

# SONGS FOR A SAD KING

Henry Kamen reveals the extraordinary career of Farinelli at the court of Philip V.

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Every night I sing eight or nine arias. I never rest.”

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The healing power of music was demonstrated at its most curious in the 18th century by the famed singer Carlo Broschi, better known by his professional name, Farinelli. Born in 1705 in Apulia, Italy, into a family of lesser nobility who were also accomplished musicians, Carlo began his career as a singer when very young. His father died when he was ten, and his singing teacher backed the family decision to have the boy castrated in order to conserve his voice. The reputation of the purity and range of his voice soon extended beyond his hometown of Naples; he appeared by invitation in Parma, Milan, Munich, Venice and, above all, Vienna. In 1734, he went to London, where he was wildly successful, but asked for temporary release from his English contract when, in 1737, he was invited by Queen Elizabeth Farnese to sing at the Spanish court.

On his way to Spain, he passed through Paris and sang before Louis XV. When he arrived in Spain, he found Philip (or Philippe) V sunk in one of his crises of depression. The king was a victim all his life of intense bipolarity. Farinelli's first concert for the royal family, on an afternoon in mid-August 1737, was consequently performed in the king's absence. As the clear tones of his voice rose into the air, they penetrated to the bedroom where the afflicted Philip lay. The divine voice immediately resuscitated the king, who snapped out of his depression and began to attend once more to his work routine. Astonished by the therapeutic effects of Farinelli's music, the king and queen demanded that he sing for them every day.

He became thereafter an indispensable part of Philip's life. Within a few days he was named *música de cámara* of Their Majesties, given the title of *familiar criado mío* (my personal assistant),

ordered to give no public concerts but to sing only for the royal family, and given lodgings in the royal palace and the same high salary that he had earned in London, but tax-free. The contract with the English employers was rescinded. In effect, Farinelli now became the king's physician. He had certainly not been prepared for the strange daily timetable of the king, who tended to be awake all night and sleep all day, so that Farinelli had to sing his repertoire at all hours. At midnight, he usually sang in the king's chamber accompanied by a trio of musicians from the royal chapel. He was allowed to withdraw to rest only when the king had had his 'dinner' at 5am. In a letter of February 1738, Farinelli wrote:

“Since the day I came I follow the same routine, singing every night for the king and queen who listen to me as on that first day. I pray to God to preserve my health in this manner of life; every night I sing eight or nine arias. I never rest.”

Farinelli's papers show that the repertoire he sang for the king included hundreds of different pieces of music from Pergolesi, Scarlatti and other composers. Through Farinelli, the king had discovered at last, after many years of suffering, a satisfactory therapy for his disorder. The singer's role was also broader than might appear. From his privileged position, he was given charge of the arrangement of music and spectacles in the court, directed private entertainments for the royal family, and developed close personal links with the royal children. The court, and Madrid by extension, experienced a growing interest in musical presentations and in the beginning of opera. By inviting over from Italy noted performers in these arts, Farinelli played a key role in the development of cultural relations between Italy and Spain. As the singer himself claimed: “My

achievement is that I am considered not as mere Farinelli but as ambassador Farinelli.” Thanks to him, Italian opera began to achieve unprecedented success in Madrid society.

As time passed, however, the king’s relapses became more serious. Although there was a rapid recovery when the tenor began his musical therapy, the basic symptoms did not disappear. In August 1738, the British ambassador reported that when the king “retires to dinner, he sets up frightful howlings”. One such howling “lasted from 12 midnight till past 2 in the morning...As the queen cannot be sure of his behaviour, she does not fail to keep him within doors. His behaviour at night is to hear Farinelli sing the same airs that he sung the first time he performed before him. The king himself imitates Farinelli sometimes after the music is over, and throws himself into such howlings that all means are taken to prevent people being witness to his follies.”

Philip’s death, long expected by those who were able to judge by his physical appearance or who understood the consequences of his daily routine, came quite suddenly and without warning in July 1746. He had been working all night as usual in the Buen Retiro with his ministers, and went to bed at

7:30am. He slept until 12 noon. At 1:30, he said to Elizabeth that he felt like vomiting. His throat started swelling, as did his tongue, and he fell back on the bed. Within seconds he was dead. Neither priest nor doctor was present at the time of his death. He was aged just over 62 years. Farinelli, still a man of great influence at court, continued to serve the new king, Philip’s son, Ferdinand VI, and his influence became even greater. He was officially received in 1750 into the ranks of the nobility, as knight of the Order of Calatrava, an honour of which he was enormously proud. Ferdinand died in 1759 and was succeeded by his half-brother, Charles III, until then king of Naples. Farinelli’s days of court favour in Spain were over, and he withdrew to estates he had purchased in Bologna, where he died in September 1782.

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