



The Castrato and His Wife
By Helen Berry
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The *Castrato and His Wife* opens with a brief sketch of a documented evening at the London residence of the Spanish Ambassador, with the famed Farinelli (Carlo Broschi) the prime attraction, and it then switches to another event in 1735, the birth of Giusto Ferdinando Tenducci, with the proviso that we know nothing about that, save that it happened.

It is refreshing to see a historian move so comfortably beyond written texts to embrace visual evidence (Gainsborough, for instance, and engravings too) and the world of *mentalités*. Although Helen Berry claims also to have consulted musical scores, it remains unclear in what respect. No matter: this is a work of social and cultural history, not musicology. (Repeated references to a favoured title role, that of Gluck's Orpheo conflate Italian Orfeo and French Orphée – the latter a tenor version.) Nor is it a biography; perhaps we should think of it as an extended historical sketch, musing on Tenducci's transfer from the anonymous, barely documented

world of the poor to the realm of books, paintings and theatres.

That transfer necessitated “a very particular and brutal kind of sacrifice”, the details shrouded in mystery. The Church and its princes claimed no knowledge of the procedure, yet proved willing to taste of its fruits. Frenchmen and Spaniards blamed Italians; how then to account for French and Spanish castrati? The celebrated musical traveller, Charles Burney, “was told at Milan” that the operation took place “at Venice; at Venice that it was at Bologna”, and so on. For the English, needless to say, the practice was a cruel offshoot of Popery and absolutism, yet they happily sampled the proffered exoticism and vocal fireworks as relief from those provided by Bedlam.

Following the operation, “happily executed” by an itinerant barber-surgeon, Tenducci headed from Siena to a Neapolitan conservatoire, where he was invested by a priest at confession and Mass. He subsequently built a starry career across Europe, taking in debt, scandal and imprisonment, as well as powerful patronage, the title of Count Palatine, and acquaintance with Thomas Arne, Johann Christian Bach and Mozart.

There is much of interest here in terms of gender relations: masculinity (or not), of course, but also the “quasi-dynastic” support afforded from elder to younger singers in the absence of biological fatherhood, and the possibility of extramarital affairs for unhappy wives, which provided “a loophole in the sexual double standard”. Tenducci for his part refused to accept that his “impediment” precluded romantic heterosexual entanglement, leading to elopement, marriage, trial and annulment – the latter much to the relief of the Protestant Ascendancy family of his bride, Dorothea Maunsell. Berry proves a diverting guide in piecing together a narrative from sources and – unavoidably, given their partial nature – speculation.

Tantalisingly – perhaps an unfortunate word in this context – recordings from 1902-03 feature the “last castrato”, Alessandro Moreschi, musical director of the Sistine Choir. They remain objects of controversy, not only thanks to poor recording quality, but also concerning Moreschi's vocal

quality: was it even very good to begin with, or is he caught too late? Moreschi was certainly not an international star *alla* Tenducci, although he exasperated Vatican officials with airs, graces and quixotic cancellations. Moreover, students of the voice vary widely in their assessments – just as they did of course during the 18th century. Nevertheless, we are reminded of the partial nature of evidence, and the role imagination can and must play. If Tenducci's voice “has been difficult, but not impossible, to recover across the centuries”, castrati and their histories remind us that voices may mislead. Proponents of the recent “authenticity” craze – so-called period instruments and performance styles – might nevertheless do well to listen.

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