

Varieties of Masculinity: Trajectories of the Castrato from the Seventeenth Century

WENDY HELLER

The Lost Castrato

Who – or perhaps more properly – what was the castrato? This is perhaps one of the most fascinating questions in all of music history – and certainly the most perplexing in the history of opera. It is also an issue that has attracted considerable scholarly attention and a host of different ideological responses and methodological approaches that often reveal more about our discipline and contemporary notions about gender than they do about the castrato. This, of course, is not surprising. The fact that young boys were routinely adjusted by (seemingly) primitive surgical means ostensibly to preserve and create singing voices – and that this was regarded as a viable option in the early modern period – arouses fantasies and anxieties that are arguably more troubling today than they were in the seventeenth or even eighteenth centuries. Carolyn Abbate's consideration of the castrato in relation to the female authorial voice in opera, for example, includes this elegant description of the discomfort created by the mere mention of a castrato:

When a castrato enters the conversation [...] we sense immediately a certain queasiness. Grim verbal formulations begin to proliferate – as if linguistic knees were being subconsciously pressed together. Indeed, so strong is our culturally conditioned revulsion for the castrato that we cannot imagine her/him as a positive symbol for the hidden female voice. But, is castration after all so bad?¹

Abbate's question, of course, is designed to shock – to cause a shudder and precipitate quite literally the rapid closing of men's knees, bringing to mind the Freudian and post-Freudian fears about castration and the misogyny associated with it. Shock, horror and – above all – a sense of loss permeate discussions of the castrato. On the most basic level, the loss appears to be physiological: while we may now understand that the actual surgery involved the ducts to the testes, the castrato engages fantasies about missing organs and the accompanying loss of virility and potency – as well as the mistaken notion that the castrati possessed genitalia that were more like those of women than men. Were the castrati, we might wonder, prone to penis envy? The answer, of course, is a qualified no – although, when I posed the question to two of my male colleagues, they answered in the affirmative. Nonetheless, the operation, as we now know, left the penis intact, and there is no evidence

to suggest that many castrati weren't capable of performing sexually, albeit lacking the ability to father children – a fact that often made them even more desirable to women.

The second loss is historical. With the exception of Alessandro Moreschi's famous recording, which provides a mere glimmer of past glories, we are unable to hear the castrato. The disappearance of this practice, at once so abhorrent and so intriguing, deprives us of something that seventeenth- and eighteenth-century audiences enjoyed – and, in many cases, enjoyed routinely – in church, in the theatre, court, academies and concert halls. Dozens and dozens of Baroque operas, cantatas, liturgical works and other vocal compositions are extant; we have heard them performed with women in the alto and soprano roles, and more recently by male altos and sopranos of the non-castrated variety. However, we are unable to hear the voices for which they were conceived. While history invariably forces us to confront what we no longer possess – missing documents, the accounts of eyewitnesses, and the like – the castrato is, as Katherine Bergeron has pointed out, an ideal representation of that which historical inquiry can never possess.²

Perhaps one of the most striking features about the modern (and post-modern) reception of the castrato has to do with the extent to which commentators imbue their discussions of the castrato with fictions, half-truths and anecdotes presumably to compensate for that which is lacking, both literally and figuratively. Indeed, this tendency seems to be inscribed into the history of the castrato. John Rosselli, whose sober and fact-based study of the castrati has gone a long way to dispel many fictions and misunderstandings, reminds us of how the castrato arouses a combination of fear, distaste, and sometimes a prurient interest. Observing how 'anecdotes, jocularity and downright hostility' have done much to keep the castrati safely on the margins of society, he notes as well that the castrato ironically received the most attention in print after his popularity had begun to wane.³ Indeed, a work of fiction has inspired many of the recent theoretical musings on the castrato: Balzac's short story *Sarrazine* – and its consideration in Roland Barthes's *S/Z* – has been used by several authors to consider, among other things, questions about authorial voices, the relationship between gender, sex and performance, and the ways in which the singing voices can become a vehicle not only of sexual arousal, but even orgasm.⁴ Inspired by Balzac and Barthes, many commentators – including Abbate in the passage cited above – have dwelt on the extent to which the castrato functions more as a double for a female voice or body than as a masculine being. The film *Farinelli, Il Castrato*, directed by Gerard Corbiau (Sony Pictures Classics, 1994), uses a mesh of fact and fiction to impart all kinds of contradictory notions about our most famous castrato, Farinelli: he is both desired and impotent, eager to make love, but unable to complete the act without his brother. Farinelli's masculinity – and the 'invented' accident that presumably caused his loss – is represented by a seemingly never-ending parade of horses, which represent variously the possible reasons for castration (through riding accidents), untarnished

masculine prowess (as opposed to the castrato's limited abilities), or even stand in for the composer's authorial voice (Handel). Ellen Harris calls our attention to the silver horse head that appears on Handel's walking stick, and how it serves two functions – to symbolise Handel's desire to possess Farinelli and Farinelli's inability to achieve an artistic climax without the music of the incomparable Handel.⁵ Fictional castrati also found their way into several novels, such as vampire enthusiast Anne Rice's *A Cry to Heaven* (1982) and Dominique Fernandez's *Porporino, or the Secret of Naples* (1976), the latter an unabashed 'coming out' story for the author.⁶ Indeed, the fact that Patrick Barbier dedicates his ostensibly scholarly history of the castrati to Fernandez further blurs the line between fact and fiction in the story of the castrato.⁷

Other fictions also seem designed to compensate either for the castrato's inherent inadequacies or our own inability to understand this irretrievable part of history. Perhaps the most ubiquitous is the 'castrato as rock star' metaphor, promulgated most prominently in the film *Farinelli*. This version of the myth often focuses on vocal pyrotechnics and the disembodied sound – castration as a technological invention – that turned the castrato into the eighteenth-century equivalent of androgynous rock stars like Michael Jackson.⁸ In such descriptions, the notion of sexuality is not entirely absent, but remains in the background as a kind of tease: were men and women aroused by these male rock-star castrati, or were they merely imitation women who only coincidentally mimed human (male) emotions and actions, albeit with spectacular vocal equipment? Richard Taruskin's authoritative *Oxford History of Western Music* begins his discussion of the castrato with the following: "The greatest screamers of all, and the most completely "educated" (that is, cultivated), were the male prima donnas, known as castrati, opera's first international stars, whose astounding sonority and preternaturally florid singing style confirmed opera in an abiding aura of the eerie."⁹ The fact that the castrati usually played the primo uomo – except in those times and places in which women were banned from the stage – is all but lost in Taruskin's elegant rumination on sonority, stardom and substitution – although he subsequently notes the success of these 'magnificent singing objects' representing generals, lovers and athletes. Taruskin does go on to mention the 'operatic divas' – which he engagingly refers to as 'warbling courtesans', without explaining the historical basis for such a formulation – from where did he derive the word warbling and who dubbed the singers courtesans?¹⁰ In the hands of less gifted historians, such half-truths all but erase the history of the prima donna in seventeenth-century opera. In *The Divas Mouth: Body, Void, and Prima Donna Politics*, for example, Susan J. Leonardi and Rebecca Pope launch their unabashedly homoerotic exploration of the operatic diva by claiming that the castrati, with their 'ethereal and otherworldly voices', were the 'first operatic "divinities"' and were also 'the first singers to be abused and stereotyped'.¹¹ But, as Beth Glixon has amply demonstrated, in Venice and certain other Italian cities prima donnas often garnered the most attention and highest salaries, achieving a

degree of international fame, were extolled in poems, pamphlets, and even subjected to parody.¹²

A final fiction swirls around the image of the feminised, grotesque singer that emerges from the satires and caricatures of the castrato that were particularly popular in eighteenth-century England.¹³ Indeed, iconographical studies of the castrato – such as those by Daniel Hertz and Franca Camiz – have done much to demonstrate the extent to which eighteenth-century portrait painters rejected the grotesquerie of the lampooned castrato. Farinelli, for example, is represented as a member of the aristocracy, unambiguously male (if not exceedingly masculine), and with an intense gaze that seems calculated to remind the viewer of his penetrating voice.¹⁴

We are thus left with a host of contradictory and half-true images. The castrato is oversexed and undersexed, impotent and overly potent; he is simultaneously attractive and repellent to men and women. He is genderless and grotesque, possessing an inhuman body that is made invisible by vocal pyrotechnics, or one that is capable of convincingly imitating or substituting for female beauty, as in Balzac's *Sarrazine*. He is also a signifier – of absence, loss, castration – and a useful theoretical tool for disentangling notions about voice from those of biological sex and gender. Surprisingly absent from this account, however, are some basic truths: the castrato was a man, who was identified as male in society and – more often than not – on the operatic stage. In what follows I will reconsider some of the ways in which truth and fiction collide in the story of the castrato, and the role he played in expressing early modern notions about masculinity.

The Masculine Castrato

Three recent articles have shed light on the ways in which the castrato functioned both on the stage and in society, providing a more nuanced view of his role in society and on the stage. In 'The Eroticism of Emasculation: Confronting the Baroque Body of the Castrato', Roger Freitas provides an invaluable reconsideration of the castrato in the context of early modern notions about gender and sexuality.¹⁵ Taking into account recent work on the history of sexuality and gender, Freitas positions the castrato in relation to the so-called 'one-sex model' – the notion based on Aristotelian and Galenic thinking that women as biological inversion of men, which dominated biological thinking and gender ideology in the seventeenth century.¹⁶ In this formulation, the castrato emerges not as an asexual being or bodiless creature, but one that inhabits a very specific sort of body that occupies the middle ground between the genders. This does not mean that the castrato is something less than a sexual being. In fact, as Freitas persuasively demonstrates, the castrato actually radiates a special sort of erotic appeal – a boyish, youthful quality that was particularly seductive to both the male and female beholder in the early modern period. As Freitas points out, there is substantial evidence

of the allure of the sexually immature (or seemingly immature) male in both life and art – poetry, painting, historical tracts, diary entries, pederasty trials, and the like. The result is an image of the castrato that, as he describes, puts the pure voice back into the body. The sexless, disembodied castrato who exists only in the auditory realm or in the physical world as an object of parody, is replaced with a different model: the young, hairless adolescent boy, on the verge of sexual maturity, with feminised features, soft edges – a potentially passive sexual partner, but one who possessed at least some of the markers of masculinity that were so essential in a homosocial if not homoerotic context.

Freitas's consideration of the castrato in the context of early modern gender ideology opens up a whole range of conceptual possibilities that help us to better understand how and why the castrato was so readily accepted in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Part of the critical difference between early modern notions about gender and our own has to do with the extent to which male and female virtues were regarded as natural attributes. Where the modern world sees biological sex as predetermined, postulating gender as performance, vulnerable to cultural construction, early moderns saw the reverse.¹⁷ The castrato as singer was imagined into being – and perhaps could *only* have been imagined into being – at a time in which it was possible to conceive of human beings not as exemplifying one of two discrete categories determined by their anatomy, but rather as points on a continuum, in which degrees of maleness and femaleness were not driven by biological imperatives. The binary notions, of course, were still present: however, herein lies the difference. Female silence and chastity – as opposed to male eloquence or courage – were regarded as innate in a way that biological sex was not.¹⁸ In other words, an eloquent female, who spoke or sang in public, was arguably more unnatural than a castrato.

This way of thinking about biological sex and virtues has enormous implications for our understanding both of castrati and the use of gender in the theatre. Early modern notions about sexuality allow us not only to reconsider the position of the castrato, but his relationship to female actresses or singers. The extent to which women were or were not allowed on the stage in any given society depended to a large degree upon the seriousness with which admonitions against the female voice were regarded. Thus, for example, boys who played women on the English stage were applauded for the 'uncanny realism': sexually charged, dangerous, seductive but not necessarily unnatural.¹⁹ Italy, where women had achieved considerable success in improvisational theatre, had developed a certain tolerance for female performers that allowed for this unnatural behaviour, although there were calculated ways of managing this presumably less than natural occurrence.²⁰ Thus, in a world in which biology was not destiny, the castrato was not necessarily the grotesque, unnatural being that is described with increasing frequency in later sources nor was he a representative of female beauty, as he is in Balzac's story. He marks a point somewhere between male and female on the biological spectrum – and this likely varied from one

to another castrato. As a human that was still identified as male, he could nevertheless be eloquent, theatrical, and desirable. These traits – especially his eloquence – oddly enough, might be regarded as a natural phenomenon in the castrato while unnatural in women, despite the fact he annexing the vocal register traditionally (but not exclusively) inhabited by the female voice.²¹

The other two studies bring the question of what is natural and what is unnatural with regard to the castrato to the fore: Mary E. Frandsen's '*Eunuchi Conjugium: The Marriage of a Castrato in Early Modern Germany*', and Giuseppe Gerbino's '*The Quest for the Soprano Voice: Castrati in Renaissance Italy*'. Gerbino exposes yet another series of fictions regarding the castrato, exploring what he describes as the relative invisibility of the castrato in Renaissance historiography – as opposed to his usual association with Baroque artificiality and excess.²² His study also eloquently demonstrates the ways in which historical fictions could be so readily mapped onto the castrato. For example, Gerbino explores some of the long-accepted myths concerning Italian hegemony in the invention of the castrato that suppressed the importance of the Spanish castrati in sixteenth-century Italy, showing the unexpected role of diplomatic alliances and political loyalties in the hiring and patronage of castrato singers.²³ Gerbino also reveals the extent to which castration in the sixteenth century was not tied to the production of singers, but rather was a well-known and accepted procedure in Renaissance medicine, and regarded in contemporary medical treatises as a viable cure for a wide variety of illnesses and diseases. Skilled surgeons were more adept at altering young men without removing the testes; less skilled barbers resorted to more bloody and brutal methods. While many advised caution and saw the surgery as only a last resort, the fact of the matter, as Gerbino describes, is that a population of castrated males was created that was well integrated into the societies in which they lived, and many of these men chose singing as a viable and 'natural' profession. That is not to say that many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century castrati were not created solely for the purpose of becoming singers; but, at least in the sixteenth century and perhaps into the seventeenth century as well, castrati were functioning members of society, who were particularly well-suited to find employment as singers. Gerbino describes this as follows:

The fact that castration was accepted or at least tolerated as a necessary mutilation to cure certain diseases explains why, to our dismay, castrati were not viewed as an abomination [...] Nor were they assigned any distinct or exclusive role in Renaissance society. This last feature becomes clearer if we turn to Byzantine culture, where court eunuchs were trained for careers open to eunuchs only and where gender identity was socially constructed and made visible through specific behaviour codes, from speech patterns to distinctive clothes. In Renaissance Italy, castrati do not seem to have breathed the same air of separateness (with some limitations; matrimonial law, for example). Good singers were few. But however 'different,' castrati were singers among other singers.²⁴

Both Gerbino and Frandsen explore contemporary concerns and controversies about the moral and religious implications of marriage for the castrato.²⁵ These debates, as Gerbino points out, were not about the legality or appropriateness of castration, but rather about the nature and goals of the institution of marriage which – as both Lutherans and Catholics were wont to insist – should fulfil both the primary goal of procreation and the secondary goal of satisfying desire – although Lutherans seem to have also focused on the importance of companionship and mutual love.²⁶ Had the medical facts been clearer, perhaps the debate would have been less problematic, but controversies between Galenic and Aristotelian ways of understanding the body continued to limit understanding of the role of the testes both in terms of pleasures and procreation. The castrato, as Gerbino points out, thus becomes a kind of stimulus for the debate, raising issues that otherwise might easily have been ignored: ‘The manufactured body of the castrato challenged structures of knowledge that had formed at the intersection of ancient science and the Christian physiology of self. It forced sixteenth-century men to pose new questions about the mechanisms of reproduction, to peer into the workings of nature, and ultimately, into the mysteries of life itself.’²⁷

Small wonder that the proposed marriage of one Italian castrato, Bartolomeo Sorlisi, singer at the Hofkapelle in Dresden, to Dorothea Lichtwer, the stepdaughter of a prominent Dresden lawyer, should have caused such a clash of cultural, theological and biological ideologies. Based on a thoughtful analysis of surviving documents and theological texts, Frandsen’s essay tells us the compelling story of Sorlisi’s quest for an apparently ordinary life – marriage with a woman with whom he shared a deep affection. Frandsen’s article about the trials and tribulations of Sorlisi’s marriage to Lichtwer highlights a number of intriguing issues about the assimilation of the castrato, whose foreignness in this case is not only a result of the fact that he is castrated, but that he is Italian and Catholic. Once again, the castrato inspires an investigation of the nature of marriage itself – is this sacrament about procreation, satisfying desire, or the need for companionship? What is the legality of sexual union without the possibility of procreation? Older widows, for example, were not prevented from marrying even if they were deemed incapable of producing children. Numerous surprising details emerge from her cogent description of this fascinating case. For Lutheran authorities, for example, the question of Sorlisi’s marriage was by no means unambiguous, and officials argued both in favour of and against the marriage.²⁸ Sorlisi’s case would have been impossible had he not established strong relationships with high-ranking members of Dresden society with connections to the court, who seem to have come to terms with his status both as man and castrato. Frandsen demonstrates the extent to which the castrato could and could not be normalised within society – his desire to become, as she notes ‘castrato *cum* private citizen in seventeenth-century Germany’.²⁹ For our purposes, what is particularly striking is the extent to which Sorlisi’s own self-fashioning emphasised his masculinity. For example, for one of his petitions,

Sorlisi presents an invented tale of a castrato under a pseudonym, presenting 'himself' as a wounded knight, no longer able to have children, but desiring to marry his beloved Lucretia.³⁰ What better way to present the castrato as a masculine hero, who – as he describes in detail – had suffered relatively little damage to his 'virile member'.³¹ As Frandsen observes:

In contrast to the stereotyped view of the castrato as effeminate held by many of his contemporaries, Sorlisi seems to have been determined to see and represent himself as an utterly 'masculine' man, one who not only participated in many of the public activities closely bound up with early modern concepts of masculinity, but also in those private behaviours that had been identified with manhood from time immemorial.³²

This case has much to teach us about early modern attitudes towards marriage, copulation, procreation and companionship – augmenting the picture provided by Gerbino about the question of the castrato's marriage in Catholic realms in the sixteenth century. And lest we imagine that the story about the castrato was all about loss, castration, the grotesque or the uncanny, we are reminded that the castrato was capable of participating in the most seemingly unremarkable of all human experiences – romantic love for the opposite sex.

The Historical Castrato

Thus, a revised history of the castrato in opera might look something like this. Admonitions against the female voice in the Church combined with a need for a full vocal ensemble led to the use of men or boys to fill in the upper voices in polyphony. These included at various times and places, falsettists, castrati and boys. Men who had undergone castration for medical reasons were among the ranks of singers, and a number of the castrati first employed in Italy came from Spain. Used primarily in the context of sacred music, the fashion proved popular in secular contexts as well, particularly Papal Rome and the Northern Italian courts, and were likely deemed more appropriate than women as residents in the home of ecclesiastic officials.

However, the voices that had been used to sing the liturgy or to entertain in private or semi-public contexts eventually took on the arguably more complex task of appearing on the commercial operatic stage. No longer mere sound-producing bodies, these first operatic castrati were now asked to portray human characters – or some reasonable facsimile thereof. Opera, after all, asks its audiences to suspend disbelief on a number of fronts, not the least of which is the whole idea of singing rather than speaking. Whatever preoccupation early opera librettists and composers might have had with the problems of verisimilitude, the introduction of the castrato into the world of opera seems to have occurred with relatively little resistance or comment. By the time opera became an industry – first in Venice, and then elsewhere in Italy – the castrato was an accepted part of the various fictions of which the

genre is comprised. The apparent mismatch between voice and character – if it were perceived as such by early moderns – seems not to have been any more astounding than any of the other features of the genre. Opera went about its business of portraying men and women on the stage in a variety of situations, both mythological and historical. Composers and librettists paraded their seemingly inexhaustible supply of pagan gods, emperors, epic heroes and servants in front of a satisfied audience, using either male singers or castrati – depending on the circumstances. Thus, regardless of their unique biological status, the seventeenth-century operatic castrati were assimilated into an operatic universe in which – at least ostensibly – there were only two genders.

Assimilation on the operatic stage was matched by degrees of assimilation within the various societies in which they lived and performed. And, as the evidence presented above suggests, they were at times quite easily absorbed into these societies, particularly through much of the seventeenth century. John Rosselli estimates, for example, that between 1630 and 1750 there existed several hundred castrati – mostly Italian – who were enough of a presence to have become a ‘feature of every day life’.³³ As we recall, Rosselli noted that they had attracted the most attention in print when they were in decline; thus so much censure and joking associated with the reception of the castrato in the eighteenth century belongs to the times and places in which they were regarded as both unnatural and foreign. Even the fact that they did not usually marry was also not considered unusual. Indeed, the castrato belonged to one of several groups in early modern Europe – priests, nuns, numerous young nobles and courtesans – who were usually excluded from the marriage and procreation game, but who nonetheless retained some sexual desirability and potency.

The Heroic Castrato

This reconsideration of the castrato in terms of masculinity brings to the fore a number of questions about gender representation on the stage. Does the castrato’s biological status and use of a soprano vocal range automatically signal some sort of compromised masculinity or even effeminacy? Or are we to imagine that the fact that a castrato is chosen for a given role suggests that gender no longer matters – that his dubious status and ‘aura of the eerie’, to quote Taruskin, somehow negates his ability to represent either gender? Perhaps the castrato is all about gender ambiguity. The early modern fascination with the seeming fluidity of biological sex is well documented.³⁴ Countless plays and operas – regardless of whether or not they employed castrati – explore the popular notion that women could turn into men and – worse still – that men could turn into women. While the castrato, it should be emphasised, certainly did not precipitate this way of thinking, which was a function of broader notions about gender and sexuality in the

early modern world – he certainly made such plots more verisimilar. How much easier for a woman to disguise herself as a man or a man to disguise himself as a woman on the operatic stage if they are able to inhabit the same acoustic space with impunity!

But the full range of creativity regarding gender representation is apparent not only in these idiosyncratic moments in which the boundaries between the sexes are challenged, but in the everyday treatment of male and female characters. Seventeenth-century Venetian opera, for example, abounds in an extraordinary variety of female characters – pathetic lamenting women, witches, courtesans, ambitious queens, lecherous old maids, cunning servants and the like. But there is equal variety in the representation of men: tyrants, pathetic lovers, benevolent fathers, conniving courtiers, mad men and comic sidekicks all populated the operatic stage in the Baroque. The castrato was but one of many possible avenues for representing some version of masculinity in the seventeenth century.

One of the most useful measures of masculinity is the representation of the epic hero. These ancient heroes were the hallmarks of masculine identity both for the societies that created them and those that subsequently recreated them. Epic heroes demonstrate masculine virtues by their participation in heroic quests – founding nations (Aeneas), rescuing the Golden Fleece (Jason) and fighting battles (Achilles or Odysseus). Their public destinies, usually ordained by the gods, were also inevitably influenced by private concerns, particularly the influence of women. Epic heroes, as Lawrence Lipking pointed out, often define themselves by abandoning, using or misusing the women who love and serve them, thus repeatedly proving masculine ability to overcome effeminate desires.³⁵ Is this something, we might wonder, that can be accomplished by the castrato? Is he capable of becoming a hero who overcomes female wiles and pursues his epic destiny? Or is he unable – literally or figuratively – to rise above the peculiarity of his biological makeup?

Let us briefly consider the implications of three different choices made by mid-seventeenth-century Venetian composers and librettists in operas that were also performed outside of Venice. The problem of the castrato, heroism and masculinity is elegantly demonstrated in Cavalli's *La Didone* (1640), the first opera based on the *Aeneid*.³⁶ As with many Venetian operas, this is a work that deftly blends poetic fancy with attention to literary detail. The libretto by Giovanni Francesco Busenello follows the basic outline of Virgil's *Aeneid*, with a few vital exceptions. He inflates the importance of the character Iarbas, the suitor of Dido, whose suit inspired the queen to commit suicide in the pre-Virgilian version of the legend, and who in the *Aeneid* bears the blame for informing Jove of Aeneas's dalliance in Carthage.³⁷ In Cavalli and Busenello's version of the opera, the story ends happily, or at least moderately happy, as Dido – rather than committing suicide – agrees to marry the suitor Iarbas. We thus have two very different male characters. Aeneas is the epic hero, destined to abandon Dido and establish the Roman republic on the Italian peninsula. Iarbas, on the other hand, is the comic hero, who gets the girl in the

end. And if his representation is not entirely faithful to Virgil's epic, it is very much in keeping with operatic convention. Iarbas not only wins the girl, but also gets to partake in one of the decade's most endearing conventions – he is driven mad and brought back to sanity just in time to rescue Dido from suicide.

In this opera, the casting thus gives us two different notions of masculinity. The hero, Aeneas, is a tenor. Presumably, we are not to question his virility; he, after all, abandons love for duty. But Iarbas, an alto castrato, is driven mad by love before ultimately being united with Dido at the end of the opera. In this case, the choice of a castrato for the one role and a tenor for the other not only places into relief two different notions of masculinity, but arguably serves to separate the fantastic world of opera – in which Dido and Iarbas might actually marry – from the epic stage, in which Aeneas must abandon Dido and set sail for Italy. Cavalli, in fact, takes advantage of the fact that Iarbas is an alto and Dido is a soprano by designing adjacent arias for the two that are motivically related but inhabit interlocking registers – Iarbas is placed primarily in the 'plagal' range while Dido dominates the opposite 'authentic' range.³⁸ For their final duet, however, when their voices are intertwined in neighbouring registers, they arguably achieve a measure of intimacy that was only possible between a female singer and a castrato.

The situation seems somewhat different for a second epic hero – Jason (Giasone), leader of the Argonauts, whose heroic exploits included the capture of the Golden Fleece. As the eponymous hero of one of the most widely disseminated seventeenth-century operas, Cavalli's *Giasone* (1649), Jason arguably presented a notion of masculinity that was to be of profound influence to subsequent composers and librettists.³⁹ In the literary sources upon which Giacinto Andrea Cicognini based his libretto, Jason's masculinity is not nearly as unambiguous as was the case with Aeneas, whose abrupt break with Dido allowed him to follow his destiny. Jason's most important exploit was the recovery of the Golden Fleece, a task that he was only able to accomplish with the assistance of Medea. The opera makes no specific reference to Euripides' famous tragedy – which was certainly known in the seventeenth century; thus, the villainy of Medea has yet to be firmly established, even if the audience tacitly acknowledged it. In this opera, however, the epic hero is presented not as a warrior, but rather as a lover. Cicognini's libretto brilliantly conflates two strands of Jason's history, following the example set in Ovid's *Heroides*, where Jason has the dubious status of being the only hero to receive letters from two different abandoned women – Medea and Hypsipyle.⁴⁰

The opera begins after Jason has abandoned both Hypsipyle and the twins that he has fathered. We learn in the opening scenes that he has been sleeping with Medea for over a year, has become the father of yet another set of twins with her and – remarkably – has accomplished all this without ever having looked upon her face. As a character played by a castrato, Jason is both ideal and strangely ill-suited to the task. He is, as Heracles claims in act I scene iii, overly effeminate, vulnerable to love, unwilling to leave the

post-coital bed to assume his heroic responsibilities, and utterly incapable of managing these two powerful women or matching their vocal prowess. The Golden Fleece is recovered only through Medea's magic in her extraordinarily powerful incantation scene. Hypsipyle, with a similarly extraordinary show of eloquence, will ultimately manage to persuade, even shame Jason into returning to her – despite the fact that Jason had tried to have her murdered. Yet Jason is also one of the most extraordinarily potent of all operatic heroes: the only operatic hero to have fathered two sets of twins in a single opera!

A third epic hero provides an even more ambiguous sense of how the castrato was used to represent masculinity in Venetian opera: Achilles, the hero of yet another widely disseminated work, *La finta pazzo* (1641), was a soprano castrato.⁴¹ With Achilles, as I have discussed elsewhere, the question of gender ambiguity is brought to the fore. Achilles was constrained to spend most of his boyhood disguised as a woman in the court of King Lycomedes.⁴² Only with the arrival of Ulysses and the prospect of battle does Achilles renounce his feminine identity and acknowledge the truth of his biological sex. This was a topic that inspired a number of librettos – Metastasio's *Achille in Sciro* – in which a castrato usually played the hero – though occasionally female sopranos were cast in the role.⁴³

For our purposes what is intriguing about the role of Achilles in *La finta pazzo* is the fact that it encompasses both models discussed above. Achilles, who spends a portion of the opera disguised as a woman, actually surpasses Jason in his show of masculinity by rejecting his feminine disguise and upbringing to take on the duties of the warrior. Of note is the extent to which this particular opera might be said to problematise the notion of gender, vocal register and castration. Not only does librettist Giulio Strozzi actually feature a castrato singer simply called 'Eunuco' (Eunuch), but composer Francesco Saccati seems to have been particularly interested in playing with the various combinations of sonorities involving the soprano Achilles. For example, in act I scene iii, Achilles and Deidamia appear for the first time singing an aria marked in the score as 'a 2', presumably sung in unison. The text accentuates Achilles' masculinity: fear does not disturb their hearts because 'in all clothing, Achilles is always Achilles'. In their subsequent love duet, Achilles and Deidamia share the same registral space, with frequent voice crossings and exchange of motives. Later, Achilles even performs an imitative canzonetta with both Deidamia and the Eunuch for the entire court (including Ulysses and his soldiers), his masculinity thus all but disguised not only by his female clothing but also by the close juxtaposition of the other high voices. However, as Achilles rejects his feminine clothing and goes off to fight the Trojan War with Ulysses and Diomedes (both cast as tenors), Saccati adjusts the sonorities accordingly. In act II scene ii, Achilles contemplates his ostensible transformation from woman into man, singing a trio with Diomedes and Ulysses. Achilles' voice is no longer subsumed by the other two sopranos. Instead, he is now one of the boys: three warriors get ready for battle, and Achilles, with the higher voice, dominates the acoustic space. As a castrato

and epic hero, Achilles is thus able both to lose himself in the sonic world of the feminine, and also assert himself as a masculine hero. The way would seem prepared for the castrato to take over the role as the primo uomo – a masculine, albeit, youthful hero who is capable of performing both as the hero and the lover.

By the time Farinelli enters on the scene, the use of the castrato in opera will have become both more conventional and more extraordinary. A number of factors likely caused this; opera had gained much more force as an international phenomenon, the audience had changed, and the publicity mechanisms – pamphlets and the like – had become increasingly sophisticated. Shifting views about sexuality – a better understanding of how the body actually worked – also made it far less possible for the castrato to become assimilated or retain the kind of invisibility that may have been special privilege accorded to his forbearers. In an era in which the virtuosic capacity of all instruments was being exploited, the castrato, regardless of his sexual orientation, biological status, desires, or insecurities, provided an irresistible technological innovation – an opportunity for composers to experiment with the virtuosic potential of the human voice for a genre whose very existence depended upon the suspension of disbelief. The castrato was perhaps a victim of his own success; fame came at a cost, and part of that cost might have been the ability to assume masculine identities with authority – both in real life and on the stage – without the accompanying censure, parody, and anxiety that has become so exaggerated in contemporary scholarship.

But regardless, in the everyday business of opera, castrati continued to play men, and to play them with passion and authority. We might remember, for example, that when Farinelli made his Venetian debut playing Arsace in Leonardo Leo's *Catone in Utica* (1729) at the elegant Teatro S. Grisostomo, soprano castrati were also chosen to play the other two major political figures: Julius Caesar, the enemy of the Republic, and Cato, the supporter of Republican causes.⁴⁴ In Venice, where staunch Republicanism was invariably linked with masculine virtues, there was apparently no difficulty accepting castrati in one of the most potent political showdowns – the battle between the dying Roman Republic and Caesar's newfound empire.⁴⁵ The castrato, at least in this instance, was apparently man enough for the job.

* I would like to thank the students of Princeton's Music 34I, whose contributions to this essay were many and multifarious.

NOTES

1. Carolyn Abbate, 'Opera, or the Envoicing of Women', in *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship*, ed. Ruth Solie (Berkeley, CA 1993), p.225-58 (p.233).
2. Katherine Bergeron, 'The Castrato as History', *Cambridge Opera Journal* 8 (1996), p.167-84.
3. John Rosselli, 'The Castrati as a Professional Group and a Social Phenomenon, 1550-1850', *Acta Musicologica* 60 (1988), p.143-79 (p.143).

4. Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York 1974). Carolyn Abbate 'Opera, or the Envoicing of Women'; Kaya Silverman, 'The Female Authorial Voice', in *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington, IN 1988); Yvonne Noble, 'Castrati, Balzac, and Barthe S/Z', *Comparative Drama* 31 (1997), p.28-41; Joke Dame, "'Unveiled Voices": Sexual Difference and the Castrato', in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, ed. Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood and Gary C. Thomas (New York 1994), p.139-53.
5. Ellen Harris, 'Twentieth-Century Farinelli', *Musical Quarterly* 81 (1997), p.180-89.
6. Anne Rice, *A Cry to Heaven* (New York 1982); Dominique Fernandez, *Porporino, or The Secret of Naples* (New York 1976).
7. Patrick Barbier, *The World of the Castrati: The History of an Extraordinary Operatic Phenomenon*, trans. Margaret Crosland (London 1996).
8. Harris, 'Twentieth-Century Farinelli', p.183.
9. Richard Taruskin, *Oxford History of Western Music* (New York 2005), ii.16.
10. Taruskin, *Oxford History*, ii.17.
11. Susan J. Leonardi and Rebecca A. Pope, *The Diva's Mouth: Body, Voice, Prima Donna Politics* (New Brunswick, NJ 1996), p.24.
12. Beth L. Glixon, 'Private Lives of Public Women: Prima Donnas in Mid-Seventeenth Century Venice', *Music & Letters* 76 (1995), p.509-31. Beth L. Glixon and Jonathan E. Glixon, *Inventing the Business of Opera: The Impresario and his World in Seventeenth-Century Venice* (Oxford 2005), p.202-205. Glixon and Glixon present the salaries for lead male and female singers in the opera companies run by Marco Faustini in the 1650s and 1660s. While some castrati were paid at the same rate as prima donnas, their fees did not surpass those of the female singers with whom they starred. In fact, they show that 'value of a top castrato could change according to the particular woman in the cast' (p.204). The fees for Giovanni Antonio Cavagna, one of the best paid and most highly valued castrato in mid-seventeenth-century Venice rose during his career, but as Glixon and Glixon demonstrate, only once did his fee exceed that paid to the prima donna. Less illustrious castrati were paid lower salaries.
13. This may well be a result of a number of factors, some of which were undoubtedly unique to the British audiences of the period: their preference for an imported cultural product, anxiety about the feminising influence of Italian music, fear of the castrato as a sexual predator, and a history of discomfort about women on the stage. See Todd S. Gilman, 'The Italian (Castrato) in London', in *The Work of Opera: Genre, Nationhood, and Sexual Difference* (New York 1997), p.49-70. On English views about gender and music, see Linda Phyllis Austern, "'No women indeed": The Boy Actress as Seductress in Late Sixteenth-Century English Drama', in *Embodied Voices: Representing Female Vocality in Western Culture* (Cambridge 1995), p.83-102.
14. Franca Trinchieri Camiz, 'The Castrato Singer: From Informal to Formal Portraiture', *Artibus et Historiae* 9 (1988), p.171-86; Daniel Heartz, 'Farinelli Revisited', *Early Music* 18 (1990), p.430-43.
15. Roger Freitas, 'The Eroticism of Emasculation: Confronting the Baroque Body of the Castrato', *Journal of Musicology* 20 (2003), p.196-249.
16. Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge 1990), p.26-62. For a discussion on the applicability of Laqueur's views to gender representation in opera, see Wendy Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence: Opera and Women's Voices in Seventeenth-Century Venice* (Berkeley, CA 2003), p.9-12.
17. Wendy Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence*, p.9-17.
18. See also Stephen Orgel, *Impersonations: The Performance of Gender in Shakespeare's England* (Cambridge 1996).
19. Austern, "'No Women Indeed'", p.86.
20. Anne MacNeil, *Music and Women of the Commedia dell'Arte of the Late Sixteenth Century* (Oxford 2003). MacNeil demonstrates, for example, how Isabella Andreini was able to present herself to the public as an actress who, as a married woman, retained her status as a virtuous woman. The oft-repeated claim that all actresses were regarded as courtesans was certainly not true in the travelling comedy actors in the Northern Italian courts that were, in some respects, the predecessors of opera singers.
21. It is worth noting that falsettists were often regarded as singing 'unnaturally' in the soprano range.
22. Giuseppe Gerbino, 'The Quest for the Castrato Voice: Castrati in Renaissance Italy', *Studi Musicali* 32 (2004), p.303-57; Mary E. Frandsen, 'Eunuch Conjugium: The Marriage of a Castrato in Early Modern Germany', *Early Music History* 24 (2004), p.53-124.
23. Gerbino, 'The Quest for the Castrato Voice', p.318-36.

24. Gerbino, 'The Quest for the Castrato Voice', p.353.
25. Gerbino, 'The Quest for the Castrato Voice', p.334-39; Frandsen, 'Eunuch Conjugium'.
26. For example, the response of the Leipzig consistory to the marriage request in October 1666 notes that God 'delivered the woman to the man as a helper, and moreover it has nowhere been commanded that a man who cannot have children should for this reason not wed or take a wife'. UAG, Theologische Fakultät Nr 3, Addendum no.2, cited by Frandsen, 'Eumuchi Conjugium', p.85.
27. Gerbino, 'The Quest for the Castrato Voice', p.341.
28. Frandsen, 'Eumuchi Conjugium', p.59-61.
29. Frandsen, 'Eumuchi Conjugium', p.55.
30. Frandsen, 'Eumuchi Conjugium', p.66-67.
31. Frandsen, 'Eumuchi Conjugium', p.67.
32. Frandsen, 'Eumuch Conjugium', p.57.
33. Rosselli, 'The Castrati as a Professional Group', p.158.
34. Much recent literature has focused on this. On the phenomenon in Venetian opera, see Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence*; on the Shakespearean stage, see Orgel, *Impersonations*, and Austern, "'No Women Indeed'".
35. Lawrence Lipking, *Abandoned Women and the Poetic Tradition* (Chicago, IL 1988).
36. Francesco Cavalli, *La Didone* (I-Vnm, It IV, 355[=9879]). For the libretto, see Giovanni Francesco Busenello, *La Didone* (Venice, Giuliani, 1656). On Cavalli's *Didone*, see Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence*, p.82-135.
37. Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence*, p.104-105.
38. Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence*, p.106-108.
39. Francesco Cavalli, *Giasone* (I-Vnm, It IV, 363[=9887]) is one of a number of surviving sources for this broadly disseminated opera. For the libretto, see Giacinto Andrea Cicognini, *Giasone* (Venice, Batti, 1649). On the importance of *Giasone*, see Ellen Rosand, *Opera in Seventeenth-Century Venice: The Creation of a Genre* (Berkeley, CA 2001), p.275-77.
40. Medea and Hypsipyle are featured in Ovid's *Heroides* 6 and 12. On the use of the *Heroides* in *Giasone*, see Wendy Heller, 'Chastity, Heroism, and Allure: Women in the Opera of Seventeenth-Century Venice', PhD Diss., Brandeis University, 1995, p.286-303.
41. I-Isola bella, private collection. For the libretto, see Giulio Strozzi, *La finta pazza* (Venice, Surian, 1641). For the importance of this work, see also Lorenzo Bianconi and Thomas Walker, 'Dalla "Finta pazza" all "Veremonda": Storie di Febriarmonici', *Rivista italiana di musicologia* 10 (1975), p.211-99.
42. Wendy Heller, 'Reforming Achilles: Gender, Opera Seria, and the Rhetoric of the Enlightened Hero', *Early Music* 26/4 (1998), p.562-81.
43. Wendy Heller, 'Reforming Achilles,' p.58on.
44. Artino Corsario [Pietro Metastasio], *Catone in Utica* (Venice, Buonarigo, 1729). According to the printed libretto, Catone was played by Nicola Grimaldi and Caesar by Domenico Gizzi.
45. On the uses of Roman civil war in expressing Venice's own sense of identity as a masculine Republic, see Wendy Heller, 'Tacitus Incognito: Opera as History in *L'incoronazione di Poppea*', *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 52 (1999), p.39-96.