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978-0-521-88521-8 - Portrait of a Castrato: Politics, Patronage, and Music in the Life of Atto Melani
Roger Freitas
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Introduction

In an age that prized extravagance, Atto Melani led a life that may itself seem an object of wonder. Born in 1626 into a bourgeois family in the Tuscan town of Pistoia, northwest of Florence, Atto was the second of seven brothers, all to become musicians, and the first of four to be castrated for the sake of his beautiful voice.[1] By the age of fifteen he seems already to have been working for Prince Mattias de' Medici, brother of the grand duke of Tuscany. Within a few years, Mattias loaned his singer to the court of France, where in the 1640s Atto first rose to prominence. On the one hand, his singing won him the favor of the queen regent Anne of Austria, mother of the young Louis XIV; on the other, his taste for political intrigue attracted the attention of Cardinal Mazarin, the queen's formidable first minister. This blend of music and politics set the tone for much of Atto's career.

Over the next fifteen years Atto in fact engineered a remarkable self-metamorphosis, from professional singer to gentleman diplomat. Early in his career, he performed whatever was commanded of him, from the title role of Luigi Rossi's historic *Orfeo* to the tiny female part of La Primavera in a one-off Mantuan spectacular. But as his ambitions grew, he became increasingly concerned about prestige. He realized that, as long as he continued to sing, especially publicly, he limited his social standing. And so, though a castrato, he adopted the unlikely posture of a talented musical amateur. When he ran into trouble, he lied, temporized, and played one patron off another, all in an attempt to shape his career and control his image. At a time when most singers were treated like servants, Atto sought the kind of professional independence that vocalists would regularly enjoy only in the following century.

He also began looking more seriously to non-musical activities for his success, particularly the fields of diplomacy and espionage. His efforts in fact involved him in many of the important political events of his day: he carried on clandestine negotiations in Bavaria preceding the 1657 Diet of Frankfurt; he accompanied Mazarin to the final conference and ceremonies for the

[1] Throughout this study I refer to Atto by his first name. While this intimate usage might at first seem odd, the specificity is demanded by the number of Melani family members who will appear. The practice is also historical, with "Signor Atto" as a common form of address. Also, as figure 1.1 (page 21) shows, Atto had two sisters as well, both born after all the boys. He rarely mentions his sisters in his correspondence, and so unfortunately they play little role in this study.

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Peace of the Pyrenees (1659); he assisted in the marriage arrangements between Grand Prince Cosimo III of Tuscany and Princess Marguerite-Louise D'Orléans (1661); and he even contributed to the election of his *concittadino* and friend Giulio Rospigliosi as Pope Clement IX (1667). Such endeavors boosted Atto's reputation on the European political scene, and he became a genuine resource for a number of leaders.

Atto's efforts demanded extensive correspondence, and indeed much of his life must have been spent writing letters, thousands of which have been preserved. He kept the courts of Tuscany, Mantua, Modena, Rome, Turin, and Paris informed about the internal affairs and even military strategies of the others. Such reporting could be dangerous: when his letters turned up among the papers of Nicolas Fouquet, Louis XIV's condemned *surintendant des finances*, Atto suffered eighteen years of banishment from France. Usually, however, his diplomacy earned him gratitude and reward: Louis XIV made him a gentleman of his chamber and titular abbot of a monastery in Normandy; the Republic of Venice and the city of Bologna granted him patrician status; and a long list of nobles bestowed valuable gifts. In the end, it was Atto's diplomatic service, rather than his musical talent, that supplied the wealth and honor essential to his social ambitions: indeed, shortly after his death in 1714, his family was elevated to the Tuscan nobility.

The first scholar to explore Atto's life, Alessandro Ademollo (1826–91), was pursuing interests in theatrical history that eventually led him to write a short article on the Melani family. His insights were expanded by the archival work of Henry Prunières (1886–1942) and, most importantly, by Robert Lamar Weaver, whose crucial article from 1977 has enabled all subsequent research.[2] Thus, the biographical outline above has been known for some time, and Atto's correspondence has been recognized as a fount of data. But Atto's life itself – the most highly documented of any seventeenth-century musician – has never been thoroughly explored. Given the richness of sources, one may legitimately ask why, and whether the neglect is justifiable.

Certainly the conventions of biography itself have played some role. A typical study – whether of Monteverdi, Louis XIV, or George Washington – presupposes the importance of the subject: one takes as given that his (or very

[2] A[lessandro] Ademollo, "Un campanaio e la sua famiglia," *Fanfulla della Domenica*, 30 December 1883, 2–3; Henry Prunières, *L'opéra italien en France avant Lulli*, Bibliothèque de l'Institut Français de Florence (Université de Grenoble) ser. 1, Collection d'histoire et de linguistique française et italienne comparées, no. 3 (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1913); Robert Lamar Weaver, "Materiali per le biografie dei fratelli Melani," *Rivista italiana di musicologia* 12 (1977): 252–95. Another scholar who has made extensive use of Atto's correspondence is Lorenzo Bianconi, for example in his *Music in the Seventeenth Century*, trans. David Bryant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), originally published as *Il Seicento* (Turin: E.D.T., 1982).

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occasionally her) accomplishments merit a consideration of the personality behind them, an exploration of the "how" and "why" behind the "what." In music history, the "accomplishments" that matter are compositions, and Atto's are few and lack influence. Further, although he was a prominent singer, he was not the "first" anything (as Anna Renzi has been called the "first diva"), nor did he partner with a composer and so influence works in that way (like Isabella Colbran with Rossini). In traditional terms, then, Atto Melani is simply not important; he is not one of the heroes of music history awaiting his eulogy.

In recent decades, of course, alternatives to this "great man" paradigm have emerged. Indeed, the field of feminist studies has established biographical models specifically for the *un*important subject. As Ruth Solie explains, "feminist practice has been somewhat less interested in those certifications [of greatness] and more interested in what the lives of women have to tell us about felicitous ways of navigating treacherous waters – about what we might call, at the risk of flippancy, the diversity of successful kangaroo lives."[3] Solie draws the term *kangaroo* from the self-reflections of Emily Dickinson, signifying women whose aspirations and achievements have left them feeling alien in their societies. This sort of biographical subject offers an exemplum of resistance, someone whose evasion of social forces helps establish the boundaries for existence within a society, the kind of life that could be lived. At first glance, the abnormal figure of the castrato would seem well suited to this model. But, as I hope to show, Atto's physical state rarely hindered him in his diverse endeavors, and he certainly betrays little consciousness of handicap. He moved through society much like any other man of his class. And so if Atto is not a hero, neither is he a kangaroo.

What he *is* – to stay with figurative labels – is a specimen. As an individual his historical significance may be limited, but he represents a historically significant group: castrato singers – or more generally, musicians – of the mid to late seventeenth century. That assertion probably demands some support, for past scholars have tended to judge Atto's life as too unusual, too varied, to be illuminating of others. Indeed, Atto's only sporadic references to music and his essential abandonment of the field later in life have led many to bemoan rather than investigate his career. As Henry Prunières complains,

> [In later life] he no longer speaks of anything but political and diplomatic negotiations, and one could despair of ever learning what the old musician – who had been intimately acquainted with Luigi Rossi, Cavalli, and without doubt also Carissimi and Cesti – thought of French opera, of Lully, Campra, Destouches. From 1661, Atto disappeared from the history of music.[4]

[3] Ruth Solie, "Changing the Subject," *Current Musicology* 53 (1993): 58.
[4] Prunières, *L'opéra*, 274.

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Alessandro Ademollo likewise grumbles that "in Florence [Atto] was occupied with art and musical things; but unfortunately they wanted him back in Paris, and politics reclaimed him."[5] Defending the nobility of art, these writers portrayed the worldly interests of Atto and his family as contamination, undermining any musical significance. Still today, as Jean Grundy Fanelli writes, "it is generally assumed that the Melani family was a phenomenon apart."[6]

Of course scholars now recognize the conventionality of careers that integrated artistic, political, and social endeavors. Like the artists Peter Paul Rubens and Gianlorenzo Bernini, more than a few contemporary musicians exploited a wide range of skills in the competition for advancement that characterized courtly life.[7] In his study of singers, Sergio Durante declares outright that in the early *Seicento* "the aspiration to integrate individuals and families into the court system characterizes singers socially … [F]rom musical aristocracy, [they] aspire to become aristocracy *tout court*."[8]

Any number of examples can illustrate the point, including Atto's slightly older contemporary, the castrato Marc'Antonio Pasqualini (1614–91). Born into an apparently large and poor family, Pasqualini found his way by the age of fifteen onto the payroll of Cardinal Antonio Barberini, nephew of Pope Urban VIII. The singer rapidly became Barberini's favorite and convinced the cardinal to declare him "gentleman of the chamber," from which position he controlled access to his patron. Soon, Pasqualini began adopting his superiors' behavior, refusing, for example, to cede precedence to bona fide aristocrats. By the summer of 1641, observers were complaining that "the boy's insolence has become unbearable," but they also admitted that "without [Pasqualini], one can do nothing" to win the cardinal's favor.[9] The volatility

[5] Ademollo, "Un campanaio," 2.

[6] Jean Grundy Fanelli, "Castrato Singers from Pistoia, 1575–1660," *Civiltà musicale*, no. 40 (May–August 2000): 47. Fanelli herself argues *against* this idea.

[7] On Rubens, see Marie-Anne Lescourret, *Rubens: A Double Life*, trans. Elfreda Powell (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1993), originally published as *Rubens* ([Paris]: J.C. Lattès, 1990). On Bernini, see Robert Enggass, foreword to *The Life of Bernini*, by Filippo Baldinucci, trans. Catherine Enggass (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1966), xvii, originally published as *Vita del Cavaliere Gio. Lorenzo Bernini* (Florence: V. Vangelisti, 1682).

[8] Sergio Durante, "Il cantante," in *Il sistema produttivo e le sue competenze*, vol. IV of *Storia dell'opera italiana*, ed. Lorenzo Bianconi and Giorgio Pestelli, Biblioteca di cultura musicale (Turin: E.D.T. Musica, 1987), 352 and 354. These passages are translated in their entirety (and somewhat differently) in Sergio Durante, "The Opera Singer," in *Opera Production and Its Resources*, ed. Lorenzo Bianconi and Giorgio Pestelli, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane, The History of Italian Opera, part 2, "Systems," vol. 4 (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 348 and 350. See also the important study by John Rosselli on this subject, "From Princely Service to the Open Market: Singers of Italian Opera and Their Patrons, 1600–1850," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 1 (1989): 1–32.

[9] Georges Dethan, *The Young Mazarin*, trans. Stanley Baron (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977), 64, originally published as *Mazarin et ses amis* (Paris: Berger-Levrault, 1968). Dethan gives no citations for these quotes but notes that the first statement was made by Cardinal Alessandro Bichi.

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of the situation eventually forced Barberini to abandon his protégé, but not before engineering a prestigious canonicate for Pasqualini at the church of Santa Maria Maggiore.[10]

The case of Leonora Baroni (1611–70) is similar. Born to the celebrated singer Adriana Basile, Leonora's chamber performances – as well as her impeccable manners and conversation – earned her numerous devotees among the nobility of Rome until she became an important figure in Roman society. Prunières even suggests that it was she who helped the young Giulio Mazzarini become *maestro di camera* to Antonio Barberini, thus launching Mazarin's meteoric career. In 1644, Mazarin again looked to Leonora for help: specifically, he asked that she come to Paris, both to satisfy the queen regent's taste for Italian music, at which she succeeded, and to report the Spanish strategy for the conclave following Urban VIII's death. As the lover of Camillo Pamphili, himself nephew of the Spanish candidate, Leonora was well informed. Unfortunately, when she returned to Rome after the election of Innocent X Pamphili, she discovered that one of her letters to the French contender, Giulio Cesare Sacchetti, had been intercepted. Instead of occupying the pinnacle of society, she found herself entirely out of favor. Undaunted, Leonora simply waited for the next pope, who turned out to be Clement IX Rospigliosi, a man who admired her talents and restored her prestige.[11]

To the foregoing examples one could add the cases of three more castrati: Francesco (Cecchino) de Castris, whose relationship to Grand Prince Ferdinando de' Medici was as intimate as that of Pasqualini with Antonio Barberini; Domenico Melani (no relation to Atto), who after years of service abroad returned, ennobled, to his native Florence as a wealthy philanthropist; and Angelini Bontempi, who, in addition to his singing, became an official historian at the court of Dresden.[12] Taken together, these vignettes confirm that Atto's fusion of music and politics indeed epitomized the careers of

[10] The above material on Pasqualini is based on the following sources: Margaret Murata, "Pasqualini, Marc' Antonio," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera* (New York: Grove's Dictionaries of Music, 1992), III:902; Dethan, *The Young Mazarin*, 63–64; Prunières, *L'opéra*, 89–90; Henry Prunières, "Les musiciens du Cardinal Antonio Barberini," in *Mélanges de musicologie offerts a M. Lionel de la Laurencie*, Publications de la Société Française de Musicologie, ser. 2, vols. 3–4 (Paris: La Société Française de Musicologie / E. Droz, 1933), 121; Rosselli, "From Princely Service," 5.

[11] The above is based on Prunières, *L'opéra*, 41–55, 65.

[12] The material on De Castris is based on Harold Acton, *The Last Medici* (London: Faber and Faber, 1932), 186, 199, 215; and Warren Kirkendale, *The Court Musicians in Florence During the Principate of the Medici: With a Reconstruction of the Artistic Establishment*, "Historiae musicae cultores" biblioteca, no. 61 (Florence: Olschki, 1993), 437–46. On Domenico Melani, Weaver, "Materiali," 262n; and John Walter Hill, "Oratory Music in Florence, III: The Confraternities from 1655 to 1785," *Acta musicologica* 58 (1986): 139–40. On Bontempi, John Rosselli, "The Castrati as a Professional Group and a Social Phenomenon, 1550–1850," *Acta musicologica* 60 (1988): 169.

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many seventeenth-century singers; if his case goes a little further in this direction than others, he is just an outstanding specimen of the type.

And so a study of his life opens a window on the broader world of seventeenth-century music and musicians. Through his letters one glimpses daily musical life in several of the European centers he frequented. More importantly, one observes the social context of the musician, the real-life aspects of music-making: what a singer thought about his profession, what his patrons thought about his services, how he related to those patrons, and how he related to other musicians and contemporaries generally. Ultimately, Atto's life demonstrates the inextricability of seventeenth-century music and politics, with politics understood both narrowly as the interaction between forces of governance and broadly as "the total complex of relations between people living in society."[13] That is, Atto's life portrays music not so much as an artistic event as a social or even political activity. Of course this perspective on *Seicento* art is not new. But Atto's biography furnishes a uniquely rich case study: it sheds light on the quotidian mechanisms that generated meaning for this music and thereby linked it to expressions of power. In the end, Atto helps clarify what music in seventeenth-century Europe actually *was*, what it signified to its producers and consumers. Even were his life's story not so fascinating in itself, it would be well worth the trouble of telling.

Exactly *how* to tell that story is a thorny question, for, truthfully speaking, the entire enterprise of musical biography has a bad reputation. Notwithstanding foundational studies by Spitta (on Bach), Chrysander (on Handel), and Thayer (on Beethoven), Guido Adler's influential vision of *Musikwissenschaft* relegated "biographical studies of musicians" to ancillary status, inferior to style history, paleography, aesthetics, and even pedagogy.[14] For Adler, the appropriate subject of musical research was the work itself and only secondarily the individuals who created or performed it. That tension between "work-centered" and "people-centered" approaches has of course endured. Quarrels between "music theory" and "music history," "positivism" and "criticism," "old musicology" and "new musicology" all engage this debate about musical autonomy versus social context. In the narrower field of biography, that debate plays out in the classic bifurcation of "life" and "works" and arguments about what one sphere of inquiry may reveal about the other.

[13] Merriam-Webster Online, s.v. "Politics," www.m-w.com/dictionary/politics (accessed November 21, 2005).

[14] See Guido Adler, "Umfang, Methode und Ziel der Musikwissenschaft" in *Music in European Thought, 1851–1912*, ed. Bojan Bujić, trans. Martin Cooper, Cambridge Readings in the Literature of Music (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 348–55, originally published in *Vierteljahrsschrift für Musikwissenschaft* 1 (1885): 5–8, 15–20.

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Because the majority of musical biographies examine composers, defining this relationship is crucial and in fact the subject of much debate.[15] But because Atto was not primarily a composer (and will not be treated as one), such considerations are less urgent here.

Further, because he is more important as a specimen than an individual, I hope to temper the "essentializing" tendencies for which biographies of all types are regularly censured. In her insightful essay, "The Writing of Biography," the historian Elisabeth Young-Bruehl details many ways the biographer can be enticed into constructing the *essence* of a person and so positing a falsely consistent personality.[16] The musicologist Jolanta T. Pekacz likewise complains that "musical biography typically develops in a way similar to a realistic novel: a coherent, unified voice claiming to present the truth about a life; omniscient narration, repeating themes and symbols; and linear chronological presentation of events provide readers with the illusion of totality and closure."[17] The biographies these writers critique endeavor to explore the mind of the subject and so elucidate that person's actions or achievements. I too will posit reasons for many of Atto's exploits and so touch on the nature of his personality, but a deep understanding of his inner life – his motivating "essence" – is not my aim.

Indeed, it would be exceedingly difficult – perhaps even perverse – to probe the psyche of a subject who never acknowledges it himself. Atto certainly shows emotions in his letters, and his undeclared motives can often be surmised. But unlike correspondents and diarists of later centuries, his writings are virtually devoid of self-contemplation. Only once, for example, does he make even a passing remark about his physical state, what would now seem the defining fact of his identity. When faced with adversity, he does often display self-pity, bemoaning his fate, but that dramatic gesture seems a play for sympathy: like a staged lament, it shows but a fictive interiority. Indeed, through all his letters, Atto's inner life remains astonishingly opaque; he dons many masks, but we are left wondering what lies behind. Perhaps a psychoanalyst could eventually decipher something more profound, but then again one might mistrust the application of Freudian theory to *Seicento* subjectivity. In any case, the portrait promised by my title will be just that,

[15] Maynard Solomon, among others, has written lucidly and provocatively on the subject: "Thoughts on Biography," in *Beethoven Essays* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1988), 101–15. An important consideration of these issues is Jolanta T. Pekacz, "Memory, History and Meaning: Musical Biography and Its Discontents," *Journal of Musicological Research* 23 (2004): 39–80.

[16] Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, "The Writing of Biography," in *Mind and the Body Politic* (New York and London: Routledge, Chapman and Hall / Routledge, 1989), 125–37.

[17] Pekacz, "Memory," 42.

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a representation focusing on observable attributes, in this case, Atto's words and actions. His consciousness I leave to the reader to infer.

I also hope to mitigate the essentializing impulse by disrupting the standard "omniscient narration" and "linear chronological presentation." I doubt that the genre of biography can ever wholly escape chronology or the need for constructing a narrative. But, in the organization of this study, I try to balance the chronicling of Atto's life with essays that consider a particular feature of that life. The former chapters tend to draw heavily on documents while the latter use just a handful to initiate the discussion. Indeed, the second type usually wrestles with questions for which conclusive answers are impossible, such as the parental rationale for castration, the sexual significance of the castrato, and the function of composition in Atto's career. The irregular succession of these two modes foregrounds, I hope, the role of interpretation here and the impossibility of both certainty and objectivity.

Indeed, the opening chapter, dealing with Atto's youth, requires some of the most extensive speculation in the study. Without the letters generated by his later travels, narrative is not possible. Instead, the chapter considers the motivation of Atto's parents in their decision to castrate four of their sons. Based on the status of the Melani family, the local conditions in Pistoia, and contemporary familial customs, I conclude that Atto's parents were not in fact sacrificing sons in the hopes of financial gain, an oft-cited justification for the practice; rather, they were engaging in – and initiating their sons into – the subtler economy of patronage. This more dignified, if not entirely selfless, explanation may shed light on the objectives of other parents of castrati as well as on attitudes toward these singers at the time.

Chapter 2, which deals with the first part of Atto's singing career (1638–53), specifically addresses the links between music and power. As Atto became a cultural commodity in the relationship between France and Tuscany, he fulfilled political needs on several levels: he earned favor for Mattias de' Medici (and indeed the whole Medici regime) from the monarchy of France; he helped cement Cardinal Mazarin's relationship with the ruling queen mother, Anne of Austria; and he himself won gratitude from all parties. Each of the political figures exploited music – or in this case, one musician – to satisfy a yet more powerful figure. While this function of the arts has been much studied, Atto's activities also expose the less familiar processes by which musicians might likewise exploit their noble patrons. Any servant would of course expect remuneration from his masters, and Atto was handsomely paid. But instead of merely serving the Medici, he worked to acquire additional patrons, converting each new singing assignment into an expansion of personal support. (See table 0.1 for a chart of European rulers during Atto's lifetime.) Because Atto could not sing for all these rulers simultaneously, he began serving

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Table 0.1 *Important rulers of Europe during the lifetime of Atto Melani*

	Tuscany (grand dukes) (de' Medici)	Rome (popes)	Mantua (dukes) (Gonzaga)	Modena (dukes) (d'Este)	Turin (dukes) (Savoy)	Paris (kings) (Bourbon)	Empire (emperors) (Habsburg)
1626	Ferdinando II (1621–70)	Gregory XV (1621–23)	Vincenzo II (1626–27) Carlo I Gonzaga-Nevers (1627–37)	Cesare (1597–1628)	Carlo Emanuele I (1580–1630)	Louis XIII (1610–43)	Ferdinand II (1619–37)
1628		Urban VIII (1628–44)		Alfonso III (1628–29) Francesco I (1629–58)			
1630					Vittorio Amedeo I (1630–37)		
1632							
1634							
1636			Carlo II (1637–65)		Francesco Giacinto (1637–38)		Ferdinand III (1637–57)
1638					Carlo Emanuele II (1638–75)		
1640							
1642						Louis XIV (1643–1715)	
1644		Innocent X (1644–55)					
1646							
1648							
1650							
1652							

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Table 0.1 (*cont.*)

	Tuscany (grand dukes) (de' Medici)	Rome (popes)	Mantua (dukes) (Gonzaga)	Modena (dukes) (d'Este)	Turin (dukes) (Savoy)	Paris (kings) (Bourbon)	Empire (emperors) (Habsburg)
1654		Alexander VII (1655–67)					
1656							
1658				Alfonso IV (1658–62)			Leopold I (1658–1705)
1660							
1662				Franceso II (1662–94)			
1664			Carlo III (1665–1708)				
1666		Clement IX (1667–69)					
1668							
1670	Cosimo III (1670–1723)	Clement X (1670–76)					
1672							
1674					Vittorio Amedeo II (1675–1732)		
1676		Innocent XI (1676–89)					
1678							
1680							
1682							
1684							
1686							

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