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*A true likeness? Removing the dust of musicological methodologies
and modern performance traditions from the portraits of early 18th-century
castrati*

The phenomenon of the castrato in European Art Music has attracted considerable attention within and beyond musicology for over 50 years. Some castrati, in particular the most famous of them, Carlo Broschi Farinelli, were almost mythical figures already in their own lifetime. Both musicologists and practitioners subscribing to the historically informed performance practice ethos have been seeking to recover and restore historically accurate knowledge and approaches to music-making. But do the large bodies of scholarly writings and music recordings create a true likeness of the castrati and their musical practice?

To be sure, the concept of historical accuracy is indisputably elusive. However, it is possible and useful to reflect on how modern practices and vantage points shape our understanding of the past. This paper analyses areas in which the modern image of early 18th-century castrato singers and their art has come to be transmuted. Examining modern notions and practices, such as conventions of casting and ornamentation, the conception of the *dramma per musica* as a musical genre and the idea of the castrato's 'otherness', it will remove some of the patina that has formed through the influence of modern performance traditions as well as scholarly methodologies.