



TRANS 18 (2014)

DOSSIER: VOCAL PERFORMANCE: NEW PERSPECTIVES IN THE STUDY OF VOCAL MUSIC

Voices, bodies, identities: The Modern Imagery of Castratos in Contemporary Performance

Bianca De Mario (Università degli Studi di Milano)

<p>Resumen Alcune scelte discografiche e svariati allestimenti attuali di opere sei-settecentesche, attraverso la presenza di controtenori e donne in abiti maschili che sostituiscono le voci dei castrati, contribuiscono alla costruzione di un immaginario del cantante attuale che forza i confini di genere ed identità. L'articolo analizza tre allestimenti contemporanei di opere tra loro piuttosto diverse per tematiche, struttura drammaturgica e contesti di composizione (il Giasone di Cavalli/Clément, il Rinaldo di Händel/Alden ed il Prigionier superbe di Pergolesi/Brockhaus) nell'intento di delineare alcuni caratteri comuni nella creazione dell'immagine di questi 'moderni castrati'.</p>	<p>Abstract Several choices of recording industry and current productions of sixteenth- or seventeenth-century opera, contributes to the creation of a singer's image that, through countertenors or women in male roles, substituting castratos voices, forces the boundaries of gender and identity. This article deals with three directions: <i>Giasone</i> by Cavalli/Clément, <i>Rinaldo</i> by Händel/Alden; the <i>Proud Prisoner</i> by Pergolesi/Brockhaus. Although different for themes, dramatic structure, composition background and direction choices, these works depict some common features which contributes to the creation of a peculiar image of 'modern castratos'.</p>
<p>Palabras clave Controtenori, genere, performance.</p>	<p>Keywords Countertenor, gender, performance.</p>
<p>Fecha de recepción: octubre 2013 Fecha de aceptación: mayo 2013 Fecha de publicación: octubre 2014</p>	<p>Received: October 2013 Acceptance Date: May 2013 Release Date: October 2014</p>

Esta obra está sujeta a la licencia de Reconocimiento-NoComercial-SinObraDerivada 4.0 España de Creative Commons. Puede copiarla, distribuirla y comunicarla públicamente siempre que cite su autor y la revista que lo publica (TRANS-Revista Transcultural de Música), agregando la dirección URL y/o un enlace a este sitio: www.sibetrans.com/trans. No la utilice para fines comerciales y no haga con ella obra derivada. La licencia completa se puede consultar en http://creativecommons.org/choose/?lang=es_ES

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International license. You can copy, distribute, and transmit the work, provided that you mention the author and the source of the material, either by adding the URL address of the article and/or a link to the web page: www.sibetrans.com/trans. It is not allowed to use the work for commercial purposes and you may not alter, transform, or build upon this work. You can check the complete license agreement in the following link: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Voices, bodies, identities: The Modern Imagery of *Castratos* in Contemporary Performance

Bianca De Mario (Università degli Studi di Milano)

Una voce significa questo: c'è una persona viva, gola, torace, sentimenti, che spinge nell'aria questa voce diversa da tutte le altre voci. Una voce mette in gioco l'ugola, la saliva, l'infanzia, la patina della vita vissuta, le intenzioni della mente, il piacere di dare una propria forma alle onde sonore. Ciò che ti attira è il piacere che questa voce mette nell'esistere: nell'esistere come voce, ma questo piacere ti porta a immaginare il modo in cui la persona potrebbe essere diversa da ogni altra quanto è diversa la sua voce.

I. Calvino, *Un re in ascolto*¹

Oh quante sono incantatrici, oh quanti incantator tra noi, che non si sanno!
Che con lor arti uomini e donne amanti di sé, cangiando i visi lor, fatto hanno.

Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, VIII:1-4²

Questioni di (*sex*) *appeal*

During the defense of my doctoral thesis on the current problems of staging eighteenth-century *opera seria*, it was pointed out rather jokingly that, speaking about the more or less arbitrary use of the term 'original version' by certain record labels, I described this commercial operation as emptied of meaning although endowed with "sex appeal". The word *sex* — cause of a few laughs and some embarrassment on my part — was obviously rather out of place in that context. However, looking back later, I realized that somehow this error could have been a Freudian slip, at least vis à vis the visual sphere.

Let me explain. Among the first CDs and DVDs of seventeenth- and eighteenth- century *opera seria* that come to my mind there is Cavalli's *Giasone*, released for Dynamic with stage direction by Mariame Clément for the Vlamsee Opera of Antwerp (2010). On the CD cover, countertenor Christophe Dumaux, who interprets the title role, is lying on a vertical bed, naked and caressed by four female hands sprouting from the cracks of this modern alcove, as we shall see him later while singing "Delizie, contenti".

For this scene the director was most likely inspired by David Alden's staging for Handel's

¹ "A voice means this: there is a living person, throat, chest, feelings, who sends into the air this voice, different from all other voices. A voice involves the throat, saliva, infancy, the patina of experienced life, the mind's intentions, the pleasure of giving a personal form to sound waves. What attracts you is the pleasure this voice puts into existing: into existing as voice; but this pleasure leads you to imagine how this person might be different from every other person, as the voice is different" (Calvino 1986: 68-69; for the English translation see Weaver 1988: 54).

² "How many enchantresses among us! Oh, | How many enchanterers are there, though unknown! | Who for their love make man or woman glow, | Changing them into figures not their own" (English translation by Rose 1824: 45) .

Rinaldo, produced in Monaco in 2001 and directed for television by Brian Large. During the performance of the aria "Abbrugio, avvampo e fremo" in the second act of this production, the protagonist, David Daniels, is held to a wall with gaps in it, from which faces, arms and legs appear, as a symbol of the continuous transformations of the sorceress Armida, who wants to beguile Rinaldo into temptation. Suddenly two hands roughly nail him to the wall and almost seem to make an attempt on his virility. This is the cover image used in the new Arthaus edition: Daniels' terrified gaze, fearing "un infernal error", while the two demonic tentacles try to trap him.

These examples may be enough to justify my Freudian slip. But it goes further. With regard to the feminine universe, the focus is on a statuesque beauty, as illustrated in the artistic photographs proposed by Naïve label for the Vivaldi Edition opera CD box set . The faces and bodies of the women allude to masculin (as in the cover for *l'Ottone in Villa*), tenebrous (*Farnace*, *Orlando finto pazzo* o *Armida*) or noble impassive beauty (*Orlando furioso* and *l'Olimpiade*). These women are in turn ethereal, disturbing or voluptuous; their poses aim at rejuvenating the image of a music which remained buried for a long time, promoting sales in what was still a niche market. Such photos are actually used by the record label for the entire series dedicated to Vivaldi, including the instrumental music. It is true that for a concert or a series of sonatas, the descriptive value of a cover image may be negligible, but in the case of an opera such a product also involves the visual sphere (although in this case, speaking of a CD, we have in part to renounce the visual aspect): The photograph takes on a stronger dramaturgical value because, in most cases, we are used to seeing images from the opera scenes on covers.

My lapsus may originate in the constant allusions made by the visual imagination the sexual sphere, but I cannot be sure. Nevertheless, beyond the obvious commercial intent, it is undeniable that these products will help promote a particular image of eighteenth-century opera and the current "substitute" for *castratos*. Certainly, the huge interest gravitating around them is not new.³

A CD box set produced by Decca was dedicated to their art in 2011, with the symptomatic title of *Sacrificium*. On the cover, the face of the soprano Cecilia Bartoli is mounted on the body of a marble statue with mutilated genitals. This picture may offer the most condensed reading of the contemporary phenomenon of the castratos and the underlining relationship between body and voice: a disfigured and asexual ancient body whose voice today is renovated and inevitably sexually

³ The realm of gender studies and studies on the baroque theater offers a large amount of contributions on issues such as ambiguity, the taste for transvestism and fiction, the relationship with patrons, the court and the public (Rice 1982; Ranke-Heinemann; Rosselli 1988; Abel 1996; Gilman 1997; Mamy 1998; Ortkemper 2001 [1993]; Freitas 2003, 2009; Feldman 2005, 2007, 2009; Scarlini 2008; Gordon 2011). The fact that Italy was the cradle of this practice, kept alive and maintained for over two centuries, together with the fact that castratos had an artistic rather than religious significance (unlike in other cultures) leaves many questions open, especially that of a possible association of this phenomenon with the sacred sphere.

denoted (see discography).

So in this essay I will venture onto a very slippery terrain: the vast rediscovery movement of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century opera in recent years — in which the roles of castratos are necessarily assigned to women *en travesti* or to countertenors — contributes to the creation of a new imagery that, although modeled on the idea that we have of the past, becomes in performance a vehicle for further meanings related to the contemporary world. This represents a sort of attempt to replace, both in the physical and vocal sense, an absence which must be taken into account.

To understand how this imagery arises, I will take the example of some contemporary productions of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century opera. Through the approach of different directors faced with a peculiar dramaturgy or particular production requirements, we will see how some characters or situations, originally sung by castratos, have acquired different shades of significance that can in turn enrich or impoverish the staging, divert the spectator or bring him/her closer to understanding the opera.

The "fat" opera

Some precautions are appropriate before getting to the heart of this discussion. Although the castratos have long been considered as "middle ground" creatures (Freitas, 2003: 204), half way between the masculine and the feminine, it has been repeatedly demonstrated that castration was understood as the 'freezing' of the male individual in the state of a boy: a common practice in an age in which man was considered as the most perfect manifestation of body. It was an era in which sex differences were physiologically explained by the balance of humors and the theory of heat, when erotic attentions towards boys and the castration of children and adolescents for musical purposes fell within the normal patterns of thought.⁴

⁴ This issue is widely discussed in Freitas 2003, particularly in the paragraph *The Eroticism of the Boy* (206-214) and *The Castrato as Boy* (214-223). On sexuality, behavior patterns associated with it, and queer studies, see also Daolmi, Senici, 2000: "[...] la *queer theory* fonda la propria impalcatura concettuale sulla recezione americana di pensatori quali Foucault, Derrida e Lacan. Punto di partenza è la collocazione foucaultiana della nascita del concetto di 'identità sessuale' verso la fine dell'800, col contemporaneo riconoscimento dell'omosessuale come 'specie'; non a caso il termine 'omosessuale' si comincia a usare dal 1869. La decostruzione [...] e la psicanalisi d'ispirazione lacaniana, soprattutto femminista, hanno sollecitato un'attenzione particolare per il ruolo fondamentale che spetta al linguaggio nel creare tale identità. Ne discende, al di là dell'Atlantico, la formazione della teoria costruzionista, che concepisce la sessualità come adeguamento a modelli di comportamento e rappresentazione; donde la *queer theory*. Le definizioni di 'sessualità', inclusa quella dell'eterosessualità, non sono quindi giudicate immutabili, universali, date una volta per tutte, ma variano invece nel tempo e nello spazio, sono legate a contesti sociali e politici, ed hanno radici ideologiche. Le sessualità che non si conformano alla norma eterosessuale e che sono state marginalizzate ed oppresse offrono quindi un punto d'osservazione e di critica privilegiato per il riesame della sessualità tout court, e perciò dell'identità e del linguaggio, nella storia e nel presente". On the connection between *castratos* and queer studies, see the second meeting of the program *Italian Music and Literature: Recitar Cantando*, organized by Casa Italiana Zerilli Marimò (New York University), entitled *The Freak and the Superstar: the Castratos in the Italian Music Tradition* (10 April 2013). During her speech, Emily Wilbourne (Queens College and the Graduate Center, CUNY) announces the upcoming release of her *Queer History of Castratos*. The video of this conference is available online (see Sitography, Casa Italiana).

Castrating a boy before puberty, then, did not throw his sex, in the modern sense, into question. It merely froze him within the middle ground of the hierarchy of sex: he never experienced the final burst of vital heat that would have taken him to full masculinity. Sexually speaking [...] the castrato would have been viewed as equivalent to the boy. In fact, he was an arrested boy: although his body would increase in size, his surgery ensured that his vital heat, and thus his physical characteristics, would remain at the less markedly masculine level of youth. (Freitas 2003: 204)

Therefore, regarding bodily and sexual aspects as much as the vocal aspect, it would be absurd to assimilate the castrato voice to his current substitutes. On the one hand, it is undeniable that the allure of these figures derives, at least in part, from the contrast between body and voice, on the other hand — in the specific case of countertenors — travesty roles and games of ambiguity for sopranos or altos today try to recreate in the theater not only the curiosity and admiration of the audience for the amazing vocal skills of these singers, but in particular the attraction for something that becomes an object of desire through theater and opera.

In fact, once a spectator not accustomed to the genre has left behind the initial astonishment of this short-circuit between body and voice, and once the peculiarities of a drama in which the hero is the one with the highest voice are understood (not a tenor, but a soprano, an alto or a woman), the reasons for which a seventeenth- or eighteenth-century "spettacolo d'opera" (Chegai 2000) can be well received by a contemporary audience go far beyond the simple interest in something perceived as queer, in the original sense of the term — that is, something unusual, outside of the patterns of thinking or current habits (Daolmi, Senici 2000).

Indeed, the excesses and sometimes even the paradoxes existing in the world of opera are proof of how the 'anomalies' find their natural habitat in the musical theater. Above all the Fat Lady, who has found a place in American slang: "It ain't over till the Fat Lady sings" (Abel 1996: 11-21). First among the *prime donne* and a stereotypical excess of the Wagnerian Valkyrie, the Fat Lady has become a symbol of an opulent and overwhelming opera, an extreme manifestation of the feminine that is, at the same time, a bearer of masculinity, something that becomes an obstacle to the effective expression of its female potential.⁵ According to Abel, no phenomenon

⁵"This much-trafficked image of the Fat Lady conflates a wide array of contradictory and exaggerated gender-role stereotypes. She is, first an overblown evocation of the feminine, everything society tells us women should be, carried to a frightening extreme. Her huge breasts imply both an overwhelming sexual fecundity and a monstrous maternalism. She is the Freudian feminine out of control [...]. She has the siren's stratospheric vocal range but with excessive volume, the piercing soprano that can shatter glass [...]. These extreme signs of the feminine, however, become negated at the same moment they appear by conflicting signs of the masculine. The Fat Lady is as butch as she is femme. She is excessively maternal, but she has no children. Her breasts are encased in metal, steeled against any attempts at sexualizing them [...]. The Fat Lady's voice is her most potent weapon, and she wields it aggressively. She carries a spear but has no need for it. Her voice has enough power to beat down any potential rival with a single 'Hojo-toho'" (Abel 1996:13).

manifests this "dynamic of excess and embarrassment" better than the castratos.

The spoken theatre of the same period toyed frequently with androgyny: Shakespeare's boy actors and their complex cross-dressing games, or the fops of Restoration comedy. But only opera took the extreme step of literally creating androgynes to put on the stage, a step so embarrassing that the church banned the practice, yet simultaneously created the greatest demand for castrated singers in church choirs. (Abel 1996: 17).

In the opera, almost like a sacred place, the excess becomes the norm. Beyond the difficulties that current stagings entail today, there is no particular reason why — once listeners have been accustomed to seventeenth- or eighteenth-century opera—, the figure of a callow and boyish warlord could be less credible or less desirable than that of a warrior woman, or his voice less persuasive than that of an abandoned queen. The problem of a director is therefore not to historicize or update the action in order to make it more or less credible, but to create bonds, elements of continuity, that link the modern audience to a plot and characters alien to our imagination. The affects that move the entire opera offer a fertile ground of creative possibilities for the construction of individual characters.

Therefore, the singer not only receives the inheritance of the role he plays and that of the previous interpreters, but he also becomes the vehicle of physical contact between the text and the audience. Since, in visual matters, scene and costumes represent the idea of a past era, the singer, through mime, gesture, pose and expression, becomes the living mirror of a reality, the current one, which is dealing with the past. Countertenors and women in men's clothes, with their well-defined physical, sexual and artistic identity, are loaded with elements related to the history of fashion, costume and mentality and offer us a vision of the past filtered through the present, going to redefine our imagery concerning the phenomenon of castrato singers.

The two covers referred to above are exemplary in this respect.

Il Giasone: The defeat of men?

The Flemish production of this opera, both well received appreciated and much discussed, took to extremes the seduction and sensuality which in Cicognini's libretto and Cavalli's music are not only a constant but become real formal elements (Rosand 1991:267-275). Not surprisingly the *Giasone*,

staged for the first time at St. Cassian of Venice in 1649, became one of the most popular and influential *drammi per musica* of its century. The plot, which astutely alternates comic scenes with moments of great lyrical emotion, is about the love between Giasone and Medea and Giasone's infidelity towards his betrothed Isifile, the abandoned mother of two twins now in search of her beloved. Medea —who also will become a mother of twins—, will reveal her true identity to Giasone and, with her artifices, help him conquer the Golden Fleece. Once Medea discovers the Argonaut's past, she will attempt to take revenge on her rival and Giasone himself, but she finally brings him back into the arms of his first love.

The opera opens with a quarrel between the divinities Sun and Love. They have conflicting plans for Giasone's fate, since he is enjoying the favours of two different women. The first scene of the opera is exemplary: Hercules, the Argonaut, and Besso, captain of Giasone's guard, discuss Giasone's propensity to love. It is worth quoting the dialogue which makes the leitmotiv of the whole drama clear, as well as the influence of time on falling in love.

Scena prima*Giardino con palazzetto*

Ercole, Besso

ERCOLE

Dall'oriente porge
l'alba a i mortali il suo dorato lume,
e tra lascive piume
avvilto Giasone ancor non sorge?
Come potrà costui,
disanimato dai notturni amplessi,
animarsi a gl'assalti, alle battaglie?
Donne, co' i vostri vezzi
che non potete voi?
Fabbricate ne i crini
labyrinthi a gl'eroi;
solo una lacrimetta,
che da magiche stelle esca di fuore,
fassi un Egeo cruccioso,
che sommerge l'ardir, l'alma e 'l valore,
e 'l vento d'un sospiro,
esalato da labbri ingannatori,

First scene*Garden with a small palace*

Hercules & Besso

HERCULES

Dawn from the east
Brings its golden light to mortals;
And from his wanton pillows
Debauched Jason has not yet risen?
How will he then,
Fatigued by his nocturnal embraces,
Sally forth to the assault or the battle?
Women, with your charms,
What can you not do?
Out of your tresses you make
Labyrinths for heroes,
A mere little tear
Issuing from enchanting stars,
Creates a raging Aegean
That drowns all fire, mettle and valour,
And the breeze of a sigh
Breathed from beguiling lips,

da i campi della gloria
spiantò le palme e disseccò gl'allori.

BESSO

Sotto vario ascendente
nasce l'uomo mortale,
e perciò tra gl'umani
evvi il pazzo, il prudente,
il prodigo, l'avarò e 'l liberale:
ad altri il vin diletta,
un altro il gioco alletta,
altri brama la guerra, altri la pace,
altri è di Marte, altri d'Amor seguace.
Se ascendente amoroso
dominò di Giason l'alto natale,
qual colpa a lui s'ascrive
se in grembo a donna bella
a gran forza lo spinge
l'amoroso tenor della sua stella?
L'uom che viene alla luce
dalla superna sfera
seco ne porta un'alma forestiera:
questa, pellegrinando
per l'incognite vie del basso mondo,
nell'incerto oscurissimo cammino
non si può consigliar che col destino.

ERCOLE

Il saggio puote dominar le stelle.

BESSO

Sì, se la stella del saper gl'assiste

ERCOLE

L'uso della ragion comune è a tutti.

Upon the field of honour
Uproots the palm and withers the laurel

BESSO

Under different stars
Mortal man is born.
That is why among humans
There are the mad and the wise,
The wastrel, the miser and the bounteous.
Wine delights the one,
Gaming distracts another,
One yearns after war, another after peace,
One follows Mars, another Venus.
If an amorous star
Ruled over Jason's exalted birth,
What faults can be ascribed to him
If into a fair lady's bosom
With irresistible force he is thrust
By the amorous tendency of his star?
The man who comes into existence
From the superior sphere
Brings a foreign soul with him:
This, wandering
Across the underworld's unknown roads,
In the uncertain dark path,
Can only seek advice with destiny.

HERCULES

The wise man can dominate the stars.

BESSO

Yes, if the star of wisdom helps him.

HERCULES

Discourse of reason is common to all.

BESSO

Ciascun d'oprar con la ragion presume.

BESSO

Everyone presumes that he acts with reason.

ERCOLE

Chi segue il senso alla ragion diè bando.

HERCULES

He who follows emotion banishes reason.

BESSO

Il senso è la ragion di chi lo segue.

BESSO

Emotion is reason to him who follows it.

ERCOLE

Fu sempre il senso alla ragion nemico.

HERCULES

Emotion was already the enemy of reason.

BESSO

Ma però vince chi di lor prevale.

BESSO

Yet he triumphs who is master of both.

ERCOLE

Arbitro in questa pugna è 'l voler nostro.

HERCULES

The arbiter in this battle is our will.

BESSO

Giason è bello, ha senza pel la guancia,
è bizzarro e robusto,
di donar non si stanca;
onde per possederlo
ogni dama le porte apre e spalanca.
Bellezza, gioventù, oro, occasione?
Come può contro tanti
fortissimi guerrieri
contrastar il voler, o la ragione?

BESSO

Jason is handsome and his cheeks are smooth.
He is amusing and strong,
Never tires of giving;
Therefore to possess him,
Every lady opens wide her doors!
Beauty, youth, gold, opportunity,
How can the will or reason
Hold out against
So many all-powerful warriors?

No, no, no,
non a fé,
resister non si può,
credilo a me.

No, no
No, in faith,
They cannot be resisted,
Believe you me!

ERCOLE
Sei troppo effeminato.

HERCULES
You are too effeminate!

BESSO
Di femmina son nato.

BESSO
Of woman was I born

ERCOLE
Tu per femmina sei.

HERCULES
You are like a woman

BESSO
Rispondete per me, o membri miei (*si parte*)

BESSO
Answer for me, o my members! (*exit*)

ERCOLE
Oh, come ben seconda
l'adulator del suo signor gl'errori!
Ma su la porta dell'albergo indegno
pur riveder si lascia

HERCULES
O how well
A flatterer seconds his master's weaknesses!
But at the door of this ill-famed inn
The nocturnal warrior

il notturno guerriero,
carco di gioia e di cervel leggero.

Shows himself,
Overcome with bliss and dazed in the brain!

Scena seconda

Giasono, Ercole

GIASONE

Delizie, contenti
che l'alma beate,
fermate, fermate:
su questo mio core
deh più non stillate
le gioie d'amore.
Delizie mie care,
fermatevi qui:
non so più bramare,
mi basta così.
In grembo a gl'amori
fra dolci catene
morir mi conviene;
dolcezza omicida
a morte mi guida

Second Scene

Jason & Hercules

JASON

Delights, raptures
That ravish my mind,
Stop, stop;
On this my heart
Let not one drop more fall
Of love's joys.
Beloved raptures,
Stop here!
I can desire no more.
I have enough.
In love's bosom,
In sweet chains,
I should like to die.
Fatal sweetness,
Lead me to my death

in braccio al mio bene.	In the arms of my beloved!
Dolcezza mie care,	Beloved raptures,
fermatevi qui:	Stop here!
non so più bramare,	I can desire no more.
mi basta così.	I have enough. ⁶

In the eyes of Hercules, who epitomizes strength and masculinity, Giasone seems discouraged ("avvilito") and enfeebled ("disanimato") because of women for whom a man can even "uproot the palms". The discussion touches on some philosophical issues: for Besso, Giasone must be understood and excused because it is the astral influence that has subdued him into loving with the complicity of fate, and nothing can be done against the stars; for Hercules, instead, wisdom and common sense should dominate the instincts. The high tone of conversation soon ceases and ends with what seems a tavern dialogue, transformed into explicit gestures in Clement's staging.

HERCULES	You are too effeminate!
BESSO	Of woman was I born
HERCULES	You are like a woman
BESSO	Answer for me, o my members! <i>(exit)</i>

Besso's description of Giasone is symptomatic of his female inclinations: handsome, beardless, bizarre and robust.⁷ The aria with which this "nocturnal warrior | [...] overcome with bliss and dazed in the brain" introduces himself calls to mind the act of making love, expressed through the usual metaphor of capture and death.

We do not know if the contralto who played the role of Giasone was a castrato or a woman, although the description of the character and his feminine features seems to require a castrato's *physique du rôle*. It is not surprising that for this role a countertenor was chosen, in this case, Christophe Dumaux, a singer with delicate, sometimes childish features, despite the deliberately neglected aspect of the beard he has in this production. In him we find an almost androgynous figure, able to attract the female audience, but also that of men.⁸ Mariame Clément's direction

⁶ The English translation is by Derek Yeld and is taken from the Harmonia Mundi booklet (see discography). The lines cut for the recording are translated by me.

⁷ According to the vocabulary of the Accademia della Crusca, "bizarre" means "irascibile, cantankerous", from Latin *ferus, iracundus*. It presents occurrences in Boccaccio and Dante (Accademia della Crusca online).

⁸ For a description of the scene and about the androgynous figure of Christophe Dumaux, see *Parterre Box*, a blog by "La Cieca" (The Blind Woman/Seer) that is also a reference point for issues relating to opera and video (Senici 2009: 273-274): "Both musically and dramatically, the best

mixes elements from different eras, a sort of hangar overlooking the sea with trap doors and hidden passages. One of these niches is transformed into the bed in which Dumaux lies and from which he will emerge completely naked, covered only with flesh-colored underwear that makes him seem almost asexual. Then he will don a bullfighter's suit, clothing more suitable for amorous conquest than the fight with the monster —here a dark and fiery-eyed buffalo— which instead he confronts in boxing shorts, gloves and robe. In the second half of the opera, after his entrance on the stage on a boat with Medea (Katarina Bradić), Hercules (Andrew Ashwin), the servant Demo (Filippo Adami), and the wet nurse Delfa (Yaniv d'Or), he is a sailor. The couple posing, Titanic style, on the bow of the boat is an ironical quotation, which becomes comical because of the presence of the three absurd characters Hercules, with the physique of an American football player and an Aries head, the stuttering servant with rabbit's ears who emerges from a porthole, and the nightmarish wet nurse always thirsty for love, with seventeenth-century headgear and masculine calves. Dumaux the sailor, with white cap, pants and mini shirt in his lean and cut physique, recalls one of those thirties American dancers who contributed to the creation and exportation of homosexual identity (Campbell 2012 : 451-52).

We are presented therefore with an overlap of meanings which, on the one hand, may be in line with the Baroque taste for ambiguity – a taste that, at least in terms of sexuality, reflects much in our own time. On the other hand, this risks giving a faulty image both of the past and the present. Giasone, originally depicted as a young libertine with a weakness for the demands and pleasures of women —and for this he is "effeminate"⁹— is now played by a countertenor who, more or less explicitly, alludes to homosexuality.

One last detail goes to reshuffle the cards on the issue of gender and sexual identity. Among the reviews of this production one headline is particularly significant: "L'opéra ou la défaite

moments of this performance are in the more languorous, sensual scenes. After a brief prologue where Apollo and Cupid debate which Queen Giasone will marry, we come to a notable example. A door opens to a sunken bed, where a virtually nude Giasone (countertenor Christophe Dumaux) is being caressed all over his body by two pairs of hands, representing his two lovers. He sings the very sensual aria "Delizie, contenti" with an almost orgasmic longing [...]. The singing is a mixed bag. The androgynous, whisper-slim Dumaux in the title role has an absolutely beautiful countertenor, even of tone and capable of both sensuality and bravado" (La Cieca online).

⁹ "Lacking this heat, both castratos and young boys were described as *effeminate*, an important concept in this discussion. Although the denotation of the term seems to have changed little since the 17th century, its connotations are significantly different today: Whereas nowadays describing a man as "effeminate" might imply homosexual leanings, a womanish demeanour in the 17th century was considered rather a sign of too great a taste for woman. The 1612 dictionary of the Accademia della Crusca defines *femminacciolo*, for example, as "[a man who is] pretty in a feminine way, and who is happy to remain among [women], *effeminato*". Indeed, scholars such as Ann Jones and Peter Stallybrass have concluded – surprisingly to the modern sensibility – that in this period "it is 'heterosexuality' itself which is effeminating for men"". Freitas 2003: 204-205. For this concept and the question of "softness" of mind, see also the literary archetypes. In these terms, for example in Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, Ariosto describes Ruggiero's clothes as confectioned by Alcina: "Il suo vestir delizioso e molle | tutto era d'ozio e di lascivia pieno, | che de sua man gli avea di seta e d'oro | tessuto Alcina con sottil lavoro" (canto VII, st. 53, vv. 5-8). And also: "[...] tutto ne' gesti era amoroso, come | fosse in Valenza a servir donne avvezzo: | non era in lui di sano altro che 'l nome; | corrotto tutto il resto, e più che mezzo". Then we find it in Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*, when Rinaldo's image is reflected in the shield: "Egli al lucido scudo il guardo gira, | onde si specchia in lui qual siasi e quanto | con delicato culto adorno; spira | tutto odori e lascivie il crine e 'l manto, | e 'l ferro, il ferro aver, non ch'altro, mira | dal troppo lusso effeminato a canto; | guernito è sí ch'inutile ornamento sembra, non militar fero strumento" (canto XVI, st. 30; vv. 1-8). This issue was taken up in the realm of painting, e.g. in Tiepolo's series featuring Rinaldo and Armida, and in the realm of opera, from Quinault-Lully to Rossini and so on.

des hommes" (Schreuders 2010). Although the author himself posits from the very first lines that this reading would have been unthinkable at the time –and, in fact, the happy ending stipulated the return to a patriarchal society, with Giasone's repentance, Medea's sacrifice and Isifile's forgiveness— it is undeniable that Clément's staging is a "triomphe de la poitrine". Not only from the physical point of view, with the images of Isifile's generous breast or Delfa's funny and dropping one, but especially in a metaphorical sense: masculinity appears ridiculed (see Hercules, Besso, Orestes and Aegean), or it passes completely unnoticed, while femininity triumphs in every way. The figure of the main character remains uncertain: the propensity to love made him weak (*molle*), unfit for male issues, as had already happened to Ruggiero in Alcina's kingdom, to Rinaldo in Armida's garden or to Achilles, hidden in Skyros and in love with Deidamia. The current singer however alludes to a contemporary homosexual male and, whether it is a real predisposition or a constructed image that has the favor of part of the audience (Abel 1996; Daolmi-Senici 2000), this is something that keeps the feminine world, which seemed to have triumphed at a distance.

This consideration applies also to Rinaldo, who has been mentioned at the beginning.

***Rinaldo* and the flight from women**

Rinaldo was Handel's first opera for London, and the first Italian opera presented to the British public (1711). In this case too the danger posed by the feminine universe remains a constant issue. Once again the primary risk is infidelity, embodied once again in the character of a sorceress: Armida. Unlike Medea, who used her powers to allow Giasone to carry out his mission, Armida will use magic to tempt the hero, bind him to her, and therefore slow or halt the fulfillment of his chivalrous mission.¹⁰

David Alden's production for Munich Prinzregententheater in 2001 is a postmodern rewriting (Giorgi, 2011: 69-73) which replaces the original context of the Crusades with contemporary Protestant Christian Evangelist preaching against modern paganism (*idem*: 121). *Rinaldo* thus becomes one of the missionaries, dressed as an Italian-American gangster. Pushing the modernization to the extreme and superimposing the original dramaturgy with scenic actions closer to the contemporary audience —but with dynamics and conventions that are rather distant from the original—, there are inconsistencies and sometimes real short-circuits between text and

¹⁰ On the figure of Armida, as outlined by Tasso, see *cantos* IV, V, X, XV, XVI, XVII, XVIII and XX of *Gerusalemme liberata*. For an evolution of Armida as a musical character, see Carter 2001. On the concept of magic in the Renaissance and modern era, see Bruno (1986 [1590]), Walker 1958, Meroi 2007.

scene. To cite one for all, the clash between Rinaldo and Armida and the arrival of Godfrey and Eustace in III.4 (Loney 2003). Nevertheless, the contribution of Alden's *Regietheater* to the contemporary aesthetics of opera is undeniable and his interpretations —with constant reference to television and cinema— have a decisive effect on the creation of a new operatic imagination. One short sequence in particular deserves to be highlighted. In the central part of the opera Almirena (Deborah York) is a prisoner in Armida's castle (Noëmi Nadelmann).¹¹ The sorceress is pleased to have Rinaldo in the palm of her hand (David Daniels) and has him brought to her.

Scena V*Armida sola*

ARMIDA

Cingetemi d'alloro

Le trionfali chiome!

Rinaldo, il più possente,

Terror dell'arme Assire,

In umile olocausto

Sull'altar del mio sdegno

Cadrà svenato al suolo.

Conducetelo quivi, o spirti, a volo.

Fifth scene*Armida alone*

ARMIDA

Let groves of laurel shoot around my head

To crown this last great triumph of my skill:

Rinaldo, proud Rinaldo!

The mightiest terror of our Asian arms,

Now brought an humble captive to my feet,

Shall on the altars of my fierce revenge

Fall a lamented victim to my pow'r!

Guide him, obsequious spirits, to my presence.

Sixth scene*Due spirti conducono Rinaldo alla presenza d'Armida*

RINALDO

Perfida, un cor illustre

Ha ben forza bastante

Per isprezzar l'inferno:

O rendimi Almirena,

O pagherai con questo acciar la pena.

ARMIDA

D'Armida a fronte si superbi accenti?

RINALDO

A fronte ancor de' più crude tormenti.

Sixth scene*Enters two Spirits leading in Rinaldo*

RINALDO

Smil'st thou, perfidious hag? Art thou a devil

And has not Hell inform's thee, that a soul,

Daring as mine, can scorn thy fiends and thee!

Know I defy thy pow'r; for proff whereof,

Give me my Almirena or thou diest.

ARMIDA

Before Armida's face this insolence?

RINALDO

Find me a devil yet blacker then thyself!

¹¹ In order to understand the scenery and stage elements of later scenes, it will be worth a brief description of the meeting between Almirena and Argante (II.4). Alden has "flattened" Almirena, immobilizing her on a big canvas. Her Aria "Lascia ch'io pianga" moves king Argante (Egils Silins) to compassion. Now in love with her, he wants to help her and frees her from the picture. The girl, in the first act characterized as extremely puritanical and prudish, rejects the king's attentions. Not being able to escape, trapped between the treacherous Argante and a huge puppet with his trousers down, Almirena gets back into the canvas from which she had been freed, producing a comic effect. The prison becomes her salvation from the corruption in the world outside.

ARMIDA	ARMIDA
Mio prigionier tu sei.	Dost thou not know thou art my prisoner here?
RINALDO	RINALDO
Sin nell'alma non giunge il mio servaggio.	Fool! Dost thou think thy chains can reach my soul?
ARMIDA	ARMIDA
È in mia balia la vita.	Thy life is in my pow'r!
RINALDO	RINALDO
La morte non paventa un'alma invitta.	I tell thee, hag; That courage cannot die
ARMIDA	ARMIDA
(Splende su quel bel volto Un non so che, ch'il cor mi rasserena.)	(Methinks that shines, I know not what gay something in his look, That draws me up to wonder!)
RINALDO	RINALDO
Omai rendi Almirena!	Hear me, fiend, Restore me to the arms of Almirena
ARMIDA	ARMIDA
(Con incognito affetto Mi serpe al cor un'amorosa pena)	(I feel a pain so different from all pains I e'er yet felt, that I half fear 'tis love!)
RINALDO	RINALDO
Rendimi, sì, crudel, rendi Almirena!	Lead me, where Almirena waits my succour!
ARMIDA	ARMIDA
(Ma d'un nemico atroce Sarà trofeo il mio core?)	(But shall my heart, which never bow'd before, Become the slave and triumph of a foe?)
RINALDO	RINALDO
Ha forza il mio furore, Per atterrar il tuo infernal drapello.	My rage has slept till now, but thou hast wak'd it, To crush thy self, and thy infernal train!
ARMIDA	ARMIDA
(Son vinta, sì; non lo credea sì bello.)	('Tis so, my self must prove the victim now, Who wou'd have thought that so much beauty dwelt With so much roughness?)
Rinaldo, in queste piagge Ogn'aura spira amore;	Rinaldo, in the rosy bow's around thee, The wings of ev'ry wind are charg'd with love;

L'onda, l'augello, il fiore	The purling streams which trickle through the grass,
T'invitan solo ad amorosi amplessi;	The warbling birds, and odoriferous flow'rs,
Depon quell'ira infida,	Invite to softness, and wou'd fain instruct thee,
Vinto non più, ma vincitor d'Armida!	That only amorous battles here are fought.
T'amo, oh caro.	Unbend that stormy brow, and smile upon me,
RINALDO	No more my captive now, but conqueror;
	RINALDO
lo t'aborro!	How I detest thy wiles!
ARMIDA	ARMIDA
Prendi questo mio cor!	Receive a proffer'd heart
RINALDO	RINALDO
Per lacerarlo.	To give it torments
ARMIDA	ARMIDA
Mille gioie t'appresto.	May pleasures crown thy hope
RINALDO	RINALDO
Io mille pene.	May pain dash thine
ARMIDA	ARMIDA
T'ammoliscano i prieghi!	Will not entreaties melt thee?
RINALDO	RINALDO
Io gli detesto	I disdain'em
ARMIDA	ARMIDA
Abbian forza i sospir.	Have sighs, like mine, no force?
RINALDO	RINALDO
D'accender l'ira.	To blow up anger
ARMIDA	ARMIDA
M'obbedisce l'inferno.	Hell listens to my call.
RINALDO	RINALDO
Io ti disprezzo.	But I am deaf.
ARMIDA	ARMIDA
Pensa ch'io son...	Think what I am
RINALDO	RINALDO
Tiranna	A tyrant and a devil.
ARMIDA	ARMIDA
Risolvi!	Risolve on
RINALDO	RINALDO
La vendetta.	Vengeance!
ARMIDA	ARMIDA
Per pietade!	Cannot pity move thee?

RINALDO

A te corro, o mia diletta!
(*Vuol andarsene.*)

ARMIDA

Férmati!

RINALDO

No, crudel!

ARMIDA

Armida son, fedel...

RINALDO

Spietata, infida!

Lasciami!

ARMIDA

Pria morir!

RINALDO

Non posso più soffrir.

ARMIDA

Vuoi ch'io m'uccida?

Férmati, ecc.

Scena settima

Armida si cangia in Almirena

ARMIDA

Crudel, tu ch'involasti
Al mio core la calma,
Un sol guardo mi nieghi a tante pene?

RINALDO

Che veggio! Idolo mio! Sei tu, mio bene?
Deh! Vieni a consolar l'alma smarrita!

ARMIDA

Quivi con molle vita
Vai fometando una novella brama,
E lasci sì chi t'ama?

RINALDO

No, cara, ché tu sei
La sospirata meta, e in questo loco

RINALDO

Why lose I time? Dear soul, I fly to seek thee.
He is going off

ARMIDA

Oh stay!

RINALDO

I will not

ARMIDA

Ungrateful, kill not;

RINALDO

Inhumane sorceress fly

Leave me;

ARMIDA

'tis death

RINALDO

Quit then thy breath

ARMIDA

Why must I die?

Scena settima

*Armida changes her self into the likeness of Almirena
and follows Rinaldo, weeping*

ARMIDA

Ungrateful, cruel Man! Whom I have lov'd,
'till not a corner of my heart is mine!
Yet now, regardless of my tears or pains,
You will not grant one look to guild my sorrow!

RINALDO

Ha! Are my eyes deveiv'd? what do I see?
My heav'n! my soul's best half! Let me embrace thee!

ARMIDA

While I, unhappy mourn thy cruel absence,
Thou of a nature changing, and unkind
With some new mistress laugh'st away the hours,
Forgetful of a gentle maid, that loves thee;

RINALDO

Alas! My heart is bound so firmly to thee,
That ev'n inconstancy wants strength to lose it;

Sol d'Armida crudel viddi 'l sembante.	But I, by strange delusive magic, led, Mistook thee, lovely creature, for Armida.
ARMIDA	ARMIDA
Stringimi dunque al sen.	Thus let my arms enfold my soul's desire!
RINALDO	RINALDO
Beato amante!	What lover wou'd be happier than Rinaldo?
<i>Nell'abbracciarsi, Armida riprende la sua forma, e Rinaldo fugge.</i>	<i>While they embrace, Armida riassume her proper shape, and Rinaldo amaz'd, starts back in sudden confusion.</i>
Sfinge, un penoso orrore	Gigantic horrors wrap'd in hells dark mists
Arrecchi nel mio core!	Shadow my frighted soul! Oh! Tricks of fate!
Giove, lancia il tuo telo!	Why sleeps the thunder in an idle sky?
Non avrà per costei fulmini il cielo?	When heav'n can never hurl his hottest bolts
<i>Armida si cangia un'altra volta in Almirena.</i>	At guilt more black than this! <i>Armida again takes shape of Almirena</i>
ARMIDA	ARMIDA
Corri fra queste braccia!	Why start you thus? And wherefore roll those eyes in clouds of terrour?
RINALDO	RINALDO
Anima mia!	And is it really thee?
<i>Va per abbracciarla, poi si ferma.</i>	<i>Is running to her arms but stops suddenly</i>
Ma chi tenti, Rinaldo!	But hold fond heart!
Forse sotto quel viso	What wou'd my madness do? Beneath those charms
V'è l'inferno co' un vel del paradiso.	There lies a magic hell, shaded from sight, By the most tempting front of paradise;
Abbruggio, avampo e fremo	I burn, I freeze, I fry
Di sdegno e di furor.	Midst fury and disdain,
Spero, ma sempre temo	Now live, now doubt, now die,
D'un infernal error.	Deceiv'd in all I try,
Abbruggio, ecc.	And torn with endless pain! I burn, etc. ¹²

Alden imagines Armida's palace as a framed room with colorful and sloping walls, which contribute to the idea of a space deformation due to magic. The furniture is essential: an armchair, a framework from which Argante appears in later scenes, a stylized figure of Almirena projected on the wall, (see footnote 9) and a lamp in the center of the room.

¹² For the libretto, both in English and Italian, see Rossi-Hill 1711: pp. 30-37. The English version by Hill is very interesting and would be worth a deeper analysis, since it can be considered more an adaptation than a real translation, both for meanings and metrics.

Rinaldo arrives in a blue boat and begins to threaten the sorceress. In the first recitative he sets foot in this frame-room singing "La morte non paventa un'alma invitta", and then falls awkwardly, because of the "trick" of the sloping floor. From this moment Armida begins to take an interest in this quixotic knight and the whole scene takes on a comic tone: the more Rinaldo is comical in his naive desire to save his beloved and revenge the tempting sorceress, the more Armida will be attracted by her "nemico atroce".

Among the various humorous devices adopted by Alden, two in particular arouse laughter and applause from the audience. Immediately after getting back on his feet and always trying to stay balanced in this haunted room, Rinaldo shows another display of courage ("Ha forza il mio furore | per atterrare il tuo infernal drappello") but he will slip again and end up astride the lamp's stem in the center of the room. A new attack on his force and virility.

This concept will be exaggerated during the subsequent scenes and culminates with Rinaldo's Aria in II.7. Misled by Armida, who has taken the form of his beloved, Rinaldo is held to the wall where Almirena's image is shaped and, in a game of continuous transformations, the sorceress will be able to undress him. Female legs and arms —Armida in all her forms— will spring from the (punctured) shadows of this frame and try to seduce the crusader, going as far as undressing him. At that point the two African American hands later immortalized in the cover photo appear: the director Brian Large brings this particular image up even closer, while these claws are challenging Rinaldo's fidelity.¹³ Scared, he detaches himself from the wall, takes his suspenders and hat and runs away, disappearing behind this infernal frame.¹⁴

It is undeniable that this kind of scene is intended to entertain the audience, both here and in other moments that make explicit reference to the sexual sphere.¹⁵ Certainly, when a snapshot is used as the main art of a production, the meaning conveyed from the image becomes extremely strong, especially in a culture like ours, where the visual sphere plays a major role. Once again, this marketing strategy is targeting mainly a male homosexual audience and David Daniels, a gay icon, becomes in this way a symbol of rejection and estrangement from a female universe that threatens not only fidelity but virility.

It is true that an advertising campaign aimed at sales cannot represent all contemporary

¹³ On the effects of video and camera gaze, see also Will 2011. He refers to Wieler and Morabito's version of *Don Giovanni* for Nederlands Opera, and for television by Vermeiren, but his comment on the cameras' zooming can be of use for this case: "Gazing at men may be less familiar than gazing at women, but it is not necessarily any less objectifying, and singers may become objects of fetishization in their own right, a phenomenon recognized in connection with voice but no less possible with regard to looks". Will 2011: 53.

¹⁴ For a comment on David Daniels' performance see also Morman, 2010: 61.

¹⁵ For example, in III.4 the liberation of Almirena and the attack on Armida by the Crusaders becomes a grotesque and inexplicable group sex, within the same frame, now claustrophobically smaller.

opera, but one cannot avoid the fact that it draws its inspiration from the common imagination and tastes, reshaping and guiding them in turn to certain models. Even in this case —but you could also take the character of Eustace (played by Axel Köhler) or the Christian Magician (played by Charles Maxwell)— the castrato substitute is assimilated, more or less consciously, to homosexuality but also to an ideal that, even while showing some elements of femininity, avoids the dangers represented by the opposite sex. And the flip side is that the *travesti* woman, as already tended to occur in seventeenth-century theater (Heller, 2003), becomes more manly and masculine than the man, the countertenor.

The *Prigionier superbo*: between genders

There is another production of *Rinaldo* that gives us confirmation of this paradox. Sonia Prina wearing her shining crusader armor is the cover image of the new Opus Arte DVD recorded in 2011 at Glyndebourne opera house, directed by Robert Carsen. It is no coincidence that the singer comes from Italy, where the school of countertenors has hardly been established, at least in the operatic circuit, and bore its first fruits only in recent years (Morman, 2010: 93-100). Thus there are many women in male clothes singing in place of the castratos and currently there is no unequivocal criterion to guide the choice between countertenors and sopranos or altos. There is no shortage of productions proposing a change in their successive representations. For example, McVicar's *Giulio Cesare*, which starred Sarah Connolly at Glyndebourne, subsequently adopted David Daniels for the Met opera house; and he in turn was replaced by Ann Murray in *Rinaldo*.

The history of opera is full of women *en travesti* and before examining the contemporary imagery, it will be useful to identify that of the seventeenth century.

Like the anatomical demonstration that so often took place during carnival, the theater provided a space in which the unstable body could be defined and examined, in which the shifting grounds between biological sex and gender could be repeatedly reinvented by a focus on androgyny (in which women assume masculine characteristics), by transvestism, and even transvestite theatre. As long as virtue retained its association with gender, many exceptional women – whose deeds were inappropriate to their sex – would appear to be endowed with masculine characteristics. But by borrowing such traits, these powerful operatic women not only accomplished feats traditionally associated with men; their absorption of the masculine almost invariably resulted in the loss of stature – and masculinity – for the men with whom they were juxtaposed. (Heller 2003: 17).

This is a reference to female characters who take over the functions, powers and duties generally pertaining to the contemporary male world, such as Amazons or Semiramides. This action helps to create a gender dimension, affecting not only the appearance but also the personality, the identity. If this is true and if in the opera the female character can become masculine and make the male character become feminine —sometimes almost "castrating" him—, the same will be true, at the performative not the dramaturgic level, for a woman who wears men's clothes and does a man's deeds.

The cross-dressing that works at the level of staging is perfectly suited to the aesthetic of this kind of opera; however, it seems to arouse less enthusiasm among the public with respect to the phenomenon of countertenors. This may have its roots in different motivations. First of all the vocal issue: besides the fact that an all-female cast risks creating a homogenization of timbre, resulting in dramaturgical misunderstandings and a flattening aesthetic, we also lose, in this way, the gap body-voice that was linked to the *castrato's* very identity, and this is somehow repeated in the countertenor's technique. Secondly there is a motivation related to fruition. While the countertenor, as we have seen, becomes the object of desire of a predominantly homosexual male audience, in this case the references to female homosexuality seem to be absent or, at least, veiled. In the case of singers such as Marijana Mijanović in the role of Orlando (Herzog-Christie, Zurich 2008), Vesselina Kasarova in that of Ruggiero (Noble-Minkowski, Vienna 2011), or Jennifer Rivera interpreting Licida (Schulin-De Marchi, Innsbruck, 2010; then Annunziata De-Marchi, Jesi 2011,) the disguise is obvious, however androgynous, masculine or masculinized they are: it is clear that they are women and it is the exhibited fiction to attract the interest and desires of the viewer. Masculinization does not necessarily mean de-feminization and even when the protagonists interact with other women, they capture the attention mainly —but not only— of a male audience.

One director who is fully aware of the erotic desire provoked by a woman starring in a man's role, adopting the gestures and movements of the male but in feminine clothes, is Henning Brockhaus. In his *Prigionier superbe* —the opera by Pergolesi which contained the famous intermezzos of *La Serva Padrona*— the German director dresses the singers "according to their voice" (Brockhaus, 2009: 63). This means that the cast members, all female except for the tenor, retain their gender on stage, creating an acting dynamic completely that is different to the libretto requirements and customary performing practices. This is possible because the production

proceeds on two levels: on one hand the singers, imagined as contemporary people coming from a gala celebration in luxurious dress and vertiginous heels; on the other, the Bunraku's puppets representing the opera characters, which come back to life from the ashes of the past when this group finds them.

Everything here relates to the creation, or rather the reconstruction of, the voice-body connection. The singers borrow their voices from the puppets, their eighteenth-century *alter ego*, but only in the recitatives. During the action the puppets, wearing male and female eighteenth-century clothes, take up poses and stylized gestures while the singers are only "voice actors" who observe them, remaining in the background. Instead the singers emerge in the Aria, when the puppets stop moving and give way to these actors in a new stage action. Those who in the past, a castrato and a woman *en travesti*, were respectively the tyrant (Metalce) and the hero (Viridate), are now two women confronting each other (Marina De Liso and Marina Comparato). They implement mechanisms related to grounds of gender that were not (in the least) envisaged in the original drama – viz. the unhealthy relationship between the tyrant (here, female), and her prisoner, the tenor (Antonio Lozano); or that between the page (Giacinta Nicotra) and the second woman (Ruth Rosique).

Such a doubling of perspectives —multiplied like a matryoshka effect— can easily detract from the drama, and the result is often a sort of schizophrenia between the languages and the texts that go to make up the production (De Mario 2009). It is true that in this case, on one hand, the gender games so appreciated in the eighteenth century are taken too far. On the other hand, it aims to arouse the audience's interest by emphasizing its inclinations and also what seems to reflect the modern taste. And so here both the masculinized dark female tyrant, and the champion of vocal prodigies who plays the hero and even the protagonist —apparently frail and frightened— crush the male universe, almost canceling it.

Apparently this is not enough, because a woman *en travesti* does not seem to have the same strength as the countertenor. This is seen in the fact that none of these women is on the DVD cover of *Il Prigionier superbo*, which offers instead an alluring Serpina wearing tutu and sequins (Alessandra Marianelli in *La serva padrona*, Brockhaus-Rovaris, Jesi 2010), someone who transforms her master, a circus tamer, into a servant. *Femminilissima*.

Conclusions

With these three examples, each unique and having its own biases, we certainly cannot claim to offer a comprehensive sample of the current trends in terms of performance. Nor can we establish with certainty the actual taste of the audience or define the boundaries on the slippery terrain of gender studies. However, some items do emerge from this analysis which can be taken into account in a study on the current opera voices.

Where the castrato is now replaced by a countertenor, he is often interpreted as a homosexual. The seventeenth- and eighteenth-century pleasure in an androgynous and in part feminized figure is now covered by a man who, if not actually gay, at least addresses a very precise segment of the audience. Although this reflects the modern taste, at least in part, there is a risk that it becomes the exclusive prerogative of one type of audience. Also, a less conscious audience could be led to superimpose the castrato image with that of the male homosexual, with all the consequences that this implies.

There are few critical contributions or female audience reactions to the presence of women *en travesti*. In fact, contrary to what we would expect, the interest of a female homosexual audience does not seem to be aroused, and women *en travesti* remain largely the prerogative of the male heterosexual viewer. So in this case women masculinization does not mean defeminization.

The function and the extent of the voice in these mechanisms is crucial, as has been pointed out in these pages. The attraction exerted by a man who can reach the peaks of the female vocal register is undeniable and is, in my opinion, superior to that exerted by a woman in men's clothing: with his own voice the countertenor really does cross gender boundaries, while the woman can only suggest it. The exact equivalent of the countertenor voice would be a bass voice in the female realm, and it is perhaps no coincidence that the most convincing female singers in men's clothing are often mezzo-sopranos or altos. But this opens a window on the distribution of voices in opera, a completely different issue.

The current performance of early opera offers the possibility to fill an absence, to superimpose a voice and a body, defined and shaped in the modern world, on the image of a voice that comes from the past and is the ghost of a tortured body, beyond genres. The body can flirt with the contemporary world, but it is the voice that makes us imagine, to quote Calvino, "how this person might be different from every other person", beyond genres, beyond time.

REFERENCES

Abel, Sam. 1996. *The Opera in the Flesh. Sexuality in Operatic Performance*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.

Ariosto, Ludovico. 2006 [1532]. *Orlando Furioso*. Cesare Segre. Milano: Mondadori. (English translation by William Stewart Rose, *The Orlando Furioso translated into English verse from the Italian of Ludovico Ariosto with note by William Stewart Rose*, London: John Murray, 1823-31).

Bianconi, Lorenzo (ed.). 1992. *I libretti italiani di Georg Friederich Händel e le loro fonti*, 2 voll. Firenze, Olschki.

Brockhaus, Henning. 2009. "Salti nel tempo e nello spazio". In *Prigionieri e fughe. IX Festival Pergolesi Spontini*. Jesi: Fondazione Pergolesi Spontini. (p. 63)

Bruno, Giordano. 1986 [1590]. *De magia. De Vinculis in genere*. Albano Biondi. Pordenone: Biblioteca dell'Immagine.

Calvino, Italo. 1986. *Un re in ascolto*, in *Sotto il sole giaguaro*. Milano, Garzanti (English translation by William Weaver, *A King Listens*, in *Under the Jaguar Sun*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1988).

Campbell, Jennifer. 2012. "Dancing marines and pumping gasoline. The creation and exportation of (homo)sexual identity in depression-era American ballet". *Musics, Cultures, Identities*, programme and abstracts IMS 19th Congress. Roma: Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia.

Carter, Tim. 2001. "Armida". In *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie.

http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/O900189?q=armida&search=quick&pos=1&_start=1#firsthit [Consultato il 20 giugno 2013].

Chegai, Andrea. 2000 [1998]. *L'esilio di Metastasio. Forme e riforme dello spettacolo d'opera fra Sette e Ottocento*. Firenze: Le Lettere.

Cicognini, Giacinto Andrea. 1649. *Giasone. Drama musicale del D. Giacinto Andrea Cicognini Accademico Instancabile da rappresentarsi in Venetia nel Theatro di San Cassiano [...]*. Venezia: Giacomo Batti.

Daolmi, Davide; Senici, Emanuele. 2000. "'L'omosessualità è un modo di cantare'. I contributi queer all'indagine sull'opera". *Il Saggiatore Musicale* 7(1): 137-178. <http://www-5.unipv.it/girardi/essais/daolmisenici.htm> [Accessed 03/06/2011].

De Mario, Bianca. 2009. *Salde querce e ombre mute. Le istanze drammaturgiche di un'opera pergolesiana*.

www.centrostudipergolesi.unimi.it/saggi.php

_____. 2011. "Il castrato tra corpo e voce. Le tracce del sacro nell'opera". *Molimo. Quaderni di*

Antropologia Culturale ed Etnomusicologia 6: 101-116.

http://www.scribd.com/fullscreen/62811095?access_key=key185ib7cvmy5z74d5hix8

Feldman, Martha. 1995. "Magic Mirrors and the Seria Stage. Thoughts toward a Ritual View", *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 48(3): 423-484.

_____. 2007. *Opera and Sovereignty. Transforming Myths in Eighteenth-Century Italy*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

_____. 2009. "Strange Births and Surprising Kin. The Castrato's Tale". In *Italy's Eighteenth Century: Gender and Culture in the Age of the Grand Tour*, ed. Paula Findlen et al., 175-202. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Freitas, Roger. 2003. "The Eroticism of Emasculation. Confronting the Baroque Body of the Castrato". *The Journal of Musicology* 20(2): 196-249.

_____. 2009. "Sex Without Sex. An Erotic Image of the Castrato Singer". In *Italy's Eighteenth Century: Gender and Culture in the Age of the Grand Tour*, ed. Paula Findlen et al., 203-215. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Gilman, Tod. 1997. "The Italian (Castrato) in London". In *The Work of Opera: Genre, Nationhood and Sexual Differences*, ed. Richard Della Mora and Daniel Fishlin, 49-70. New York, Columbia University Press.

Giorgi, Paolo. 2011. "Quelle arie antiche rese nove". *Percorsi scenici dell'opera barocca nel XX e XXI secolo*, Tesi di Dottorato di Ricerca. Università degli Studi di Pavia.

Gordon, Bonnie. 2011, "The Castrato Meets the Cyborg". *The Opera Quarterly* 27: 94-122.

Heller, Wendy. 2003. *Emblems of Eloquence. Opera and Women's Voices in Seventeenth-Century Venice*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Jackson, Michael. 1983, "Knowledge of the Body". *Man* 8: 327-345.

Loney, Glenn. 2003. "David Alden's Post-Modernist *Rinaldo*: A Long Way Off from Handel's Holy Land". <http://www.nytheatre-wire.com/lt03073t.htm#3> [Consultato il 20 giugno 2013].

Mamy, Sylvie. 1998. *Les Castrats*. Paris: PUF.

Meroi, Fabrizio (ed.). 2007. *La magia nell'Europa moderna: tra antica sapienza e filosofia naturale*. Firenze, Olschki.

Mormile, Alessandro. 2010. *Controtenori. La rinascita dei "nuovi angeli" nella prassi esecutiva dell'opera barocca*. Varese: Zecchini.

Ortkemper, Hubert. 2001 [1993]. *Angeli contro voglia. I castrati e la musica*. Trad. Arianna Ghilardotti. Milano: Paravia-Mondadori.

Ranke-Heinemann, Uta. 1990 [1988]. *Eunuchi per il regno dei cieli*. Trad. Enea Riboldi. Milano: Rizzoli.

Rice, Anne. 1982. *Cry to Heaven*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Rosand, Ellen. 1991. *Opera in Seventeenth-Century Venice. The Creation of a Genre*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Rosselli, John. 1988, "The Castratos as a Professional Group and a Social Phenomenon, 1550-1850". *Acta Musicologica* 60 (2): 143-179.

Rossi, Giacomo; Hill, Aaron. 1711. *Rinaldo. Opera da rappresentarsi nel Reggio Teatro a Londra*. London: Thomas Howlatt.

Scarlini, Luca. 2008. *Lustrini per il regno dei cieli*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri.

Schreuders, Bernard. 2010. "L'Opéra ou la défaite des hommes". *Forum Opera*.

http://www.forumopera.com/index.php?mact=News,cntnt01,detail,0&cntnt01articleid=1683&cntnt01origid=69&cntnt01detailtemplate=gabarit_detail_breves&cntnt01dateformat=%25d-%25m-%25Y&cntnt01lang=fr_FR&cntnt01returnid=54 [Accessed 20/06/2013]

Senici, Emanuele. 2009. "Il video d'opera 'dal vivo'. Testualizzazione e *liveness* nell'era digitale". *Il Saggiatore musicale* 16(2): 273-312.

_____. 2010. "Porn Style? Space and Time in Live Opera Videos". *Opera Quarterly* 26: 63-80.

Walker, Daniel Pickering. 2000. *Spiritual and demonic magic, from Ficino to Campanella*. Stroud: Sutton. (I ed. or. 1958)

Will, Richard. 2011, "Zooming In, Gazing Back: *Don Giovanni* on Television". *The Opera Quarterly* 27: 32-65.

Discography

Cecilia Bartoli; Giovanni Antonini (dir.) 2010. *Sacrificium*. Universal.

Michel Chance, Gloria Banditelli, *et al.*; René Jacobs (dir.) 1988. *Cavalli. Giasone*. Harmonia Mundi

Videography (see. Appendix Videography)

Il Giasone, Francesco Cavalli (Dynamic 2011)

Rinaldo, Georg Friederich Händel (Arthaus Musik 2000)

Il prigionier superbo, Giovanni Battista Pergolesi (Arthaus Musik 2012)

Sitography

Accademia della Crusca

http://vocabolario.sns.it/html/_s_index2.html

Casa Italiana

<http://www.casaitaliananyu.org/content/the-freak-and-superstar-castratos-italian-music-2013>

La Cieca

<http://parterre.com/2012/05/31/pillow-talk-2/>

Appendix: Videography

TITLE 1	<i>Il Giasone</i>
Composer	Francesco Cavalli
Libretto	Giacinto Andrea Cicognini da Apollonio Rodio
Premiere	Venice, 1649
Director	Mariame Clément
Conductor	Federico Maria Sardelli
Orchestra	The symphony orchestra of Vlaamse Opera
Place	Vlaamse Opera, Antwerpen
Cast	Christophe Dumaux (<i>Giasone</i>); Katarina Bradić (<i>Medea</i>); Robin Johannsen (<i>Isifile</i>); Filippo Adami (<i>Demo</i>)
Set design	Julia Hansen
Coreographer	unknown
Lighting designer	Philippe Berthomé
Costume designer	Julia Hansen
Video director	Matteo Ricchetti
Label	Dynamic (2011)
Catalog number	33663

TITOLO 2	<i>Rinaldo</i>
Composer	Georg Friederich Händel
Libretto	Giacomo Rossi, su soggetto di T. Tasso
Premiere	London, 1711

Director	David Alden
Conductor	Harry Bicket
Orchestra	The Bavarian State Orchestra
Place	Prinzregententheater, Monaco
Year	2000
Cast	David Daniels (<i>Rinaldo</i>); Deborah York (<i>Almirena</i>); Egils Silins (<i>Argante</i>); Noëmi Nadelmann (<i>Armida</i>)
Set designer	Paul Steinberg
Lighting designer	Pat Collins
Costum designer	Buki Shiff
Video director	Brian Large
Label	Arthaus Musik
Catalog number	(NTSC) 100 389

TITLE 3 *Il prigionier superbo*

Composer	Giovanni Battista Pergolesi
Libretto	Gennarantonio Federico
Premiere	Naples, 1733
Director	Henning Brockhaus
Conductor	Corrado Rovaris
Orchestra	Accademia Barocca de I Virtuosi Italiani
Place	Jesi, Teatro G. B. Pergolesi
Year	2009
Cast	Antonio Lozano (<i>Sostrate</i>); Marina Rodríguez Cusi (<i>Rosmene</i>); Marina De Liso (<i>Metalce</i>); Marina Comparato (<i>Metalce</i>); Ruth Rosique (<i>Ericlea</i>); Giacinta Nicotra (<i>Micisda</i>)
Set designer	Henning Brockhaus
Coreographer	Movimenti marionette a cura del Teatro Pirata
Lighting designer	Henning Brockhaus, Fabrizio Gobbi
Costum designer	Giancarlo Colis
Video director	Tiziano Mancini
Label	Arthaus Musik (2012)

Catalog number (NTSC) 101 654

Note Includes the intermezzo *La serva padrona*

Bianca De Mario is a research fellow at the Università degli Studi di Milano. In 2013 she obtained a PhD in Comparative Studies at the University of Siena with a thesis about eighteenth-century opera seria between dramaturgy and direction. She held a scholarship for a period of research in France (2003-2004, Paris III, Sorbonne Nouvelle) and in the USA (2009, Oberlin Conservatory, OH). She collaborates with Teatro alla Scala, Fondazione Pergolesi Spontini, MITO Settembre Musica, Società del Quartetto di Milano, Il Giornale della Musica, etc. Performance studies and all those investigations in a border crossing among literature, theatre and anthropology are her favorite topics.

Cita recomendada

De Mario, Bianca. 2014. "Voices, Bodies, Identities: The Modern Imagery of *Castratos* in Contemporary Performance". *TRANS-Revista Transcultural de Música/Transcultural Music Review* 18 [Fecha de consulta: dd/mm/aa]



Esta obra está sujeta a la licencia de Reconocimiento-NoComercial-SinObraDerivada 4.0 España de Creative Commons. Puede copiarla, distribuirla y comunicarla públicamente siempre que cite su autor y la revista que lo publica (TRANS-Revista Transcultural de Música), agregando la dirección URL y/o un enlace a este sitio: www.sibetrans.com/trans. No la utilice para fines comerciales y no haga con ella obra derivada. La licencia completa se puede consultar en http://creativecommons.org/choose/?lang=es_ES