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"Offence to the Eye": Farinelli as an Actor on Opera Stage. Case from Anthropology of Theatre

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Abstract: *The article discusses an issue of relationship between vocal scenic practice and theatrical art in Neapolitan opera. Issue in question was broadly discussed in the theory of vocal performance of those days (e.g. by Pier Francesco Tosi). The particular example of my analysis of this phenomenon will be figure of excellent castrato, Carlo Broschi, known as Farinelli. This perfect singer, the world-famous performer of the Neapolitan opera was criticized and even mocked because of his poor acting. This text contains analysis of this historical topic on the example of selected sources: diaries, handbooks, sketches, paintings, press news and another. Aforementioned sources give us picturesque description of Farinelli, which was not only a singer and musical performer, but also a personage of the stage. They also reveal the imperfections of this excellent artist, exposing his not so much statuesque image. The analysis contained in the article is an attempt to capture the overall phenomenon of Farinelli, aspiring to be the greatest opera serial' hero of his time.*

Keywords: *castrato, Farinelli, Neapolitan opera, theatre, acting*

1. Introduction

The significance and the rank of acting in Italian opera theater is an issue that has been the subject of controversy since the beginning of opera genre (Cicali 2009; McClary 2000; Fisher-Lichte 2012; Guccini 1998). It was quite obvious for theoreticians and teachers of singing that "to be a good actor that is not enough to sing good, but this is necessary to know how to speak good and act good" (Mancini 1774, 165). In 1723 (three years after brilliant stage debut of Carlo Broschidetto Farinelli), another excellent castrato singer, and both teacher and theoretician of vocal techniques, Pier Francesco Tosi, expressed his doubts "if a perfect Singer can at the same time be a perfect Actor; for the Mind being at once divided by two different Operations, he will probably incline more to one than the other". He also considered it useful to complete this reflection with the additional opinion: "It

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being, however, much more difficult to sing well than to act well, the Merit of the first is beyond the second. What a Felicity would it be" – concluded – "to possess both in a perfect Degree!" (Tosi 2009, 65).

It could be argued if in Italian Baroque opera – at various stages of its development – singing, or, even more generally, if music, perceived among various interacting elements of work, was the most important one. It's not as obvious as one might suppose. This common opinion results, partially, from the manner in which we used to listen to Baroque opera nowadays, in particular to *opera seria*, which retains its artistic meaning as the concert form rather than theatrical one. No one will expect today to be both good opera singer and good actor. On the contrary, Peter Kivy wrote in one of his essays: "We all know that singers are seldom good actors and actresses; this is just a statistical fact" (Kivy 1993, 156). The same Kivy claims that too much acting in the opera distracts our attention from much more essential goal of opera theatre, which is affecting spectator with the means of music.

Kivy's opinions, however, refer, to some imaginary construct, which depicts kind of "ideal" type of reception of the opera in the 20th and 21st centuries. Meanwhile, no one and universal way (or style) of listening exists, which could be applied to all, extremely numerous, forms and genres of the phenomenon which today in conventional and general way is called "opera" (even if we stress this notion only to "opera seria"). This notion, in every place, time, and convention meant something different and was strongly related to its social, cultural, and even political and economic context (not to mention national style context, which was so vital in eighteenth-century discourse about the music). This is especially true when we think about Italian and French Baroque opera at the turn of the centuries when drama was so deeply associated with its social functionality.

2. Concepts of role and staging in Baroque Italian Opera

Before we ask whether typical spectator in Venetian or Neapolitan opera theater put or didn't put attention on acting, first of all we have to define precisely what the notion of acting and notion of role meant in this theater. As Gianni Cicali points out, the concept of role in Italian *opera seria* is connected above all with a specifically understood hierarchy (in dramaturgical sense of the work). As we know, Baroque Italian opera made room first of all for spectacular stars of singing (Cicali 2009, 85–8). The function of instrumental music in this opera is absolutely peripherical and constrained mostly to the strings, which provide kind of "colorless" background, sometimes supported by brass (like trumpets or horns in

special type of the airs, connected mostly to the roles of king or warrior). In other words, the first and foremost function of scenic role was to determine the rank of the singer, who could be casted as more important (*primo uomo*, *prima donna*) or less important. Exactly the same principle of hierarchy was the basis of construction of the opera as a musical piece – types and disposition of the airs depended on casting issues rather than on dramaturgy of the whole artwork. Carl Dahlhaus told about Mozart's *Idomeneo* that if one would put all airs in changed order, this opera still would mean exactly the same, because its actual meaning doesn't rely on the sense of libretto, but on the mutual relations between characters (Dahlhaus 2003, 73–5). It means that logic of opera work has absolutely nothing to do with libretto's dramatical authenticity and plausibility. This tendency started since Venice opera time, which means thirties of the 17thcentury, and during next decades of the 17thand 18th centuries it lasted the same, becoming more and more petrified in this shape. Most theorists of *opera seria* in second part of the 18th century, both Italian and French, like Esteban Arteaga ý López or Michel-Paul-Guy de Chabanon, criticized this genre in rather harsh words (Arteaga ý López1785, 295–6, 320–9; Chabanon 1785, 275–6). All of them argued that most important problem of Italian opera remains its libretto. This is easy to imagine that plausible (in the sense of mimesis), acting wasn't something especially relevant for the scenic existence of the genre.

Therefore, being a good actor in Italian and especially in Neapolitan opera meant first of all a good awareness of the place in the stage hierarchy and, second, the practical mastery of knowledge, which affects (in the sense: strong emotions or feelings) are attributed to this place and how to show them according to the common rules. Construction of Baroque opera is, in fact, nothing more than the field of mutual interactions between affects (like love, hatred, fear, jealousy, desire, despair etc.), expressed by the actors/singers. As for the tools and means of this expression, the main source of knowledge for the actors were textbooks and treatises on physiology and physiognomy – their authors showed in both descriptive and visual ways which gestures, movements and facial expressions correspond to particular affects (see also King 2008). That prescriptions were very strict and in all cases according to the same rules. However, aforementioned textbooks and treatises, even if read by efficient actor, were not always of value in the theater, where the stage was ill-illuminated; and not only the face, but also the whole silhouette of the actor hardly could be visible to the spectator. This is the source of the practice of highly exaggerated expression in the opera theater of both 17th and 18th centuries. For this reason, the evaluation of singer's performance was simply a general assessment of his stage personality.

3. Phenomenon of Castrato in Baroque Italian Opera

How was perceived the performer of *primo uomo* part (most often castrato) on this illusive background of the opera? The position of castrato singer – *primo uomo* or *primo musico*, as he was called at that time – was undoubtedly special and in shows us clearly that singer's acting in opera theater was defined basically through the prism of vocal skills. For example, François Raguenet, juxtaposing Italian and French music in his treatise *Parallèle des italiens et des françoisence qui regarde la musique* (Paris, 1702) tells us that Italian performers of *primo uomo* parts (castrati) are better suited to the role of lovers than their French colleagues– not-castrati. Raguenet explains this surprising phenomenon as follows:

> These Pipes of Theirs [castrati – M. L.] resemble that of the Nightingale […]. Add to this, that these soft, these charming Voices acquire new Charms, by being in the Mouth of a Lover, what can be more affecting than the Expressions of their Sufferings in such tender passionate Notes; in this the *Italian* Lovers have a very great Advantage over ours [French – M. L.], whose hoarse Masculine Voices ill agree with the fine soft things they are to say to their Mistresses (Raguenet 1709, 38).

It means that the very voice of castrato – high and angelic, alto or soprano– made him especially suitable to particular type of role: role of lover. It seems quite understandable that this common castrato stage image as both lover and protagonist of the show had strong impact on his picture also outside the stage. Testimonies of this approach (sometimes full of drastic eroticism) can be found, inter alia, in memoirs of Francesco Bernardidetto Senesino (see: Finucci 2003, 278). It's worth noting here, as very significant, that castrato was identified by his contemporaries mostly as *opera seria* stage singer. Of course, castrati were present in religious music as well, however – as commented by Joseph-Jérôme Le François de Lalande (de Lalande 1769, 345–9) – they recruited mostly from thosewho weren't lucky enough to make a career on the stage. Charles Burney, famous British historian of music and music traveller through Europe, thought the same: „Indeed all the music in the churches at present times are made up of the refuse of the opera houses, and it is very rare to meet with a tolerable voice upon the establishment in any church throughout Italy" (Burney 1773, 134). It seems that, at least in general opinion, castrati have been building their most important music careers through the theatrical scenes (Rosselli 1988, 144).

This stage picture of castrato as a perfect lover was especially important in the case of virtuosi as Farinelli, who undoubtedly was among these greatest. The famous singer was illustrated in the most suggestive way onthe mock sketch by

William Hogarth from his *Rake’s Progress* series. Hogarth put castrato on a pedestal located above the altar with plenty of burning hearts. On another Hogarth’s drawing Farinelli stands on a platform, surrounded by women handing him his burning hearts and shouting “One God! One Farinelli!” (Howard 1977, 31–7; Paulson 2003, 242–3; Shesgreen 2002, 209).

4. Farinelli’s scenical portraits depicted in the sources of epoch

Flipart? ca. 1750 (public domain, source: http://www.artnet.com/artists/joseph-charles-giuseppe-flipart/portrait-of-carlo-broschi-called-farinelli-in-the-BnR7fPc-ad4TNSufRM5YbQ2)

One of the best known Farinelli’s portrait is one attributed to Charles-Joseph Flipart or to Jacopo Amigoni, which depicted Carlo Broschi in his full stage costume. The picture in question was made after spectacular singer’s performances in London in 1734, and the author of short poem, which was attached to this portrait, described Farinelli with flattering words – „E furon Nomi suoi Prodigio e Incanto” (Heartz 2004, 113). Both these words (which can be translated as “miracle” and “charm”) characterize the main goal of predicted influence of the opera: to enchant and to fascinate spectator with the illusion, to bewile him/her with beauty and magnificence of the spectacle.

This artwork, reportedly by Flipart,is not only one. Many of portraits dedicated tofamous castratowas created by Venetian painter, Amigoni, Farinelli’s favorite. Farinelli in his Italian villa kept thirty-three of such depictions, mostly by Amigoni – bought or perhaps partially donated to him by the authorsthemselves (Shesgreen 2002, 101).

On above-said portrait Farinelli wears a purple coat with golden lining, fancifully draped on his shoulders, with white tunic also decorated with gold.White and purple colors along with gold or silver dominated the costumes of opera theater in the17th and first half of the 18th century (Glixon and Glixon 2006, 281). Predominance of these colors on the palette of Flipart's painting emphasizes basically "stage" entourage of the main character. It seems to be costume of a ruler or a triumphing commander, rather than of a warrior. The spear, decorated with purple, leans against singer's left shoulder, and seems to be theatrical prop, not a tool which could be used for killing; even if the finger of right hand indicates the head of a slaughtered animal. The left arm rests on the hip in a nonchalant gesture, which, however, accentuates whiteness and graceful shape of singer's palm. Reportedly Farinelli was depicted here as Epitide in Geminiano Giacomelli's *Merope*, staged in San Giovanni Grisostomo in Venice in 1734/1735 season (Selfridge-Field 2007, 440–441). But it could be as well the role of a lover in *Polifemo*, or a god in *Ifigenia in Aulida*, or a hero in *Issipile*[2]. The model's face seems to be completely out of touch with the role he apparently plays: its gentle and subtle expression as well as soft and delicate features indicate rather taste and elegance (praised by Arteaga 1783, 308) than expressiveness and strong affectation of the character. However, the whole portrait makes an impression which is probably similar to Farinelli'sgeneral way of acting: affected, unnatural, and pompous.

This impression was perhaps even reinforced in Amigoni's poetics, which, in opinion of the contemporary critics, was rather poor. As Alexander Chalmers wrote: „his [Amigoni's – M.L.] figures are so entirely without expression, that his historical compositions seem to represent a set of actors in a tragedy, ranged in attitudes against the curtain draws up" (Chalmers 1812, 114–5). Amigoni, with his painting style, seems to be perfect match for Farinelli's staging.

[2] In first of these operas, all of them by Niccolò Porpora, Farinelli sang in London part of Atis, in the second one – of Achilles, in the third one – of Jason (Highfill, Burnim, and Langhans 1978, 149).

Amigonica. 1734–5 (public domain),
source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jacopo_Amigoni_%E2%80%93_Ritratto_di_Farinelli.jpg)

As previously mentioned, the expression of face and mimicry was of little importance on the ill-illuminated stage of the 18th-century opera theater. Acting was reduced to expressive gestures, and voice was one of its important tools. In a sense, the voice of a singer – its type and color, as well as the character of its sound – replaces his face on the stage and, instead of the face, reflects as the mirror the nature of his character, even if acting is not sufficient. The evidence is given by Abraham Rees in his famous work, *Cyclopaedia*. In the entry devoted to FarinelliRees reveals *en passant* some details of his vocal manner:

> Without the assistance of significant gestures or graceful attitudes, enchanted and astonished his hearers by the force, extent, and mellifluous tones of the mere organ, when he had nothing to execute, articulate, or express. But though during the time of his singing he was motionless as a statue, his voice was so active, there no intervals were too close, too wide, or too rapid for his execution (Rees 1819).

To make this thesis more convincing, one could recall a reminiscence of Burney, who described the first appearance of Farinelli at King Theater in London (in October 29th, 1734). Broschi sang Arbace's part in *Artaserse*, and he was partnered by his illustrious competitor, Francesco Bernardidetto Senesino – another great castrato singer. who used to work with Georg Friedrich Händel. Burney reports that

"Senesino had the part of furious tyrant, and Farinelli that of an unfortunate hero in chains; but in the course of the first air, the captive so softened the heart of the tyrant, that Senesino, forgetting his stage-character, ran to Farinelli and embraced him in his own" (Burney 1773, 225). This story, which describes quite unusual and difficult to be imagined situation, was repeated many times, in changed versions, in various popular sources (Doran 1853, 10).

In general it seems that Farinelli's stage playing was absolutely not sufficient (even though, reportedly, he was practicing a lot in the front of the mirror) – and, shortly, he was really bad actor. Farinelli's acting failure was reported by Roger Pickering in his *Reflections upon Theatrical Expression in Tragedy* (1755), where he ridiculed famous castrato with no mercy:

> I shall therefore, in my farther remarks upon this Article, go back to the *Old* Italian Theatre, when Farinelli drew every Body to the *Haymarket*. What a Pipe! what Modulation! What Extasy to the Ear! But, Heavens! What Clumsiness! What Stupidity! What Offence to the Eye!
> Reader, if of the City, thou mayest probably have seen in the Fields of *Islington* or *Mile-end* – or if thou art in the environs of *St. James's*, thou must have observed in the *Park*, with what Ease and Agility a Cow, heavy with Calf, has rose up at the Command of the Milk-woman's Foot: Thus from the mossy Bank sprung up the Divine Farinelli.
> Then with long strides advancing a few Paces, his left Hand settled upon his Hip, in a beautiful Band like that of the *Handle* of an *old fashion's Caudle Cup*, his Right remained immoveable across his manly Breast, 'till Numbness called its Partner to supply its Place; when, it relieved itself in Position of the other Handle to the *Caudle-Cup.*
> 'Twas well for this *tuneful* Exotic, that the Generality of his Audience were more ready to extinguish one Sense to gratify another, than I, attached as I am to musical Merit, could suffer myself to be (Pickering 1755, 63–4).

In this rather ruthless Pickering's characteristics Farinelliseems to be theactor of one role, unable to deal with his own hands on the stage. The true irony is that on many of the preserved portraits of Broschi, the singer was immortalized precisely in the pose described above. The painting of Flipart gives a good example of what critic had in mind comparing singer's arm to the "handle of the Caudle-Cup" (handle of the soup vase); incidentally, Farinelli takes almost identical position in abovementioned portrait.

William Hogarth's drawing, on the other hand, depicting the scene from Handel's *Flavio*, staged by Farinelli, Francesca Cuzzoni, and Senesino, is not proper caricature, but undoubtedly has overtly satirical character. The subject of this satire

was for sure Farinelli. He is unnatural high and shapeless, with his head low on his shoulders, legs wide apart, with all his posture expressing kind of awkward jerkiness. Farinelli seems to be kind of distorted reflection of Senesino, which takes his place on the right side of the stage.

Hogarth 1728 (public domain, source: https://www.art-prints-on-demand.com/a/hogarth-william/farinellicuzzoniandsenesi.html)

This unflattering image of Farinelli seems to be confirmed in the imagination of contemporary caricaturists. The most famous caricature of Broschi on the stage is a drawing by Pier Leon Ghezzi, depicting castrato in the female role. Daniel Hertz claims that Ghezzi’s drawing was inspired by concrete spectacles: the parts of Berenice in *Farnace* (opera by Leo Vinci) and/or *Salonice* in *Scipione Lucia* (by Antonio Predieri), both sung by Farinelli in the carnival of 1724, at Teatro Aliberti in Rome (Heartz 2004, 119). It means that caricaturist focused mostly on theatrical details of portrayed character: he put a special emphasis on the meticulous depicting of his costume. In his left hand famous singer keeps the fan, while his law hand is raised. The distance between the fingers of his palm, as Daniel Hertz brightly noticed, resembles Farinelli’s palm in well-known portrai tby Amigoni, where castratos its among his friends and colleagues: singer Teresa Castellini, librettist Pietro Metastasio and the painter himself (Heartz 2004, 119).

Ghezzi 1724 (public domain), source: https://commons.wikimedia. org/wiki/File:Farinelli_female_caricature_edited.jpg)

Amigoni ca. 1750–2 (public domain), source: https://www.the-athenaeum.org/art/full.php?ID=118216)

Critics regard the afore-mentioned caricature as "intelligent but non-aggressive" (Hughes 1984, 233). Indeed, if we look at the portrait of the singer, what attract one's attention are details of his outfit, especially the ornaments of dress and posh headgear. There is nothing vulgar or exaggerated on this picture. However, castrato's face, turned to us with its profile, is almost deprived of the human features. One of the greatest researchers of the castrato phenomenon, Martha Feldman, described it as "piggish", recognizing that this piggish appearance becomes even more obvious if one combines it with truly feminine vanity, which seems to be one of Farinelli's attribute (Feldman 2009, 199). Is it sign of anxiety and disgust of the epoch against castrato – a handicapped *evirato,* as he also was called? This word for long time had no negative connotations[3]. However, it describes castration after all in the term of some kind of lack. Perhaps Ghezzi points out the behavior which was especially characteristic for Farinelli, and which manifested itself through the mean of a gesture, which is most external of signs.

[3] For example, in the biography of Handel wrote by Victor Schoelcher the castrato Nicolo Grimaldi is called "celebrated evirato"and entitled "Chevalier" (Schoelcher 1857, 47).

This ambivalence in the perception of Farinelli’s figure makes his stage personality to some extentambiguous.

5. Conclusions

As the actor, Farinelli wasn’t outstanding, but, in the same time, as an actor he gained his most spectacular success. We can say that his case confirms the intuition of researchers: that traditional drama model is not adequate for both meaning and functionality of Italian Baroque, especially Neapolitan,opera. At the same time,Farinelli’s case denies the opinion of Samuel Sharp, who wrote ironically about Neapolitan audience: “witty people, therefore, never fail to tell me, the Neapolitans go to *see*, not to *hear* an Opera” (quoted after: Bongiovanni 2005, 92).

Adored and admired, paid better than his celebrated colleague Senesino (according to Pickering’s testimony, an excellent actor), Farinelliprobably hidden behind his stage mask a trauma which stopped and blocked his already inept acting. However, this incompetence could be read by listeners as the expression of authenticity of the affect. And yet, affects constitute the essence of the Baroque theater.

The case of Farinelli allows us to obtain a lot of valuable information regarding the perception of the early Europeanmusical theater, as well as some ideas about the actor’s image, his tasks and functions, and the social image of castrato, not only as a scenic personality but also as a member of some type of community. Although this case is unrepresentative, because it cannot show us full and reliable cross-section of this extremely hermetic group, it still gives us some insight into this complex and delicate problem which was so-called castrato phenomenon. Thanks to this kind of analysis, we can penetrate better the psychology of reception of contemporary spectator and listenerof theatrical music and look at the Neapolitan opera not as a relic of music history, but rather as a living communication tool, mirroring tastes, prejudices and collective needs.

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