

JAVIER MEDINA

a 21st Century Castrato

Homage to **Alessandro Moreschi**

Castrato Arias



E416HR

FRANCESCO PAOLO TOSTI, (1846-1916)

- 1.-*Preghiera*.....4:23
2.-*Ideale*.....3:09
3.-*Sogno*.....3:13
4.-*L'Ultima Canzone*.....4:35

ANTONIO VIVALDI, (1678-1741)

- 5.-*Domine Deus, (Gloria)*.....4:10

RICARDO BROSCHI, (1698-1756)

- 6.-*Ombra fedele anch'io*.....8:55

JOHANN ADOLPH HASSE, (1699-1783)

- 7.-*Pallido il sole, (Artaserse)*.....6:35

CHRISTOPH GLÜCK, (1714-1787)

- 8.-*O del mio dolce ardo, (Paride ed Elena)*.....3:17

YGNACIO DE JERUSALEM Y STELLA, (1707-1756)

- 9.-*Cherubes y Pastores*.....6:01

STANISLAO GASTALDON, (1861-1939)

- 10.-*Melodia Op.5, (Musica proibita)*.....3:52

GIOACHINO ROSSINI, (1792-1868)

- 11.-*Crucifixus, (Petite Messe Solennelle)*.....3:16



At the beginning of the 16th century, a tradition emerged that would dominate the musical world for nearly three centuries: the castrati—men whose testicles were removed to preserve their childlike voices into adulthood. The practice of preserving boys' voices in this manner originated in Italy and Spain during the 16th century; castrati joined the Sistine Chapel choir around 1565 and remained a fixture there until the late 19th century, even amidst growing moral opposition.

The triumph and eclipse of an unattainable voice:

The history of Western music is deeply rooted in the pursuit of extreme aesthetics; few phenomena straddle the boundary between art and bodily transgression as radically as the castrati. Through a surgical procedure—performed forcibly before the onset of puberty—their hormonal development was halted. The result was an extraordinary biological alteration that gave rise to one of the most unique and admired forms of vocal expression. Moving beyond the morbid curiosity or brutality surrounding their origins, understanding this phenomenon requires analyzing how a liturgical necessity evolved into a mass cultural phenomenon.

The foundations of a practice: prohibition and liturgical urgency

Castration for musical purposes did not stem from a whim, but rather from a strict religious restriction. In 1586, Pope Sixtus V issued the papal bull *Mulieris in ecclesia*, which strictly forbade women from participating in church choirs, upholding the doctrine that women should remain silent within houses of worship. This ruling left sacred polyphony at an unsustainable technical crossroads: who would sing the soprano and alto melodies? While Spanish falsettists or boy trebles were initially employed, the former lacked the titanic vocal projection required by vast cathedrals, while the latter—often unruly to begin with—matured and experienced voice changes far too quickly. The solution adopted was systematic surgical intervention on boys who displayed exceptional vocal aptitude. By preventing the onset of puberty, an involuntary anatomical miracle was achieved: the child's body grew to possess the lung capacity, rib cage, and musculature of an adult man, yet his vocal cords retained the small dimensions typical of a boy of around eleven or twelve.

Characteristics of a unique sound

The true tragic and aesthetic core of the phenomenon lies in the nature of that sound; the disappearance of the castrati did not merely signal a shift in vocal fashion, but the extinction of a vocal range and timbre that nature does not spontaneously produce. A castrato's voice was considered childlike yet penetrating, possessing a special brilliance; it differed significantly from a woman's voice due to the use of the *voce di petto* (chest voice).

Today, much of the repertoire composed for these divos is performed —primarily— by sopranos or contraltos (terms that are, strictly speaking, masculine in origin). It is also performed by modern, highly regarded countertenors —adult men who have undergone vocal maturation and employ the challenging *voce di testa* (head voice) technique to sing in a high register akin to a boy's. However, none of these options successfully replicates the original acoustics. While the modern soprano possesses the necessary agility and range, she lacks the harmonic density, visceral volume, and bone resonance afforded by an adult male rib cage. The countertenor, meanwhile, may experience pronounced shifts when transitioning between vocal registers.

The castrato's sound was a perfect anomaly: its combined flexibility with the power, maturity, and physical stamina of a mature male vocal apparatus. This symbiosis imbued the singing with a unique sonic androgyny, a distinct melancholy, and a metallic brilliance. With the passing of the last of them, humanity lost the key to that acoustic universe.

From the temple to operatic splendor: the birth of the Baroque superstar

Although originally intended for sacred spaces, the castrati found their true zenith with the birth and expansion of Baroque opera during the 17th and 18th centuries. Cities like Naples established themselves as major “factories” for these voices, where thousands of boys entered conservatories hoping to achieve glory. In theaters across Europe, they became the first great superstars in the history of music. Composers such as George F. Handel and Nicola Porpora wrote scores filled with dazzling agility and dizzying ornamentation, designed specifically to showcase the abilities of singers like Senesino and Carlo Broschi—known as Farinelli. Audiences of the time did not seek dramatic realism in the modern sense, but rather a fascination with the supernatural.

Decline, the Enlightenment, and prohibition

The decline of the castrati began to take shape with the advent of the Enlightenment and a shift in European sensibilities. New humanistic and moral ideals came to view castration not as an artistic sacrifice, but as a monstrous mutilation incompatible with human dignity. This was compounded by a profound evolution in operatic aesthetic tastes: early Romantic audiences no longer tolerated mythological plots or androgynous characters. New tastes demanded earthly dramas, plausible passions, and psychological realism—a context in which the figure of a hero with an angelic soprano voice seemed anachronistic. The emergence of new vocal trends—such as the establishment of the tenor chest voice, pioneered by milestones like Gilbert Duprez's famous performance in Rossini's *William Tell* featuring high notes sung in *di petto* (chest voice)—permanently displaced the prestige once held by the ornate, stylized singing of the castrati. With the unification of Italy and the modernization of European states throughout the 19th century, the surgical practice was persecuted and banned—deemed a crime of grievous bodily harm—thereby cutting off the generational succession.

A first echo recorded for posterity: Alessandro Moreschi (1858–1922)

Displaced from secular theaters, the last survivors of this lineage found their final refuge in the seclusion of ecclesiastical choirs, with the Sistine Chapel Choir once again becoming the bastion of an ancient tradition. The last to be admitted were Domenico Salvatore, Vincenzo Sebastianelli, Giovanni Cesari, and Alessandro Moreschi. It was there that history encountered technological modernity in an almost ghostly fashion through the figure of Alessandro Moreschi—known as *The Angel of Rome*—as he was the only castrato whose voice was captured in a phonographic recording. Between 1902 and 1904, the Gramophone & Typewriter Company made recordings inside the Vatican. Although they had intended only to capture the Pope's voice, they ended up recording Alessandro performing works such as Tosti's *Ideale* and Rossini's *Crucifixus*. These recordings, shrouded in the static of wax cylinders and acoustic discs, offer a bittersweet window into that past. While Moreschi's style is marked by an interpretive use of vibrato, as well as the laments and expressiveness characteristic of the 19th century, it ~~HAS NOT~~ been fully appreciated by modern listeners; it differs markedly from their own imaginations, expectations and performance standards applied to Baroque music today, even though listening to him reveals glimpses of that ethereal, penetrating timbre.

Domenico died in 1909, prompting Alessandro to retire from the choir in 1913. Both rest in the same tomb at the Cimitero Monumentale del Verano in Rome. These deaths brought a definitive close to a unique chapter in cultural history: the moment when Western artistic ambition transcended the limits of the human body to sculpt a voice that time, inexorably, silenced.

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Recorded by Sean Murray
Madrid, September 2026

Soundfield microphones
SteinbergAXR4

C.Bechstein piano.