Singing Better by Sacrificing Sex

Anna G. Piotrowska

The biological, cultural, and social phenomenon of singing castrati in European culture of the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries (Żórawska-Witkowska 2005, pp. 75–109) continues to pose difficult questions. Not only do castrati escape the definitions of gender by mingling male and female codes, they also serve as a starting point for questioning how gender has been (and is) constructed in opera, music, and broader culture. The case of castrati also poses moral questions related to enhancement: what are the ethical limits to interfering with the human body in order to create a more perfect being?

Castrating males in order to generate artistic voices involves sacrificing their sexuality on the altar of music. This raises questions of how to distinguish between ‘improving’ and ‘damaging’ the body, and the resulting health condition remains outside of the definitions of ‘normality’ or ‘disability’. We can also ask how such a right to interfere, change, improve, or damage the body of a person for a given reason can be socially established and legitimized. In the historical case of castrati, the ambiguous reaction of society towards them provides no conclusive answer. During the peak of their popularity in the 18th century, castrati were treated as freaks, cripples, and a threat to stable social roles. They were accused of transvestism and homosexuality, and were also ridiculed and laughed at. But on the other hand, they were widely adored, cherished, loved, and pampered.

Castration today may raise a knowing smile or stir up unpleasant feelings, but it nevertheless continues to fascinate and intrigue. In the last decade of the 20th century, largely due to the success of the film Farinelli (1994) by Gérard Corbiau, the general perception of a castrato was transformed into that of a ‘very pale, brooding romantic figure, with a grown man’s speaking voice and a falsetto singing voice’ (Harris 1997, p. 182).
Thus constructed and presented to society at large, the figure of the castrato represents, especially in popular culture, a supernatural manifestation of a widely held erotic ideal, with the romantic appeal of a mysterious and mesmerizing hero.

Real – rather than imagined – contemporary castrati (such as hijras in South Asia) are still treated with distaste, as ‘an embarrassment’ (Rosselli 1988, p. 14). If a singing castrato today tried to launch a career in opera, he would probably be treated with curiosity, and the audience ‘might take an interest in him as in a freak, but should certainly consider him out of place in any dignified musical environment’ (Rogers 1919, p. 413). These strange beings – neither men nor women, neither angels nor monsters, but simply people (musicians, singers, brothers, uncles) – are still waiting for an understanding of their fate.

The rich literature on castrati that appeared in the 20th century focused on their role in the history of modern music, especially opera. However, critical reading of these publications reveals the hidden ambiguity towards the medical condition of castrati, treated by the authors as either a necessary prerequisite or as an explanation for their extraordinary singing abilities. I attempt to answer the question of how castrati have been perceived and presented in 20th century academic writing in light of the fact that their bodies were artificially altered. Did these authors see castration of would-be singers as an act of disablement (in certain spheres of life) or of enhancement (in others)?

**Historical background**

**Castration throughout history**

The tradition of human castration, although ancient and well-established, remains clouded in a haze of mystery. The intimate and private character of depriving an individual of his external male genitals – known also as gelding or neutering – has always made this topic either shameful or too drastic to be openly discussed in European, male-dominated society. The entirely obscure and legendary origins of castration are attributed to Eastern culture, in particular to the Assyrian Queen Semiramis. By the 4th century AD Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus had already claimed that she was the first person to castrate boys of tender age (Marcellinus AD 353/1862; Scholz 2001, p. 70). In many ancient cultures, for example Chinese, castration was used in warfare as a means of proclaiming victory (Abbott 1999, p. 318; Mitamura 1970, p. 54). This continued into the medieval age in Europe, when castration was also used as a punishment for seducing women.