

The Castrato and His Wife

Helen Berry

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Topping the charts in 1762 was the hit *Artaxerxes*, sung all-in-English by Giusto Tenucci. With a three-octave range, Tenucci was a virtuoso. He also was a castrato.

Apparently his loss was the Baroque era's gain. The most brilliant castrati were known for their ability to introduce trills supposedly like birdsong and for their powerful, clear soprano voices. Tenucci's fame went beyond singing, though. He scandalized the opera-going public by taking a wife.

Tenucci had come to England "with the promise of fame and fortune ahead of him." At the age of twenty-three, he possessed not only the finest singing voice, but also "the ability to attract the devotion of women, and the ire of powerful men." He was ill-equipped to handle his meteoric celebrity, however, or the school-girl crush of his talented pupil, Dorothea Maunsell, whose family had connections "on the side of the ruling elite." Needless to say, the Protestant gentry did not look kindly on her elopement with a Catholic eunuch.

Tenucci was born in Italy and turned over to one of the four great musical conservatories in Naples. For a poor boy, this was a remarkable opportunity. It was also a costly one. To preserve "his pure, unbroken voice," Tenucci "submitted to undergo the Operation with great Courage," though it took a lifetime to turn him into an opera-star castrato.

Calling this book not a biography but a "microhistory," the author provides a fascinating glimpse of what was "shrouded in secrecy due to the illegal nature of the procedure." Helen Berry is a historian and teaches at Newcastle University. As she points out, the story is really about how one man refused to let "biological destiny" keep him from experiencing love and marriage.

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