Roger Freitas. 2009. *Portrait of a Castrato: Politics, Patronage, and Music in the Life of Atto Melani.* New Perspectives in Music History and Criticism. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.

Reviewed by Emily Wilbourne

Roger Freitas firmly situates his book, *Portrait of a Castrato: Politics, Patronage, and Music in the Life of Atto Melani*, as biography, yet the text aspires to something more: both the blurb and the introduction promise to clarify "what music at this time actually was." More properly, Freitas offers an articulate analysis of the social valence of musical performance within the elite circles of the seventeenth-century Italian courts; he focuses on music as a skill with material benefits.

The subject of Freitas's book, Atto Melani (1626–1714), was a castrato, trained as a singer, although eventually he moved away from performance, spending the latter years of his life as a diplomat. According to Freitas, Atto—referred to by his first name, as per contemporary convention—was the "most highly documented" musician of the seventeenth century (2). With few exceptions, the documents that survive are letters written by Atto, and addressed to a cross-section of the most important political figures in Italy. In his relationship to courtly culture and as a court musician, Atto participated in an increasingly anachronistic model of "musical performance," one which persisted in contrast with newer, recognizably modern patterns of professionalization associated with the public operatic stage. This is, perhaps, one of the most valuable aspects of this study: Freitas has ably and coherently mapped out the way in which the intricate and asymmetrical obligations of patron and client functioned in seventeenth-century Italy, situating Atto's musical skills within a broad range of courtly services and deftly portraying the castrato's gradual shift from court musician to courtier.

Acknowledging the co-existence of courtly patronage alongside public performance is an important task for scholars who would take the seventeenth century on its own terms. In attempting to do just that, Freitas faces several other challenges—not least the codifications and assumptions inherent in the genre of musical biography.

As Freitas points outs, musical-biographical writings focus almost exclusively on composers rather than performers, where the subject's "life" is valued for the extent to which it illuminates the subject's "work." If this model works most efficiently for nineteenth-century composers and their oeuvres, it has frequently been applied to composers such as Claudio Monteverdi with little modification.

In choosing to write about a seventeenth-century performer, however, Freitas is not alone. Richard Wistreich's recent book on Giulio Cesare Brancaccio (2007) is an obvious example, along with a number of texts dealing with female subjects. Suzanne G. Cusick's long-awaited book on Francesca Caccini (2009) treats Caccini's compositional achievements as one facet of a musical career that included performance, as do a number of studies of Barbara Strozzi, and by the time this review goes to print, Amy Brosius will have defended a dissertation on female singers in Rome (2009). To this list, we can add Anne MacNeil's work on the late sixteenth-century singer, actress and poet, Isabella Andreini (2003), and my own work (Wilbourne 2008) on the early seventeenth-century career of Isabella's daughter-in-law, Virginia Andreini.

Each of the above authors deals differently with the question of writing about performance. In Freitas's case, he chooses to sidestep the issue of specific performances and their impact or meaning entirely. Instead, as is implied above, he focuses on the use value of performances for Atto and for his patrons in a courtly milieu where "work" was socially inappropriate and favors were exchanged according to a complicated etiquette. In addition, Freitas spends a substantial portion of the book discussing the fifteen extant compositions attributable to Atto; this is, in my opinion, the least convincing part of the monograph, a topic I will discuss in more detail below.

Alongside biography and court culture, Freitas provides a careful reassessment of the role of castrati within Italian society. Atto Melani was the second of seven sons—all of whom became musicians—and the first of four who were castrated with the intention of preserving the beauty of their youthful singing voices. In chapter 1, "Creating a Castrato," Freitas details the known facts of Atto's early life, placing the individual singer firmly within a particular family, and the Melani family within a seventeenth-century context of blood relations, family honor, and parental responsibility. He argues for the importance of the family as a whole over the individual and emphasizes the principle of "indivisible inheritance":

> Parents knew that if they parceled out their assets to all the children, the family would never accumulate wealth and standing. Accordingly, one male child, usually the eldest, was designated sole inheritor of the family's titles and fortune, leaving his siblings in less secure circumstances . . . [T]he most common consequence of the indivisible inheritance was the imposition of a "'sacred' or 'profane' celibacy" on the younger sons and daughters of the family. (27)

Read alongside research into the frequency of the surgical procedure of castration and anecdotes of individual cases from a variety of social strata, Freitas's focus on the family manages to detach the decision made by Atto's parents from the expressions of outrage and offended sensibilities typical of modern commentators.

Freitas continues his project of normalizing the practice and lived experience of castration in chapter 4, "The Sexuality of the Castrato," much of which appeared previously in his 2003 article, "The Eroticism of Emasculation: Confronting the Baroque Body of the Castrato." While the argument of the earlier article—that the castrato represented the highly eroticized figure of the adolescent boy, an age thought particularly suited (and vulnerable) to the delights of love—remains essentially unchanged, Freitas brings the generalizations admirably to bear on the specific circumstances of Atto's life. Freitas discusses an affair between Atto Melani and Carlo II Gonzaga-Nevers, Duke of Mantua, and another between Atto and a young, unnamed Italian nobleman who also seems to have had an affair with the Duke, along with evidence of heterosexual assignations. Taken together, chapters 1 and 4 argue convincingly for the ubiquity and normality of the castrato within seventeenth-century Italian society.

If chapters 1 and 4 theorize outward from the exemplar of Atto Melani to suggest ways in which the category "castrato" can be better understood, chapters 2, 3, 5, and 7 deal with the specific biographical circumstances of Atto's life. Throughout these four chapters, which are rich in their use of documentary material, Freitas maintains an admirable deftness of touch, conveying the twists and turns of complicated political machinations with clarity. These chapters are remarkably easy to read and should reward seventeenth-century scholars who desire a concise yet detailed explication of specific Italian political events alongside less well-versed readers hoping for an insight into the world of the seventeenth-century courtier.

Atto's transition from musician to diplomat is fascinating, although at times I wished for some comparison with other performer/politicians. The traveling commedia dell'arte performers of the early part of the century would have made a nice foil. Useful and pertinent parallels exist not only at the level of patronage, but also at the level of informant. Flaminio Scala (1547–1624), for example, who directed the *Confidenti* troupe, exchanged vital political information on the cities they visited in exchange for the patronage of Don Giovanni dei' Medici. The details are evident in Scala's letters, readily available in modern edition (Burattelli, et al. 1993); as a point of comparison with Atto's behavior they would have helped the reader to determine when and where his actions deviated from the norm.

Chapter 6, "Atto Melani and the Cantata," shifts the focus from biographic detail, political intrigue, and the social acceptability of castration to that of specific musical pieces and compositional style. Surprisingly, while Freitas is keen to emphasize structural differences between traditional musico-biographical models and his own book—in particular, the familiar "Life and Works" template—his choice to devote an entire chapter to Atto's compositions, without devoting similar attention to other works in which Atto merely performed, replicates too neatly the "Life and Works" divide.

A significant portion of the eighty-five-page chapter situates the cantata within its social milieu and rehearses the arguments about cantata poetry and the function of wit that Freitas published in *Music & Letters* in 2001. It does so as a means of valorizing the genre within which Atto composed: all fifteen extant works are chamber cantatas. From there, Freitas discusses the texts of Atto's oeuvre and analyses the extent to which poetic form is represented in his musical settings. A large portion of the chapter is devoted to an articulation of Atto's musical style, tracing similarities with and differences from the main "schools" of contemporary cantata composition, namely that of Luigi Rossi versus Antonio Cesti.

This in itself is useful work; however, the evidence of Atto's reputation as a composer is scant, and Freitas never quite manages to justify his interest in the extant works as evidence of compositional intent. This where I want to quibble most dramatically with Freitas's goals and his musicological conclusions. My issue is not that Freitas wants to see compositional value in music by someone other than a first-tier composer, but rather that he does so at the expense of an improvisational performance tradition.

Among the most evident challenges for those who wish to write about seventeenth-century performers and performance is the difficulty of knowing what, when, and where a given singer performed; such details are only infrequently recorded. Even where the pertinent information can be ascertained with any precision, a second problem concerns the relationship of extant scores to their sounding representations: the importance of improvisation and ornamentation cannot be overstated. To my mind, the compositional efforts of someone predominantly trained in improvisation provide an extraordinary opportunity to uncover improvisational and musical elements of the performance repertoire of a specific singer, and I would have liked to see Freitas engage with that possibility. Instead, he dismisses it quickly. Of Atto's musical style, he writes:

> Perhaps [Atto] was just aiming to turn out standard, if unexceptional, embodiments of a Rossian heritage. Or perhaps his use of formulas is a sign of improvisation, his extant works representing little more than notated extemporizations. Other aspects of the works argue against both conclusions and suggest instead that Atto devoted considerable care and imagination to his compositions. (262)

This is an oddly loaded statement, and one that implies that improvising musicians performed with a lack of care and imagination—although I don't believe that Freitas intended to make such a blatant claim. I do believe, however, that a convincing argument could be made linking Atto's composi-

tional strategies to his improvisational practices without downgrading them to the second-class status of notated extemporizations; the same evidence Freitas marshals in order to bolster Atto's claim to compositional skill can be thus re-interpreted with very little difficulty. Indeed, one could argue that improvisation was a compositional skill and that singer-performers who notated the occasional piece of music might have done so in order to showcase their distinctive style such that "their" music making could be enjoyed elsewhere.

The elements of Atto's musical style itemized by Freitas include a characteristic use of formulaic bass figures (such as the descending tetrachord), his text setting (in particular the rhythmic values assigned to stressed and unstressed syllables and the occasional moments where Atto breaks with the pattern in order to create rhetorical effect), unconventional text repetitions and rhythmic disjunction in passages of recitative, and particularly piquant dissonances in the lead up to important cadences: "In each instance, Atto breaks the rules of counterpoint and dissonance treatment to create quick but deliciously shocking effects" (265). None of these techniques exclude improvisation. In fact, Tim Carter (1999) has suggested that the distinctive rhetorical repeats that structure Monteverdi's *Lamento d'Arianna* may well delineate the influence of the singing actress who first performed it—accustomed as she was, to improvising dialogue.

In one sustained musical example, Freitas discusses the aria, "Se il mio cor non sa ridere," from *Scrivete, occhi dolenti*, where Atto composed four related melodies to set the four strophes of the poem. Freitas charts out the slight variants in cadence points (e.g., G minor versus E♭ major) and stacks the four melodies in score format so that the myriad points of similarity and difference are easily identified. In his analysis,

> As the different melodic lines and harmonic goals indicate, the technique here amounts neither to strophic repetition nor to variation. Yet so many melodic and formal elements recur that the general impression of a strophic structure remains... [Atto] has simply written a pleasant minor-mode tune that, subjected to a kind of permutation, avoids monotony while respecting the poetic form. (267, 269)

This ability—to unfold remarkably similar and yet independent melodies over related chordal structures—could also be thought of as improvisatory. The other melodic gestures Freitas discusses, including free bass ostinati and contiguous melodies that start the same only to branch off towards a different melodic close, could be categorized in a similar fashion.

My point is not to suggest that the compositional choices archived in these cantatas are any less valid because of their possible link to improvisation—quite the opposite. I also want to stress that I found Freitas's analytical observations fascinating and pertinent; the comparison with the standards of cantata composition was particularly useful. My objection is merely that Freitas has automatically linked Atto's musical and structural idiosyncrasies to a privileged assessment of composition without taking improvisation seriously.

Portrait of a Castrato is engagingly written, clear, and easy to follow. It makes compelling arguments about the ordinariness of castration within seventeenth-century Italian culture and articulates the complicated relationships between patrons and clients during that time; the first chapter alone should prove invaluable to anyone teaching baroque opera to undergraduates. Roger Freitas has written a book that is both useful and interesting; he is to be commended.

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