

HISTORICAL TIME LINE

of the Castrato Singer phenomenon

- WOMEN are banned from Church singing. The justification is the reviled state of the female body within the Christian THEOLOGY OF INCARNATION.
- CASTRATI singers, construed as concealing a chaste MALE BODY, are admitted into the Church as early as the 4th-c. AD in the East, and the 13th-c. in the West.
- With the rise of Opera in the 17th-c., Castrati gain fame portraying exalted male characters on the secular stage as well—for the “height” of their voices is congruent with prevailing aristocratic ideology.
- As women’s public performances are still restricted or outright banned, Castrati are frequently called to perform female roles on the operatic stage as well.
- Though portraying female religious characters had always been a mainstay of their duties within the sacred domain, their participation in operatic productions is strongly discouraged by Church authorities on two grounds: No ecclesiastic castrati should be sharing the stage with female singers, let alone taking on costumed female parts themselves.
- The public-at-large increasingly experiences Castrati as projecting an androgynous public persona, subjecting them to ridicule. This perception frequently stands in painful contradiction to the realities of their private lives.
- Yet, their popularity with the audience is still so great that even in England they are freely cast in female roles as a matter of economic reality at the box-office.
- From its inception, Castrati’s ideological/theological function, both in the East and West, crucially rested on the fact that they were considered essentially MALE. Once they ceased to be perceived as such, they were outright banned in Church (replaced by “sure-to-be-male” FALSETTISTS), while even their popularity with opera audiences came to a sudden end.

SUMMARY OF MODERN PERFORMANCE PRACTICE DILEMMAS

when tackling the Castrato Repertoire

- MODERN COUNTERTENORS are FALSETTISTS, and therefore lack the full-voiced warmth of the NATURAL castrato voice.
- The timbre of WOMEN is actually the closest sound to that of a castrato of old.
- Recreations of Baroque-era works have the option of adopting a VISUALLY realistic aesthetic by casting a MALE singer (COUNTERTENOR), or they can opt for a more realistic AUDITORY experience by casting a FEMALE singer.
- This latter was also the practice of composers/impresarios like Handel, who interchangeably cast FEMALE and CASTRATO singers in the same roles, for they must have considered them auditorily and artistically equivalent.