Farinelli and the English: “One God” or the Devil?

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Abstract
En Angleterre, où l’on se passionne pour l’opéra italien depuis le début du dix-huitième siècle, l’arrivée du castrat italien Farinelli en 1734 déchaîne les passions les plus vives. Les pamphlets et satires qui prirent le chanteur pour cible montrent que celui-ci joua un rôle important dans les bouleversements affectant la façon de concevoir les catégories sexuelles. C’est ainsi par exemple que grâce au personnage du castrat, la femme découvre la possibilité de relations sexuelles sans conséquence pour l’avenir. En recherchant la gratification érotique sans recours à l’homme normalement constitué, elle pervertit donc le système patriarcal dominant. Le débat suscité par le succès de Farinelli en particulier et de l’opéra italien en général concerne aussi les valeurs musicales : la musique n’est plus perçue uniquement comme un art bénéfique, régulateur des passions et source de fierté nationale, mais devient incitation à l’immoralité. L’opéra est non seulement un danger pour la morale, mais aussi pour les finances du pays. L’auteur se concentre ensuite sur le parcours de Farinelli. Si celui-ci rencontre un succès retentissant dès son arrivée à Londres, il y est aussi envisagé dans la presse comme un démon et comme la source de tous les maux de la société. Ses contemporains l’accusent d’avoir perverti le goût esthétique. L’opéra est représenté par exemple dans les peintures de Hogarth comme un monde désordonné où tout sens du devoir est perdu au profit des caprices les plus fous. En 1737, après trois saisons passées à Londres, Farinelli part pour Madrid où il passe les vingt-deux années suivantes au service de la cour. Enfin, il se retire à Bologne. Là, touristes et protecteurs anglais affluent et sont reçus chaleureusement par Farinelli, qui voue une reconnaissance éternelle au pays qui lui a permis de construire sa renommée.

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Thomas McGeary first studied philosophy and aesthetics, before receiving his doctorate in musicology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 1985. He has written extensively on opera, music, and the arts in eighteenth-century Britain. He has published many articles about Italian opera in London; his many important archival and documentary discoveries about Farinelli have appeared in numerous articles, including “Farinelli in Madrid: Opera, Politics and the War of Jenkins’ Ear” (1998) and “Farinelli and the Duke of Leeds: ‘tanto mio amico e patrone particolare’” (2002). He is preparing a work on the subject of Italian opera in 18th-century England to be published by Cambridge University Press.

I would like to frame this essay with an anecdote from American political humor from Florida in the 1950s. A candidate is asked: “Should the state be ‘wet’ (allow liquor) or ‘dry’ (forbid liquor)?” The candidate gave what is called an “if-by-whiskey” speech, in which he tried to please both sides of the question. He said:

“If by whiskey, you mean the water of life that cheers men’s souls, that smooths out the tensions of the day, that gives gentle perspective to one’s view of life, then put my name on the list of the fervent wets.” [i.e., pro whiskey]

“But if by whiskey, you mean the devil’s brew that tears families apart, destroys careers and ruins one’s abilities to work, then count me in the ranks of the dries.” [i.e., opposed to whiskey]

So in some ways, this is an “if-by-Farinelli” essay. When Charles Burney visited Farinelli at his villa in Bologna in 1770, Farinelli, wrote Burney, spoke “much of the respect and gratitude he owes to the English”¹; and years earlier in 1749, Farinelli’s friend at the Spanish Court, the British minister Benjamin Keene, wrote home how “Farinelli […] swears he loves the nation”². The English, however, were ambivalent about the greatest singer ever to have graced the London stage. For both good and ill, no singer of

² Benjamin Keene, The Private Correspondence of Sir Benjamin Keene, ed. Richard Lodge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 133), 98.
his day left so many traces upon English high and popular culture in poems, plays, epigrams, song sheets, portraits, newspapers, prints, and private correspondence.

Italian opera was first introduced to London in 1705. The vast sums the aristocracy spent on opera subscriptions and tickets, the singers’ salaries of thousands of pounds, the subsidies given by subscribers and the king each year to the bankrupt opera companies, the efforts to recruit the best singers from Italy, the gifts bestowed by admirers on the singers, and the folly of having two concurrent opera companies, all testify to the English rage for Italian opera.

But Italian opera was quickly accused of corrupting every aspect of British moral, cultural, and social life: its soft, sensuous music, without the masculine and rational component of English verse, effeminized men: they lost their public spirit and strength to defend their country, and abandoned females and turned their love to one another. Opera’s intoxicating sensuality ravished the females in the audience: they fell in love with the singers, and squandered money and gifts on them. The castratos with their feminine features—high singing range, soft and smooth skin, absence of typical male beards—seemed to defy and threaten the natural sexual and gender order. They were sexually attractive to both men and women. Men, attracted by their feminine features, desired them as catamites. Women were said to be ravished by both their singing and sexual favors. Women were further corrupted by castratos: already the inferior sex, they were further debased by sexual perversion that negated their fundamental sexual essence (procreation within monogamous marriage) in favor of safe sex with eunuchs.

Opera as Bivalent Cultural Production

Italian opera and Farinelli are examples of cultural productions that occupied what Ian Hacking calls “bivalent” positions in eighteenth-century Britain’s “cultural field” (to use Pierre Bourdieu’s term).


Music, opera, and Farinelli (like whiskey) hovered between a good-evil pair (what Hacking calls a “cultural polarity”). Music can be a good: a divine gift, a means of divine praise, a regulator of human passions, and a solace from human labors and sorrows. The institution of opera was a source of national pride and, following Bernard Mandeville, an economic stimulus that drove the economy; or following Bourdieu, a means of aristocratic status and social reproduction. Hence, opera and its singers represented the most socially prestigious, expensive élite, and visually spectacular dramatic form in London. But music was, as well, a luxury, a vanity, an occasion of idleness and inducement to immorality, a force for irrational arousal, and a sensuous distraction from one’s concerns for salvation.

Thus, opera and Farinelli were such lightning rods for controversy in British culture because their devotees could see in them the pinnacle of music, taste, and polite culture: opera’s prominence was a sign of Britain’s coming of age as a pre-eminent commercial and political power that was competing with Italy and France in matters of taste. On the other hand, detractors saw opera and Farinelli as a luxurious, irrational, effeminate import with supposedly insidious effects on British moral fiber, national identity, and the survival of native British drama.

We can analyze Italian opera’s bivalent position using Bourdieu’s concepts of cultural productions and cultural fields. Opera occupied the most dominant position in the field of cultural production in London: it had the greatest symbolic value (social status) of any production in the cultural field; and like Bourdieu’s demonstration of the literary field in 19th-century France, its social capital was an inverse of its market-place status (i.e., economic failure). It took great expenditures of economic and cultural capital to be a consumer of opera and Farinelli. Consider: ticket prices were double those of the highest theatre tickets; but to maximize one’s symbolic and social status, an opera-goer had to purchase a season subscription of 20 or 22 pounds, plus librettos and tea—not to mention having the coaches, servants, and dress to make a respectable appearance. And to trump this, devotees competed to give the singers additional gifts, entertain them, and have them entertain at private musical gatherings. One also needed the cultural capital of knowing a smattering of Italian and ancient history to follow the plot (even with libretto), endure long stretches of recitative and long arias, as well as know the appropriate ways to praise opera and its singers (instances of ignorance in this regard

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5 See the sources cited in note 3.

are frequent targets of satirists)—all of which legitimated opera as the dominant cultural production. Moreover, each season the King gave 1,000 pounds to the opera company, and many aristocrats gave additional sums as outright subsidies of the season’s losses. Hence, patronage of opera took great economic and cultural capital, which in turn served the interests of the aristocracy and gentry, whose own social status is reproduced by their consumption of opera (opera is thus produced by the aristocracy, for the aristocracy).

It can only be the super-dominant role of opera in the cultural field that—by a Newtonian law of cultural dynamics—caused its equally strong demonization in another field, the field of what I’ll call social-moral discourse. Here the dominant position would be held instead by those acts, precepts, writings, sermons, and devotional literature that served the interests of, and legitimated, church and state: civic virtue, religious observation, moral decency here on earth, Christian piety, chastity, charity, frugality, and industry. By their dominant position in this field, these placed (by polarity) the irrational, sensuous, luxurious, foreign, and feminine Italian opera at the ultimate negative pole of the field.

All of these bivalent responses to opera in general were aroused by Farinelli as well, and for roughly the same reasons. In what follows, I’ll trace Farinelli’s public career with the English. I’ll show how he was celebrated as the “one god,” as the highest embodiment of the most elegant, sophisticated, and spectacular art form of the day—but also how Farinelli was vilified for embodying all the social ills, moral and political corruption, effeminacy, and disruption of the sexual order that the art from the hot, horrid southern climate inflicted on England.

Farinelli: The “One God”

Farinelli’s Early Fame in England
Farinelli first sang in London in October 1734. But his reputation had preceded him and made him a star in the opera world, if one still over the horizon, by more than eight years. Owen Swiney wrote from Venice, 22 March 1726, to the Duke of Richmond, then the Deputy Governor of the Royal opera company:

I am just returned from Parma where I heard ye Divine Farinelli (another blazing star) but I am sorry to tell you that I’me afraid he’ll not be persuaded to goe for England these two or three years yet.

Swiney continued his raptures of Farinelli to Richmond several months later (2 July 1726):

Ye dear Farinelli is another Dear Faustina. These two, non pareils, touch the hearts of the happy few, who are endowed with the spirit of the buon gusto, and I pretend to be one of this number.

After the Royal Academy of Music collapsed at the end of the 1727-28 season, there were several schemes to revive opera. At a meeting on 18 January 1729, Farinelli was proposed as one of the desired singers; and there was optimism he could be hired—attracted, according to Paolo Rolli, “by the bait of a benefit performance”. Handel set out from London in February 1729 to engage Farinelli and other singers for the new company. As Rolli wrote to Senesino on 4 February of the prospective singers,

Farinello comes first in estimation, and all the more so as news has recently arrived from Venice [...] that all throng to the theatre at which Farinello is singing, and that the theatre where you and Faustina perform is nearly empty.

But Rolli’s later report was inaccurate:

They say that Farinello has already been engaged for next year here [in London]. [...] You will without doubt see Handel before the end of the Carnival, because, for sure, he is going directly to Venice for Farinello.

But in fact, Handel could not meet with, let alone engage Farinelli; according to Colonel Elizeus Burges, the British resident in Venice, who had written back 9/20 January 1730, to the Duke of Newcastle, in London:

When Mr Hendel was here last winter, Farinello would never see him in particular, or ever return’d him a visit, tho’ Mr Hendel was three times at his door to wait on him.

The English desire to snare Farinelli for their own opera stage was so well known, that the German traveler Johann Georg Keyssler, wrote early in May 1730, “The English have taken a great deal of pains to induce Farinelli to take a voyage to London; but hitherto to no purpose. This refusal may possibly proceed from the great sums of money which fine singers get even in Italy.”

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8 Elizabeth Gibson, op.cit., 366-367.
10 Donald Burrows, op.cit., 128.
11 Idem.
The Milords in Italy
Without Farinelli in London, the English Milords on their Grands Tours in Italy flocked to hear “the blazing Star”\(^{14}\). As Burges wrote back (20 January 1730, new style) to the Duke of Newcastle in London:

Farinello draws hither a great many Strangers to hear him. The Virtuosi do all agree there never was such a Voice as his in ye World before; besides, he is young and a very good Figure upon ye Stage: but as he is engaged for three of four years to come, and, as I am told, has more than once express’d an unwillingness to go to England, for fear our Air should hurt his Voice, I can’t tell whether your Grace will ever see him there or no.\(^{15}\)

The Earl of Essex, the British Ambassador to the Court at Turin, heard Farinelli sing the title role of Siroe (Metastasio / Hasse) in Bologna in the spring of 1733\(^{16}\), and reported there was “a vast deal of Company [and] thirty two English besides other Strangers”. The Duke of Leeds, while on his Grand Tour, seems to have followed Farinelli like a modern fan: his account books from 1733-34 show he traveled to see Farinelli in Venice (December-January), Vicenza (May), and Florence (July)\(^{17}\). Farinelli had refused to see Handel in 1729. But in June 1733 when the Opera of the Nobility was being organized in London in opposition to Handel, one of the organizers, the Earl De la Warr, wrote to Richmond:

There is A Spirit got up against the Dominion of Mr Handel, A Subscription carry’d on, and Directors chosen, who have contracted with Senisino, and Farrinelli, it is hoped he will come as soon as the Carneval of Venice is over, if not sooner.\(^{18}\)

The new opera organizers could not command Farinelli’s appearance for their first season. But apparently they did have agents working on their behalf, for early in May 1734, Joseph Smith, the English consul in Venice, informed Essex of “the news of a good End being putt to the Treaty for

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\(^{15}\) London, Public Record Office, SP 99/63, f. 123.

\(^{16}\) See Essex had received the King’s permission “to go in May to Bolonia for three weeks, its to hear an Opera where Farinello, & Carestini, are both to sing,” Letter of 25 February, from Turin; London, Public Record Office, SP 92/34/Pt. 1, f. 41v; see also f.104v and London, British Library, Add. MS 60, 387 f. 62v. On Essex’s interest in music, Carole Mia Taylor, “Italian Operagoing in London, 1700-1745” (PhD diss., Syracuse University, 1991), 192-234.


\(^{18}\) Donald Burrows, *op.cit.*, 176.
Farinelli; and much to his mind, and [...] he returns your Lordship his Thanks for it, owning it as good altogether proceeding from your Generous Protection19”.

News of Farinelli’s impending departure spread rapidly among opera lovers in Italy and on to London. Richard Pococke wrote back from Venice to his mother in London on June 13, “Faraneli’s ye top voice in Italy we shall hear [him] at Vicenza he is to England”; and then adding from Milan (23 June) he will have “1400 Guineas & a benefit night20”.

In London though, his employers were getting anxious about their star singer, as Consul Smith wrote to Essex on 18 September:

I suppose Farinello is by this time gone from Turin; his Masters [in London] were full of Fears he would not come at last, ‘till my Letters assur’d them to the Contrary21.

Farinelli’s Progress to England

As he had written to Conte Pepoli in May, Farinelli planned to depart for England early in September22. His progress was aided by his British friends and carefully monitored by their watchful eyes and attentive ears. Brinley Skinner wrote to the Earl of Essex (in Turin) on 4 September from Florence:

Farinello left us some days ago, and before he went desired of me to direct a Trunk of his to be shipt from Leghorne, about wch. the duke of Leeds also spoke to me23.

After he had passed through Paris, Lady Bolingbroke, at Sens, reported to the Earl of Essex (on 24 October 1734), back in Turin:

je scay pourtant que farinelly a passé a paris et que les gens qui l’ont entendu disent que la voix est parfaitte et sans égale. il est party pour l’Angleterre 24.

A day later, George Stanhope wrote from Paris to his brother Earl Stanhope:

19 Letter from Joseph Smith, Venice, 14 May 1734, to the Earl of Essex; London, British Library, Add. MS 27,733, f. 81v.
20 Letters from Richard Pococke; British Library, Add. MS 19,939, f. 15v and f. 17v.
21 Letter from Joseph Smith, Venice, 18 September 1734, to the Earl of Essex; British Library, Add. MS 27,733, f. 131v.
23 See letter from Brinley Skinner, Florence, 4 September 1734, to the Earl of Essex; British Library, Add. MS 27,733, f.126v.
24 Letter of Lady Bolingbroke, Sens, France, 24 October 1734, to the Earl of Essex, Turin; British Library, Add. MS 27,733, f. 138v.
Mr: Crow [...] and Sr: Hugh Smissen [Smithson] dined here and they brought along with them Il Signior Farinelli [...] almost all the English came here to hear him and liked his singing very much and I especially25.

Farinelli in England

Farinelli arrived in London on the 26th of September (old style)26. As was apparently the custom, shortly after his arrival, he sang at Court before the royal family27. In fact, we now know he sang twice within a week. Of his first appearance, The London Evening-Post reported:

the famous Signor Farinelli was introduc’d to their Majesties at Kensington by the Right Hon. the Earl Cowper; he is [...] allow’d by all Judges to be the first Voice in the World: The Court receiv’d him with particular Marks of Esteem, and he had the Honour to sing before their Majesties, and the rest of the Royal Family, in the Queen’s Anti-chamber, with vast Applause28.

The following week (on Thursday, 17 Oct.) he sang “again before their Majesties at Kensington with great Applause29”.

Newspapers variously reported to the public the terms of Farinelli’s contract. One stated it was “for two Years, at the rate of 1400 l. for each Year, and one Benefit for the whole Time”; while another said the terms were “to sing [...] 50 Nights, for 1500 Guineas and a Benefit 30”.

Opera Debut

Farinelli made his public debut with the Opera of the Nobility on 29 October in the role of Arbace in Artaserse (Metastasio; Hasse/R. Broschi), at which “all the Royal Family” were present. “The Theatre was exceedingly crowded,” and he was received “with prodigious Applause,” reported one newspaper31. Essex’s agent reported to him back in Turin:

25 Centre for Kentish Studies, Maidstone, Kent; U1590 C708/2.
26 As reported in The Bee Revived, vol. 7, no. 83 (21-29 September 1734), and The Daily Advertiser, no. 1142 (26 September 1734).
27 The event is described in Burney, Present State of Music in France and Italy, 224; and Farinelli, La solitudine amica, letter no. 43, 132.
28 The London Evening-Post, no. 1076 (10-12 October 1734). The report was in error in stating “he is just arriv’d from Rome, [and] is the principal chorister in the Pope’s Chapel.” This report dates the appearance “On Thursday last” (= Oct. 10). The Daily Advertiser, no. 1155 (11 October) dates the appearance the following Friday (= Oct. 11).
29 The Daily Advertiser, no. 1163; 21 October (“On Thursday last” = 17 Oct.).
31 The Daily Advertiser, no. 1171 (30 October 1734).
The Opera was opened, on last Saturday night, and Farinelli is allowed by everybody to be the best performer who has yet appeared from Italy\textsuperscript{32}.

When the Earl of Egmont heard him on Tuesday, November 5, he proclaimed him \textit{“the finest voice that Europe affords.”} In November, he also performed publicly at the Crown and Anchor tavern\textsuperscript{33}.

Among Farinelli’s greatest patrons and protectors in Britain were the young Duke and the dowager Duchess of Leeds. While the Duke was still in Italy, his step-mother wrote him (12 November 1734) news of Farinelli’s arrival in London, including an account of his dining and singing for her. The Duchess’s comments about Handel and his newly recruited singer Giovanni Carestini confirm she is a strong partisan of the Opera of the Nobility, who had engaged Farinelli.

Dear Duke

[…] I must now give ye an account of thee agreeable Farinelli, who may say some thing like Ceaser; He only sung and conquer’d, […] m’t Farinelli din’d wth me ye other day & sung so delightfully y’ He charm’d my L & Lady Charlotte\textsuperscript{34} who y’d know cou’d never bear Musick before, […] Hes so civille & well bred too y’t it makes one like him more, […] I dont know a word of news for nothing but Farinelli is talk’d off, I think him handsome too, […]\textsuperscript{35}.

\textbf{Benefit}

Farinelli’s London apotheosis was his celebrated benefit performance in a concert of \textit{Artaserse} on March 15, 1735, at about the mid-point of his first season. The benefit concert was preceded by an unprecedented series of seven advertisements in the London newspapers, including \textit{The Daily Advertiser} and \textit{The London Daily Post}, and \textit{General Advertiser}. What could be vilified as Farinelli’s greed was a line added to the last three announcements that \textit{“Signor Farinello humbly hopes that the Subscribers will not make Use of their Tickets on this Occasion”}. That is, subscribers were presumably asked not to invoke the use of their season ticket, but to buy an additional ticket for Farinelli’s benefit.

Two days before the concert, \textit{The Daily Advertiser} could report \textit{“Tis expected that Signor Farinello will have the greatest Appearance on Saturday that has been known. We hear that a Contrivance will be made

\textsuperscript{32} Letter from Thomas Bowen, London, 30 October 1734, to Essex in Turin; British Library, Add. MS 27, 738, f. 122r.


\textsuperscript{34} Lady Charlotte Scott was the daughter of James, Earl of Dalkeith.

\textsuperscript{35} London, British Library, Add. MS 28,050, ff. 223-224.
to accommodate 2000 people” (13 March 1734, no. 1286). The nobility were vying with other to show their munificence toward him, and the same day *The Daily Advertiser* reported on the gifts bestowed Farinelli on the occasion, ranging from 200 guineas from the Prince of Wales to 20 guineas from others. The benefit was expected to yield Farinelli 2,000 pounds. At the benefit, one account reported:

> there was a most numerous Audience; for the Pit and Galleries were full by four o’Clock, and the Stage being done up without any Scenes, as at a Ridotto, and curiously adorned with gilt Leather, there were several hundreds of People in the Seats erected there; so that it is reckoned he had a most extraordinary Benefit.\(^{36}\)

### Paintings and Sculpture

Farinelli’s fame was made eternal by portraiture. The Duke of Leeds and the Earl of Essex both returned from Italy with portraits of Farinelli painted by the Venetian painter Bartolomeo Nazari. And in England, Leeds obtained a portrait by Farinelli’s friend and traveling companion Jacopo Amigoni.\(^{37}\)

About the time of Farinelli’s benefit, Amigoni must have began a large allegorical portrait, “Farinelli Crowned by Euterpe and Attended by Fame” (1735), now at Bucharest, which became a “must see” for London society. One newspaper reported:

> Signior Amiconi, the famous Italian Painter, having lately finish’d a fine Picture of Signior Farinello at whole length, there is a great Concourse of Persons of Distinction every Day to see it, at his House in Great Marlborough-street. The picture is 15 Foot by 10, and is valued at 150 l.\(^{38}\)

On 31 July 1735, Lord Egmont entered in his diary: “After dinner I went to see Mr. Amiconi’s painting, who showed us […] a good picture of Farinelli the eunuch.”\(^{39}\)

### Farinelli’s Second Season of 1735-36

Despite the presence of Senesino, Cuzzoni, Farinelli, and the composer Nicola Porpora, the Opera of the Nobility struggled financially with London’s limited opera audience divided between it and Handel’s company. Certainly, one reason for the Nobility’s problems was that the novelty of Farinelli wore off. By March, Bowen’s outlook was not rosy:

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\(^{36}\) *The Political State of Great Britain*, 49 (January-June 1735), 365-366.


\(^{38}\) *The Daily Advertiser*, no. 1382 (3 July 1735); reprinted in the *Grub-street Journal*, no. 289 (10 July 1735).

\(^{39}\) *Manuscripts of the Earl of Egmont*, *op.cit.*, 2: 190.
'Tis Generally thought the Operas will hardly last 'till the next Winter, the Spirit which supported them seems to flagg very much [...] Farinello has a Benefit next week, but I believe he will find a vast difference between the Profits of this and his Benefit last year40.

Farinelli’s second benefit on 27 March was even more heavily promoted (it received ten advertisements) and was also a performance of Artaserse “With an Addition of several new Songs,” and Farinelli again requested that subscribers “not make Use of their Silver Tickets.” This time there was an additional notice to the public:

Whereas the Repetition of the Songs add[s] considerably to the Length of the Opera, and which hath been much complain’d of, it is hop’d that no Person will take it ill if the Singers do not make any Repetition for the future41.

Summer 1736
After his second season, in the summer of 1736, Farinelli went over to Paris with his friend the painter Jacopo Amigoni. London papers reported how “the French Nobility are in the greatest Raptures with the celebrated Signior Farinello”, and that he refused an offer of 50 Louis d’Or to sing a single song in the oratorio at the Tuileries42. Later, Londoners heard that he performed before the Cardinal and Duke and Duchess de Fleury. When he sang before the Queen and King43, the king presented him “his picture set in Diamonds44”.

Farinelli: The Devil
While Farinelli’s March 1735 benefit was his London apotheosis, its very success and splendor let loose a flood of vilification of him as the greatest corruptor of English society. And here—in what I call the social-moral field of discourse—we find Farinelli at the extreme negative position, being demonized as the direct cause of all Britain’s ills.

Reporting on his benefit, halfway through his first season, the periodical The Prompter (no. 37, 14 March 1735), generally concerned with the theatre, led off and sounded most of the themes. It complained of British women giving their charity to “this Amphibious Animal”, this “Poor Distressed Foreigner, whose Cries have a sort of a Magick Charm in them

41 Advertisements in The Daily Advertiser.
42 The Old Whig, no. 76 (19 August 1736).
43 The Old Whig, no. 80 (16 September 1736).
44 The Daily Post, no. 5305 (13 September 1736).
[... and] who is only fit to enervate the Youth of Great Britain, by the pernicious Influence of his Unnatural Voice”. He asks:

Is there no Spirit left in the young Fellows of the Age? No Remains of Manhood? Will they suffer the Eyes, Ears, Hearts, and Souls, of their Mistresses, to follow an Echo of Virility? [...] Have they no Notion of this more Visible Prostitution, this Adultery of the Mind, [...] when a Wife is alienated from her Husband, by any pleasure whatsoever?

In following their own private passions for Farinelli, the nation’s aristocrats “but Begin the Ruin of their Country.”

Social Ills
Numerous other texts elaborate on most of these points. Some accused Farinelli of causing the bankruptcy and ruin of tradesmen and entire families. In the poem The Rake of Taste (November 1735), the Man of Pleasure evades paying tradesmen’s bills:

My Lord has Money; --well -- we grant it true,
It is for FARINELLI, -- not for you
 [...] 
The Op’ra too, will ready Money take,
His Lordship must subscribe, his Rep’s at Stake. (page 7)

In Paul Whitehead’s Manners: A Satire (3 Feb. 1739), one peer’s love of opera and Farinelli is a sign that the nobility have been debased to the level of Nero’s rome.

Who blushes not to see a C--- [Churchill45] Heir
Turn Slave to Sound, and languish for a Play’r?
What piping, fidling, squeaking, quav’ring, bawling,
What sing-song Riot, and what Eunuch-squawling:
C—, thy Worth all Italy shall own,
A Statesman fit, where Nero fill’d the Throne.

A footnote identifies the squeaking eunuch as Farinelli.

False Taste
Some contemporaries suggested that Farinelli exemplified False Taste in the arts: he was both a representative of a corrupted and debased art form, as well as an object of excessive, misplaced, or uncritical appreciation of an otherwise acceptable art form. There was a counterpoint of criticism for his poor acting. John Corey in London, wrote to the Essex, still in Turin:

45 Charles Spencer, fifth Count of Sunderland and, from 1732, third Duke of Marlborough (1706-1758).
The Notion I had at first of Farinelli is now in great Vogue that he was only fitt for a popes Chappele, for that on the Stage he has neither Action, nor Expression in what he is about, and many that admired him beyond measure at first say they are now tyrd w46 his fyne gurgle tho it is so exceeding sweet.

One woman of false taste is the “gay Larilla” in the satire The Lady of Taste: Or, F—–’s [Farinelli’s] Levee (1737)47. Larilla is shown pursuing her empty rounds of daily life. Opera and Farinelli are among her ruling passions, which threaten her household with ruin:

For Op’ra Tickets and her Debts of Play,  
Reduce her Houshold [sic] to one Meal a Day;  
Yet will she risque to starve the Twelvemonths round,  
To give her Fav’rite Songster Fifty Pound. (page 149)

Churches are empty, while she and

[…] the Beau Monde adore an Eunuch Shrine,  
Their Morning Pray’r, O Far----i---llo’s thine,  
One G---d, one Songster, they alike partake,  
But for the Songster, they’ll their God forsake. (page 152)

Larilla attends Farinelli’s levee with the other “unthinking dull Admirers of a Song” (154) and adds to the gifts and adoration bestowed on him.

Farinelli appears as a symbol of false taste in the well-known “The Rake’s Levee,” the second plate of Hogarth’s The Rake’s Progress, published two months after Farinelli’s benefit48. In the print, we see the nouveau riche Tom Rakewell surrounded by the professors and purveyors of the fashion and follies that he indulges: dancing, fencing, gardening, horse racing, and hunting. In the background are the tradesmen being turned away without payment.

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46 Letter from John Corey, London, 25 December 1735, to Essex in Turin; British Library, Add. MS 27,738, f. 232v. This opinion was repeated later in 1755 in a comparison of Farinelli and Senesino: “What a Pipe! What Modulation! What Extasy to the Ear! But, Heavens! What Clumsiness! What Stupidity! What Offense to the Eye!” The writer compares “the Divine Farinelli” to the rising of a cow, heavy with milk, at the “Command of the Milk-woman’s Foot”: “Then with long strides advancing a few Paces, his left Hand settled upon his Hip, in a beautiful Bend, like that of the Handle of an old fashion’d Caudle-Cup, his Right remained immoveable across his manly Breast, ‘till Numbness called its Partner to supply the Place; when, it relieved itself in the Position of the other Handle to the Caudle-Cup”; Roger Pickering, Reflections upon Theatrical Expression in Tragedy (1754), London, 63-64.

47 In A Collection of Miscellany Poems (1737), London, 145-157. I am grateful to Xavier Cervantes for bringing this source to my attention.

In characteristic Hogarthian fashion, opera is represented by an allusive bric-à-brac throughout the room and especially by allusions to Farinelli, who represents one example of Tom Rakewell’s false taste in art. The long scroll hanging over the harpsichordist’s chair records the fabulous sums the aristocracy and gentry expended upon Farinelli at his March 1735 benefit:

A List of the rich Presents Signor Farinelli the Italian Singer Condescended to Accept of ye English Nobility & Gentry for one Nights Performance in the Opera Artaxerses--A pair of Diamond Knee Buckles Presented by --- A Diamond Ring by --- A Bank Note enclosed in a Rich Gold Case by --- A Gold Snuff box Chac’d with the Story of Orpheus charming ye Brutes by T: Rakewell Esq: 100l 200l 100l.

Corruption of the Sexual Order

A more serious charge about opera and Farinelli arises in what I’m calling the moral-social field of cultural production: their music is inherently soft, sensuous, and irrational. In the moral-social field that is defined in terms of the interests of church and state, opera is at the negative pole and is charged with damaging and corrupting the nation’s health.

Like perennial concerns about the effects of modern pop stars on their teenage female fans, eighteenth-century moralists were especially concerned about Farinelli’s effects on his female admirers. One satirist imagined one of Farinelli’s deranged female admirers who becomes hallucinogenic:

A Lady who had spent all her Cash in Presents to Farinelli, fell into a violent Fever; and for six or seven Days together she was perpetually raving to the People about her, and desiring them to turn that rascally Italian out of the Room. For, says she, he is incessantly singing in that corner, and won’t let me get a wink of Sleep.

Farinelli’s greatest threat was to his female admirers who reacted so emotionally and irrationally to his singing that critics compared their ecstasies and swooning to being sexually ravished by his singing (or its analogue, his tongue).

In Hogarth’s “The Rake’s Levee” plate, the poem on the floor evokes women’s misplaced enthusiasm for the singing of Farinelli. All that we see of “A Poem Dedicated to T. Rakewell Esq.” is what must be a title-

49 Another Hogarth print in which a castrato is among a fashionable company is “The Countess’s Levee,” plate 4 of Marriage à-la Mode; see Paulson, Hogarth’s Graphic Works, no. 231; and Frederic George Stephens, Catalogue of Prints and Drawings, no. 2731.

50 The Poet Finish’d in Prose. Being a Dialogue Concerning Mr. Pope and His Writings (1735), London, 15-16.
page vignette, in which Farinelli, seated on top of a pedestal, looks down on an altar with a burning offering as a sacrifice, while a crowd of women approach, offering their hearts in their outstretched hands. One of them blasphemes, “One God, one Farinelli”. On the surface, the ladies are swooning over Farinelli’s singing. But the obvious double entendre implies the women are also being sexually ravished by illicit sexual favors offered by him.

In The World Unmask’d (March 1738), Thomas Gilbert shows Farinelli as the ruin of families and upsetter of social order:

‘[...] to an Eunuch’s Voice such Charms belong,
‘That Families are ruin’d for a Song,
‘And without Benefit of Propagation.
‘Gay F[arinelli]! Cuckolds half the Nation. (page 5)

Families are ruined by the extravagant gifts and money given to Farinelli by his female admirers. But with the explicit designation of Farinelli as a eunuch and the lack of propagation when half the nation is cuckolded, the passage is one of many accounts that charge British women with taking castrato singers as lovers.

Farinelli and Con Phillips

A poetical commentary on the “The Rake’s Levee” plate from Hogarth’s Rake’s Progress, in which we saw Farinelli featured, says of the ladies’ admiration for Farinelli and other castrato singers:

No wonder that the Ladies pay,
They take it out another Way.
[...]
For tho’ they [the castratos] lose the Pow’r of Harm,
The Woman know they yet can charm.
The Footman, he may make ‘em swell,
Or Beaux may all their Secrets tell,
But here each Night the am’rous Maid
Securely Sins, of nought afraid.

Reports of women being ravished by Farinelli’s singing were exaggerated and transformed into images of Farinelli ravishing them sexually (as we already saw mentioned in a previous poem). Castratos with their infantile phalluses would have been sexually unfunctional; therefore, we must presume satirists are either (1) confusing castratos who were castrated before puberty with grown men who were castrated as slaves, and, hence, who would at least temporarily have been potent, or (2) assuming castratos provided some form of “safe sex.”

51 The exclamation is first recorded in The Prompter, no. 37 (14 March 1735).
52 The Rake’s Progress; or, the Humours of Drury Lane (1735; reprint ed. 1880), London, 18.
How Farinelli can charm without “the Pow’r of Harm” is suggested in a scene in Fielding’s play _The Historical Register for the Year 1736_. Four ladies are talking about Farinelli and the previous night’s opera:

4th LADY. He’s everything in the world one could wish!
1st LADY. Almost everything one could wish!
2d LADY. They say there’s a lady in the city has a child by him.
ALL LADIES. Ha, ha, ha!
1st LADY. Well, it must be charming to have a child by him.
3d LADY. Madam, I met a lady in a visit the other day with three [...] Farinellios, all in wax.
1st LADY. O Gemini! Who makes them? I’ll send and bespeak half a dozen tomorrow morning. (II.i.9-19)

The implication here is clear: the supposed babies fathered by Farinello are the product of him using a wax dildo. According to one French traveler in 1713-14, in St. James’s Park women carried baskets from which they sold dildos that were disguised as dolls, which were quite popular with the young ladies. The idea that a wax baby might be the result of copulation with a wax dildo trades on the commonplace notion that the vigor, activity, and position of parents in coition (and its timing and frequency) may affect the child, that undue copulation may produce monsters, or that ideas in the mother’s imagination at conception or during gestation may affect the shape or appearance of the child.

If lascivious women were accused of taking Farinelli as a lover, it was opportune for satirists to portray the most publicly notorious and scandalous courtesan of the day, Teresa Constantia (Con) Phillips (1709-65), taking Farinelli as a lover. By her death, she had gone through five marriages and at least seven lovers. References to Con and her amours and avarice earned mentions by Alexander Pope, Henry Fielding, and Horace Walpole, among others.

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54 See for example, _Aristotle’s Compleat Master-Piece_, 19th edn (1733), London, 46; _Aristotle’s Master Piece Completed_ (1698), London, 16-17, and 40; and _The Problems of Aristotle_ (1682), D4v, D8v, and E1v.

A number of other sources make fun with the notion of an affair between Con and Farinelli. Joseph Dorman fabricates an exchange of letters between them arranging a rendezvous\textsuperscript{56}. Going further, in the poem “F--LI’s Labour,” Con and Farinelli supposedly live as man and wife. Perceiving her extravagance, Farinelli declares they must part. In revenge, Con vows to give Farinelli something that should spoil his singing. Nine days later, the town is distressed to learn Farinelli is bed-ridden. His case is bad, reports one Peer “‘tis his Mishap, / To be in Labour-- -with a C--p [clap]\textsuperscript{57}.”

The fictional affair between Con Phillips and Farinelli is elaborated on in The Happy Courtezan: Or, the Prude Demolish’d. An Epistle from the Celebrated Mrs. Constantia Phillips, to the Angelick Signior Farinelli (April 1735)\textsuperscript{58}. Con declares her love for Farinelli and renounces for him all men, commoner or peer. Con describes why she desires Farinelli for safe sex and how she is attracted by his effeminacy. Con addresses a clearly feminine Farinelli:

\begin{quote}
While Thy soft beardless Chin, and blooming Cheek, 
That tuneful pleasing Sweetness, when you speak; 
Those Eyes, which like two sparkling Orbits shine; 
And pierce thro’ ev’ry Breast, as well as mine.
\end{quote}

Con lets out the great secret of his attraction to women:

\begin{quote}
‘Tis not for thy sweet Voice and warbling Tongue, 
But that thou’rt handsome, vigorous and young; 
[...] 
They [Prudes] know, that safe with thee they may remain; 
Enjoy Love’s Pleasures, yet avoid the Pain: 
Each, blest in thee, continue still a Maid; 
Nor of a Tell-tale Blantling be afraid: 
This, by Experience, know the Prudes full well, 
Who’re always virtuous, if they never swell.
\end{quote}

One poem takes to vicious extremes a favorite gibe at Farinelli’s expense: his feminine appearance and ambiguous gender. In An Epistle to John James Heidegger, Esq; on the Report of Signior Farinelli’s being with Child (January 1736)\textsuperscript{59}, the author asks Heidegger to clear up the town’s doubt,

\textsuperscript{56} Joseph Dorman, The Curiosity: Or, Gentleman and Lady’s Library (1739), London, 142-3.
\textsuperscript{57} In The St. James’s Register: or, Taste a-la-mode (1736), 36-8; excerpts reprinted in J. Dorman, Curiosity, 138-40, where in other letters, several noblemen supposedly take action on Farinelli’s behalf against the printer of “F--LI’s Labour.”
\textsuperscript{59} For further information and a reprint of the poem, see T. McGeary, “Verse Epistles on Italian Opera Singers.”
“Is the soft Warbler then a Wench with Child?” The author’s fanciful idea that Farinelli could be with child was used by other authors in the same year.

The epistle to Heidegger relates the reactions of various persons to the news of Farinelli’s pregnancy. In most cases, the persons are imputed to have used or desired Farinelli for various types of sexual gratification and are now disappointed. “Chaste Clarinda” despairs she must forego her hoped-for bliss with Farinelli. The news also affected forty prudes and forty “smock’d-fac’d Youths,” who also desire Farinelli as a lover. If Farinelli really is a woman, one Lord Epicæne has lost a potential catamite. In his rage, the Lord would have Farinelli sent to Bridewell. By imputing sexual perversity to Clarinda, Lord Epicæne, the forty prudes, and forty effeminate youth who patronize opera, the poem further widens the scope of those whose sexuality is corrupted by opera and Farinelli.

Farinelli’s Final Season

Farinelli’s last performance of his third season (1736-37) was in June 1737. Unknown to Farinelli and the English, this would be his farewell London performance and his last on the public opera stage. To mark the occasion of his last performance, he composed and had printed in London an aria, “Ah! che non sono le parole,” to express his respect and gratitude to his British public.

After the season, Farinelli left for his second summer in Paris. He did not, as expected, return to London for the next 1737-38 season, but went on to Madrid, where he spent the next twenty-two years in service to the Spanish Court.

Farinelli in Bologna

Farinelli left the Spanish Court in 1759 and retired to Bologna two years later, where, as the English traveler Norton Nicholls reported (writing from Bologna, 7 March 1772), he “lives […] in great esteem.” In his villa, which he had been building and preparing during the past twenty-five years, Farinelli had souvenirs of his stay in Britain and his friends there. He probably had a pair of portraits of the Duke and
Duchess of Leeds, painted by Amigoni. Farinelli also had a pair of pictures of London street-criers by Amigoni; a pair of pictures from Lord Chesterfield; as well as a set of English silver and “a curious” English clock.

Farinelli’s villa became a pilgrimage site for British tourists—perhaps comparable to Voltaire’s or Rousseau’s. By then, many visitors probably knew of his singing only by reputation or from their elders of the previous generation. Farinelli gracefully received his English friends and admirers, unlike Senesino in Siena, where one traveller (George Langton) reported his experience in 1738:

I saw the outside & w’d have seen the inside of Senesino’s house, but my Guide told me he had carry’d other Strangers there but cou’d never get in.

When the Duke of Leeds’s son, the Marquess of Camarthen, visited Farinelli on his Grand Tour in the spring of 1771, Burney reports that “upon being told it was the son of his patron and friend the Duke Leeds, he [Farinelli] threw his arms round his neck, and shed tears of joy in embracing him”.

The blue-stockings Mrs Anne Miller, gives the longest account of an English visitor to Farinelli and his villa in 1772. Part of her compliment seems to stem from how English his garden appears:

When we came thither, we were surprised to find an elegant house built in the taste of an English villa, on what is there generally called an Italian plan: the grounds about the house are laid out in the English style, (ferme ornée) his cattle come up to the door; his hay harvest is just over, and the haystacks are made up in the corner of one of his fields as with us; his trees are planted in hedge-rows and clumps, and the neatness and simplicity is such, that I could scarce persuade myself that we were not in England. He received us most politely at the gate, and shewed us into an excellent saloon for music, where we found the Vice-Legate and several of our acquaintances conversing, and from them we learnt, that they frequented this villa, often passed their evenings here, and treated it as belonging to themselves. Signor Carlo (as Farinelli is called at Bologna) is in person extremely tall and thin, and though considerably advanced in years has a youthful air. The moment we had entered his house, he began to express his obligations to the English nation, for the kind protections and approbation they had bestowed on him when in London; naming several of distinguished rank who flourished in his day, and who had treated him in

67 Charles Burney, General History of Music, 2: 817. Francis Godolphin Osborne, Marquess of Carmarthen (1751-1799) was in northern Italy in 1769-71 on his Grand Tour; see J. Ingamells, A Dictionary of British and Irish Travellers in Italy 1701-1800 (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1997), 182.
the most generous manner, by aiding him with their bounty, and honouring
him with their protection: he concluded, after having made the most grateful
acknowledgments, with saying, he owed to the English that villa and land
which he possessed, and the means of enjoying the remainder of his life in
plenty, tranquility, and ease.

Very genteel refreshments of every kind were brought in, and this man
appears in his own house as if he was made to serve all those who honour him
with their company, and without the least consciousness of his being the owner:
he bears an excellent character, and is much esteemed by all the Bolognese; his
villa is neatly furnished, but very simple. I observed a picture of an English
lady, at full length, in a magnificent frame: she is about the middle size, of a
very genteel make, dressed in a pink night-gown, muslin apron, and a chip hat;
I could not prevail on him to tell me who it was drawn for\(^{68}\). He is also
possessed of one of the finest harpsichords, I suppose, in the world; the portrait
and this harpsichord are what he most values of all he is master of\(^{69}\).

Conclusion

Farinelli’s star blazed over England for only three seasons. Here—
where he sang for the longest period of his public career—he received the
enthusiastic adulation of the English public, which probably more than
anything established his fame. But it was in fact the extreme of the
adulation of his public that no doubt made him such a bivalent figure and
such a potent symbol of both the good and evil aspects of Italian opera.

So, to conclude, if you ask me, “What do you think of Farinelli?” I
reply, “If by Farinelli, you mean that singer whose ravishing charms
corrupted all of English society, I answer, ‘Je le déteste.’ But if by Farinelli,
you mean the most divine singer ever to appear in England, I answer, ‘Je
l’adore.'”

\(^{68}\) This portrait may be that of the Duchess of Leeds.

\(^{69}\) Anne (Riggs) Miller, Letters from Italy, in the Years MDCCLXX and MDCCLXXI to a Friend