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### SENESINO'S BLACK BOY (1725)

For all their celebrity and constant exposure to public invective, London's opera stars in the 1720s and 1730s received limited factual coverage in the press. Typical reportage includes contractual engagements, arrival in and departure from England, and private performances for the royal family, noblemen and foreign dignitaries, all averaging a few lines. This makes even more impressive the long paragraph on Senesino's private life printed (on the singer's behalf, one reasonably assumes) in May 1725. I discovered the episode in a volume of 18th- and 19th-century music advertisements now held at the Gerald Coke Handel Collection. The newspaper cutting is from *The Daily Post*, no. 1759, for Saturday 15 May 1725, [p. 2]; it was reprinted with minor corrections in *The Daily Courant*, no. 7359, on Tuesday 18 May 1725, [2].

Whereas a very false and malicious Report hath for some time past been industriously spread, relating to Mr. Senesino, one of the Performers in the Opera, it is thought necessary to publish the following Authentick

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Relation of that Affair: Mr. Senesino's Servant, a Black Boy, came into his Service about two Years ago being then about ten Years old, he was from the first unhealthy, but about the Month of November last past, he began to be worse than before, and was much afflicted with a violent Asthma and Dropsy, until on the 26th of February last past he was sent by the direction of Dr. Teissier, Physician of his Majesty's Household, and at the Expence of Mr. Senesino to Islington for the Air, where he was lodg'd at the House of Mr. George Allcock, Farrier, and was never after that seen by Mr. Senesino. On the 25th Day of March last past, he dy'd at Islington and was their [*sic*] bury'd. Having been guilty of some great Crimes some Days before his Death, and the said Allcock having corrected him for it, and even that without the Knowledge of the said Mr. Senesino, a Report was spread thereabouts, that the said Correction was the occasion of his Death, which Report was examin'd into by the Coroner's Inquest, and found to be malicious and groundless upon the Oath of Persons who lodg'd in the same House, and of Mr. Rideout a Surgeon of the Neighbourhood who visited him. It is suppos'd this hath given pretext to the late wicked vnd [*sic*] malicious Report, the falshood of which may be clearly prov'd by the said Inquest and Examinations taken then and there by Mr. George Rivers Coroner, or by the Report of the above-mention'd Dr. Teissier, and of Mr. St. Andre Surgeon, who both saw the Boy in his Illness.<sup>1</sup>

The growth of the transatlantic slave trade and London's dominant position in this market led to a strong influx of Africans and West Indians to England.<sup>2</sup> Among these, black boys were prized accoutrements in upper-class households. Their dark skin and facial features added a splash of exoticism to domestic life and brought attention to their owner in public places, while their youth and short stature minimized any physical threat to their masters. Ownership was affirmed through an engraved metal collar (e.g., 'GONE away from his Master a Negroe Boy ... had a Silver Collar about his Neck, on which was engraved Mrs. Gascoigne's Black Boy').<sup>3</sup> Serving usually as domestic servants, they

could also be used for rougher, though spectacular, activities, such as running races 'three times round St. James's-Park, for 100 l.'<sup>4</sup> Some managed to escape from their owners, prompting calls for their capture with generous rewards of up to several guineas. Even if they remained at large, they had little choice but to join London's buzzing crime scene and often targeted their former masters and properties. Victims of 'black' crime included lofty figures, such as the Earl of Burlington, whose 'Diamond Ring of 800 l.' was stolen in 1728 by a 'Negro Boy'.<sup>5</sup>

At the other extreme, black boys in the service of fashionable ladies could enjoy privileges unavailable to native youth, as several Hogarth images illustrate (e.g., *Taste in High Life; Marriage à-la-mode*, no. 4).<sup>6</sup> Partly pets and partly adopted orphans, they were fulfilling British colonial aspirations of civilizing savages while satiating the increasing demand for exotic products.<sup>7</sup> Their association with luxury naturally brought them in cultural alignment with Italian opera and especially castrati, whose childhood, too, was robbed of another kind of freedom.

No surprise, then, that Senesino had a black boy in his service (it is hard to tell whether he was also his legal owner). The question is why he employed one of evidently ill health. For a celebrity expected to be at the top of his form twice a week for half a year, the presence of a sickly boy might have been psychologically stressful and medically imprudent. Did the vulnerable creature touch a paternal nerve in him? This is an intriguing possibility, given the explicit references to his lost manhood in the satirical *Epistle from Senesino, to Anastasia Robinson* (1724).<sup>8</sup> Whatever the case may be, it says a lot that, while the singer had ignored the scurrilous attacks of early 1724,<sup>9</sup> he responded to this one with legal precision, protesting his innocence and defending his honour. An easy target for contemporary satirists and a Judas in Handelian historiography, Senesino here appears a concerned employer and a humane being. Even if this factual aria was clearly not of his own making (recall his mangled English in the production of *Esther* seven years later), his moral performance deserves a fair hearing.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Old Advertisements (Musical)': London, Foundling Museum, Gerald Coke Handel Collection, accession no. 605, p. 2. My deepest thanks to Katherine Hogg and Colin Coleman for their wonderful hospitality.

<sup>2</sup> Their exact population is hard to determine but was clearly in the thousands, with the majority close to the three slave trade ports of London, Bristol, and Liverpool. According to *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 34 (1764), 493, 'the number in this metropolis only, is supposed to be near 20,000'. For textual and visual records of their presence, see David Dabydeen, *Hogarth's Blacks: Images of Blacks in Eighteenth Century English Art* (Manchester, 1987), 17-40, and Catherine Molineux, 'Hogarth's Fashionable Slaves: Moral Corruption in Eighteenth-Century London', *English Literary History*, 72 (2005), 495-520: 497-98.

<sup>3</sup> *The Daily Post*, no. 2617, Saturday 10 February 1728, [2].

<sup>4</sup> *The Original Weekly Journal*, Saturday 27 February 1720, 1676.

<sup>5</sup> *The Country Journal: Or, The Craftsman*, no. 81, Saturday 20 January 1728, [2].

<sup>6</sup> See, however, Catherine Molineux's reading of these images as satirical inversions of black slavery in Britain: 'Hogarth's Fashionable Slaves', 513-15. Senesino's account shows that indulgence and cruelty could

easily alternate. One cannot imagine what 'great Crimes' a dangerously ill twelve-year-old could have committed back then. It is possible that Allcock, facing legal investigation, exaggerated the boy's actions to justify his harsh punishment.

<sup>7</sup> See the famous epitaph of Scipio Africanus, one of the Earl of Suffolk's black boys who died in 1720 ('I who was Born a PAGAN and a SLAVE / Now Sweetly Sleep a CHRISTIAN in my Grave / What tho' my hue was dark my SAVIOR'S sight / Shall Change this darkness into radiant light / Such grace to me my Lord on earth has given / To recommend me to my Lord in heaven / Whose glorious second coming here I wait / With saints and Angels Him to celebrate'), reprinted in Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London, 1984), 62; the tombstone can be seen at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Scipio\\_Africanus\\_grave.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Scipio_Africanus_grave.jpg).

<sup>8</sup> See Thomas McGeary, 'Verse Epistles on Italian Opera Singers, 1724-1736', *Royal Musical Association Research Chronicle*, 33 (2002), 29-88: 32-33, 54-55.

<sup>9</sup> A letter published under his name ('SENZINO') in *The Weekly Journal or Saturday's-Post*, no. 220, Saturday 12 January 1723, 1293 is clearly fraudulent: see <http://ichriss.ccarh.org/HRD/1723.htm>.