



**Patricia Howard.** *The Modern Castrato: Gaetano Guadagni and the Coming of a New Operatic Age.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. xiv + 238 pp. \$41.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-936520-3.

**Reviewed by** Corinna Herr

**Published on** H-Music (September, 2017)

**Commissioned by** Lars Fischer (UCL Department of Hebrew and Jewish Studies)

Gaetano Guadagni (1729–92) was and is doubtless one of the best-known castrati of the second half of the eighteenth century. In contrast to Giovanni Battista Velluti (1781–1861), whom Stendhal called “the last of the good castrati,” Guadagni lived in an age in which castrati were still the norm rather than the exception. Not much has been published on Guadagni and nothing that goes beyond his role in Christoph Willibald Gluck’s *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762). A fuller account has long been a desideratum, then. Patricia Howard has now filled this gap with her detailed biography. Her reconstruction of his career draws on Claudio Sartori’s invaluable catalogue of published libretti, which were frequently prepared for specific performances and therefore listed the artists involved.

The 1760s and 1770s were a crucial time for opera reform and Guadagni was repeatedly engaged in places that stood at the forefront of this reform movement, especially Vienna and Padua. Yet the most important location in terms of his career progression was London, where he spent his formative years as a singer (1748–55), traveling there with the *opera buffa* troupe of the impresario Giovanni Francesco Crosa. As Howard points out, it was most unusual for a castrato to sing in a *buffa* troupe and this trajectory seems all the more improbable given that Guadagni had be-

gun his career in Venice in *opera seria* and would go on to become “one of the most noted exponents in Europe in serious roles” (p. 28). Having begun his career in 1748 as an alto, he moved on to mezzosoprano roles that habitually reached a g2, though his most famous role, the Orfeo in Gluck’s reform opera, was an alto role with a modest range (to e2).

To the best of our knowledge, Guadagni’s last concert performance took place in 1785 in his then hometown of Padua. He subsequently suffered a stroke, which left him aphasic—a particularly cruel fate for a singer. He nevertheless seems to have retained his energy and could still be heard singing in a liturgical context at the Basilica del Santo. Howard cites a contemporary Paduan source describing how the “curiosity of hearing him sing a versicle attracted an incredible number of people” (p. 185).

His participation in Crosa’s *buffa* troupe demonstrated—or perhaps established—a trait that later became a crucial factor for Guadagni’s success: his ability to act. Unlike *opera seria*, *opera buffa* depended, for the most part, on actors who were also able to sing. *Opera seria*, by contrast, depended before all else on trained singers who could meet the challenges of coloratura, *mesa di voce*, and the wide range for which castrati were known. In the past, the fact that Guadagni

trained with the famous actor David Garrick has generally been presented as fundamental to his acting skills. Howard, however, quite rightly stresses the significance of his experience as a *buffa* singer and the fact that his acting skills were enhanced by his cooperations with Filippo Laschi and, especially, with Pietro Pertici, who had worked extensively with Carlo Goldoni and whom London critics considered “one of the greatest comedians of his age and country” (p. 30).

In her otherwise chronological account, Howard frequently references the status of castrati in general. In her account of Guadagni’s first sojourn in London, for instance, she discusses the state of *opera seria* in London around the middle of the eighteenth century, the various well-known stories and rumors about the castrati’s virility and attractiveness to women, and the casting of castrato roles in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Unfortunately, these digressions are too long not to interrupt the flow of her account of Guadagni’s career and too short genuinely to address the issues they raise. Her treatment of various scholarly opinions on the castrati’s ability to perform sexually, for example, only generates the vague sense that the contemporary discourse must surely have been more substantial than her discussion reflects—as indeed it was. One need only consult the contemporaneous discussions of the (platonic) androgynous ideal, or the legal intricacies pertaining to the castrato’s marriage, to realize how profound the impact of these phenomena was at the time.[1]

On the issue of sexual attraction, Howard mentions reactions to the castrato’s voice, especially that of the notoriously ostentatious Fanny Burney after hearing the soprano Giuseppe Millico in London in 1773. Burney spoke of “rapture” and Millico’s “divinely penetrating” voice. For Howard, these expressions have a sexual connotation. This is certainly a possibility but one might equally well contextualize these utterances with reference to the Age of Sensibility. Take Julie de

Lespinasse’s reaction to the same singer from the following year: “Never, no never was the perfection of singing so united with sensibility and expression. What tears he made me shed! what trouble he brought into my soul! No singing ever left so deep, so sensitive, so heart-breaking an impression; I could have listened to him till it killed me. Oh! how preferable such a death to life!”[2] Apparently, Howard has found no similar reactions to Guadagni, which is hardly surprising, given that such extreme responses were usually provoked not by the alto but by the soprano male voice—with the notable exception of Francesco Bernardi, widely known as Senesino, whose return from England to the Continent in 1737 apparently provoked extreme female reactions, which again became the butt of much satire.

Like Guadagni, Millico too was one of the initial embodiments of Gluck’s *Orfeo* (or *Orphée*). Guadagni’s participation, in 1762 in Vienna, as the lead in the premiere of the original Italian version of Gluck’s opera clearly marks his greatest claim to fame (which may explain why Howard’s book was published in 2014, the year of the 300th anniversary of Gluck’s birth). When the opera, as “Atto d’Orfeo,” was performed in Parma in 1769 as the third act of *Le Feste d’Apollo*, Gluck altered the part and it was performed by the soprano Millico. At the 1774 premiere of *Orphée* in Paris, Joseph Legros, a Haute-contre, sang the title role. These respective adjustments of the score chart a development from a *stile d’agilità*, represented by Guadagni, to a more dramatic part relying on Legros’s more “heroic” timbre. This trajectory maps neatly both onto the development of opera more generally in this period and onto the history and eventual demise of the castrati, even if this history would not finally draw to its close until 1824, when Giacomo Meyerbeer created the final castrato role in opera for Giambattista Velluti in *Il crociato in Egitto*.

Guadagni’s acting and singing skills doubtless affected Gluck’s conception of the Orfeo role. How

exactly it did so is hard to determine precisely, though. Howard approaches this complex problem with caution and insight. There is very little evidence documenting the role's development. His statement that the role was "tailor-made" for Guadagni apart, the librettist, Ranieri de' Calzabigi, seems to have had no more to say about the singer. Given that "Orfeo is literally never off stage, and ... sings almost continuously" (p. 98), the dramatic scope of the role would certainly have matched Guadagni's well-known acting skills. The noticeable plainness of Orfeo's arias suggests that they were designed for free ornamentation, and there has been much speculation in the scholarship as to how much ornamentation Guadagni is likely to have introduced. On the other hand, Gluck is known to have loathed the tradition of free ornamentation that was common practice in *opera seria* and engaged in with sometimes excessive relish by castrati and female singers alike at the time. Howard approaches this issue from a comparative perspective, drawing on the ornamentation documented for Guadagni's stage performances in London where, in 1770, he also resumed the Orfeo role in a pasticcio with additional music by Johann Christian Bach and himself (chapter 8). In addition, Howard also takes Guadagni's skills as a singer (chapter 12) and his own compositions into consideration.

The chapter on "Guadagni the Composer" (chapter 9) is definitely one of the book's highlights. Howard analyzes three of his arias (the arias are available in full on the book's companion website). Her discussion offers valuable insights not only into his compositional skills but also into his approach to constructing music in a manner best suited to show off his singing skills. As Howard mentions only in passing, two of these three arias were in fact part of the aforementioned *Orfeo* pasticcio—surely inviting a direct comparison with Gluck's corresponding arias. Howard focuses especially on the "sensitive word-setting" (p. 154) in the arias, obviously an issue of particular interest to singers. At a point like this,

the methodological problems that arise as a result of Howard's decision to offer a predominantly chronological account become particularly clear. Guadagni's performance of the role in the 1762 *Orfeo* performance, discussed in chapter 6, cannot fully be understood with taking into account his later resumption of the same role in London (chapter 8), his acting skills (chapter 4), and his skills as a singer and composer (chapters 12 and 9).

The crucial chapter on "Guadagni the Singer" is the last in the book. Much of its content would be very useful for the appreciation of some of the earlier chapters, though. Here, Howard comes back to Guadagni's time in London where he performed extensively in oratorios by Handel (the parts of Didymus in *Theodora* [1750] and Hercules in *The Choice of Hercules* [1751] were written for him). Examining the music that Handel, Gluck, and others wrote specifically for Guadagni, she concludes that his was a lyrical alto voice with extensive inflections, suited most of all to *arie cantabile* and *arie parlante* but less so to bravura arias, and emphasizes especially his "strengths as a declamatory singer-actor" (p. 207). Howard provides no specific evidence for the contention that *messa di voce*—characterized by Pierfrancesco Tosi as an ornament of the *patetico*—was Guadagni's "trademark." It may be that this did not strike contemporaries as worth noting, given that it was a skill attributed to many castrati (and also to female singers, especially to Faustina Bordoni-Hasse, who was known to employ a special technique to prolong her tones *ad infinitum*). It would certainly match Guadagni's voice profile, though.

The *telos* of Howard's account is stated clearly both in the title and the subtitle of the book. But what could be "modern" about a castrato? Does one always have to proclaim a change of paradigm to sustain what one has written? If I had to connect the phenomenon of castrato or indeed the high male voice with a period other than the Baroque it would be Postmodernism. Only since

the 1980s has a new appreciation for this special phenomenon in singing emerged; only since then have countertenors begun to emulate the castrati and shared in some of their success. Modernity might sensibly be associated with the French Revolution, which flatly rejected the reactionary phenomenon of the castrato. The Enlightenment, on the other hand, contrary to widespread belief, did not criticize the castrato. Howard is entirely right, of course, in stressing that Guadagni's new art of singing differed from that of Farinelli's generation. Guadagni's association with Gluck's reform certainly seems to weigh heavily in favor of the notion of his "modernity," though one might well argue that the impact of this reform did not genuinely become apparent until at least fifty years later. Where Howard sees us in a "new operatic age" that is profoundly connected to "nature" and "feeling," a closer look at *opera seria* demonstrates that many of the traits she identifies with this "new operatic age" had in fact been around since the early eighteenth century at the latest. In many ways, of course, how one approaches these issues will depend heavily on one's more general understanding of the relationship between historical continuity and discontinuity.

Howard's book has many merits, foremost among them her judicious exploration of a comprehensive source base covering four languages and ranging from the ubiquitous to the virtually unknown. At the same time, her account relies on a mostly positivistic compilation of facts seemingly guided by no intentional interpretive scheme designed to draw connections and thus illuminate cultural contexts or illustrate specific paradigms. The exception are her three crucial chapters on "Guadagni the Actor," "Guadagni the Composer," and "Guadagni the Singer." These chapters are crucial not only for the book but for any real appreciation both of Guadagni's vita and of the work and status of eighteenth-century castratos more generally.

Notes

[1]. See Corinna Herr, *Gesang gegen die 'Ordnung der Natur'? Kastraten und Falsettisten in der Musikgeschichte* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2013); and Martha Feldman, *The Castrato: Reflections on Natures and Kinds* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015).

[2]. *Letters of Mlle. de Lespinasse, with notes on her life and character by d'Alembert, Marмонтel, de Guibert, etc., and an introduction by C. A. Sainte-Beuve*, trans. Katharine Prescott Wormeley (Boston: J. B. Millet, 1909), 128.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-music>

**Citation:** Corinna Herr. Review of Howard, Patricia. *The Modern Castrato: Gaetano Guadagni and the Coming of a New Operatic Age*. H-Music, H-Net Reviews. September, 2017.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=50421>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.