IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Charles Burney, “Farinelli” (1771)

“What singing! Imagine a voice that combines the sweetness of the flute, and the animated suavity of the human larynx—a voice which leaps and leaps, lightly and spontaneously, like a lark that flies through the air and is intoxicated with its own flight; and when it seems that the voice has reached the loftiest peaks of altitude, it starts off again, leaping and leaping still with equal lightness and equal spontaneity, without the slightest sign of forcing or the faintest indication of artifice or effort; in a word, a voice that gives the immediate idea of sentiment transmuted into sound, and of the ascension of a soul into the infinite!” (Angus Heriot, The Castrati in Opera, p. 36) Thus wrote a nineteenth-century observer who had heard many castrati.

Indeed, throughout its history, the castrato voice had been embraced by audiences with astonishment and a bit of erotic titillation. Since the sixteenth century, boys, usually between eight and ten, had been castrated so that their larynx and vocal cords would remain small, like those of a woman. What resulted were strong vocal cords that could produce a powerful, high sound. But these arrested voices were not exclusively in the high soprano range, no more than every normal male voice is a high tenor. The castrato voice ranged in tessitura from high soprano to contralto.

Castration for musical purposes was practiced first in Spain and then, from the seventeenth century onward, almost exclusively in Italy, especially southern Italy in the region of Naples. If the operation was successful, and the boy musically gifted and well trained, there was the prospect of fame and fortune singing on the operatic stage or in a cathedral or chapel. The leading castrati were paid and idolized as are modern rock stars. And like Prince and 50 Cent, they all seem to have gone by short stage names, such as Farinelli (Carlo Broschi), Senesino (Francesco Bernardi), Siface (Giovanni Francesco Grossi), and Cortona (Domenico Cecci), which derived from their place of origin or some other facet of their personal history. Castrati were also stars in the bedroom. They could enjoy sexual arousal but could not ejaculate or procreate, and for that reason had certain advantages as illicit lovers, sometimes with disastrous results. The castrato Siface, for example, was murdered in 1697 by relatives of a woman with whom he had had an affair.

The glory days of the castrato occurred during the first half of the eighteenth century, the high point of opera seria. Strutting on stage, they played the parts of kings, emperors, and the hero generally. Ironically, the church turned a blind eye to this practice of emasculation so that it could be supplied with sopranos and altos to take the place of the women whom it had banned from public church performances and the theater. Rossini and Meyerbeer both composed roles for castrati in the nineteenth century, but that was the end of the operatic castrato. The tradition lingered, however, in the church until the death of Alessandro Moreschi, the last castrato, in 1922. Recordings made of Moreschi during 1902–1904 are the only surviving record of this ethereal, otherworldly voice.

Most famous among the castrati was Carlo Broschi, called Farinelli (1705–1782), a singer legendary for his vocal acrobatics, breath control (it was said that he could hold a note for a minute), and range (three octaves, approximately f[below middle c] to f”). Farinelli was trained in Naples and took the European operatic stage by storm at age fifteen, and then disappeared almost as quickly. Choosing to withdraw from public view at the height of his powers at age thirty-two, he accepted an offer to move to
Spain and become a private chamber musician to King Philip V, where he remained for twenty-two years. In 1759 Farinelli returned to Italy, living out his days in luxury, surrounded by fine paintings (many of himself) and numerous keyboards, his favorite being a 1730 pianoforte made in Florence. An oft-visited celebrity, among those who journeyed to Farinelli’s villa during his last years were young Mozart, Gluck, Casanova, Emperor Joseph II, and music critic Charles Burney (see below).

In 1994 Farinelli was the subject of an award-winning film, Farinelli, in which the producers sought to re-create the lost voice of the castrato by recording the sound of a male falsettist and a female soprano, and blending and enhancing that sound through electronic synthesis. Several clips from Farinelli that exploit this “synthetic castrato” voice can be viewed on YouTube by searching under that title. Among them are performances of arias written specifically for Farinelli by his brother Riccardo Broschi, ones designed to demonstrate his extraordinary vocal technique.

Charles Burney (1726–1814) was an English music critic and composer who, in the spring and summer of 1770, began a two-year European tour to gather material for a projected history of music. In August he reached Bologna, Italy, where he sought out the now sixty-five-year-old Farinelli. Farinelli, as he himself reports, had been gracefully expelled from Spain and had built a villa for himself a mile outside of Bologna, to which he retired. Burney apparently had two meetings with the amiable Farinelli and included a biographical sketch of him in his The Present State of Music in France and Italy. Noteworthy in it are Burney’s account, as told to him by Farinelli, of the castrato’s nightly contests with a trumpet player in the Naples opera orchestra, of the advice given him by Holy Roman Emperor Charles VI, and of Farinelli’s job at the Spanish court, which was essentially to sing the same four arias every night to the melancholic King Philip V.

[Saturday, August 25, 1771] Carlo Broschi, called Farinelli, was born at Naples in 1705; he had his first musical education from his father, Signor Broschi, and afterwards was under [Nicola] Porpora [1686–1768, also Haydn’s teacher], who traveled with him; he was seventeen when he left that city to go to Rome, where, during the run of an opera, there was a struggle every night between him and a famous player on the trumpet, in a song [aria] accompanied by that instrument; this, at first, seemed amiable and merely sportive, till the audience began to interest themselves in the contest, and to take different sides. After severally swelling out a note [holding a pitch with crescendo], in which each manifested the power of his lungs, and tried to rival the other in brilliancy and force, they had both a swell and a shake [trill] together, by thirds, which was continued so long, while the audience eagerly waited the event [end], that both seemed to be exhausted; and, in fact, the trumpeter, wholly spent, gave it up, thinking, however, his antagonist as much tired as himself, that it would be a drawn battle; when Farinelli, with a smile on his countenance, shewing he had only been sporting with him all this time, broke out all at once in the same breath, with fresh vigour, and not only swelled and shook the note, but ran the most rapid and difficult divisions [varied ornaments], and was at last silenced only by the acclamations of the audience. From this period may be dated the superiority which he ever maintained over all his contemporaries.

In the early part of his life he was distinguished throughout Italy, by the name the boy [il Ragazzo].

From Rome he went to Bologna, where he had the advantage of hearing Bernacchi (a scholar of the famous Pistocchi [Francesco Pistocchi, 1659–1726] of that city) who was then the first singer in Italy, for taste and knowledge; and his scholars afterwards rendered the Bologna school famous.

From thence he went to Venice, and from Venice to Vienna; in all which cities his powers were regarded as miraculous; but he told me, that at Vienna, where he received
great honours from the Emperor Charles the VI, an admonition from that prince was of more service to him than all the precepts of his masters, or examples of his competitors for fame: his Imperial Majesty condescended to tell him one day, with great mildness and affability, that in his singing, he neither moved nor stood still like any other mortal; all was supernatural. “Those gigantic strides, (said he); those never-ending notes and passages . . . they only surprise, and it is now time for you to please; you are too lavish of the gifts with which nature has endowed you; if you wish to reach the heart, you must take a more plain and simple road.” These few words brought about an entire change in his manner of singing; from this time on he mixed the pathetic with the spirited, the simple with the sublime, and, by these means, delighted as well as astonished every hearer.

In the year 1734, he came into England, where everyone knows who heard, or has heard of him, what an effect his surprising talents had upon the audience; it was extacy [sic]! rapture! enchantment!

In the famous air *Son qual Nave* [the simile aria *I am like a ship*], which was composed by his brother, the first note he sung was taken with such delicacy, swelled by minute degrees to such an amazing volume, and afterwards diminished in the same manner, that it was applauded for a full five minutes. He afterwards set off with such brilliancy and rapidity of execution, that it was difficult for the violins of those days to keep pace with him. In short, he was to all other singers as superior as the famous horse Childers was to all other running-horses; but it was not only in speed, he had now every excellence of every great singer united. In his voice, strength, sweetness, and compass; in his style, the tender, the graceful, and the rapid. He possessed such powers as never met before, or since, in any one human being; powers that were irresistible, and which must subdue every hearer; and learned and the ignorant, the friend and the foe.

With these talents he went into Spain in the year 1737, with a full design to return into England, having entered into articles [a contract] with the nobility, who had then the management of the opera [in London], to perform the ensuing season. In his way thither [to Spain] he sang to the king of France at Paris, where, according to Riccoboni, he enchanted even the French themselves, who at that time universally abhorred Italian music; but the first day he performed before the king and queen of Spain, it was determined that he should be taken into the service of the court, to which he was ever after wholly appropriated, not being once suffered to sing again in public. A pension was then settled on him of upwards of 2,000 pounds sterling a year.

He told me, that for the first ten years of his residence at the court of Spain, during the life of Philip the Vth, he sung every night to that monarchy the same four airs, of which two were composed by [Johann] Hasse [see MWC, Chapter 41], *Palido il sole*, and *Per questo dolce Amplesso*. I forgot the others, but one was a minuet which he used to vary at his pleasure. . . .

When the present king of Spain ascended the throne, he was obliged to quit that kingdom, but his pension is still continued, and he was allowed to bring away all his effects. The furniture of his house is very rich, as it is almost entirely composed of the presents he received from great personages. . . . [pp. 205–211]

Earlier, in his account of his arrival at Farinelli’s villa, Burney said the following about the musical instruments the castrato possessed:

Signor Farinelli has long left off singing but amuses himself still on the harpsichord and viol d’amour: he has a great number of harpsichords made in different countries, which he has named according to the place they hold in his favour, after the greatest of the Italian painters. His first favourite is a *piano forte*, made at Florence in the year 1730, on which is written in gold letters, Rafael d’Urbino; then Coreggio, Titian Guido, etc. He played a considerable time upon his Raphael, with great judgment and delicacy and has composed several elegant pieces for that instrument. The next in favour is a harpsichord given him by the late queen of Spain, who was Scarlatti’s scholar [pupil of Domenico Scarlatti who lived many years at the Spanish court; see Chapter 43], both
in Portugal and Spain; it was for this princess that Scarlatti made his two first books of lessons [sonatas] and to her the first edition, printed at Venice, was dedicated, when she was princess of Asturias [an area of Spain]; this harpsichord, which was made in Spain, has more tone than any of the others. His third favourite is one made likewise in Spain, under his own direction; it has moveable keys, by which, like that of Count Taxis, at Venice, the player can transpose a composition either higher or lower. Of these Spanish harpsichords the natural keys are black, and the flats and sharps are covered with mother of pearl; they are of the Italian model, all the wood is cedar, except the bellies [sound boards], and they are put into a second case.

Signor Farinelli was very conversible and communicative, and talked over old times very freely, particularly those when he was in England; and I am inclined to believe, that his life, were it well written, would be very interesting to the public. . . . [pp. 202–204]