

Exploiting the Artist: History Repeats Itself

Periodically *MPPA* publishes historical articles on performing arts subjects, usually but not necessarily with some medical connection of interest to our readers. The study of history provides an understanding of where we have come from, and gives a perspective with which to view the world of today. This principle applies as much to a historical look at the performing arts as it does to history in general. In this issue of *MPPA* is the second of a two-part article by Dr. Peter Vogelaar on the historical musical role of castrati. Although this review was selected on its merits as a scholarly review of a fascinating arts-related subject, like other historical studies it can also provide a new approach to more timely situations in the performing arts. Using this review of the castrati as a case in point, I would like to share some associations that came to me as I thought through some of the more disturbing implications of this historical material.

First and foremost among the contributions of these articles is the appreciation gained of these singers' unique role in the development of vocal music and early opera, in the context of their place in history. With Dr. Vogelaar's documentation we learn that this procedure was performed in spite of questioning about its morality, even by surgeons at the time, and with the initial blessing of the Catholic Church, although they eventually opposed it. The scientific and bioethical questions surrounding the castrati, with all of the musical, hormonal, and psychosocial consequences, are closest to the interests of performing arts medicine specialists. As I read the articles, these were the questions that I dwelled on and made me realize that, in spite of very significant qualitative

differences, there are some contemporary parallels regarding the commercial exploitation of artists.

The castrati came into being in response to a demand from the composers and musical promoters of the period, for a particular vocal quality. Initially those promoting the castrati included the Catholic Church, but after Rome's change of heart the procedure was continued because of the role of the castrati in early operas. In addition, many of these singers became local heroes, idolized by women who admired their appearance and the ambiance surrounding them more than they did their music, akin to modern "groupies." While the selection of boys to become castrati was nominally with their acquiescence, because of the necessity of making the choice at such a young age the decision clearly was more that of their families, motivated by greed, along with the urging of local clergy who needed to recruit them for performing sacred music. The only possible redeeming feature of the family's sacrifice of their sons was for the associated benefits of an education, along with room and board that went with the vocal training. However, it is unlikely that many of the young men subjected to this procedure, or their families, had the necessary information to make what could be regarded, in current terms, as an "informed" decision. All in all, this was not a happy chapter in the annals of musical recruitment and there can be little question that these young men were needed to fulfill roles that could not be filled in any other way, so the ends justified the means. (This has a familiar ring and is reminiscent of more contemporary recruitment tactics in the name of medical research.) The underlying goal of

the castrati was less to satisfy an aesthetic need and more to ensure the success of church musical services and later for the new musical form, opera. From the vantage point of centuries later, it is interesting to wonder to what extent the success of opera truly depended on the existence of these voices and where might opera have gone without them?

Happily what was asked of these boys does not approximate anything asked of performing artists today. While the issues raised by the castrati admittedly represent an extreme example, I believe there are contemporary parallels to be drawn in commercially motivated exploitation of performing artists. In ways that are more acceptable and in keeping with today's standards, many artists are encouraged and expected to, in a sense, "prostitute" themselves for the sake of commercial, non-artistically motivated advancement of their arts. While the effects of these activities may have less directly unhealthy consequences than the production of castrati, there is nevertheless potential for more subtle impact on the well-being of the involved artists.

Bigger is better is a standard in many areas of our lives, which is also evident in the arts, especially when left in the hands of those who are commercially rather than artistically driven. The marketing of "The Three Tenors" may be the ultimate example of this, although in their case the concern is more properly for the art than the artists. What concerns me more are the long-term implications for artists and their art hyped in a way that is flagrantly commercial, and bears no relationship to their artistry. The attempts to sell artists via manufacturing identities unrelated to their

artistic expertise, through sexy CD covers and advertising endorsements for totally unrelated products such as Rolex watches, seem to me to compromise artistic credibility and, ultimately, the artists' own self-identify.

During their training, performing artists are expected to strive for the highest level that they can attain of artistic perfection, and as they do so develop an image of themselves as the artists that they are or will become. Whatever the art form, be it classical or popular music, ballet or modern dance, they are made to believe that they have something unique to offer that is their own and they must be as good as they can be. This is not unique to being a performer: in medicine we have the same general goals, and some of the same expectations for maintaining a public and a personal persona and image. However, it is the degree of training and perfection customary in the performing arts that carries this concept to higher and perhaps more restrictive levels, and possibly more than in other professions. Some performing artists may feel trapped between traditional artistic values and the expectations of their audiences, and their own wishes and needs for an individual identity. Fortunately, there has been some stretching of the limits of definition and identity in all professions, thanks in part to the turbulent '60's! In spite of this, we the public and the artists themselves continue to expect a certain look, behavior, etc., that stereotypically goes with a given art form.

The concept of the relation between the artist's art and the artist as a person is a hugely complicated matter and I don't want to try to trivialize or oversimplify it. However, it seems clear that it should be the artistic product that is judged, patronized, or passed up and that the artistic persona should be a separate and unrelated entity. When our readers buy a CD, I

doubt that the purchase is influenced by the picture on the CD cover, pro or con. We elect to buy the recording of a certain artist, but it is the name of the performer and not the picture on the cover that turns us on.

Is there a relationship between image and artistry? Is there only one appropriate image that corresponds with being a successful musician? Do young musicians feel compelled to break out of the old mold because they feel personally unfulfilled, or is it that the projected need for marketing classical music has supplanted the need for personal artistic integrity? *The Wall Street Journal* posed these questions in an article by Gwendolyn Freed, "Music Hath Charms, All Showing."* This piece describes the efforts of a number of young female instrumentalists to shed their traditional classical images for more contemporary and sexually provocative ones, done in the name of publicity. I do not consider myself a prude, and I absolutely believe that people have the right to assume any image they wish. Hopefully most mature people try to project that image which is representative of what they feel is best about themselves. What I question is whether in the long run this type of public relations helps the cause of these young women or that of any other "serious" artists, assuming that the production and sale of well-performed fine music is the final objective. In the instances cited in the article, these were all attractive young women who happen to also be very competent and successful classical musicians. However, in one example, the young woman violinist's commercial success was said to have come only after a *Playboy* magazine spread, rather sadly described as "the audition of her life." While space does not per-

*Freed G. *Music hath charms, all showing.* *Wall Street Journal*, Tues, Aug 18, 1998, p A20.

mit reprinting this provocative article in its entirety, the final two sentences alone say it all. "To be sure, and to be blunt, these women will get crow's feet, their breasts will sag, and their butts will droop long before they run out of musical ideas. If the public stops looking, will it also stop listening?"

Perhaps, like the women who were so enamored of the castrati, the audiences of today, rather than the industry's promotion of their commercial images, are the ultimate culprits. Whatever the reasons that are responsible for making these young musicians feel compelled to sell themselves in the guise of selling music, I believe this marketing strategy represents another hidden danger to their health, both artistic and emotional. These young artists have been made to feel that by appealing to the buying public, with these sexy and nonartistic efforts, they will make the performing arts pay off big. Once again, the assumption is that the art form cannot adequately sell itself without the artists' appealing to some popularized conception of today's artist, whether voluptuous and seductive or simply affluent and listening to the most expensive sound systems while wearing the most costly gold watches. The image is not the person, nor is it the artist. It is both sad and fundamentally unhealthy for any person to feel it necessary to assume a persona in order to project and have success, when that person has so much more of value to offer. This has been a somewhat tortuous journey to make a point: exploitation of artists in any guise, whether desexed as in the case of the castrati, or hypersexed as in the case of these young women, is fundamentally dishonest, especially to the artists themselves, and will ultimately further contribute to their already more than abundantly stressed lives.

Alice G. Brandfonbrener, M.D.