

Do Di Petto: "Covering" the Castrato, the English Counter Tenor, and the Teachings of Manuel Garcia II

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Until the return of counter tenor Alfred Deller in the 1940s, such a sound had all but disappeared in vocal performance for over 50 years. The *castrati* fell silent the century before, as *bel canto* singing emerged as the dominant vocal sound of the stage. It would seem that things did not hold well for such voices: enter Manuel Garcia II (1805-1906). Garcia II is perhaps the greatest teacher of voice in history. His students were among the top singers in the world, and there were many of them (e.g. Mathilde Marchesi and Jenny Lind). His approach, as stated in his *A Complete Treatise on the Art of Singing, Parts One (1841) & Two (1847)*, became one of the principal methods of vocal instruction during the time. Solid technique, beautiful tone, exquisite musicianship and mesmerizing performances typify his product. While many would say that such qualities are also true of gifted counter tenors and *castrati*, Garcia II would not. The cornerstone of his technique for the male singer dictated that the singing voice must be based on the chest voice, not the lighter mechanism as utilized, although differently, by the counter tenor and *castrato*.

While it is said that both of these voices could stir their audiences into an uproar, it was not a production that excited Garcia II. On the contrary, he was amazed by male singers who sang the high C an octave below, using a thunderous and robust chest voice, as first sung by Gilbert Duprez in 1835. Unfortunately for *castrati* and for counter tenors, *bel canto* singing also embraced this aesthetic. Garcia II's teaching melded perfectly with the movement, eliminating the need for *castrati* and counter tenors altogether. The *castrati* had no hope of changing to please *bel canto* audiences. It was impossible for such singers to shift gears now that some of the hardware had been removed. The majority of counter tenors, even though intact, still endured great difficulty. Take for example Adolphe Nourrit, a student of Garcia II. He committed suicide in 1838 because he could not master the chested high C. While such recourse now seems absurd, one can imagine the stress imposed on these singers. The source of their livelihood was vanishing, proclaiming them artists of a forgotten age. Sadly, the singing style cultivated by Garcia II also faded; today's voices do not sound like those of the early to mid 20th century.

The *castrati* were viewed as some of the greatest vocal artists in history. Called *castrati*, *male sopranos*, *mezzos* or *castrati contraltos*, the name often varied. Their popularity was best represented by the vogue they enjoyed in Italian opera during the 17th and 18th centuries. Though the *castrati* were not natural male voices, they were captivating, thrilling listeners to magnificent heights. Their roots can be traced back thousands of years to the harems of the East, where such individuals served as the sexually-safe protectors of women. While the radical practice of castration did not reach global proportions, it was, however, not uncommon. In the Greek tradition, eunuchs were used during antiquity as singers.

One factor which greatly accelerated the rise of *castrati* was the advent of complicated *capella* singing in church music during the middle of the 15th century. Such music required extremely competent and reliable treble singers, and since women were not permitted to sing in the church, young boys were used. The problem arose that by the time young boys had learned to sing in the manner and style required, their voices were about to change. By altering a

young male's physiology, no vocal change would accompany maturity.

During adolescence, diseases such as the mumps can cause the suppression of hormones needed for normal sexual development. This process meant that a young male's vocal chords would not thicken, thereby eliminating normal vocal maturity. Now, such a case would be treated with modern medicine, but during earlier centuries, this science (e.g. hormone therapy) was not available. Though accidental castration is rare, it was the preferred method for admitting the castrati as musicians into the Catholic Church. Naturally, the Church could not support the procedure if unnecessary, because it represented, in effect, the deliberate maiming of children.

Deliberate castration was, however, the most common method used in producing a castrato, as disease and accidents could not keep up with the growing demand. One would think that medicine during the 1600s would have made for a nightmarish experience, but in reality, it was a comparatively minor procedure. After the youth had been administered a potent narcotic, usually opium, he would be placed in a hot bath, rendering him insensible. At this point, the ducts leading to the testicles would be severed. This procedure meant that the testicles would eventually shrivel and disappear. Surprisingly, these organs were not removed from the body during surgery.

In order to preserve a young boy's singing voice, such a procedure must be completed before the vocal chords thicken (ages 12-13). If such surgery were performed on a mature tenor or bass, they would not be able to sing treble as would a young castrato because the vocal mechanism has already undergone developmental change. Boys chosen for this procedure also needed to demonstrate considerable vocal aptitude; surgery was not performed randomly.

Contrary to popular belief, most castrati were not of noble birth. Poorer families hoped to obtain money and prominence by having a child in the profession. If successful, the young boy would become the bread-winner for the household. Only two well known castrati came from well-to-do families, those being Farinelli and Caffarelli. Apart from the desires of parents, it was also law that the child himself had to permit the surgery.

Italian opera is considered by many to be one of the ultimate expressions in operatic art. The style dominated the stage during the 17th and 18th centuries. In France and England, however, opera tended to be more of a diversion in courtly life, as performances were confined to the royal courts, patrons and public theatres of capital cities. Though some of the best (e.g. Farinelli) did tour other nations giving listeners a sense of the castrati style and mode of singing, they performed mostly in Italy. England subscribed to high male voices later, and even then, used their own counter tenors in operas and stage music, not castrati.

The role of the castrati began to decline towards the end of the 18th century. By this time, Italian musical tastes had degenerated into frivolity and excess, with audiences demanding pure vocal wowism. Sadly, stage music functioned as little more than a spring-board for extreme vocal virtuosity. The following is a short account of the astonishing sound that castrati were capable of producing. It describes the great Farinelli (1705-1782), whose real name was Carlo Broschi. The castrato voice was not an intensified falsetto or head voice, as is the case with legitimately trained counter tenors, nor was it a sound associated with any soprano voice. Instead, it was the fusion of female and male vocal qualities, incorporating extremes of range with agility and incredible power. Farinelli was considered to be the best in the field. Mancini, an 18th century singing teacher, wrote that Farinelli's voice was

to be a marvelled, because it was so perfect, so powerful, so sonorous and so rich in its extent, both in the high and low parts of the register, that its equal has never been heard in our times. He was, moreover, endowed with a creative genius which inspired him with embellishments so new and so astonishing that no one was able to imitate them. The art of taking and keeping the breath so softly and so easily that no one could perceive it began and died with him. The qualities in which he excelled were the evenness of his voice, the art of swelling its sound, the portamento, the union of registers, a surprising agility, a graceful and pathetic style, and a shake as admirable as it was rare. There was no branch of the art which he did not carry to the highest pitch of perfection. (Giles, 1982, pp. 78-79)

The Napoleonic invasion of the 1790s brought with it political upheaval and change in fashion. Older conservatories weakened as newer types of music were encouraged; now the seeds of bel canto singing and opera were being planted. Donizetti, Bellini and Rossini created dramas where castrati played little to no part. While castrati such as Velluti and Pergetti were active for the first few decades of the 19th century, they ultimately faded as the bel canto emerged.

Often confused with castrati is the counter tenor. Counter tenors of the 17th and 18th centuries were very much intact. This meant that a thickening of the vocal folds had indeed occurred during adolescence. But rather than to pursue training based on the chest as is commonly done with male voices today, the falsetto became the primary register in singing.

The English counter tenor reached greatest prominence in England before 1812. Until this point, these singers were in great demand, being heard constantly in both the cathedral and recital hall. By 1884, the female alto replaced the counter tenor in chorus, recital and oratorio settings. In the words of Percy Scholes: "Apparently there was . . . a definite movement a foot in favour of [altos] against counter tenors" (Giles, 1982, p. 53). The alto voice ($g-e^2$) is similar in range to the counter tenor (g or a to g^2), but naturally has a feminine quality which distinguishes it from high male sounds.

Just as the soprano took over for the castrato with the advent of bel canto opera, the alto supplanted the counter tenor in England during the early to mid-19th century. No scholars, to my current knowledge, have addressed this exact phenomena. Simon Maguire in his *Vincenzo Bellini and the Aesthetics of Early Nineteenth-Century Italian Opera* (1989) states that the "bel canto was entirely motivated by castrati" (p. 154). This I agree with, as does Haböck in his *Die Kastraten und ihre Gesangskunst* (1927). I do not, however, agree that the decline of bel canto singing came from the departure of castrati from the stage, as Duey proposes in his *Bel Canto in its Golden Age* (1951). Duey states that the end of castrati, and therefore bel canto, coincided with the operas of Rossini (c.1810). This is simply not true. Donizetti and Bellini, hallmark composers of the genre, did not write their finest bel canto operas (i.e., *Lucia*, *Norma* and *Puritani* among others) until 1835. Another discrepancy exists because Duey also asserts that the bel canto singing movement faded after Garcia II. How could the same movement die twice? No documentation exists stating that the genre ever enjoyed a resurgence. Garcia II did not die until 1906. Therefore, a hole of approximately 90 years is punched into Duey's argument. It is my belief that after Garcia II died, the bel canto singing tradition did indeed fade during the 20th century.

As the Romantic period progressed, vocal music responded by increasing its range upwardly. This rise in pitch was perfectly suited to the alto voice. As a result, high male voices

were replaced by female voices again. This usurping during the 19th century was influenced by foreign composers like Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847). The music of the Romantic period in itself contributed to the demise of the counter tenor, a voice often described as *classical* in quality. It can sound breathy, devoid of energy and sterile. To some, it is an overly "clean" sound. Romantic music, however, generally calls for a warm and round tone—ideals which counter tenors of the time could not produce. While counter tenors of today can facilitate these qualities, (e.g. David Daniels and Andreas Scholl) many of their 19th century predecessors could not.

It is Alfred Deller (1912-1979) who is credited with re-establishing the lost art of the English counter tenor. He did so not just in Britain and North America, but also in the rest of the English speaking world. He was a self-taught counter tenor, and possessed artistry of the first rate. Through his concerts, Deller re-acquainted the modern world with the counter tenor sound. *The Times* of 1943 contained a review of a performance Deller gave at Morley College.

Mr. Alfred Deller of Canterbury, in the anthem, and in the air, made familiar by Dr. Whittaker as *Music Shall Now Proclaim* (Music for Awhile), but sung in its original pitch, showed by the purity of his voice and of the style how it was that the 17th and 18th centuries came to attach so much value to the high male voice. (Giles, 1982, p. 66)

Manuel Patricio Rodriguez Garcia II (1805-1906) is a supremely important figure in the world of singing for several reasons. First, because of his link to the traditions of *bel canto* singing, and secondly because his method combined the traditions of the Italian singing schools with *bel canto* ideals and scientific research. His investigation into covered singing revolutionized vocal instruction, not to mention sound quality. It is because of his work that tenors of today sound the way they do—utilizing and extending the chest mechanism to obtain full control and unification of the voice. Garcia II also demonstrated profound knowledge of mid 19th century vocal performance practices, the bulk of which constituted *Part Two* of his method. Finally, Garcia II is unlike any other teacher because so many of his students attained consistently high levels of skill and artistry. No other teacher produced such a succession of major singing talents, working as he did in his father's conservatoire from 1829 until his death. In 1854, Garcia II invented the laryngoscope, thus facilitating the intense study of the living larynx during the act of phonation, a first. The use of the laryngeal mirror also confirmed his previous theories on vocal mechanics, these being explanations he had formulated before such technology was available. It was his combined knowledge of anatomy, singing, music and artistry that made him a master teacher.

Manuel Patricio was born on March 17, 1805 in Zafra, Spain. After his first two years, he was sent to live with his grandparents in Madrid. In 1814, he joined his parents in Naples where he was given the occasional vocal lesson by Ansani. The majority of his early vocal training, however, came by way of his father, and was an extension of Ansani's teaching.

Beginning in his father's conservatoire as an assistant, his first pupil was his sister Maria (1808-1836). She had just made her operatic debut on the London stage, and following their father's death in 1832, Garcia II became her sole instructor. Eventually, she came to be known as an unrivalled contralto and legend during her own lifetime. Unfortunately, she died at the age of 28 as the result of complications stemming from a horse accident. In addition to Maria, Garcia II taught his other sister Pauline Garcia (1821-1910), who sang most of her career

under the married name of Viardot. While not possessing the instrument that Maria did, she was none the less gifted, and was regarded as a very intelligent performer.

Garcia II's studio reads as a "who's who" in vocal performance for the final seven decades of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. His most distinguished pupil was Jenny Lind. Others included Mathilde Marchesi, Julius Stockhausen and Sir Charles Santley. Richard Wagner even sent his niece Johanna to Garcia II for lessons. In gratitude, Wagner invited Garcia II to the first ever Bayreuth Festival in 1876 to train the singers. Unfortunately, Garcia II had to decline because of previous commitments in London.

His first major literary work was his *Mémoire sur la voix humaine*, which he sent to the French Academy of Sciences in November of 1840. It contained a description of his theories on the formation of registers and timbres in the singing voice. Voice classification is also explained. This *Mémoire* served as the basis for his *Traité Complete sur l'Art du Chant* of 1841. In this, his *Part One*, Garcia II fully examines vocal production in attempting to master the vocal music of his day.

Garcia II prepared his *Mémoire* five years after Gilbert Duprez's *do di petto* (chest voice high C). In 1838, one of Garcia II's most celebrated tenor pupils, Adolphe Nourrit, committed suicide because he could not master the *voix sombre* in the upper register. Garcia II's knowledge in anatomy was gained through observation in Parisian military hospitals. His investigations gave him great insight into the physiology of the pharynx and into phonation. In *Mémoire*, Garcia II establishes that the human voice is composed of two registers, the chest (*voce di petto*) and the falsetto-head (*fassetto/voce di testa*: the lower part designated as falsetto/middle and the upper as head). In addition to registers, two vocal timbres exist: the *clair* (bright/clear) and *sombre* (dark/warm). Sounds of the same register are consequently of the same nature, no matter the modification (e.g. quality) of timbre or the degree of force used (breath, subglottal pressure). Garcia II proposed that in certain parts of the voice, the two different registers can exist at the same time (overlap, transition or mix). Such dovetailing exists between the chest and the falsetto from *g* to *d*². It is his treatment of the male voice that we shall investigate.

Garcia II deemed that the chest register is the fundamental element of the male voice, and that as a whole, it extends from the low C of a deep bass to the *c*² (high C) of a tenor. The sound it produces is "loud, round, clear, and usually comprises a range of two octaves" (Coffin, 1989, p. 20-21). It was Garcia II's strong belief that a legitimately trained tenor voice never switch from the chest into prolonged falsetto singing, even though such a tendency is natural in the upper region. By utilizing his method, it was possible to extend the chest to high C. The male falsetto register extends from about *a* (or *bb*) to *c*#². Such tones are reminiscent of the low tones on a modern flute.

It should be noted that Garcia II was not the only authority on voice during the 19th century. Others include Mathilde Marchesi (1826-1913, a product of the Garcia II method herself), Francesco Lamperti (1813-1892), and Giovanni Battista Lamperti (Francesco's son, 1839-1910).

This exercise was intended to create balance between the chest and falsetto as the tenor approaches the second lift point (*f*#¹). By regimenting the voice in this area through continual repetition of the exercise, a proper transition can be made into the upper region; no break is heard by the listener because the singer's tone remains constant. It is only after applying this technique that Garcia II considers a mix created: the *mezzo voce*.

Garcia II's assessment of timbres is a complex issue. In simplified terms, it can be summarized that he sought to balance both the *clair* and the *sombre* in the voice throughout the registers (generally two octaves with up to a major second on either side).

It was the advent of extending the chest voice beyond g^1 (falsetto based voices would not have proceeded beyond this note, perhaps switching out of the chest even sooner) that Garcia took great pains in detailing. He said that "tenors should attack their chest voice at d and e [below middle c]," (Coffin, 1989, p. 28) and that between d^1 and f^1 the qualities of the *clair* and *sombre* agree. He emphasized that particular attention must be given to this transition, as the bright timbre alone is capable of making the voice light and penetrating. The tenor should also abandon the *clair* voice on $f\#^1$ —the singer's formant. Here, the tone should sound closed, a procedure which can be accomplished by using the *coup de glotte* (a literal squeezing of the glottis). In contrast, Pavarotti, famous tenor of today, says that *real* tenors should cover on f^1 .

"The tones g^1 to b^1 should be sung only in the covered manner, as the *clair* timbre would be much too shrill [spread] even in a large room" (Garcia II, 1975, p. 28). Here, Garcia II is alluding to the unpleasant *tenore bianco*. Generally, Garcia II intended his covering technique to be used by men (and women) to round out the sound quality of high notes. Since the castrato, counter tenor and falsettist based their sound on the lighter mechanism rather than that of the chest, Garcia II disliked their production. Though I am not aware of any sources in which Garcia II blatantly attacks such a production, one can sense after reading his work that this is not the sound he favoured in the male voice. He did say that all men normally speak in the chest register; women seldom do. Why then should a male base his singing voice in a register where he would not naturally commence phonation? Garcia II's ideal tenor voice existed with the use of the chest. In the words of the Great Caruso (1873-1921):

The voice is naturally divided into three registers—the chest, medium and head. In a man's voice of the lower quality that last is known as the *falsetto*, but in the case of a tenor he may use a tone which in sound is almost falsetto, but really a *mezza voce*, or half voice. This latter legitimately belongs to a man's compass; the falsetto does not. (Tetrazzini, 1975, p. 55)

This sound ideal also adheres to the aesthetics of *bel canto* singing. In addition to Garcia II, composers like Rossini (1792-1868) Donizetti (1797-1848) and Bellini (1808-1835) were attracted to the chest voice. By 1810, castrati, counter tenors and falsettists were becoming passé.

Another point to consider is that of the role of the hero within opera. Castrati and counter tenors, while capable of virtuosity, are not typically macho persons. Though Farinelli was thought to be a great womanizer (fiction propagated by the movie bearing his name), most would agree that the average castrato is not the ultimate male persona. Counter tenors too are emasculated, due much in part to the feminine quality of their sound. It would then seem obvious why *bel canto* and Romantic composers chose to write for chest voice—it is a distinctively male-sounding instrument. The robust chest voice (less stylized or artificial) was an excellent medium for heroic action, not the falsetto associated with prepubescence. Operas featuring the chest-tenor include Donizetti's *Anna Bolena* (1830), *L'elisir d'amore* (1832), *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835) and Bellini's *Norma* (1831) and *I Puritani* (1834).

In *Part Two* of 1847, Garcia II tackles song interpretation and the practical application of the techniques he proposed in *Part One*. *Part Two* is especially useful because of its comprehensive treatment of performance practice issues concerning the mid 19th century. This knowledge is then combined with science to dissect the singing process.

After reviewing my current compact disc collection, I arrived at a puzzling question: why is it that I am drawn to singers who are now dead or no longer singing—those who enjoyed careers from the early 20th century up until the late 60s? These singers include Maria Callas, Beverly Sills, Mario Lanza, Roberta Peters, Joan Sutherland, Enrico Caruso, Edita Gruberova, Jussi Bjoerling and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau.

What do Marilyn Horne, Joan Sutherland, Beverly Sills and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau have in common? Much of their art of singing can be traced to Manuel del Popolo Garcia, whose principles of singing were the roots of many outstanding teachers of the 19th and 20th centuries. (Coffin, 1989, 12-13)

The reason that singers no longer sound like those mentioned above stems from the fact that many of the agility and training exercises have been omitted in today's type of voice building: singers are simply not as well conditioned as they once were. Garcia II referred to a perfected sound and voice as the florid style (*canto fiorito*).

This generic name includes every style which abounds in ornaments and colours at the same time. The florid style permits the singer to display the fertility of his imagination, and to make the most of the sonority and flexibility of his voice. Here, as in the *spianato* [broad/grand] style, one uses the *messa di voce*, *tempo rubato*, *portamento*, *dynamics*, in short, all the musical accents which were spoken of in the chapter on the art of phrasing. But the principal effect of this style is based on the passages. One should before all fit [appropriately] them, by their harmony, their character and their performance, to the harmony and the character of the piece, as well as the meaning of the words. (Garcia II, 1975, pp. 192-193)

The above passage very much describes bel canto singing. It is no wonder that Garcia II's method developed so successfully within the genre. According to him, ornamentation, character and performance were all dictated by affect and the text; the connection to the words was not to be sacrificed. The sound created needed to be carefully constructed, producing an integrated musical aesthetic. Indeed, such a task requires not only a gifted performer with a fine voice, but also one with a sensitivity and intelligence capable of understanding and interpreting the work. The florid style was most complex, incorporating elements from the *canto di agilità* (the rapid style), *canto di maniera/ con grazia/ portamento* (the graceful style) and *canto di bravura/ con forza/ slancio/ sbalzo* (the rapid style, with increased power and emotion). This was not the approach of the castrati, counter tenor or falsettist. Garcia II's approach and bel canto ideals were perfectly matched, rendering them symbiotic.

Of the singers I currently know, Renée Fleming is one of the few who embodies such faculties. The programme notes included with her *I Want Magic* recording (a compilation of American opera arias), states that she sings in the Grande Tradition typical of the early to mid

20th century. Sadly, this is a manner all but lost to singers, opera houses and concert halls today. It is my hope that conservatories, schools and teachers will return to Manuel Garcia II's method of vocal instruction, thus ensuring future generations of first class singers.

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