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Review Article
A Natural Voice?

ROSEEN GILES*

Martha Feldman, *The Castrato: Reflections on Natures and Kinds*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015. 421pp.

Patricia Howard, *The Modern Castrato: Gaetano Guadagni and the Coming of a New Operatic Age*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. 238pp.

The mystery of irrecoverable sound is a problem faced by scholars of early music in nearly every aspect of research. All we have at our disposal is musical notation, often fragmentary, and circumstantial evidence, inevitably incomplete, to help us imagine how the music of the past may have sounded. While the scholarly debates surrounding 'historically informed performance' have largely abandoned the notion that sonic reconstructions of earlier musical repertories – in the manner of museum pieces – are possible or even desirable, the matter of 'unknowables' in the history of music remains central to musicological inquiry. In the introduction to *The Castrato: Reflections on Natures and Kinds*, Martha Feldman writes,

> If there is payoff in the very struggle into that void, however fitful the process and bracketed the results, above all it lies in the exercise itself, in asking the central unanswerable question of what would happen were we to try with all the faculties and resources we can muster to imagine the very thing that we can never locate, much less experience. (xx–xxi)

The value in asking a question for which a definitive answer is certainly impossible poses no great problem from a philosophical standpoint – the unpredictable avenues to which such a question may lead make it inherently worthwhile – but taking such a premise as a starting point is less common in the study of music history.

'Asking the central unanswerable question' raises important issues of methodology. Musicologists write histories of music – the transient art – by interpreting the traces of it that survive. These traces consist of much more than just musical notation. On the one hand, we have evidence that is by nature embedded in a particular time and place: issues which can be unstable and imprecise such as style, taste and practice. On the other, we have tangible evidence for which a greater degree of continuity can be reasonably assumed: musical instruments; architectural and acoustic specifics of performing spaces; and the physiognomy of the human body. We can therefore

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imagine the music of a particular age by connecting our knowledge of its stylistic and cultural practices with a partial understanding of the physical bodies and spaces that produced it. The voice of the castrato is an exceptional case. In the absence of the altered body from which it originated, this sound is uniquely 'unknowable'. Not only did the virtuosic style of singing and practices of ornamentation created by generations of castrati gradually die out by the late nineteenth century, the voice itself is quite literally extinct.

In their recent books on castrato singers, both Martha Feldman and Patricia Howard tackle the fundamental unknowability of the castrato voice. Feldman's work, which originated in the 2007 Ernest Bloch Lectures at the University of California Berkeley, is a comprehensive study tracing the practice of castration for singing from its inception in the 1550s to the death of the last castrato, Alexander Moreschi, in 1922. The scope of Feldman's book is as ambitious as it is extraordinary. By considering the castrato voice as 'kind' – an amalgamation of 'many different sorts joined by a few stubborn physiological and social facts' (xi) – she presents a much-needed survey of the phenomenon by reframing castrati through the various historical and cultural contexts in which they lived. Howard's book takes another approach, one that has been more typical of studies on castrati.[1] *The Modern Castrato* is a detailed study of Gaetano Guadagni (1728–92), the castrato who achieved renown as the first Orfeo in Gluck's celebrated reform opera *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762).[2] While both authors concede that there are aspects of the castrato's history which may indefinitely remain inaccessible, they approach the unknowable with innovative re-evaluations of the evidence that has been left to us; although the sound of a castrato may be impossible to experience first-hand, it is not as elusive as one might assume.

The castrato as other … or not

In order to justify the comprehensive historical scope of *The Castrato*, Feldman defines her idea of the castrato 'kind' as a flexible concept encompassing many types of voices which can be coloured by various historical contexts. As she rightly points out, 'there was no one sort of castrato' (xi), and the diversity of timbre, range, and voice type within this group of voices was just as contingent on cultural conditioning as it was on biological facts such as the age at which castration occurred.

[1] Most recent studies of the castrato have offered case studies of individual singers, or else have been limited to narrower time periods. See, for example, Helen Berry, *The Castrato and his Wife* (Oxford, 2011); Roger Freitas, *Portrait of a Castrato: Politics, Patronage, and Music in the Life of Atto Melani* (Cambridge, 2009); Mary E. Frandsen, '"Eunuchi conjugium": The Marriage of a Castrato in Early Modern Germany', *Early Modern History* 24 (2005), 53–124; Wendy Heller, 'Varieties of Masculinity: Trajectories of the Castrato from the Seventeenth Century', *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 28 (2005), 307–21; and Daniel Heartz, 'Caffarelli's Caprices', in *Music Observed: Studies in Memory of William C. Holmes*, ed. Colleen Reardon and Susan Parisi (Warren, MI, 2004).

[2] There was a rumour, originating in Paris in the 1770s, that it was actually Guadagni, and not Gluck, who composed the music for the role of Orfeo; Howard discredits this on the grounds that 'only two of Guadagni's surviving arias are contributions to *Orfeo*, and they were composed well after 1762, designed to be inserted in pasticcio versions of the opera' (137).

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The tremendous variability in the ways castrati were seen, heard and portrayed is one of the principal challenges to any large-scale study on this subject; a church-employed castrato living at the end of the sixteenth century certainly faced a very different life from that of a performer with regular opera engagements in the early 1760s. The book is split into three more or less equal parts, titled, respectively, 'Reproduction', 'Voice' and 'Half-Light', and each of the larger parts is further divided into two chapters. Feldman summarises the impressive, almost overwhelming, scope of *The Castrato* when she writes:

> This book suggests that while the resolute infertility of testicular castration made filiation of wealth problematic, it was strangely but necessarily coupled with many uniquely efficacious forms of cultural exchange in which castrati participated, and in such varied domains as music making, composing, reputation building, networking, power brokering, courting, and estate and legacy building. (xii)

The reader may wonder how such an extensive set of topics can be threaded together – the practicalities of 'music making, composing, reputation building, networking, power brokering, courting, and estate and legacy building' changed fundamentally from the sixteenth century to the twentieth. But Feldman's focus on the economies of culture casts a new light on the castrato's 'difference', one that allows her to view the subject comprehensively, holistically and without limiting the discussion to a particular historical moment. The castrato's infertility did not bar him from participating in the cultural networks in which he lived. Rather, it forced him to find alternative methods of doing so and therefore to define himself in relation to these societal norms, a process Feldman describes in critical-theoretical terms: 'he is the inverted self, the Other that presses up against, antagonizes, and thereby creates the self' (24). Feldman's approach to the castrato, as different from yet operating alongside other singers with similar career trajectories, thus focuses the reader's attention on the fabric of both historical, social and cultural networks, and the normative or non-normative ways in which musicians navigated them.

Without being strictly chronological, Feldman's book draws evidence from various points in the history of the castrato to justify the idea – put forth by Roger Freitas in his 2009 study on the singer Atto Melani – that castrati were decidedly male and not sexually 'continuous' or 'ambiguously sexed'; 'the symbolic and cultural meanings of that maleness are braided together here with empirical evidence in a dialectical rhythm that modulates this book' (Feldman, xvii). These 'cultural meanings' that help to 'modulate' the book comprise Feldman's central themes: the idea that 'castration for singing was widely framed as a form of sacrifice entailing both renunciation and gain' (xii); the unusual place of castrati in the economy of patriliny; the voice of the castrato in relation to performance and composition; and the exclusive relationship between castrati and monarchs, by which, according to Feldman, the singers 'participate[d] in a kind of virtual diarchy'.[3]

[3] While Feldman gives many illuminating examples of castrati portraying monarchs on stage, her suggestion that the singers acted as 'deluxe' doubles – mirrors that risked usurping the power of sovereigns – might be more convincing if the evidence for interactions between monarchs and

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Feldman presents these larger themes and expands upon them with a virtuosic command of the historical evidence, though the organization of the book, or perhaps its 'dialectical rhythm', carries with it peculiar challenges. The reader risks missing some of Feldman's most fascinating connections if the book is not read cover to cover; Feldman's chapters (with titles such as 'Red Hot Voice' and 'Castrato De Luxe: Blood, Gifts, and Goods') are thematic, open-ended and persuasively coherent only after a careful reading of a substantial portion of the book. In Chapter 5, for instance – 'Cold Man, Money Man, Big Man Too' – Feldman uses a discussion of castrato bodies as 'cold' according to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century medical discourses to lead the reader to a crossroads in the history of the castrato. The eighteenth century witnessed the creation of two lineages (Feldman argues): the 'flamboyant line' of Luigi Marchesi, whose virtuosic style was increasingly to be denounced for its cold artifice; and the legacy of Gaetano Guadagni, whose voice was prized instead for its 'naturalness' (188–9). The contrast between 'red hot' voices and 'cold' bodies is aptly struck to push the reader towards a reconsideration of physiognomy and musical style, but it requires close scrutiny of the book as a whole in order to become clear. Another instance of this concerns what is arguably one of the most thought-provoking of Feldman's interventions, a thesis alluded to throughout the book and finally brought into focus in the last chapter ('Shadow Voices, Castrato and Non'): 'it is no exaggeration to say that the entire classical foundation of virtuosic solo singing in the West … owes its existence to the musical traditions and practices of castrati' (xi–xii). This idea brings together much of Feldman's discussion of the castrato's place in musical, political and social history: although they were incapable of having biological heirs, castrati certainly had much to leave the singing traditions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Patricia Howard's *The Modern Castrato: Gaetano Guadagni and the Coming of a New Operatic Age* presents invaluable new research on the life and legacy of Guadagni, Gluck's first Orpheus. Howard provides a survey of Guadagni's exceptional career by filling in important details regarding the singer's biography – including a baptismal record discovered in the parish archive of Lodi, the castrato's will and an inventory of goods at his death – which have until recently been unknown or unscrutinised.[4] If Feldman's book largely avoids chronology, Howard's places it front and centre: *The Modern Castrato* traces Guadagni's life season by season, with clear subheadings in each chapter presenting evidence for Guadagni's whereabouts and activities from year to year. Howard's book follows Guadagni from his early apprenticeship in London, where he sang in more oratorios under Handel's direction than any other castrato, through to his operatic career in Vienna, and finally to his retirement in

castrati was the primary focus (in the form of the economy of gift-giving and other pecuniary tensions between singers and their employers). That these tensions are the result of Feldman's 'virtual diarchy', as opposed to being simply the result of ambitious musicians occasionally demanding unreasonable compensation is not always made clear.

[4] An image of the baptismal record is reproduced in Figure 1.1 (17), as is Guadagni's record of death, given as Figure 11.1 (190). The singer's will is transcribed in Appendix C. See also Patricia Howard, 'Happy Birthday, Cosimo Gaetano Guadagni!', *Musical Times* 148 (2007), 93–6.

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Padua. Chapters Four ('Guadagni the Actor'), Six ('Guadagni the Composer') and Twelve ('Guadagni as Singer') provide fascinating interludes by focusing on specific aspects of Guadagni's career, aspects that were extraordinary for the castrato, and that contributed in a substantial way to his fame. Whereas Feldman's work is primarily concerned with some of the most elusive, unusual or even grotesque issues surrounding the history of the castrato, Howard seeks, as far as the historical archive allows, to give a complete portrait of Guadagni's life in late eighteenth-century Europe; she focuses equally on the exceptional and the quotidian. Particularly effective is Howard's discussion of Guadagni's small theatre of marionettes, an elaborate and surprisingly well-documented pastime that the singer turned to towards the end of his life; Guadagni continued to play Orfeo in miniature, even after his voice had faded and his career as an opera singer had ended.[5] In a phrase that is as delightful as it is tragic, Howard cites Gluck himself as having remarked, 'Nothing but a change in the mode of expression is needed to turn my aria "Che farò senza Euridice" into a dance for marionettes.'[6]

Howard's nuanced analysis of Guadagni's role in the complex business of theatre and opera acknowledges the singer's status as an outsider, in terms of both nationality and physiognomy, and also as an insider, whose reputation amongst composers, patrons and audiences was built on far more than his status as a castrato. Particularly revealing are her accounts of Guadgani's scandalous involvement with an unlicensed opera in London during the 1770–1 season (Chapter Eight, 'Success and Scandal in London, 1769–1771'), and his influential contributions to Gluck and Calzabigi's reform opera movement (see especially Chapter Six, 'Guadagni in Vienna, 1762–1765'). Howard summarises her scope and aims as follows:

> My intention in undertaking this investigation was to address two questions: how far was Guadagni's career typical of a high-ranking opera singer in the second half of the century, and what made Guadagni unique, ground-breaking, or modern? By tracking the events of Guadagni's professional life from season to season, I have tried to show a career path typical of many itinerant singers of this period. (15)

Readers will concur that this careful survey of Guadagni's career will yield many fruitful comparisons to the lives of other eighteenth-century singers, castrated or not.

While Howard's study is more circumscribed than Feldman's, the two are equally successful at disrupting long-standing orthodoxies related to the castrato. Yet to read Howard's case study alongside Feldman's 'Meditations on Natures and Kinds' is also to meditate on the ways in which 'nature' is as variable in its ties to a given historical moment as is 'kind' in its relationship to human physiognomy. Both studies call into question the idea that boys who were castrated to preserve their high voices came from impoverished Italian families who undertook the procedure in order to

[5] Guadagni suffered a stroke around 1785, and subsequently lost the ability to speak. Remarkably, he continued to sing in the Basilica del Santo in Padua, vocalising wordlessly and still attracting curious tourists (Howard, 185).

[6] Gluck to the Duke of Braganza, October 30, 1770 (Preface to *Paride ed Elena*, Vienna, 1770); quoted and translated in Howard, 177.

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ameliorate their financial straits. In her first chapter, on the myths and origins of castrati, Feldman claims that 'the business of having a son castrated is not reducible to a quest for survival or improvement. Always mediating the phenomenon were Catholic religious ideas, often intermixed with rural folk beliefs as well as familial strategies for distributing wealth and functions within a system of primogeniture, none of the strands of which can be disentangled' (7). As Howard's study shows, the case of Guadagni provides further evidence on this point. Guadagni's family was not impoverished, and his parents' choice to have him castrated as a boy had more to do with their confidence that their child would have a successful musical career than it did with economic desperation – Guadagni's three sisters and brother were also opera singers.[7]

If Feldman and Howard would agree that economic necessity was not the sole motivator for castration, the authors diverge sharply on the matter of how such acts were understood. Feldman chooses to focus on the sacrificial implications of this act, as a 'kind of indirect symbolic imitation of Christ's passion' (7). Howard, by contrast, writes that Guadagni's castration 'must have been an informed choice by parents who knew the profession from the inside, and to whom it might have seemed of little more significance than choosing an instrument for a child' (2). On this point both Howard and Feldman challenge the reader's historical imagination: it seems equally difficult to accept that permanently mutilating one's child was comparable to enrolling him in a course of lessons on the flute or violin, as it is to see the castrated singer as 'reminiscent in its sacrificial aspects of the effigy of the murdered man carried about at Carnival', whose voice 'might thus be imagined as the audible approximation of a wailing Christ'.[8] Feldman bases her interpretation of castration for singing as a form of sacrifice – one involving the agency of several parties including the boy himself, his parents, teachers, priests, etc. – on the theories about sacrifice of Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss. Similar to ordination into the Catholic priesthood, castration for singing involved both the renunciation of progeny and a transformation of identity; like members of the clergy who could take on new names after ordination, castrati tended to renounce their family names and take on those of their teachers, often in diminutive form (i.e., Caffaro's student Caffarelli, or Porpora's, Porporino). Guadagni was an exception here, retaining his own name, and apparently not apprenticed to any singing teacher (Howard, 19).[9]

[7] Gaetano's brother was the tenor Giuseppe Guadagni, and his three sisters, Anna, Angiola, and Lavinia Guadagni, were all sopranos.

[8] The first quotation is from Feldman, 24–5, and the second from 45. 'Carried out in a kind of indirect symbolic imitation of Christ's passion, such sacrifices were a more viable alternative in a world where want and famine were rife and where mutilation, whether as physical therapy or punishment or the consequence of harsh labor, disease, and other misfortunes, was common place. That virtually all castrati did sing primarily or (more often) exclusively for the church speaks to this issue of castration as sacrifice in the properly Catholic sense' (Feldman, 7).

[9] Feldman makes her connection between sacrifice and religious penitence rather forcefully, even sarcastically, by at one point quoting in passing the Nicene Creed: 'In thinking about the broader context for these practices, it is important to bear in mind that castrations for singing, beginning well before 1600, took place only in Italy, geographic heartland of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church' (xii).

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Guadagni was exceptional in several other ways as well, not the least of which was his physical appearance. The few surviving likenesses of the singer are included as figures in Howard's text, notably an image of Guadagni on trial before Sir John Fielding in 1771 (4). The physical characteristics that were typical of castrati – including unusually large lower jaws and ribcages – are now understood to have resulted primarily from testosterone deprivation during adolescence.[10] Yet it seems that Guadagni's appearance was, for the most part, free of such 'deformities'. The Irish tenor Michael Kelly described Guadagni as 'the handsomest man of his kind I ever saw', and the singer's obituary noted that he was 'without those bodily defects that are usually seen in castratos' (Howard, 3, 191). Though no formal portrait survives of the singer, Guadagni seems to have been fortunate in that he avoided being cast in satirical likeness; he was ever praised for his 'elegant figure' and 'his countenance replete with beauty, intelligence and dignity' (3). Such seeming immunity from caricature was by no means typical for castrati. Feldman's analysis of Anton Maria Zanetti's drawings from the 1720s brings to light a complex web of fascination, revilement and satire regarding the unusual and varied bodies of well-known castrati including Nicola Tricarico, Farinelli and Senesino.[11] Whereas Feldman sees such grotesquery as central to eighteenth-century representations of the castrato, Howard claims that 'Guadagni and his coevals had the advantage of living in a period when audiences had become used to the castrato persona. Distaste, satire and ridicule had gradually fallen away, and the singers found themselves increasingly accepted into all levels of society' (211).

Despite a touch of 'arrogance', Guadagni seems to have lacked the temperamental nature frequently ascribed to other castrati – exemplified by Senesino's outrageous demands of the king of Naples in 1739–40 (Feldman, 165–6).[12] In what seems like a rather honourable act of sacrifice, Charles Burney related that Guadagni's chief 'offence was to refuse to interrupt the performance of Orfeo to acknowledge applause or to give encores: this attitude was at odds with the conventions of his age, but was entirely in the spirit of Gluck's reform' (Howard, 7–8). Guadagni was not only aware of changing practices in acting and in opera during the mid- to late eighteenth century, but by his performance choices was also instrumental in bringing many of these changes about – and herein lies his claims to being a 'modern' artist.

[10] Buried in endnote 25 of Feldman's book (278) is a reference to the somewhat gruesome but revelatory study by Maria Giovanna Belcastro et al., 'Hyperostosis Frontalis Interna (HFI) and Castration: The Case of the Famous Singer Farinelli (1705–1782)', *Journal of Anatomy* 219 (2011), 632–7, consisting of an anatomical study of Farinelli's remains, exhumed in 2006.

[11] The histories of the castrato and of satirical representations are here intertwined, whether through caricature drawings, or, as Feldman suggests, in the comic but terrifying character of Pulcinella (discussed in Chapter One, 'Of Strange Births and Comic Kin'). See also the reproductions of Zanetti's drawings given as Figures 24–6 and 39–41 in Feldman's study.

[12] See William C. Holmes, *Opera Observed: Views of a Florentine Impresario in the Early Eighteenth Century* (Chicago, 1993), 136–9. In the chapter 'Castrato De Luxe: Blood, Gifts, and Goods', Feldman also recounts the legend of Caffarelli snubbing King Louis XV over the apparently inadequate gift of only one gold snuffbox (166). An equally delicious anecdote can be found in Charles Baroe's story regarding the castrato Tenducci (the subject of Helen Berry's groundbreaking study), who was said to carry with him a red velvet purse containing the remains of his testicles.

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Howard, like Feldman, grants a great deal of agency to castrato singers in the shaping of opera history; instead of focusing only on their necessary exclusion from conventional social and economic practices, Howard draws our attention to the castrato's unique methods of participating in them. Despite his apparently atypical personality, there are, however, several colourful tales of Guadagni's scandalous behaviour, including one told by Forkel that the singer, in a room with his mistress, once kept a king waiting, exclaiming, 'Let him wait until I've finished!' Whether or not Guadagni was able to 'finish', and the extent to which he could please his mistress, is, of course, left to the reader's imagination.[13]

Natural voices

How then should we approach the castrato voice itself, a voice which Howard describes as 'triply denied us'? 'Not only is the sound unavailable to us in the same way that Bach's organ playing, or Paganini's violin playing or Chopin's piano playing are, but while physical instruments survive, from which certain deductions about timbre, tonal range and volume can be made, singers leave no instruments' (Howard, 192). Yet there are ways that we can make what Howard calls 'imaginative contact' (192) with this lost voice type, and even aural contact, in a limited way. The voice of the last castrato, Alessandro Moreschi, is preserved on twenty-four recordings made in 1902 and 1904, recordings that Feldman calls 'castrato voice ground zero'.[14] Despite the fact that these recordings bring together a technology in its infancy with a singer in his dotage, and, as a consequence, do not capture what must have been the full resonance of Moreschi's voice at his prime, they are nevertheless precious pieces of evidence. Feldman draws a parallel to transmission debates within medieval musicology, suggesting that we imagine these sounded historical documents as 'Homeric fragments' and 'aural palimpsests, the scraped and funnelled parchments of an acoustic past, much like fragmentary parchments of Beneventan chant or Notre Dame polyphony' (81).[15] Though she does not elaborate on this connection, arguments about the precise nature of 'oral' vs 'written' musical evidence – distinctions, or lack thereof, between the two, which have been crucial to the study of medieval chant – may help us to reconsider both the notated and the recorded fragments we have of the castrato voice. Feldman's idea of an 'aural palimpsest' returns in her discussion of nineteenth-century pedagogical texts on singing, including those by Manuel Garcia Jr and Domenico Corri, a subject addressed in what is arguably the most successful chapter of *The Castrato*: 'Red Hot Voice'. How exactly do we read the notation found in these books to reconstruct a voice that is equal parts training and biology? Feldman masterfully uses these treatises not only as sources for information on performance practice, but also as evidence to reconstruct the unique

[13] Johann Nikolaus Forkel, *Musikalischer Almanach für Deutschland* (Leipzig, 1783), 130.

[14] These recordings, as well as several others of soprano singers from the early twentieth century, and video footage of in-use vocal chords can be accessed through *The Castrato*'s companion website: www.ucpress.edu/go/castrato.

[15] On the reference to Homeric fragments and medieval musicology, see Leo Treitler, 'Homer and Gregory: The Transmission of Epic Poetry and Plainchant', *The Musical Quarterly* 60 (1974), 333–72.

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physical qualities and registral shifts of the castrato voice; the voice by this estimation can be situated historically even though we do not have access to it directly by recording, or even indirectly by existing human physiognomy. Such a method strikes me as both innovative and particularly effective for such an elusive subject, despite Feldman's insistence that she is not interested in 'talking about old-school notions of musical style' but instead 'something closer to what Roland Barthes called the grain of the voice, something that falls "outside the realm of textuality" and relates on one side to the production of voice and on the other to a "drastic" experience of its performance'.[16] Regrettably, some of the most compelling score facsimiles presented in this chapter, including an excerpt from Garcia's *Traité complet de l'art du chant* (Paris, 1847) of a romanza by Francesco Morlacchi as sung by the castrato Giambattista Velluti (123), are so tiny and dark as to be all but illegible. Several other images included in the book are inexplicably dark, most unfortunate of all being the reproduction of the aria 'Ombra adorata, aspetta' from Niccolò Zingarelli's *Giulietta e Romeo* as adapted and embellished by Girolamo Crescentini (1762–1846), the castrato famous for astonishing Napoleon with his performance of 28 April 1804.[17]

Rethinking the few traces we have of the castrato voice can also suggest new ways of using anecdotal evidence. Both Feldman and Howard refer to Charles Burney's story regarding the castrati Rauzzini and Guadagni, who, while at Nymphenburg, apparently tested some of Tartini's famous difference tones by singing together in the music room of the royal baths: there, Burney recounts, the two castrati 'went successfully through all Tartini's experiments, in order, by sustaining with their voices consonant intervals, to produce a *third sound*, which is generated in the air, and is their true fundamental base'.[18] In addition to giving us an intimate glimpse into the daily activities of two castrati flexing their vocal muscles, the story grants us, as Howard points out, valuable evidence for Guadagni's 'perfect intonation' (157). The account is extraordinary for other reasons as well; Feldman sees the two singers as representatives of two diverging traditions, placing Rauzzini in the 'flamboyant line' of castrati, whose extroverted virtuosity contrasted the 'naturalness' of Guadagni's style (189).

If the male body mutilated through castration is inevitably understood as unnatural in view of modern gender binaries, it is ever surprising that written accounts of the castrato voice describe it as singularly natural, even in the final years of its dominance within opera.[19] Reading both Feldman and Howard's contributions in tandem, the

[16] Thankfully, Feldman also clarifies that she is 'not talking about anything so slippery as a psychoanalytic Lacanian voice, the voice as an "acoustic mirror" of the listening "subject", the object of a drive, or the uncanny space between mechanism and cause' (79).

[17] This is found again in the edition by Garcia in the *Traité complet de l'art du chant* (Paris, 1847), reproduced in Feldman, 225. The notes of the embellished version of the recitative and aria are largely illegible in this image.

[18] Quoted and translated in Howard, 157.

[19] 'And inseparably too the castrated man is at odds with an emerging sexual binarism and a new set of representational codes that insist that things seen and heard should be true to nature, and hence that representations on stage not be disjunct from the bodies doing the representing' (Feldman, xxi).

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reader is struck by the way in which the castrato's difference has been interpreted historically both as aberration – explored in Feldman's early chapters – and as ideal, chronicled by Howard in the surviving accounts of Guadagni's voice. Burney famously wrote of Guadagni's voice as 'natural and elegant'.[20] The second volume of the *General History of Music* records Burney's struggle to convey what exactly made Guadagni's voice so subtle and captivating:

> I frequently tried to analyse the pleasure he communicated to the audience, and found it chiefly arose from his artful manner of diminishing the tones of his voice, like the dying notes of the Æolian harp. Most other singers captivate by a swell or *messa di voce*; but Guadagni, after beginning a note or passage with all the force he could safely exert, fined it off to a thread, and gave it all the effect of extreme distance.[21]

It is telling in this context that Burney attempted to describe the castrato's voice for posterity by means of an analogy to that most natural of instruments, the Æolian harp. Yet Guadagni's perceived 'natural'-ness was not simply attributable to the tone quality and registral agility of his voice; it referred also to the style of singing and acting for which he became famous. Guadagni found success on the operatic stage largely because he rejected the 'artifice' and 'cold virtuosity' associated with Farinelli's generation in favour of the 'natural', comparably simple declamation embraced by the reform opera movement of Gluck and Calzabigi. As one listener noted, Guadagni 'always gives pleasure but rarely astonishes'.[22] Not only did Handel develop in Guadagni 'the restrained lyricism that was to become his trademark', Calzabigi confirmed that the role of Orfeo in Gluck's opera was 'tailor-made' for the singer: 'the role was written to display the power of a supremely eloquent singer; there is an abundance of passionate declamation, and the vocal lines show a simplified lyricism closer to folk song than the instrumentally-conceived vocal style of opera seria' (Howard, 99).

Despite the marks of his 'kind', then, it seems Guadgani's voice was ideal not for the musical traits usually associated with castrati – trills, cadenzas, long *ritornelli* and astonishing passagework – but instead for the stark lyricism closely tied with the opera reform movement. Howard connects Guadagni's 'natural' voice to important developments in acting technique, especially in late eighteenth-century England, where Guadagni spent several of his formative years. Burney emphasised David Garrick's influence on Guadagni, and in particular the actor's abandonment of the stiff or stylised movements of a previous generation, in favour of the gestural evocation of strong emotion.[23] But Howard suggests the possibility that the role

[20] Burney, *A General History of Music, from the Earliest Ages to the Present Period* (London, 1776), 1: 863; quoted in Howard, 199.

[21] Burney, *General History*, 2: 876; quoted in Howard, 195.

[22] This was written by Gian Maria Ortes in his letter to Hasse dated 31 December 1768; quoted and translated in Howard, 120.

[23] Lord Mount Edgcumbe also commented on this upon visiting the aged Guadagni in Padua in 1784: 'When he sang as first man at our opera he was uncommonly handsome, and a remarkably good actor; Garrick himself having taken pains to instruct him'. Mount Edgcumbe, *Musical Reminiscences*, 4th edn (London, 1834), 34–6; quoted in Howard, 175.

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Garrick played in Guadagni's development as an actor has perhaps been exaggerated, pointing out that the singer spent more time learning from Italians Pietro Pertici and Filippo Laschi than Garrick, and that 'Guadagni's refusal to give encores might have been a lesson he learned from Laschi, who "never sought applause at the expense of Nature"'.[24]

This idea that the castrato voice was 'natural' in its sound is culturally embedded; if audiences of the mid eighteenth century were 'long accustomed to the sound' of the castrato and could hear it without too much unease (Howard, 41), then listeners of the nineteenth century began using a different type of language to describe it, betraying an increased reluctance to accept such a sound as 'natural'. In an absorbing passage titled 'Heavy Metal', Feldman cites several descriptions wherein castrato voices are compared to metals, including Schopenhauer's account of Crescentini's singing as 'supernaturally beautiful' with a 'silver purity', and Franz Haböck's comparisons of Moreschi's voice to gold and crystal (Feldman, 107, 83n., 86n.). Indeed, such references to metallic voices suggest that the instrumental transcriptions of castrato arias are much more than overlooked witnesses to an emerging work-concept.[25] Rather, they reveal a paradigm shift in the language and materials of timbre and tone colour. It is no coincidence that the soprano Emma Calvé (1858–1942) coveted above all the mysterious 'flute tones' she heard from her castrato teacher Domenico Mustafà (1829–1912), not long after Teobald Böhm (1794–1881) had developed a new design for the flute, which employed a unified mechanism of keys, and, most significantly, new materials of gold and silver in the place of wood.[26] When the castrato's voice changed from being natural to being metallic, and when the virtuosity associated with it was perceived no longer as marvellous but rather as unnerving, both body and practice collectively began to die. Upon hearing the choir of the Sistine Chapel in 1839, Charles Gounod described the sound as initially disconcerting but ultimately captivating. He asked himself:

> was it the style of the compositions themselves, an entirely new experience for me, or was it the distinctive sonority of those special voices that I was hearing for the first time, or rather the firm attack, verging on harshness … I was not dismayed by my first impressions, bizarre as they were. I returned again and again until at last I could not stay away.[27]

[24] Howard, 76; the source of this quotation regarding Laschi's stage presence is not specified in the text.

[25] Both Feldman and Howard address the issue of transcription/re-composition/embellishment of opera arias famously performed by particular castrati and subsequently notated for publication: 'On this view, scores were not just intentional objects, nor were they just records of performances, presentation objects, or souvenirs, as the case may be, but rather they were templates for audience/performer interactions' (Feldman, 134); see especially Feldman's discussion of Crescentini's 're-composition' of Zingarelli's aria 'Ombra adorata, aspetta' (224) and Howard's consideration of Guadagni's 'extemporaneous effusions' as compositions (139).

[26] '"Fourth tones" in this gloss become something like the "third kinds", notes that exceed the usual registral triptych conventionally described for human voices, much as humans can exceed or defy a "typical" sexual dyad. Fourth tones are strange and other. White and cool like Calvé's flute tones, they lie for her beyond nature or sex, beyond earth, beyond knowing' (Feldman, 128).

[27] Charles Gounod, *Mémoires d'un artiste* (Paris, 1896), 99–100; quoted and translated in Howard, 193.

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Gounod's confusion about the 'distinctive sonority of those special voices' may serve to draw our attention to this double-edged sword of physiognomy vs practice; it is not surprising that he could not quite disentangle the voice from the composition because the two contribute equally to its 'distinctive sonority' and are thus inextricable one from the other.

In her final chapter, Feldman returns to the paradox of 'reproduction' in the history of the castrato, and to the idea that, although biologically sterile, castrati nevertheless participated in lineages: social, economic and especially musical. She cites the example of Honoré de Balzac's character Marianina – the pure-voiced grandniece of the fictional castrato La Zambinella from the 1830 novella *Sarrasine*. Balzac's description of the young woman's voice is telling: no less divine than that of her uncle, she 'was able to bring the same level of purity of sound, sensibility, rightness of movement and pitch, soul and science, correctness and feeling'.[28] La Zambinella is childless to be sure, though he is certainly not without an heir; his niece is both musical and genetic kin, having inherited his art and possibly his fortune, as castrati were known to pass their worldly goods to the children of siblings.[29] Likewise, Feldman suggests, the singers of the twentieth century were musical heirs to the generations of castrati, who bequeathed them an almost unearthly fusion of style and technique that is knowable today only through historical fragments. While Feldman's and Howard's studies, by their respective methods, bring us closer to the 'unknowable' sound of the castrato voice, they also invite us to consider the more fundamental historical and cultural implications of such a subject. The history of the castrato brings to light the unending human fascination with the boundaries between 'natural' sounds and 'unnatural' bodies, reminding us that these categories are dynamic, culturally determined and anything but fixed.

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[28] Honoré de Balzac, *Sarrasine*, in Roland Barthes, *S/Z: An Essay*, trans. Richard Miller (New York, 1974), 223; quoted in Feldman, 258.

[29] In his will, Guadagni specified his nephew Vincenzo Guadagni as his universal heir; see Howard's transcription, 188–9.

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