

Farinelli: *il castrato*

It took a movie to make me believe it. I had heard that young boys would be castrated in certain countries to preserve their soprano ranging singing voices, but I had always written it off in the back of my mind as an uncommon practice. I simply had trouble imagining what it would be like to hear a grown man produce the sounds that would rather be expected from a female opera singer. Farinelli: *il castrato*, expanded my knowledge of this barbaric practice used to produce un-barbaric singing.

I would assume, that because Carlo Broschi lived during that 18th century in Italy and other places in Europe, that he probably followed the Roman Catholic religion or at least some other form of Christianity. Therefore, I find it quite interesting that such a practice was condoned during this times, a time of supposed enlightenment. I was under the impression that Catholicism would not approve of any act that would purposely prevent a man from procreating other than willfully entering the clergy. However, I could completely off base in assuming that Broschi followed a Christian religion, or any religion at all for that matter, as he was never portrayed performing any religious acts.

From the small amount of time dedicated to the child of Broschi in the beginning of the film, I gathered that being a “castrato” was not an option afforded to just any boy. I don’t believe the requirements were so much based on social status as they were simply on the actual voice of the child, because it did not appear that the Broschi brothers came from lofty beginnings. Again hypothesizing, I would venture to say that selection of children to be castrated showed the importance that music held during that time. Music must have been a major part of the society in order to make being castrated a sacrifice that some boys would be willing to make. In the case of Broschi, he probably wouldn’t

have allowed himself to be castrated, and even though he struggled with his identity his whole life, it seemed to me that he still enjoyed the life he attained from being a castrati singer. Carlo's brother Ricardo was obviously willing to preserve his voice.

Another interesting thing I came to find out from this movie was the affect that castrated men like Broschi had on women. Rather than being repulsed by the femininity and inability to reproduce, the women in the movie were quite infatuated with Broschi. They enjoyed Broschi so much, that because he could not ejaculate, they would allow his brother Ricardo to come in during the middle of intercourse and literally provide the ejaculation that he could not. I honestly did not believe that a boy who was castrated prior to puberty would have ever gained a strong libido in the first place, but this film proved me wrong. The fact that women would faint and cry during Broschi's performances, and have sex with him afterwards, shows to me how important the music really was to the people of this time.

An aspect that I had expected to see, but was not in the film, was that of homosexuality. I had expected that groups of castrated boys learning to sing together would have been subject to homosexuality, either by their teachers, or by their common bond in never being able to reproduce. Again, my assumption was incorrect. In fact, it seemed that the sexuality of the castrated men became even more masculine than expected. It was seemingly that Broschi's inability to ejaculate made him the perfect lover for a woman, rather than the usually portrayed man throughout history that lacks in sexual stamina.

Despite all of this, I also came to realize that being a famous castrati singer came with a dual nature, despite all of the easy women. While the women would look up to

these singers, as would the men, when a castrati singer would some way insult another man, the insulted man would not hesitate to use “castrato” as an insult. So, being castrated was a route to becoming famous and rich, but it also made you an easy target for ridicule from your enemies.

In conclusion, what I have learned from this film is that what is seen as attractive or masculine is a frequently changing value in society. A castrated man today would not stand a chance to avoiding ridicule and social exclusion if he was found out. Luckily, and unluckily, for Broschi, this was an accepted practice during his time. He was able to achieve great fame, that has lasted until today, but he lost his ability to procreate. My knowledge of the history of sexuality has been expanded, because my mind has been opened. I learned that things are not always the same, that they change, and I can't assume that the way things now socially are not how they have always been.