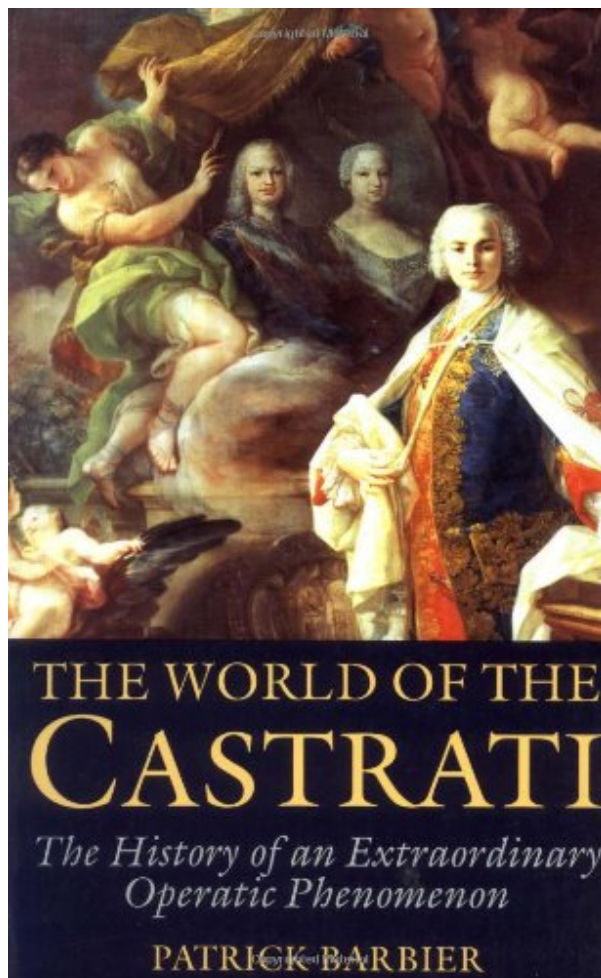


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HISTORY OF AN EXTRAORDINARY
OPERATIC PHENOMENON BY PATRICK
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From Library Journal

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From Kirkus Reviews

A remarkable topic that, unfortunately, doesn't get the nuanced handling it deserves. In a society in which the outrageous garners maximum media attention, the Baroque-era castrati should be guaranteed to lure readers other than scholars and opera fanatics. What other history can discuss sex, forced genital mutilation,

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This entertaining and authoritative study of the castrati during the baroque period explores the lives and triumphs of more than 60 singers over three centuries—their social origins, training, and relationship to society and church. Blending history and anecdote, it traces the course of a phenomenon that held Europe in its thrall. People were fascinated by these hybrids—part man, part woman, and part child—who became virile heroes on the operatic stage. The reader will learn of the horrors of castration, the nature of the strange castrato voice, and the conflicts these singers experienced.

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Most helpful customer reviews

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Eviva

By Neil G. Croll

No serious discussion of opera would be complete without mentioning the castrati; the period which gave rise to the castrati, their lives and work, and their legacy as it affects us today. In Barbier's book the reader is given an extraordinarily well researched, informative and entertaining look at the castrato phenomenon from its earliest beginnings, through the so called "golden age", and right on into the twentieth century. While presenting a tremendous amount of information the book is never boring or pedantic but rather gives a unique insight into a subject that many, even the most learned opera cognoscenti, would not want to discuss. Along with the lives of the greatest operatic castrati (Farinelli, Senesino et al.) Barbier gives details of almost every castrato of any significance in the history of opera. He also provides an informative description of the physical characteristics of eunuchs along with the social, religious, and political conditions that ushered in and provided for the existence of the castrati.

Any person who wishes to learn more about the castrati, their role in the development of opera, or simply to expand his or her knowledge of opera history should read this book.

28 of 30 people found the following review helpful.

Opinioni

By farinelli_primo@yahoo.com

I thought the book did very well in revealing the great yet mysterious past of some of opera's greatest exponents, the castrati. Through their eventful history vocal technique was able to reach past its highest peaks, and audiences were able to be thrown, into raptures of ecstatic bliss, by listening to the angelic voices in all their skill... and unassailable perfection of the greatest singers our world has known through the music of some of the greatest composers. However petty some may make themselves in attacking the style of the author or some phrase he was supposedly ridiculous to have uttered in the book, Patrick Barbier indeed accomplished much in revealing to us in wonderful detail the history of music's glorious past. I also wish to thank him for all that he has given me through the publishing of this great book.

5 of 7 people found the following review helpful.

Like a Wacky Sci-Fi tale, if it Weren't (Sadly) True

By Carol DeChant

I see this fascinating story as much about the lengths to which the Vatican would go in order to deny women a voice (in church, on stage, in society) as about these male victims of a fear of women. Indigent young boys not only had the misfortune of being maimed for a shot at a career as singers, but they had to have the surgery before the audition! Few castrati had a good enough voice to have a singing career in choirs, let alone become a star. So they were viewed as (unemployed) freaks the rest of their lives.

The book also shows how a society with such gender bans became obsessed with sex (especially those who enacted and enforced the bans). The cross-dressing that castration led to involved castrated men playing women's roles in opera and ballet--wearing female wigs and costumes, (sometimes off stage as well as on). Decades later, when the ban of women from the Roman stage was lifted, female sopranos disguised themselves as castrati to compete with them for the high register roles. Everyone speculated on the sex lives of castrati, and there are cases of folks who fell in love with someone whose gender they'd mistaken.

It's grimly spell-binding to read about centuries of Popes struggling with the morality of castration, while creating a market for it by hiring the castrati for choirs. Pope Leo XIII finally banned it forever, allowing the remaining ones to leave the Sistine Choir in their own time. The last one left in 1913!

Barbier has written an authoritative page-turner that would be like an absurd sci-fi tale if it weren't sadly true.

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