

# Listening for a queer utopia: unexpected pleasures in Baroque castrato roles

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**ABSTRACT:** This article seeks out queer resonances in the peculiar lives and sensational music of the castrati: castrated male singers who, on operatic stages of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, proved their virility not through the strength or reproductive capacity of their unusual bodies, but through the breathtaking virtuosity of their voices. Problematizing not only binaries of gender and sexuality, but also those of mind vs. body and verbal vs. non-verbal, this paper uses music as a medium through which to explore the liminal space between linguistic signification and embodied experience. Relying on Sylvia Wynter's 'deciphering turn', this study investigates what the stories and music of the castrati can *do* rather than concentrating on what they mean. The use of auto-ethnography extends this investigation into the present, exploring how modern performances of the castrati's music can potentially offer solace and inspiration to queer subjects of today.

**KEYWORDS:** Music, opera; Aesthetics, Baroque; Castrato; Performance; Gender.

As a non-binary trans person, I inhabit a body which does not always signify in accordance with my lived gender experience, often making it difficult to navigate a world in which assumptions are constantly made about me in response to the shape and physical characteristics of my body. In particular, as a genderqueer opera singer I struggle to fit many aspects of my identity into a marketable package within the highly gendered opera industry. However, there are times when opera offers unique opportunities for me to explore my gender expression, sometimes even more freely than in everyday life: for example, my work in opera has given me the chance to embody characters from across the spectrum of gender, from hyper-femme to masculine and everything in between.

Specifically, as a mezzo-soprano I am often called upon to play roles originally written for *castrati*, castrated male singers who sang in a mid-to-high treble range. The rock stars of their time, the castrati captivated opera audiences across Europe from the end of the sixteenth century until shortly after the end of the eighteenth century. Not only were they fan favourites, but they also typically played the male romantic heroes in serious operas,

proving their virility not through the strength or reproductive capacity of their unusual bodies, but through the breathtaking virtuosity of their voices. In the opera house at least, manhood depended less on the physical phallus and more on musical significations of power.

In everyday life, however, the castrati occupied an ambiguous liminal space between masculinity and femininity, their non-normative physicality marking them as different while simultaneously allowing for the astonishing technical skill of their voices. Due to hormonal differences caused by pre-pubescent castration, many castrati presented secondary sex characteristics somewhere in between those typically associated with maleness or femaleness. Most obviously, the castrati's larynxes did not grow larger or descend. Other distinctive physical attributes were common as well; small, hairless faces with delicate features, accompanied by a tendency to fat deposits around the chest and hips, lent their figures a certain perceived femininity. However, because their growth plates did not fuse during puberty, they were also often quite tall and long-limbed, with extraordinarily large rib cages which allowed for their legendary breath capacity (GORDON 2015: 651).

Thus in vocality as well as in physicality, the castrati were living paradoxes of sexual signification. Their bodies — like my trans body does today — called into question deep-seated beliefs about the nature of sex and gender, most notably the assumed correspondence between easily perceivable secondary sex characteristics and gender expression or identity. Obviously the parallel is not straightforward: as a child I was not surgically operated on without my consent, as castrati were, nor do I occupy the same public position of celebrity as the most famous castrati once did. However, as José Esteban Muñoz (1999: 11-12, 30-31) suggests in his book *Disidentifications*, it is possible for identification to be partial, falling somewhere between recognition and rejection. Further, Muñoz proposes that we embrace such contradictions and transform them in order to disrupt the linear path from identification to interpellation expected from compliant subjects.

In his subsequent publication *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz (2009: 15) extends this concept by looking back in time to find what he calls “anticipatory illuminations”: moments of past potential which reveal new paths forward into the future. Accordingly, in this paper I will seek out queer resonances in the peculiar lives and sensational music of the castrati, both of which may offer solace, inspiration, or catharsis to queer and trans subjects of

today. Music, rather than merely providing a backdrop for my argument, will hold the key to this unique queer potential through its occupation of the liminal space between linguistic signification and embodied experience.

### THE CASTRATI AS HISTORICAL TEXT: INTERSECTIONS OF DESIRE AND REPULSION

The castrati have long presented a paradox to scholars: during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Italian music was marked as degenerate due to the presence of castrati in Italian opera — and yet, the very same Italian opera was the most well-attended and marketable musical genre throughout Europe. In England in particular, while castrati played to enthralled audiences, they were also reviled and ridiculed in the popular press, accused not only of spreading the sin of sodomy throughout England, but also of using their feminine charms to seduce infatuated women away from respectable Englishmen. Todd S. Gilman (1997: 58) argues that the desirability of the castrati threatened the very foundations of English manhood by drawing attention to the inherently contingent nature of gender itself: if— as the press claimed — these castrated, effeminate men were irresistible to both Englishmen and Englishwomen, how then could England’s nationalist reification of masculinity be justified?

Unfortunately, we cannot know exactly how castrati were understood by audiences of centuries past, nor can we access the embodied experiences of the castrati themselves, nor ask them how they experienced their gender or sexuality. Therefore, instead of attempting to reveal any essential truth in relation to the castrati, in this essay I will rely on cultural theorist Sylvia Wynter’s “deciphering turn”, drawn from her work on film criticism. Wynter (1992: 266) searches for ways to conceptualize agency while still acknowledging that every subject is always-already playing by the rules of language dictated by existing systems of signification. Her solution to this problem of agency is what she calls “a deciphering turn”, which “seeks to identify not what texts and their signifying practices can be interpreted to *mean* but what they can be deciphered to *do*”. In other words, in the context of such a deciphering practice, the meanings of a particular text — whether those intended by its author or those received and interpreted by its audience — are of secondary importance to the mechanisms which construct such meanings through the repetition and citation of cultural assumptions and norms.

Using Wynter's proposed methodology, I will focus on three subjects in turn: first, the castrati themselves, treating their bodies and stories as texts; second, the music written for them and embodied by them; and third, modern performances of this music, which can potentially add or modify layers of signification. Through this process I hope to inspire innovative queer approaches to performance — in particular, ways in which queer and trans subjects can mobilize performance as a space for healing and consciousness-raising.

Many scholars, musicological and otherwise, have grappled with the problem of how castrati were understood in the past, attempting through various methodologies and frameworks to reconcile the often-contradictory primary sources which describe their bodies, lives, and work. For example, Bonnie Gordon (2015: 647) casts the castrato as a living manifestation of technology, human flesh transformed for the purposes of art, not only by the surgeon's knife but also by intensive vocal training undertaken from a very young age. Framing the castrati as a form of economic capital, John Rosselli (1988: 151-152) explores how, despite the illegality of the operation, the sacrifice of young boys' potential manhood — and in particular their reproductive capacity — was viewed as an advantageous transaction for parents and teachers, who exchanged the heteronormative futures of their charges for the possibility of fame and fortune. In contrast, Martha Feldman (2009: 176) investigates the shame surrounding the operation itself, citing Charles Burney's *The Present State of Music in France and Italy* in order to point out that, even while the practice of castration was at its height, no city in Italy would admit to its existence within its walls: instead, each city's inhabitants would eagerly blame the phenomenon on another, ostensibly less moral municipality (1773: 312). Further, castrati and their patrons often formulated polite fictions ascribing the cause of castration to a childhood illness or an unfortunate accident (FELDMAN 2009: 177).

Feldman (2009: 177) also joins the ranks of scholars who have concentrated on the castrati's navigation of existing social structures, exploring how many castrati surrounded themselves with non-normative kinship networks, including relationships based on mentorship or adoption. Valeria Finucci (2003: 230) further situates the castrati in the social and economic context of the seventeenth century, showing that due to increasing taxation, industrial stagnation, market instability and economic depression, the castration of a son was not only an economic necessity but sometimes

an attractive alternative to poverty. Finucci's argument is supported by the fact that, although the fame of the castrati was at its height in the eighteenth century, the number of castrations being performed decreased – perhaps as a result of increased economic prosperity (2003: 255).

In *Portrait of a Castrato*, Roger Freitas (2009a: 27-28) continues in the same vein, normalizing the practice of castration within its cultural context. Under an extremely patriarchal system, a father was absolute ruler over his family, responsible for maintaining and developing the prosperity of the household as a whole, rather than the happiness or well-being of its individual members. In order to protect his wealth, the father would pass down his estate intact to his oldest son. Any other sons had to find their income elsewhere, either through marriage or a suitably noble profession. At this time, however, marriage was expensive, and many young men chose to enter the church instead. Daughters had even fewer choices: if their families could afford dowries, they might marry, but if not, they would be placed in a convent. In fact, during the seventeenth century so many people joined religious orders that there was a corresponding expansion of monasteries and convents to hold them all. Freitas (2009a: 28) suggests that this voluntary “widespread renunciation of sexual activity” puts castration in context, as one of many strategies used to further the interests of an upwardly mobile family.

Conversely, Helen Berry (2012: 27) situates the castrati directly within the social economy of marriage: while they were forbidden to marry by law, there are accounts from the eighteenth century of illegal marriages taking place between women and castrati. Further, according to Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace (1992: 158), castrati were popularly believed to hold a special attraction for women, with whom they could reportedly enjoy all the pleasures of a sexual relationship without having to fear the potential consequence of pregnancy. For paranoid Early Modern manhood, the imagined sexual liaison of the castrato and the respectable woman introduced the terrifying spectre of a non-phallic female sexual pleasure, unfettered by the imperative of reproduction.

Todd S. Gilman (1997: 49-50) grapples with this paradox, investigating the castrati as objects of both desire and disgust: while commonly associated with sodomy (which at the time was known in England and France as ‘the Italian vice’), castrati were simultaneously held to be particularly appealing to (and sexually successful with) their female fans. Interestingly, Roger

Freitas (2003: 206) suggests that, while marking them as physically ‘other,’ the androgyny of the castrati directly contributed to their sexualization by audience members of all genders. Drawing on the work of Thomas Laqueur (1992: 25), Freitas (2003: 212) explains that in the Early Modern era the boundaries of physical sex in relation to gender were considered somewhat more permeable than today: instead of perceived biological realities leading to essential differences in physicality and behaviour, variations between physical bodies were viewed as symptoms of differences of position within a larger cosmic hierarchy, in which men occupied the highest place.

Further, in the Early Modern period femininity was less connected with passivity — as it came to be in the nineteenth century — and more with an excess of emotion and a lack of rationality and self-control. Male femininity was therefore tied both to homoeroticism and to an excess of *heterosexual* behaviour, since — like women — feminine men were considered less rational, with less control over their sexual appetites and emotions (FREITAS 2003: 206). Thus, under the influence of this cosmological model of sex, the castrati were in fact perfectly suited to play young heroes in the throes of romantic torment. Their androgynous sensuality excused an excessive susceptibility to the charms of love, whereas it would have been unacceptable for a more mature, masculine man to fall prey to women in the same way.

### CASTRATED EROTICISM: SEXUAL SIGNIFICATION IN ITALIAN BAROQUE OPERA

Sam Abel (1996: 130-134) suggests that in serious Baroque opera, vocal virtuosity (rather than physical masculinity) was the primary signifier of strength and virility, with impressive solo singing acting as a substitute for the physical combat of swordplay. Thus paradoxically, the castrati’s phallic lack allowed them to become the uncontested heroes of the opera: the atypical development patterns of their castrated bodies allowed for unparalleled feats of vocal endurance and agility (GORDON 2015: 651). Crucially, Abel refers here to a symbolic lack, embodied in the castrato’s infertility rather than the absence of a physical phallus. Finucci (2003: 273) points out that post-Freudian conceptions of castrati are often shaped by the conflation of castration with the loss of the penis, which was usually left undamaged by the operations performed on castrati. Indeed, Freudian conceptions of castration fail to take into account the long history of real

(rather than symbolic) castration in Western society: “his idea that women want to castrate men goes against the fact that historically men have castrated each other, whether for political, disciplinary, medical, or economic reasons, with no female involvement in the matter” (FINUCCI 2003: 273).

Finucci (2003: 248-250) further explains that castrations of various types were far more commonplace in the seventeenth century than one might imagine. Firstly, castration was a customary punishment for various crimes, practised by both the church and state. Secondly, castration was commonly used as a treatment for patients — including children — suffering from certain diseases and ailments. Beyond the relatively high instance of castrated or otherwise genitally damaged men in Italy, Finucci (2003: 253-254) also normalizes the *castrati* by comparing them to the multitudes of women placed in convents in order to ensure the economic prosperity of their families — in Catholic Italy at least, the heterosexual procreative imperative did not necessarily apply to everyone.

Beyond significations of gender and sexuality, however, the emphasis on vocal display in the music written for *castrati* also had a fascinating effect on the relationship between music and text. In order to highlight the spectacular virtuosity of the *castrati*, composers often truncated, repeated, or reconfigured textual phrases, obscuring the aural clarity of the words with long strings of *coloratura* (rapid vocal lines which, while impressive, often hinder pronunciation and thus audience comprehension).

At least in the context of Western modernism, music itself has long been suspect because of the potential for musical meaning to change or even subvert its overt textual message (GORDON 2015: 648). Music which explicitly elevates non-verbal means of signification over verbal communication has typically been singled out as decadent, degenerate, or just plain noise. This process of devaluation has often been motivated by racial prejudices, including historical and ongoing attempts to control, sanitize or censor genres such as jazz, rock, and electronic dance music. The unspoken assumption about these musical traditions is that styles which emphasize rhythm, emotion, and above all movement may inspire bodies which have been historically oppressed and marginalized to join together in motion and action.

Today we may not think of the music of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries as particularly dangerous or subversive. However, even the term ‘Baroque’, which we now use to refer to this period, was initially a pejorative applied retroactively to the era in question by the

following generation. ‘Barocco’ was originally a Portuguese word used to describe an irregular pearl: once prized by jewellers for their singularity, such baroque pearls came to be considered misshapen and unnatural by eighteenth-century standards of elegance and proportion. Similarly, eighteenth-century rationalists rejected the music of previous decades as unnecessarily complex, overly ornamented, and excessively emotional, in particular denouncing the primacy of the voice (read: body) over the text. By the mid-eighteenth century, musicians were beginning to adhere to a new set of aesthetics informed by the philosophies of the Enlightenment: simple, elegant melodies, logical linear progressions of harmony, and a more ‘natural’ approach to the communication of text.

Because of its overt virtuosity and rhythmic vitality — as well as its association with the sexually ambiguous castrati — Italian music was particularly singled out for criticism by French and English rationalists, who decried its emphasis on purely musical expression at the expense of textual clarity. Yet, even in culturally protectionist France, Italian styles slowly infiltrated the musical scene and became popular: despite conservative theorists’ best efforts, by the mid-eighteenth century French audiences were happily applauding the spectacular Italian-style vocal effects they had rejected in previous decades. Why then, despite widespread accusations of decadence, effeminacy, and degeneracy, was the Italian musical idiom so powerfully attractive to listeners? The answer may lie in the gap between Early Modern philosophy and the lived experiences — including the aesthetic tastes — of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century subjects.

In “Rethinking ‘aesthetics,’” Sylvia Wynter (1992: 239) argues that the science-based philosophies of Descartes reconfigured the world as universally subject to understanding by human reason, and thus to alteration by human means. Indeed, Descartes’s most persistent contribution to Western thought is arguably the duality of mind and body, as well as the imperative that the mind should control the body just as it subjects the rest of the physical world to the laws of reason. However, in his last published work, the 1649 *Les passions de l’âme*, Descartes — perhaps not entirely intentionally — makes very clear just how dangerously easy it is for the mind to be overwhelmed by bodily sensation.

*Les passions de l’âme* opens with a reiteration of the separation between the mind and body, describing how the two interact only in one small gland located within the brain, inside of which the mind’s and the body’s



respective “animal spirits” mingle, resulting in “passions”—what we would now call emotions (DESCARTES 1649: art. 31). According to Descartes, the passions themselves cannot be directly controlled by the will. However, while one cannot simply force oneself to feel an emotion, Descartes (1649: art. 45) describes how one can manipulate one’s passions by focusing one’s attention on an object which naturally triggers a specific affect. In fact, in his personal correspondence Descartes recommended that those suffering from anxiety or grief should turn their thoughts to objects which summon up the pleasant and calming passions most conducive to their rehabilitation (JORGENSEN 2012: 423).

In many ways, Cartesian thought had a profound impact on Baroque aesthetics: if merely thinking of an object was enough to evoke the affect associated with it, how much more powerful would the outcome be if the object was represented in an elevated, artistic form? Music, the most abstract of the arts, was believed to be particularly effective in moving the passions of listeners: new discoveries in acoustical science illuminated the sympathetic properties of sound vibrations in ways which dovetailed neatly with theories on the interpersonal transmission of affect (HACOHEN 2001: 626). However, while music was acknowledged to have the ability to soothe the soul or to provide emotional catharsis, conservative factions also decried music’s potential to overwhelm and unbalance the subject with excessive emotion (TANAY 2003: 73).

This ever-present potential for embodied sensation to overwhelm reason pervades *Les passions de l’âme*. One of the most pertinent distinctions which Descartes (1649: art. 73) draws in his text — at least in relation to aesthetics — is the difference between wonder (*l’admiration*) and astonishment (*l’étonnement*), which he considers an “excess of wonder”. For Descartes, wonder is a desirable affect because it allows the body and mind to move freely in order to further investigate whatever unfamiliar object originally caused the subject’s sense of wonder (DESCARTES 1649: art. 70). Further, Descartes (1649: art. 71) suggests that wonder — unlike the other passions — involves a reaction of the mind alone, without any attendant movement of the blood or the heart. Wonder — a positive affect due to its inducement of curiosity and therefore learning — only crosses the line into astonishment when the body’s reaction becomes too prominent and both body and mind are overwhelmed by sensation, unable to move, react, or reason (DESCARTES 1649: arts. 73, 75).

It is on the subject of wonder versus astonishment that artistic practice in the Baroque era seems to have departed from Descartes's moralistic treatment of affect. While Descartes (1649: art. 73) held a negative view of astonishment, for artists and musicians of his time the opposite was true: the Baroque style fully embraced an "excess of wonder" with its effusive play of affect and abundance of ornament. Baroque musicians adhered more to Italian poet Giambattista Marino's aesthetic of *meraviglia* (the marvellous), which in the context of music manifested itself as wide, sudden contrasts of mood and texture, a self-conscious manipulation of audience expectations, and an often tongue-in-cheek excess of artifice or embellishment, meant to draw attention to, rather than hide, the existing conventions of the art form (GILES 2017: 415). Delightfully summarized by Roseen Giles (2017: 425) as a sense of "pleasure in the unexpected," the playful spirit of Marino's *meraviglia* pervades much of Baroque music.

Despite Descartes's prescription of mental control, seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century audiences seemed to seek out the marvelous, preferring music which intentionally inspired a state of astonishment, and which emphasized the sensual experience of listening over rational response. A perfect example of this appears in the writings of French critic Jean-Laurent Le Cerf de La Viéville, who in 1705 described a particularly arresting scene from Jean-Baptiste Lully's opera *Armide* (quoted in SMITH 1847: 5):

One has seen twenty times...everyone, terror-stricken, without breathing, remaining motionless, their whole soul in their ears and in their eyes, until the air of the violin which finishes the scene gives permission to breathe; then the spectators resume their breath with a buzz of joy and admiration...

In Le Cerf's account, while the singer is onstage the audience is completely enraptured, paralyzed by an excess of wonder just as Descartes describes in *Les passions de l'âme*. However, after the scene ends listeners begin to reflect and comment — seemingly contradicting Descartes's belief that astonishment must necessarily prevent engagement of the mind as well as the body.

The extreme virtuosity found in Italian opera of the Baroque period further encouraged this type of double perception in the spectator. One of many examples of this phenomenon is Caesar's first aria from G. F. Handel's 1724 opera *Giulio Cesare in Egitto*. Caesar — a character originally

portrayed by a castrato — has just learned that his military rival, Pompey, has been murdered in cold blood by the general of the Egyptian army. Outraged at this betrayal of his honour as a warrior, Caesar sings the aria “Empio, dirò, tu sei,” which features many conventional musical significations of fury, including a minor mode, rapid *coloratura* runs and turns, jarring leaps, and a racing, frenetic sense of rhythm. However, even as the fiery music of the aria depicts the uncontrolled affect of the character, the technical skill required for the singer to execute such a tour de force performance draws the audience’s attention to the means of artistic production (in this case, the physical operation of castration as well as the singer’s many years of intensive training). Handel leveraged his audiences’ susceptibility to astonishment in order to encourage appreciative reactions — both visceral and relatively esoteric.

In addition to exploiting the castrati’s technical skill, composers capitalized on the erotic potential of their treble range. As operatic lovers, the castrati occupied the same vocal space as their soprano romantic partners, allowing for intensely intimate musical effects. Susan McClary (2012: 8) argues that seventeenth-century developments in harmony allowed composers to create “extended trajectories of desire” as they experimented with the tonal system’s ability to delay or subvert audience expectations of release and closure. Such musical depictions of aural eroticism were used by composers to great effect in operatic love duets written for castrati. One of the earliest examples of this idiom is “Pur ti miro” from Monteverdi’s 1643 opera *L’incoronazione di Poppea*. Occurring at the end of the opera, just after the courtesan Poppea has been triumphantly crowned empress by the lovestruck Emperor Nero, the duet marks the musical consummation of the couple’s relationship. The two vocal lines, both written for high treble voices, employ every possible musical image to evoke the affect of intimate desire: as McClary (2012: 101) describes, “they intertwine, take turns being on top, rub up against each other in aching dissonances,” and “resolve sweetly together”.

This compositional style — one which privileges the extended expression of a single affect over specific word-painting — is incongruous with the rest of the opera, in which Monteverdi concentrates on the nuanced depiction of minute details of text and character. Rachel A. Lewis (2005: 32, 36) argues that this stylistic shift points to the disputed authorship of the finale of the opera: Monteverdi was in ill health at the time of the work’s

composition, and was likely aided by other, younger composers, one of whom probably wrote the final duet. Although it is impossible to confirm exactly how much of the opera's score was composed by Monteverdi himself, Lewis suggests that several elements of the duet's style set it apart from the rest of the work. The piece's musical language, featuring close, sweet harmonies, deliberate use of dissonance, and breathless repetition of short motives, exemplifies a new style of love duet which quickly became ubiquitous in the eighteenth century. Made possible in a heterosexual context by the altered voices of the castrati, these passionate duets emphasized the intimate interweaving of two equal voices.

This type of suggestive musical signification was adopted by other musical genres of the Baroque era as well, including pieces meant for sacred contexts. Written almost a century after "Pur ti miro," the opening duet of Giovanni Battista Pergolesi's 1736 *Stabat Mater* uses almost exactly the same musical language. Two treble voices create an effect which could easily be interpreted as erotic friction, intertwining in a chain of languorous suspensions — extended dissonances which eventually resolve — before coming together at the end of the phrase with a sense of release. However, rather than depicting a sexual scene, the piece imagines the Virgin Mary standing before the cross, watching helplessly as her son dies a slow, cruel death. Susan McClary (2012: 131) argues that "it was because of such egregious violations of taste that [later] eighteenth-century rationalists branded their predecessors with the pejorative term 'baroque'". Indeed, although in earlier decades such sacred sensuality was common, Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater* — written during the musical transition period between Baroque excess and Enlightenment neo-classicism — received criticism for what was perceived as its ostentatious emotionality.

The *Stabat Mater* must also be situated within a long tradition of sensuality in sacred music and art, beginning (but not limited to) the Catholic Counter-Reformation in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Andrew Dell'Antonio (2011: 21) explains that in the context of the Counter-Reformation, music was acknowledged to be a powerful tool for the Church to attract parishioners, by "exposing them to the multisensory persuasive power of the church." Further, Dell'Antonio (2011: 34) argues that while both Protestant and Catholic reforms in the early modern church were focused on participation of believers, Protestants emphasized a personal and largely unmediated spiritual relationship with God. In contrast,

Catholics cast participation as “a *receptive* activity” in which “the viewer or listener has equal status in the creation of meaning to the person performing the ritual — and by extension, creating the artwork or playing the music” (DELL’ANTONIO 2011: 34).

Much of the Catholic church’s response to the Protestant Reformation was rooted in the Council of Trent, which took place between 1545 and 1563. However, John W. O’Malley (2013: 28) notes that the Council of Trent did not result in any official pronouncements about the arts or music in sacred contexts — certain books were placed on a list to be censored, but no music or artistic works were banned. Bette Talvacchia (2013: 50) further argues that the widespread appearance of sensual elements and themes in art works from this time period shows that the sacred erotic was an accepted — although not uncontested — practice, since this type of art “was sought after by the wealthiest patrons, proudly displayed, and carefully preserved.” In fact, sensually stimulating works of art were profoundly linked with spiritual experience and devotion. For example, the Jesuit manual *Spiritual Exercises* included a recommendation to engage in meditation by focusing on an artwork or other material object observable by the all senses — including hearing, smell, and touch, as well as sight (O’MALLEY 2013: 44). St. Philip Neri (d. 1595; canonized 1622) was particularly celebrated for his ecstatic and mystical spiritual episodes, often in reaction to specific works of art (BARBIERI 2013: 206). Costanza Barbieri (2013: 207) explains that Catholic believers were encouraged to follow St. Philip’s example: “the senses [could] lead the viewer from mundane beauty to divine glory”.

Some of the most extreme examples of erotic sacred music from this time period originated in convents, which were relatively cloistered from the outside world. Nuns were often highly trained musically, but were only allowed to perform in the context of religious ceremonies and rituals, from behind a grate or screen (JOHNSON 2013: 39). Invisible yet audible, the disembodied voices of these nuns often accessed the sensual musical techniques in wider use in Italy, as well as sacred texts in the erotic tradition of the Song of Songs. Lindsay Johnson (2013: 39-40) writes that during this period, women were considered particularly susceptible to spiritual ecstasy; many visual or sculptural depictions of holy women reflect this almost-erotic state, such as Bernini’s *Ecstasy of St. Teresa*. Partially, this ecstatic tendency was explained by conceptions of the female body as an incontinent, “leaky vessel”—as opposed

to the male body, which was “the ideal object of creation, being both more hot than the female, and particularly more closed” (GREENBURG 2002: 143).

Under this gendered liquid economy, Johnson (2013: 38) explains that bodily fluids, including blood, breast milk, and tears, were closely linked to the sacred erotic. With an emphasis on fluids already built into the Catholic mass, through the focus on the Blood of Christ during the sacrament of Communion, “the body’s carnality and its internal liquids, or humors, were... a celebrated aspect of spirituality within Roman Catholic practices” (JOHNSON 2013: 42-43). Nuns in particular often felt an affinity for another oft-depicted sacred liquid, the breast milk of the Virgin Mary, a tendency which is best illustrated by the concerted duet “O quam bonus es”, composed by Chiara Margarita Cozzolani in 1650 (JOHNSON 2013: 43-44). The piece’s text is characteristically sensuous, with the poet expressing an urgent wish not only to suckle at the breast of Mary, but also to drink the blood from Christ’s wounds. The sacred milk is “sweeter than honey”, and brings joy and peace to the drinker, who in increasingly ecstatic language praises the virtues of the two sacred liquids. As the two treble voices entwine in the musical trope of the sacred erotic, the singers cry out repeatedly that, when drinking alternately from the breast and from the wound, they “do not know where to turn next”. The liquid sources are addressed directly, as symbols of the Virgin and the Saviour: “I love you, I desire you, I want you, I thirst for you, I seek you, I drink you, I enjoy you”. This repetitious poetic construction, paired with increasingly breathless, overlapping vocal lines, is undeniably sensuous – and in the context of the Counter-Reformation, specifically meant to draw the listener as well as performers into a closer and more embodied relationship with the divine.

Even in instrumental works, whose meaning is most often totally abstract, similarly voluptuous musical effects can be found in examples from throughout the Baroque era. Typically, two treble instruments take on the role of the two high voices, such as the two solo violins in the first movement of Arcangelo Corelli’s 1689 trio sonata Opus 3, no. 2. Since string instruments are not limited by the breath capacity of their players, Corelli is able to take the idiom of the operatic love duet and extend its conventional chains of dissonance almost indefinitely: the result is an increased sense of tension followed by an exquisitely delayed release. Although the piece presents no overt narrative, listeners familiar with Western musical systems of tonality will likely experience a very physical sense of longing

for resolution as Corelli expertly establishes and then subverts expectations of closure.

Thus the Baroque musical language of eroticism, originally embodied by the castrated male voice but enthusiastically adopted by other instruments, was — at least in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries — very easily transferred from erotic to non-erotic contexts. This phenomenon speaks not only to the power of music to evade concrete definition, but also to music’s queer ability to draw attention to the contingent nature of all linguistic systems: although the meaning of music is no less socially contingent than that of any verbal language, its chains of signification can be much more slippery. As Josh Kun (2005: 23) writes, music can be a “space of difference, where contradictions and conflicts do not cancel each other out but coexist and live through each other”. At least in Baroque music, a love duet can double as a religious lament — and both can be equally effective.

#### LISTENING FOR A QUEER UTOPIA: TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY PERFORMANCES OF CASTRATO ROLES

In his book on musical and theological interpretations of the biblical story of David and Jonathan, Dirk Von der Horst (2017: 94) argues that “aesthetics are a powerful tool with which to investigate historicity because... they make the mediation of perception by social and linguistic parameters clear”. In other words, by foregrounding elements of human experience which are clearly products of cultural construction (such as musical styles which are very different from those of the present), a similar awareness of the historically contingent nature of other concepts (such as gender or sexuality) can be illuminated. How might the musical legacy of the castrati offer such opportunities for queer illumination?

Baroque duets like “Pur ti miro” often sound queer to twenty-first century ears — after all, they are love duets sung by two voices both in a high range, which listeners have been trained to associate with femaleness and femininity. However, the gender of the singers is not the only factor which contributes to the perception of queerness: I suggest that such duets — along with all of the castrati’s music — have queer potential because they straddle the line between linguistic signification and embodied experience.

In the past, theories of listening have often depended on the disembodiment of the operatic voice. For example, Michel Poizat (1992: 33-34) argues

that opera depends on a “radical autonomization of the voice”, allowing for the extreme cross-signification of the diva’s voice and body — the listener can be “ravished” by the diva’s voice, even while her body may not appear attractive. Further, Poizat (1992: 116) claims that the extreme popularity of castrati, not just as “substitute women” but in masculine roles, is “a clear indication of the autonomy of the voice, particularly the high voice, as an object of *jouissance* detached from its usual functions of signification, communication, and the marking of gender difference”. In other words, Poizat uses the example of the castrati to prove that the operatic voice is fundamentally disembodied, totally autonomous from the flesh which creates it.

Conversely, in her writing on the castrati, Bonnie Gordon (2015: 649) emphasizes the materiality of the operatic voice, contrasting it with dominant discourses of the voice as an unmediated conduit for verbal communication: “The bodily singing voice is a material stream of sound, but its materiality has been obscured by discourses that posit the impalpable individuality of the soul [...] the voice becomes most obviously manifest when it intrudes on and exceeds the semantic content it transmits”. Thus, the operatic voice — particularly when it displays its training through feats requiring extreme technical skill — can act as a signal, drawing attention to both the socially constructed and the material aspects of all vocal communication.

The subversive potential of live opera goes beyond a mere awareness of vocal physicality: Josh Kun (2005: 13) argues that “music makes you immediately conscious of your identity precisely because [...] alien sounds emitted from strangers [...] enter, via vibration and frequency, the very bones and tissues of your being”. When an audience hears a pair of singers perform a duet like “*Pur ti miro*,” vibrations created by those singers’ bodies literally enter the bodies of audience members, causing their bodies to vibrate in sympathy. Almost instantaneously, listeners’ brains perceive these vibrations as music, but exactly how they perceive that music — for example, whether or not they perceive it as erotically charged — is to a large extent socially contingent.

Wayne Koestenbaum (1993: 42) posits something similar in his seminal *The Queen’s Throat*, describing the listener’s bodily response to the singer’s embodied voice: “Forceful displays of singing insist that the diva has a body and so do you because your heartbeat shifts in uncanny affinity with her ascent.” For Koestenbaum (1993: 44), the listening experience



can be bittersweet, reminding silent spectators of how trapped they are in their own bodies, revealing that “you have only used a fraction of your bodily endowment, and your throat is closed”. It is in private listening that Koestenbaum (1993: 49) seems to find the most solace: “A voice is like a dress; playing a record is sonic drag. I’m not the voice’s source, but I absorb the voice through my ears, and because I play the record — an act of will — it seems I am masquerading as that voice”. However, Koestenbaum (1993: 154) concentrates more on the listener than the performer — admitting that “If I could sing I would not be writing this”—while I am more interested in the experiences of the singers themselves.

For singers, performance is a very intimate and profoundly embodied experience: even though they may be singing words to each other, singers also engage in other, non-verbal modes of communication. Partners in a duet are constantly aware of each other’s bodies, breathing together, listening to how their voices are blending, and working together to maintain a shared sense of rhythm. Even when singing alone, the heightened physical awareness required by operatic singing often leads to a peculiar double consciousness: even while one is directing the body through a series of extremely complex vocal tasks, there can be a simultaneous sensation of allowing the flow of voice and affect to overwhelm conscious processing. Thus opera blurs the mental boundary between verbal and non-verbal — not only for singers, but also for audience members, who in most North American contexts will not be fluent in the language being sung onstage.

Mauro P. Calcagno (2012: 13) suggests that performance itself, as a space to inhabit various different — and perhaps even contradictory — identities, can trouble the often-essentialized nature of selfhood, with the performer “projecting a self that is constantly shifting.” I argue that the roles originally written for castrati are uniquely situated to draw attention to the contingent and temporally unstable nature of gender identity. Since the castrati are a gender category that no longer exists, any performer who takes on their roles today will automatically be engaged in a cross-signification of gender, regardless of their own identity. Further, the extreme vocal demands of the castrati’s music as well as the perceived gender ambiguity of its high range offer opportunities to destabilize assumptions about gender and sex in the present day.

In “Unveiled Voices” Joke Dame (2006: 139) suggests that no modern performer will be a wholly satisfactory substitute for the castrati, at least

while we hold on to “the need to categorize a voice according to gender, to assign a sex to the voice”. Countertenors — men who train their voices to sing in a high range — are dismissed by Dame as lacking the piercing strength and extended upper range of the legendary castrato voice. Similarly, Serena Guarracino (2006: 49) suggests that countertenors sound unfamiliar and “artificial” because of their use of falsetto, which “allows them to sing in a far higher vocal register than that allowed to most male singers”. Koestenbaum (1993: 164) agrees, calling falsetto “an act deemed unnatural” and “among the greatest of singing sins”. But is this necessarily a universal reaction? Even among Western audiences, most spectators will have some level of familiarity with high male voices, considering how many male pop singers use falsetto quite extensively.

In contrast, Dame (2009: 149) writes that female mezzo-sopranos are often rejected not because of their vocal timbre, but based on their presumed inability to convincingly portray male romantic heroes — despite the fact that this kind of cross-gender casting was common during the Baroque era, with parts originally written for castrati being taken by women, and vice-versa. The last possible solution, which Dame rejects outright, is to transpose the castrato role down an octave into the range of a male tenor. While this may pander to audience perceptions of gender dynamics, Dame argues that the love duets in Baroque operas are much less effective when the voices sound farther apart. Instead, Dame suggests that in the Baroque era, equal voices were chosen to portray romantic couples expressly because of their capacity for erotic signification. Dame (2009: 150) writes: “the dissonances are very close and cause frictional moments...the lovers literally merge into each other” and “it becomes difficult...to tell them apart”. In the end, Dame (2009: 151) recommends that female singers rather than male tenors be cast in castrato roles, calling this potential for onstage homoeroticism “a present from history”.

Albeit from a different perspective, I feel a similar gratitude for the opportunities presented by the gender ambiguities inherent in castrato roles. In 2017, I had the opportunity to sing a role originally written for a castrato: the character of Tirinto in G. F. Handel’s 1740 *Imeneo*, with University of Toronto Opera. In U of T Opera’s interpretation of the piece, directed by Tim Albery, Tirinto was a gender-non-conforming or transgender person still coming to terms with certain aspects of his gender identity. Specifically, the pressure Tirinto felt to conform to normative models of



FIGURES 1 & 2 (next page): Camille Rogers as Tirinto in Handel's *Imeneo*, photos by Richard Lu, University of Toronto Opera, 2017.



masculinity profoundly informed my portrayal of the main conflict of the opera, a love triangle between Tirinto, his fiancée Rosmene, and Imeneo, a warrior who has recently rescued Rosmene from a band of pirates.

One aria in particular resonated with me deeply: Tirinto’s Act II “Sorge nell’alma mia.” In the aria, as Tirinto begins to suspect that Rosmene may be developing feelings for Imeneo, he compares his growing confusion and agitation to a thunderstorm rising on the horizon. Although such metaphors are almost comically conventional in serious Baroque opera, in this particular production I found the image anything but cliché. Because I was at the time grappling with my own gender expression, I could relate intimately with Tirinto’s rage and insecurity. The frenetic, relentless orchestral accompaniment seemed to echo the obsessive turn of Tirinto’s thoughts as he and I both struggled with feelings of doubt, jealousy, and dysphoria. Albery’s staging of this aria highlighted Tirinto’s jealousy and indecision by having Tirinto interact with a prop associated with Imeneo — his sword. Apart from fairly obvious phallic implications, this sword served to represent a particular type of manhood with which Tirinto was uncomfortable, and yet towards which he felt pressure to conform. Later in the aria, in a fit of petulance Tirinto ripped up a photo of Rosmene; then, regretting his

rash action, he tenderly reconstructed the portrait from the torn pieces.

I can relate intimately with feelings of pressure to embody a particular version of masculinity. At that time in my life, I was struggling with my own gender expression; in particular, I was placing internal pressure on myself to outwardly present as masculine in order to be perceived as androgynous. I suppressed my feminine side — painfully — even though I feel most comfortable inhabiting the middle of the spectrum rather than one extreme or the other. My relationship with the role of Tirinto, and this aria in particular, was therefore profound. This connection was highlighted when there arose the possibility of it being reassigned to another singer, the bass playing Imeneo. Unsurprisingly, I protested — not only did the aria resonate deeply with me personally, but I also felt strongly that Tirinto as a character needed an outlet for his anger and frustration. Without “Sorge nell’alma mia”, Tirinto’s music would be almost entirely written in a softer mode, more lamenting than raging: affectively, balance was needed. Thankfully, the director agreed with me and the aria remained Tirinto’s.

Josh Kun (2005: 3) suggests that a musical experience can function as a temporary utopia, a space where sensation and affect can take precedence over linguistic modes of signification. Live music performance — ephemeral and therefore open to continuous re-creation — can perhaps then be understood as an infinite, collective, relational utopia, one in which I myself have often found solace and inspiration. Certainly, one could interpret my experience in this production of *Imeneo* as a kind of utopia — or at least a space in which I could process my own struggles with gender at a safe distance, through the medium of Tirinto’s character. In particular, the repetitive process of memorizing and rehearsing the role allowed for additional nuances of feeling to be uncovered within myself. As for the balance between verbal and non-verbal communication, in the moment of the performance I did not think specifically of the meaning of individual words, nor of my own personal experiences. Instead, in my best moments I allowed the affect of the music to flow through me, bringing Tirinto and me closer together in our shared struggles.

Did my personal queer utopia extend to include the audience? Unfortunately the program notes gave no indication of Tirinto’s trans identity, so it is unlikely that many spectators would have read him through that specific queer lens. Opera fans already familiar with the convention of trouser roles may have found the performance unremarkable — except perhaps for the

unusual final pairing, in which the soprano unexpectedly ends up with the bass rather than the high-voiced hero. However, the very fact that my trans body was onstage, embodying a sympathetic character and delivering music of great affective power, may have been queer enough in and of itself. Perhaps in the future, more productions could experiment with the opportunities castrato roles offer for reinterpreting old stories for new audiences. By embracing the ambiguity of the castrato — both from historical and current perspectives — operatic directors and singers could clear a little more space for queer, trans, and gender-non-conforming artists in the opera industry.

Throughout this paper I have argued that music holds a peculiar power to move beyond the binary of mind and body: in particular, a queer practice of music performance can lead performers and audiences alike to question their perceptions of reality, including the everyday assumptions they make about the nature of gender and sexuality. Moreover, I believe that through a queer approach to music performance it is possible to meld Descartes' concept of 'wonder,' with all its connotations of critical self-awareness, with Marino's more playful and embodied *meraviglia*, characterized by taking "pleasure in the unexpected" (GILES 2017: 425). While Descartes was afraid that the overwhelming physical effects of a fully embodied spectatorial experience would deaden the minds of audiences and prevent them from engaging critically with the presented material, in a queer performance space, moments of non-verbal communication can fill the gap between musician and listener with an abundant flow of affect, leading to both emotional and cognitive renewal.

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