

# Farinelli or Concerning the Vocal Derivations of the Old Custom of Castration

Oscar Bottasso

Instituto de Inmunología. Facultad de Ciencias Médicas, Universidad Nacional de Rosario (Argentina).

Correspondence: Oscar Bottasso. Facultad de Ciencias Médicas. Santa Fe 3100. Rosario -2000- (Argentina).

e-mail: [bottasso@uolsinectis.com.ar](mailto:bottasso@uolsinectis.com.ar)

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## Summary

The film presents some of the passages of the life of Carlo Broschi, the famous Farinelli, a *castrato* who delighted so many lovers of the *settecentista* opera. Upon witnessing a street challenge between the young singer and a young trumpeter, over which Farinelli is victorious due to his extraordinary voice, George F. Handel, at the time an official musician of the English court and being present almost by chance, proposes a trip to London. Farinelli rejects the offer which leads to a tense relation between the two of them, a relationship full of antipathies but at the same time with a certain degree of mutual recognition. In contrast to Farinelli's scarcely addressed confinement in the Spanish court, at the peak of his career, the film is rich in showing us the varied visits of the Broschi brothers to different European scenarios, blended with episodes where Farinelli's seductive character triggers numerous love scenes finally consummated by his brother Ricardo, anatomically intact. According to the physiopathology of prepubertal castration this seems more over-acted than real.

**Keywords:** Carlo Broschi, Castration, Farinelli, Gérard Corbiau, Haendel.

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## Technical details

**Title:** *Farinelli*.

**Original title:** *Farinelli*.

**Country:** Belgium, Italy, France and USA.

**Year:** 1994.

**Director:** Gérard Corbiau.

**Photography:** Walter Vanden Ende.

**Music:** Classical themes.

**Photography:** Walther van den Ende.

**Film editor:** Joëlle Hache.

**Screenwriters:** Marcel Beaulieu, Andrée and Gérard Corbiau.

**Cast:** Stefano Dionisi (Carlo Broschi - Farinelli), Enrico Lo Verso (Riccardo Broschi), Elsa Zylberstein (Alexandra), Jeroen Krabbé (George Frederic Handel), Caroline Cellier (Margareth Hunter), Renaud du Peloux de Saint Romain

(Benedict), Omero Antonutti (Nicola Porpora), Marianne Basler (Countess Mauer) Pier Paolo Capponi (Broschi) Graham Valentine (Prince of Wales), Jacques Boudet (Philip V), Delphine Zentout (young fan), Jo Betzing and Josef Betzing.

**Runtime:** 111 minutes.

**Genre:** Biography, Drama, Music.

**Production companies:** K2 SA, Canal+, France 2 Cinéma, MG, RTL, Sony Pictures Classics, Studio Image, Stéphan Films, TV 1 Films Production and Union Générale Cinématographique (UGC).

**Synopsis:** The film deals with some aspects of the life of the Italian opera singer Carlo Broschi, better known as Farinelli, one of the most outstanding "*castrati*" of all times. The film bears a relationship with the context of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and reflects an excellent reconstruction of the times. The use of digital

technology to blend the voices of the soprano Ewa Małas-Godlewska and the countertenor Derek Lee Ragin in an attempt to reconstruct what would have really been Farinelli's voice is very appropriate. As in many other films based on exceptional characters, from our point of view a certain degree of dramatic licence is taken, with no solid basis in the historical and medical aspects in which the action took place. The blurring of Porpora, the reason for the choice of the name Farinelli, the competition between the theatres where Farinelli was presented or where Handel's music was played; the great importance of his brother Ricardo, and the scarce mention to the long years spent in Spain. From a cinematographic point of view, Farinelli's numerous sexual encounters are very sensationalist, although they are less credible in realistic terms.

**Awards:** In 1995 it was nominated for an Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film and it won the Golden Globe for Best Foreign Language Film.

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0109771>

### A brief historical look at castration in Western civilization

We will never know when it was first performed, but, in one way or another, the human being has always been possessed by passions as detestable as this one of castrating, and the well-known joys of the depraved who promoted it. It might have begun as an animal taming practice that someone decided to apply to humans. Confirmation of the behavioural changes that take place in a male sterilized by some accident may well have operated as a trigger.

Be that as it may, when history began to be written castration was practised in many cultures, if not in all. In ancient Egypt, boys were fastened to a table and a radical castration was performed, removing both penis and testicles. The wound was then cauterized and afterwards a small metallic piece was inserted in the urethra to prevent it from closing. The person was buried up to the navel in hot sand for 5 to 6 days with no water or food. Between 20% and 40% of them survived! In India they were "slightly less cruel": the young man was given opium and, while he remained in a sitting position, his organs were fixed with bamboo and later removed with a knife. The wound was washed, sterilized with oil and covered with an oil-soaked cloth. The boy was fed with milk and was made to rest until he healed<sup>1,2</sup>.

The Greeks, very fond of their myths, tell tales about "great" castrations. According to Hesiod (Figure 1) in his *Theogony* (Θεογονία)<sup>3</sup>, not even Uranus himself would have imagined that fateful episode: "*So, those who*

*were born from Gaia and Uranus, the most terrible sons, were angry with their father from the beginning. And every time one of them was about to be born, Uranus kept them all hidden within Gaia's bosom without allowing them to see the light and he cynically enjoyed his evil act. The monstrous Gaia, about to explode, inwardly complained and plotted a cruel trick. Producing a kind of bright steel she forged an enormous sickle and then explained the plan to her sons... The powerful Uranus arrive, driving the night, and he lay on the Earth eager for love and spread himself full upon her. One of his sons (Cronus) leaving his hiding place managed to reach him with his left hand, holding the prodigious sickle, enormous and with a sharp blade, with his right one. He hastily cut off Uranus' genitals and then cast them away to fall behind him".*

There were also stories about Cybele, who, although the different versions do not completely coincide, was considered the Earth Mother goddess, natural



Figure 1: Hesiod and the Muse (1891), by Gustave Moreau (1826-1898). Musée de Orsay in Paris.

from Phrygia in Asia Minor and adored in Anatolia since Neolithic times. As with Gaia, Cybele was the personification of the generous Earth, of Nature and animals, a deity of life, death and resurrection. In the statue in Madrid she can be seen upon a throne in a carriage pulled by two lions (Figure 2). The cult to Cybele was practised by members of a brotherhood who danced in a strange and convulsive way until when an orgiastic frenzy took over not a few mutilated themselves. Zeus, who languished from unrequited love from Cybele, spilled semen over a stone, from which the hermaphrodite Agdistis was born. Later she became a woman after the removal of her genitals, which were the origin of an almond tree that sprouted where they were buried. One of the daughters of the river Sangarios picked an almond and kept it within her bosom, thus becoming pregnant. She gave birth to a child named Attis with whom Cybele fell in love when he reached puberty because of his great beauty. However, the young man was due to marry the King's daughter, which is why the goddess drove him mad during the nuptial ceremony. In his delirium Attis cut off his genitals and died. Remorseful about this, Cybele persuaded Zeus to maintain the body incorrupt. Those who became priests of the cult to Cybele were castrated as a contribution to the Earth Mother<sup>4</sup>.



Figure 2: *La Cibeles* fountain in Madrid (1782). The Goddess and her chariot are the work of Francisco Gutiérrez (1727-1782).

On the other side of the Mediterranean, castration was not well received among the Israelites<sup>5</sup>: *No one who is emasculated or has his male organ cut off shall enter the assembly of the Lord* (Deuteronomy 23:2). Among the impediments for priesthood, Leviticus also mentions *he who has been castrated* (21:20) and for sacrificial animals (22) it establishes that *no animal with crushed, broken, torn off or cut off testicles shall be offered*. Isaiah is more conservative (56:3-5): *Let no foreigner who has bound himself to the Lord say: "The Lord will surely exclude me from his people"; and let not any*

*eunuch complain: "I am only a dry tree". For this is what the Lord says: "To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant, to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off."*

In the New Testament, Mathew (19:2) refers to one of Jesus' comments where he numbers the reasons for not getting married: *"Indeed some do not marry, for there are eunuchs who were born that way from their mother's womb; others were made that way by men and others have renounced marriage because of the Kingdom of Heaven"*. Islam did not look upon castration favourably either, despite the fact that eunuchs were very well accepted in court circles.

Contrary to the pejorative sense it is currently attributed, the term eunuch, derived from Greek *"eunoukhos"* and from Latin *"eunuchus"*, means the guardian of the bedroom (Figure 3). One is thus referring to someone who could be trusted to guard what was most private in the household; a servant who allowed nobody to break into the bridal chamber in the master's absence. Without too much ostentation, it is true that eunuchs castrated after puberty could enjoy a very decent erection. In this sense, a vigorous penis deprived of its sperm produced no pregnancies. Everybody happy!

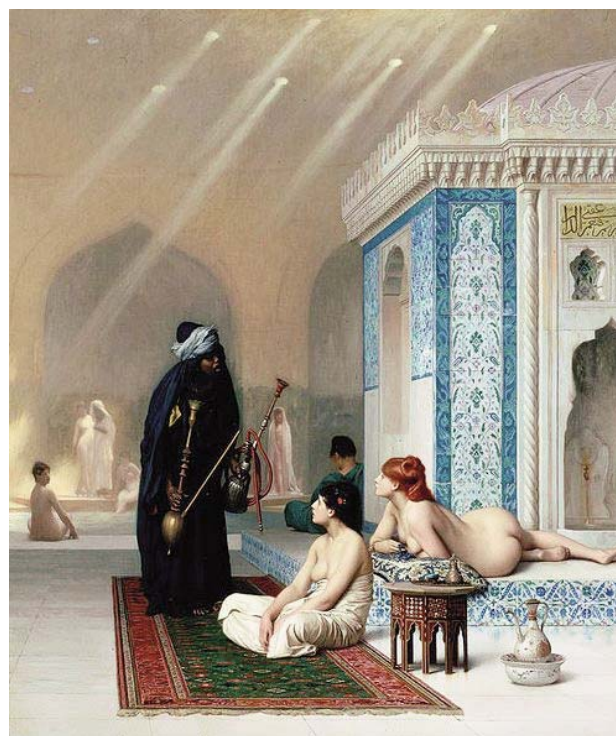


Figure 3: *A eunuch in a harem* (1876) by Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904). Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg.

In the Middle Ages and also during the Renaissance, men continued to mutilate themselves. In addition to punishments linked to adultery, rape or homosexuality, there was now a kind of contraceptive method to avoid succumbing to the eternal temptations in times when sexually transmitted diseases were the order of the day and the practices implemented to cure them were quite bloody. Whoever has witnessed the insertion of the Benique probe in patients with urethral narrowing due to subsequent bouts of urethritis caused by the preventive application of potassium permanganate for possible gonorrhoea will certainly agree with this assertion.

However, there were still things to come. Towards the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the musical sphere of Renaissance Europe would introduce a new type of singer, the *castrati*, young men castrated before puberty and essential to church choirs because female voices were forbidden. The practice was officially introduced in 1599 when Pope Clement VII became enchanted by the sweetness and flexibility of these *quasi* angelical voices, very suitable for choirs and operas, which would very soon win over the scene. *Castrati* inspired a captivating feeling of otherness for some and of horror for others. Not men or women, not children either, "*castrati*" were a complete novelty. As a practice it was illegal, which is why young choirboys who had endured castration were always said to have succumbed to a terrible accident. We have no statistics to ascertain whether the phenomenon acquired epidemic levels, but the number of cases must have been significant. The children were treated with opium and then immersed in a tub with very hot water until they fell unconscious. Then, the surgeon would cut their testicular cords and subsequently pull on them to remove the testicles. Because they were castrated before puberty, their bodies did not undergo the changes brought about by testosterone; they kept their childish features, their facial hair did not appear, they did go bald or develop powerful muscles, and they could not manage a full erection either. Macroscelia was also common; they had long arms, were taller than average, and tended towards obesity. The last *castrato* was Giovanni Battista Velluti, who retired in 1830 (Figure 4).

Castration was introduced as a medical practice in 1941 to treat prostate cancer, a practice that is no longer performed and it is now treated with drugs. We also recognise the existence of psychological castration, but will not deal with this at the moment.

#### Bibliographical data related to Farinelli

The main character of our story was born in 1705 in Andria, what is now Apulia, and was the son of Salvatore Broschi, a composer and *maestro di cappella* at



Figure 4: Giovanni Battista Velluti (1780-1861) around 1800.

the cathedral. His family enjoyed an acceptable economic status. In 1711 they moved to Naples (his mother was Neapolitan), and in 1712 his eldest brother Ricardo entered the Conservatory of Santa Maria di Loreto, specializing in composition. Carlo had a great talent for singing and was introduced to Nicola Porpora, a teacher at the Conservatory of Saint Onofrio, from whom he may have received lessons. 1717 would mark his future: his father Salvatore died unexpectedly and the family's economic situation deteriorated, leading to his inevitable "fall from a horse", demanding that he be castrated. The epidemic of equestrian misfortunes had claimed another victim.

Under Porpora's tuition the young man made great progress and a few years later he made his debut with *Angelica e Medoro*, a composition by Porpora himself whose text was by Pietro Trapassi "Metastasio", with whom he became great friends. In 1722, he sang in Rome for the first time a piece by Porpora and another one by Predieri. The peninsula's musical spheres chattered about the successes of this *ragazzo*, and those years were also when the version of the supposed challenge between him and a musician who was to play an aria with a trumpet appeared, a challenge that he managed to win. As opposed to what is mentioned in the film, the name Farinelli apparently derived from two Neapolitan lawyers, the Farina brothers, who had contributed to paying for his studies.

In 1724, Farinelli made his first appearance in Viena, invited by Pio di Savoia, director of the Imperial Theatre. He would return in 1728 and 1731 for concerts attended by the very emperor. In 1727 he sang at Bologna with the famous *castrato* Antonio Bernacchi in Orlandini's *Antigona*. Although Farinelli had a penetrating, rich, and well-modulated voice, and although he had excellent control over his range, deserving great praise,

Bernacchi excelled in exquisiteness. Farinelli asked him to teach him his techniques, to which Bernacchi acceded.

In 1734 (Figure 5), he moved to London. One year before, Senesio, another castrato from Handel's company (also interested in Farinelli's joining his group), had quarrelled with the composer and he set up a rival company in Lincoln's Inn Fields. Porpora was the company's composer and Senesio its main singer. Farinelli joined them and it did not take them long to reach success. His first appearance took place in *Artaxerxes* and according to critics he was applauded for several minutes. It is even said that the violins found it difficult to follow him in his song. In addition, he was also pleasant and polite, and so the public simply adored him. He remained in the city until the summer of 1737, when he was invited to visit the Spanish court. At a time when music therapy was an accepted practice Elisabetta Farnese, the Queen, believed that Farinelli's voice would cure the deep depression into which her husband, Philip V, had fallen.



Figure 5: Farinelli around 1735. Engraving by Joseph Wagner (1706-1780) according to the painting by Amigoni.

He stopped in Paris to sing at Versailles before King Louis XV. Having arrived in Spain in August, 1737, Farinelli was named chamber musician to the King and honorary member of the Royal Family. He never sang for the public again. Not long after his arrival he became very influential in the court, although he kept out of political matters. For 9 years, Farinelli gave concerts for the royal couple. As a musician he could also play the harpsichord very well and in his latter years he learnt to play the *viola d'amore*. He also used to sing for other members of the royal family and organize private performances for them. In 1738 he arranged for an Italian opera company to visit Madrid, beginning the tradition of *opera seria* in the Spanish capital. His influence at court became even greater with the accession to the throne of Ferdinand VI. The new king was

a keen musician and his wife, Barbara of Portugal, an enthusiast of this art form. In 1750 he was made a Knight of the Order of Calatrava (Figure 6), an honour of which he was extremely proud, even to the point of requesting burial with the mantle of the order. His luck changed radically when in 1759 Ferdinand was succeeded by his half-brother Charles III, who was no lover of music and had never forgiven Farinelli for his decision to remain at court after the death of Philip V. His stay in Spain was coming to an end. He retired to Bologna, where he had acquired a property and was awarded citizenship. There he was visited by great figures; however, he gradually became lonely, having outlived the friends of his own age and generation. He lived in the city from 1761 until he died in 1782, when he was buried in the cemetery of the Capuchin Monastery of Santa Croce<sup>6</sup>. In 1810 his great-niece Maria Carlotta Pisani had his remains transferred to the cemetery of La Certosa in Bologna, because the site of his tomb had been destroyed in the Napoleonic Wars.

In recognition of his career, the Farinelli Study Centre was opened in Bologna in 1998, charged with the restoration of his tomb in Certosa di Bologna (Figure 7), official publication of *Il fantasma del Farinelli* (2005), and the exhumation of his remains on July 12, 2006. His bones were long and strong, in accordance with the reports on the features of a castrato.

Romanticism also took an interest in him. With a libretto by Eugène Scribe (who produced the texts for



Figure 6: Portrait of Carlo Broschi, Farinelli (1750-1752) by Jacopo Amigoni (1682-1752). Note the Cruz de Calatrava cross on his breast. Museo de la Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando, Madrid.

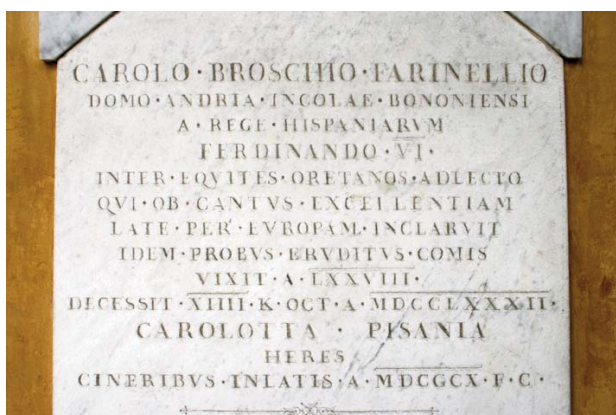


Figure 7: Stone plaque of the tomb of Farinelli in Bologna.

*Ballo in maschera*, *Vespri Siciliani* and *Adrienne Lecouvreur*), Daniel Auber set music to the opera *La Part du Diable*. In 1839 the English composer John Barnett also premiered another opera by the name *Farinelli*<sup>7</sup>.

### Summary of the film

The action begins in 1740 with Riccardo (Enrico Lo Verso) (Figure 8) on his way to Spain in an attempt to become reconciled with Carlo (Stefano Dionisi), and from there we are taken to Naples, 1722, where the well-known quarrel between Carlo and the trumpeter, witnessed (Jeroen Krabbé) by chance by Handel while visiting the city, is played out. In 1720 Handel had been appointed director of the Royal Academy of Music and because of this he was travelling all over Europe seeking singers and composers wishing to live in London<sup>7</sup>. Based on that scene, the director presents three central lines of the story: Carlo's supposed baptism as Farinelli for turning the trumpet *into flor*; the girl who is captivated by Carlo's voice and the lovers' meeting of the two of them, which Riccardo also attends owing to the physical and functional limitations of his brother, and the meeting between Handel and the Broschi brothers, which triggers a lack of understanding between them that is never solved and whose central theme develops in London.



Figure 8: Riccardo Broschi (Enrico Lo Verso).

The brothers' symbiosis is an ingredient that is used, and perhaps overused, by the director, taking as a starting point Carlo's seductive power that leads to different trysts, finally consummated by his brother Ricardo. This arrangement is very well illustrated in a performance at which Farinelli stops singing (*Ombra fedele anch'io*) when he notices that countess Mauer (Marianne Basler) is absorbed in the reading of a text, a situation that later results in a game of seduction she plays with Carlo and the subsequent threesome (Figure 9).



Figure 9: Countess Mauer (Marianne Basler).

As mentioned, the main part of the film is devoted to the 3 years spent in London. In 1734 he begins to sing with Porpora's company, which competed with the productions set up by Handel, a struggle that at the same time fed the composer's continuous attacks against Farinelli, who he called a *singing machine*, *jumble of notes*, *voice born without a soul*, *virtuosity instead of inspiration and enchanter of the female public*, among other "flatteries". In turn, Farinelli, who already had enough with his brother, the self-declared promoter of his own popularity and a permanent reminder that he was a castrato, defended Handel's music before the prince himself, but at the same time made it clear that his song had power over the rest. In fact, when we have contact with others, what resounds inside us is linked to our first emotional experiences, prior to reason. Language appears later and tries to give meaning, encode or envelope the feeling, and it is this way that we appoint words to sensations. Perception is cut from emotion and it also has an effect on our sensorial perception and on our memory. It could be proposed that there is a kind of perceptive severance that depends on our significant plots. Thus, emotion invades us before we even have conscious awareness of the underlying feeling. It is an affective state in which we can experience intense upset strongly involving the autonomic nervous system and the endocrine system. When these emotions are not decoded by consciousness there is "permission" for them to exert a substantial influence over our acts without us having a clear notion of the fact that they are momentarily governing us. In the case

of somatizations, the body confronts what the mind did not manage to register, although for the time being this is another story. Carlo, whom we are now dealing with, triggered pleasant emotional states (Figure 10), and how not to desire to approach, and even better, possess, whoever was able to grant such pleasure (let us reflect for a moment on what would happen to a pop singer if he were reached by a female public eager for experiences, not precisely of the platonic type)? Even though the “goal” had been maimed in his amatory possibilities, it is clear that Ricardo’s participation provided a certain degree of compensation that encouraged exploration.



Figure 10: The Carlo we are currently dealing with triggered emotional states of pleasure.

Interwoven with other scenes in which Alexandra (Elsa Zylberstein) (Figure 11) Lady Margareth (Caroline Cellier) and her son appear (Figure 12), the plot continues to be centred on the Broschi brothers and Handel. Carlo is in possession of one of the musician’s scores, Ricardo continues setting music to his never ending Orpheus, and Handel, while revising the music Ricardo plays, listens to the reasons for his brother’s castration: a voice that had to be saved, not only because of its talent, but because his music would flow through it; a union of a higher nature than that of the one between lovers. Although the film is not focused in that direction, the historical data do not suggest that Handel disapproved of castrati, since the role of Rinaldo was appointed to a *castrato contraltino*.

Carlo finally sings one of Handel’s operas at a theatre frequented by the nobility. The booing at the beginning soon gives way to a respectful silence and increased attention, and this finally results in the passionate applause of the public after Rinaldo’s *Cara Sposa* (Figure 13). From the upper tiers of the theatre, Ricardo sees how Handel throws a letter that falls at Carlo’s feet when *Venti turbine* comes to its end. The content is no less wounding than his previous attacks, a castrato who consecrates his talent to his punishers while he spits at Handel, now castrated of his own musical talent. *Lascia ch’io pianga* follows, blended with scenes of his childhood and the castration. The climax washes over the whole audience, and



Figure 11: Alexandra (Elsa Zylberstein).



Figure 12: The son of Lady Margareth.

even Handel himself is seized by a huge feeling of excitement, and the public acclaims Carlo verbally (Figure 14). On the stage there is a being enveloped in a drama that he did not enter voluntarily and that he somehow tries to mitigate by means of what he arouses in others.

The last part of the plot takes place in Spain. Ricardo appears after 3 years and claims to have finished his Orpheus, to which Carlo had also been setting music.



Figure 13: Carlo singing the *Cara Sposa* aria in *Rinaldo* by Handel.



**Figure 14:** The climax takes hold of everybody and even Handel himself is visibly excited.

Ricardo's soul is as dark as the Madrid of those times, taken over by an eclipse (Figure 15). At his brother's refusal to forgive him he tries to commit suicide but fails. Shortly after leaving his sickbed he spots Carlo and Alexandra intertwined in their mutual love and he approaches them to consummate the act as he had so often done before. In a very well balanced scene, Alexandra's look pierces Carlo as his brother does what is expected from him. The brother moves away and Alexandra conceives a child. Though not complete, there is finally "pay back".



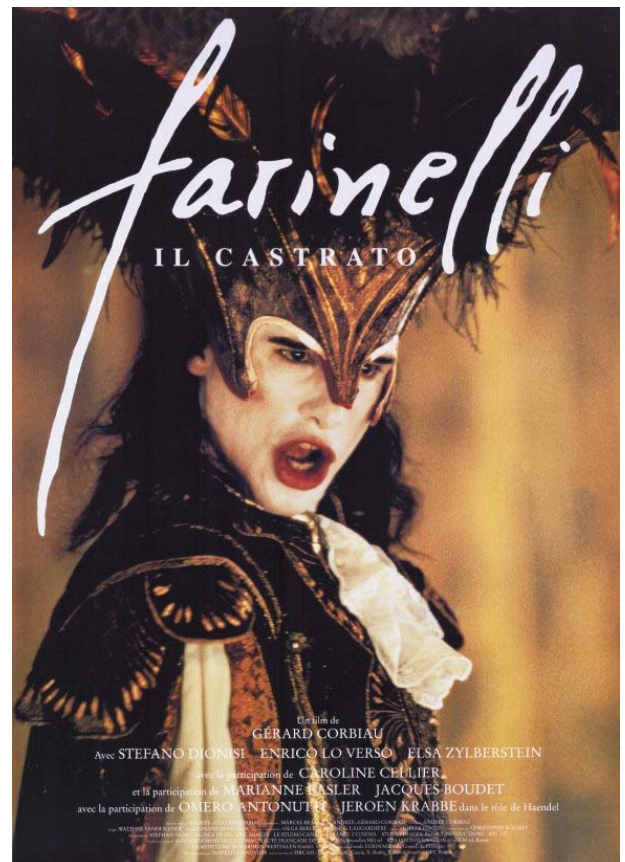
**Figure 15:** Ricardo's soul is as dark as Madrid when invaded by an eclipse.

## Conclusion

From a semantic point of view, the term testicle is linked to a kind of "qualification" to testify. Obviously, whoever was deprived of them could not testify. In addition to the sexual connotations, there is no doubt that a castrato accumulated enough reasons to feel degraded in the most private part of his being. And when it comes to disgracing, we human beings are very learned, especially concerning others but sometimes even towards ourselves. Upon this basis, "demoniacal fortune" one day endows castration with quite different connotations. Adorned with money and fame, the tacit or openly expressed justification for a practice that is unacceptable

from all points of view achieves consent.

The film adapts to this historical context and displays an excellent reconstruction of the times. In an attempt to reconstruct what would have been Farinelli's singing the voices of the soprano Ewa Małas-Godlewska and the countertenor Derek Lee Ragin were fused together by means of digital technology. For their part, the characters display the different sides of the human race: Carlo's ambiguous relationship with Ricardo; a Porpora who is more interested in business than in music itself, unlike a virtuous Handel who somehow manages to seduce Farinelli, who finally sings Rinaldo as if he were almost excusing his pride and rancour; as well as a kind of musical orgasms from the attending public, which is worthy of psychoanalytical research. As in so many films based on outstanding characters, it seems to us that there is a certain degree of poetic license for which there is no solid justification from the historical and medical context in which the action took place: the reason why the name Farinelli was adopted, the competition between the theatres where Farinelli sang and those where Handel's music was played; the huge influence of his brother Ricardo, and the numerous love scenes in which Farinelli plays a part, which on the basis of a cas-



Belgian poster



trato's physiopathology seems more an exaggeration than a reality. Nevertheless, all these ingredients are very effective when it comes to arousing the public's interest.

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