

Upskirting the Past: Cross-Dressing Divas and Their Impact on LGBTQ Rights

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Abstract

Cross-Dressing, while ostracized by heteronormative culture, has played a surprisingly large role in the history of western music. From the castrati of 17th-century opera to the travesti of the 18th and 19th centuries to drag queens and pop stars of the 20th and 21st centuries, cross-dressing divas have captured audience's attention. First appearing in Roman Catholic Church music and eventually spreading to the operatic tradition, this paper explores castrati as a group but focuses on the most infamous castrati, Carlo Broschi, now more commonly known as Farinelli, and his role in the development in Italian Opera. Eventually, travesti replaced castrati, as the public still yearned for the "high voice"; however, cultural attitudes towards castrati became negative. Jumping forward to the "drag" tradition of the twentieth century, particularly Drag Queens whose prominence grew after the Stonewall Riots of 1969, this presentation will focus on RuPaul, whose song "Supermodel (Your Better Work)" was the first music video by a drag performer to be played on MTV, causing a great rise in the visibility of the drag community. Finally, this presentation will include a close look at Lady Gaga, whose alternate male persona, Jo Calderone, makes a number of appearances in her music videos, most notably, "Yoü and I." Viewing my musicological research through the lens of queer theory, I theorize that cross-dressing is more accepted when it is viewed as a form of cultural entertainment as opposed to a queer lifestyle. As humans, we are uncomfortable with anything that goes against our typical and outdated view on the duality of gender. However, by viewing cross-dressing as a means of entertainment, the public has been greater able to accept these alternate ways of life. This is an important topic of research due to the prevalence of current discussion and scholarship into Queer Theory and LGBTQ rights. By better understanding the ways in which cross-dressing has been discussed historically, we can more actively participate in the dialogue on its place in our modern world.

Keywords: Music, Castrati, Drag

1. Introduction

Go to any gay club in the world on a Saturday night and you will undoubtedly see a Drag Queen lip-syncing to a song by a gay icon such as Cher, Madonna, or Lady Gaga. While some might think that this prevalence of cross-dressing in Western society is a modern phenomenon, cross dressing was common in Baroque and Classical Italian opera, where men were castrated before puberty and performed female roles in musical performances. There are a number of cultural differences between the methods and reasons for these gendered performances, ranging from the public's desire to watch these gender-bending acts to the performers themselves wanting to "try on" a new gender. It is interesting to look at these different instances of cross-dressing in musical performances because cross-dressing has been frowned on for so much of history, yet has also been accepted in certain circumstances. While these circumstances have varied greatly, there are some correlations, particularly the use of cross-dressing as a means of entertainment.

2. Castrati

Since the dawn of church music with the Byzantine and Eastern European ceremonies, castrati have existed. Composers were writing music for “high voices” yet females were not allowed to sing in Christian churches due to the patriarchal nature of the religion. At this point in history, it was mostly monks who were being castrated to obtain the high voices needed to sing the parts¹. The Catholic Church at this time maintained a very strict policy that women were to remain silent in churches, and as Rome was the papal state, the rule carried throughout the city. Women were strictly forbidden to sing in public, though some private performances were staged in homes with women singing.² Even with the ban of female vocalists in Rome, the fascination with the female voice spread throughout Italy up to Florence, where the *concerto de donne* was formed to perform “secret music” for the court of Ferrera. An early opera composer, Giulio Caccini, took a special interest in the female voice due to the presence of musical talent in his second wife, Margherita, and his two daughters, Francesca and Settimia. Francesca also possessed the gift of composition, as she is believed to be the first woman to compose an Opera.³ Her appointment as a court musician to the Granducato of Tuscany at age twenty made secured that she would enjoy the most professional and productive career of any female musician up until then.⁴ As the popularity of the soprano voice grew, the need for “high voices” in more church choirs grew as well. The first castrati were admitted to the Sistine Choir in 1599, much to the dismay of the countertenors currently in the choir. While Pope Clement VIII (1592-1605) took a stand against castration, he said it was authorized for the glory of God. As church composers started to understand the possibilities of using castrati voices, secular composers started to use castrati in a number of ways, particularly to play female roles if female singers were not available or allowed.⁵

It is interesting to note that the public did not react negatively to the castrated vocalists at all, quite the contrary. The castrati had become the stars of the operas; in many cases people were more interested in them, the performers, than the actual opera. This led to a rise in the number of castrati roles in Opera, with the eventual ratio becoming seven to two to one of castrati to tenor to basses in sixteenth century opera.⁶ The love for the castrati voice led to many of the male leads being written for castrati, instead of the “traditional” male vocal types, the tenor and the bass. While our modern ears may be confused with the hero of an opera being sung by a soprano voice, at this period in history, it was considered the norm.

A number of operas use several cross-dressing parts, with one prime example being Alessandro Scarlatti’s *Pompeo*. This is a great work to study due to the diversity in character portrayals done by singers of opposite sexes. This opera has very few roles being played by the sex of their character - men are being played by women, women are being played by men, and castrati were being used for both male and female characters. Women playing the role of men were known as travesti. While there are many instances of this phenomenon, the most common was to play castrato roles when a castrato was not present. The reason for all of these character shifts was that composers were experimenting with combining different vocal timbres to try to find the blend that they found the most aesthetically pleasing.⁷ In some ways, this was a more free and open time for composers as they were not locked into vocal stereotypes of the heroic tenor and soprano heroine. By the late-nineteenth century, these standards were so ingrained that cross-dressing had almost stopped - minus historic performance, comedy, and women acting as a young boy.

The vocal range of the castrati varied as much as the vocal ranges of typical male vocalists, though some castrati had ranges spanning more than three octaves. Due to the wide range and unique timbre of the castrati voice, many composers wrote for certain castrati. One of the most interesting things about the castrati phenomenon is that in most cases the castrati did not choose to become one, the decision was made by their parents and other musicians before the child was able to comprehend what was happening.⁸ This is an interesting departure from many other instances of cross-dressing throughout history; the actual person doing the gender-switching has little control over their gender roles. They were not becoming the opposite gender because they wanted to but instead because someone else made decision that it was something that they should do.

Cultural attitudes toward castrati are some of the most troubling points to discuss. While the public clearly was supportive of the gender bending performers, the role of the church waxed and waned with time. The church played a very large role in the creation of the castrati phenomenon but they were also instrumental in their demise. There were a number of laws passed throughout Europe that limited the rights of castrati, including their ability to get married. These laws were based off of biblical scripture saying that only those who were able to procreate should be allowed to marry as sex for reasons other than procreation was sinful. In some cases these laws were simply ignored, though one time the marriage of Queen Anne of France to castrati Bartolomeo de Sorlisi was approved because allowing a castrati to marry was a lesser evil than allowing the queen to have sex out of wedlock, as she was so in love with Sorlisi that she was prepared to break “god’s law” and have sex outside of marriage. The church

decided it was a lesser crime to allow a castrato to marry than to allow a Queen to have extra-marital sex.⁹ It is also interesting to note that while the church did not support them legally, there were a number of castrati supported by the church by means of employment in church choirs up until the start of the twentieth century. This control of the castrati phenomenon is just another example of the church wanting to control aspects of people's personal life and gender identity.

Perhaps the most infamous castrato of all time was Carlo Maria Michelangelo Nicola Broschi, more commonly known by his stage name Farinelli. Born in 1705, Broschi moved to Naples when he was young and began to study with pedagogue Nicola Porpora. Farinelli made his public debut in 1720 in Porpora's opera *Angelica e Medro*. After his performance, the demand for Farinelli throughout Northern Italian cities grew exponentially. Through his travels to Venice, Milan, and Florence, Farinelli made a number of connections with high profile people, including the Duke of Parma, Antonio Farnese, Count Sicino Pepoli, and the English ambassador, Lord Essex. Farinelli's connection to Lord Essex was essential in developing his international perception, particularly in England. Handel had tried to secure Farinelli for his opera company in the late 1720s, though in 1734 Farinelli signed a contract with a competing opera company where Porpora was the lead composer. After his stint in London, Farinelli was invited to spend time in Madrid singing in the royal court. He spent the end of his life in his house in Bologna, living a life surrounded by music and art. While Farinelli would be remembered simply for his career as a performer, his impact in all areas of music is just as extensive. Farinelli was an active composer, as well as keyboardist and violist. Above all, his vocal stylings and musicianship made him an artist that everyone strived to be like.¹⁰ A renaissance man of music, Farinelli is a musician that is far too often forgotten.

No one is sure of how many total castrati there were, though one can assume that in between 1630 and 1750 one could find several hundred castrati throughout Europe, most of them in Italy. In the larger cities they were prevalent enough to become a feature of everyday life.¹¹ In the mid-nineteenth century, the popularity of the castrati voice declined due to the rise of the tenor as the hero of the opera. The opera reform instituted by Gluck in the mid-to-late 1700's also played a large role in the end of the castrato. Many castrati would rely on added embellishments to draw in and maintain an audience. As composers started to limit the performer's ability to do this, they limited the power of the castrati.¹² To this day there remains one recording of an actual castrati singing, though it does not do justice to the apparent crystalline quality of the castrati voice.

3. Drag Performers

As castrati left the stage, another group of cross-dressing performers entered - Drag Queens and Kings. Male and female impersonation has existed for centuries, as previously discussed with castrati and travesti. In the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century's, a number of high profile male homosexuals and lesbians were known to dress as the opposite sex as a way of helping bring the issues of homosexual rights to the forefront of society. During the jazz age, a number of African-American female singers would dress as men in their acts. Gladys Bentley would regularly wear tuxedos in her performances and there are a number of drawings of the infamous Ma Rainey dressed in full drag trying to seduce women.¹³ In the 1960s, drag queen pageants began all around the United States and they became a stigma of the homosexual community. However, after the Stonewall Riots of 1969, drag queens took center stage in the gay rights movement as they were already out and proud. Different regional styles of drag began to develop across the country through the drag shows, balls, and pageants, creating subcultures within the drag community.¹⁴

Many comedic writers know that having a man dress up as a woman is a very easy way to get cheap laughs, but as a culture, we should remember that people dress in drag for a number of reasons. There is an assumed link between drag and homosexuality, though one does not have to be gay to perform in drag. However, due to the assumption and link between homosexuality, drag has been outlawed in a number of cities, including Los Angeles, during times of unrest in the gay community.¹⁵ A number of people become interested in drag because of feelings of transsexualism and believe that it is a good way of having a "test-run" in another body. Others feel that drag is a way of "performing" gender to an extreme. Judith Butler says that "drag is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality."¹⁶ Butler is saying that the act of dressing in drag is meant to point out the inconsistencies in the traditional views on the duality of gender and the fact that we as humans consistently try to fit everyone into our established dual gender roles. Then there are those that try to break the mold and they are ostracized from society for their non-conformity. In terms of drag and music there are two main instances - the

performers who always embody a drag persona and those who simply cross-dress from time to time to make a cultural statement.

Drag Queens and Kings make up a subculture of the gay community. While this community has existed for many decades, it started to come to the forefront of pop culture in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The 1990 documentary film, *Paris is Burning*, helped enlighten the American public about what was happening in the large cities around the nation. This film highlighted many parallels between drag culture and musical training of castrati. In the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century, most castrati attended specialized conservatories with programs specifically for developing castrati. At these schools, developing singers learned from great talents about how to increase their skills so that they could become opera stars as well.¹⁷ A parallel in the drag world is the presence of “Drag Houses” or “Drag Families.” These are groups of drag queens who are all mentored by an older, more seasoned drag queen. These “Drag mothers” help their protégés learn about technical aspects of drag performance such as make-up, sewing, and lip-syncing, similar to how the vocal teachers at conservatories centuries ago taught young castrati.¹⁸ Most drag queens also go through a process known as “tucking” whenever they begin the process of getting into their drag personas. This process involves manipulating the male genitalia to appear female for a more authentic performance. While this is not a permanent procedure like the orchiectomies that castrati underwent to obtain their unique voices, drag queens will go to extreme so that they both give a more accurate performance as well as feel more feminine.¹⁹

One of the early icons of drag is RuPaul, born RuPaul Andre Charles. Having moved to New York City in the early 1980s, she lived among the homeless drag community of Central Park. She eventually rose to stardom after the release of her hit single and music video “Supermodel of the World.” Not only was this one of the first portrayals of a drag queen in a positive spotlight, it also started a trend of the creation of drag scenes throughout major cities around the globe as well as an increase in numbers domestically.²⁰ One drag queen was even quoted as saying, “The day RuPaul came out it [the number of drag queens] went from 20 to 1,000, ‘cause every faggot thought I can be a star too. It was really crazy. I hated her for that.”²¹

The video that caused the stir shows RuPaul taking on the role of a supermodel while singing about how when you are a supermodel, you look good in any clothing.²² One can interpret this video in a number of ways. She could be singing and dancing in this way as a means of shocking the audience, as at this time, many people in small towns had not seen a drag queen. She could have been doing this to as a way of being arrogant and trying to prove to the world that she was the most beautiful woman. She could also have been trying to help demonstrate to the audience that there are many different interpretations of beauty and that all should be valued and accepted. Finally, she also could be seen as helping those who are confused with their gender realize that they can be whoever they want to be and will always be beautiful. While the lyrics and the attitude present in the video can make this seem as a bit of a stretch, I do believe that this is the eventual message that she was going for.

Since “Supermodel of the World” premiered, there has been an explosion of cross-dressing in popular culture, to the point that there are even reality shows to find future drag superstar. RuPaul challenges these budding stars to use their charisma, uniqueness, nerve, and talent to not only perform her music, but to create their own. In a similar vein to “Supermodel,” almost all of these songs have a positive message. Manilia Luzon, a contestant on *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, released a single in 2012 called “Hot Couture,” a song that also preaches the importance of self confidence and the power of fashion.²³

4. Cross-Dressing Superstars

In contrast to those who performers who only perform in drag, there are those who simply take on a same-sex persona from time to time to make a point. There are examples of performers like this throughout a number of musical genres, perhaps with the greatest numbers being in Pop and Rock. Stars such as Freddie Mercury, Boy George, David Bowie, and Lady Gaga have all been known to dress as a different gender for shock value or performance reasons.

In a recent Lady Gaga music video, “You and I,” Gaga takes on a number of personas including male, female, and mermaid. Perhaps one of the most provocative scenes has Gaga portraying both a male and female role. The male persona is known as Jo Calderone, a typical hyper-masculine male. Calderone made his first appearance on the cover of the September 2010 issue of Japanese Men’s Vogue. Since then, the pop music scene has been abuzz with discussion about who exactly Calderone is and what his relationship is with Gaga.²⁴ In the video, Calderone comes complete with cigarettes and actions that some could almost interpret as domestic violence. In contrast her female persona is extremely feminine with neutral makeup and white clothing, leaving us with a feeling of innocence.²⁵ While some would say that Gaga is only doing this for the shock value, I would argue that instead she is having the

audience think critically about the duality of gender. The one physical embrace between the male and female Gaga occurs as she sings “Something, something about just knowing when it’s right/...You and I, you, you and I/Baby, I’d rather die without you and I.” While the obvious interpretation is that Gaga cannot live without her lover, but I can see another meaning to this detail. Gaga is saying that she herself cannot live without her masculine and feminine traits and others should not either.

It is interesting to note that Lady Gaga is a self-identified bisexual, having had both male and female sexual partners in the past. A number of her other songs deal with her bisexuality, including her early hit “Poker Face,” which many interpret to be about a woman who sleeps with a man, but wishes it was a woman.²⁶ One could also say that Gaga is trying to make her audience challenge their views on gender, sexuality and desire. Heather Humann brings forth a situation in which a heterosexual male, who is sexually attracted to Lady Gaga, realizes that Gaga and Calderone are the same individual. So does this mean that the man is having homosexual attraction since he is now also attracted to a “man?” Is a heterosexual female who is attracted to Jo Calderone having lesbian feelings since Calderone is really a female?²⁷ Lady Gaga is using her music and music videos to express her feelings of attraction to both genders, and in a way, her feelings of identifying with both genders. Within each of us there are “masculine” and “feminine” traits; it is important that we do not ignore either aspect of our personality as this could lead to sexism developing within our society.

5. Conclusion

There are countless other examples of cross-dressing throughout musical history and they all serve a purpose - whether to fill the role of a missing gender or to question and defy conventional gender stereotypes. The acceptance of cross-dressing in music without it coming across as comedic is key; it shows that those in the music community are more concerned about the integrity of the art than with who is creating it. To some performers, cross-dressing is who they are, so for the community at large to make a mockery of them is simply cruel. Humanity has come a long way in our acceptance of alternative lifestyles, though there is still much work that needs to be done. In the eternal words of RuPaul, “If you can’t love yourself, how the hell you gonna love somebody else? Can I get an amen up in here?”

6. Acknowledgements

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