

The Silencing of Bel Canto

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Introduction

The castrato voice is lost to modern ears, but was a significant and influential phenomenon in music history, which continues to fascinate researchers. It has been noted by Katherine Bergeron that ‘the figure of the castrato offers a kind of chilling embodiment of that truth, a poignant testimony to things that can never be recovered’, (Bergeron, 1996, p. 167) and yet as Michel Poizat points out ‘there is every reason to expect that attempts to yield something that may once more conjure up its echo will continue’ (1992, p. 95). Without the physical embodiment of this voice type, there are many limitations in constructing what the castrato voice may have sounded like, and yet the lasting legacy of the phenomenon is of significant importance to opera due to the dominance of the castrato during the development of the genre and, by extension, the development of vocal education. John Potter has theorised that throughout the 18th century castrati were responsible for the development and cultivation of the art of singing. He further suggests that the loss of the castrato voice and their ‘irrecoverable skills’ created the ‘myth of bel canto’ (2007, pp. 99). Bel canto is a style of singing that has a number of contradictory definitions and time periods that it encompasses. Rodolfo Celletti in his brief overview of the history of bel canto entitled *A History of Bel Canto*, describes a resurrection of the bel canto tradition in the 20th century with singers such as Maria Callas (1996). However, to Potter, bel canto and the castrato vocal technique are one and the same and with the loss of the castrato, the skills and techniques that once built this vocal style became blurred in the oral tradition, leaving nothing but the myth of their art of singing, which can be defined as bel canto. In this article, I will take a closer look at the link between the castrati and the bel canto tradition reconstructing the key vocal technique of flexibility, which is often referred to in vocal education books published in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The Castrato and Bel canto

The loss of the castrato voice has created a gap in the knowledge of vocal education, which continues to be mainly passed on through an oral tradition. Scholars have attempted to reconstruct this gap in knowledge; however, my hypothesis is that certain terminology used in scholarly text has created much confusion surrounding the history of vocal pedagogy.

Bel canto is a frequently used term which confusingly carries a number of potentially contrasting definitions. Even the article discussing bel canto on *Grove Music Online* states ‘the term remains ambiguous and is often used nostalgically in its application to a lost tradition’ (Harris). James Stark concurs with the article on *Grove* stating that the ‘label is widely used but only vaguely understood’ (2003, p. xvii).

Potter theorises that throughout the 18th century castrati were responsible for the development and cultivation of the art of singing. He further suggests that the loss of the castrato voice and their ‘irrecoverable skills’ created the ‘*myth of bel canto*’ (2007, p. 99). Potter appears to acknowledge bel canto as a singing style developed by the castrati of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and that this singing tradition was already in decline by the 19th century. Castration for the purposes of music was only carried out in Italy and came about in the 16th century, when castrati appeared in church choirs in Rome. With the birth of opera in the early 17th century, castration became more popular and continued throughout the 18th century, though it went in to decline by the early 19th century. Despite this, the tradition continued into the early 20th century.

Some argue that bel canto is a vocal style, which is still alive in the current vocal tradition. Celletti states in his study that ‘bel canto, based on an abstract aesthetic, came to an end when Romanticism took as its motto as the search for “veracity”’ (Celletti and Fuller, 1991, p. 188). He goes on to examine the operas of Verdi and Wagner and suggests the vocal ideal these composers expected for their romantic operas were in opposition to the bel canto ideal (Celletti and Fuller, 1991, p. 191). Romantic operas sought for dramatic truth which encouraged a more declamatory style of singing, opposite to the bel canto style that was associated with florid, virtuosic ornamentation. He goes on to suggest that singers such as Renata Tebaldi (1922 –2004) and Maria Callas (1923 –1977), prompted a vocal and ‘musicological revolution’ which encouraged a restoration of the ‘pre-Verdi’ voice production and the resurrection of bel canto (1991, p. 205 - 206). Callas and Tebaldi formed a rebirth of the bel canto tradition, which is still alive as vocal tradition in the 21st century. However, this rebirth of the bel canto tradition provides a further complication to its definition. From the texts thus far examined, I would propose that there are two ‘states’ as it were of the bel canto singing tradition:

1. Bel canto defined by the castrati in the seventeenth and 18th century, becoming mythicized with the decline of the castrato

2. The rebirth of the bel canto tradition prompted by early twentieth-century singers

It would seem that these states fail to co-exist alongside one another because the definition of what defines bel canto singing is unclear. From Celletti's point of view bel canto is simply a form of singing in opposition to the declamatory Wagnerian style that dominated the stage in the latter half of the 19th century. However, Potter suggests that bel canto was lost alongside the decline of the castrati. Analysing these main features of bel canto will provide a better definition of this singing style, and will allow scholars to further understand the influence the castrati may have had on the development of this style of singing.

Flexibility and the bel canto tradition

All of the authors cited above continually discuss the florid, delicate ornamentation present within bel canto operas and the need for a light flexible voice in order to achieve this (Rutherford, 2006, p. 90). Past and current scholars are in agreement when discussing the voice of the castrato: that flexibility was a distinguishing feature of this voice type. Potter highlights that 'by the middle of the 18th century the castrat[i] were taking virtuoso singing into realms that we can now barely imagine' (Potter, 2007, p. 97). There are many anecdotes about the most famous operatic castrati of the 18th century, such as Farinelli, that describe their superhuman vocal ability. For example, the most famous anecdote about Farinelli is that he sang in competition with a baroque trumpet but surpassed the trumpeter with fast and complex ornamentation that stunned the audience and they erupted into applause, celebrating the singers amazing feat. This suggests that the castrato singer took the initial ideals of bel canto – flexible diminution – and further developed it to the point of extraordinary ability. This is perhaps why many scholars have alluded to the possibility that the castrato's ability to command long, flexible virtuosic phrases for which they became so famed was a direct result of the castration operation.

The operation carried out on young pre-pubertal boys caused many anatomical anomalies, which developed as the body grew into adulthood. The most obvious (and certainly by the late seventeenth and 18th century the main purpose for the operation) was the preservation of the larynx in what was assumed to be a child-like state, which would allow these men to continue to sing with a treble voice. Descriptions of the voice, however, suggest that though the voice maintained a treble range, it differed greatly from the vocal sound of a child or a woman which would imply that the larynx did undergo some form of further

development after the operation. For example, the eighteenth-century French writer Charles de Brosses (1709 – 1777) provides a further description of the castrato voice:

Their timbre is as clear and piercing as that of a choirboy and much more powerful; they appear to sing an octave higher above the natural voice of a woman. Their voices have always something dry and harsh, quite different from the youthful softness of women; but they are brilliant, light, full of sparkle, very loud and with a very wide range. (Heriot, 1975 p. 14)

Without a direct examination of a castrato's larynx it is impossible to determine whether the larynx was frozen or continued to develop after the operation. However, there were other anatomical changes that perhaps further altered the vocal quality of these singers.

Potter states that 'many [castrati] could sing complex divisions for more than a minute without drawing breath' (Potter, 2007 p. 99). He attributes this to the castrato's large chest, another anomaly that occurred as a result of the operation. Caricature drawings of castrati in eighteenth-century operas depict enormously tall creatures with tiny heads and a huge barrelled chests. Potter believes that this barrel chest provided the castrato with greater reserves of air which allowed him to sing extremely long phrases and have a wide dynamic range (Potter, 2007 p. 99). From this analysis, Potter is posing the castrato as a creature with features that aid his ability to sing better than any other male or female singer. By suggesting that the operation allowed the castrato singer to supersede the ordinary man Potter is suggesting that these singers possessed abilities that could not be learned or achieved by other voice types.

Barbier, however, completely disagrees with the 'barrel chest' theory, stating this is an incorrect 'assumption' (Barbier, 1996, pp. 16 - 17). He believes that the castrati were able to command extremely long phrases as a result of long and intensive training. By disregarding the theory that the adaptations to the castrato's anatomy did allow them to have a better command, virtuosity or singing ability, Barbier humanises the castrato. He believes that the castrato had to learn these abilities over a long course of study, and that their bodies did not provide them any advantage in their singing ability. This therefore implies that any other singer, with sufficient study, could learn these abilities as well.

From an examination of some of the educational song books written by castrati and non-castrated singers, it appears that singing techniques developed which assisted both the castrato singer, as well as vocal types in cultivating flexibility, which would suggest that Barbier is correct in his theory. Young castrato singers did undergo an extremely intensive

and long vocal training process, and this was because in the Western classical music tradition, the Italian castrato stood as the image of a musician; a creature specifically created for the purposes of music. Rosselli states that ‘castration, actual or in prospect, implied a total commitment to the singing profession’ and quotes an eleven-year-old applicant to one of the Naples conservatoires: ‘since he is a eunuch, music ... is the only profession to which he wishes to apply himself’ as evidence for this statement (Rosselli, 1995, p. 41).

Nicola Porpora (1686 –1768) was a famous 18th century vocal teacher who taught many famous castrato singers including Farinelli. Barbier quotes an often cited anecdote about Porpora asserting that he would have his singers repeat the same study of exercises for many hours a day for many years and this repetitive work allowed the singer to develop an excellent technique (Barbier and Crosland, 1998, p. 54). Another anecdote cited by Clapton in discussion of Farinelli argues he trained for six hours a day and this training would involve the study of counterpoint and literature, ‘one hour of work “singing pieces of difficult and awkward execution”, another studying passaggi (ornamentation) and another singing exercises in front of a mirror in the presence of the teacher, to practise deportment and gesture, and to avoid pulling faces while performing’ (Clapton, 2005, pp. 323 - 324). This study of passaggi is most likely the repetition of the same exercises that Porpora demanded from his students. With such intensive training, even those castrati who were considered less apt performers would have obtained a well-grounded knowledge in music and vocal technique and this is most likely why, as Potter suggests that ‘many (if not most) singers of the [18th century] were taught by castrat[i]’ (Potter, 2007, p. 98).

Solfeggi

What were the exercises that Porpora and Farinelli were using during vocal training? I would like to suggest that Porpora and Farinelli were training using solfeggi and these can be seen in the publications from the late eighteenth and early 19th century. On examination of the educational song books published by the castrato singers Pier Francesco Tosi (1653 - 1732) Giuseppe Aprile, (1731 – 1813), Girolamo Crescentini (1762 - 1846), Venanzio Rauzzini (1746 – 1810) and Paolo Pergetti (c. 1850), each one of these authors either provide or discuss the use of solfeggi exercises in order to train a student. Solfeggi exercises are long and complex exercises, similar in style to the exercises written for instrumentalists, without lyrics, intended to be performed on an open vowel such as Ah, Eh or Oo or the sol-fa syllables Do, Re, Mi, Fa, Sol, La, Si, Do. Solfeggi exercises were not exclusive to castrato publications, but also appeared in the publications of un-castrated singers. Treatises not

written by castrati ease the singer into the performance of solfeggi by writing simple examples to initially assist the student with their intonation. These examples are quite short and are not very fast, which allows the student to slowly build the flexibility of the voice. An example of this can be seen in *The Singer's Assistant* as it states at the top that the first exercises are 'Easy Solfeggi' (1822, p. 10).

Solfeggi were regarded as having many benefits to training voices, such as is stated by Plumstead in *The Musical Companion*:

There are a variety of exercises for improving the flexibility of the voice... Great attention must be paid to taking breath; for unless a sufficient quantity is inspired and kept in reserve, the notes will become weak and faltering; and instead of a clear succession of notes a confused jumble of unmeaning sounds will be heard. (Plumstead, 1833, p. xxi)

Not only does Plumstead acknowledge that solfeggi were key exercises for improving vocal flexibility, but he also brings in another area where solfeggi improved vocal technique by cultivating breath control. With articulation being the key to the successful performance of solfeggi, it becomes clear that a student would need instruction in how to properly facilitate the breath so that the articulation, especially when performing fast passages, did not lose any distinction as the student began to run out of air. As solfeggi have no lyrics or words, passages can be broken down into smaller sections, thereby slowing building up the breath support system of the student over time. Though the castrati may have been at an anatomical advantage as Potter suggests and could command a great expulsion of air due to their large barrel chest, repeated singing of the solfeggi would also improve breath control.

These exercises would greatly benefit a student prior to studying songs and arias as the student would have obtained the necessary vocal technique and breath support system over the gradual build-up of difficulty in solfeggi exercises. Further to this, it is clear that these solfeggi were expected to precede the study of songs, providing the student with knowledge of styles and difficult passage work presumably assisting the teacher in identifying the style of music best suited to his student's voice.

Crescentini states that his solfeggi:

Les exercices ci-joints sont composés pour être vocalisés, étude la plus nécessaire à la perfection du chant, après avoir travaillé sur d'autres Solfèges, en nommant les notes; et quoiqu'au remier abord, il semble difficile de donner l'expression convenable à la mélodie, sans le secours des paroles' les Elèves studieux pourront la trouver, et la faire ressortir en observant exactement

L'accent, le coloris et la flexibilité, qualités nécessaires, non seulement au chanteur, mais à quiconque exécute de la musique étant les seules qui forment la véritable expression.

[The exercises below are composed for vocalized studies and are the most necessary to the perfection of singing. After working on notation and naming the notes, at first, it may seem difficult to give the suitable expression to the melodic phrase, without the aid of words', but the studious student can find and bring this out, observing exactly the accents, colour and flexibility; qualities needed not only by the singer, but anyone who executes the music if they are to form true expression] (Crescentini, 1812, p. iv).

While Crescentini acknowledges that study of solfeggi is difficult due to the fact that they are similar to song composition but are not composed with lyrics so the student may find it difficult to bring out musical expression. On the other hand, solfeggi assist the student in developing other skills essential to vocal technique such as flexibility and colour, which would aid the student when they move onto study songs and arias. Crescentini observes the benefits of solfeggi for the purposes of developing an understanding of musical expression but it is clear that he is expecting these exercises to be studied before a student would study songs and arias.

Aprile similarly provides examples of exercises that resemble passages in theatre music, opera compositions and dramatic music, thereby providing exercises that are specifically related to particular styles of music (Aprile, 1805?, p. 9). However, the vast majority of the educational song books written by the castrati authors cited do not provide song compositions for a student of singing to advance and instead provide multiple solfeggi exercises. In fact, both Rauzzini and Crescentini state that their solfeggi exercises are for the more advanced student and say that the singer should have a preliminary knowledge of music and of the art of singing (Crescentini, 1812, p. 3) (Rauzzini, 1816, p. i). Both of these authors expect that their students will have a preliminary knowledge of singing, which suggests that they would have already gone through some rudiments in vocal training and were embarking on further instruction through the study of these solfeggi. Crescentini's work begins with examples of ornaments and complex passages taken out of context, the first solfeggi exercises are not simple easy exercises, but immediately embark on fast, complex passage work, which only a student who is already familiar with the rudiments of vocal technique would be able to perform. From Rauzzini's work it is also clear that he does not intend his work to be solely used by other castrato singers. He states within his preface that singers should listen to the singing celebrities of the time to assist in understanding how to

improve their vocal technique. He then goes on to list both male and female singers, most of whom were his students, which indicates that Rauzzini intended his solfeggi to be performed by all different voice types, not just a castrato (Rauzzini, 1816, p. ii). As they are intended for the more advanced student, they are very complex, requiring careful articulation, and an incredibly flexible voice. Rauzzini alludes to the difficulty of his solfeggi by saying ‘almost every passage the human voice is capable of performing’ (Rauzzini, 1816, p. iii). His use of ‘almost’ is a clear indication that there are passages that a human voice perhaps cannot perform at all but he is testing the abilities of the singer.

Flexibility was cultivated by both the castrato and non-castrated singer and it is clear that flexibility was key to the successful development of vocal technique, which would in turn lead to the successful performance of songs and arias. The question is was it the castrato body that allowed them to possess an extraordinarily flexible voice and then other singers attempted to match the abilities of the castrato or was it the vigorous training of a castrato that allowed them to develop flexible voices, therefore implying that any singer could develop in the same manner. As we no longer have any living castrati in the twenty-first century this is a difficult question to answer, but Clapton attempts to provide a middle ground explanation to this conundrum:

The ability to produce sounds of this brilliance was largely due to the castrati’s anomalous anatomy: a lack of testosterone in the growing adolescent castrato’s body prevented the epiphyses (bone joints) hardening; thus the ribcage continued to grow, and this, combined with the rigorous training young castrati underwent from the age of about eight, produced a sound unlike any other (Clapton, 2005 p. 325).

I agree with Potter that with the operation, the castrati would appear to have had certain anatomical advantages that allowed them to become the leading figures in cultivating the art of singing, but I also agree with Barbier that the castrato singer underwent many years of rigorous training. It is difficult to know whether the vocal anatomy alone was responsible for their singing ability, examinations of those castrated men from other cultures suggest that training was a key factor in developing a good singing voice. Examination into research carried out on men castrated for a different purpose other than the preservation of a high singing voice such as the case in the Skoptzy and Chinese Ottoman Courts, there is no record of these castrated men (even those castrated pre-pubertally) developing a good singing voice and this is further indication that training did play a huge role in the cultivation of a castrato’s singing voice (Wilson and Roehrborn, 1999, p. 4330).

As the popularity of the operatic castrato grew, it encouraged aspects of their technique, such as the possession of a flexible voice that could command virtuosic lines, to be sought by other singers. For example, a number of female sopranos made their fame by matching the vocal abilities of castrato singers. There is an anecdote regarding the soprano Nancy Storace (1765 – 1817) who during a performance with the famed castrato Marchesi, mimicked his ornamentation in every aspect and then exceeded him with her own ornamentation. The castrato became angry and dismissed her from the performance, but Storace became a famous sought after prima donna after this performance. The castrato art of singing as the 18th century continued was not confined to castrato singers alone and many other voice types such as the female soprano cultivated their vocal ability to match the vocal abilities of their castrated colleagues. Several castrati, after they left the operatic stage became vocal teachers and trained all voice types. For example, Rauzzini trained many of the most famous late 18th century prima donne including Elizabeth Billington, Nancy Storace and Rosemund Mountain. However, in studying the introduction of his vocal treatise he states:

The Singers who have acquired the greatest celebrity in the profession, are those who properly appreciated their own Talent, who knew the extent of their own abilities and sought not to soar beyond them, adopting a method suited to the powers of their voice, and never attempting a passage which they could not execute with the greatest neatness and in the most correct and finished style (Rauzzini, 1816, p. iii).

Rauzzini clearly believes that success is down to a singer understanding their own vocal abilities and not attempting to perform exercises, songs or arias that are not in line with these abilities. His solfeggi are written with all different genres and styles in mind, which could assist a singer in identifying the exercises their voice is best suited to and get to know the areas in which their voice may struggle and where the voice soars. Crescentini and Aprile also set their vocal treatises with all different styles of solfeggi, which further imply that they were also using solfeggi to assist a singer in identifying the style singing to which their voice was best suited.

Furthermore, there is evidence that composers' throughout the 18th century readily adapted arias to suit their operatic cast. For example, when *Le Nozze di Figaro* by W.A. Mozart was recast after the premier production he composed two new arias for his new leading soprano, replacing arias that had previously been sung. Operas were composed for the cast; therefore the arias were specifically composed in accordance with the singer's vocal

abilities in mind. In many ways, we have lost the sound of these operas with the absence of the original cast but this is another reason why the bel canto tradition is so difficult to define.

The art of singing that encompassed flexibility and light, florid ornamentation was closely connected to the castrato tradition. Castrati underwent long and rigorous training to allow them to develop a singing technique that allowed for highly complex and florid ornamentation. This is one way to define the bel canto tradition. However, there is an aspect of training and composition that needs to be considered when understanding the bel canto tradition; a singer was encouraged to cultivate their voice according to their natural abilities. Once a singer understood the abilities of their voice, composers of the period could write operatic arias to suit. Therefore, a singer cannot describe themselves as a bel canto singer, as bel canto does not have set parameters of a vocal style. The singers of the 18th century may have had a similar vocal sound but in absence of these singers, which include the castrato singer we will never know what this vocal sound may have been.

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