



The Castrato and His Wife

Helen Berry

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The opera singer Giusto Ferdinando Tenducci was one of the most famous celebrities of the eighteenth century. Mozart and Bach both composed for him. He was nothing less than a rock star of his day, with a massive female following. He was also a castrato.

Ranging from the salons of princes and the grand opera houses of Europe to the remote hill towns of Tuscany, Helen Berry's compelling account of the unconventional love story of the castrato and his wife offers fascinating insight into the world of opera and the history of sex and marriage in Georgian Britain. Berry vividly describes how women flocked to Tenducci's concerts and found him irresistible. Indeed, his young singing pupil, Dorothea Maunsell, found him so irresistible that she eloped with him. A huge scandal erupted and her father persecuted them mercilessly.

Dorothea joined her husband at his concerts, achieving a status she could never have dreamed of as a respectable girl. She also wrote a sensational account of their love affair, an early example of a teenage novel. Embroiled in debt, the Tenduccis fled to Italy, and the marriage collapsed when she fell in love with another man. There followed a highly publicized and unique marriage annulment case in the London courts. Everything hinged on the status of the marriage, whether the husband was capable of consummation, and what exactly had happened to him as a small boy in a remote Italian hill village decades before.

Telling the remarkable story of Tenducci for the first time, *The Castrato and His Wife* is both an exhilarating read and a perceptive commentary on the meaning of marriage, one that still resonates today.

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