

CHRIS MCMANUS: 'ACCIDENTS' AND WILD BOARS IN THE WOODS

HANDEL AND THE CASTRATI

Handel House Museum, London, until October 1.

"There is a bit of testicle," said Diderot, "at the bottom of our most sublime sentiments and most refined tenderness." Or, in this case, the absence of a bit of testicle.

Handel and the Castrati surveys famous castrati, such as Farinelli, Senesino and Guadagni, who made fortunes visiting London, and for some of whom George Frederic Handel wrote arias. But at the heart of the exhibition is a vacuum, because written descriptions of forever silent voices are as frustratingly uninformative as ancient accounts of the lost paintings of Apelles.

The only moment one gets close to the sound is a 1902 recording of Alessandro Moreschi, the last castrato, who had a "never thoroughly understood childhood mishap" (apparently these often involved wild boars in the woods). His voice, described as "flut-ingly soft, light, spontaneous, unforced and uncontrived", has also been described as "one of the saddest things in the world". I, though, was reminded of the 18th-century print of Domenico Scarlatti on harpsichord accompanying the famous Caffarelli, portrayed as a cat.

Surprisingly, the exhibition doesn't capi-



An engraving of the castrato Senesino (left), with the soprano Francesca Cuzzoni and castrato Gitano Beronestat, in a scene from a Handel opera

talise on the inevitable curiosity of visitors. Ambivalence about the castrato voice — "neither man's nor woman's but... more melodious than either" — is reflected in visitor anxiety. Two American students found their prurience satisfied only by two castratori, described by one as "looking like nutcrackers". "Literally nutcrackers," the other said. Ambivalence is certainly not modern, as seen in 18th-century quips about "a blunted sword, a pistol without balls, a pen without ink, a dog that cannot wag his tail, a pin

which cannot prick, a chimney without fire".

The twin problems were musicological and biological. The exhibition, mostly consisting of boards on walls and books in glass boxes, assumes visitors know about sopranos, mezzos, contraltos, counter-tenors and falsettos. Three CDs, contrasting a mezzo-soprano and a counter-tenor on successive tracks, without explanation, tells one little. I yearned for an interactive display comparing equivalent passages accompanied by an informative textual commentary. Instead, I

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got rhetorical questions about hearing Handel operas as he intended. A naughty thought did arise about the resolution of the authentic performance brigade, as soon as some serious commitment is required...

The voice — its origins and what affects it — is barely described. Some science was needed, to show how the shorter vocal cords of the castrato larynx affect pitch and the enlarged thoracic cage provides prodigious quantities of air, producing a voice "clear and penetrating as that of choirboys but a great deal louder with something dry and sour about it yet brilliant, light, full of impact".

Few visitors seemed to know much about anatomy, physiology or endocrinology — and could not understand the consequences of those clandestine men from Norcia, the norcini, with their castratori. Answers were needed to the inevitable questions of how, when, why, where, whom and what — and perhaps some comment about Freud and castration anxiety. Where were the scientists?

Only near the end did I think the exhibition might be going interactive when I saw a sign that read "Handel and the Castrati — family activity area and display" — but the attendants knew nothing about such activities. Definitely not one for the whole family.

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