

CASTRATI SINGERS AND THE LOST ‘‘CORDS’’

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In the Italian language, nouns of feminine gender end with ‘‘a’’, while those of masculine gender end with ‘‘o’’—yet we label Joan Sutherland a soprano, not soprana and Marian Anderson a contralto, not contralta. Why?

THE year 1600, with the performance of *Euridice* composed by Jacopo Peri, marks the birth of modern opera.¹⁻⁴ Prior to that date, Greek-style dramas were performed in which polyphonic choruses dominated. Vincenzo Galilei, the father of Galileo, and Jacopo Peri rebelled against this and introduced a significant innovation by employing single vocal parts consisting of arias and recitatives. This in time led to *bel canto*, often for sheer vocal display. At first there were no *public* opera houses, and performances were given in private theaters or chapels belonging to kings, dukes, bishops, etc. But opera soon caught on and in 1637 the first public opera houses opened in Venice. By 1700 Venice had 17 opera houses and there were hundreds throughout Italy. Some were very ornate, displaying a mixture of baroque and rococo styles. Soon there were performances in Germany (*sangspiel*), France (*opéra bouffe*, later *opéra comique*), Poland, Sweden, and England (where it was labeled ‘‘ballad opera’’).^{1,2,3}

Composers and producers of opera had a problem because for centuries women were not allowed to sing in church or theater. There were no women singers; all roles, male and female, were played by men. There are two reasons: Roman male chauvinism: only a man with normal testis could be a witness—the very word *testis* means witness.⁵ He could swear in court by placing his right hand on the scrotal area and declaiming: ‘‘I hereby ‘testify’.’’ † Religious taboos: women were not allowed to sing in

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*Deceased June 3, 1983.

†Should the term ‘‘testify’’ raise the ire of Women’s Lib, I would suggest that the ladies substitute ‘‘ovarify’’ for ‘‘testify.’’

Fig. 1. A sequence of drawings showing steps in operation for hernia: the legends are a translation by this author from the German (in verse) from Stromayr.⁶



Fig. 1a. The assistants in the drawing show
How to place the child with head low.

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the Catholic Church since its inception. This was probably due to the injunction by St. Paul: "Let your women keep silence in the churches; for it is not permitted unto them to speak...." (I Cor. 13:34). As the Church grew in power and wealth and with the building of great cathedrals and the musical contributions by Bach, Handel, Haydn, and others, church music, always an integral part of worship, led to a great demand for soprano voices. First they employed falsetto singers—the best came from Spain—but their voices were thin, artificial, and unpleasing. Then they tried prepubertal boys, but their voices were not strong enough and changed at puberty, at which time many became unruly.^{1,2}

In the late 1500s young castrates began to be heard with voices ideal for soprano parts. How was this effect discovered? Perhaps it was serendipitous following bilateral orchietomy incidental to bilateral herniotomy on children as practiced by the barber-surgeons (Figure 1).^{6,7,8} If the boy



Fig. 1b. Pray to God and to Him kneel;
Ask him to stand by you and heal.

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happened to have a good soprano voice it remained so into adulthood. The news of such an outcome must have spread, but just when the practice became widespread is not known. It was also known that the Romans performed this mutilation on young male slaves for a variety of purposes, including singing. The Church forbade castration, but in the case of the castrati singers it was faced with an accomplished, irreversible deed and, hence, welcomed the victims at least to serve it in its choirs and thereby to expiate their (?) sin. In 1599 two young castrati, Pietro Paolo Folignato and Girolamo Rossini, were the first to be admitted to the Sistine Chapel Choir.^{1,2,9,10}

Although castration was done clandestinely, news of the success of the castrati singers spread rapidly. Bologna, Lecce, and Norcia became centers for this operation. Their surgeons became adept and were called to many capitals in Europe.^{2,11,12} Often, poverty-stricken parents themselves performed the mutilation, trading the boy's future sexual potency and fertility for a hoped-for "pot of gold." Ancillon describes it: the boy five to seven years of age was placed in a hot bath to soften and make the parts supple and more tractable. He was given a potent drink, the jugular veins were compressed and when he became groggy the organs were snipped



Fig. 1c. I push the scrotum from below
Until all its contents clearly show.

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out with a knife with scarcely any pain. In the very young constant compression and rubbing of the tiny gonads were done until they were no longer palpable. When the child grew up, excuses, some fantastic, were offered by parents or guardian: that the boy was injured in a fracas with other boys; or that he was bitten by a dog, a pig or wild goose; or that he fell from a horse and injured his testes, and so on.^{1,4,13,14,15}

That officialdom tolerated castration is illustrated by the following entries of salaries in the Archives dell'Ospedale S. Maria Nuova: Antonio Santerelli, Maestro dei Castrati, 24 scudi; Girolamo Corambone, Second Maestro dei Castrati, 18 scudi. The Maestro dei Castrati was the surgeon who emasculated young boys with good voices. Eight beds were earmarked for this purpose.^{1,2,9}

TRAINING OF THE CASTRATI SINGERS

The young castrato went through a prolonged, exacting training period lasting eight to 10 years under world-famous music masters, such as



Fig. 1d. With scissors I now strip
Cord and tissues which I clip.

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Nicola Porpora, Bernacchi, and Pistocchi (Figure 2). Castrati developed the chest of a man, but their vocal cords were like those of a woman. These voices had a powerful, resonant quality, and their breath control was incredible. Some had a range of four octaves, up to A or even E above high C in full voice. They could hold a note well over a minute.

When the *musico* (the young castrato singer) reached his 15th or 16th year, a debut was arranged by his mentor. If well received, then a series of concerts in various cities took place and soon the singer became known throughout Italy. Scouts from the courts of princelings or kings in Italy or neighboring countries, particularly Austria, Germany, and Poland, vied for his services. Some courts had their own opera companies. If the *musico* did not reach stardom, he still had a chance for a good livelihood in the choir of any of the thousands of churches, but none was more miserable or pitiable than a castrato whose voice failed.^{9,10,11}

The castrati were usually tall, with a disproportionately large thorax, infantile larynx, long, spindly legs, and flat feet. Most were handsome with feminine facial features. They were beardless, although scalp hair



Fig. 2. "Ecole de Chant", by La Guerchin, shows young castrati pupils, or musicos, at work, studying or writing, with the maestro (probably Porpora) observing. (*Les Chanteurs des Rois*. Paris, Michel, 1943.) Reproduced by permission from Melicow, M. M. and Pulrang, D.: Castrati Choir and opera singers. *Urology* 3:663-70, 1974.

was luxuriant. Gynecomastia was at times prominent; they were wide-hipped, somewhat obese and a few had steatopygia.⁹⁻¹³

Though deprived of their gonads, many of the castrati singers, according to Haböck, Heriot, and Ancillon, had heterosexual affairs, in some instances with scandalous and tragic consequences. Loss of both testes during adulthood does not necessarily result in impotence, but their complete removal or destruction in childhood should result not only in sterility but also prevent potency. Were these heterosexual relationships physiologically normal, or were the liaisons with morbidly curious women? We have no way of knowing. In order to arrive at a consensus as to the efficacy of the various castration procedures in preventing fertility and potency and of the role of the age factor, the author sent a questionnaire to a number of urologic surgeons in the United States. They are listed alphabetically together with their replies in the accompanying table.

There was consensus that bilateral orchiectomy properly performed on boys between the ages of five to seven years should result in **permanent sterility and impotence**. Unfortunately, we have no records or statistics

OPINIONS OF UROLOGISTS INTERVIEWED REGARDING EFFICACY OF 1) SURGICAL AND/OR 2) NONSURGICAL PROCEDURES PERFORMED ON PREPUBERTAL BOYS AGES FIVE-SEVEN YEARS IN ORDER TO PREVENT POTENCY (P) AND FERTILITY (F).

Name of urologist	1. Surgical bilateral				2. Nonsurgical bilateral				Remarks
	Orchiectomy	Vasectomy only	Vasotomy only	Crushing of testes	Crushing of vas only	None performed bilat. orchiectomy in children 5-7 yrs.			
	P	F	P	F	P	F	P	F	
Dr. Stanley B. Braham Assoc. Clin. Prof. Urology, Columbia U. College of Phys. & Surg. N. Y. C.	In none	In some	In many	In some	In none	In many	In some	In few	Has performed bilat. orchiectomy for tumor for torsion
Dr. David A. Culp Prof. Urology, Iowa State former pres. Amer. Urological Assoc.	" "	" "	" "	" "	" "	" "	" "	" "	No experience, no opinion. Has done only unilateral orchiectomy (for torsion).
Dr. Joseph H. Kiefer Dept. Surgery, Div. Urol., U. of Illinois College of Medicine	" "	In some	In many	In some	In none	In many	In some	In few	Is aware that crushing of both testes of small children was often done. Saw some cases of crush injuries to one testis. Complete atrophy followed.

<p>Dr. Ralph R. Landes Danville Urologic Clinic, Danville, Va.</p>	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	<p>Mentioned that Lynchburg Training School in Lynchburg VA sterilized mental defectives in the 1930s- 1940s. Wrote for infor- mation as to results.</p>
<p>Dr. John K. Lattimer Prof. & Chairman Emer., Dept. Urol., Columbia- Presbyterian Med. Center; former pres., A.U.A. & Int. College of Urology, N.Y.C.</p>	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	<p>If enough interstitial cell survived, potency could develop & voices would probably deepen.</p>
<p>Dr. Russell W. Lavengood, Jr. Chief Urologist, St. Luke's Hosp. Center, N.Y.C.</p>	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	<p>Mentions Burdizzo clamp (emasculator) said to have been used to obtain "blood- less orchietomy," on animals. Popular in Italy in 1920. Thinks something was probably employed on children during castrato period.</p>
<p>Dr. Victor F. Marshall Former Director of Urology at Bradly Clinic of New York Hospital; former Prof. of Urology at Cornell med. School, N.Y.C.</p>	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	<p>Mentions Burdizzo clamp, but states that the crushing was often not completed. In the castrati any procedures may have been incom- plete; hence, potency was not always prevented.</p>

Dr. Earl F. Nation former pres., American Urological	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	In animals, crushed both vasa. Thinks similar proce- dures employ- ed on children.	Saw 1 or 2 cases children: after orchiopexy the vasa was inadver- tently transected (vasotomy). There was no sub- sequent change in the gonad. Mentions Burdizzo clamp used on animals.
Dr. Lester Persky Prof. & Chairman, Dept. of Urology, Case-Western Reserve U. School of Medicine, Cleveland	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	In a many	Vasectomy or vasotomy do not necessarily produce atrophy of all interstitial cells. Potency possible, but infertility likely.
Dr. Willet F. Whitmore, Jr. Chief, Urologic Service, Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, N.Y.C.	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	In a few	Thinks all opinions specu- lative in regard to the castrato period.
Dr. Adrian W. Zorngiotti Prof. clinical urology, New York Un. School of Medicine; Director of Urology, Cabani Medical Center; Medical Director, Metropolitan Opera Association, New York City	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	"	In a few	Mentions Tenducci as claiming to be triorchic. Also thiadial—breaking or dashing together both testes (collicle); thibibai—compression and rubbing of testes until no longer palpable. Refers to Burdizzo clamp and states that gradual compression of testes with split rod (fissa ferua) was probably used in Roman era and possibly during castrato period.

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Medical Staff of Dover
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Reported on the "Use of the Burdizzo Clamp to Crush the Vas" in 1958 (*J. Urol.* 80:199-202). In 1910 Dr. Napoleone Burdizzo, a veterinary surgeon invented the instrument now bearing his name. It consists of a pair of pincers with a strong compound leverage action, much like a heavy wire cutter. It has been used on animals to crush the spermatic cords within the scrotum without cutting through it. This resulted in testicular atrophy within about 40 days. It was widely employed by farmers and veterinarians to castrate calves, lambs, and goats. Many reports attest to its efficacy and to the infrequency of unpleasant postoperative sequels. Procedures: the clamp is placed across the cord and closed (the process is repeated on the opposite cord). The crushing action of the clamp actually bites the cord in two, whereas the skin, though flattened, is not divided. Dr. A.G. Danks of the New York State Veterinary College reported that this instrument had been in general use for approximately 30 years with a lower incidence of postoperative infections than following open operations. In 1951, at the Cornell clinic in New York City, Dr. R.G. Wiggans, using local anesthesia, employed the device on patients with advanced cancer of the prostate gland. The procedure was performed without moving the patient from his bed. There were no significant postoperative complications. Among those patients who died of the prostatic cancer, testes removed at autopsy showed varying degrees of atrophy. From 1952 to 1956, 200 vasectomies were performed at Bellevue Hospital with the Burdizzo clamp (Figure 7).²⁵

regarding the type of operation and technique performed on the children, or, in many instances, the age when the mutilation was carried out. We do not know how many were mutilated without complete removal of the gonads. Other procedures may have caused some destruction, retarding androgencity but not necessarily negating eventual potency or even fertility. Boys castrated at a later stage, i.e., from nine to 12 years of age, should have been rendered sterile, but potency need not necessarily have been compromised because the interstitial cells that manufacture testosterone had probably functioned and induced erections and, once begun, erectability may have continued because of testosterone-producing cells along the cords and in the retroperitoneum.

Bilateral subcapsular evacuation of the stringy seminiferous tubules probably resulted in sterility, but potency was not always eliminated. Numerous cells elaborating testosterone line the interior of the capsule of the testis and, if they survived and functioned, then it was possible for some castrati singers to have had heterosexual relationships.

None of the urologists had the occasion to perform bilateral orchiectomy on the five to seven year age group; some had done unilateral orchiectomy for tumor, trauma, or torsion. This operation did not affect the subsequent onset of fertility or potency, provided the opposite testis was normal.

There were some differences in opinion among the urologists as to the efficacy in producing eunuchs through procedures **other** than bilateral orchiectomy, such as bilateral vasectomy, vasostomy, and vasotomy, which apparently were performed in some cases. The two latter terms were sometimes used interchangeably, but the three terms are not synonymous. Vasectomy means *excision* of part or all of the vas deferens. Vasotomy means cutting into or across the vas. Vasostomy means *cutting into* and making an opening (a stoma) in the vas. Bilateral vasectomy, destroying tubes and blood vessels, i.e., the cords, properly performed prepubertally, should result in sterility and impotentia. Following bilateral vasostomy or vasotomy, atrophy of the genital tracts does not always follow because there can be healing and recanalization. Thus, fertility and potency are not necessarily prevented. The mutilations often caused chronic infection and fistula formation and, at times, sepsis.

The case of the castrato singer Tenducci is interesting. He fell in love with Dora Maunsell in Limerick. Her family objected, but the lovers eloped. Tenducci was jailed but later released. Casanova related that he met the couple three years later on the continent and lo, they had two

children!^{10,14,15} It may have been possible that the compression procedure had been incomplete and that the testes were not completely destroyed. However, when questioned by Casanova, Tenducci replied that originally he had three testes (triorchic) and thus only two were removed, leaving one, which functioned. Pleasants states that "...on July 4, 1767 the marriage between Tenducci and Dora Maunsell, was legalized in the parish church of Shaurahan, Co. Tipperary!..." and continues "...the romance ended in 1776 when on February 28, 1776... a cause brought by Mrs. Tenducci against her husband, a singer at the Opera-House, for nullity of marriage, when, after hearing all matters, the Judge declared the marriage *void from the beginning...*" No mention is made of any offspring. This puts doubt on the credulity of Casanova's account.³

Although triorchism is an extremely rare anatomical entity—only 37 cases have been reported in the medical literature since 1895—a case similar to that claimed by Tenducci was reported in 1975: "Triorchism with normal spermatogenesis; an unusual cause for failure of bilateral vasectomy." The patient's wife became pregnant by her husband. Examination disclosed a supernumerary testis with *intact vas*, normal histology and normal spermatogenesis.¹⁶ There are five more reports of triorchism with active spermatogenesis by Jichlinski and Ward-McQuaid (1963),¹⁷ Smart (1972),¹⁸ Nocks, (1978)¹⁹ and Pelander, Luna and Lilly (1978).²⁰ Butz and Croushore reviewed and compiled all reported cases to 1978.²¹

Perhaps other factors of an emotional or sociological interaction between the sexes may have played a role in modifying the lack of proper responses by the supposedly sexually frozen castrati. On the part of the women, the lady friends' hero-worship of a great singer, prurience, curiosity, and the challenge to their self-confidence in the capacity to induce eroticism and awaken libido may have led to pseudosexual play, with even some turgescence in the penis and reciprocal excitation in the female, climaxed by orgasm devoid of ejaculation.

Another factor that probably played a very important role in preserving treble voices of youths castrated at puberty or postpuberty was the intense, prolonged voice training by the music masters who taught in the conservatories in Italy. Their techniques in training young castrati, and perhaps also the older ones, led to *bel canto*, an art lost when the castrati and their teachers vanished from the musical scene. Rossini in 1858 remarked "...If those who possess the great, true traditions disappear without leaving disciples on their level, their art vanishes, dies..."²² The present lack of adequate training probably accounts for the falsettos, high tenors,

whose treble voices, though of high register, sound artificial, squeaky and scratchy.

THE CASTRATI SINGERS AND THE OPERA

The castrati singers became superstars, performing before huge audiences, commanding large salaries and receiving adulation which, according to some authorities, has not been surpassed.²³ For more than 200 years they dominated opera, singing both male and female roles. Few pretended to act; opera was merely the vehicle through which these vocal wonders transported their audiences by their supernatural, nightingale-like voices into heavenly ecstasy. Thus, one lady was so thrilled after an aria sung by Farinelli that she shocked the huge opera audience by exclaiming "One God! One Farinelli!" The voice *bianco*, or white voice, was not really human; there was a certain detachment and depersonalization, almost godlike.

A number of composers wrote operas expressly for the castrati. Among them were Alessandro Scarlatti (1659-1725), composer of more than 115 operas. A popular one was *Pompeo*, first performed in Naples.^{3,4} George Frederic Handel (1685-1759) was a famous organist, harpsichordist and opera composer. He left Germany and in 1710 went to London, which was then very much like New York City today: a center of art, literature and music.²³ In 1711 Handel wrote the opera *Rinaldo* for the castrati singers. At first the literati were skeptical, but later, when Handel brought to London such singers as Sennesimo, Caffarelli, and finally the greatest castrato opera singer of his day and perhaps of all time, Carlo Broschi, better known as Farinelli, the critics, nobility, the court, and the general public went into ecstasy. Gifts of money and jewelry were showered on the singers. Franz Joseph Haydn (1732-1829) had a good soprano voice and studied with Porpora, the famous teacher of the castrati, but at 18 his voice changed and he discontinued. He married late in life and then expressed hatred of his wife.^{1,3,4}

Among the literati were Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift, Joseph Addison, Richard Steele, Lady Montague, and Samuel Pepys.^{3,4} London was full of eccentrics, dandies, perverts, poets, the select rich and nobility, and the numerous deprived poor. This brilliant but polluted and grotesque social hodgepodge was conducive to the satirical creations by such contemporary artists as Rowlandson, who mocked the medical profession, and Hogarth, who lampooned high society and opera devotees.

From the description of the outpourings by the public and their enthusiasm, it seems that the castrati exceeded the popularity of the cinema and television stars of today. From the purely vocal point of view, the castrati singers are considered by musical authorities to have been the greatest singers of any age.^{3,4,23} For two centuries, the 17th and 18th, they dominated opera. All the female parts were sung by these *evirati*. Their dominance came to an end early in 1800, when Napoleon invaded Italy. The military and political upheaval disrupted the conservatories and the training of musicians ceased abruptly. Composers began to write operas for tenors, and soprano roles sung by castrati were now entrusted to women.

However, the hermaphroditic aspect of opera lingered and found expression in some of the parts created by ensuing composers. For instance: in Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*, Cherubino (soprano) poses as a male page. In his *Così fan tutte*, Despina (soprano) poses as a male by wearing successively the robes of a physician and a notary. In Beethoven's *Fidelio*, Leonora (soprano), who is Florentine's wife, disguises herself as a young man. In *Der Rosenkavalier* by Richard Strauss, Octavian (mezzo-soprano), who is supposed to be a young man, puts on clothes of a maid and becomes Mariandel. In Gounod's *Romeo et Juliet*, Romeo's page is a soprano dressed as a male.

Composer Gioacchino Rossini late in life stopped writing opera because "there are no more opera singers; i.e., no more castrati." The last great castrato singer was Giovanni-Battista Velluti, for whom Mayerbeer wrote *Il Crociato in Egitto*. Castrati, nevertheless, continued to sing in the Sistine Choir well into the 20th century; the last was Alessandro Moreschi (1858-1922).^{1,3,4,23}

THUMBNAIL SKETCHES OF SOME OF THE FAMOUS CASTRATI SINGERS

Baldassare Ferri (1610-1680) was born in Perugia and made his debut at 11. He was tall, handsome, and idolized by women. On the way to Florence, he was met by a huge admiring crowd three miles from the city and escorted on a flower-strewn route. He served the kings of Poland over a period of 30 years. During the reign of Sigismund III, although Poland and Sweden were at war, Queen Christina wrote to the Polish king asking him to make it possible for her to hear Ferri. Fighting was halted and the castrato was allowed to pass through the battle lines unmolested. His reception in Stockholm was phenomenal, and a medal was struck in his honor. In 1655 Ferri was invited to the Court of Vienna, where he stayed

for 20 years. Emperor Leopold I had a portrait of the singer in his bedroom with the inscription "Baldassare Ferri, Re dei Musici."

Siface (Giovanni Francesco Grossi) derived his nickname from the role of Siface (Syphax) in Cavalli's opera *Scipione Africano*, in which he had a sensational success in Venice in 1678. Siface had a love affair with Countess Elena Forni, widow of a Modenese nobleman. Her horrified family placed her in a convent, but Siface gained admission, continued their trysts, and boasted about it! Her family had him murdered by the local "Sparafucile."

Farinelli (Carlo Broschi) (1705-1782), superstar castrato and diplomat, was tall, handsome, and kind, and was known as *il ragazzo*. His lung capacity was extraordinary, his intonation pure, and his voice was described as "supernatural," "like that of a nightingale," with a range from A to F above high C. He could hold a note for more than a minute. In 1734 Farinelli went to London where he made a sensational debut. Members of the orchestra were so entranced by his singing that they ceased playing, listened, and applauded enthusiastically.

King Philip V of Spain suffered melancholia; he refused to bathe or shave, and is said to have worn the same clothes for over a year! He neglected his duties as king. The Queen, Elizabeth Farnese, was desperate and perhaps recalled the soothing effect of music on a troubled mind, as related in the Bible. She invited Farinelli to the Spanish Court to sing in a room adjoining the king's bedroom. Farinelli accepted. Philip V was so enthralled by his singing and felt so much better that he hired him, and for the next 10 years Farinelli is said to have sung nightly the same four songs for the monarch. Philip appointed him Minister of the Admiralty as a reward and also entrusted him with plans for irrigation, dredging the River Tagus and making agricultural improvements. When Ferdinand VII succeeded Philip in 1746, he retained Farinelli, who continued to sing and hold important positions until 1759, when he retired after receiving one of the highest honors from the court: the Order of Calatrava (Figure 3). Farinelli returned to Italy and continued to enthrall audiences until two years before his death at the age of 77. Farinelli was considered "the greatest singer who ever lived."^{3,23}

Caffarelli (1710-1783), whose real name was Gaetano Majorano, was taught to sing by Domenico Caffarelli, who then had him castrated. Later, when the musico became a great success, he adopted the nickname Caffarelli out of "gratitude" to his mentor. Caffarelli was a rival of Farinelli, but of unpleasant personality. When King Louis XV sent him



Fig. 3. Painting by Jacopo Amigoni of Farinelli with Order of Calatrave, highest honor bestowed by Spanish Court. King Ferdinand VI and Queen Maria Barbara in background.

the gift of a gold snuff box, Caffarelli returned it, claiming he had a better one. When told that the box was like those the king gave to ambassadors, his retort was: "Then let him ask the ambassadors to sing!" (Figure 4a)^{1,3,7,8,23,24}

Felice Salimbeni (1712-1751) was handsome and possessed a voice of great beauty. Casanova related that he met a beautiful girl in Ancona posing as a castrato. She explained that Salimbeni fell in love with her and told her to pass herself off as a castrato so that other men would not be her suitors. He told her: "When in a year or two your breasts are fully formed, it will seem a defect which you will share with many of us", and assured her that no one would discover the imposture. Casanova, however, undoubtedly did and a year later she was with child fathered, it is said, by that famous rake.¹⁵

Giusto Ferdinando Tenducci (1736-?), previously discussed, was born in Sienna, hence the nickname Senesimo (Figure 4b).

Balani (?-?): Heriot quotes Archenholz regarding an episode that apparently occurred in the San Carlo Opera House in 1765:¹



Fig. 4a. Caffarelli (Gaetano Majorano) adopted nickname of his "benefactor," who had him castrated. He was Farinelli's greatest rival. (Museo Teatrale Alla Scala, Milan) Reproduced by permission from Melicow, M. M. and Pulrang, D.: Castrati choir and opera singers. *Urology* 3:663-70, 1974



Fig. 4b. Tenducci (1736-?) eloped with Dora Maunsell of Limerick. (British Museum) Reproduced by permission from Melicow, M. M. and Pulrang, D.: Castrati choir and opera singers. *Urology* 3:663-70, 1974

A very particular accident occurred a few years ago to a singer by the name of Balani. This man was born without any visible signs of those parts which are taken out in castration. He was, therefore, looked upon as a true-born castrato, an opinion which was confirmed by his voice. He learned music and for several years sang in theatres to great applause. At one performance, however, he exerted himself so uncommonly in singing an arietta that all of a sudden those parts which had so long been concealed by nature dropped into their proper place. The singer, from this very instant, *lost his voice*, which became even perceptible in the same performance, and with it he lost every prospect of a future subsistence... a calamitous climax!

Giovanni Battista Velluti (1781-1861) was the last castrato to sing in opera. Napoleon was intrigued by his voice (Venice, 1810) and said: "Pareils sons Je ne crois possible qu'a ce qui n'est pas homme!" When the Princess of Wales asked that the opera begin at the second act, Velluti, angered, cried out: "My throat is worth as much as a queen!" (Figure 4c)

Alessandro Moreschi (1858-1922) was the last castrato attached to the Sistine Chapel Choir. He sang at the funerals of King Victor Emmanuel II and King Umberto I. Moreschi was the only castrato singer to make a recording of his voice. In 1902 he made 10 disks, on the labels of which he is described as "Soprano della Capella Sistina." As a singer Moreschi was not in the same class as Farinelli, Caffarelli, or Carestini, and he was in his 40s at the time — past his prime as a singer. Yet his soprano voice is surprising and does give an insight into the reputedly superb quality and greatness of the voices of the preceding castrati at their zenith (Figure 5).^{7,8}

The resemblance of the castrati singers to patients with Klinefelter's syndrome is illustrated by caricatures of Gaetano Berenstadt and Francesco Bernardi (Senesimo) (Figure 6).

THE LOST "CORDS"

The combination of circumstances that heralded the advent of the castrati will probably never recur. Their voices are stilled forever. No longer does the cry *Viva il coltello!* (Long live the knife) reverberate through opera houses. But the phenomenal trills and embellishments can be culled forth from the rave accounts of contemporaries. These induced pseudohermaphrodites with their supernatural nightingale voices trained to perfection awed, thrilled, and intrigued audiences for 200 years. Although virility was supposedly denied them, the records of their love-life are profuse. We cannot accurately evaluate their potency, but the majority, as stated, apparently did not suffer from lack of heterosexual love affairs — it seems that many women brought "orchids" to the castrati!



Fig. 4c. Velluti, last of the great opera castrati, was handsome and had romances with women of great wealth and position. (Harry S. Beard Collection, Cambridge) Reproduced by permission from Melicow, M. M. and Pulrang, D.: *Castrati Choir and opera singers. Urology* 3:663-70, 1974



Fig. 5. Reproduction of magazine photograph of Alessandro Moreschi, last castrato attached to the Sistine Chapel Choir. Recordings of his voice, made in 1902, are still extant today; soprano quality of the voice is astounding.



Fig. 6. The figure on the left is Gaetano Berenstadt, the only famous German castrato. The figure on the right is Francesco Bernardi, or Senesimo, the most famous of three castrati by the same nickname, all born in Siena. Note the grotesque height, "Kleinfelter's" build and stance, of the two castrati compared with that of Francesca Cuzzoni, a prima donna, one of the few female singers allowed to participate in opera. The scene is from a performance of *Flavio* by Handel, 1723. (James Goodfriend Collection) Reproduced by permission from Melicow, M. M. and Pulrang, D.: *Castrati choir and opera singers. Urology* 3:663-70, 1974.



Fig. 7. Napoleone Burdizzo, an Italian veterinary surgeon, introduced a clamp in 1910 which now carries his name. It consists of a pair of pringers with a strong compound leverage action like a heavy wire cutter. He used it to crush the spermatic cord (one side at a time) without cutting into the scrotum. The procedure results in testicular atrophy in about 40 days. It has been widely employed by farmers and veterinarians to castrate all sorts of animals, primarily calves, lambs, and goats. A similar crushing machine may have been used by the Romans and by some barber-surgeons during the castrato period.²⁵ Reproduced by permission from Melicow, M. M. and Pulrang, D.: *Castrati choir and opera singers. Urology* 3:663-70, 1974.

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