

## Sacred & Profane Season 2, Episode 3: “To Move the Passions”

[00:00:00] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** I'm Martien Halvorson-Taylor

[00:00:02] **Kurtis Schaeffer** And I'm Kurtis Schaeffer,

[00:00:04] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** And this is Sacred & Profane. Our story today starts where the sacred and the profane have collided for centuries: in Rome.

[00:00:19] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** It's 1902 and a young American named Fred Gaisberg is headed to the Vatican. He's not there for prayer, but for business.

[00:00:32] **Kurtis Schaeffer** It's a mission that would have been impossible just a few years before. Gaisberg and his brother had been traveling Europe using newly developed audio technology to record some of the most famous singers in France and Italy for Americans to listen to back home.

[00:00:48] **Kurtis Schaeffer** They were in Rome to record the famed Sistine Chapel choir. But this recording will become famous for just one of the voices in the chorus.

[00:00:57] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Alessandro Moreschi, the soloist known as “The Last Castrato.”

[00:01:04] [RECORDING ALESSANDRO MORESCHI]

[00:01:19] **Bonnie Gordon** The most interesting thing about that recording is precisely what you can't hear.

[00:01:27] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** This is our colleague Bonnie Gordon.

[00:01:30] **Bonnie Gordon** I'm Bonnie Gordon and I teach in the music department at UVA.

[00:01:35] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Moreschi was one of the last of a long line of castrati singers, castrated men whose high but powerful voices dominated the sacred and secular music in Europe for centuries. His performances in the Vatican are the only known recordings of a castrato voice.

[00:01:54] [RECORDING ALESSANDRO MORESCHI CONT.]

[00:02:11] **Bonnie Gordon** When you listen to early phonographs, they're really capturing only a kind of very small portion of the sound, a very small portion of the power. So if you read about castrato, everything you hear as they are these like remarkable, amazing, the most phenomenal voice ever.

[00:02:27] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** You can tell there's something really strong and vigorous about.

[00:02:32] **Bonnie Gordon** Yeah.

[00:02:33] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** About his voice.

[00:02:34] **Bonnie Gordon** And then you hear that record.

[00:02:37] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** It is disappointing.

[00:02:38] **Bonnie Gordon** It's so disappointing. And if you play it for students, for example, often they're sort of unmoved or they think it's creepy and it becomes as much a lesson in

technology as it does a lesson in the castrato by what phonographs did, what ranges they picked up.

[00:02:56] **Kurtis Schaeffer** When I listened to the recordings, I wasn't disappointed. It was more a feeling of...

[00:03:02] **Bonnie Gordon** Yeah.

[00:03:02] **Kurtis Schaeffer** I felt like I was getting a hazy glimpse into another world.

[00:03:08] **Bonnie Gordon** Yeah, they sound ghostly no matter who you hear sing kind of between 1900 and 1930. It sounds ghostly like even when you listen to early blues or when you listen to some of these recordings of the Philadelphia Orchestra, it sounds like a ghost of the orchestra.

[00:03:24] [RECORDING ALESSANDRO MORESCHI CONT.]

[00:03:33] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** But even though we only have this ghostly recording, which captures only a fraction of the richness and timbre of Moreschi's voice, we have hundreds of written accounts of castrati performing.

[00:03:52] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** There are accounts of castrati singing in the cathedrals and the princely courts of Europe as early as the mid-1500s. And Bonnie says there's no reason we should doubt the many written accounts that these men's voices were extraordinary.

[00:04:11] **Bonnie Gordon** Oh, yes. So they write these things like, you know, there were 5000 people in the streets and not one person failed to cry. And then there's people swooning and there's all kinds of stories of that, just like the wonder and the marvel. And just being completely astounded by the performance.

[00:04:29] **Bonnie Gordon** I mean, I think a better way to imagine is it to think of like the most amazing musical, perhaps spiritual experience you've had and what it feels like. At their height, what they did was move the passions. And they what they did was, too, a part of a process of recovering an ancient tradition of making words musical, making sensations, musical. So it was a kind of voice that could move you.

[00:05:02] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Part of their popularity came down to religious strictures in the New Testament. One of the letters of Paul says that no woman should raise her voice in church. Castration allowed male singers to keep a high voice even as an adult, essentially to take the challenging roles that might otherwise have gone to experienced female singers or to boys who would age out of the part. But their appeal went beyond an attempt to solve a perceived scriptural problem.

[00:05:33] **Bonnie Gordon** There was coming out of a Jesuit tradition of a spiritual conversion. Moving the passions.

[00:05:44] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** That is to say, the idea that you have to create the right climate to reach a potential convert to move the passions. Rather than simply presenting scripture, you give people beautiful art and beautiful music that they can connect to emotionally. And the Jesuits did not shy away from the idea that art and music can be both erotic and spiritual. Look at something like Bernini's famous sculpture, The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa. It was carved around the same time that castrati singers were popular.

[00:06:24] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** A young woman is having a spiritual experience seeing a messenger of God. At the same time, she's swooning and the look on her face is extremely suggestive that she's having a sexual experience as well. Castrati's otherworldly voices offered that same mix of spiritual and erotic power.

[00:06:52] **Bonnie Gordon** The Jesuits were incredibly invested in basically using pleasure to convert and they did it in Rome and they did it in missions and they did it all over the world and the technology that they used was the wonder of the castrato voice.

[00:07:06] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Take the famous 17th century castrato, Loreto Vittori.

[00:07:15] **Bonnie Gordon** He performs in this opera that's based on Marino's "Adonai", which is like a completely erotic opera that had been censored by the Pope. And then he meanwhile performs in this giant mass before the Pope. And in fact, the music is quite the same. And you can see those debates. This question of do you use the music to convert or does it make it so profane that it's gotten in your way?

[00:07:42] **Bonnie Gordon** This debate about what music can do gets enacted over and over again and it gets enacted on the castrato body.

[00:07:54] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Promising singers would have been identified at a very young age and between the ages of 6 and 8 their testicles were crushed. The operation was almost always done in secret.

[00:08:09] **Kurtis Schaeffer** It seemed like it was important to make some excuse...

[00:08:12] **Bonnie Gordon** Yes.

[00:08:12] **Kurtis Schaeffer** for them being castrated.

[00:08:15] **Bonnie Gordon** Totally.

[00:08:16] **Kurtis Schaeffer** So you couldn't just do it because you're going to be a musician. It was because you had some injury. Fell off a horse.

[00:08:21] **Bonnie Gordon** Also wild boars.

[00:08:23] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Oh, wild boars?

[00:08:24] **Bonnie Gordon** It was a really big thing. There was always this thing about the wild boar accident. And actually everybody's always saying, oh, no, we would never do that. Like this castrated person just showed up and could sing. So, I guess we'll have to take them.

[00:08:35] **Kurtis Schaeffer** So if the young boy in your village happened to be gored by a wild boar, you might as well make good of it.

[00:08:41] **Bonnie Gordon** Correct.

[00:08:42] **Kurtis Schaeffer** By putting them in music.

[00:08:43] **Bonnie Gordon** Yeah. Particularly if he happened to be, for example, the second son of minor nobility. That was especially beneficial.

[00:08:51] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Yeah. So what? Yeah. Once you're either gored by a wild boar or you have a medical procedure...

[00:08:56] **Bonnie Gordon** Or a riding accident...

[00:08:57] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Or a riding accident, or you happen to be the second son of nobility, what happens once you've been sort of designated?

[00:09:05] **Bonnie Gordon** So you go to a singing school and if you're a castrato, you get very preferential treatment. And if you are second son of minor nobility living in poverty, it's really not a bad place to be a child. And you'd learn music probably for kind of eight hours a day, but you don't just learn to sing because this is music that was incredibly improvisational. So you learn to play the keyboard. Usually some kind of string instrument. You learn to read music. Musicians were quite literate because this was a moment when text and sound were intimately connected.

[00:09:39] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Of course, the castrato voice wasn't simply a matter of training.

[00:09:46] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Does the distinctiveness, the kind of athletic quality of what they can do? Does that come from training exclusively?

[00:09:52] **Bonnie Gordon** And the bodily alteration.

[00:09:53] **Kurtis Schaeffer** OK, so it is a direct result of the castration as well.

[00:09:57] **Bonnie Gordon** Yeah, because it's the vocal cords of coloratura soprano and the chest of a giant man. Because of the way the hormonal process was altered, their bodies were strangely shaped. They did have actually very large chests and very long appendages and they were very tall. Because it basically halts puberty, the process.

[00:10:17] **Kurtis Schaeffer** I see.

[00:10:18] **Bonnie Gordon** You know, when you make your voice, you the vocal cords vibrate and the resonance comes from your chest cavity. So if you have the vocal cords of a high soprano and the chest of a very large man, it was in fact a bigger sound.

[00:10:52] **Kurtis Schaeffer** While their voices were prized, even at the height of their popularity, there was intense debate about castrati, bodies and the process that shaped them. Castration was frowned upon and in some regions, illegal. Even as people continue to value castrati voices.

[00:11:10] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Across Europe, many found castrati unsettling. They seemed to defy the natural order of things.

[00:11:20] **Bonnie Gordon** It was debated almost from the get-go. Where the legal trouble started was about whether castrati could marry. A castrato would get married and they'd say, well, there's a problem because you can only get married if you can procreate. And that was verum semen, which means basically like viable semen.

[00:11:40] **Bonnie Gordon** And they go through like these incredible discussions like books, pages and pages about like what the semen can and can't do. And then if it can't make a baby, basically can't get married. So that becomes a problem. It's also a problem if you are mutilated to be a priest.

[00:11:56] **Bonnie Gordon** And that that's where you get into this sort of almost comical situation of get to the 18th century in the English, say, oh, you know, we got it from the French, who got it from the Italians, who got it from the Spanish, who got it from the Moors. You know, everybody wants to blame somebody else.

[00:12:14] **Kurtis Schaeffer** It's like the Buddhists outsourcing the profession of being a butcher.

[00:12:19] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Yeah. Oh, yeah.

[00:12:21] **Kurtis Schaeffer** You're gonna eat meat all the time.

[00:12:22] **Bonnie Gordon** Yeah.

[00:12:23] **Kurtis Schaeffer** But your tribe is not going to do it.

[00:12:31] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Even as castrati voices were prominently featured in both sacred and secular music, castration itself was seen as an alien custom. An English traveler in the 18th century tried to find where in Italy the operations were done. In Milan, they told him it was done in Venice. In Florence, they said it was done in Rome. In Rome, he was assured that Romans would never do such a thing. It was done in Naples.

[00:13:01] **Bonnie Gordon** The English were the ones that had the most trouble with the castrati, but it was basically a xenophobic move. By the time you get to England in the 18th century, you have travelers on the grand tour who are writing these accounts of these amazing castrati they heard in Naples and then you get to England and they're like, we must get out these sodomites who are causing the French pox to infuse all of England.

[00:13:24] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Are they more upset that they are Italian or that they're castrati?

[00:13:28] **Bonnie Gordon** I think they're incredibly confused and they're upset about castrati, but they're really upset about Naples. They're super upset about syphilis, which they want to blame on anyone but themselves. They are super tied to a like global south as bad, global north as good. You know what went goes back to Pliny and goes right through Montesquieu and Jefferson of like what part of the world you're from and you get to have a soul and castrati get identified with Naples, which is very much associated with the Mediterranean as opposed to the Atlantic. So they also emerge at precisely this moment when the axis of power is shifting from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic.

[00:14:10] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Interesting. So if you're English, you love the music, but you can't love it so much because that music is Italian. It's Catholic. And comes from this bodily practice that you can't live with.

[00:14:24] **Bonnie Gordon** Yes.

[00:14:25] **Curtis Schaefer** The first thing I thought of when we started learning about this story was professional football.

[00:14:31] **Bonnie Gordon** Yeah.

[00:14:32] **Kurtis Schaeffer** That starts at a very young age.

[00:14:34] **Bonnie Gordon** Yeah.

[00:14:34] **Kurtis Schaeffer** In grade school people start watching people who might make good pro ball players. And we accept a high degree of injury. We accept lifelong injury.

[00:14:45] **Bonnie Gordon** Yeah.

[00:14:45] **Kurtis Schaeffer** For the sake of something that we value collectively sufficiently.

[00:14:50] **Bonnie Gordon** The ritualized use of certain kinds of bodies for the pleasure of others. You know, children who are cultivated into something in ways that will permanently destroy their bodies. And in the case of football players, with all this new work on concussions, it's like we used to think it was kind of broken legs. It turns out actually it's, you know, death from too many concussions.

[00:15:10] **Kurtis Schaeffer** But there's a kind of awe in the football player, too. There's something more than human there. Maybe not quite human, too, because we're willing to accept things for them that we wouldn't accept for everybody.

[00:15:21] **Bonnie Gordon** Right. And maybe that is this question of like there's a fine line between the superhuman and the subhuman. The football player is kind of a godlike figure and the football player is very ritualized. There's a story there to their bodies.

[00:15:35] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Their bodies injure, you know, malformation. And also, very few of them achieve the rock star status for as many as go in, only a very few reach the ultimate heights of fame. Is that also true with the castrati?

[00:15:51] **Bonnie Gordon** Yeah. I mean, very few of them reach the ultimate heights of fame. I think there was more of a space for them to be a kind of middling castrato. So very few of them were the kind of famous rock star opera stars, Sistine Chapel singers, but quite a lot of them made a life. You know, the castrati that we know the most about, of course, are the ones that were the equivalent of rock stars. And the Sistine Chapel choir is kind of like a rock star, I think. But some of them ended up in cathedrals in tiny towns, some of them had miserable lives, as did many people. You know, there were some of them for whom it was a radical failure. Also, sometimes it turned out like they didn't really have good voices.

[00:16:31] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Why talk about the castrati now?

[00:16:34] **Bonnie Gordon** Right.

[00:16:34] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** And talk about them not as sort of a weird thing in the past that we once did.

[00:16:39] **Bonnie Gordon** Yeah. I mean, that's I think that's the sixty-million-dollar question for historians. All told, you know, on the one hand, like, why should my students care about anything in the 16th and 17th century? Like, who cares? We have so many bigger problems now. I think in terms of the castrati, I mean, one of the things I think very carefully or very hard about is this question of who has a soul. You know, some of the logic behind castrati comes right out of Aristotle and also comes from Aristotle on slaves and Aristotle on sort of replacing machines with humans and that gets to Jefferson and who gets to vote. And so this question of who has a soul, who has esthetics, who can get owned and who can't. I think those are at the center really of even contemporary politics.

[00:17:28] **Bonnie Gordon** It's very easy to think that we don't have anything like this. Right. Like we're sort of beyond this. And the sort of easy answer to why did cause the phenomenon of the castrato go away? Is the enlightenment. Right. Like you could argue. OK. Well, the reason it went away is we started to care about human life. But that's actually a cheap shot because we know we only cared about some human lives and we still have people that are mutilated and mutilated to do services. You know, there's kind of like people that are enslaved. There's sex trafficking. There's also child athletes. It's a good reminder that at the heart of Western culture lies some incredibly destructive behaviors.

[00:18:58] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Sacred and Profane is produced for the Religion, Race and Democracy Lab at the University of Virginia. Our guest was Bonnie Gordon. Our communications manager is Ashley Dufallo. Emily Gadek is our senior producer. Kelly Jones is the Lab's editor.

[00:19:18] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Music on this episode comes from Blue Dot Sessions. Fred Gaisberg's recordings of Alessandro Moreschi are widely available online. The album is called Alessandro Moreschi: The Last Castrato. We'll also link to a few of his performances on our website. You can find out more about our work at [religionlab.virginia.edu](http://religionlab.virginia.edu) or by following us on Twitter @thereligionlab.

[00:19:50] **Kurtis Schaeffer** If you like the show. Head over to iTunes or the platform of your choice to rate and review us. It really makes a difference for new shows like ours.