

Patricia Howard

Guadagni in the dock: a crisis in the career of a castrato

ON 13 February 1771 Gaetano Guadagni (1729–92), singer, actor, lover and the renowned creator of the title role in Gluck's *Orfeo* in Vienna some eight years earlier, appeared in the magistrates' court in Bow Street, accused by former colleagues of taking part in the performance of an opera in unlicensed premises at Carlisle House for hire, gain or reward.¹ The charge amounted to common vagrancy. How had the celebrated castrato come to such humiliating circumstances and what impact did they have on his career?

Guadagni had arrived in London in the early autumn of 1769. This was, in fact, his second visit to England. During the years 1748–55 he had made his mark first as a member of Giovanni Francesco Crosa's comic opera troupe,² and then singing in oratorios by Handel and in an English opera, *The Fairies* by J. C. Smith the younger. In these formative years, besides working with Handel, whom he later designated 'my great master',³ he received advice from Burney⁴ and training from Garrick;⁵ he was subsequently able to make use of their guidance even though his employment lay thereafter largely in *opera seria*. With hindsight, his performance in *Orfeo* in Vienna in 1762 has to be regarded as the climax of his career. But this was not apparent when in 1769 he returned to London as an international star.

His engagement as first man at the King's Theatre had been rumoured in April of that year. Mrs James Harris wrote to her son, the future first Earl of Malmesbury, that 'they talk of having the Guadagni and the Amicci, but I have lived long enough to know that spring talk and winter performances are not always the same'.⁶ Mrs Harris's scepticism was justified to the extent that Anna de Amici did not

come to London on this occasion, but Guadagni did, and his engagement was announced in *The Public Advertiser* on 5 September.⁷ Guadagni was recruited by the Hon. George Hobart, the new manager of the King's Theatre, to rescue an ailing company and to re-establish *opera seria* in the capital, from which it had been absent for a season. His salary of £1,150 was one of the highest ever paid by Hobart to a first man.⁸

Guadagni's performances in Piccini's *Olimpiade* (from 18 November 1769) and Guglielmi's *Ezio* (from 13 January 1770) attracted little critical notice, hardly an unusual state of affairs since reviews of opera in the daily press were infrequent at this time. During Lent 1770 he was in demand for oratorios. He sang in Jommelli's *La passione*, Pergolesi's *Stabat mater* and J. C. Bach's *Gioas rè di Giuda* at the King's Theatre, and also contributed to two Handel performances at Drury Lane—though it is not clear whether he actually took part in *Alexander's feast* and *Acis*, or whether he only sang the interval arias.⁹ He certainly sang as Israelite Man in *Judas Maccabeus* at the Haymarket on 4 May (as he had at Covent Garden 20 years earlier). Then, at the end of the season, he won what Burney described as 'very great and just applause' in *Orfeo*.¹⁰ This was a version of Gluck's opera expanded and altered by the librettist Bottarelli, with additional music by J. C. Bach and Guglielmi, as well as an aria by Guadagni himself.¹¹ Twelve performances were given between 7 April and 30 June, a number exceeded in that season only by *Olimpiade*. One spectator recorded his approbation:

... went in the Evening to the Opera of Orfeo—the King & Q. there—House remarkably crowded—Opera very

Patricia Howard, a Tutor and Lecturer in Music at the Open University, has published a number of books on opera, notably on Britten and Gluck. She is currently writing a study of Gluck's singers.