument until 1758. Until this point, all had been expected to practice together.¹⁰⁹ The conservatories that existed to train young

¹⁰⁷ Giambattista Mancini, *Practical Reflections on the Figurative Art of Singing*, trans. E. Foreman (Champaign, IL: Pro Musica Press, 1967), 121-122. As quoted in John Potter and Neil Sorrell, *A History of Singing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 96.

¹⁰⁸ Raguenet, quoted in Richard Taruskin, *Music in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 68.

¹⁰⁹ Barbier, *The World of the Castrati*, 49.

singers in this way were not an isolated route by which one attained a professional career in singing, but one of the only methods by which to be proficiently trained to do so. As Charles Burney wrote, ‘it is from these conservatories that nearly all the singers for the theatres or the churches emerge’.¹¹⁰ Given that tenors and basses were given similar treatment and training, this hints at something more than technical ability in setting the castrati apart.

Tying in to the notion of the voice as an aural representation of the castrato himself is the link between the castrati and angelic imagery. Just like the propensity to align castrati with animal mysticism, so too do explanations of the angelic appear as a viable explanation for the castrato’s voice and existence when neither can be explained fully. Bringing together the concept of perfection with inhuman ability or as something non-normative, both castrati and their voice are repeatedly labelled as angelic as a viable explanation for what people heard and saw. This phenomenon is present from the beginning of their existence when castrati, for reasons both religious and economical, were paraded through cities on holy days dressed as cherubs and singing to represent the choirs of heaven. Owing to the large number of masses, funerals, and processions this work was numerous and well paid (most often to the conservatoires). Records from the Neapolitan *battaglini* processions show that the state paid twenty-eight ducats for four groups of musicians and thirty-six ‘angels’ to accompany three services on San Biagio’s Day.¹¹¹ Also highly profitable was the use of castrati dressed as cherubs to keep a vigil by the bodies of children who had died, and as Barbier points out, it was an important source of revenue for the choir schools during an era of high infant mortality. Evidence for these transactions can be found in the library of the Conservatorio di San Pietro in Naples, who have kept detailed records of the incomes of all but one of the main choir schools in the state.¹¹² That castrati were aligned to cherubic imagery from an early age would undoubtedly have formed

¹¹⁰ Charles Burney, *The Present State of Music in France and Italy* (London, 1771). As quoted in Barbier, *The World of the Castrati*, 49.

¹¹¹ Barbier, *The World of the Castrati*, 50.

¹¹² Barbier, *The World of the Castrati*, 38.

part of the collective conscious of those who continued to perceive them as such in adult life. Even castrati referenced themselves and each other as such. Giovanni Andrea Angelini Bontempi, a castrato and singing master said of his colleague Baldassarre Ferri's singing, 'the harmony of his voice, being concordant with the harmony of the spheres, made inferior the very singing of the angels'.¹¹³ Even in the modern scholarship from which much of this essay is taken, references to castrati and the angelic are in abundance. The second chapter of Helen Berry's book, *The Castrato and his Wife* is entitled 'Schooling Angels in Naples' and the final chapter in Barbier's book *The World of the Castrati* is called 'The Twilight of the Angels'. Alessandro Moreschi, the last castrato, was known as the Angel of Rome.¹¹⁴ If the castrato is to be viewed as a liminal figure who stands between the understanding of masculine and feminine, human and not, then the androgyny of the angelic figure says much of the cultural attitude towards castrati and their gender at this time. Feldman points out that much contemporary discourse linked the angelic voice to that of the 'quasi-feminine, transhuman, and thus divine'.¹¹⁵ When linked to the religious fervour and mysticism that form part of cult of the castrato is an important example of how castrati were viewed as removed from the typical understanding of male and female, and that this liminal state was, via association with the divine, worthy of esteem. That this also extended to explanations of their singing is worthy of note. Where explanations of their singing are fanciful, other-worldly or inhuman, it must be read within the context of attitudes towards castrati as a whole. They were after all human, and a voice is only capable of so much.

When attempting to construct this now lost sound the essence of the castrato 'problem' lies not just in the inadequacy of the written word to accurately describe aural perception but in our reliance on the musical score to provide a full representation of what was sung. As Bruce Haynes has said, 'the reason musical

¹¹³ Giovanni Andrea Angelini Bontempi, *Historica musica* [1695] (Geneva: Minkoff Reprints, 1976), 110-111. As quoted in Feldman, *The Castrato*, 29.

¹¹⁴ Nicholas Clapton, *Moreschi: The Last Castrato* (London: Haus Publishing, 2004), 139.

¹¹⁵ Feldman, *The Castrato*, 29.

writing succeeds is because, alongside the notation system, there is a parallel oral tradition'.¹¹⁶ This problem is by no means unique to the study of castrati, but as researchers we are further disadvantaged to studying the nuances of the implied or of the performance variables because unlike other areas of historically informed performance practice, we are unable to test any theories that are formulated, and they remain conjecture. The scores of Monteverdi and Handel from which much of the music of the castrato still sung today are taken provide an incomplete picture of the style and ornamental decoration so often written about in their performances. A great deal of emphasis was placed on the ability to master a large number of improvisatory techniques and to display these willingly in a performance. The emphasis on personal interpretation and improvisation gave singers artistic licence to provide performances that were unique. In turn, this formed part of the culture that permitted castrati their star status. John Potter and Neil Sorrell describe the blurring of the compositional/performer process as 'one of mutual creativity; it was not the composer's task to conceive of a complete work which the performer would then attempt to produce or interpret'.¹¹⁷ This 'collaborative process' is by no means unique to the castrato, however much of the virtuosity for which they are famous is not available to us beyond second-hand accounts, as their improvisations do not exist in notated form. There do exist however influential vocal tracts written by castrati on the style of ornamentation expected along with vocal exercises. Notable publications include Pier Francesco Tosi's *Opinioni de' cantori antichi* (Observations of Florid Song) published in 1723, Giambattista Mancini's *Pensieri e riflessioni pratiche* (Practical Reflections of The Figurative Art of Singing) of 1774 and *Instructions of Mr Tenducci to his Scholars*, published in 1785, all of which are written by castrati, though the fundamental principles these singing tracts extol were intended for all voice types.¹¹⁸ The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in music prized virtuosity above

¹¹⁶ Bruce Haynes, *The End of Early Music: A Period Performer's History of Music for the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 105.

¹¹⁷ Potter and Sorrell, *A History of Singing*, 92.

¹¹⁸ Ravens, *The Supernatural Voice*, 103.

almost all else, the skill of which lay in taking the musical material provided by a composer and embellishing it just enough to be recognisable as the composer's own work whilst exhibiting, and pushing, the limits of a singer's talent. It was Mancini who wrote, 'we get only the conception of a simple melody which shows just enough musical phrasing to allow the talented interpreter full liberty to embellish as he desires and conceives'.¹¹⁹ It is this skill for which the castrati were particularly lauded, helping secure their reputation as the *primi uomini* of the Italian stage. Whilst this legacy lives on, it is impossible to ascertain how accurate this reputation was. It must be assumed however, given the large number of works for castrati still in existence, coupled with evidence of the large sums of money they were able to command, that their reputation preceded them.

The premise of this chapter is thus, how does one portray the sound of a voice without the use of aural evidence and how possible is it to ascribe the qualities experienced to a whole group of singers? As Feldman so rightly asks, 'when all is said and done, isn't every voice as irreducibly distinct from every other as each human face...?'¹²⁰ It is an important point, voices are unique, and the experience of hearing them and the vocal qualities they display are highly subjective. This problem does appear to be uniquely bound to the topic of the castrato, as in the process of constructing what they may have sounded like, and without a large bank of aural evidence to consult, generalisations will inevitably be common in a field that of study based on elaborate guesswork. As researchers we have the music, singing manuals, written descriptions and the scant recording material of Alessandro Moreschi with which to draw a conclusion. The topic of the elusive castrato voice is important and necessary, because in examining what castrati may have sounded like we are better able to understand to what extent their fame relied upon their vocal ability, and the second is to examine how attitudes towards the voice effected representations of gender.

¹¹⁹ Mancini, *Practical Reflections on the Figurative Art of Singing*, 49. As quoted in Potter and Neil Sorrell, *A History of Singing*, 93.

¹²⁰ Feldman, *The Castrato*, 79.

Vocal Development and Physiological Difference

The voice in question was the product of a set of unique physical factors that enabled its difference. The castration procedure that took place between the ages of seven and thirteen had a profound effect in determining the physiological and vocal difference of the castrati, the true extent of which is still being explored in modern medical science. It is only in the twentieth century that a fuller understanding of the consequences of the operation have been uncovered, owing to the great advancements made in medicine during this time. This has, of course, come too late for castrati and those who castrated them. The fact that the operation effected the voice appears to have been a happy coincidence that was, over many centuries, capitalised upon. The physiological changes castrati experienced were always present, satirised by writers and journals eager to make light of their physical difference. It is thanks to the work of writers such as Enid and Richard Peschel, whose highly influential 1987 publication ‘Medical Insights into the Castrati in Opera’, that a greater understanding in this field has arisen.

In modern medical terms, the operation performed on the boys was a bilateral herniotomy, or a bilateral orchiectomy. The testicles would be crushed, squeezed (causing them to atrophy) or excised. Much rarer was the resectioning of the entire scrotum, after which the testicles would be removed.¹²¹ It was also possible to undergo a partial castration, as depicted by Charles d’Ancillon in his 1707 work *Traité des eunuques*, where the spermatic duct leading to the testes would be severed. This resulted in the ‘withering and eventual disappearance of the testicles’.¹²² Information on this practice comes from Paolo Zacchia, whose 1661 publication *Quaestiones medico-legales* details the main forms of castration for singing and the surgical procedure that accompanied it.¹²³ It was typical for boys to have been given opium or for the carotid artery to be compressed, causing the patient to fall into a coma. Once unconscious, the boys were immersed in a

¹²¹ Feldman, *The Castrato*, 7.

¹²² Bergeron, ‘The Castrato as History’, 170.

¹²³ Finucci, *The Manly Masquerade*, 246.

milk bath in order to anaesthetise the area. The spermatic duct was cut before a two centimetre incision was made along the testicles.¹²⁴ There are no accounts of a full removal of the penis and testicles as was common in the earliest accounts of castration from China and the Byzantine Court. In fact, cases where a boy failed to be castrated properly, and hence their voice broke after years of training are much more common to find. Rosselli cites the case of Francesco Pocaterra, who having been castrated aged six was admitted as a boy soprano to the choir of St John Lateran in Rome. The operation appears not to have been successful, his voice broke aged fourteen causing his teacher to abandon him. The explanation given was that he was castrated ‘on one side only’.¹²⁵ It is difficult to say how safe the procedure was, but it is possible to deduce that it was relatively routine given the lack of evidence of death owing to it, and the numbers of boys willing to undertake it. It is possible that the lack of reported deaths and complications is due to an environment in which high infant mortality was common so death in this instance would seem unremarkable.¹²⁶ However, given the widespread use of medical castration in Italy at this time, as well as the similarity of this particular castration procedure to the castration carried out on livestock (this would have been practiced widely in rural communities, and given that many of the boys came from rural towns there would have been an understanding and acceptance of this castration technique) it can be assumed that operation was relatively low risk.¹²⁷

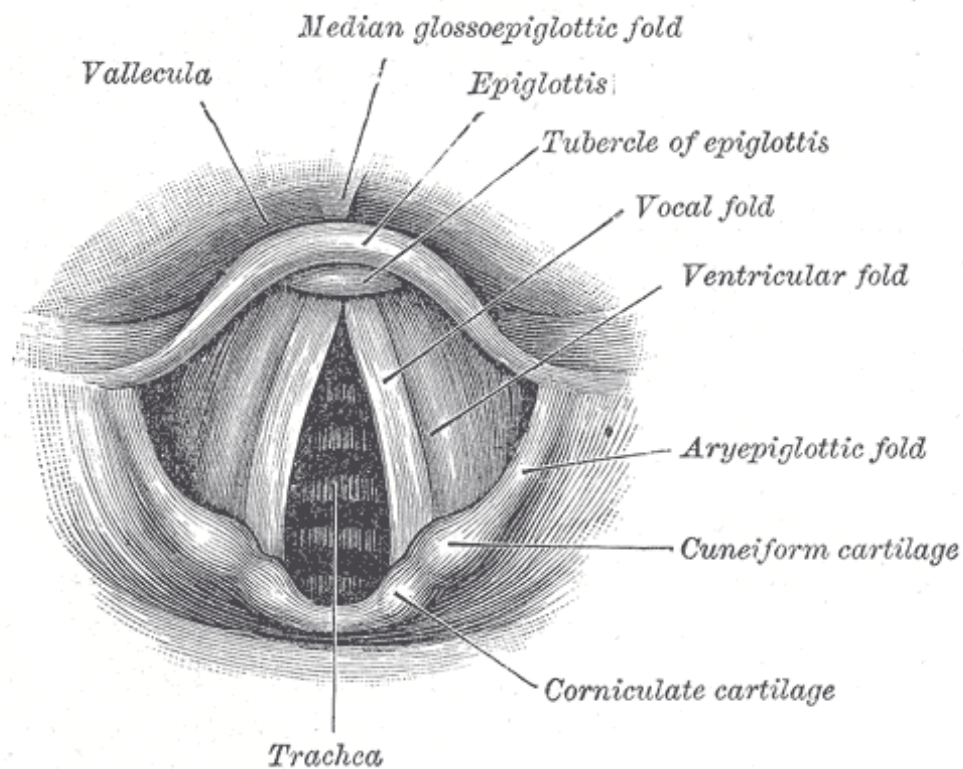
¹²⁴ Paolo Zacchia, *Quaestiones medico-legales in quibus omnes eae materiae medicae, quae ad legales facultates videntur pertinere, proponuntur, pertractantur, resolvuntur*, Vol. 3, Part 1 (Rome: Sumptibus Andreae Brugiotti apud Iacobum Mascardum, 1621-34). As quoted in Feldman, *The Castrato*, 7.

¹²⁵ Rosselli, ‘The Castrato as a Professional Group and a Social Phenomenon’, 152.

¹²⁶ Rosselli, ‘The Castrato as a Professional Group and a Social Phenomenon’, 153.

¹²⁷ Feldman, *The Castrato*, 7.

The operation took place between the ages of seven and twelve (before puberty) in order to deprive the body of its main source of testosterone. Though the scientific reasons behind castration were unknown during the period in which boys were castrated in Italy, it was understood that the operation would cause physiological changes that resulted in the retention of a childlike vocal range. Without sufficient testosterone a boy castrated before he reaches puberty will develop differently, resulting in an altered physical appearance and development, hormonal makeup along with sexual maturity and function.¹²⁸ The height of the voice for which the castrati were famed is the result of the lack of development of the vocal chords, which would have ordinarily altered at the onset of puberty due to these hormonal changes. The vocal chords, pictured in an anatomical drawing by Henry Gray below, change at the onset of puberty in both men and women.¹²⁹



¹²⁸ Enid Rhodes Peschel and Richard E. Peschel, 'Medical Insights into the Castrati in Opera', *American Scientist*, Vol. 75, No. 6 (Nov-Dec 1987), Sigma Xi, The Scientific Research Society, 583.

¹²⁹ Henry Gray, 'Vocal Chords', Fig. 956 in *Anatomy of the Human Body* (New York: Bartleby.com, 2000). Accessed April 13 2016, <http://www.bartleby.com/107/illus956.html>.

Significantly, the vocal chords are comprised of a firm cartilaginous portion and a more pliable, membranous portion. Before puberty male and female vocal chords are approximately the same size. At the onset of puberty the chords are enlarged, but the change in size is more significant in men than women, especially the more pliable, membranous part of the chords. It is now understood that this increase in size is what causes the male voice to ‘break’ and the female voice to become lower during adolescence. The variance in size difference between the male and female vocal chords is what determines the pitch at which a person may sing and speak; as this difference is determined by hormonal variations (namely, the increased levels of testosterone in a man) this variance is broadly consistent with a person’s sex.¹³¹

This change occurs in men through the increased production of the androgen hormones in the Leydig cells (the interstitial tissue of the testes and chief source of testosterone). If a man is castrated before puberty, the enlargement of the vocal chords will not take place because the hormonal stimulation that should occur in these cells during puberty has been removed.¹³² Thus, the castrated male’s vocal chords were different, as the underdevelopment of the pliable membranous part of the chords meant that they remained the same size at that of a child.

¹³³

Table 1: Length of the Membranous Vocal Cords

| Prepubertal male and female | Adult female | Adult male |
|-----------------------------|--------------|------------|
| 7–8 mm. | 8–11.5 mm. | 12–16 mm. |

The table above, taken from Peschel and Peschel’s article shows the significant size difference between the chords of an adult and child. The

¹³¹ Peschel and Peschel, ‘Medical Insights into the Castrati in Opera’, 26.

¹³² Peschel and Peschel, ‘Medical Insights into the Castrati in Opera’, 26-27.

¹³³ Peschel and Peschel, ‘Medical Insights into the Castrati in Opera’, 26.

implications of this were that the larynx which houses the vocal chords remained smaller and more supple than that of an uncastrated man's, it remained high in the throat unlike an adult's larynx which typically drops during puberty, whilst the smaller vocal chords which vibrated across the top of the larynx created a sound which would have certainly set the voice apart from any male or female counterpart. This was due in part to the positioning of the larynx in relation to the cavities of resonance of the nose, throat and mouth.¹³⁴ As the castrati had retained the larynx of a child whilst their bodies matured physically into adulthood, the result was a unique set of resonating chambers that were proportionally larger to the size of the larynx given their adult frame.¹³⁵ Given this set of physiological conditions reports praising the castrati's vocal agility and powerful resonance are not unsurprising. This explains the retention of a childlike or female vocal range. However, as John S Jenkins iterates, this does not mean that the voice of the castrato was synonymous with that of a boy soprano. The resonating chambers continued to develop to normal adult capacity, and this was often compounded by developmental abnormalities to the bones in the face. Although the pitch of the castrato voice may have mimicked that of a female, the timbre would have been different.¹³⁶

‘Mariannini, at six feet tall...is the largest princess I'll see in my
time’.¹³⁷

The consequences of castration were not vocal alone, a great deal of evidence exists to suggest that castration produced permanent physical alterations alongside a number of developmental problems that allowed castrati to be instantly recognisable as such. It is now understood that castration before puberty results in a medical condition called primary hypogonadism in which the absence

¹³⁴ Barbier, *The Castrati in Opera*, 16.

¹³⁵ Feldman, *The Castrato*, 10.

¹³⁶ Jenkins, ‘The Voice of the Castrato’ 1878.

¹³⁷ Charles de Brosses, ‘Lettre d’Italie sur les spectacles et la musique’, in *Le Président de Brosses en Italie: lettres familières écrites d’Italie en 1739 et 1740*, Vol. 2, (Paris: Didier et Co., Libraires-Éditeurs, 1858), 39.

of testosterone produces developmental abnormalities, all of which are synonymous with characterisations of the castrati's physical appearance.¹³⁸ They include, underdevelopment of the genitals and prostate, the absence of facial and bodily hair, fat distribution mimicking that of the female form (the hips, buttocks and breasts), facial distortion especially around the eyes and the over development of the arms and legs.¹³⁹ This was due to the absence of testosterone preventing the epiphyseal plates in the bones from fusing correctly in the boys' growing joints, meaning that castrati were liable to suffer erratic skeletal development. Their limbs would grow to be disproportionately long, their ribcages larger and their facial bones, especially the jaw, were bigger than their uncastrated counterparts.¹⁴⁰ These physical abnormalities has secondary repercussions for the sound of the voice. As the ribcage expanded there was greater capacity for the voice to resonate; given the size and shape of the larynx this would have produced a far more powerful sound than a falsettist. It must be noted however that there is a common misconception that due to the appearance of a barrel chest castrati had larger lungs, and were thus able to hold breath for a considerably longer length of time than other uncastrated singers. There is no medical evidence for this, and it appears that the ability to hold breath for up to a minute was the product of extensive vocal training and a larger ribcage in which the lungs could expand.¹⁴¹ The extent to which these physical abnormalities were present in castrati was dependent on the age at the time of castration and the success of the operation in removing completely the function of the spermatic ducts. Given that these factors varied wildly it would be impossible to suggest that there was a castrato body type, however some or all of the above developmental abnormalities would have been present in castrati, to varying degrees.

That castration provoked such a unique set of developmental abnormalities means that although these changes were not universal, the

¹³⁸ Peschel and Peschel, 'Medical Insights into the Castrati in Opera', 29.

¹³⁹ Peschel and Peschel, 'Medical Insights into the Castrati in Opera', 29.

¹⁴⁰ Feldman, *The Castrato*, 10.

¹⁴¹ Barbier, *The Castrati in Opera*, 16-17.

mechanism through which the castrato voice was created was unique to them, and by its very nature, present in all castrated singers. From this a few facts may be deduced. The larynx was small, and high in the throat, which explains their extended range. Due to the lack of testosterone the voice box remained supple like a child's, which would have enabled greater agility than an uncastrated adult. The larynx was closer to the resonating chambers, which were adult sized, which would explain the propensity for castrati to sing loudly and the larger ribcage allowed greater breath control. All of these traits would have had an effect on the harmonics and timbre of the voice. Given these factors, it can be deduced that a castrato 'sound' may well have existed, and it is this unique combination of vocal factors that aroused such fascination with castrati, and is the essence of what so many commentators tried to describe. It is of little wonder that castrati were so prized.

Moreschi

And so we turn to the most obvious starting point in determining the castrato sound, the scant recording material we possess that captures the voice of Alessandro Moreschi.¹⁴² He was the last castrato to sing with the Sistine Chapel choir before castrati were banned from singing within it by Pope Pius X in 1903.¹⁴³ In all, ten solo arias and seven ensemble recordings survive, made, on Moreschi's direction, by the Gramophone and Typewriter Company between 1902 and 1904.¹⁴⁴ Of these recordings, Moreschi's interpretation of Gounod's *Ave Maria* is considered to be the best quality recording in a group otherwise described as

¹⁴² Martha Feldman with Martina Piperno, 'Moreschi and Fellini: Delineating the Vernacular Castrato in Post-Unification Italy', *voiceXchange*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Fall 2011), 1.

¹⁴³ John Roselli, 'Moreschi, Alessandro'. *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press. Accessed April 18 2016, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/19126?q=castrati+&search=quick&pos=1&_start=1#firsthit.

¹⁴⁴ Joe K. Law, 'Alessandro Moreschi Reconsidered: A Castrato on Records', *Opera Quarterly*, Vol. 2, Issue 2 (1984), 3.

‘sonically dreadful’ by Eric Van Tassel.¹⁴⁵ Owing to their age the quality of the recordings limits how much can be ascertained about the true nature of Moreschi’s voice. A combination of cracking along with the pre-electrical horn and cutting-stylus technology used means that not all of the vocal resonance can be acoustically registered on the recording.¹⁴⁶ This is in part due to frequency at which a classical singer produces said resonance. Feldman explains that a classical singer will produce resonance of between 2000 and 4000 hertz, but the earliest recording technology was only capable of recording up to 2100 hertz, meaning that much of the upper resonance of Moreschi’s voice could not be audibly documented.¹⁴⁷ This means that the harmonics that add richness to the timbre of a voice that appear at around 3000 hertz, also known as the singer’s formant, allowing a voice to cut through an orchestra and be heard by means other than volume, will not have been captured.¹⁴⁸ Since these recordings have also gone through a process of digitalisation and editing, the recordings available to access today will not be a true representation of the original.

As a soloist Moreschi enjoyed reasonable success in his career, and having at one time been named the ‘angel of Rome’ for the quality of his voice, was made First Soprano in the Sistine Chapel Choir, a position he held for thirty years.¹⁴⁹ His vocal training took place at the Schola Cantorum of San Salvatore in Lauro, Rome, upon graduating professional engagements included singing with the Lateran and Giulia Chapel choirs, as well as at the Sistine Chapel. His career culminated not only in lead soprano there, but as music director of the Sistine Choir at the turn of the century.¹⁵⁰ His career pattern, along with distinguished invitations to sing at the funerals of Vittorio Emmanuelle II in 1878, and his son

¹⁴⁵ Eric Van Tassel, ‘The Last Castrato by Alessandra Moreschi: Singers of the Sistine Chapel’, *Early Music*, Vol. 13, No. 2, J. S. Bach Tercentenary Issue (May 1985), Oxford University Press, 326.

¹⁴⁶ Feldman, *The Castrato*, 81.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Clapton, *Moreschi: The Last Castrato*, 143.

¹⁴⁹ Clapton, *Moreschi: The Last Castrato*, 102-103.

¹⁵⁰ Law, ‘Alessandro Moreschi Reconsidered’, 4.

Umberto I in 1900, are an indication of the esteem and status he held as a singer during his career.

Despite his reasonable qualifications, the recordings that exist showcase a singer whose voice had most likely declined. Having joined the Sistine Choir in 1883, Moreschi had sung professionally, and continuously, for twenty years before the recordings were made. Contemporary accounts suggest even he was aware of his declining voice, with Moreschi purported to have cancelled a private Vatican performance on account of his 'vocal fatigue'. In the archives of the Pontifical Institute of Sacred Music in Rome exists a letter that reveals both the anger of Vatican officials at Moreschi's cancellation, and a telling insight into the duality of reverence and disdain for castrati at this time. It translates, 'it does not seem proper to me that the Vatican chapel should be put off at the caprice of a hermaphrodite'.¹⁵¹ It is a sad reality that the only recorded evidence of the castrati voice displays little of the vocal qualities of power, range and breath control for which they were famous. We don't listen to Moreschi's recordings to be enlightened by the quality of his voice, but rather for any sort of clue as to how the great Castrati of the operatic world may have sounded.¹⁵² As Patrick Barbier wrote, he was 'a modest religious castrato far removed from the golden age of his counterparts, giving us only an infinitely small part of the whole'.¹⁵³ It would be naïve however to dismiss the evidence entirely. Despite a general consensus that the recordings do not provide any real insight into the sonority of the castrato voice, and are therefore dismissed, I believe they should be viewed as providing an important link to an historical, and otherwise lost, musical tradition.

The recordings are an intriguing piece of evidence in the subject of the castrato. That the recordings exist at all is remarkable, yet as Feldman suggests 'the recordings are often dismissed as useless romantic artefacts of the Roman

¹⁵¹ Law, 'Alessandro Moreschi Reconsidered', 4.

¹⁵² Van Tassel, 'The Last Castrato', 327.

¹⁵³ Barbier, *The World of the Castrati*, 89-90.

church by a singer said to be long past his prime'.¹⁵⁴ The Moreschi recordings are problematic for a number of reasons. The first is due, in part, to expectation versus reality. It is hard to align accounts of castrato sound such as that of writer Charles de Brosses with Moreschi's voice. He wrote, 'their voices have always something dry and harsh, quite different from the youthful softness of women; but they are brilliant, light, full of sparkle, very loud, and with a very wide range'.¹⁵⁵ This description is echoed by John Ebers, who noted in his diaries the castrati had a 'sweetness and flexibility of tone', though 'there was something of a prenatal harshness about them'.¹⁵⁶ The harsh timbre both writers elude to can certainly be heard in Moreschi's voice. The sound has a piercing quality that one could imagine to be beautiful, but the voice also sounds cumbersome, and in passages of *Ave Maria* sounds declamatory to the point of shouting.¹⁵⁷ The agility and flexibility for which castrati were famed are frustratingly absent in these recordings. The second is the quite wrongful expectation that the recordings can give real insight into any voice but Moreschi's. Not only will Moreschi's voice be unique to him, but the traditions from which his style of his singing arose will be vastly different from the stars singers about whom much of written evidence of the castrato voice is taken. The singers whose voices we really seek to capture had been dead for well over a century by the time the recordings were made. Moreschi's career, whilst successful, was one spent almost exclusively in the employ of the church with relatively little exposure to the virtuosic writing of Baroque opera.

There are obvious technical issues: the breaks between registers in his voice are marked and unblended, and passages in high tessituras sound uneasily forced and insecure, overcompensated for by sweeping portamenti. These technical issues are particularly abundant in his 1902 recording of Rossini's

¹⁵⁴ Feldman, *The Castrato*, 81.

¹⁵⁵ Herriot, *The Castrati in Opera*, 14.

¹⁵⁶ John Ebers, *Seven Years of the King's Theatre* (London: W. H. Ainsworth, 1828), 166.

¹⁵⁷ This is most obvious between 2 minutes to 2:20 seconds of 'Ave Maria' on the Album *The Last Castrato: The Complete Vatican Recordings*, accessible here: [Alessandro Moreschi – Ave Maria](#).

Crucifixus.¹⁵⁸ Another problem is our 21st century perception of the style in which he appears to sing. There is such an overt emotional intensity to his performances that Robert Hill in *The New Grove Dictionary* comments that to modern listeners, ‘such obvious emotion is a little embarrassing’.¹⁵⁹ Listening to Moreschi’s religious recordings, one gets a real sense of the ‘romantic’ having informed his performance style. The rubato, glissandi and emphatic phrasing sometimes audible in his singing seems at odds with our modern interpretation of religious musical performance. The declamatory, emotional style of singing prevalent in his recording of *Hostias et Preces* seems, to modern ears, better suited to an opera house than a man whose singing career was based entirely on liturgical music.¹⁶⁰

One particularly interesting feature of Moreschi’s voice is the manipulation of his vocal registers to create a largely even tone across his lower range. In this instance register is broken into two, rudimentary categories of chest voice and head voice. Chest voice is indicative of a person’s speaking range whilst head or falsetto voice infers a higher, lighter sound made above the larynx, thus called head and chest to indicate the resonating chambers and different vocal mechanisms used to create the sound.¹⁶¹ In the study of vocal pedagogy it is broadly acknowledged that a vocal ‘break’ occurs between registers in men and women that takes place between an *eb* and *f#* above middle C at *A=440*, and that navigating this shift seamlessly so that the break is inaudible has been considered by many as a prerequisite of good singing technique.¹⁶² In Moreschi’s recording of *Ave Maria* there is a sense that his tone colour is even throughout his lower register right up to a *D*, over an octave above middle C. One possible explanation for this is that rather than using falsetto or head voice around an *f₄*, Moreschi extends his chest voice to an octave above middle C, which is a far higher

¹⁵⁸ Alessandro Moreschi, ‘Crucifixus’, Rossini, YouTube video.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HbV6PGAWaIU>.

¹⁵⁹ Haynes, *The End of Early Music*, 37.

¹⁶⁰ See < [Alessandro Moreschi – Hostias Et Preces](#) >

¹⁶¹ Feldman, *The Castrato*, 85.

¹⁶² Ibid.

extension of this register than would be typically found in the voice of a classical singer. Though subjective, this explanation has been put forward by a number of scholars, and furthermore, appears to have links to singing treatises on castrato technique. This extension is particularly audible in the second phrase of the piece, ‘dominus tecum’, where an octave leap on the syllable ‘do’ does not appear to shift in register. It is in the next phrase where the word ‘benedicta’ begins on a top G, and an audible shift into head voice can be heard, with Moreschi immediately reverting to chest voice on the octave leap.¹⁶³ It is possible to argue that Moreschi’s technique is aural evidence of some of the writing regarding the castrato sound that appears to link a high chest voice into head voice, around an octave above middle C. Both Mancini and Tossi, whose vocal tracts give evidence of the castrato ‘break’, list this as occurring anywhere between a B above middle C and up to a high E.¹⁶⁴ Mancini wrote,

The voice in its natural state is ordinarily divided into two registers, one of which is called the chest, the other the head or falsetto...The chest voice is not equally forceful and strong in everyone, but to the extent that someone has a relatively more robust or more feeble organ of the chest, that person will have more or less a robust voice. In many, the natural voice, or chest voice, does not extend beyond B-mi; and many others will be able to ascend as far as E-la-mi.¹⁶⁵

This quotation highlights how chest voice in castrati appears to have been used to a much higher pitch than would otherwise be used by a classically trained singer today. This technique may well have been assimilated into the ‘castrato sound’ via a combination of the unique physiology of their larynx and their extensive training. Nicola Antonio Porpora for example, whose vocal teaching produced Farinelli, Caffarelli, Porporino and Salimbeni, made his pupils practice the same

¹⁶³ Moreschie, ‘Ave Maria’, YouTube video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KLjvfqnDows>.

¹⁶⁴ Feldman, *The Castrato*, 91.

¹⁶⁵ Mancini, *Practical Reflections*, 20. As quoted in Feldman, *The Castrato*, 93.

sheet of vocal exercises every day for six years, the aim of which was to produce an even tone from the lowest to the highest note.¹⁶⁶ That this was highly praised and synonymous with castrati is evident from the large number of descriptions of the voice as being even, flexible and strong. Farinelli's singing is described by Johann Joachim Quantz as possessing all of these qualities. 'His intonation was pure, his trill beautiful, his breath control extraordinary and his throat very agile, so that he performed the widest intervals quickly and with the greatest ease and certainty'.¹⁶⁷

It is common to find explanations of the castrato voice as a 'natural' voice, especially when espoused in contrast with the falsetto sound. For the longest time this has been a problematic explanation, especially given that in modern consciousness the concept of the castrato voice as natural goes against every notion of the castrato as the ultimate manmade construction in art. That the castrato voice comes from something modified, and furthermore, occupies the opposite end of the aural spectrum of sound we would now attribute as masculine, would imply that it is the opposite of natural. Yet, it is highly common to find explanations of the castrato as such, both in terms of vocal casting and in description of the voice. Lodovico Grossi di Viadana prefaces a publication of his sacred works as being for 'soprani naturali', in this instance meaning castrati.¹⁶⁸ Tosi consistently refers to the 'extent of the full natural voice' in relation to the modern understanding of the chest voice.¹⁶⁹ Simon Ravens has suggested that despite castrati being very obviously unnatural, the term may well have been a double-entendre in order that the castrato voice could be referred to without drawing attention to its contentious origins.¹⁷⁰ Whilst there may be an element of truth in Raven's suggestion, I think the explanation hints at something far more

¹⁶⁶ Barbier, *The World of the Castrati*, 53-54.

¹⁶⁷ Haböck, *Die Kastraten*, 227, quoting Johann Joachim Quantz.

¹⁶⁸ Ravens, *The Supernatural Voice*, 55.

¹⁶⁹ Pierfrancesco Tosi, *Observations on Florid Song; or, Sentiments on the Ancient and Modern Singers*, 2nd ed., trans. Mr. Galliard (London: J. Wilcox, 1743), 24. As quoted in Feldman, *The Castrato*, 91.

¹⁷⁰ Ravens, *The Supernatural Voice*, 55.

tangible, and useful, in imagining the castrato sound. It is a crucial element in understanding what contemporaries may have heard. Castrati were so called 'natural' voices because they did not need to sing in falsetto, they were able to carry the richness and clarity of the chest voice far higher than a falsettist, or indeed a woman could. In doing so, the sound they created was stronger and would have retained the clarity of timbre not possible if a shift in register takes place at a lower pitch in the voice. There are valid physiological reasons for this. When singing in chest voice the thyroarytenoid muscles which form part of the body of the larynx are tensed, whilst the muscles are relaxed when in head voice as the larynx rises in the throat.¹⁷¹ The higher the pitch, the quicker the vocal folds vibrate. During this process, the vocal folds repeatedly come together and separate forming the glottal cycle. However, when singing in falsetto, the vocal folds do not make full contact allowing some breath to escape and thus the sound produced does not retain the clarity and resonance of chest voice.¹⁷² If we are to accept that the registral shift took place an octave above middle C, then the castrato voice would have been clearer, with the associated harmonic overtones of chest voice (up to 4000 hertz), and therefore louder. This is due to the singer's formant, the 'ring' which allows a voice to be projected over an orchestra which takes place between 2500-4000 hertz. As a female soprano head voice will produce harmonic overtones up to around 2000 hertz, the castrato voice would have been not only clearer, but would have sounded louder due to the harmonics of their extended chest range.¹⁷³ The Abbé Ragueneau hints at this in his treatise 'Parallels between the Italians and French regarding the music of opera' in 1702. In it he writes,

Women's voices are truly as soft and agreeable in France as those of these men, but they are far from being as strong and penetrating. There is no man or woman's voice in the world that

¹⁷¹ Feldman, *The Castrato*, 96.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Feldman, *The Castrato*, 99.

is as flexible as that of the castrato, his voice is clear and affecting, and it pierces the soul.¹⁷⁴

If one is to take into consideration these physiological conditions, it is possible to argue that the most closely related voice to the castrato would be that of a high tenor or mezzo, and not the most obvious substitute, the counter-tenor.¹⁷⁵ John Potter has written extensively on the connection between the castrato and tenor voice as evidence for vocal similarities. The tenor voice we hear today was the product of a gradual evolution in the early nineteenth century from the florid virtuosity of the Baroque to what Potter calls ‘the myth of the *bel canto*’.¹⁷⁶ One of the most significant outcomes of this shift was the replacement of the operatic hero from castrati to tenor. Evidence for this shift can be found by studying cast lists around the turn of the century where castrati began to disappear between 1807 and 1808.¹⁷⁷ The shift towards the tenor voice did not, however, occur irrespective of the castrati. Castrati taught extensively, and by imparting their knowledge and experience of singing technique to a new generation of tenor, a link between the voices was formed. As Potter writes, ‘this early link between castratos and potential tenors not only determined the nature of tenor technique but was a major factor in the transmission of ideas about singing from generation to generation’.¹⁷⁸ Given the extent to which register and even tone of voice featured as part of the castrati’s technique, an interesting piece of evidence exists that appears to confirm the transmission of this idea to the early tenor. In 1818 *The Musical Quarterly* published an experiment they conducted with the tenor John Braham who was taught by the castrato Venanzio Rauzzini. Braham, who had been schooled in the art of blending his registers seamlessly, was tested on whether an audible break could be heard. The *Quarterly* wrote:

¹⁷⁴ Prest, *Theatre Under Louis XIV*, 143.

¹⁷⁵ Feldman, *The Castrato*, 105.

¹⁷⁶ John Potter, ‘The Tenor-Castrato Connection, 1760–1860’, *Early Music*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Feb 2007), Oxford University Press, 99.

¹⁷⁷ Heriot, *The Castrati in Opera*, 36.

¹⁷⁸ Potter, ‘The Tenor-Castrato Connection’, 100.

Mr Braham can take his falsetto upon any note from D to A at pleasure and the juncture is so nicely managed that in an experiment to which this gentleman had the kindness to submit, of ascending and descending by semitones, it was impossible to distinguish at what point he substituted the falsetto for the natural note.¹⁷⁹

This evidence, though anecdotal, is an important link between descriptions of the castrato sound and assumptions on technique being carried through to the tenor voice, from which the concept of the timbre and clarity of the castrato voice can be audibly understood. By relating the castrato voice to our understanding of a full, extended chest voice that was trained to transition seamlessly into head voice, the imagined sound begins to appear. Coupled with their unique resonating chambers and smaller larynx, one begins to sense that the castrato voice did have unique audible qualities; that these qualities are recognisable in the Moreschi recordings is a useful confirmation that the castrato voice was physiologically unique, despite changes in style or singing experience.

Vocal Casting

What then does this mean for modern vocal casting of castrato roles? It is an interesting conundrum, as gender aside, the castrato voice type has to be substituted, most typically by either a mezzo-soprano or countertenor in order to match the height of the castrato sound. More than any other voice type, castrato roles offers a uniquely blank canvass on which an opera can be cast. Seventeenth and eighteenth century opera, and therefore the issue with casting castrati parts, is a relatively modern phenomenon of any real scale owing to the historically informed performance movement of the mid-twentieth century. Furthermore, there is little to tie the sound of these parts to tradition or fashion in the way that some Romantic operatic parts are now associated with a type of voice or even

¹⁷⁹ M. Sands, 'These were singers', *Music and Letters*, xxv (1994), 106. As quoted in Potter, 'The Tenor-Castrato Connection', 101.

singer, think Luciano Pavarotti and Rodolfo from Puccini's *La Bohème*, because the aural perception of the castrato voice is almost all but lost. The relative fluidity of this model enables a conductor or casting director to prioritise certain theatrical or musical tropes associated with castrati, whether for theatrical effect or musical authenticity, the most common of which is the association between castrati and a high singing voice.

Where a castrato role was written as vocally cross-cast, such as the female role of Berenice, from Leonardo Vinci's 1724 opera *Farnace*, or alternatively, the male role of Sextus from Handel's *Julius Caesar*, written originally for a female soprano but portrayed by castrati subsequently, the height of the vocal line will have some associations with femininity. This may be implied, as in *Farnace*, where the pitch will mimic that of a female voice, or out of necessity, as in *Julius Caesar*, where a woman, and most specifically a soprano, would be unable to sing at the male pitch. It was common for castrati to be delineated with the feminine owing not only to the matching of the female vocal range but their sexual ambiguity. It was traditional for new castrati to begin their theatrical lives playing female roles before advancing to the larger, heroic male roles. Barbier explains that this transition period allowed 'advantage to be taken of their youth, their fresh-sounding voice, their feminine charm and that kind of hybrid sensuality they possessed'.¹⁸⁰ The height of the voice would have formed a part of this sexual ambiguity, however, it is important to note that upon graduating to a masculine, heroic role, this prompted no change in pitch. Unlike our own modern understanding of masculine virility as being associated with lower voices, the opposite appears to have occurred during this period of time. Height became associated with virility and power, and in the process, the height of the castrato voice became synonymous with heroism, and therefore, masculine characters.

That high voices are so prized at all is an intriguing topic. Margaret Reynolds cites Brigid Brophy, who draws a link between the high voices of women

¹⁸⁰ Barbier, *The World of the Castrati*, 87-88.

and girls and a heightened emotional response this elicits through childhood experiences and a mother's authority.¹⁸¹ She also cites Michel Poziat's theory of association between the angelic and divine as therefore possessing an otherworldly authority, the extent to which this is found in relation to the castrati has already been discussed in this essay.¹⁸² The most obvious explanation lies in the culture in which castrati were formed, operating in a deeply hierarchical society where order and categorisation were key. That the soprano voice, literally meaning 'higher', should come to be associated with superiority in a society used to displaying hierarchical order is unsurprising.¹⁸³ In opera, the soprano voice could therefore be used as an auditory marker of this hierarchical difference, making it the clearest expression to an audience of a character's status. Dorothy Keyser suggests that castrati were originally cast as 'allegorical figures, goddesses, and occasional supporting males, such as Arcetro in *Euridice*, in keeping with the other wordly qualities of their voices are their physical identities as males'.¹⁸⁴ As the plotlines of early opera were chiefly concerned with gods, kings and warriors, these parts became synonymous with castrati because their voice, being the highest, rarest male voice and highly prized, were an obvious expression of the authority they sought to portray.

As the public opera house began to develop during the 1630's, the superiority of the higher voices was carried through from the stage into the treatment of the singers themselves. This is evidenced in the ways that voice types were paid, castrati were always paid more than their more common tenor and bass counterparts.¹⁸⁵ Heriot suggests that there was a prejudice against tenor and bass voices during this period for being rough and coarse sounding. This was due, in

¹⁸¹ Margaret Reynolds, 'Ruggiero's Deceptions, Cherubino's Distractions', in *En Travesti: Women, Gender Subversion, Opera*, ed. Corinne E. Blackmer and Patricia Juliana Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 136.

¹⁸² Margaret Reynolds, 'Ruggiero's Deceptions, Cherubino's Distractions', in *En Travesti: Women, Gender Subversion, Opera*, ed. Corinne E. Blackmer and Patricia Juliana Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 136.

¹⁸³ Rosselli, 'The Castrato as a Professional Group and a Social Phenomenon', 148.

¹⁸⁴ Keyser, 'Cross-Sexual Casting in Baroque Opera', 51.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

part, to the training methods for singers not being well adapted to lower registers.¹⁸⁶ This may well be an accurate assumption, given the formulaic nature of singing teaching in the music schools, and the reliance upon singing treatises (most often written by castrati) to inform on the latest in vocal technique. In a rather circular way, this may well have contributed to the continued use of the high voice to portray masculine superiority in contrast to a sound associated with being common and unrefined.

Height, it appears, was prized above all else because it was the greatest expression of virility in a patriarchal, class-entrenched society, and timbre and range were the most obvious statement of that power on the operatic stage. This provides an interesting, if disjunctive problem in modern vocal casting. Chiefly, how is it ‘that the hierarchy of voice value was so absolute and so important at this time that it completely overturned the oppositions of gender value?’¹⁸⁷ If we consider vocal casting practices in seventeenth and eighteenth century Italy, there was a far greater propensity to gender fluidity in the casting of those roles. It was highly common for a woman to be engaged as the primary male lead where a castrato was unavailable, or indeed, for a part to be purposefully cast *en travesti* (a woman dressed as a man) amongst castrati, tenor and basses in the same cast list. Take, for example, Francesco Cavalli’s 1667 opera, *Eliogabalo*, where the three male leads, Eliogabalo, Alessandro and Cesare are written for high voice, whilst the female role of Zenia was written for a tenor.¹⁸⁸ Another such example is the 1737 performance of Pietro Metastasio’s work *Achille in Sciro*, where the character of Achilles is disguised as a woman during the plot, only to reveal his sex at the end of the performance. The singer chosen to play the role however was the soprano Vittoria Tesi, which, given the centrality of gender to the drama of the play is, as Heriot points out, borderlining on the absurd.¹⁸⁹ That the freedom with which these roles were cross-cast seems so odd is due to our own inescapable

¹⁸⁶ Heriot, *The Castrati in Opera*, 83.

¹⁸⁷ Reynolds, ‘Ruggiero’s Deceptions, Cherubino’s Distractions’, 136.

¹⁸⁸ Heriot, *The Castrati in Opera*, 33.

¹⁸⁹ Heriot, *The Castrati in Opera*, 34.

experience of gender binary, the rule of 'masculine over feminine as a governing structure'.¹⁹⁰ This issue, to be discussed in the next chapter, is the result of the fundamental difference in attitudes towards gender between the modern understanding of male/female and the world in which the castrati were able to exist and thrive.

Whilst gender fluidity was common, it would be wrong however to suggest that castrati and female singers were held in equal esteem at this time. In the musical hierarchy castrati were considered superior to their female counterparts, irrespective of the gender of the role they were to play. In Tosi's *Observations on Florid Song* he suggests that women were equal only to the less competent castrati. He wrote, 'the presumption of some singers is not to be borne with...to wait for their ill-grounded caprices, learned by heart, carried from one theatre to the other, and perhaps stolen from some applauded female singer, who had better luck than skill, and whose errors were excused in regard to her sex'.¹⁹¹ This attitude was present in the casting of opera. Monteverdi's opera *L'Incoronazione di Poppea*, first performed in 1643, is scored for the parts of Nero and Ottone as soprano voice, whilst the female characters of Ottavia and Poppea were sung by female contraltos.¹⁹² The male characters would therefore have sung at a higher pitch than their female counterparts, conserving the absolute importance of pitch hierarchy to delineate power, strength and masculinity.

In modern casting this presents an interesting problem. It is commonplace to prioritise the height of the voice in vocal casting decisions, so castrato roles are now played by mezzos and counter-tenors whose ranges are similar to that of the castrati. Yet, there is legitimate cause to ask why this tradition has carried through into modern performance. If it were for the purposes of acoustic authenticity, then the argument that a high tenor voice is more closely aligned to the sound of the castrato, and that by transposing the role down an octave, the vocal brightness,

¹⁹⁰ Reynolds, 'Ruggiero's Deceptions, Cherubino's Distractions', 136

¹⁹¹ Heriot, *The Castrati in Opera*, 30, quoting Tosi, *Observation on Florid Song*.

¹⁹² Heriot, *The Castrati in Opera*, 33.

and relative range of the modern tenor voice would provide a more authentic interpretation of the sound could provide a possible casting solution. Paul Henry Lang advocated this in the 1960's during the Historically Informed Performance revival, and the idea is less bizarre than it appears, especially when the notion of what we want the voice to represent is taken into consideration. If, as Reynolds suggests, 'the use of the castrato sound pointed away from the ordinary meanings of the voice, which lie in the message, and directed the listening ear to the particularities of the voice itself', then one must ask why higher voices continue to be used to represent the concept of power and virility when this musical trope is longer recognisable as such to a modern audience.¹⁹³ In the proceeding nineteenth century strength, power and virility began to be associated not with the height of the castrato, but with the weight and of the bass voice. Even Handel, a great exponent of the castrato voice began to use basses in this way, take for example the bass arias in *Messiah*, *Why do the Nations* and *The Trumpets Shall Sound*, with their connotations of war and strength.¹⁹⁴ Owing to this shift in association between high and low to represent masculinity, it is possible to argue that a more accurate acoustic representation of the heroic male lead would be to cast the role as a tenor or bass, and simply to transpose down the octave.

Yet we don't, and for good reason. To claim that the castrato hero should be presented by a man purely because this would be more vocally aligned to the modern concept of masculinity in music would be to fundamentally misrepresent the importance of gender play in these roles, and frankly, be a huge injustice to the possibility of strength and power portrayed through the female voice. Furthermore, the very nature of opera, and surely, the castrato at its pinnacle, is the concept that opera as a 're-representation of reality itself' is not confined by realism.¹⁹⁵ As Reynolds points out, 'that there are so many opera roles of this kind is partly due to opera's absolute insistence upon its own esoteric rules, where voice

¹⁹³ Reynolds, 'Ruggiero's Deceptions, Cherubino's Distractions', 137.

¹⁹⁴ Laura E. DeMarco, 'The Fact of the Castrato and the Myth of the Countertenor', *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 86, No. 1 (Spring 2001), Oxford University Press, 183.

¹⁹⁵ McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 36.

and music come first and where realism has no place'.¹⁹⁶ Castrati roles must be played by mezzos and counter-tenors, for despite the transposition of these roles to tenor or bass being more aligned to our aural perception of the hero, it would be to deny the purpose of performing early opera. Namely, the emergence of the historically informed performance movement to conserve and deliver the most accurate acoustic representation of early music. Though it might not sound 'right', the high voice must remain, and the audience required to suspend their disbelief.

The suitability of these voices continues to be a contentious topic, with the emergence of the modern counter-tenor felt by some to an inadequate substitution. The counter-tenor's extended use of falsetto means that whilst they are acoustically similar to castrati in height, this does not necessarily extend to the weight and clarity of the sound. This has given rise to a reluctance, though certainly not universal, of casting the counter-tenor voice in a more dramatic role. Contemporary composer Harrison Birtwhistle dismissed using a counter-tenor in a lead role because he believed that 'they don't have any dramatic qualities'.¹⁹⁷ Laura De Marco is particularly adamant on the unsuitability of the counter-tenor or male alto to provide an accurate substitute for the castrato. She writes, 'whatever the verisimilitude gained by casting men to play male parts, its more than offset by the change in timbre, and it directly flouts the intentions of composers such as Handel and Mozart'.¹⁹⁸ In some respects, she is right. Whilst composers were happy to substitute castrati with female sopranos, they almost seldom used falsettists. De Marco's solution is to choose between female substitution and transposition, and to discount the counter-tenor entirely. Her theory is an important element of the complicated attitudes towards vocal casting of these roles, however, I fundamentally disagree with her belief that the counter-tenor has nothing to offer the repertoire. Though the counter-tenor may have been the assumed successor of the castrato, they are not, I believe, their most suitable

¹⁹⁶ Reynolds, 'Ruggiero's Deceptions, Cherubino's Distractions', 133

¹⁹⁷ DeMarco, 'The Fact of the Castrato and the Myth of the Countertenor', 177, quoting New York Times, December 31 1997.

¹⁹⁸ DeMarco, 'The Fact of the Castrato and the Myth of the Countertenor', 177.

vocal substitute. However, it must never be forgotten that opera is entertainment, and audiences want to be presented with art that is tangible, and that it will, on some intrinsic level, meet their expectations. Reynolds sums up perfectly by writing, ‘opera is not natural, not contemporary, not real...in this consecrated place we give ourselves over to the contrivances of art’.¹⁹⁹ Whatever else the castrati were, theirs is a legacy so bound to the notion of gender, and specifically difference, that in some respects the use of the counter-tenor in conjunction with mezzo-sopranos offers the perfect embodiment of the gender fluidity from which these parts originated. As Julia Prest argues, ‘the castrato is vocally cross-cast when playing a male role (he performs as a man but sounds more like a woman) and more conventionally cross-cast when playing a female one’.²⁰⁰ If the counter-tenor offers an audience the opportunity to be confronted with the intricacies of castrato cross-casting in a tangible, accessible way, then they should have a place in early opera revival.

The voice of the castrato, prized, elusive and ultimately lost, lies at the heart of the fascination in this field of study. Despite the best efforts of many to distil the concept of the voice as something disembodied from the castrato himself, the uncomfortable truth remains, the voice however beautiful or celebrated, is the direct result of what the castrati was born out of, and inextricably tied to his altered gender. How this is represented on stage, and why the notion of the castrato is so inherently uncomfortable, is the subject of the next chapter.

¹⁹⁹ Reynolds, ‘Ruggiero’s Deceptions, Cherubino’s Distractions’, 132.

²⁰⁰ Prest, *Theatre Under Louis XIV*, 133-134.

The Castrato Problem: Delineating Gender from a Sex Unknown

‘This music can only be salvaged... if we substitute for the impersonal instrument [i.e the castrato] a human character. The contrast between men and women is vital, there can be no drama without it, not to us’.²⁰¹

Paul Henry Lang wrote that statement in the midst of the 1960’s early music revival, and in doing so, perhaps unknowingly, captured the essence of what makes a modern audience so inherently uncomfortable with the concept of the castrato. Gender binary is such an entrenched concept in both daily life and staged representations of it, that the castrato, marked by both sexual difference and gendered ambiguity, appears as a superfluous historical figure, the purpose of which is not obvious to us now. The castrato distorts the notion of the binary opposition between male and female, and in doing so, effects how sexuality and power come to be represented on stage.²⁰² Most importantly, it is the construction of masculinity that the castrato puts at risk. Much modern discourse on the castrati focuses too heavily on the site of their difference, and thus, focuses on othering them from traditional notions of male and female in order to provide explanations of their sex, and subsequently gender. Lang’s theory that castrati parts could only be dramatically understood if the castrato were erased from the opera altogether, substituted by the clear cut sexual difference between male and female is extreme, and certainly a product of a society less willing to accept gender ambiguity. However, his views are an important anchor from which to explore the topic, as they are borne out of two important aspects of attitudes towards gender constructs on stage. The first is the notion that markers of identity between male and female characters in opera are fundamental to its existence as a staged

²⁰¹ Paul Henry Lang, *George Frideric Handel* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1966), 172-173.

²⁰² Prest, *Theatre Under Louis XIV*, 132.

representation of our social world.²⁰³ Delineations of masculine and feminine in music are themselves a useful social history in how a society viewed these and thus represented them to an audience. If Lang wants rid of the castrato, it's because their obvious ambiguity is too far removed from modern society's concept of masculine and feminine to be dramatically useful. The second is that Lang's understanding (or lack of) what castrati represented will have been undoubtedly shaped by opera's romantic nineteenth century, where the cross-dressing part was almost all but abandoned in favour the heterosexual love affairs of Puccini and Verdi, and men and women were clearly defined by their difference.²⁰⁴ *En travesti* parts, where they existed at all, were almost always women dressed as men, not men dressed as women dressed as men etc. etc. There appears to have been a marked shift in attitudes towards gender during the proceeding century, evident in how constructions of masculinity shifted on stage. And so the premise of this chapter is to discover what these attitudes towards the construction of gender were, and how they differ between the age in which castrati existed to present day. In turn, I hope to prove why modern representations of castrati don't always accurately represent this.

The problem is, as Margaret Reynolds boldly states, 'everyone knows that opera is about sex'.²⁰⁵ A more nuanced explanation would be that the art form is designed to be pleasurable, sophisticated, beautiful and engaging, drawing on shared experiences in order to present to its audience a version of reality so far removed from their own, but nevertheless recognisable as a human experience. Art has always been aligned to presentations of love and sexuality and opera is no exception to that. Seeking love and pleasure is a universal human experience, whether the subject matter is of gods and kings or the humble household servant, sex is a leveller of us all. The end of the sixteenth century, and aligned with the rise of castrati on the operatic stage, witnessed a shift in attitudes regarding the

²⁰³ McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 36.

²⁰⁴ Reynolds, 'Ruggiero's Deceptions, Cherubino's Distractions', 141-142.

²⁰⁵ Reynolds, 'Ruggiero's Deceptions, Cherubino's Distractions', 132

discourse on human eroticism. Michael Foucault argues that the propensity to talk and sing about sex (and where better than the theatre where the discourse can happen indirectly of the audience it engages), rather than having the desired effect of controlling sexuality, continued to stir interest in it.²⁰⁶ This is evidenced in the ways that the arts had to find ways of presenting desire to its audience through musical and theatrical tropes. Where human desire is fundamental to the dramatic discourse, then representations of gender and sexuality must also become its concern as it is through these constructions that love and sex may be represented. In this way, gender and sexuality became the ‘central concerns of Western culture in the seventeenth century’.²⁰⁷

In the 1640’s representations of masculinity began to change, evidenced by portraiture from the era which shifts from the Spanish style of projecting obvious virility, short hair, all black clothing, rigid collars, erect posture and the fashion for carrying a dagger (no doubt an artistic symbol of the sitter’s masculinity), to the French style of ornamentation and excess.²⁰⁸ The aesthetics of this new presentation of masculinity were marked by a more effeminate style that included powdered wigs (first introduced to Venice in 1665), stockings, heels and makeup, amongst other things.²⁰⁹ This new style was part of a wider cultural shift in the presentation of virility that was reactionary to the social and economic climate that permitted castration for artistic purposes in the first place. Finucci explains that this new Baroque style

...was liked because it provided an escape from an existence marked by political submission, rampant poverty, waves of epidemics, and the plague. The feeling of disempowerment and of demasculinization that these events must have created

²⁰⁶ McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 36.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Finucci, *The Manly Masquerade*, 4.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

nourished in turn a divide between illusion and reality and encouraged fantasies of frivolity and impermanence.²¹⁰

Gender fluidity and the art of cross-dressing became such a common feature of both artistic and real life during the Baroque because it played into the prevailing fashion for artifice in personal representation. Furthermore, attitudes towards gender and the possibility of its transience were inherently effected by understandings of biological sex, which differ greatly from our own. The fundamental concepts of a person's sexuality have gone through a radical shift, prompting McClary to warn 'it is extremely treacherous for us today to depend on what we might assume to be universal experiences of the transhistorical body'.²¹¹ Unlike the concept of gender as fluid and culturally formed, biological sex tends to be understood in terms of its immutability and aligned to the sexual organs ascribed at birth. This was not however how sexuality was understood to operate between the early modern and post-Enlightenment periods. Thomas Lacqueur's research into historical sexual attitudes cites the one sex model as the prevailing thought behind male/female sexual difference. Rather than imagining male and female as opposites, he urges the reader to imagine sex as 'a vertical, hierarchical continuum ranging from man down to woman'.²¹² Sex was not absolute, but subject to the whims of the humours, and changing body heat believed to be linked to a person's predominant sex. It was also believed that the psyche could be infected by matter with the power to alter a person's sex.²¹³ Crucially, sex was not aligned exclusively to genitalia, but rather was the product of a number of biological conditions some of which were universal to men and women. 'Genitalia, in short, did not constitute a clear-cut sign of difference, and a sex could always assume the features and functions of the other: a man could, in effect, be constructed'.²¹⁴

²¹⁰ Finucci, *The Manly Masquerade*, 5.

²¹¹ McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 37.

²¹² Freitas 'The Eroticism of Emasculation', 203.

²¹³ Finucci, *The Manly Masquerade*, 6.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

Failed Men

The popularity of Galenic sexual theory in determining male/female sexual difference during the Renaissance impacted greatly how men and women were viewed. Much of the discourse that surrounds this subject is based on the ability to procreate, and what, if any, role a woman played in the successful creation of a child. Galen's theories combined Aristotelian and Hippocratic teaching and saw a resurgence in popularity during the Renaissance due to the widespread use of anatomical exploration in medicine at this time.²¹⁵ Galen's one sex model advocates that men and women operate with the same sexual organs, the difference being the placement of these in the body. It was believed that a woman's sexual organs were within her body and that all of the female reproductive organs corresponded directly to a man's. This prompted the belief that a woman produced sperm from her vagina, and that it acted as an inverted penis, the ovaries were the equivalent of testicles and the uterus was a scrotum.²¹⁶ The reason for sexual difference between men and women was assumed to be heat, men were 'hotter' than women, and therefore more fully formed. The concept of heat in determining bodily functions originated in the ancient writings of Aristotle and developed by Galen. He wrote,

the woman is less perfect than the man in respect to the generative parts. For the parts were formed within her when she was still a foetus, but could not because of the defect in heat emerge and project on the outside.²¹⁷

This lack of heat effected the quality of female 'sperm' as well as the general quality of her organs. As the quotation above shows however, the concept of sexual parity between men and women must not be read in terms of sexual equality. As Laqueur wrote, the female body was assumed to be 'a lesser version

²¹⁵ Finucci, *The Manly Masquerade*, 8-9.

²¹⁶ Finucci, *The Manly Masquerade*, 13-14.

²¹⁷ Gilbert, *Developmental Biology*, 17.

of man along a vertical axis of infinite gradations'.²¹⁸ A woman's body was contextualised not as its own entity but in relation to their more perfectly formed male counterparts. For political and biological reasons men had to be considered superior to the female form in order for the hierarchy of male over female to be relevant in biological sexual discourse too. That women alone were capable of carrying a child and giving birth, whilst being understood as an 'inverted man' and so having all of the sexual functions of a male gave women 'too much power'.²¹⁹ In order for male superiority to be asserted, women were in essence 'failed men', who whilst sharing their biological traits, were not fully formed, not enough and too passive to be fully male, and thus order was restored to the concept of sexual difference.²²⁰ The concept that biological sex was not independently determined between men and women but rather operated in terms of hierarchy in a same sex model is fundamental to the way projections of femininity and masculinity were portrayed in the Renaissance and early Baroque periods. If male and female were not opposites but formed from one collective biological sex, with the quantity of certain features determining their difference, the concept of gender fluidity as a feature of daily life does not seem so absurd when the biological factors from which engendering occurs are broadly universal.

The castrated body is a fascinating component of this biological theory. It stands that the castrato occupied the middle ground on the hierarchical continuum between male and female by virtue of their incompleteness as men. The castrato was unique in the sense that their castration was almost always the product of choice, rather than medical necessity, so the consciousness of the decision coupled with the age at which it took place may well have diminished associations with masculinity that otherwise existed for medically castrated men. However, I do not believe that castrati should be viewed as being so separated

²¹⁸ Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990), 4.

²¹⁹ Finucci, *The Manly Masquerade*, 13.

²²⁰ Finucci, *The Manly Masquerade*, 15.

from the concept of male or female that they are considered neutral or other, as Feldman so aptly puts it, a ‘mutilated man is still a man’.²²¹

Demi-Virs

To what extent castrati can be categorised as male is a contentious topic, aided somewhat by castrati’s own ambiguous accounts of their gender identity. I am inclined to agree with Martha Feldman’s view that castration should not be viewed as shifting so radically a castrato’s gender that they ceased to be men, were rendered genderless or occupy a third gender. If this were the case the discourse that surrounded their gender would have asserted their non-male status to a far greater extent.²²² As she argues, accusations of their unmanliness appear during the eighteenth century by which point castrati, who have fallen from public favour, seem ‘monstrously uncategorisable’ because attitudes towards gender difference began to favour binary opposition, rather than gender scale, as a measure of male/female difference.²²³ The most logical categorisation for castrati is Charles de Brosses term ‘demi-virs’, meaning half-man, which appears to correlate with some castrati’s own, if slightly confused, understanding of the gender they inhabited. In the castrato Filippo Balatri’s autobiography he wrote a short poem to explain the difficulty in defining himself when asked. Translated from Italian it reads:

‘I remain confused about how to reply.
To say I am male is almost a lie,
To say I am female is true even less,
And to say I am neuter makes me blush’.²²⁴

It is clear however that Balatri is most comfortable identifying as a man given the possible choices, and I would argue that any gender ambiguity must be read as

²²¹ Felmdan, *The Castrato*, 44.

²²² Felmdan, *The Castrato*, 43.

²²³ Felmdan, *The Castrato*, 44.

²²⁴ Prest, *Theatre Under Louis XIV*, 133.

non-normative in relation to masculinity, from which assumptions of a castrato's gender were primarily taken. Even in contemporary accounts of gender confusion the pronoun 'he' is used to denote a castrato's 'true' gender. An interesting piece of anecdotal evidence appears in the memoirs of Casanova regarding the 'castrato' Bellino. Whilst trying to establish Bellino's sex (obviously ambiguous enough for Casanova to enquire), he discovered that Bellino was in fact a woman, the soprano Teresa Lanti, who appears to have disguised herself as a castrato in order to sing in Rome whilst women were banned from performing on its stages. It is Casanova's description of this event that is so striking, owing to his insistence on the use of masculine pronouns to describe Bellino despite having been discovered to be a woman in disguise using a prosthetic penis. He wrote, 'I saw that Bellino was in truth a man; but a man to be scorned both for his degradation and for the shameful calm I observed in him at a moment when I ought not to have seen the most patent evidence of his sensibility'.²²⁵ Despite this discovery, Casanova refers to Bellino as 'he', because this is the gender aligned to castrati and thus, in this gender disguise, a woman pretending to be a castrato may be referred to as masculine via association with a castrato's most commonly perceived gender.

Modern research into gender identity appears to confirm this theory. Robert Stoller's book, *Presentations of Gender*, puts forward the theory that a core gender identity is established from the age of one.²²⁶ Given that castration did not occur for at least another six years it can be argued that the operation itself did little to alter a child's gender identity as this would have been firmly established before castration took place.²²⁷ This provides a logical explanation to the concept that castrati were male aligned, rather than being categorised as a third gender. As Finucci urges however, their gender identity should be removed from the concept of their sexual identity, as this will have been formed within the

²²⁵ Giacomo Girolamo Casanova de Seingalt, *History of my Life*, trans. William R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1966), 139-140. As quoted in Keyser, 'Cross Sexual Casting in Baroque Opera' 51.

²²⁶ Robert Stoller, *Presentations of Gender* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 11. As cited in Finucci, *The Manly Masquerade*, 274.

²²⁷ Finucci, *The Manly Masquerade*, 274.

context of their physically and hormonally altered bodies. It is possible that hormonal imbalances as well as their physical difference may have impacted upon their sexual identification, ranging from heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual or asexual.²²⁸

It is possible that the castrated body was understood in much the same way that the adolescent body was, and considered to be incompletely formed.²²⁹ It was believed that a man reached full heat in adolescence which determined his difference from the female form. Under this model distinctions of sex could only be made once a man was 'completed'. The castrato, having been castrated before the final heat of masculinity could take effect could not escape this sexual liminality. Freitas makes the important point that:

...castrating a boy before puberty, then, did not throw his sex, in the modern sense, into question. It merely froze him within the middle ground of the hierarchy of sex: He never experienced the final burst of vital heat that would have taken him into full masculinity. Sexually speaking – and this is an essential point – the castrato would have been viewed as the equivalent to a boy.²³⁰

The implications of this theory mean that castrati should be viewed as being male aligned, but not fully. They were permitted to partake in maleness but only to the extent that they could be viewed as a prepubescent male, and thus retain a certain level of gender ambiguity as full sexual maturity could not be reached. This diminution of castrati does appear to have impacted upon their own sense of self. It was common practice for castrati to adopt an assumed stage name (as did many female singers and composers) that often paid homage to a teacher, family or sponsor to whom the castrato's career was indebted. *In the World of the Castrati* Barbier lists many such examples, Stefano Majorano became known as Caffarelli, in homage of his teacher Caffaro, and Uberti, taught by Nicolo Porpora was billed

²²⁸ Finucci, *The Manly Masquerade*, 274.

²²⁹ Freitas 'The Eroticism of Emasculation', 204.

²³⁰ Freitas 'The Eroticism of Emasculation', 203.

as Porporino.²³¹ What Barbier doesn't mention is how these names are almost always diminutives, made so by the addition of the modifying suffixes of 'ino', 'ano' or 'ello' in Italian to denote something smaller. Their assumed name most often followed their own full names on posters or in programmes, so the connotations of their adopted name formed part of the social consciousness of the singer for all of their professional life. This fascinating, self-diminishing practice labels castrati as the literal embodiment of being lesser men, as though by adopting the name of something or someone with authority and influence over them, and then diminishing that in regard to themselves, they acknowledged their status as incomplete. Even the great Farinelli was colloquially referred to in Southern Italy as *il ragazzo* or *il bambino*, meaning little boy or baby.²³² This was not intended as a slight but as a term of endearment. Some castrati even went as far as referring to themselves as boys. When Atto Melani wrote to Hugues de Lionne in October 1666 he referred to himself as 'the most miserable boy in the world'.²³³ Odd, given that he was 35 years old and a diplomat to the Papal Court writing to the French Foreign Minister.²³⁴ That Melani is comfortable to refer to himself in this way in such a formal setting, it is possible to infer from it that his language is indicative of well-established attitudes towards castrati at this time.

What these attitudes tell us about castrati, and thus what they embodied on stage is both interesting and fundamentally at odds with modern projections of masculinity. Whilst the association of height and virility has been previously discussed, it does little to quell the inherent uncomfortableness with the concept of the emasculated, boy-like castrato portraying the classical, virile hero. Neither does it explain how castrati could be, and were, the object of intense sexual fascination. It is possible to argue that projections of potent sexuality onto castrati existed because of their association with youth, rather than in spite of it.

²³¹ Barbier, *The World of the Castrati*, 84.

²³² Ibid.

²³³ Melani to Hugues de Lionne, Rome, October 31 1661, (Paris, Archives de la Ministère des Affaires étrangères, Correspondence politique, Rome), 142

²³⁴ Freitas 'The Eroticism of Emasculation', 215.

Freitas argues compellingly that the boy figure was the subject of eroticisation both in art and real life due to the predilection towards pederasty during this time.²³⁵ He cites Luciano Marcello, who suggests that ‘the pederastic type of relationship was widespread and almost rooted in social custom...it represented a phase of life entirely within normal customs of and the masculine sexual life’.²³⁶ If it was acceptable to sexually objectify the adolescent boy, then castrati, widely associated with adolescent sexuality must have seemed libidinally fascinating both on and off the stage. Their advantage being of course that the qualities of youthfulness that were apparently desirable did not cease to exist once they had reached full sexual maturity through puberty because they were biologically incapable of doing so. If the audiences to which castrati performed were accustomed to representations of male youth as the sexual ideal then the concept of its finality must also be considered. It was understood that once a boy reached eighteen his sexual role in a relationship would shift.²³⁷ Having reached adulthood, they ceased to be the object of a man’s erotic gaze and were expected, in turn, to become the active partner in a sexual relationship, thus confirming the cycle of the figurative and literal boy as the pinnacle of sexual attraction. That castrati were able to embody this adolescent sexuality beyond the age of eighteen is a possible explanation for the use of the castrato as the virile hero. The sexual potency they must have portrayed would have made them both desirable to watch and cast as the adult, fully formed male could be associated with the castrato’s youthful sexuality.

This concept is important as it challenges more contemporary notions of the castrato as ‘de-sexed’ or sexuality mutilated, prompting some to question whether the castrato character is capable of representing eroticism. Dorothy Keyser, for example, in an otherwise extremely informative essay states that

²³⁵ Freitas ‘The Eroticism of Emasculation’, 211.

²³⁶ Luciano Marcello, *Società Maschile*, 119. As quoted in Freitas ‘The Eroticism of Emasculation’, 211.

²³⁷ Freitas ‘The Eroticism of Emasculation’, 211.

castrati 'being claimed of neither sex, could assume the guise of either'.²³⁸ This is echoed by Roland Barthes who describes the castrato voice as being 'produced, *a contrario* (according to a strictly symbolic inversion) by singers without sex'.²³⁹ Whilst interesting, assumptions of neutrality are, I believe, to fundamentally misunderstand the nature of both masculinity and the result of castration itself. This is due, in part, to the topic of castration having been removed from the concept of inhibiting procreation to inhibiting sexuality. Sigmund Freud's work on castration theory and its effect on notions of masculinity has had a major impact on the study of castrati, the result of which being that castrati have been aligned to theories on the effects of castration that were not a concern during the height of their existence. Freud's work is centred on the premise that children develop a fear of emasculation through fear of loss or damage to their sexual organs. During the phallic stage of psychosexual development (3-5 years old) a boy will become aware of the difference between male and female genitalia and conclude that this must be the result of a female's castration. The child will develop castration anxiety due to the fear of being castrated by the father figure that Freud proffers is the main rival in the desire for the mother.²⁴⁰ The literal and metaphorical loss of the penis through castration therefore becomes one of the central concerns and threats to a man's sexual identity. It is common in modern discourse to find assertions that the castrato was prejudiced against owing to their ability to incite castration anxiety in other men. Julia Prest believes 'he is the literal embodiment of the fulfilment of Freud's castration complex and thus liable to be a powerful source of castration anxiety in the adult male'.²⁴¹ Whilst Prest makes a valid point, applying the theory retrospectively is not, I believe, a useful explanation of attitudes towards the castrato. Freud's work aligns the

²³⁸ Keyser, 'Cross-Sexual Casting in Baroque Opera', 53.

²³⁹ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974), 109-110.

²⁴⁰ Sigmund Freud, *The Origins of Psycho-Analysis: Letters To Wilhelm Fliess, Drafts And Notes: 1887-1902*, ed. Marie Bonaparte, Anna Freud and Ernst Kris (Thame, Oxfordshire: Imago Publishing Co., 1954).

²⁴¹ Prest, *Theatre Under Louis XIV*, 131.

concept of castration to the penis rather than to the testicles, and thus, refocuses castration as being a sexual inhibitor rather than a procreative one. As previously discussed full castration of the penis is seldom heard of in regards to castrati, yet by applying Freudian theory to the topic the understanding of what was diminished by the castrato's castration becomes confused. Take, for example, Beth Kowaleski-Wallace's assertion that 'the existence of the castrato forces the issue of the significance of the non-phallus, of the possibility of sexuality in the absence of a penis'.²⁴² Quite simply, it doesn't. Castration may have diminished a man's sexual potency but it did not remove completely that symbol of masculinity. Whilst I do not doubt that the castrato would have been an uncomfortable reality to non-castrated men, the specifics of Freudian castration theory unhelpfully shifts the focus away from procreation, which is a more logical explanation for any anxiety the castrato may have stirred.

One important distinction to make is how masculinity was asserted in a society that operated along these lines. The ability to father appears to have been the strongest indicator of a virility, especially the ability to father sons in a deeply patriarchal society. Renaissance medical practice attributed the ability to procreate successfully and engender a child to the testicles, and it was common practice to tie the left testicle during intercourse in the hope of conceiving a boy.²⁴³ The concept of the ability to father as the clearest delineation of maleness is evidenced by the church's prescriptions on what constituted a legal marriage. In the June of 1587 Pope Sixtus V set out the terms by which castrati were unable to enter a legally binding marriage by stating that men who were 'frigid and impotent' were not able to enter a marriage contract and that any castrated men already married would need to have the contract annulled.²⁴⁴ The exception to this was any castrato able to have an erection and produce as 'emission', and thus, the potential ability to procreate. In doing so, Finucci argues that 'he reinforced

²⁴² Beth Kowaleski-Wallace, 'Shunning the Bearded Kiss: Castrati and the Definition of Female Sexuality', *Prose Studies*, Vol. 15, Issue 2 (1992), 154.

²⁴³ Finucci, *The Manly Masquerade*, 267.

²⁴⁴ Finucci, *The Manly Masquerade*, 263.

the view that masculinity needed to be associated with fertility as a foundational myth of Christian discourse'.²⁴⁵ This places the concept of masculinity as being directly related to procreation at the heart of the governing structures of political and religious life at the same time that the castrato phenomenon began. If the castrato induced anxiety in other men it was because their castration removed the possibility of proving their masculinity, whilst still allowing them to be objectified as a sexual being. This is a vitally important idea in relation to the perceived sex and gender of castrati because it is the clearest indication that castrati could not be perceived as fully male, as they lacked both the outward sexual organs and ability to procreate which would have aligned them to the concept of maleness during that time. It is also useful, because the fact that a prescription against marriage for castrati had to exist is indicative that the practice was not unheard of, and furthermore, something sought by women.²⁴⁶ Attitudes towards biological sex are an important piece of evidence in the castrato's history because they provide a viable explanation as to why altering a boy's physical condition did not seem as shocking, invasive and transformative as the procedure appears today. If sex was a moveable concept, capable of being constructed by forces uncontrollable in the body, then the concept of purposely altering that in a child can be understood as being part of a wider framework of behaviours that enforced this belief system.

Femininity

A predilection for gender ambiguity did not, however, mean that castrati existed without prejudice or intolerance. Lacqueur's theory of scale does not imply that maleness at its pinnacle was something to aspire to, rather, the 'infinite gradations' of gender possibilities were diminished by their male lack. Castrati are routinely feminised in both serious and satirical portrayals of them, proof, I would argue, that castrati were a legitimate enough threat to masculinity that they elicited

²⁴⁵ Finucci, *The Manly Masquerade*, 264.

²⁴⁶ Finucci, *The Manly Masquerade*, 262.

reactions that sought to undermine them. An obvious point of derision was the castrato physique, often satirised through comparisons to the female form. Castrati were cast as female characters on stage, and given that they shared some physical attributes with women they were often depicted as such both on and off the stage. The famous caricature below by Pierre Leone Ghezzi in 1724 depicts Farinelli, aged nineteen in the role of Berenice, from Leonardo Vinci's opera *Farnace*. Ghezzi's caricatures were much admired in Rome, and his work was recognisable for his repeated use of the exaggerated anatomy in the portraits of those he painted. He seeks to deride Farinelli by depicting his physique as recognisably feminine, whilst the size of his hands and jaw draw attention to his masculinity. The purpose, one assumes, is not to highlight Farinelli's suitability for the role by presenting him as physically androgynous, but rather to exaggerate these physical discrepancies to suggest that the castrato is suitable to play neither.

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²⁴⁷ Ghezzi, Piere Leone, jpeg image of ink drawing. The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. 1724.

The tone with which associations with femininity are described are interesting, given that almost all physical accounts of castrati are told from the male gaze. Whereas a castrato may be ‘positively’ sexually objectified as having boy-like features, female features tended to carry negative connotations. Another anecdote from Casanova, this time describing his meeting with Beppino della mamana, is one such example.

In the middle of the confusion, I saw a priest with a very attractive countenance come in. The size of his hips made me take him for a woman dressed in men’s clothes, and I said so to Gama, who told me that he was the celebrated castrato, Beppino della mamana. The abbe called him to us, and told him with a laugh that I had taken him for a girl. The impudent fellow looked me in the face, and said that, if I liked, he would shew me whether I had been right or wrong.²⁴⁹

If associations with femininity in castrati appear to be levelled as accusations rather than as a statement of fact, the notion of femininity as a derisive trait must be examined. This is due once again to the concept of a person’s vital heat in determining not just their physical, but behavioural qualities too.²⁵⁰ Just as men were ‘hotter’ and therefore more perfectly physically formed, heat became synonymous with desirable personality traits, and thus, women who were colder and the qualities associated with them were considered lesser. It also follows that where a person’s physicality could be altered by external forces acting upon their vital heat, so too could their personality. This belief was extended to the idea that the company you kept had the power to alter the psyche if their heat was different to your own.²⁵¹ If good qualities became engendered as masculine, then associations with femininity were born out of a genuine concern that a woman, quite literally, had the power to negatively affect your personality. As Finucci

²⁴⁹ Casanova de Seingalt, *History of my Life*, 266.

²⁵⁰ Freitas ‘The Eroticism of Emasculation’, 205.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

maintains, 'women were considered pliable, inherently shift, perhaps immoral creatures; seeing or acting a certain behaviour lured them to assume that behaviour'.²⁵² This was due, in part, to the philosophical concepts of the aesthetics of virtue that began to take hold during the eighteenth century. Virtues began to be hierarchically constructed as masculine and feminine delineating gender difference to certain personal qualities. Reynolds cites Edmund Burke's 1757 publication *Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, in which the sublime (and masculine) qualities of fortitude, justice and wisdom are placed in contrast to the more feminine qualities of compassion and kindness associated with love.²⁵³ This is evident in generalised descriptions of the castrati's character. It is common to read that they had 'weak eyes and a weak pulse, lacked fortitude and strength of mind, and had difficulty pronouncing the letter R'.²⁵⁴ If this is indicative of prevailing attitudes towards masculine and feminine difference, then the castrato's feminisation off of the stage must have affected the reception of the roles they played. It stands to reason then that accusations of effeminacy bear different connotations today than their use in the seventeenth century.²⁵⁵ Where castrati were purposefully cross-cast and physically androgynous, accusations of effeminacy serve to other them from the concept of them retaining masculine qualities, whilst casting a judgement on the castrati's perceived character traits. Archenholz, for example, is clear that in imitating women on stage, they inherit, and are changed, by associations with them:

These unfortunate men have carried imitation so far that anyone who is not knowledgeable on the subject, seeing them from a distance, could not guess their sex. Since the greatest difficulty has been removed by the nature of their voices, they attempt by

²⁵² Finucci, *The Manly Masquerade*, 231.

²⁵³ Reynolds, 'Ruggiero's Deceptions, Cherubino's Distractions', 139.

²⁵⁴ John Rosselli, *Singers of Italian Opera: The History of a Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 145.

²⁵⁵ Freitas 'The Eroticism of Emasculation', 204.

their carriage, gestures, movements and facial expression to imitate women, in such a way that from this point of view the illusion is complete.²⁵⁶

Castrati of course inhabited the middle ground between masculinity and femininity, but could not partake fully of either. Whilst this may have been artistically useful in allowing them to portray a range of theatrical guises across both sexes, the question still remains, why did castrati become synonymous with the heroic primo uomo part when their association with femininity and male lack prevented them from ever being truly male? Furthermore, what, if anything, does this infer regarding the attitudes associated with this peculiar representation of masculinity? The explanation I offer is the use of the castrato body as a theatrical device that, owing to the fashion for artifice, presented its audience with the physical opposite of the character it sought to portray as both a further, theatrical element of gender play, whilst undermining the presentation of virility and power they otherwise represented. By presenting the hero as a diminished man, the castrato being the literal embodiment of it, provided a provocative visual clue of the attitudes towards some of the characters he played.

Presentations of Maleness

Like heroines, they are surrounded by real men, veritable Adams who have cast them down. They partake of femininity: excluded, marked by some initial strangeness, they are doomed to their undoing.²⁵⁷

It is possible to argue that castrati, emasculated, feminised and half-male were the product of an audience who prioritised illusion and aestheticism above all else in order to be entertained. After all, an eighteenth century audience was well versed in the *commedia dell'arte* tradition in theatre where cross-casting was common.

²⁵⁶ Archenholz, quoted in Barbier, *The World of the Castrati*, 153.

²⁵⁷ Catherine Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, trans. Betsy Wing (London: Virago Press, 1989), 118.

The comic older female character was often played by a man *en travesti* whilst an adolescent boy was sometimes portrayed by a woman.²⁵⁸ The nearest relation to the castrato was the Pulcinella character, a paradoxical figure with a high voice, capable of a number of theatrical guises and associated with animal imagery in similar ways to castrati.²⁵⁹ In many senses, the *commedia dell'arte* tradition paved the way for castrati to physically embody the gender ambiguous role audiences had come to expect as the operatic art form gained popularity. In 1637 Niccolò Sabbatini wrote a treatise on stage design and special effects in the theatre that provides important information on the emphasis placed on spectacle, optical illusion and changing perspective that came to dominate the Baroque stage and its penchant for excess.²⁶⁰ Cross-casting, and castrati in particular, can be viewed as an extension of this. Gender fluidity has naturally become synonymous with castrati owing to their casting as both male and female characters. This chapter has been concerned with exploring the extent to which castrati were deemed male or female. As I have tried to prove, their biological sex allowed them to partake in masculinity in everyday life, however, and crucially to this argument, staged representations were often concerned with their perceived feminisation. The virtues of femininity were more aligned to displays of emotion than representations of strength or valour associated as being masculine. It is possible to surmise that the castrato became a vessel through which explorations of masculine emotion could be explored because their biological sexual status as a man, coupled with their physical androgyny (and so blurring the lines between male and female) meant that the traditionally female rhetoric of emotion and sexuality could be explored.

The concept of castrati as rhetoricians is interesting, because by partaking in cross-dressing on stage as frequently as they did, they were tasked with the public delivery of female rhetoric whilst maintaining their position as *primi*

²⁵⁸ Keyser, 'Cross-Sexual Casting in Baroque Opera', 48.

²⁵⁹ Feldman, *The Castrato*, 22-23.

²⁶⁰ Nino Pirrotta and Elena Povoredo, *Music and Theatre from Poliziano to Monteverdi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 335-336.

oumini. A man skilled in rhetoric was one capable of exerting power and influence, whilst a woman's rhetorical prowess was understood as seduction and the positing of her sexual power.²⁶¹ It is entirely possible that the female rhetoric of seduction, fragility and overt emotion became associated with castrati due to their history of appearing *en travesti*. Take for example the 1607 staging of Monteverdi's *Orfeo* where all the female parts were cast as castrati.²⁶² As one of the first definitive works in the operatic canon the association between castrati and presentations of femininity (Euridice, for example, was sung by the castrato Girolamo Bacchini) was established from the beginning of the art form's popularity. McClary has written extensively on the topic of rhetoric in Monteverdi's *Orfeo* and how this is used to delineate gender roles in an opera otherwise sung by men. Prosperina, she argues, shows rhetorical skill through her manipulation of Orfeo and in the seduction of Plutone, however, this is permissible because she is established as an older, experienced female character for whom the concept of virginity and purity (like Euridice) do not apply.²⁶³ Euridice, conversely, cannot show rhetorical skill as the young and innocent object of Orfeo's desire because this would mark her as a seductress, skilled in manipulation, undermining Orfeo's position as the archetypal male hero. Rhetoric, from her mouth, undermines the gender hierarchy at play. Interestingly, Orfeo and Apollo were scored for tenors, whilst Caronte and Plutone were basses, meaning gender ambiguity only applied to the female characters in the opera. In order to differentiate gender roles in another wise all male cast the virtues of the male and female characters must be distinctively defined. This has interesting consequences for the heroic, masculine roles for which castrati were famous. Where castrati began to be cast as the male lead the gender subversion they represented would not have been just physical due to their androgynous appearance, but tied into the virtues, and vices, of their frequent presentations of female characters. As Reynolds points out, an eighteenth century audience was quick 'to perceive the wit that might lie in a

²⁶¹ McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 38.

²⁶² Finucci, *The Manly Masquerade*, 229.

²⁶³ McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 43-44.

disjuncture between the real and the apparent and willing to play the game of cross-dressing'.²⁶⁴ I argue that the pleasure derived from the obvious artifice of gender play was also bound to the concept of feminine and masculine virtues being purposefully cross-cast. Goethe's comment on the pleasure derived from watching castrati is interesting because he directly addresses the obvious artifice of their cross-casting as the most engaging element of their performance.

I reflected on the reasons why these singers pleased me so greatly, and I think I have found it. In these representations, the concept of imitation and art was invariably more strongly felt, and through their able performance a sort of conscious illusion was produced. Thus a double pleasure given.²⁶⁵

The premise of my argument is that castrati were used as a theatrical double-entendre. Associated as they were with femininity, their purpose was to disrupt the concept of a character's heroism through the obvious juxtaposition of their emasculated bodies with the masculine values their roles sought to portray. Furthermore, the widespread use of castrato parts is indicative, I believe, of an era in music that sought to challenge its audience dramatically by pushing the boundaries of acceptability. If we are to accept that the discourse of human eroticism became a more central concern in the plotlines of opera during the seventeenth and eighteenth century, then the portrayal of human emotion, and how this is presented dramatically had to be considered.

Wendy Heller made an interesting observation in saying that 'most of the characters played by castrati were feminised either literally (by cross-dressing) or figuratively (by falling in love)'.²⁶⁶ Her point is a fascinating one, as it connects the concept of emotional vulnerability to the heroic protagonist who, through falling in love or being manipulated is forced to engage in female rhetoric, and thus,

²⁶⁴ Reynolds, 'Ruggiero's Deceptions, Cherubino's Distractions', 138.

²⁶⁵ Goethe, cited in Reynolds, 'Ruggiero's Deceptions, Cherubino's Distractions', 138.

²⁶⁶ Wendy Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence: Opera and Women's Voices in Seventeenth-Century Venice* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2003), 18.

emasculate themselves. A sample of some of the most famous heroic castrato roles is proof of this. In Handel's 1724 opera *Giulio Cesare* the role of Caesar was premiered by the castrato Senesino opposite soprano Francesca Cuzzoni in the role of Cleopatra. During the act two aria 'V'adoro pupille' Cleopatra, disguised as the character Lidia successfully seduces Caesar for both her own sexual gratification and the political advancement of her and her brother, the Egyptian King, Tolomeo. Incidentally Tolomeo is also a castrato role, premiered by Gaetano Berenstadt whose character is eventually killed by Sesto whilst trying to rape the character Cornelia, Sesto is a soprano *en travesti* role played by Margherita Durastanti. Each of the castrato protagonists, despite their social status, are emasculated, and in Tolomeo's case, killed, by their association with perceived feminine qualities. It is important to note however that Caesar's manipulation and eventual seduction at the hands of Cleopatra is also the sight of the most dramatic intensity of the opera.

Other such examples are the characters Nero and Ottone in Monteverdi's 1642 opera, *L'Incoronazione di Poppea*. The original featured Stefano Costa as Nero and Fritellino (though this is uncertain) as Ottone. The opera is famous for its inversion of moralistic behaviour, prompting Ellen Rosen to describe it as an 'extraordinary glorification of lust and ambition at the expense of reason and morality'.²⁶⁷ Central to this are the exploits of its two central male characters and the relationships they seek with Poppea, Nero's mistress, and his wife, Empress Ottavia, eventually cast aside and exiled in favour of Poppea. In *L'Incoronazione di Poppea* love not only has the capability to distort reason, it actually disrupts the patriarchal authority of its three main male leads promoting McClary to describe them as 'profoundly passive and impotent'.²⁶⁸ The eventual exile of Ottavia by Nero through the manipulation of Poppea, is a complete distortion of both gender and social hierarchy. Given Nero's position as Emperor and heroic

²⁶⁷ Ellen Rosand, 'L'Incoronazione di Poppea'. *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*. *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press. Accessed April 24 2016, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/O902316>.

²⁶⁸ McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 49.

protagonist his emasculation at the hands of a woman leave him with just the illusion of power and authority. The concept of the hero 'doomed to their undoing', as the quotation at the beginning of this section states is worthy of exploration. The tragic hero is a theatrical trope with routes in the earliest spoken theatre. Depictions of heroism are often articulated in conjunction with characteristic flaws, the purpose being to highlight a character's emotional vulnerability. The presence of the tragic hero is keenly felt in the castrato repertoire where, as discussed, the hero's feminisation enables the character to articulate a great range of human emotions, and thus, advance the drama of the opera. Catherine Clément summed this up eloquently when she wrote, 'for any individual, woman or man, to become the hero of an opera, he must in himself represent enough deviance and reckless power to create another, antithetical gathering around him. His story will be called fate, chance a curse, a conspiracy, a plot. There is no "normal" opera hero.'²⁶⁹

This argument is further strengthened, I believe, by the use of female singers to portray these roles. It shouldn't be forgotten that there was widespread interchangeability between castrati and women on stage. When Handel's 1720 opera *Radamisto* premiered in April of that year, he had always intended the role to go to the castrato Senesino. When he became unavailable Handel simply gave the role to the castrato Senesino. When he became unavailable Handel simply gave the role to the female soprano Margherita Durastanti instead, and used Senesino when he became available for the revival in the December. Women were also used as the hero even if the plot was further convoluted by their casting. Metastasio's 1737 opera *Achille in Sciro* was cast with Vittoria Tesi playing Achilles, the premise of the plot being Achilles escape from the harem at Scyros by disguising himself as a woman.²⁷⁰ Whilst the similar timbre of their voices will have enabled women to sing these roles with relative ease, the fact that women were able to sing on stage in most parts of Italy along with the abundance of castrati available

²⁶⁹ Clément, *Opera, Or the Undoing of Women*, 131.

²⁷⁰ Reynolds, 'Ruggiero's Deceptions, Cherubino's Distractions', 136.

meant that female singers did not need to function as substitutes for castrati.²⁷¹ In fact, the predilection to cross-cast is indicative of the rhetoric of the heroic male character being not only acceptable, but sought, from the mouth of a female singer. There is no evidence to suggest that where a castrato was unavailable the part would be transposed down an octave for a tenor or bass to perform in order to align the part with its masculine origins. The emasculated hero could be represented by a woman for two reasons. The association between a high voice and virility, so the sound could be emulated, and the feminine rhetorical devices used for castrato roles that meant that the flawed hero could be considered feminine enough that a woman could portray the part without disrupting the characteristics and virtues belonging to the role.

There is little doubt that the castrati's gender ambiguity was capitalised upon as both an illusory device through which to subvert gender hierarchy as well as a vehicle through which masculine emotion could be articulated. A further possible way in which castrati partook in artifice on stage is through the representation of power and class they were often associated with. Italian opera was both hugely popular with, and patronised by the ruling classes during the eighteenth century. With little competition from the spoken theatre, the opera house became a general meeting-place for dignitaries and the nobility, many of whom attended not for the quality of the art but for the purposes of socialising. Heriot cites Benedetto Marcello who explained 'they will come to the theatre every night, but will stay not more than a quarter of an hour, so they will take a dozen successive evenings to see the whole opera'.²⁷² Where opera was concerned with kings, the nobility or indeed classical myth (through which many of the hierarchical practices of absolute authority can be seen), opera served as entertainment to, and an extension of, the social world that patronised it. Where the main protagonist, for example Julius Caesar appears emasculated through feminine rhetoric this may be symbolic of a more generalised dissatisfaction with

²⁷¹ Reynolds, 'Ruggiero's Deceptions, Cherubino's Distractions', 137.

²⁷² Heriot, *The Castrati in Opera*, 72.

social structures. McClary cites the librettist for *L'Incoronazione di Poppea*, Gianfrancesco Busenello, a member of Accademia degli Incogniti, a group of intellectuals 'intolerant of all preconstituted authority'.²⁷³ Where an adversity to the power structures that enabled Busenello's work to exist is not only prevalent but outwardly acknowledged, it's possible that the emasculation of the characters played by castrati was a subtly levelled criticism at said power structures, veiled by the castrato's status as an emasculated man to begin with. As McClary writes, 'critiques, are safer, after all, when displaced onto marginalised others'.²⁷⁴ This is proven, to a certain extent, by the fact that castrati were never cast as kings.²⁷⁵ Whilst heroes could be associated with lack and emotional vulnerability, to level this accusation at a ruler was neither fitting nor wise. This infers that castrati were indeed used as a theatrical device through which emotional vulnerability and criticism were displayed. In a society governed by absolutist rules, the fact that castrati were not used to portray rulers is indicative of a consciousness that they were marginalised by associations with femininity and lack. It is on this premise that I argue that the figure of the castrato was so much more than just a pinnacle of singing capability, or indeed, a natural choice for a hero given the association with height and virility. As much as the drama itself, castrati were used to articulate wider cultural feelings on masculinity, power and displays of emotion. As I will discuss next, this is difficult to portray in modern revivals of Baroque opera because whilst these broad dramatic themes are still being explored in opera and theatre today, it does not exist in our own modern consciousness to associate them with a castrated man. The concept that the castrato figure distorts the original message behind their widespread theatrical use is the subject of the next chapter.

²⁷³ McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 51.

²⁷⁴ McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 51.

²⁷⁵ Rosand, *Opera in Seventeenth Century Venice*, 239.

The Castrato as a Theatrical Device

One of the most striking differences between the casting practices of the castrato's existence and ours is the regular use of gender bending as a dramatic construct. Not because it existed, as previously explored the concept of gender's mutability during the Baroque means that these constructions would have formed part of the dramatic arsenal on stage given the role of opera as a staged representation of its social world. However it is the reception of an opera's audience to these gendered constructs that can be most problematic because the tools with which these theatrical devices may be understood no longer form part of the collective consciousness of a modern audience. As Susan McClary urges us to remember, 'all modes of gender encoding are social constructs rather than universals'.²⁷⁶ This is particularly evident in the abundance of Baroque cross-dressing and castrato roles. The problem appears to be the difference between theatrical convention and device, where the passage of time and changing social attitudes has meant that cross-dressing on stage has shifted between these two concepts, resulting in the dramatic intentions of it being lost. A dramatic convention refers to the parts of a staged presentation that an audience is expected to overlook, owing to the discrepancy between their existence and the realism of the plot.²⁷⁷ This would be, for example, characters having private conversations on stage in the presence of an audience, or rooms having three walls.²⁷⁸ A theatrical convention is ordinarily not meant to draw attention to itself, but rather to exist unnoticed as the mechanisms through which the plot unfolds. A theatrical device however refers to an element introduced deliberately to the action of a play in order to draw the audience's attention towards a particular part or concept in the production. For a theatrical device to function successfully however it needs to deflect attention away from itself and onto the aspect of the production or concept it is trying to emphasise.²⁷⁹ Keyser makes the very valid

²⁷⁶ McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 37.

²⁷⁷ Keyser, 'Cross-Sexual Casting in Baroque Opera', 46.

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

point that historical dramatic conventions are problematic, because a convention only works if it exists in an audience's collective consciousness, is expected, and therefore does not draw attention to itself. Baroque opera is littered with elements that at one time existed as theatrical conventions, the da capo aria is one such example, that have become devices to later audiences because the intention behind them is no longer relevant or understood in modern performance practice.²⁸⁰ Castrato roles are uniquely problematic in this because two sets of historical theatrical conventions are at play in any one interpretation. As previously discussed, the first is the divorce between vocal timbre and a character's gender so that pitch hierarchy took precedence, the second being the gender fluidity of these roles, where sopranos and castrati were cast simultaneously to play both male and female characters.²⁸¹ These conventions, borne out of the prevailing attitudes towards sexuality, gender, class structures and constructs of power are too far removed from our own understanding of these concepts to be dramatically useful. Thus, gender ambiguity and vocal height disrupt, rather than aid, the plot of a Baroque opera for a modern audience. Instead we interact with these conventions as theatrical devices, from which assumptions about their motive may be drawn. This, I would argue, is the biggest hurdle facing contemporary casting practice of the castrato role. How does a director or performer accurately present the intentions and uses of a castrato to a modern audience when the theatrical conventions that accompany them now mean something different? The purpose of this essay so far has been to examine the broad and wide ranging elements that allowed the castrato phenomenon to thrive, and what this tells us about the construct of masculinity both on and off the stage during this era of time. The aim has been to construct from this, as fully as possible, the musical and theatrical purposes of the castrato in order to examine whether modern interpretations of these roles are an accurate presentation of all

²⁸⁰ Keyser, 'Cross-Sexual Casting in Baroque Opera', 47.

²⁸¹ Ibid.

that the castrato symbolised. The aim of this chapter is to explore how cross-casting and gender fluidity are addressed in modern productions.

The Castrato: Reimagined

‘What are these women doing in opera?’ Ralph P. Locke once asked, and specifically, what are they made to do, and do to us, as we sit and watch them perform?²⁸² Locke’s essay, a feminist critique of the role of women on stage is a field of academic research, fascinating and greatly studied, in response to a period in opera’s history where women were routinely stereotyped, diminished and often dead by the end of the night’s drama. I would not dare be so flippant and say that I could do justice to the vast complexity of this area of research, and nor would I wish to try, by mentioning it in passing in relation to the depiction of castrati. However, it is important to acknowledge that a woman’s role on the operatic stage went through a radical shift in the nineteenth century, where the ambiguity of cross-dressing, cross-casting and illusion were almost all but abandoned for the absolute insistence on gender opposition, men sang low, women sang high, and opera became, in Clément’s words, ‘the undoing of women’. I say almost abandoned, because *en travesti* roles did exist in the nineteenth century, for example Jemmy in Rossini’s *Guillaume Tell* from 1829, Romeo from Bellini’s 1830 opera, *I Capuleti e i Montecchi*, the 1893 opera *Hänsel und Gretel* by Humperdinck, with Hänsel cast as a mezzo, and of course Octavian from Strauss’s *Der Rosenkavalier*, to name but a few. Though the nineteenth century *en travesti* tradition bares some link to the cross-dressing hey-day of the early Baroque, the roles had shifted. They are not, in Reynold’s words, truly ‘heroic, they are young men or boys, and they are very often foolish, or even portrayed as idiots’.²⁸³ Nobility and heroism, however diminished those roles may have been, were no longer the remit of female singers. The resurgence of Baroque opera in the twentieth century has been oddly jarring to the experience of women on the operatic stage. Gender binary has become such an entrenched concept in both society and in staged depictions of it that a modern audience has had to re-learn

²⁸² Ralph P. Locke, ‘What are these Women doing in Opera?’, in *En Travesti: Women, Gender Subversion, Opera*, 59.

²⁸³ Reynolds, ‘Ruggiero’s Deceptions, Cherubino’s Distractions’, 135.

the principles of pitch hierarchy and cross-dressing in the presentation of authority and power. Suddenly women, and mezzo-sopranos specifically, were tasked with depicting a different kind of masculinity. The most famous trouser role in the repertory is Cherubino from Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro*, which heralds from the page boy *en travesti* tradition (think Sesto from *Giulio Cesare*). He partakes in all the theatrical conventions one would expect from a cross-cast role, disguise, gender play and tease, anarchically disrupting the social order.²⁸⁴ Yet there is a crucial difference, in the construction of Cherubino's gender 'whatever the dramatic personae might say, [he] is a girl in disguise, and the audience is never allowed to forget that'.²⁸⁵ The principles of cross-dressing had fundamentally changed. Any form of staged gender ambiguity was always a woman dressed as a man, (and sometimes) disguised as a woman. In an odd way this gender subversion sought to achieve everything the castrato had done before them by disrupting the masculinity and power of the character being portrayed, but the nineteenth century chose to use a woman's objectified body, rather than a castrato, as the vehicle through which this message was relayed.

It is through this history that we arrive in the mid-twentieth century, where the historically informed performance movement paved the way for Baroque opera, and therefore the castrato, to be explored and enjoyed by modern audiences. This was widely heralded as a great opportunity for mezzo-sopranos, Clément rejoices in their 'heavenly ambiguities'²⁸⁶ whilst Margaret Reynolds urges the mezzo to 'praise the day that he stopped being made'.²⁸⁷ There is, of course, a catch. Castrati were men, and where they played the heroic *primo uomo* part, their ambiguity was presented through different, and previously discussed, variations on gender play. Then there is the countertenor, the voice made famous by the likes of Alfred Deller and Russell Oberlin, who also sought to tap into the large bank of repertoire for high male voice that had suddenly made a resurgence

²⁸⁴ Reynolds, 'Ruggiero's Deceptions, Cherubino's Distractions', 141.

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

²⁸⁶ Clément, *Opera, Or the Undoing of Women*, 71.

²⁸⁷ Reynolds, 'Ruggiero's Deceptions, Cherubino's Distractions', 133

in popularity. Originally derived from the post-war early music movement, the countertenor voice we know today was born out of the English church music tradition and made popular in opera through their depictions of castrato roles.²⁸⁸

It is only natural that as the popularity of the early music revival grew, so too did the appearance of castrati in contemporary culture. In 1995 the film *Farinelli* was released to great critical acclaim, winning a Golden Globe award in 1995 under the submission of 'Best Foreign Language Film' and nominated for an Academy Award in the same category.²⁸⁹ Directed by Gérard Corbiau and starring Stefano Dionisi as Farinelli, the story is a biographical account (though largely historically inaccurate) of his life, and most specifically, the relationship between Farinelli and his brother, the composer Riccardo Broschi. The film is a seminal part of the modern discourse on castrati, bringing the concept of their existence off the stage of an opera house to a far wider audience. The film is important for introducing two important concepts to the study of castrati. The first is the possibility that the voice of a castrato could be constructed by combining a mezzo soprano and countertenor together electronically. For the purposes of Farinelli's singing voice, the Polish soprano Ewa Malas-Godlewska and American countertenor Derek Lee Ragin were separately recorded and their voices merged digitally in order to create something that might audibly represent the castrato voice.²⁹⁰ The second, and perhaps greater point, is the exploration of Farinelli's masculinity throughout the course of the film. The film is edited in such a way that it juxtaposes Farinelli's virile, charismatic exploits with constant reminders to the audience of his true lack of sexual potency. As Alan Sikes writes, 'the famed castrato appears throughout the film as a tortured figure obsessed with his lost manhood'.²⁹¹ Corbiau makes much of Farinelli's sexual desirability, and the film in

²⁸⁸ DeMarco, 'The Fact of the Castrato and the Myth of the Countertenor', 176.

²⁸⁹ Oscars Website, Accessed 25 October 2016, <http://www.oscars.org/oscars/ceremonies/1995>

²⁹⁰ Bernheimer, Martin. 'Commentary : The Castrato Sound: Real and Imagined', *Los Angeles Times*, April 2 1995, Accessed 25 October 2016, http://articles.latimes.com/1995-04-02/entertainment/ca-50067_1_male-soprano

²⁹¹ Sikes, Alan. *Representation and Identity from Versailles to the Present: The Performing Subject*. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 58.

punctuated with scenes of a sexual nature. However, much is made of the duality of Farinelli's sexuality. On the one hand, his voice and star quality are part of his deep desirability, and yet, the operation that brought about that which makes him desirable has also robbed him of his potency. In all Farinelli's sexual exploits, his brother Riccardo completes the sexual act because Farinelli can't. At one point, the character Margareth mocks him, proclaiming after having slept together that 'last night I had my first musical orgasm'. She goes on to ask, 'do you need your brother? Can you come despite what they took from you?'²⁹² In the course of the film it transpires that it was his brother who castrated him, thus perpetuating the cycle of his lack. It was his brother who removed his potency, and his brother sexually reclaims it for himself. The film's legacy is an important one in bringing the concept of the confused sexuality and masculinity to a modern audience. Dionisi's depiction of Farinelli is one of a masculine, deeply sexual being frustrated and hampered by that which makes him so interesting. It is a powerful message, and one that has undoubtedly informed the conscious depictions of these roles onstage by singers and directors alike. The concept of a tortured, emasculated demi-vir is revisited in the portrayals of Julius Caesar later in this chapter.

So revivals of Baroque opera are depicted by either a mezzo-soprano or countertenor where a castrato part needs to be cast, and these two groups of singers compete for largely the same roles in early opera. It would be tempting, and highly pleasing, to say that this approach to casting, where the best voice for the job is hired irrespective of their gender emulates the casting principles of the castrato's era. Whilst it is common to find both mezzos and countertenors in the same production, the concept of equality in casting these roles is neither possible, nor useful, if the true message behind the castrato is to be relayed. Below I offer some of the considerations, and pitfalls, that modern casting needs to consider in the decision to cast a man or woman in a castrato role.

²⁹² Youtube, 'Farinelli Film', Access October 19 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CmCPiGeHCM>

The castrato is in the most literal sense a Baroque construction of a diminished man, drawn from the era's attitudes towards gender hierarchy and a wider cultural phenomenon of subverting traditional notions of authority and constructs of power. The castrato was able to embody this through the juxtaposition of their high voice with emasculated, but crucially male bodies to the delight of an audience well versed in the nuances of theatrical cross-casting. Whilst mezzo-sopranos have been subject to cross-casting, and thus, a modern audience is able to recognise her presence on stage *en travesti* as a standard, operatic theatrical convention, men are almost never cross-cast outside of early opera. When a countertenor is cast as a castrato he may be more physically aligned to the castrato's biological sex, but the emasculation of castration and the androgynous form from which audiences took delight will not be realised through his physical casting. It all depends to some extent, on dramatic intention. It is possible to argue that if a director wanted to use the physical androgyny of the castrato character to dramatic effect, or indeed, to use the singer's body as a theatrical device with which to draw the audience's attention to gender constructs within the performance, a mezzo-soprano would be a more obvious choice. By choosing a countertenor, the nuances of gender play or the 'feminisation' of the emasculated hero must be articulated in other ways. This is due in part to a modern audience's familiarity with the concept of gender play in opera and therefore, its lack of usefulness as a shocking or visually engaging dramatic construct. Whilst a director may choose to make a statement regarding gender constructs on stage depending on the biological sex of the singer engaged in the role, gender bending itself is a common theatrical trope. This was true of the heyday of the castrati, however an important distinction should be made at this juncture. Cross-dressing onstage, contemporary to the castrati's existence, held broadly recognisable, gendered connotations. The association between height and virility, or indeed the use of the tenor to represent an older female character are two such examples born out of strict societal understandings about gender roles in life, and therefore the distortion/representation of these on stage. Gender-

bending in a modern theatrical context is born less out of these strict gender stereotypes, but rather a move towards greater fluidity in sex/gender constructs in real life. Thus, gender-bending is less likely to be noticed by a modern audience for hidden or subversive connotations, but rather seen as another theatrical tool with which the drama is portrayed. In simple terms, a modern audience is less likely to notice a cross-dressed singer.

The other consideration is the voice, its use and sound and its association with virility. The counter-tenor is naturally disadvantaged owing to its still (relatively) new widespread use in opera, so the sound itself is both strange and rare for audiences more accustomed to more traditional pitch/gender associations. Whilst the pitch remains the same for mezzo-sopranos, this correlates to their gender, so despite virility and height needing to be a learnt relationship to an audience, the use of a countertenor may distort this further by adding another layer of gender ambiguity. As Reynolds points out, 'the use of the castrato sound pointed away from the ordinary meanings of the voice, which lie in the message, and directed the listening ear to the peculiarities of the voice itself'.²⁹³ This vocal cross-casting forces an audience to interact with the voice as more than a medium through which the text of a work is delivered, but to confront the 'sound' of the voice and its associated connotations. To a certain extent the countertenor offers a solution to this problem, as the high male voice so purposefully distorts pitch/gender association that it appears 'asexual' and 'defamiliarising', and in Patricia Pulham's words, 'more of a musical instrument than a voice at all'.²⁹⁴ Neither solution is entirely satisfactory. One of the biggest challenges is balancing the expected 'sound' of the voice with the dramatic intentions of the opera. As discussed in the chapter on voice, it is possible to argue that a mezzo-soprano is more vocally suited to the castrato repertoire than a countertenor singing in falsetto would be. Laura De Marco, an avid exponent of the use of mezzo-

²⁹³ Reynolds, 'Ruggiero's Deceptions, Cherubino's Distractions', 137

²⁹⁴ Patricia Pulham, 'The Castrato and the Cry in Vernon Lee's Wicked Voices', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (2002), Cambridge University Press, 428.

sopranos over a counter-tenor believes that a counter-tenor, through the use of falsetto can never sound heroic, and thus falsifies (her word) the sentiment the sound of the voice tries to convey.²⁹⁵ Once again, this is a matter of theatrical intention and where the perceived message in the voice lies. Neither is there a correct answer, but a number of vocal casting considerations leading to different outcomes. The first is to try and vocally reconstruct the castrato sound so that the audio experience for the audience emulates the perceived notion of the castrato voice. Given the second chapter's exploration into timbre, pitch and register, a mezzo-soprano is, in my opinion, a better vocal fit. The second is the use of the voice to draw attention to the castrato's ambiguous nature. As an audience is far more accustomed to a mezzo-soprano's voice in opera and her pitch correlates to her gender, casting a counter-tenor is a more useful dramatic and musical tool through which to convey this message. The third possibility is to state, as David Schulenberg does, that the heroism of leading male figures is expressed in Baroque opera by virtuosity.²⁹⁶ If one chooses to align ability to dominance and authority, then the possibility of total gender fluidity in casting based on merit is once again opened up. The message becomes a singer's voice, distilling the concept of a singer's authority on stage from any notion of gender.

The issue of course is that whilst these theories, born of academic research and consideration are useful to proffer, their practical application has a different meaning altogether. Opera is a live art form, the stories it tells are inextricably bound to the interpretations of its singers and what they bring physically, emotionally and vocally to a role. It is impossible to divorce the singer from the character. Since Moreschi's death in 1922, and in reality long before that as gender constructs became realigned to binary difference, cross-casting has not been the product of a period in which sexual ambiguity was actively encouraged, but rather, formed, and thus presented in opposition to a singer's gender. Gender binary has so distorted the fluidity of the Baroque that it is impossible to present the

²⁹⁵ DeMarco, 'The Fact of the Castrato and the Myth of the Countertenor', 181.

²⁹⁶ Freitas 'The Eroticism of Emasculation', 197.

diminished masculinity the castrato embodied without drawing on modern delineations of masculine and feminine. When Paul Henry Lang said there can be no drama without the contrast between men and women, what he really meant was that we cannot understand the social world the castrato inhabited without presenting it through ours. If the castrato character is a liminal, sexually ambiguous character to a modern audience, this needs to be presented through a counter-tenor's feminisation, or a mezzo-soprano as convincingly masculine enough for there to be no doubt of the sex she is trying to portray. In modern casting we must make a choice, do you use a counter-tenor, and allow the audience to imagine the gender play through his voice, or do you use a mezzo-soprano, whose body is an obvious reminder of her masculine lack, and then she 'acts' out maleness? Both of course are possible, is one more preferable than the other is the question that remains.

Though it might seem converse, I believe that a mezzo-soprano is better able to represent the castrato's diminished masculinity than a counter-tenor can. For all of the reasons I have offered, her voice, her body, the association between the mezzo and *en travesti* roles and the obvious use of a woman to play a man, and thus, the immediacy of the role's gender ambiguity. There is one final reason, one that a counter-tenor cannot help. They have always known what it is to be masculine, so they cannot 'construct' masculinity into their performance. The castrato is, and always was, a construction of gender, taking from both male and female qualities and existing on a scale between the two. A woman *en travesti* partakes in a form of drag, but drag is self-referencing, relying on clearly defined gender roles that highlight the behaviour of an individual as atypical of social expectations of his or her gender. Where a counter-tenor is playing a diminished man the gender construct is too closely aligned to his own gender identity for him to 'act'. A mezzo can play at being a man precisely because she is not.

I return to Ralph Locke's original question, 'what are these women doing in opera?', and I ask, what are these men doing instead? What purpose do they

serve, musically and dramatically, that enhance the plot? Margaret Reynolds makes an interesting observation when she says, ‘mezzos are girls, and the castrato roles were made for men, and not all ages and cultures want to play about with gender, nor do they all have the same idea of gender hierarchy (or its absence)’.²⁹⁷ Counter-tenors are useful in representing maleness when gender ambiguity is not the primary artistic concern of the staging or interpretation of the role.

Central to this argument is the concept that a director, and therefore audience, will interact differently to a castrato’s character depending on the gender of the singer performing. A mezzo-soprano and counter-tenor serve different theatrical functions because gender binary has so instilled the concept of difference that any interaction with the character will be judged on the premise of the singer’s original gender. To explore this I will use two different productions of Handel’s 1724 opera *Giulio Cesare in Egitto*, one in which the mezzo-soprano Sarah Connolly is cast as Caesar, and the other in which the title role is played by counter-tenor Lawrence Zazzo. Both are English productions from the last decade, so the way in which the singers, director and production interact with gender should be relevant to the argument. I aim to compare and contrast presentations of masculinity in each production for variances towards the gender of the performer.

Giulio Cesare and Difference

Handel’s opera *Giulio Cesare in Egitto* is one of the most popular Baroque operas staged today. Its resurgence in popularity is relatively recent given its age, but nevertheless, it has entered the (early) operatic canon and continues to be revived. In the last two years alone one hundred and thirty six performances have taken place from nineteen separate productions.²⁹⁸ Compared to another of Handel’s popular operas, *Rinaldo*, of which seventy-one performances from sixteen

²⁹⁷ Reynolds, ‘Ruggiero’s Deceptions, Cherubino’s Distractions’, 133.

²⁹⁸ Operabase. Accessed June 6, 2016,

<http://operabase.com/oplist.cgi?id=none&lang=en&is=julius+caesar&by=&loc=&stype=abs&sd=1&sm=1&sy=2014&etype=abs&ed=&em=&ey=>

productions have taken place within the same time frame, *Giulio Cesare* is a popular choice of both fans and producers of Baroque opera.²⁹⁹

As late as 1969 the opera was being performed and recorded with the character of Caesar transposed down the octave in order to negate his gender ambiguity and restore the male/female difference between Caesar and Cleopatra. Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau was the last to record the role as a baritone, conducted under Karl Richter's baton. In 1984 a seminal operatic production took place at English National Opera under Charles Mackerras. John Copley directed a lavish, classical style production with Janet Baker in title role and James Bowman as Tolomeo.³⁰⁰ The set design might not have been ground-breaking, but the staging intentions were. Order or indeed, gender-disorder, was restored once again to Handel's opera, and Caesar was played by a woman. The opera provides an interesting backdrop from which to research the topic of gender presentation. The role of Caesar, originally a castrato part is romantically connected to the soprano Cleopatra for whom he is figuratively emasculated through his love for her. Secondary gender play takes place in the form of the character Tolomeo, originally a castrato role, and the male character of Sesto, a soprano *en travesti*. Though it hails from the opera seria tradition, gender tease and questions of sexuality are possible and encouraged by Handel's casting of the main characters. This exploration is concerned with how masculinity is presented in a modern production compared with the singer's gender. We begin with Sarah Connolly in Glyndebourne's 2005 production.

Connolly is a mezzo-soprano who has become synonymous with *en travesti* roles. Her casting in the 2005 production at Glyndebourne Opera House was one of a string of engagements in which she was cast in a castrato role after a breakthrough in 2003 at English National Opera as *Xerxes* under Nicholas

²⁹⁹ Operabase. Accessed June 6, 2016, <http://operabase.com/oplist.cgi?id=none&lang=en&is=rinaldo&by=&loc=&stype=abs&sd=1&sm=1&sy=2014&etype=abs&ed=&em=&ey=>

³⁰⁰ Reynolds, 'Ruggiero's Deceptions, Cherubino's Distractions', 146.

Hytner.³⁰¹ This production was conducted by William Christie and directed by David McVicar, with the cast as follows:

Cast List: Glyndebourne³⁰²

Cesare: Sarah Connolly

Sesto: Angelika Kirchschrager

Cleopatra: Danielle de Niese

Tolomeo: Christophe Dumaux

Cornelia: Patricia Bardon

Achilla: Christopher Maltman

Nireno: Rachid Ben Abdeslam

This aesthetics of this production were 1920's British post-colonial style, fading and slightly absurd, as British military uniform met with fez adorned servants and Connolly dressed as the Emperor. McVicar's use of the political landscape of a dying British Empire is both visually stimulating and thought provoking, as the production sweeps effortlessly between the 'unsteady amalgam of political psychodrama and Bollywood musical'.³⁰³ The deliberate adoption of orientalism, whilst providing a wealth of aesthetic opportunities in the design of the production, serves an important theatrical purpose that is echoed in the 2012 English National Opera staging as well. British Imperialism, its political and social connotations, its historical reach and wide-ranging consequences on our own modern understanding of the world, and indeed, the cultural influences that it brought about are not so far removed from modern collective understanding that its adoption as a theatrical backdrop would not have some kind of political or

³⁰¹ Jeal, Erica. 'Who Wears the Trousers?', *The Guardian*, Oct 10 2008. Accessed June 8 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2008/oct/10/classicalmusicandopera>

³⁰² Royal Opera House Website, Accessed June 6 2016, <http://www.roh.org.uk/products/handel-giulio-cesare-dvd-glyndebourne>

³⁰³ Kettle, Martin. 'Giulio Cesare', *The Guardian*, May 25 2009. Accessed October 17 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2005/jul/05/classicalmusicandopera>

emotive charge for its audience. *Giulio Cesare*, written by a German Handel and presented in Italian was nevertheless an ‘English’ opera, first performed at The King’s Theatre in Haymarket, London, in 1724. Updating the staging to a post-colonial world is an interesting, self-referencing dramatic tool that purposefully engages the audience in the political and psychological reach of the production. The first is to retain the link between the opera’s origins as a representation of history and foreign cultures through the prism of an English audience’s viewpoint, the second is to present the dramatic discourse of the production in such a way that the audience is reminded of the jarring juxtaposition of a history that is to some politicised, uncomfortable and still relevant in the modern world, but in these productions presented as a theatrical tool for entertainment. When the Glyndebourne production first appeared in 2005, Martin Kettle described its reception as ‘inspirational’, given what he believed to be the immediacy of its ‘echoes of the Iraq war’.³⁰⁴ That elements of a production’s staging and setting could be translated into the contemporary political life of its audience is a testament to the credulity of its characterisation and the success of the production’s setting in engaging its audience as a believable theatrical tool. There is little doubt that both McVicar and Keegan-Dolan would have been aware that a production that references colonialism may not always be well received, so the adoption of the absurder elements in each production (Bollywood dances routines in McVicar’s against a stiff, classically represented Caesar, and a dead giraffe’s tongue and crocodile centre-stage make an appearance in the ENO production) serve as an important reminder that these productions are not glorifications of this history, but rather, a tool with which to highlight the emotional and political lives of its characters instead. Despite the seriousness of the plot line, both productions choose to use elements of their staging to absurd, comedic effect. How this staging impacts upon the representation of Caesar in these productions, and the variances between his portrayal based upon the gender of the performer

³⁰⁴ Ashley, Tim. ‘Giulio Cesare’, *The Guardian*, July 5 2005. Accessed October 17 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2005/jul/05/classicalmusicandopera>

is the topic of the rest of this chapter. If one chooses to adopt this reading in examining both productions, then the representation of masculinity each production offers is fascinating and important because the similarity in their contextual settings points at something other in highlighting how gender is portrayed in *Giulio Cesare*.

In McVicar's Glyndebourne production, Connolly is by design a masculine Caesar, whose portrayal of the role is one of strength and heroism without any reference to her own femininity. Of playing the role she said, 'When playing Giulio Cesare, I make every effort to make him a powerful intelligent military commander, who is also urbane, worldly and ruthless. Making him look like a girl would serve no purpose'.³⁰⁵ For Connolly, her portrayal is one of the masculine ideal, the comedic elements of gender play will need to be found elsewhere. It is little wonder that reviews of her portrayal praised her mastery of 'Caesar's physicality', Connolly is able to depict masculinity through her movements and body language with ease and certainty.³⁰⁶ Connolly's interpretation is a serious one, and I would argue that the gender play in this production happens through other characters' interactions with Caesar.

³⁰⁵ Rheingold, Accessed June 8 2016, <http://www.rhinegold.co.uk/trouser-roles-en-travesti/>

³⁰⁶ Digital Theatre, Accessed June 8 2016, <http://www.digitaltheatre.com/production/details/handel-giulio-cesare-glyndebourne/overview#overview>

One of the most interesting gender interactions is the physical difference between Sarah Connolly and Danielle de Niese in the role of Cleopatra, where de Niese's obvious femininity is in extreme contrast to the characterisation of the production's hyper-masculine Caesar. Though this is a woman playing a man in love with a woman, the characters feel as though they are partaking fully in the modern understanding of male/female sexual difference. Take, for example, the production still below.³⁰⁸ De Niese is described by one critic of the production as 'indecently well-endowed with looks, personality and star quality'. Her obvious beauty and femininity are marked and used to full effect in order that Cleopatra and Caesar are physically different, even if the timbre of their voices doesn't immediately set them apart.



³⁰⁸ Sarah Connolly and Daniele de Niese, Photo. Accessed June 9 2016, <http://www.medici.tv/mobile/giulio-cesare-haendel-david-mcvicar-glyndebourne-festival>

How the relationship between Caesar and Cleopatra is perceived by the audience where both performers are women is an important one to explore. There is a substantial body of academic discourse on the topic of lesbianism in *en travesti* casting, and whether the intentional cross-casting of a woman as a man should be viewed as erotic, implicit or otherwise, referred to by Corinne E. Blackmer and Patricia Juliana Smith as ‘the eloquent interplay of erotically charged identification and difference’.³⁰⁹ Since the revival of Baroque opera a number of productions have made use of female cross-casting in order to add a secondary sexual reading to a production, or at least, to revel in the sexual ambiguity of the performers, their characters, and the complicated sexuality therefore represented on stage. On the topic of lesbian opera spectatorship, Margaret Reynolds asks ‘where else can you see two women making love in a public place?’³¹⁰ Her point is a valid one, especially given the overt sexuality in the relationship between Caesar and Cleopatra, in the aria ‘V’adoro pupille’ Cleopatra sings of her plan to seduce Caesar from afar. In the McVicar production a scantily dressed De Niese teases Connolly during a bedroom scene in exactly the manor Reynolds describes.³¹¹



³⁰⁹ ed. Corinne E. Blackmer and Patricia Juliana Smith, *En Travesti: Women, Gender Subversion, Opera*, 5.

³¹⁰ Reynolds, ‘Ruggiero’s Deceptions, Cherubino’s Distractions’, 133.

³¹¹ Sarah Connolly and Daniele de Niese, Photo. Musical Criticism Website. Accessed 21 October 2016, <http://www.musicalcriticism.com/opera/gly-cesare-0509.shtml>

However, two important points must be made at this juncture. The first is this, the erotic gender tease Reynolds refers to and from which a lesbian reading may be conferred is abundant in modern operatic productions, but only when the gender of the performer (i.e, a woman) is referred to, even if she is cast in a masculine role. *En travesti* roles that have become synonymous with this sort of gender tease are self-referencing as being obviously at odds with the gender the singer is tasked to portray. Take the character of Cherubino from *Le nozze di Figaro* or Octavian from *Der Rosenkavalier*. Both characters are sexualised by literally undressing (Cherubino), or by the inference of the bed scene at the beginning of Act One in *Der Rosenkavalier*. Neither Mozart or Strauss were blind to the obviously tantalising, and potentially scandalous nature of a real woman, dressed (or undressed) as a man and thus revealing her secret to a willing audience would be. This sort of gender play serves an important theatrical purpose, because in drawing attention towards the gender ambiguity taking place, the *en travesti* character becomes sexualised not as a man, but as the woman the audience really know ‘him’ to be. Characters like Cherubino are never truly meant to be masculine, that would ruin the fun, but characters like Caesar are. When Catherine Clément described Octavian and Cherubino as containing ‘a certain feminine weakness in the voices of mezzo-sopranos disguised as young boys’ she is referring to the association with sexuality, emotion (and thus by association, youth) that became synonymous with feminine rhetoric.³¹³ Caesar of course is fundamentally a castrato character, a masculine, heroic role that hails from a very different era in *en travesti* casting. Both McVicar and Connolly are, I believe, aware of this subtle but important distinction. As a woman playing Caesar, Connolly cannot emphasise Caesar’s sexuality without drawing attention to her own. By depicting Caesar in such a masculine way, Connolly’s portrayal is not interrupted by association to the later *en travesti* tradition that references the mezzo’s gender.

³¹³ Clément, *Opera, Or the Undoing of Women*, 76.

The second point is by extension, I believe, proof of the first. As Connolly's portrayal is not sexualised, De Niese as Cleopatra is abundantly so. In order for the spectator to find the relationship both interesting and believable, De Niese embodies femininity, sexuality and tease, traits continually remarked upon in her portrayal of the role. Eleven years after premiering the role at Glyndebourne she is described as having put 'the sex into Sussex' in one *Telegraph* article by Louise Carpenter.³¹⁴ I have no interest in diminishing De Niese's performance or (broadly) highly praised critical reception, it is clear that her representation of Cleopatra was artful, skilled and engaging. However, it is important to consider whether the reception of her characterisation, and specifically, the sexualisation of her in it, was influenced was Connolly's lack of feminine sexuality in her own performance.

Another important distinction is how Connolly's Caesar is flanked by Christophe Dumaux as Tolomeo and Rachid Ben Abdeslam as Nireno. Tolomeo is Cleopatra's brother, a boy king and Caesar's enemy. Nireno is servant to Cleopatra and Tolomeo, and though this role does not occupy the same social standing of that of his masters his association with royalty and closeness to Tolomeo specifically is a possible explanation for his vocal casting as a castrato, suggesting relative importance in the hierarchy of the opera's male characters. Crucially, both of these roles were written for alto castratos and, as such, were intended to occupy the same vocal and physical casting as that of Caesar himself. In Handel's version of this story, Tolomeo is cruel, powerful, subject to multiple attempts on his life, and meets his fate when the character Sesto discovers him raping Cornelia. The opera concludes with a celebration of Tolomeo's death, an end to his tyranny in Egypt, and the subsequent coronation of Cleopatra as queen, with Caesar now her lover. This is an important contextualisation, because the

³¹⁴ Carpenter, Louise. 'Danielle de Niese: the Diva who put Sex into Sussex', *The Telegraph*, June 18 2016. Accessed 20 October 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/opera/what-to-see/danielle-de-niese-the-diva-who-put-the-sex-into-sussex/>

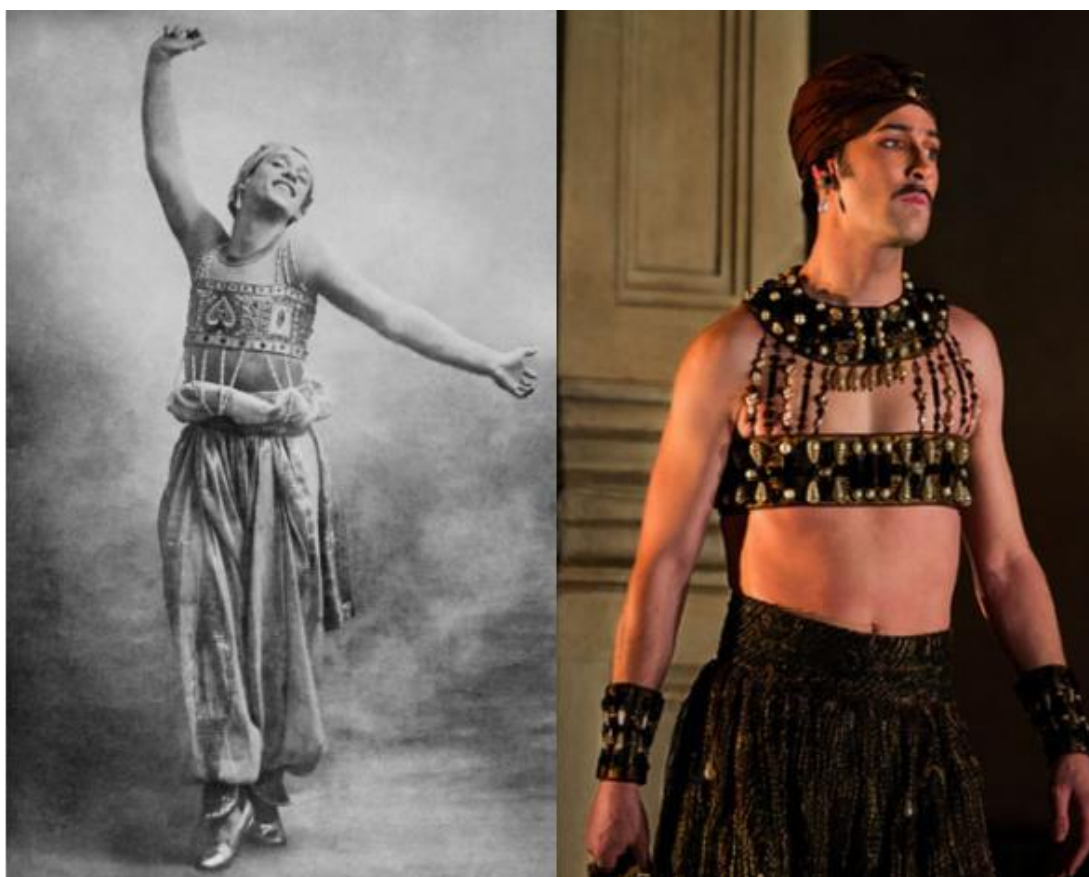
presentation of his character in the McVicar production is fundamentally at odds with his intended characterisation as a powerful, tyrannical ruler.

In direct contrast to Connolly's presentation of masculinity is Christophe Dumaux's overtly camp, emasculated Tolomeo. The contrast between their physicality on stage is best presented through the aria 'va tacito e nascosto', where Caesar and Tolomeo partake in a choreographed dance and Caesar asserts his dominance through the assured slowness of his movements.³¹⁵ Despite Connolly's assured masculinity, her character and the serious portrayal of it appears undermined by the obvious effeminacy of the other male characters around her. In order to portray Caesar seriously, it is as though the other characters must diminish this through their own gender play. In response to the overt masculinity of Connolly, the other men become feminised. Ryan Koons, writing on the *Ethnomusicology Review* website presents the argument that Tolomeo and Nireno are gay in this particular production.³¹⁶ He cites the similarity between the costume worn by Dumaux in the act 2, scene 30 arioso 'Belle dee di questo core' (as Tolomeo prepares to enter his harem) to that worn by Vaslav Nijinsky, queer choreographer for *Les Ballet Russes* in their famous 1910 production of *Scheherazade*.³¹⁷

³¹⁵ Youtube Video, Accessed 10 June 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2CJXIJCJSH4>

³¹⁶ Koons, Ryan. 'Through the Lens of a Baroque Opera: Gender/Sexuality Then and Now', *Ethnomusicology Review Website, Sounding Board*, Accessed 23 October 2016, <http://ethnomusicologyreview.ucla.edu/content/through-lens-baroque-opera-gendersexuality-then-and-now>

³¹⁷ Ibid.



The above side by side comparison shows the similarity between the costume worn by Dumaux and Nijinsky, evidence of a reference, Koons believes, to Tolomeo's intended sexuality in this production. Whether one chooses to accept this reading of Dumeux's characterisation, both his physicality and dress are feminised, he is not the tyrannical leader, or 'masculine' match, to Connolly's Caesar. If Tolomeo is meant to be the aggressor, and a masculine counterpart to Caesar, by presenting him in an emasculated way could be viewed as undermining Connolly's masculine characterisation. If the other male characters subvert their masculinity by presenting it in comical ways, the purposeful act of

³¹⁸ Koons, Ryan. 'Through the Lens of a Baroque Opera: Gender/Sexuality Then and Now', *Ethnomusicology Review Website, Sounding Board*, Accessed 23 October 2016, <http://ethnomusicologyreview.ucla.edu/content/through-lens-baroque-opera-gendersexuality-then-and-now>

'maleness' in Connolly's character is made ridiculous by the 'true' men in the cast undermining this gender ideal.

At this juncture it is important to proffer why McVicar may have chosen to present these characters in this way. Given this thesis' previous exploration on the presentation of masculine lack through castrati roles, it is possible that he wanted to portray Caesar as a man who is emasculated through the choices he makes and people he is associated with. However, in casting a woman to play the role of Caesar, it is possible that he did not want to present Tolomeo in a way that could be perceived as being dominant over Caesar, for fear that this may be viewed as either gender stereotyping, sexist, or both. It may also, in turn, have unhelpfully referenced the mezzo-soprano's gender. Perhaps, in casting a woman, Caesar's masculinity is called into question not through a forceful or dominant Tolomeo, but through association with the foibles of those he associates with. In this way, undermining Caesar's masculinity is asserted passively through characterisation and staging of the opera.

It is possible to argue that this is in direct contradiction to the 2012 English National Opera production in which Lawrence Zazzo took on the title role. Directed by choreographer Michael Keegan-Dolan. In a similar way to Glyndebourne, the production incorporated dance and elements of the absurd to heighten the theatrical experience. This was done by removing the recitative and the use of the Beast Dance Theatre Company in conjunction with the singers on stage. Keegan-Dolan introduces his own gender play into this casting, by turning the soprano *en travesti* role of Sesto into a female character, the decision, he explained in the programme notes, was taken for dramatic interest.³¹⁹ The cast list was as follows:

³¹⁹ Karlin, David. 'ENO's Julius Caesar in Egypt', *One Stop Arts Website*, Accessed 24 October 2016, <http://onestoparts.com/review-eno-julius-caesar>

Cast List: English National Opera³²⁰

Julius Caesar – Lawrence Zazzo

Cleopatra – Anna Christy

Cornelia – Patricia Bardon

Sesto – Daniela Mack

Tolomeo – Tim Mead

Achillas – Andrew Craig Brown

Curio – George Humphreys

Nirenus – James Laing

It is clear from this production that despite contextual similarities with McVicar's setting, the set is, by design, realised in a far more abstract way. Of his approach to directing Keegan-Dolan wrote, 'actions speak louder than words, and images speak a thousand words'.³²¹ This is not a production that relies upon realism to tell this story of Caesar. A troop of dancers articulate the narrative in place of recitative, the effect is a visually stimulating, kinetic production, however it also has the effect of drawing attention away from the plot and onto the abstract visuals. It is interesting to note that McVicar's production also makes use of dance, yet the ENO production does not involve the singers themselves dancing, rather removes it from the drama occurring on stage and uses dance to tell a separate, abstract story. This is possibly why critics who had widely praised the use of Bollywood dance at Glyndebourne were so scathing of it at ENO.

As previously mentioned, the staging itself makes use of large, bloodied animals whose bodies appear in various capacities on stage throughout the course

³²⁰ Wordpress Website, Accessed 24 October 2016, <https://lietofinelondon.wordpress.com/2012/10/06/dancers-in-the-dark/>

³²¹ Karlin, David. 'ENO's Julius Caesar in Egypt', *One Stop Arts Website*, Accessed 24 October 2016, <http://onestoparts.com/review-eno-julius-caesar>

of the opera. Whilst this is a useful, if not flagrant and slightly coarse way of setting the production in some sort of colonial game reserve, it also has the effect of infantilising the plot. In contrast to the animals the singers appear small and almost childlike in scale, whilst the absurdity of the animal's size and use in the dramatic narrative has the distinct feel of children at play. Below are two such photographic examples taken from the production.

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³²² Jack-Corbis, Robbie. September 28, 2012. Ghetty Images, English National Opera, London. Accessed 24 October, 2016. <http://www.gettyimages.co.uk/photos/michael-keegan-dolan?excludenudity=true&mediatype=photography&phrase=michael%20keegan%20dolan&sort=mostpopular>

³²³ Ibid.

Against this backdrop it is important distinguish how this depiction of Caesar is different. Where Connolly embodied her masculine act, Lawrence Zazzo doesn't need to. His Caesar can be more subtle, more playful, less virile, precisely because he has nothing to prove in a production where the aesthetics do much to call into question the validity of the drama. Where Connolly wore a red military tunic, Zazzo wears a Stetson and cowboy boots. It is still a projection of masculinity, but not one that is immediately obvious to a British audience. A gun toting game hunter, if it is a familiar concept at all, will most likely be distilled from other depictions of such characters in television or film, immediately othering the concept of Zazzo's Caesar with qualities that seem exotic or unfamiliar. To a certain degree this characterisation gives Keegan-Dolan licence to play with the characters in his opera to a far greater extent than in the McVicar production. Zazzo's Caesar is not imbued with the concept of the masculine 'ideal' in the way that retaining the character's military status may do. To emasculate that character through the actions and manipulation of those around him is to make a bolder, less subtle statement on the character of Caesar himself.

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³²⁵ Workman, Robert. 'Lawrence Zazzo Photo'. BBC Radio 3 Website, English National Opera, London. Accessed June 9 2016, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p010jbc/p010h84h>

One of the most interesting, differing aspects of this production compared to McVicar's is the characterisation of Tolomeo, which is in direct contrast to the effeminate, comical Dumaux. In this production he is played by Tim Mead, who was described as 'psychopathic' in a *Telegraph* review.³²⁶ Mead is powerful, cunning and clever, this Tolomeo is a malevolent presence, 'venomously spitting' in his plotting against the other characters.³²⁷

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This is a striking difference, because it must be noted that both characterisations of Tolomeo successfully emasculate the Caesar in their productions, but this is done in opposite ways, depending on the sex of the singer they are playing against. Mead is permitted to play the Iago like character because Zazzo is playing his

³²⁶ Gent, Paul. 'Julius Caesar, English National Opera Review', *The Telegraph*. Accessed June 9 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/opera/9582464/Julius-Caesar-English-National-Opera-Coliseum-review.html>

³²⁷ Berry, Mark. 'Giulio Cesare in Egitto', *Blogspot Website*. Accessed October 25 2016, <http://boulezian.blogspot.co.uk/2012/10/giulio-cesare-in-egitto-english.html>

³²⁸ Workman, Robert. 'Tim Mead Photo'. *BBC Radio 3 Website, English National Opera, London*. Accessed June 9 2016, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p010jbr/c/p010h84h>

physical opposite, a man. If the character Tolomeo is subversive, diminishing Caesar through the actions of the plot, then he diminishes the character by playing to his gender. Mead is permitted to diminish Zazzo's Caesar through strength and cunning because at no point is Zazzo associated with femininity. Mead's power, and the strength of the characterisation in this production, is that Caesar's character can be diminished and belittled because the power struggle between Caesar and Tolomeo does not need to reference gender. Tolomeo can be strong, because Caesar's masculinity is not a construct, the audience do not need to be sold on the idea that he is a masculine, albeit complicated, hero. To this end, the character of Tolomeo is designed to highlight and exploit the weakness in Caesar, and I proffer this argument, this cannot be done in the presentation of a castrato role without gender play becoming part of that struggle. In the ENO production, Caesar is manipulated by a cunning Tolomeo, and through the stage setting is drawn into a world that seems childlike and slightly surreal. In the Glyndebourne production Dumaux's Tolomeo diminishes Connolly by becoming effeminate in her quest for masculinity, his characterisation is directly opposite to Mead's, because his Caesar's masculinity is a construct. To make Tolomeo powerful in that production could potentially weaken the gender construct that Connolly has achieved in her portrayal due, in part, to a (sadly) ingrained and inescapable social understanding of gender inequality. If a man plays a character that is more powerful than a woman playing a man, her illusion is ruined, because that social understanding (male power versus female weakness) is more immediately understood than the minutiae of her cross-dressing. So Dumaux does disrupt Connolly's complicated gender construct, by referencing her femininity through his own adoption of it in his portrayal of Tolomeo. The choice for a director, it appears, is which version of the story they wish to tell, and thus, to cast their Caesar accordingly.

The purpose of this thesis has been to show that castrati, despite their sexual status as men, lived a complicated gendered life, and that the intricacies of these gender constructs contributed directly to the characterisation of the

powerful men they sought to portray. By comparing and contrasting these two productions, I hope to have made clear how inescapable the concept of gender is to the performance of a castrato role, because it is this, more than anything else that sets these roles apart. Gender is not an entirely comfortable subject for many, and in the opera houses of modern Europe and America, where many of these Baroque revival operas are performed, directors and singers alike will be keenly aware that attitudes towards gender, and breaking down of long held beliefs on gender binary, are being tackled and explored both on the stage and off. Perhaps we should not shy away from the topic, but use it to explore how gender and its construct is in itself a story, complicated and ever changing, through which we can learn as much about our own modern lives as the classical stories of antiquity so many castrati roles portray. If the legacy of the castrato enables that, the continued performance of these roles is an important and worthwhile endeavour.

Conclusion

The castrato is a disruptive figure whose gender, sexual difference and place in society seems so at odds with our own modern understanding of masculinity. That we are tasked with depicting this through modern interpretations of Baroque opera forces us to confront uncomfortable truths about the construction of gender and how this has changed. The purpose of this thesis has been to examine the layers of social history that enabled the castrato to exist, and to question whether this can truly be depicted in a modern theatrical setting. In reality, the castrato embodies something that can never be properly expressed, a half man, feminised on stage, both lauded and derided for a choice they did not make. The resurgence in Baroque opera and interest in castrato roles is, in some respects, a unique opportunity to promote gender ambiguity in operatic casting again. The issue appears to lie in the inability to portray these roles with the fluidity they were once known for. Where a castrato or soprano could sing a role and partake in gender play with little thought given to the ambiguities of this choice, the modern director cannot, in reality, be so flippant. The nineteenth century taught singers, the audience, directors and composers that men and women were opposite. When confronted with the castrato and all that he embodies, his otherness, partaking of both masculine and feminine, feels anarchic. In reality we can only interact with gender when we are presented in terms of its relation to the other. In order to cast the castrato role with the gender ambiguity it inhabited, the director or conductor are forced to make a choice, a woman to play at masculinity, or a man to diminish his. This essay, and my exploration into constructions of masculinity, proffers that the mezzo-soprano is the best choice for these roles. As Baroque opera continues to be performed and explored, I am happy to be proved wrong.

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