THE CASTRATO SACRIFICE: WAS IT JUSTIFIED?

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One of the greatest mysteries in the history of music is the castrato singers of the Baroque era. Castration has existed for many thousands of years, but for the first time in history, it was used for artistic purposes. Who were these men who seemingly gave up their masculinity for the sake of music? By examining the time period and circumstances in which these musicians lived, an answer may be found. Exploring the economic, social, and political structure of the 17th and 18th centuries may reveal the mindset behind such a strange yet accepted practice. The in-depth study of their lives and careers will help lift the veil of mystery that surrounds them. Was their physical sacrifice a blessing or a curse? Was it worth it?
Perhaps the greatest mystery in the history of opera is the Italian castrato singers of the Baroque period. These strange phenomena can more easily be seen as ethereal voices whose mystique cannot be duplicated by any amount of modern training or specialized technique, rather than as human musicians who simply wanted to perform or serve the Church with their unique talent. Castration has existed throughout history since Ancient Egypt, and even was present in Ancient Egyptian myth, particularly in the story of Isis and Osiris. Although it was historically used for such sinister purposes as punishment, revenge, and even as the “spoil” of victory, castration was also used for “higher” purposes such as achieving a spiritual and pure life without “physical” distraction, and even for political gain. I will explore the rise to power of eunuchs in the Byzantine Empire, who held almost every possible office, save that of emperor himself. But the castrato singers seem to be the only example of castration used for “artistic” merit. Was it just musically minded? Or were there other more compelling reasons for this sordid practice to take place?

Who were these men who seemingly gave up so much for the sake of music? Under what circumstances would a father allow his son to undergo such a mutilation? Was he sacrificing his son for the good of the family? Or providing for his son’s future the best way he knew how? To examine questions like these, the circumstances and thought processes of the period must be understood. In modern times it is practically impossible for us to conceive of such a practice. Yet in the 18th century, economic, social, political, and even musical situations were vastly different. Due to the so-called “crisis of the 17th century,” which ravaged Europe with wars, plagues, and devastating droughts, people were forced to resort to “creative forms of survival.” High taxation rates, deindustrialization, and a new practice of refuudalization drove families to take extreme measures to avoid abject poverty. Many other factors concerning children themselves were
different as well. Family units were not the same as they are in modern times, which may possibly shed some light on what type of situation might drive a family to go the route of castration in order to survive. By exploring the economic and social situations that might cause a family to choose this option, it can be determined whether or not it was truly a voluntary decision of the boys or terrible sacrifice imposed by an uncaring family.

The lives of the castrati themselves will be examined. The most successful castrati became perhaps the first international celebrities, commanding outrageous salaries, lavishly detailed contracts, and even enjoying great political influence at times. What were their daily lives like growing up as these strange creatures, separated from their families in conservatories and churches? Were they better off? What about the less successful singers? Did they have comfortable lives as well? By exploring specific lives of such castrati as Farinelli, Balatri, the author of the only known castrato autobiography, and Senesino, Handel’s favorite, and naturally the great Farinelli, who became perhaps the most celebrated singer of all time, perhaps an answer can be found.

I attempt to delve into the psyche of the castrati, and how the operation may have affected how they saw life, and how they were seen by society. Were they worshipped? Feared? Resented? It is difficult to determine exactly how they may have felt, as they cannot be interviewed directly. But through their personal correspondence and observing the details of their miraculous careers, particularly the cosmopolitan travels of Balatri, we can formulate a theory.

The world of the castrati is shrouded in a veil of mystery. Perhaps some light can be shed on these strange creatures by exploring their way of life, the times in which they lived, and their unique struggles and triumphs will. Discussions with a modern day castrato will give a bit of
unique insight. The vast influence on music in general and particularly the history of opera of these amazing singers cannot be denied. Was the sacrifice they made personally worth the possible professional glory? Was what they actually sacrificed a life of poverty and an uncertain future? Were they better off? Was it worth it?

To begin, the process itself should be examined as history. How long has this strange phenomenon taken place? Castration certainly was not a new practice in the 16th century. Ancient Greek, Roman, Near East, Indian, and Egyptian sources give us rather graphic depictions of castration. In ancient mythology, castration was even a prevalent practice among the gods. Castration was seen as a symbol of the existence of cosmic forces, a fitting punishment for battles that were lost, or simply as a means of plain and simple revenge. A story that has been weaved into opera, the mythical tale of Isis and Osiris, was steeped in this practice. Osiris himself and Seth, his son, were both said to have been castrated. Mythology dictates that Osiris’s condition was completely reversed by Isis. She somehow replicated his phallus, which became a sacred symbol thereafter. Consecrated replicas were later carried in festivals of Pamyles for the purpose of immortalizing Isis’s miraculous deed. Castration has found its way into many rites and rituals, even in modern times. Every July 26th, women in Rome will carry a fascinum replica in a solemn processional to the temple of Venus, placing it upon the goddesses’ breast. Evidence of observance of this type of ritual seems to be present in all Mediterranean cultures. Castration was not something to be ashamed of. Androgyny was also very prevalent and important to mythology, particularly later Greek mythology. It was a characteristic feature of the gods, and an androgynous being was seen as an exalted creature (Scholz 2001).
The procedure had been used for different purposes, some sinister, some even “pious,” since ancient times. The reasons for castration varied according to the culture and times of the period. Tracing the origins of such practices is not an easy task, and in some cases impossible.

The more sinister reasons for castration can be quite bone-chilling. According to some twelfth and thirteenth century accounts, many times castration was used as punishment or revenge. Narratives describe many instances where men were castrated by fellow men upon discovering an extramarital sexual affair with one of their kinswomen. Although these affairs were generally considered to be consensual, the kinsman’s honor was at stake, and therefore castration was deemed a suitable punishment for such an offense. Adultery was also a recognized offense punishable by “justified” castration, although the courts did try and control the actual act of such punishments. Canon law even supported these ideas under more specific circumstances. A Christian European found guilty of an adulterous affair with a Saracen woman was punishable by castration according to Canon Law. Further tales of castration involve even clerics and monks. They could be castrated for sexual crimes just as a layperson. Terrifyingly detailed accounts of such situations, some even involving nuns, are told by Aelred Rievaulx, an abbot serving from the years 1147-1167. This so-called “judicial castration” was used in many aspects of life as a punishment, particularly for sexually-related offenses. Ancient Babylonian law even contained references to this practice. The Code of Hammurabi (1728-1686 B.C.), one of the oldest surviving examples of legislation, makes a specific reference to eunuchs and castration being used as a form of punishment (Cohen-Wheeler 1997).

Castration was not always used as a punishment, however. The procedure was also used for “noble” religious purposes as well. The story is told of an early patristic philosopher by the name of Origen. He actually castrated himself to “become a eunuch for the kingdom of heaven’s
sake” (Cohen-Wheeler 1997). Other tales recount the stories of divine intervention when it came to castration. A Carthusian monk and bishop of the knightly class in Burgundy was said to have been castrated by a descending saint from heaven. He was relieved of his “intense sexual desire” which granted him “only calm from that moment on” (Cohen-Wheeler 1997).

It is somewhat difficult to determine the origins of these beliefs. The practice of castration was usually steeped in religious myths and rites that are no longer used or believed by modern societies, and in some cases are simply lost. This, accompanied by the fact that these beliefs were considered to be quite sacred, therefore often times quite secret as well. When used as religious rite, castration was generally tied to the idea of sacrifice. Certain necessary traits to make one more holy and spiritual were desired. Among the utmost of importance among these traits was the idea of celibacy. Castration served as a type of “insurance” policy in order to place a guarantee on one’s chastity, and therefore insure holiness. Other “wishes” such as fertility were also considered. This may seem ironic considering that castration renders one infertile. But the fertility that was to be “insured” through this strange castration belief was not individual, but “earthly.” The belief was that through one sacrificing one’s own procreation, “one could assure a fruitful and prosperous Earth.” Castration was seen as a way to fertilize the “Earth goddess,” seen as the “giver of life” (Scholz 2001). The process was also often thought of as an offering to the gods. Offering up one’s virility could be seen as the ultimate sacrifice. These were the kinds of ideas that led to the creation of eunuchs in the first place.

But what types of lives could these early eunuchs expect? They were not created for a specialized purpose like the castrati singers, so it is easy to assume that they may have had extremely humble and unimportant lives. This assumption could not be farther from the truth. But castration did not necessarily institute a life sentence of humility and servitude. It is a
common misconception that early eunuchs were all merely “bedchamber attendants.” In fact, these eunuchs held many varieties of positions, including priests, scholars, physicians, ascetics, and even as senior officials at the courts of both eastern and western rulers. At the court of China’s last emperor, over 2,000 eunuchs were employed. Although technically emasculated, this did not stop the eunuchs from achieving positions of great power. In the Byzantine Empire, they were able to rise to the very highest levels of the imperial hierarchy. These men held every possible office, except for that of emperor himself. (Scholz 2001).

A significant promoter and said to be “inventor” of castration was Semiramis (Scholz). She was an Assyrian queen in 9th century B.C. Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus stated that:

finally [came] the throng of eunuchs, beginning with the old men and ending with the boys, sallow and disfigured by the distorted form of their members; so that, wherever anyone goes, beholding the troops of mutilated men, he would curse the memory of that Queen Semiramis of old, who was the first of all to castrate young males… (Scholz 2001)

Queen Semiramis obviously did not actually “invent” the procedure of castration, yet during her rule she personally promoted eunuchism. She surrounded herself with castrated catamites (term for the young lover of an older man). She also became quite an astute businesswoman through the selling of these eunuchs. She sold over 500 castrati to the Persians to serve as catamites (Scholz 2001).

The history of Queen Semiramis is steeped in legend and myth, and the real story of her life is seldom told, compared to the fantastical tales that surround her. The legends range from being raised in the desert by doves, being the daughter of the goddess Atargatis. She was famed to have had numerous lovers, and even for having many of them killed after a tryst to insure no further complications. Semiramis has been immortalized in many artistic forms: literature,
paintings, music. Specifically, her story was the inspiration for Rossini’s opera *Semiramide*. But even in this dense fog of legend and myth, some truths are present (Scholz 2001).

The institute of “sacred kingship” was introduced and promoted during her reign. Sacred kingship was the idea that a ruler or official was a manifestation or channel of the scared or divine world. It became a regional state institution. Castrated males were seen as chaste and holy, without the distraction of sexual drive. Semiramis required the services of eunuchs in her court. It is also very likely that Shamshi-ilu, the royal confidant and general of the Queen, was a eunuch. For a long time, he was considered the “first man in the state”. Italian Assyriologist Pettinato even went so far as to call him a “would-be Assyrian king.” He described Shamshi-ilu’s title as “general deputy, grand herald, keeper of the temple, supreme commander of many armies, he who governs the land of Hatte.” This type of power leads to the conclusion that he was in all likelihood a castrato (Scholz 2001).

Being a castrated male was actually an advantage in the rise to power. The term “harem” was probably used by the Assyrians in this positive context, since the palace and royal chambers were “scared and therefore prohibited” areas (*sacri cubiculi*), in which only eunuchs were likely allowed. Under Roman and Byzantine emperors they became statesmen, high court officials, and patriarchs. Because of the emperor’s concubine situation which, subsequently, also included many unwanted children, many of which grew up to be a threat against the actual royal successor. Palace revolts and the like were extremely common with these spawn of the emperor’s concubines. Some of these “rivals” were even castrated themselves, to remove their threat. A eunuch could hold any office of power save that of emperor, so a castrated rival became no rival at all. This actually ensured a possible senior position for the newly created eunuch, and became a distinct political advantage for the boy. Becoming a castrato meant giving up the
possibility of actually becoming the emperor himself, yet it was a savvy political move for the boy in itself, since he could from then on directly participate in the exercise of power. Abbott’s *A History of Celibacy* details the distinct political advantages that a eunuch would have over a normal man:

The great advantage of eunuchs was their inability to procreate, which meant they would never be driven by ambitions for their children. Isolated from their human families, who could never enter the palace, they could turn to the emperor as the family they would never have. For these reasons, they seemed more trustworthy in affairs of state.....As not-quite men, eunuchs seemed appropriate buffers between citizens and the emperor, a divinity who could not have contact with ordinary humans lest they notice that he, too, was an ordinary man. (Abbott 1999)

Issues that generally could be the cause mistrust in this type of situation such as promiscuity and thievery simply were not as serious for a eunuch. He could possibly have a few affairs with the female inhabitants of the harem he guarded, but there would be no embarrassing pregnancies that could cause shame or create offspring that might later attempt to advance in the palace. Since eunuchs had no possibility of extending their own family tree, the political realm and atmosphere of the palace became a type of family for these gelded youth. Crimes such as embezzlement which are generally considered quite serious tended to be much more overlooked for a castrato, since his primary concern would be merely for his own well being, as he would have no familial legacy to protect or maintain other than the emperor’s himself (Rosselli 1992).

Becoming a eunuch did not at all mean emasculation. Quite the contrary, it meant a much better possibility of rising to great power, even since ancient times (Scholz 2001). This raises the question: why did the musical world adopt the process of castration? The answer lies in the religious, political and musical climate of the time. The primary center for castrato singers was Italy, particularly Naples. There is evidence of the existence of castrati singers as early as the 12th century in Constantinople, but the period in which they most publicly flourished and were
accepted began in the 17th century. In the period of the 17th and 18th centuries, the Italian religious and political climates were practically one in the same. The Church was of primary power in Italy, and still set the standards and rules for the country. St. Paul’s Biblical admonition that women should silent in the church was interpreted literally. The Church cited I Corinthians 14:34, which states, “Let your women keep silent in the churches,” and forbade women to participate in the church service, in speech or song. Women were not allowed to sing in the church choirs, which was not terribly problematic until music began to evolve and become more complex (Street 1987). Boys and falsettists had been used when music dictated the need for higher voices. But the a capella style that began to grow around the middle of the 15th century began to highlight the inadequacy of young boys and falsettists. The new music necessitated a much broader range and virtuosity that was simply lacking in the aforementioned singers. The employment of choir boys to sing this new literature also had distinct non-musical disadvantages that made the situation all but impossible. Discipline became a problem, since as a rule most young boys can be a bit unruly, with many other things besides music on their adolescent minds. But even the best behaved of boys could not overcome the physical changes under which they had no control. Just around the time that a young male singer had begun to flourish musically, his voice would change and break at puberty, practically crippling him. The latter situation was obviously not a factor for the falsettists, but their voices generally had a rather shrill and unpleasant quality to them that was not very well liked. The problem of range was also a consideration. Most falsettists could sing only up to the alto range, and unable to soar into the soprano range that was needed. Spanish falsettists at the start filled these necessary roles, having somehow attained a bit higher range than other falsettists. They began to appear in cathedrals and chapels throughout Europe around the middle of the 15th century. There is some
speculation (particularly by Italian writers such as Fantoni and Monaldi) that many of these Spanish falsettists were actually castrati. They argued that these singers hid their identity to preserve public opinion. Although some contend that these Italian writers were merely trying to project the “blame” the practice of castration for musical purpose onto Spain, this may explain the sudden appearance of large numbers of castrati around the year 1600. In 1589, Pope Sixtus V approved the recruitment of castrato singers for the choir of St. Peter. This was introduced in an official Bull of 1589. Perhaps it was merely a case of these singers acknowledging their existence instead of a sudden appearance of newly created castrato singers. Orlando Lassus, kapellmeister at Munich in the 1560s and 1570s, boasted six castrati singers in his choir, all of whom had been imported from Spain (Heriot 1975). This fact supports the theory that not all Spanish falsettists were indeed what they claimed, and that the special “method” used in Spain to train these soprano voices was indeed not based in theory or pedagogy at all, but one of illicit castration procedures. A more permanent solution was needed. Therefore, the castrati were born.

In order to properly understand the mindset of someone who might produce a castrato from one of their own sons, the family structure and situation must be examined. Modern day families are of a much closer-knit nature than families of the 17th and 18th centuries. Family units were run more like a business than the closely involved and supportive groups that are more common today. All authority was placed on the male head of the family, and a sense of formality and distance was the normal atmosphere between the parents and children. The husband and wife spent the majority of their time apart, each with members of their own gender. A child’s formative years were much more often spent with nurses who reared the children, instead of their biological parents. The child was then sent back to their parents around age 10, to be apprenticed to learn a trade. The tumultuous economy caused families to resort to “defining
childhood so that it included employment so far as possible and in so far as it was necessary” (Black 1990). Children were also used as pawns to “assist in begging,” and employed to handle all sorts of tasks, even at what we might consider extremely early ages. In Altopascio, near Tuscany, children as young as 4 and 5 years old were used to tend to the livestock. It was very common for children to perform agricultural and even industrial type work. The child labor laws that exist in modern times simply were not a factor in 17th and 18th century Europe. In fact, the government approved and actually even encouraged children to work. Officials argued that the work “prevented idleness and begging, educated children to useful employment and accustomed them to work” (Black 1990). In order to survive, every able family member had to work, women and children included. Social care simply didn’t exist in the capacity that it could help families. Desperation even led some families to abandon their children completely to “foundling hospitals,” which were basically the orphanages of the time. These hospitals, founded in Milan in the 8th century, served as a make-shift “dumping ground” for unwanted children. The idea spread beyond Italy into the rest of Europe in the 13th and 14th centuries. Yet Italy was the country of origin, and sadly, versions of those institutions still exist there today (Owen 2005).

Family relationships were also rather different than they can be in modern times. A father showing tender expressions or concern to a child was seen as a negation of his authority. That kind of affection was not to be shown, as it would be contrary to his establishment as head of the family. The priority was to teach the children respect, rather than love. In modern family units, the needs of the child are often more important than the well-being of the parents. Today many parents make sacrifices for their children, to give them a better life. But the close emotional bonds and the huge concern over a child’s well-being that are so prevalent today simply did not exist back then in the general sense (Black 1990).
This difference in family culture did not stop with the common folk. The nobility shared a similar family structure and unit as the peasantry. Focus for the nobility was on the family dynasty rather than the family unit. Individual ambition was not really considered. Achievement for the “house,” rather than for the individual family members, was what mattered. Children simply did not have the choices or variety of lives that they would enjoy during later periods of history. The primary source of wealth at the time was by inheritance alone, which generally solely took place within the family (Black 1990). The custom of “indivisible inheritance” severely restricted the lives of a family’s children, save that of the eldest son, the usual benefactor of this practice. Through this concept, there was a sole heir to the family fortune (usually the oldest living son), rather than a division of the family’s assets among all of the children. Therefore, the younger children, male and female alike, had a much less secure future. They were left with very few options. If lucky, the daughters could marry with a good dowry, but many joined convents, not necessarily to answer some divine calling, but as a means of survival. The sons could possibly learn a trade, but at a rather great expense. The view of work in that time period was vastly different that that of the modern western society. Such work was looked down upon by the nobility, and by working, a son forfeited his rank and could never really socially advance. This situation forced many of the younger children into a “sacred” or “profane” celibacy. Celibacy in general was on the rise, as marriage was much more expensive than single life. The younger sons lived on an extremely modest allowance, called a piatto. Many of these young men preferred a life in a quiet monastery to the rush of traffic and commerce, or certainly to the discomforts of military life (Black 1990). This rise in the interest of the celibate life led to many new convents and monasteries, as well as new orders being created. The number of the religious soared, although their reasons for entering monasteries and
convents were most likely usually not centered in religious beliefs. These factors paved the way for a common disparaging of all sexual activity, which helped lay good groundwork for castration.

The ideas of castration and celibacy were vastly different in those centuries. While today celibacy seems rather an abstract concept, reserved simply for the most devoted of the religious ilk, in the 17th and 18th centuries it was quite a common life choice. It must be examined not from our modern point of view, but from the feeling of Baroque period Italy. Even the most basic concept of sexual life was completely different then. While more modern day assumption tends to center around individual fulfillment, sexual expression and freedom, sexuality in that era was almost seen as a burden. The celibate life was the ideal, for many reasons. Between the years of 1600 and 1750, celibacy was on the rise. Although the Church officially did not publicly condone castration, it supported the idea of celibacy. Baroque theologians promoted the idea that our bodies do not belong to us, but that we are simply caretakers (Rosselli 1992). The belief was one of self sacrifice for the greater good. As previously discussed, even a child’s future was determined not on the basis of what he himself was interested in or would like to achieve, but on the basis of what would best serve the family unit as a whole. In many cases, this pointed to a life of celibacy as the most viable solution. With the fragile economic situations, fueled by revolts and general unrest, a child with a stable, safe, respectable career and a life that was guaranteed not to produce more offspring to feed must have been an attractive idea. In *A History of Celibacy*, Elizabeth Abbott, speaking of eunuchs and castrati, emphatically states that: “They or their parents neutralized poverty by trading their sexuality for opportunity...” (Abbott 1999).
Financial gain was assuredly not the only advantage to the family of a son in such a career. It was certainly true that at the apex of their career, some castrato opera singers became extremely rich and internationally famous. But of course not all castrati had such lucrative careers. However, even the “failed” castrati often continued their careers within the Church. By serving the Church in such a way, he was also bringing respectability to the family name. Even if he did not strike it rich in the opera realm with his voice, he was still employed by the Church in a stable and worthy career. Pope Clement VIII’s edict described their service as *ad honorem Dei*. So when the need for castrato singers in the Church arose, this could have seemed an ideal solution for some of those desperate families. The most successful castrati became international celebrities, arguably the first of such fame in history. Statistically, only about one out of a hundred castrati escalated to this height of glory. This may seem to be a bit of a far reaching goal to place upon a young boy’s shoulders, but considering the desperate situations that many families faced at the time, this must have seemed a viable and attractive solution (Somerset-Ward 2004).

Whether the boy became an international opera star or spent his days serving a holy purpose by singing in a church or monastic choir, it was a much better situation for a noble or peasant family in those uncertain times than a fruitful son who produced more mouths to feed or more heirs with which to subdivide land. As for the boy himself, his chance to live a better and more meaningful life was at hand. Whether of peasant or noble background, their education and prospective careers stood to be much improved by this operation. But what exactly was created by this procedure?

The way that castration affects a boy’s voice is primarily of a preventative nature. The removal of the testes prevents the sexual dimorphism of the larynx at the time when a boy would
go through puberty. For a normal male, this is the natural process that causes the lower pitch and stronger power of the voice. Testosterone production is increased, changing the length of their vocal chords. During the process of puberty, the male vocal chords increase by 63%, while the female vocal chords increase only by about half that rate at 34%. Prepubescent male vocal chords grow from an average of 17.35 mm to 28.92 mm by the time they reach adulthood. During this change, serous fluid accumulates in the tissue. This excessive swelling is called oedema, which is responsible for the permanent thickening that lowers the pitch of the voice even further. The prevention of this natural physical process leaves the castrato’s speaking voice pitched like a female’s. Tandler and Gross of Italy had the unique opportunity in 1909 to examine for themselves a 28-year-old castrato through autopsy. Their discoveries revealed that, besides the fact that the larynx was extremely small and the thyroid notch hardly even visible, the man had vocal chords approximately the size of a coloratura soprano! They were a mere 14 mm in length (Brodnitz 1974). This was a definite indication of the extreme physical changes, brought about by castration that created the unusual power and uniqueness of the castrato voice. The actual sound of the castrato voice is something that, rather tragically, modern day ears shall never truly experience. Alessandro Moreschi (November 11, 1858- April 22, 1922), the proclaimed “last castrato,” produced in 1902 the only solo castrato recording in existence. However, these were phonograph recordings on gramophone records for the *Gramophone and Typewriter Company* (Heriot 1975). Therefore, the resultant quality is rather poor. Critics argue whether Moreschi was a castrato singer of rather average talent, or that he was just as exquisite as some of his predecessors, but simply “past his prime” when he made these extremely rare recordings.
Although this can give modern listeners a general idea of what they may have sounded like, it certainly does not convey the truly magnificent sound of a fully trained castrato during the height of their fame. Moreschi, in his fifties at the time of his recordings in the early 1900s, was not present at the time when the most renowned castrati were at the apex of their musical careers. We can only surmise a general idea from these recordings what they may have truly sounded like. In her account, *A History of Celibacy*, Elizabeth Abbott attempts to capture Farinelli’s legendary sound at the time when he reportedly sang Philip V of Spain back to health:

What manner of music was it that could save a life? Imagine a voice as sweet as a flute and with tones as subtle as the human larynx can produce, a voice that soars upward through the air “like a lark, intoxicated with its own flight.” Imagine a voice that transforms emotion into sound as glorious as a soul rising upward with it, clinging to its wings. Imagine, finally, “a calm, sweet, solemn, and sonorous musical language” that leaves its audience thunderstruck, transported into ecstasy by the power and grace of the most splendid music under the heavens. (Abbott)

The voice is not the only thing that is affected by this process. Other, more visible physical characteristics are altered. The procedure also prevents the closing of the epiphyses (the end of the long bone), which normally happens at puberty. This renders the growth hormone and other growth factors able to continue activity, which affected the height of these men. The castrati grew to rather unusual (particularly for the 18th century) and sometimes ungainly heights. This often resulted in the castrati appearing awkward and ungraceful. As a consequence, many castrato roles required vocal prowess rather than physical agility onstage (Keyser 1987). They also had more obvious “feminine” type characteristics that may have made them stand out more in a crowd. Their skin was typically smooth and pale, and they grew no beards. The latter was perhaps one of the most unfortunate physical differences to the psyche of a castrato, since generally a beard was seen as a sign of virility in a male. They also sported fine wrinkles around the eyes in their later years. Although they did not grow facial hair, the hair on their head was
quite abundant, which may be seen as an advantage over their “normal” male contemporaries. However, the differences did not stop with facial and hair characteristics. Castrati took on many other feminine features such as roundness in the hips, and narrowing shoulders. They also had more of a tendency towards obesity than normal men (Jenkins 1998).

The effect of castration on lifespan has been heavily debated. Some contend that the castrati lived longer lives than their contemporaries, and some claim that there is no effect of longevity. One study conducted by J.S. Jenkins of the Urological Sciences Research Foundation supported the latter. He studied 25 documented castrato singers born between the years 1610 and 1762. The average lifespan found of these singers was 65.1 years. Comparatively, the mean lifespan 25 intact male singers born between the years of 1605 and 1764 were discovered to be 64.9 years. This may suggest that castration had no real effect on the lifespan of the recipient. However, this may prove inconclusive when comparing any male singers, intact or castrated, to males of the period that held other occupations. In general, the male singers lived rather pampered and coddled lifestyles in comparison to their male contemporaries. This possibly could have accounted for this profession in general supporting a bit longer longevity- not just for castrati, but for singers on the whole (Jenkins 1998).

Of course, the most relevant change brought about by castration is that of the voice itself. The prevention of the release of testosterone inhibits a boy’s Adam’s apple form developing. Although they all suffered through basically the same physical alteration, not all castrato voices were the same. The voice of each castrato could differ from another castrato as much as a female soprano and contralto voice could differ. There were alto as well as soprano castrati (Keyser 1987). One castrato certainly was not merely replaceable with another. For example, Handel very much favored the lower, alto-range castrato voices such as Siface and particularly
Senesino. Handel composed many roles especially for Senesino, a contralto. A few of these roles are the title role in *Giulio Cesare*, the role of Guido in *Flavio*, and Luceuis in *Scipione*.

What kinds of lives did these altered boys lead? To answer this question fully, we must first explore the time in which they lived. The 17th and 18th centuries were not an easy time in which to raise a family and be successful. Some historians refer to this time period and the one preceding it as the “crisis of the 17th century.” The general crisis theory was first introduced in 1965 in a collection of essays highlighting different aspects of the 17th century crisis edited by T.S. Aston, also the editor of the journal *Past and Present*. He extracted 13 essays from *Past and Present* that dealt with this topic and entitled them *Crisis in Europe 1560-1660*. Many more publications on this subject have arisen since then, many in foreign journals. But this was not the first attention given to the general problems of this shaky time period. Voltaire would even go so far as to say that the 17th century was “a period of usurpations almost from one end of the world to the other,” in his 1756 *Essai sur les moeurs et l’esprit des nations*.

Historians describe this crisis in various ways. Some call it a general economic crisis, targeting the fall in the rate of European economic growth. Economic considerations factored in every aspect of life, including the population. The price of essential items such as bread directly affected the birth, death, and even marriage rate in early modern Europe. People had trouble supporting themselves when the erratic price of bread rose beyond the earnings of the average worker. Harvest failures swept throughout Europe in the 17th century, causing a “subsistence crisis.” These crises in turn led to “industrial and commercial paralysis” (Parker and Smith 1978). A vicious cycle, the sharp rise in the price of food caused the demand for manufactured goods to drop, which resulted in widespread unemployment among the wage-earning population. Countless families had to deal with the painful irony that their wages were cut off just as the
price of life-sustaining goods was rapidly rising. These short term “commercial recessions” coupled with a general downward slope of the European economy in the period following the year 1620 created a somewhat desperate environment. Taxation was also suddenly increased, which only fueled the fire of desperation. Even areas that managed to avoid major warfare ended up shouldering a heavy burden of taxation as a direct result of the wars. Naples, which would later become the epicenter for training castrati, was one of these places. Niels Steensgaard of the Institute of History at the University of Copenhagen explains that,

The revolt in Naples followed after a number of years of large contributions to the Spanish war chest, which not only had been economically devastating, but also had created chaos in the traditional distribution of authority and wealth. (Parker and Smith 1978)

These long periods of crippling taxes led to a major decline in the living standards of a great deal of the population (Parker and Smith 1978).

All these factors led to one inevitable reaction: rebellion. French historian Marc Bloch stated that: “The peasant revolt was as common in early modern Europe as strikes are in industrial societies today.” Rural uprisings due to general unrest were apparently quite common during this time period. But while more modern-day strikes are usually directed by workers towards their respective employers, these uprisings were directed more towards the State, whom they blamed for their misery. Steensgaard describes these revolutions as “not a social revolutionary, but reactionary against the demands of the State” (Parker and Smith 1978). Government officials, particularly the hated tax collectors, were the primary targets of these riots.

There seemed to be unrest in every aspect of life, including politics. The crumbling of the relationship between state and society fueled the already strenuous state of affairs, and caused
even more revolutions in the middle of the century. In 1959 in the Aston publication, Trevor-Roper describes the situation as a conflict between a

puritanically minded opposition and a parasitic bureaucracy created by the Renaissance state during the boom of the 16th century, but which became unendurable during the period of decline and the lengthy wars of the 17th century. (Parker and Smith 1978)

The city of Venice appears to be the only one that was able to keep its industry alive despite the grueling problems. Deindustrialization was forcing the upper classes in most other places to fall back on landholding as their primary source of income. The wars that were ravaging Europe, coupled with the plagues of 1630 and 1656 exacerbated this situation. This return to landholding caused a renewal in the custom of feudalization. Many peasants were not certain where to turn for relief, and many turned to the Church, not necessarily out of religious piety, but out of necessity to simply survive. The new social structure caused quite a rise in the number of monks and nuns. The period between 1580 and 1650 seemed to yield the greatest number of this new strand of holy men and women. All over Italy monks especially became more prevalent. In the smaller Central Italian towns like Siena, Pistoia, and Prato they comprised up to 11% of the total population. Places such as Florence and Catania contained approximately 5%. Rome contained over 3,000 monks by the year 1670, and Naples itself boasted 4,000. Church life provided a security and safety for the lower class quite unlike many other professions and lifestyles, not just for the individual, but for the entire family. Since the general welfare of the family far outweighed the good of the individual child in this century, a child’s future was decided based upon what the family needed (Rosselli 1992).

However, it was not just the poor who decided that the simpler life of a monk or nun would be best suited. It was less expensive to place a son or daughter into a monastic career than other options of the time. For a son in a wealthy family, an official career was an expensive task.
to set up. The monastery was much less expensive a path for the son, and also would provide more security, plus added benefits such as tax concessions. For a daughter of the same privilege, the life of a nun was not only socially respectable and free from possible scandal, it was also cheaper for the family than marrying her off to someone (Rosselli 1992). The monastic life was not only “holy” and certainly a religious calling for some, it was also quite economically viable for the time! Even though it was merely a good business strategy for families, there was still an “intense religious feeling common in baroque Italy- itself stirred by danger and decline” (Rosselli 1992). Many of the most successful castrati such as Balatri, returned to the church at the culmination of his career, not as a fallback position, but out of true belief and desire to serve the Church. Whether destined for greatness on the opera stage, or for a quiet life of peaceful monastic service, the church was a very wise choice for a young boy.

Once the decision was made, the process of creating a castrato began. Since the process was technically not endorsed by the Church, there would obviously not be much actual documentation of these procedures for research purposes. In general, the castrati originated from poorer Italian peasant families, although not all of them came from humble stock. Farinelli, for example, came from a rather noble parentage. Many children who were discovered to posses the slightest musical inclination were outright sold to conservatories on the chance that they might have a chance at a successful and more importantly, lucrative career (Heriot 1975).

The procedure was anything but pleasant. With the lack of general anesthesia, the methods necessary to facilitate this operation ran to the rather extreme. Eunuchism Display'd, a treatise by Charles Ancillon published in 1718, outlines the different procedures used. The severing of the spermatic cord was one method used, as Ancillon described:

…by a detestable Art have been made so frigid, as at last quite to disappear and vanish… this is done by cutting the Vein that conveyed their proper Aliment and Support, which
makes them to grow lank and flabby, till at last they dry up and come to nothing. (Ancillon, 1718)

The other methods were even more harsh and invasive. One such method called for the complete removal of the testicles. Consciousness level would obviously be a problem with this type of procedure. Anesthesia was obviously not yet available, therefore more creative methods were employed in order to make this process more bearable. The boy was practically rendered senseless. Ancillon describes the disturbing details:

Another Method was, to take the Testicles quite away at once, and this Operation was commonly effected, by putting the Patient in a Bath of warm water, to soften and supple the Parts, and make them more tractable; some small time after, they pressed the Jugular Veins, which made the Party so stupid, and insensible, that he fell into a kind of Apoplexy, and then the Action could be performed with scarce any Pain at all to the Patient; and this was generally done by the Mother or Nurse in the most tender infancy. (Ancillon 1718)

Even more disturbing was the fact that often the “patient” was given some opium in order to properly sedate them enough for the surgery. The opium proved to be quite effective for its intended purpose, as it did bring the boys’ consciousness down to such a level that they could be properly operated upon, but the consequences of using this drug greatly outweighed the effectiveness, as Ancillon affirms:

Sometimes they used to give a certain quantity of Opium to the Persons designated for Castration, whom they cut while they were in their dead Sleep, and took from them those Parts which Nature took so great care to form; but it was observed, that most of those who had been cut after this manner, died by this Narcotik; It was thought more advisable to practice the Method I just before mentioned. (Ancillon 1718)

The aforementioned method in Ancillon’s treatise was the combination of a warm bath and jugular vein pressure. This process, although certainly not pleasant, was not quite as lethal. However, there were other apparent dangers in this operation. The methods of castration varied, and unfortunately there exists very little actual documentation of this procedure when used for the purpose of creating specialized young musicians. Descriptions of these procedures that are
available tend to describe the operations in rather vague or euphemistic terms. The process itself was illegal, save for medical reasons, so surgeons obviously did not openly advertise their services in such a manner. Infections and even hemorrhages were common dangers.

Castration did not absolutely guarantee a crystalline voice. Even after the arduous undertaking of this tenuous procedure, the outcome was not always as desired. At times the boys would lose their angelic voices to the surgery itself, becoming shrill and displeasing. Sometimes the poor children would even lose their singing voice altogether, resulting in a useless hoarseness. But even this risk was apparently not enough to outweigh the possible rewards for the family (Scholz 2001).

All the risk and tenuousness of this procedure these Italian families were willing to overlook, given the chance at fame and fortune for their sons. With the structure of family life at the time, their entire future welfare was often placed solely on the eldest son’s shoulders. Success for the son meant success for the family. Therefore, the son’s manhood was literally sacrificed for “the good of the family.” The allure of a successful career in the Church or even the opera far outweighed the possibility of a fruitful son and even more mouths to feed. As preaced by the upwardly mobile eunuchs of the Byzantine Empire’s political world centuries before, castration could be construed as a savvy career move, strange as that may seem in modern times.

Castration itself even became a type of business. As more castrati were needed, agencies were created to provide them. These singers became more than just altered boys, they became an actual product of the country. Valeria Finucci states that, “Within a century of the start of this phenomenal practice, castrati became the best known Italian commodity export on the continent” (Finucci 2003). Before around 1570, most of the castrati were Spanish or French. But after this
time, Italy began to thrive in the castrato business, providing the singers themselves. By the start of the 17th century, Italy became a veritable castrato factory, controlling the production as well as the training of these singers. Italy produced so many castrati that there were plenty for both its own use and for export. As widespread and privately accepted as this process was, it was still publicly and lawfully condemned, although not at all effectively. Angus Heriot attests:

> since anyone known to have been concerned with castration was punishable by excommunication, as well as liable to civil penalties imposed by the various governments, the business had to be carried out more or less clandestinely; and there has been a good deal of discussion as to where it actually took place. (Heriot 1975)

The “blame” for the practice was shifted and passed, even among the Italians. According to Venice, Bologna was the hub for the castration of young boys. Bologna pointed to Florence as the epicenter of castrato surgery, Florence blamed Rome for the creation of these singers. Finally, Rome cited Naples as the culprit, because the city contained four large musical conservatories. Incidentally, Naples was the place that the majority of castrati trained and began their careers (Finucci 2003). However, for the actual creation of these singers, Bologna seems the most likely candidate, as there were Bolognese surgeons that were summoned even to Germany to perform this illicit operation. Some German courts mirrored the Italian ones in their use of castrati. For example, in 1752, the Duke of Württemburg’s court boasted fifteen castrati, although it is likely that they were of German descent. However, they were probably castrated by none other than two Bolognese surgeons, called from Italy to the German court specifically for the purpose of castrating singers for the Duke’s service. These Italian doctors or their successors remained there in the Duke’s employ until at least 1772. This German prince was reported to be quite an opera fanatic, going so far as to endanger the well-being of his subjects to pay for this obsession. Rumor had it that a certain hospital even had a number of beds designated specifically for the purpose of housing boys either awaiting or recovering from castration (Heriot 1975).
Because of the precarious nature of the procedure and the legal issues involved, fabrications and vagueness often surrounded the situation for the young boy, which makes research into the subject rather difficult. The procedure was illegal “unless it is done, as is often presented, upon account of some disorders which may be supposed to require it, and with the consent of the boy.” Often times the family of the boy in question would create a false story of a birth defect or some other ailment that would require the unique “treatment” of castration as a remedy. Other families would turn to more dramatic means by claiming their son lost his sensitive parts in a tragic accident such as falling down a flight of stairs. By far the most popular of this brand of tale involved the goring of the poor boy by a wild boar (Jenkins 1998).

The subject of whether or not castration was done with the consent of the boy himself is a heavily debated one, as is the question of their age. Angus Heriot maintains that they were between the ages of 7 and 9, while Piotr O. Scholz in his work *Eunuchs and Castrati* claims that the boys were a bit older, between 8 and 12. Two quite reputable sources will give two completely conflicting opinions. Still others insist that the age of puberty was even later in those days, and that the children were not necessarily castrated until such ages as 17. This raises an interesting question: were the boys old enough to have given consent to this dangerous and life-altering operation? Valeria Finucci believes that these boys were castrated somewhere between the ages of 7 and 13, with their permission. In her book, *The Manly Masquerade*, she states that they were made “all seemingly with consent” (Finucci 2003). Caffarelli, one of the most successful, yet most notorious castrati was believed to be castrated at his request. A 1720 contract exists between the ten-year-old Caffarelli and his grandmother. It states that she would award him the income of two vineyards for school study, particularly music, “to which he is said to have a great inclination, desiring to have himself castrated and become a eunuch” (Somerset-
Ward 2004). Marchesi’s beginnings are very similar. His castration apparently was against the wishes of his parents, and was made possible by the cooperation of his teacher. But he was adamant about becoming a castrato, and was successful despite the objections of his father (Somerset-Ward 2004).

There is evidence to support the fact that puberty occurred at a later age in the 17th and 18th centuries than it does today. Many modern day historians attribute this phenomenon to a nutritional difference. Studies on military history support this theory, which suggests that a deficiency in protein is the cause for the later onset of puberty. For the poorer families, from which most castrati were taken, their primary subsistence was bread. It is not hard to imagine the nutritional imbalance that many must have suffered. Centuries of better nutrition and medical insight pushed puberty to the earlier ages common to modern times.

Josef Haydn, the father of modern music, possessed an exquisite voice as a boy. At the age of eight he entered the Viennese Cathedral as a choirboy, where he sang with great success for many years. As recorded in the Concise Oxford Dictionary of Music, his voice did not break until the age of 17, which seemed closer to the norm than 12 or 13. His voice was so promising that he was given the option of becoming a castrato, but ultimately decided against it. The decision was his. This age may be a bit older than most hit puberty, but the fact evidences that some boys were given the option themselves of whether to preserve their voices through castration, and many were old enough to make an intelligent decision. Adulthood came much earlier in the 17th and 18th centuries. Boys were apprenticed out for work around age 10, the age of Caffarelli’s “castration contract,” or even younger and “childhood” was over.

In Haydn’s case, music history was greatly benefited by having one less castrato, as his accomplishments as a composer rather than a singer, are invaluable. But what happened to
Haydn after his voice broke is the other interesting facet of this story. He was immediately turned out of the Cathedral, despite his many years of service. The man that would become one of the greatest composers of all time was living on the streets in poverty after losing his voice. Haydn’s talent eventually got him work and he was on his way to success. But for the many others that were not blessed with Haydn’s talent as a composer, poverty may have overtaken them completely. So for the young boys of a church choir, castration may have seemed an attractive alternative to life on the streets (Oxford 1996).

Once the process was completed, the boys began their education in earnest. In this respect, most of them seemed to have a much improved quality of life over their peers and siblings. They were sheltered in churches or conservatories and spared harsh work in the fields. Castrati were considered much more “delicate” than their peers at these conservatories, so were given rather special treatment. It was thought that their immune systems had been possibly compromised due to their operation, so a close eye was kept on their health and general well-being. They were treated to warmer quarters and beds, and given better food than their intact male counterparts (Abbott 1999). This most certainly occasionally sparked jealousy and resentment between the castrati and the normal students, which may account for the fact that a marked number of castrato students eventually left and became runaways.

For whatever their place of origin, the city for young castrati to begin was undoubtedly Naples. There were no less than four musical conservatories in Naples: Sant’Onofrio, Pietà dei Turchini, Santa Maria di Loreto, and Poveri di Gesù Cristo. Founded throughout the 16th century as more general havens for the care and education of poor children, these institutions eventually became purely musical conservatories. By around the year 1650, these organizations had converted almost completely from simply charitable places of general education to an intensive
school for music instruction. The students did not merely learn vocal technique in order to become good singers. In these schools they were immersed in music study, from harpsichord to composition. They learned composition in separate courses for various instruments as well as all four voice parts: soprano, contralto, tenor and bass. Angus Heriot gives us a breakdown of what a typical school day for a young castrato was like:

In the morning:
1 hour singing passages of difficult execution
1 hour study of letters
1 hour singing exercises in front of a mirror, to practice deportment and gesture, and to guard against ugly grimaces while singing, etc.

In the afternoon:
½ hour of theoretical work
½ hour of counterpoint on a canto firmo (in other words, practice in improvisation)
1 hour studying counterpoint with the cartella
1 hour studying letters

The cartella was the 18th century equivalent of a school slate. A glazed tile with music staves upon it, this device served as a precursor to the personal chalkboards used later for schoolchildren. Music notes could be written on it and then erased as needed, making it quite a useful tool for teaching (Heriot 1975).

Vocal technique was certainly one of the main objectives of their education, but certainly not the sole focus. Noteworthy is the fact that the boy’s voices were not overused during daily practice, and they spent much time studying other related subjects, both for educational purposes and for vocal health. They were instructed in harpsichord exercises, which were closely interwoven with vocal study. The boys also learned to compose psalms, motets, and other types of pieces. They studied music theory, as well as the importance of the text in what they sang. Despite the rather extravagant music that many of them would later sing, it was attempted to
teach them at a young age to bring out the meaning of the words that they sang. Mere vocal acrobatics would not suffice. These students were taught to truly express the meaning of the music they were learning. This type of education fell under the heading of “letters” and was done both in the morning and in the afternoon (Heriot 1975).

Once a boy had successfully passed all his various tests and satisfactorily refined his voice, he was proclaimed ready for his debut. This was generally between the ages of fifteen and twenty. For his professional debut he would be contracted to an opera house. Because of the obvious uniqueness in both voice and appearance of the castrati, they almost always made their debut as a female. Because the stage life was considered undignified and immodest for females, non-castrated males had previously been used. Until the 17th century, women were banned from the stage altogether. Even after the ban was no longer strictly enforced, women were still discouraged from the stage. It was simply seen as immodesty. Pope Clement XI stated, “A beautiful woman who sings on stage and keeps her chastity is like a man who leaps into the Tiber and keeps his feet dry” (Gewertz 2003).

But drawbacks to the method of using intact males for female roles are quite imaginable. Even a rather effeminate normal male could not compete with the naturally more feminine characteristics and exquisite voice of a castrated youth. Abbott humorously describes what the pre-castrati situation may have been like:

One sees a stout shepherdess in virgin white with a soft blue beard and a prominent collarbone… clenching a nosegay in a fist that would almost have knocked down Goliath, and a train of milkmaids attending her enormous footsteps. (Abbott 1999)

Castrati were not burdened by facial hair, or by the obvious Adam’s apple to contradict the stage illusion that they were a lonely shepherdess or a voluptuous vixen.
It is not difficult to imagine the welcome change for the viewing audience. Because of their operation, castrati were generally much more delicate in appearance than their male contemporaries. Like a woman’s, their faces were smoother and more pale. Regarding their physique, they had narrower shoulders and rounder hips and some even developed a distinguishable chest. This body type must have been much easier to fit into the delicate, feminine dresses that the heroines wore onstage than a broad-shouldered, muscular tenor. Their unusual appearance was a distinct advantage, and was likely partially responsible for the instant acclaim and admiration many beginning castrati were treated with. Although trained in the best conservatories, these were still rather young singers, fresh but slightly immature in their art. But their crystalline voices and unusual appearance made them almost ethereal, and audiences were smitten. It is no wonder that the castrati are often proclaimed to be the first international celebrities. Angus Heriot describes their rather expeditious rise to fame:

…he would take his bows, and with elaborately simulated condescension pick up the flowers and billets doux that fell at his feet. His name would henceforth be made; a band of supporters—‘fans’—would gather round him, going en masse to the theatre every time he sang and hanging on his every note as if it were pure gold barracking the other singers and refusing to admit that, beside their idol, these miserable braying donkeys could be said to sing at all. There would be an exchange of sonnets, satires and pasquinades between the new star’s devotees and the rival cliques; aristocratic ladies and gentlemen would imagine themselves in love with him and engineer a piquant interview, and nothing else would be talked about for the next few weeks… (Heriot 1975)

The successful castrati were instant stars, garnering as much drama offstage as there was on. Opera became almost a spectator sport, with the camp of one singer cheering him on, in opposition to the fans of another. They truly became celebrities. Opera was the premiere art form and entertainment of the time, and when the focus of this art form became the castrati, they were catapulted into the spotlight. They became the “talk of the town,” so to speak, and dominated social focus and conversation. Men and women alike were smitten by these strange
creatures, new to the world of opera. Gender lines were blurred for these singers. Men and women alike swooned for them. The infamous Casanova even commented in 1762, upon the first time he encountered a castrato, that,

In a well-made corset, he had the waist of a nymph, and, what was almost incredible, his breast was in no way inferior, either in form or in beauty, to any woman’s; and it was above all by this means that the monster made such ravages. Though one knew the negative nature of this unfortunate, curiosity made one glance at his chest, and an inexpressible charm acted upon one, so that you were madly in love before you realized it.

Certainly there are fewer more qualified judges than the legendary Casanova himself!

This androgynous sexuality did have its drawbacks. Colleagues often became jealous of their celebrity, and accused them of luring other men into homosexuality. For, unlike many of their eunuch predecessors who were monks, being a castrato did not mean a celibate life, or even one that was not openly promiscuous. Contrary to popular opinion, being a castrato did not mean a life devoid of sexual encounters. In fact, the truth was quite the contrary, in many cases. The operation of castration simply prevents the man from being able to procreate, not bar him from any sexual activity. Medically speaking, castrati could have perfectly normal sex lives, minus the possibility of procreation. Castrati were perhaps even seen as a “super-natural manifestation of a widely-held erotic idea” (Freitas 2003). The widespread demand for castrati as lovers certainly upheld this theory. Unlike their fellow eunuchs who were monks, “castrato” was simply not synonymous with chastity.

Certainly some castrati did choose a life of celibacy, particularly Filippo Balatri, who wrote the only existing biography of a castrato singer. A piece written in poetry, Balatri’s life story is told with an ironic sense of humor and a sardonic wit. Regarding his propensity for marriage, he remarks: “By the grace of God, by my industry, and thanks to surgeon Accoramboni of Lucca, [I] never took a wife, who after loving me for a little would have started
screaming at me.” Apparently he feared that a woman would find him sexually inadequate after a time (Abbott 1999).

The great Farinelli was also believed to be chaste. Although he was widely known for not only being an extraordinary singer but a very handsome young man, the realm of love seemed to hold little interest for him, although countless admirers must have tried. Despite all of his enamored fans, not a single amorous story of Farinelli has been told (Heriot 1975).

Farinelli and Balatri seemed to be the exception to this rule, however. Many castrati lived rather promiscuous lives. Because their unions could produce no embarrassing offspring to explain, women saw them not only as beautiful, ethereal celebrities of the opera stage, but as prime candidates for affairs. Heriot tells us of a particularly sought-after castrato in Naples named Matteuccio:

Many of the castrati were famous lady-killers; and they were of course much in demand by the opposite sex, for their embraces could not lead to awkward consequences…. Matteuccio “could not bear to stay for long away from this city [Naples], where he was loved by all, and particularly by the ladies, as much because he was handsome and a eunuch, as for his sweet and sonorous voice.” (Heriot 1975)

A few castrati even got married, such as Tenducci. He eloped with an Irish girl of respectable family origins. This caused much consternation from her family and friends, and ultimately resulted in Tenducci being thrown into jail numerous times. Finally the father of his bride capitulated and they were able to enjoy a relatively quiet life, despite some debt trouble in London. Some others who had public affairs were not as fortunate, and ended up paying for their amorous behavior with their lives.

One of the most famous tales of a castrato romance is that of Siface, or Giovanni Francesco Grossi. He was quite a successful singer, garnering the nickname Siface from Cavalli’s “Scipione Africano,” in which he portrayed a character of that name to much acclaim.
He had quite a propensity for the female sex, and this is what ultimately caused his demise. His affair with the Countess Elena Forni of Bologna became quite the public scandal. She was widowed from a Modenese nobleman, and, like Tenducci’s bride, her family was not terribly pleased about this rather public affair. But instead of jailing her lover, they whisked her back to Bologna and hid her away in the convent of S. Lorenzo. This, however, did not deter the amorous Siface, who managed to continue the affair. While rehearsing a pasticcio called “Perseo,” he was able to charm his way into the convent and visit his beloved often, despite the numerous warnings of his friends and fans. If the affair had been more discreet, perhaps the scandal would not have escalated. But the castrato was apparently quite proud of his conquest, and persisted in perpetuating the gossip by boasting his affair throughout Bologna. Countess Forni’s family, the Marsilii, decided that it was time to put an end to this illicit romance. While returning to Bologna from a business trip in 1697, he took a road near Ferrara. There he was met with assassins hired by the Marsilii family and murdered on the spot. Quite a successful and beloved singer, his abrupt death was widely mourned. This story should suffice to distinguish any thought that the castrati were all rendered celibate by their operations. In fact, some of these unfortunate singers literally died from their overly amorous behavior (Heriot 1975)!

No matter what personal choices a castrato might make for himself, the only professional choice was the opera. The Baroque period for Italy marked a singular preference for higher voices, therefore castrati dominated the opera stage. As early as 1607 they began to appear, taking the title role in Monteverdi’s Orfeo. It is estimated that in the 18th century approximately 70% of all male opera singers were castrati. In the 17th century, that number was even higher. Tenors and basses just were not nearly as desirable at the time as these strange sopranos and altos, or sopranisti e contraltisti. Eric Street in “Castrati in the Italian Baroque” attributes their
lightning rise to fame to “public demand for vocal pyrotechnics” and “a thirst for opera” that “swept through Europe” (Street 1987). Almost all major roles were taken by castrato singers, including female roles. In 1637 at the opening of Manelli’s *Andromeda*, every female role was sung by a castrato, save one. The role of Venus, the epitome of feminine beauty and seduction, was played by a male castrato. However, they were not limited to playing women’s roles. Any major role was most likely to be taken by a castrato, whether it was the great Hercules, the stunning Cleopatra, or even military heroes such as Alexander the Great. Even female sopranos and altos were at a disadvantage. It became not merely a preference for higher voices, but wholly for castrati in general. Female sopranos were forced to take secondary roles along with the tenors and basses. Gender was completely dismissed in these operas, with female contraltos generally playing men, often opposite a castrato who was playing a female role (Street 1987). It is not hard to imagine then, that castrati were quite seductive to both men and women, with gender and sexual lines so hopelessly blurred. Casanova himself commented further on this phenomenon of alluring young male singers:

Rome, the holy city, which in this way forces every man to become a pederast, will not admit it, nor believe in the effects of an illusion which it does its best to arouse. (Heriot 1975)

As bewitching as these singers were in appearance, it was not only that which enticed the masses. Their stunning voices were what garnered such attention in the first place. The music of the Baroque era written for the castrati clearly demonstrates their amazing vocal prowess. Retaining the boyhood larynx and vocal chords from their youth enabled them almost limitless freedom in runs, trills, and leaps. Coloratura singing rose to an entirely new level with the virtuosity of these singers. These physical traits also gave some castrati phenomenal ranges, up to four octaves. Castrati were trained to make full use of their falsetto register, attributing to
some of their dizzyingly high ranges. Other physical attributes contributed to the creation of these ethereal voices. As previously discussed, the lack of testosterone production allowed long bone growth to continue without interruption in these boys, accounting for some of their unusual heights. This same principle also applied to their rib cages, which kept growing past what would have been complete puberty for them, creating a larger chest cavity. An unusually large rib cage, coupled with an unusually small larynx and accented with years and years of intense vocal training rewarded these singers with an extraordinary supply of air. One castrato, singing the premiere role in Aldovrandini’s Cesare, astounded his audience with a phenomenal two octave scale up and down, finishing with a flourish of embellishment—all in a single breath (Street 1987). It is no wonder that these singers were placed on a celebrity pedestal and admired worldwide.

For singers with a seemingly unlimited air supply, composers were free to create incredibly lengthy passages for them, and certainly took full advantage of this freedom. Cadenzas were very common, allowing the singer to embellish to his full ability, dazzling audiences at his will. Improvisation and ornamentation was heavily stressed in a castrato’s teaching, so here he was in his element. The da capo aria of the Baroque period contained no less than three cadenzas. During a fermata, 6/4 chords, the end of a section or even merely a rest in the music… all these were prime opportunities for a castrato to show off their skills. The style of Baroque opera was fashioned around these singers and their abilities. New forms of ornamentation were created around them, forms that do not really exist in today’s style of opera singing. The trillo (“goat’s trill”) is one such example. A single note was repeated in rapid succession, aspirated before each repeat. What is sung as a trill today was greatly embellished by the castrati. There were several different types of trills in the later Baroque period, making a
grand total of eight. Baroque trills were not merely by step or half step. Major trills, minor trills, and double trills were the fashion. The complicated double trill was sung by adding embellished notes within the trill itself. Certain improvisations were even attributed to specific singers. Farinelli had a particularly famous embellishment in which he would trill on a major third. Like a modern-day baseball player whose pitches are given memorable names by fans and media, some of castrati’s personalized ornaments were named. “La bomba del Marchesi” was one of the most widely known. “Marchesi’s bomb” astounded audiences with a stunning array of semitone octaves, finishing with a note of such power that it was immediately given a name of its own (Street 1987).

These singers were true virtuosos, astonishing audiences and composers alike. Improvisation and embellishment of their compositions was not only accepted, but an encouraged practice of the time. Cadenzas were created for the sole purpose of enabling these singers to showcase their vocal prowess for the masses. Composers were not generally incensed at the change in their music. The actual written scores may be a bit deceptive, as the melodies on the page were generally much simpler than what would actually be sung. The singers were expected to know how to properly ornament an aria, so the actual ornamentations were sometimes not furnished. Great liberty was also given to these singers, so that they might use their individual abilities to their full capacity as they pleased. Though this practice was commonplace and widely accepted, it is not to say that a few composers were not weary of the situation. Benedetto Marcello, a celebrated composer in Venice, penned a famous satire on the theatrical conditions of the time. He gives a rather acerbic account of this particular situation:

…while singing his aria he shall take care to remember that at the cadence he may pause as long as he pleases, and make runs, decorations, and ornaments according to his fancy; during which time the leader of the orchestra shall leave his place at the harpsichord, take a pinch of snuff, and wait until it shall please the singer to finish. The latter shall take
breath several times before finally going to a close on a trill, which he will be sure to sing as rapidly as possible from the beginning, without preparing it by placing his voice properly, and all the time using the highest notes of which he is capable. (Street 1987)

Despite this one composer’s sarcastic account, this was the standard practice of the day, and most composers accepted this and left much of the embellishment up to the singer.

Baroque opera became almost solely about the singer. Having reached true celebrity status, their needs and demands superceded most every other aspect of the opera. The castrati could possibly be considered the first true prima donnas. Few female singers even of today could boast such conditions. The goal of a convincing dramatic piece came in a distant second to the whims of the singers. Castrati were not even confined to sing the arias that the composer wrote for the opera he was singing in. The castrati perfected the practice of the *aria di baule* (“suitcase aria”). They would carry these favorite arias with them, substituting them at their will at any point in the opera, whether it made any dramatic or musical sense whatsoever. The singers were truly in charge. There were even printed certain guidelines that should be followed when composing an opera. A composer should take care to make sure that no featured singer was given more arias than another. F. S. Quadrio in his *Della storia, e della ragione d’ogni poesia* details some of these important guidelines:

Finally, it should be noted that these Ariette should be distributed so that each of the top-quality singers has the same number. It is helpful to the performance of the drama that the best voices be equally displayed before the audience. It is also right that equal ground should be given to the more virtuoso singers so that their just value may appear. And, as a last point, it contributes greatly to the peace of mind essential to the singers if they are to perform well. For they often get upset in similar situations by matters of precedence and honour. At the same time care must be taken to ensure that the above-mentioned Ariette are not arranged so that three, or four, are placed together for one singer. (Quadrio 1741)

A singer’s, particularly a castrato’s “delicate sensibilities” were given precedence over almost everything. All measures were taken to ensure the singers’ comfort and contentment, both physically and vocally. Even the positions of the singers onstage were relegated certainly not for
dramatic action or to further the plot of the opera, but to ensure that the most “important” singer was showcased to the fullest. In a series of letters written by Metastasio to the theater manager at Dresden is demonstrated just how far librettists and directors would go to appease the egos of these singers:

This was how I regulated the characters’ positions at the Imperial theatre. At moments, when the action necessitates it, the more illustrious character may be at the left, but this does not produce the least inconvenience. In the first place the right hand is not considered the most eminent position by every nation; and, even if it were, the character could make the left the most distinguished merely by walking across the stage…. If in view of such considerations and necessities the more illustrious character is on the left, and the lowlier one on the right, they can be distinguished in various ways, for instance by placing the former a few steps ahead of the other, or by placing him in the middle of the stage facing the audience, and the other a long way from him and further back, sideways on to the audience and facing his superior… (Heriot 1975)

Stage management and direction was much less about the creation of an illusion for the audience, but about ensuring the status quo for the performers.

This practice of ultimate singer appeasement even crept into the text of the opera. Composers began to choose text based on how it would sound when sung, rather than to further any dramatic plot or expression. Text became rather repetitious at times, as pleasant sounding words were repeated almost exhaustingly, to give the singer the best possible vowels to sing on. Composer Alessandro Scarlatti in particular made a practice of successively using “si” or “no” to elaborate his text with melismas. Avoiding castrati was simply impossible for the composers of Baroque vocal music. Monververdi, Lotti, Gluck, Haydn, Mozart and all of the foremost composers of the time wrote for castrati. Despite the music of these greats, staging, dramatic text, and even the music itself were second tier to the whims and demands of these truly superstar singers.

Like media celebrities of today, many of the more famous castrati were known for their rather obnoxious behavior, both onstage and off. Court conversations as well as peasant chatter
were alive with anecdotes about these singers, and certain castrato provided plenty of fuel for the fires of gossip. Caffarelli in particular was deemed “the original badly behaved castrato- vulgar, quarrelsome, and exhibitionistic.” He was known to act out onstage by making obscene gestures, demeaning his fellow singers by making fun of them with audience members during a show, and even refusing to participate in the ensembles. He was even punished for this behavior in 1741 and put under house arrest (Rosselli 1992). Marcello’s satire also gives us a clear picture of just how disconnected from the drama that some castrati could be onstage:

If he [the singer] has a scene with another actor, whom he is supposed to address when singing an aria, he will take care to pay no attention to him, but rather bow the people in the boxes…in order that the audience may clearly understand that he is the Signor Alipio Forconi, Musico, and not the Prince Zoroaster, whom he is representing. (Heriot 1975)

Of course this was not the case for every castrato. Farinelli was renowned to be a rather talented and sensitive actor. But situations such as that caused the castrati in general to have a rather bad reputation for prima donna type behavior. Marcello goes on to humorously detail his observations of a castrato singing solo:

All the while the ritornello of his aria is being played, the singer should walk about the stage, take snuff, complain to his friends that he is in bad voice, has a cold, etc… (Heriot 1975)

As astonishing as this type behavior may be to modern opera audiences, in the 17th and 18th centuries, when castrati were the undisputed stars of the Baroque stage, it was accepted. Today such behavior can only be compared what readers might see in modern day tabloid magazines, full of outlandish tales of film and music stars acting in such a manner. However, even the most outrageous story of celebrity demands today can hardly be compared to famed soprano Luigi Marchesi, originator of the aforementioned La bomba di Marchesi ornamentation. Marchesi is very often described as the “Caffarelli” of the latter half of the 18th century because of his volatile temperament and ridiculous demands. He was certainly one of the brightest stars of this
age, making his successful singing debut in “La serva padrona” in Rome. His success kept growing, and was such in Milan that a “silver medal was struck in his honour by the Academia of the city” (Heriot 1975). He was known as quite a lady killer, and even enticed a married woman by the name of Maria Cosway to leave her husband and children and follow Marchesi all over Europe for several years, causing quite the scandal.

This incredible success and acclaim apparently fostered quite a sizeable ego, as evidenced primarily by the peculiar way that Marchesi insisted upon being announced onstage. His contracts specifically detailed that, in any opera, regardless of the character he was portraying, his first entrance be announced by trumpet fanfare. Wearing a lavish helmet with multi-colored plumes a full yard high, he would descend a hill on horseback, no matter what the scene. He then would commence to sing one of his favorite arie di baule, usually Sarti’s “Mia speranza, io pur vorrei,” written specifically for Marchesi’s voice. This spectacularly vain entrance was the same no matter what the opera, with a total disregard for storyline or musical consistency. But these demands were met, show after show, defining both the castrati’s supreme importance and also the overwhelming conceit from which some of them suffered.

The best were in extreme demand, so they could easily command astronomical salaries. Scholz emphatically states that “Cultural life in the 17th and 18th centuries was unthinkable without vocal castrati. People went to the opera less to experience the dramatic plot than to hear castrati singing…” (Scholz 2001). Particularly around Turin, singers in general and particularly castrati, were able to command, and receive, elevated salaries (Bouquet 1968). According to Luigi Riccoboni, author of Reflexions historiques et critiques sur les differens theatres de l’Europe:

…for these Thirty years past, a fine Singer, either Man or Woman, has always had upwards of one hundred Golden Sequins, Sancta Stella, Faustina, Cuzzoni and Farinelli,
were all paid on this Footing; but these prodigious Expences have ruined all the Undertakers of the Opera at Venice, and drained the heaviest Purses in Italy... (Riccobini 1738)

Obviously, to pay these hefty singer salaries, other areas of the production had to be compromised. The decline of the chorus in Baroque opera can be attributed directly to this reason. It is a simple matter of finances. With more money going to pay the principal singers, there was less money for a chorus. The focus was so heavily on these popular sopranos and altos that many other aspects of an opera, including ensemble singers, were almost completely overshadowed. Riccoboni continues:

On this Account, and in order to raise the vast Sums that are paid to their Performers, they have for some Time past retrenched their expensive Machinery. (Riccoboni 1738)

Apparently, other vocalists were not the only facets that were entirely eclipsed by these supernovas. Production elements such as machinery, sets, costumes, and even the orchestra were cut back drastically in order to maintain these singers’ salaries, especially in smaller opera houses. Often sets were even reused each year, with a bit of subtle tweaking to fool an audience that was so enamored by its favorite singers that they were easy to deceive with a few pieces of last year’s costumes and scenery, cleverly converted. Heriot gives us a picture of what one might expect to see in one of the smaller town opera houses:

A visitor to the opera at one of the less important towns… would have heard some excellent singing from one or two virtuosi in costumes of their own devising, amongst dingy and tattered surroundings, and accompanied by an undisciplined scratch orchestra composed largely of violins, and with the woodwind appallingly out of tune. (Heriot 1975)

Castrato salaries were undoubtedly the highest. Composers and even the female prima donnas of the day were usually much lower rungs on the ladder of importance. At times the premiere leading lady was paid comparably to the lead castrato, but she was the exception.
There were some drawbacks to this level of fame and fortune, naturally. Many of these drawbacks, however, were not obvious at the time, and many of the more famous castrati enjoyed lives of lavish luxury. Some, however, felt immediate consequences. With these soaring heights did come hindrances such as jealousy and even hatred from colleagues, both male and female. A few singers such as Siface eventually paid for their arrogance with their lives. His affair, had it been kept discreet instead of boasted about Bologna so publicly by the amorous castrato himself, may not have been so treacherous. Other consequences were not so readily obvious, and it is much more apparent today, looking on the situation as history. The unparalleled Mozart himself, even after writing several parts for specific castrati, eventually grew tired of their exhausting demands, financial and otherwise, and lost his passion for the castrato voice in general (Scholz 2001). His letters reveal some of his disenchantment of the way some castrati behaved. One describes a trick that a musico contrived during Mozart’s carnival opera Lucio Silla. In order to garner more acclaim and applause for himself than the female prima donna, he devised that the archduchess be informed that he would be so unnerved on stage that he would be unable to sing. This induced the archduchess to immediately applaud when the castrato entered the stage, creating jealousy among the other singers (Holmes 1979).

In a humorous account to Padre Martini of his days at Munich, he refers to the fact that the castrati, or musici, are rather expensive:

> With regard to the theatre, it is badly off in point of singers. We have no musici, and are not likely to have any, because they insist on being well paid, and liberality is not one of our failings. (Holmes 1979)

There may have been even more phenomenal Mozart music for these singers had a few of the haughtier ones not eventually disillusioned him so.
Despite the flaws that this sense of power and importance certainly brought forth in some of the castrati singers, others used their social caliber for other, nobler means. Carlo Broschi, best known in history as Farinelli, is the prime example. He was heralded as the greatest castrato voice that ever lived, but never seemed to develop the ego of many of his contemporaries. Perhaps it was due to the fact that, unlike most castrati, he was from a noble family. His father, a very important man, served as Royal Governor of the towns of Maratea and Cisternino from 1706-1709. Farinelli had just been born the year before, on January 24, 1705. After his service as Royal Governor, his remaining years, until 1717 when he passed away, were spent composing and teaching music (Heriot 1975). Farinelli’s brother, Riccardo Broschi, was a rather successful composer himself, and later wrote music for his brother. This cultural and musical heritage may have given him his gentler sense of modesty somehow.

Also unlike most of his contemporaries, “Farinelli” was not a personal nickname, but a family one. Riccardo Broschi was also known by this name, although his brother’s fame quickly superceded his own. The origins of this name remain a mystery, and are not altogether important to this castrato’s story. He arrived in Naples while still a very young boy and began to immerse himself in musical study shortly after. His primary study was under the great Porpora. Farinelli would later sing in many of Porpora’s operas. At age fifteen, he made his debut in Naples with Porpora’s serenata “Angelica e Medoro”. The libretto was furnished by none other than the great Metastasio, in his first operatic work. This is an incredible landmark in musical history, as the arguably most famous singer and most well-known librettist together make their debuts. Even more beautiful is the instant friendship that developed between the two extraordinary artists. Referring to one another as *caro gemello* (“my dear twin”), their frequent
correspondence cemented a lifelong friendship, though they rarely crossed physical paths (Heriot 1975).

A few years later, Porpora and Farinelli left together for Rome. The opera stage in Rome is where Farinelli’s reputation began to swell. His legendary nightly competition with a then famous trumpet player was merely friendly sport until the audience began to get involved. Taking sides and heartily cheering their favorite, they watched in rapt attention as each musician executed to more and more impressive musical feats. Ultimately the trumpeter surrendered to exhaustion, mistakenly thinking Farinelli would surely do the same. Yet with a grin the singer jovially forged ahead, attempting with fantastical success even more complex and powerful ornamentations, clearly triumphing in this friendly duel. At age seventeen he had firmly established himself as the premiere singer of the time, garnering instant adoration.

After this astonishing episode, his fame rose exponentially. Known simply as il ragazzo (“the boy”), he was renowned not only for his extraordinary voice, but for his bewitching looks as well. His widely spaced eyes and expressive, chiseled features earned him instant acclaim, particularly with the ladies of his audiences, although, as previously discussed, the subject of love seemed to hold little interest for him. He continued to dazzle audiences with his impressive vocal pyrotechnics until his rather famous meeting with Emperor Charles VI. Upon his advice, Farinelli adopted a calmer, more personal style, focusing less on entralling people with technical acrobatics and simply becoming involved with the emotion of the piece. This proved to be extremely successful, as he moved audience after audience to tears. Even the great Senesino, himself an accomplished actor as well as singer was so passionately moved by Farinelli’s singing that he forgot his character completely and rushed to embrace the young singer. Burney reports that:
Senesino had the part of a furious tyrant, and Farinelli that of an unfortunate hero in chains; but in the course of the first air, the captive so softened the heart of the tyrant, that Senesino, forgetting his stage-character, ran to Farinelli and embraced him in his own. (Heriot 1975)

Farinelli’s fame was truly worldwide. Before castrati, internationally known celebrities did not really exist in such a capacity. Castrati were revered and practically worshipped by some, as evidenced by the now legendary exclaim of an enraptured noblewoman at an opera, “One God, one Farinelli!” The details of this story may be more myth than fact, but the idea is certainly not difficult to believe. Singers of his caliber were put on an enormous pedestal and seen almost as gods. In a performance of “Son qual nove,” Farinelli sustained his opening note for so long that the crowd became completely ecstatic (Bergeron 1996). Few celebrities of today could boast such total power over an audience.

They were immortalized in countless portraits, particularly Farinelli, who was undoubtedly handsome and rather tall, as many castrati were. One of the most prominent portraits of Farinelli shows his more human side. A musical scroll of Metastasio’s *Zenobia* in his left hand, dressed in the Order of Calatrava, in which he was knighted in 1750, he is alone with one of his dogs, whom he loved. It was painted by Jacopo Amigoni, a friend of Farinelli’s, who was commissioned for several of his portraits, beginning in 1735. Various other painters throughout Europe such as Hogarth and Giaquinto portrayed Farinelli in various settings such as a military hero, or as a god complete with an altar burning before him. Paintings were created with scenes from various operas and in different musical settings (McGeary 2002). As with any celebrity, caricatures of castrati also began to surface, both flattering and unflattering. Artists poked fun at various characteristics stereotypical of a castrato, from some of their ungainly heights to the other extreme of feminine-like obesity.
In the days of Baroque opera, many singers relied heavily on their patrons. They were sponsors of sort, and supported their favorites in many ways. Farinelli struck a rather close friendship with one of his patrons, Thomas Osborne, or the Duke of Leeds from Britain. Many of British were great fans of Italian opera, and took Grand Tours because the “most fashionable music was foreign,” referring primarily to Italian opera and some German orchestral music (Black 1990). The subject of castrati became a rather sensitive political and cultural issue, and the press denounced the aristocracy for their preference of Italian music, claiming that it was an “abandonment of British culture.” Adam Walker, prominent lecturer in experimental philosophy, states that:

…of all the seminaries appropriated to the wise purpose of propagating folly, none ever equaled the Italian Opera. Here, indeed, the god Fashion displays his mental triumph! Reason is led into captivity by the ears! Virtue and public spirit take opiates from the hands of Circe! – and effeminacy, lewdness, and perverted ideas gambol in the train! (Black 1990)

Yet not everyone felt this way, and the critics could not stop the fascination with castrati by the British noble families, and they flocked to Italy to see these acclaimed singers.

It was the singers and in particular the castrati, that commanded this attention and adoration, rather than the operas themselves. Routes were altered so that the visiting British could attend specific performances by their favorites. The Earl of Essex wrote to his agent Thomas Bowen in 1733 that the opera of Bologna was “the finest opera that was ever heard, and a vast deal of company, there was 32 English” (Black 1990). From Milan the Earl of Stanhope wrote conversely to the Earl of Essex the same year that “The Opera is the chief entertainment of all strangers here” (Black 1990).

The Duke of Leeds was one of these British that were smitten with the castrati. In the duke’s account book of his Grand Tour affirms the close friendship between this singer and
patron, and provides more details about Farinelli’s life. Leeds commissioned at least two portraits of Farinelli, and an inventory of Farinelli’s collection revealed that he had paintings of the Duke of Leeds. One such portrait of Farinelli is rather unusual. It was most likely painted by Jacopo Amigoni. Instead of a formal pose with allegorical figures like most English portraits of the time, he was portrayed in a much more informal and spontaneous manner with sheet music and a dove in a white cloth. This is indicative of the intimate friendship that must have existed between Farinelli and the Duke of Leeds. When tragedy struck the Duke’s personal life in the form of Lady Caroline Darcy, who refused his marriage proposal in favor of another, he turned to Farinelli for healing. A letter to the Duke of Essex describes Leeds’ choice of therapy:

The poor Duke of Leeds is, they say, retiring into Yorkshire, to endeavor to forget his Disappointment in Lady Caroline Darcy, who, I suppose, upon being nearly pressed by his Grace, owned an Engagement with Lord Jedburgh... His Grace did certainly retire to Weybridge on a Sudden, and the Town assigned this for the reason: He takes Farinelli with him into the Country to soothe his Sorrows. (Heriot 1975)

Farinelli seemed to have a penchant for soothing the sorrows of those close to him and forming friendships that lasted his whole life. When Leeds’ son took his own Grand Tour in 1769 and encountered the singer for himself, it was reported that: “upon being told it was the son of his patron and friend, the Duke of Leeds, he threw his arms round his neck, and shed tears of joy in embracing him” (Burney). As with his old friend and “dear twin” Metastasio, it is unlikely that Farinelli ever saw Leeds again after his farewell performance on June 11, 1737 in London. But they remained friends, and would always have their correspondence and beautiful portraits to immortalize their friendship (McGeary 2002).

With Farinelli’s unprecedented success as a singer, one may have expected him to pursue the opera stage fully until the end of his days. But after this farewell performance in London, he
retired from the opera stage at the relatively early age of 32. He did not give up singing, however, he just seemed to have different aspirations and career goals.

While the opera stage was certainly the starting point to begin an extremely successful castrato’s career, it did not have to be his only outlet. Many successful castrati had wonderful careers as premiere court musicians. Farinelli was expected to return to London for the next season, but he was enticed to Spain instead. The wife of Philip V, in an attempt to lift the debilitating melancholy of her husband, and hired Farinelli literally in order to try to sing him back to health. Whether her motives were out of love or political agenda is hard to tell. Regardless, the arrival of Farinelli was carefully orchestrated by the Queen, down to the first encounter with the King, which she made to look like an accidental meeting. Her plan worked brilliantly, and Farinelli is indeed credited with elongating the sick King’s life for another nine years. His whole life he showed a great affinity for transforming and charming people not only with his ethereal voice, but with his peaceful and humble nature. Finding tranquility in nothing but Farinelli, the King would request him to sing each night. As the tale goes, he would repeat only a certain four songs every evening without fail. It is thought that possibly he actually performed other literature as well, but kept at least one of the songs consistently nightly. Whatever the details of the legend, his effect on Philip V of Spain was one of healing.

Farinelli was paid a substantial salary that was most certainly complemented by myriad gifts and endowments. But what he perhaps found even more rewarding was the political opportunity that this job afforded him. His influence of the court of Spain was quite impressive, after living there just a short time. Although he was certainly not overbearing or bossy, he seemed to possess a quiet charisma that must have enchanted all around him. Heriot compares his influence over the Spanish court to none other than the legendary Rasputin over the Russian
Tsar (Heriot 1975). Farinelli remained there for 22 years, long after Philip V had passed away. His concerns ran to such projects as the dredging and canalization of the Tagus River. Other enterprises are detailed in his frequent letters to Metastasio, who remained his confidant throughout the years. Under Ferdinand VI, he was granted even more power by being named Commander of the Order of Calatrava. His gentle demeanor, despite his authoritarian position, earned him great respect throughout the country of Spain. Stories of his benevolence and generosity helped solidify his already stellar reputation.

An opera lover, the new Queen, Barbara of Portugal, opened a new court opera house, over which Farinelli was made director. He was naturally a success, commanding but fair. He even spearheaded some new initiatives in opera design, one being a way to simulate rainfall onstage. He remained in this important position until the succession of Ferdinand by Charles III, which eventually marked the end of Farinelli’s political career. There seemed to be no bad blood between the two, but perhaps simply a political move on the part of the new King (Heriot 1975). He then returned to Italy to retire in the city of Bologna. He lived his last years quietly, no longer singing but still playing the harpsichord and was frequently visited. One of his many visitors was none other than Mozart himself, astonishing the singer and his close friend Padre Martini, who was currently writing his History of Music, with his skill in extempore fugue (Holmes 1979).

Farinelli’s over sixty year correspondence with his “dear twin” continued unabated until Metastasio’s death in 1782. Ironically, Farinelli himself died rather suddenly, later that same year. His tomb is unfortunately no longer in existence, due to the Napoleon invasion of Italy, but his villa in Bologna survives to this day. Carlo Broschi was the ultimate example of the incredible lives that some castrati led because of their unique talent. Although not all of
Farinelli’s accomplishments were musically inclined, the doors to his success were opened foremost because of his incredible voice.

The bewitching voice of the castrato singer created many opportunities for these singers, in addition to the glamour of the opera stage. Some castrati became world travelers, summoned all over Europe to sing for great kings and rulers. Filippo Balatri of Tuscany was one castrato whose voice transported him to many exotic places, not just in central Europe. Balatri is the author of the only known castrato autobiography. He tells his life story with a biting wit and rather droll attitude. It is written in verse with rhyming stanzas composed in four line sections. The account is a wonderful insight into his psyche, and begins with simply “I was born.” As to the details of his birth and early life, including his training, he is unfortunately rather vague. Many castrati seemed to have a sense of shame about their beginnings, perhaps because of the delicate subject of their operation. Although Balatri boldly mentions and even names the doctor who performed his, one Accoramboni of Lucca. Balatri sarcastically “thanks” him near the end of his saga, as he details the manner in which he wished to be buried.

He addresses his work simply to *il Mondo*… the world. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he did not begin his career in Rome or Naples. In fact, Balatri was spirited away to Moscow when he was hardly fifteen years old. His “natural Sovereign” responsible for this move was Cosimo III de’Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany. He describes the situation:

Peter, the great Czar, who reigns over Scythia, is determined to fertilise Muscovy with science and fine arts, and has sought out people who in such things are well instructed. (Heriot 1975)

It may seem strange to modern thinkers that such a responsibility be placed on the shoulders of a fifteen year old boy, but things were much different then. Children were not generally as cosseted and coddled, and by fifteen a boy was already a man, and ready to embark on the world.
Castrati were particularly adept in their craft, due to their intensive training and natural voice, and were considered authorities on the subject, even at young ages.

After an arduous journey in which Balatri dryly details his displeasure, he was welcomed warmly in Moscow by the Czar, who even went so far as to refer to Balatri as his son. However, like his previous fellow castrati who were favored, jealousy abounded, which he humorously describes: “…a thousand others looked at me for it with stern brows as if I were a dog with the mange” (Heriot 1975). Balatri combated their opposition by managing to learn enough Russian to answer their taunts. The taunts then escalated into physical blows, so the Czar sent the singer away for a time to preserve some peace. He visited an Embassy in Russia, where once again he disliked the hardships of traveling and compared them to what he imagined military life must be like. Balatri enthralled the Embassy with his singing, despite the difficult journey, and received a gift of one of the Tartar’s beautiful horses. He then fielded a friendly interrogation by the curious Russians, with his usual acerbic wit. When the Czar inquired whether he was male or female and where people with “such a voice” are born, he said:

I reply that I am male, a Tuscan, and that there are roosters in my part of the world that lay eggs, from which sopranis are born. That these roosters are called Norcini, and make us incubate [the eggs] for many days, and when the capon is born, the eggs are showered with flattery, caresses and money. (Heriot 1975)

They were charmed by his clever banter and all continued to go well. But when he returned back to the Czar, the fights at court became worse, and eventually he accompanied the newly appointed Russian Ambassador to Vienna, Prince Boris Galitzin, back to Italy. He had been living with Galitzin while in Russia and had grown rather attached to him. In Vienna he was fortunate to study with the renowned male contralto Gaetano Orsini. There he perfected his craft, and starts building for a successful Italian career:
He sings by a method such as had never hitherto been conceived. He succeeds in making me imitate him a little. My voice is high, clear and without fault. In two years I have become a good soprano, and I even hazard myself in the presence of Caesar [i.e. the Emperor] I sing at Mass. Everyone begins to praise me, and pride begins to give me its hand. (Heriot 1975)

His career took a bit of a detour again as he had to return to Pisa at the request of his father.

There he found that his continental travel had rather changed him, and he found Pisa to be rather dull and the people, particularly some of the women, quite vapid. Of some family friends who came to dine with them, he laments:

These two women have never travelled, nor ever read a book in their lives, so that their weak little intellect makes their conversation rather limited. (Heriot 1975)

The other ladies of Pisa made no better impression on him:

The women are not accustomed to make love, nor can they understand mysterious things. I find them so insipid and lemonish that they make me sweat at the elbows. (Heriot 1975)

Thankfully, he was rescued from this banality by the Grand Duke once more, to Florence. There he was appointed interpreter for the next Russian Ambassador, Naryshkin. In Florence he had a few other non-musical jobs, of which he grew tired. He longed to return to his vocal roots and petitioned to be allowed to travel to England, where Italian opera was just becoming popular. He was eventually permitted to go, but a rough storm diverted the travelers to Lyons, where Balatri first encountered French music. Unfortunately the music was accompanied by a prejudice of the French towards Italian singers. His first singing was met with raucous laughter, the last thing he expected. In general the French had an animosity towards Italian music and particularly against castrati. He almost stormed out, but was appeased by an Italian speaker who attempted to explain a bit of the French point of view. The laughter was over the “ah” vocalize that opened the aria. The French believed:

That elaborate passages were for violins, while for voices there were words; that a passage of only eight notes must suffice for the finest of singers. (Heriot 1975)
This explanation assuaged the castrato, and he requested to hear an example of French singing, which he soon would regret. Balatri’s account of the young woman who sang is quite blunt:

After grimacing for half an hour, she begins to say “Iris,” and on the “ris” forces her voice so much, and dwells so long that it must have been heard form Lyons to London. I swear by Bacchus that this shriek bores into my brain. She takes up a higher note, and then a higher, and her “Iriiiiiiiis” tears my heart to tatters. (Heriot 1975)

Upon hearing this caterwauling, Balatri decided to have a bit of fun. He sung again, in the “French” style, taking to extremes the cloying style he had just witnessed. The French audience heartily applauded this new effort, and even advised him to go study in Paris that he might someday become a “really good singer.” He did indeed pass through Paris on the way to London. Here his singing was well received, in an obviously more cultured city than Lyons.

His lack of stage experience seemed to be an advantage in the eyes of the English aristocracy, who deemed him more gentlemanly than previous singers, and he was a great success in London. When political strife between the Whigs and Tories turned London’s eyes away from music, once again the Grand Duke came to Balatri’s rescue, sending him to Germany where his daughter, Anna Maria Ludovica de’ Medici resided. Once again the roads were perilous for Balatri, and after illnesses and other troubles, he ended up in Munich and accepted a singing job there. His illnesses however persisted, and he went back finally to Tuscany for awhile. But, still quite the traveler, he returned once more to Munich, where he finally made his stage debut in an unspecified opera. He was around 48 at the time, quite a bit older than the traditional castrato debut as a young teenager!

His debut a success, he was then commissioned to sing in Vienna by Emperor Charles VI. He sings with Faustina, whom he felt quite humbled by, as evidenced by his modest account of this experience. After a successful season at Vienna, he kept up his travels, this time
remaining in Italy and touring Padua, Venice, and Verona. But he could not stay away from Germany, and returned there to serve under Johann Theodor, Bishop of Ratisbon. At this point of his life he closes his autobiography, as things for him finally became peaceful. The records of the monastery communicate what became of Balatri in his final years. It tells the circumstances of his first mass, led by “His Highness Johann Theodor, Bishop of Freising and Ratisbon” himself. Apparently Balatri had befriended him, and confided his secret desire to “renounce the world and serve God alone.” In response, took the dedicated singer into his cloister to serve and to direct the sacred music. Balatri took the name Theodore in appreciation of the Bishop’s support and friendship. There he remained until he died in 1756 (Heriot 1975).

Although he did indeed become a monk, Balatri’s singular wit and jovial attitude towards his very existence remained. Even his will was a piquant piece of writing. Addressed to a friend, he begins with:

You have found the buffoon in all my writings; but you know that the reason was because I could not do otherwise. So, if you find the same in this, you will be all the more certain it is mine. He who was born a fool will never be cured, says the proverb. (Heriot 1975)

He continues to the body of the will, outlining the specifics of his estate with his characteristic irreverence and parody. He goes on to describe why he never took a wife, which as quoted earlier. He elaborates the situation by concocting an imaginary scenario on his deathbed, longing for a last few moments of peace, but being robbed of it by a badgering wife who relentlessly harasses him about the location of his will (Heriot 1975).

One thing in which Balatri was adamant is that his corpse was absolutely not to be washed in the traditional fashion of the country. He did not want to be degraded and washed by:

certain women… not only for the indecency I see in it, but because I do not them to amuse themselves by examining me, to see how sopranos are made. (Heriot 1975)
After this request, he pokes fun at the custom, creating an imaginary harpy that cackles with
gossip of all the dead bodies.

His adamancy over this perhaps hints at a bit of shame he may have felt over being a
castrato. It is reasonable to assume that may be why he chose a life of service in his final years,
but his confessions with Bishop Theodor seem to belie that assumption. Balatri seemed to be
genuinely devoted to God’s service, and the Prince Bishop was confident that Balatri was
completely sincere in his pious decision and welcomed him wholly to his order. Balatri was also
steadfast throughout his life in his Catholic beliefs, and often tried to convert his hosts and
patrons abroad.

He waxes sarcastic a bit longer, and concludes with a humorous lament over a real
painting of himself at Ismaning, which was his parsonage. It depicts a lively party, with Balatri
at the center on the harpsichord. He grieves that:

at this moment the courtiers perhaps are saying: “Look at that ___ed eunuch, how he used
to be idolized!” One by one, the courtiers that knew me will die, and people will begin to
ask “Who is he?” –and eventually no one will remember at all, and the picture itself will
be relegated to the scrapheap… (Heriot 1975)

In this respect, Balatri could not have been more wrong. He remains one of the most celebrated
castrati, and certainly one of the most studied. His autobiography, the only known one by a
castrato, is not only full of invaluable information about his life, but is extremely well-written in
an acerbic, irreverent wit that is simply delightful to read. His verse gives us a very rare insight
into the psyche of a castrato. The phrase to his friend that began his will, “You have found the
buffoon in all my writings; but you know that the reason was because I could not do otherwise,”
raises curious questions. Was he hiding a sense of shame and depression behind his jovial
words? Or was his ironic view of life just his basic personality? The latter seems more
plausible. Certainly there is evidence that his position in life left him abashed, for instance, his
insistence that he not be physically examined upon his death. Yet his affable attitude seemed to be a way of life for him, as shown in his behavior, not just in his writings as a singer. An example of his general attitude was his tongue-in-cheek performance in Lyons, taking the French style to the absurd.

Overall he did appear to enjoy his life of music and travel, never really leaning towards the bitter in his writings, but keeping an ironic eye on every situation. His life ended peacefully, in his final chosen vocation, combining his devotion to God and music.

Much like Farinelli, Balatri’s life included other avenues besides music. Farinelli was quite active in his political influence, and Balatri served as a Russian interpreter and type of ambassador to numerous countries. However, both these men likely would not have achieved nearly as much as they did had they not been castrati. Their talent and training as singers is what opened the doors of opportunity for them. Both men kept music in their lives until the day they died, even though they officially retired from the performance arena.

Despite the inherent hardships of a castrato, many doors were flung wide open for them that would be closed to many of their intact contemporaries. Even for castrati that did not spend a lifetime pursuing the opera stage, many successful paths were possible. Balatri’s final appointment at the church mirrors the life that some castrati led from the beginning, and some eased into upon retirement. Life in the church was a fallback position for castrati, a type of safety net. Those castrati that did not reach the heights of fame on the opera stage were not completely lost. Angus Heriot gives a rather bleak view of a “failed” castrato:

…the poor wretch might then decline to the touring of small provincial opera-houses – the “sticks” of eighteenth century Italy- or hide his head in some church choir; where, to keep his spirits up, he would choose all the latest and flashiest operatic arias, have them reset to sacred words, and with them startle the angels on the rederos and the martyred saints on the frescoed ceiling. (Street 1987)
This may sound like a terrible fate, but these failed singers still were gainfully employed, and in a much more pleasant career than, had they even survived poverty as a child, tending to the livestock or toiling in the fields. Refeudalization and deindustrialization oppressed these families, and these boys, whether superstars or not, were given a type of pardon from this life.

The castrati were also essential to music history and to the development of opera. The necessity for the castrato voice was borne from musical need, and in turn the reality of the castrato voice shaped Baroque vocal writing, particularly in opera. When studying the music written during that period, it was undoubtedly composed specifically for the castrato voice. The floridity and coloratura of the passages are obviously meant for these new voices that made such music even possible. Early Italian opera simply would not have existed as we know it without the castrati. To put it succinctly,

…Italian opera was, till the late 18th century, almost synonymous with the castrati, and that Italian opera was the opera that really mattered. (Heriot 1987)

The castrato style became the taste and fashion of audiences, and composers yielded and wrote accordingly. Roles were created to be sung by castrati and many times, for specific castrato singers. Handel created many roles for Senesino, and even Gluck, who advocated the reform of opera from what he considered abuses of the time, created the title role of *Orfeo* for castrato Gaetano Guadagni (Howard 1999).

Early opera began to give way to opera seria. Siface, the castrato who was murdered by his lover’s family, seemed to be the singer whose “career bridged the gap between what one might call “early” opera (Cavalli) and the arrival of opera seria” (Somerset-Ward 2004).

In the late 17th century, an entirely new style of singing was born. This legato technique that is now taught as the bel canto style coincided with the rise of opera seria, and the two cannot exist separately. Castrati were a large part of this, making the new style even possible.
The design of the *da capo* aria for the new opera genre awarded the proper freedom of expression for the castrati to fully demonstrate their immense talents and teachings. Lesser singers would certainly not have been able to take advantage of this style in any significant way, and opera seria may not have flourished. Castrati were absolutely instrumental in the development of opera, which became the premiere art form in Italy, and galvanized the European world of music. As many retired, they began to pass on their craft and immense knowledge to others through teaching. Many castrati who did not become particularly famous as singers at all contributed greatly to music by teaching the singers that would become the greats. Francesco Antonio Massimiliano, or Pistocchi, was one such castrato. He founded a singing school in Bologna, and taught the famous Bernacchi, whose acrobatic style of singing was often criticized as being overly instrumental and unemotional. However, he was very successful, and later became a great proponent of the new legato technique. Following the path of his own teacher, he created his own singing school right in the very same town of Bologna. One of the most common paths for a retired castrato was teaching or serving the Church. Many castrati continued to bestow their talent upon the world, even after their glory days were over.

The societal contributions of the castrati did not stop with teaching. Marchesi, having acquired a great deal of wealth by his retirement, founded the Pio Istituto Filarmonico, which supported the widows and orphans of musicians. Caffarelli’s fortune was even more impressive, and he bought himself a dukedom upon retirement. The years seemed to soften his tempestuous spirit, and he devoted much time and money to the Church and to charitable causes in his final times (Somerset-Ward 2004).

The rise of the castrati coincided with the rise of opera, and the evolution of opera is what ultimately caused the decline of these singers. Gluck, the great opera reformer, wrote the piece
that would mark the castrati’s descent. *Orfeo ed Euridice*, his first “reform opera”, premiered in Vienna in 1762. His goal was to:

> divest [opera] entirely of all these abuses, introduced into it either by mistaken vanity of singers or by the too great complaisance of composers, which have so long disfigured Italian opera and made of the most splendid and beautiful of spectacles the most ridiculous and wearisome. (Somerset-Ward 2004)

Leaving the *da capo* aria totally behind and replacing the dry recitative with fully orchestrated accompanied recitative, he strove to make opera a much more emotional experience. Arias would become part of the dramatic framework, rather than interchangeable works meant simply to showcase the singer. Ironically, much of the success of this opera is due to the aforementioned castrato Gaetano Guadagni, who sung the title role. Even the reform of opera that would begin to diminish the popularity of the castrati was aided by one of the singers themselves. They were simply invaluable in every facet of opera life at the time. Other forms of opera such as opera buffa, which had no real place for castrati, were becoming popular with not only Gluck, but other such composers as Mozart, Sarti, and Cimarosa. At times they would write a role for a castrato, but opera was evolving, and the castrati clearly were simply no longer concentric. The final major castrato opera performance was in 1829 by Giovanni Velluti in Meyerbeer’s *Crociato in Egitto*. Castrati continued to sing in the Sistine Chapel choir until 1902, with a seven year pause during the Napoleon invasion (Jenkins 1998).

The factors that consummately led to the ascent of the castrati were decidedly the very same factors that caused their popularity to begin to wane. The inevitable metamorphosis of opera certainly played a large part. The desperate economic situation that so had impoverished Italy and set the stage for countless castrati to be created was healing. The 1730s marked an end to this depression, and the number of castrations began to significantly decline, further evidencing that this was a rather significant factor in their creation.
Evirati, Kapaune, musici, castrati… whatever epithet is used to describe these incredible singers, one fact prevails. These singers had an undeniable and invaluable impact on the creation of opera, and the evolution of vocal music as a whole. Was their musical contribution worth their physical sacrifice? Evidence points to the affirmative. While the mutilation of young boys is certainly something that can never be condoned, the circumstances of their lives were vastly different than that of children today, and modern thinking cannot be properly applied to their situation. Children developed much earlier, both mentally and physically. By age ten, a young boy was ready to embark on an apprenticeship. These were the fortunate ones. The less fortunate ones were relegated to harsh manual labor in the fields and farms, some at an even younger age. Childhood was not a time to be coddled in Baroque times. The family’s future did not revolve around the individual well being of a child, quite the contrary. A boy’s future was a matter of family strategy or family dynasty, for both the peasant and nobility, respectively. And with social, economic, and political factors generating an oppressive situation that modern historians have coined the general crisis of the 17th century, that future appeared quite bleak. A cloud of desperation enveloped the countryside, so extreme that many Italian families outright abandoned their children to “foundling hospitals.” Despondent families were desperate for any flicker of hope. Strangely enough, that hope came with the development of Baroque vocal music. The ban of women from church choirs and the growing predilection for higher voices created perfect groundwork for the creation of castrati. A chance for their son to become an international opera star must have been quite attractive for these families, both the destitute and the noble alike. Although the odds of such success were not extremely promising, about one in one hundred, but if a boy already showed some musical inclination, hope was ever greater. There is documentation in many cases to prove that the boys
made the decision to be castrated themselves, at least two of which became among the greatest opera stars that ever lived.

Even the castrati that did not become wildly successful on the opera stage had their futures secured in the Church. Despite the Papal ban on castration, a blind eye was turned to these singers, and there were castrati on the payroll at the as early as the mid-1500s. Pope Clement VIII described their service as *ad honorum Dei*, and the Church provided a home and fantastic education for these boys. Life was not perfect, as jealously over their preferential treatment abounded, but this was certainly better than the dangerous manual labor or total abandonment that countless “intact” peasant boys faced in this time of depression. Even a boy of noble birth, Farinelli for example, enjoyed a much better education than he would have otherwise. And like Farinelli, many castrati had great influence and power outside the musical realm. Countless opportunities were presented to these singers because of their almost god-like status, opportunities that would have been unheard of otherwise.

Did these boys have normal lives outside of music? Certainly their lives were not typical. But considering what normal life encompassed for the majority of these children, they seemed to live a better existence, with a cosseted existence and phenomenal education that included many studies other than vocal technique. Physical life was a bit different, but castration was not a sentence of celibacy, and castrati were in great demand as lovers because of their inability to procreate. Italians even invented a socially acceptable term for them called *cicisbeo* (“gallant companion”), a gentleman with a relationship to a married woman in order to “enhance marriage.”

The psyche of these singers is difficult to determine, since only one autobiography exists. Balatri’s biting and humorous account describes an amazing life, filled with travel and intrigue.
Despite his sarcastic view of the world and his own situation in particular, he seemed happy with his existence, and his writing maintained a jovial feel, never really turning to the bitter side. Naturally it is assumed that they may have feelings of inferiority because of their diminished status as a male. But in society their vocal talent placed them on such a high pedestal that many of them were outright worshipped: ‘One God, one Farinelli!’ They were the first true international celebrities, predecessors to the Hollywood royalty that so many worship today.

Speaking to a natural castrato that lives today, John W. of New Zealand, gives a unique perspective. Growing up as a castrato has given him a special insight to how they may have felt. He firmly believes that the castrato singers of the 18th century were, for the most part, volunteers, and lived a much better quality of life because of this operation. Another modern singer, Ernesto Tomasini, states bluntly: “I regret not having been castrated. I would have perfectly happily given up my masculinity for my art” (Ellis 2002). While this opinion is certainly not universal for today’s man, or even common, it dispels the modern thinking that no man would ever voluntarily make such a sacrifice.

In addition to enriching their personal lives, where would opera be today without castrati? These singers were absolutely essential to the development of opera, particularly since women were discouraged and even banned in some Papal States from the stage. The music written for these virtuosos would simply not have been created had there not been singers capable of such feats. The popularity of opera spread wildly through Europe, as the castrati astounded audiences with their angelic yet furiously passionate singing, and ethereal, androgynous beauty. Their teachings were invaluable to the vocal world. The foundation of the bel canto singing of today is attributed to singers that had been trained by the castrati. Rossini coloratura writing is attributed
to his early memories of these singers. The existence of the castrati was absolutely crucial to opera history and helped shape what is arguable the premiere art form of today.

Was it worth it? As with many historical questions, we may never truly know the answer. But the evidence of the miraculous lives that many of them led, their contributions to society in general and particularly the field of music, and the escape from the oppressive destitution that this operation afforded them suggests the affirmative. These ethereal musicians, unique in so many ways, are one of music’s greatest mysteries. A mystery that cannot be solved, but merely studied in awe and their loss lamented. The stars of the golden age of opera shone more brightly than we can ever imagine. The magnificent Rossini summarizes the glory of the castrato singer that is past in musical history, yet everlasting in the soul of the art form that was founded on their heavenly voices:

I have never forgotten them. The purity, the miraculous flexibility of those voices, and, above all, their profoundly penetrating accent— all that moved and fascinated me more than I can tell...


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