



Castrati

by Patricia Juliana Smith

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Farinelli, a celebrated eighteenth-century castrato.

Castrati (singular form: castrato) were male singers who were castrated before they reached puberty so as to retain their high voices. This practice, while not exactly commonplace, persisted in Europe from the late sixteenth to the nineteenth century, and reached its height in the eighteenth century. It was, moreover, exploitative; castrati were usually poor boys, often orphans, and the operation itself was of dubious legality.

The justification for this extreme measure was the result of various dictates of the Catholic Church during the years following the Reformation. As certain scriptural passages called for women remaining silent in church, their voices were banned from choirs; therefore, in order to retain the four-part harmonies of polyphonic church music, the mutilation of young boys was deemed an acceptable sacrifice in the name of divine service.

As adults, castrati were capable of singing in the vocal range usual for female contraltos and, in some instances, sopranos, but with much stronger projection.

Castrati first entered papal service toward the end of the sixteenth century, and their numbers quickly increased. Simultaneously, they began to appear in opera, usually performing heroic male roles, such as Nerone in Claudio Monteverdi's *L'Incoronazione di Poppea* (1642), the title role in George Frideric Handel's *Giulio Cesare* (1724), and Orfeo in Christoph Willibald Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762). In areas where the Catholic Church banned women from performing on stage, castrati performed female roles as well.

Castrati reached the height of their popularity from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth century. During this time, they were the major stars of the operatic stage and enjoyed the reputations and behaviors of latter-day female divas. They drew large fees for their performances, took fantastic stage names, were known for temperamental and capricious conduct on the stage and off, and, despite their mutilation, were said to engage in sexual intrigues of every sort with both sexes.

The most celebrated among them were Senesino (Francesco Bernardi, 1680-1750), Farinelli (Carlo Broschi, 1705-1782), and Caffarelli (Gaetano Majorano, 1710-1783).

Operatic roles for castrati continued to be written by major composers such as Mozart, Rossini, and Meyerbeer through the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. But with the Napoleonic wars and the diminishing of papal powers, the practice of castration for musical purposes was more often seen as cruel and inhumane.

Women, moreover, had been seen and heard on the operatic stage with much greater frequency since the eighteenth century, and, with fewer castrati available, female contraltos in male attire took over their roles.

The last two known castrati were Domenico Mustafà (1829-1912), who was director of the pope's Sistine

Choir from 1860 to 1898, and Alessandro Moreschi (1858-1922). In 1903, Pope Pius X banned castrati from papal choirs; Moreschi was, nonetheless, a member of the Sistine Choir until 1913.

Castrati were not necessarily homosexual, although many seem to have conducted affairs with either sex or both. They nevertheless occupy a "queer" space in cultural history, as their peculiar situation as emasculated men rendered them as less than masculine according to societal norms, even as their performances made them objects of admiration and even envy.

Embodying the roles of women and male heroes alike, they blurred distinctions of sex and gender. Accordingly, these shape-shifters have retained a certain queer appeal--as evinced by their presence in such contemporary works as Anne Rice's novel *A Cry to Heaven* (1982) and Gérard Corbiau's film *Farinelli* (1994)--long after they have ceased to exist.

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