



Jacopo Amigoni

Portrait group: The singer Farinelli and friends c.1750-52

Jacopo Amigoni

Italian (c. 1685)–1752, worked throughout Europe (c. 1715)–1752

Portrait group: The singer Farinelli and friends (c. 1750–52)

oil on canvas

172.8 x 245.1 cm

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Felton Bequest, 1950 (2226-4)

Carlo Broschi Farinelli (1705–1782) was the most famous singer of his day. He was a castrato (a high-range singer) and had a voice of dazzling range and flexibility. Farinelli sits in the centre of this intimate but exuberant portrait. Included are a group of his close friends – from left to right, the writer Abate Pietro Metastasio, the soprano Teresa Castellini, Farinelli himself, the painter Jacopo Amigoni, and the singer's dog and his pageboy.

Farinelli was in great demand in the opera houses of Europe, performing for audiences in France, England and Italy before settling in Madrid, where he was court singer for nearly twenty years. This group portrait was painted in Madrid where Farinelli was in the service of King Philip V (1683–1746), for whom he reputedly sang four arias per night. After the King's death, Farinelli stayed at court under the patronage of Ferdinand VI (1713–59), who bestowed upon him the military Order of Calatrava, which adorns his fine costume.

Teresa Castellini was the prima donna of the Madrid opera when Amigoni painted the group. She was Farinelli's favourite pupil, and it was rumoured that their relationship was extremely close. Indeed, Metastasio mentioned in correspondence that Farinelli was in love with Castellini. She also appeared with him on stage.

Amigoni has included his self-portrait in the painting, and the touching gesture of his arm around Farinelli's shoulder clearly identifies the artist as a friend and member of Farinelli's circle. He is posed with brushes in hand, implying that he is at work on this very canvas, which conveys a sense of informality and intimacy. Born in Venice, Amigoni was something of a journeyman, working all over Italy, as well as Germany, England and Spain.

The Roman-born Pietro Metastasio was a famous writer, well known as the author of numerous opera librettos. Amigoni has quaintly posed him with quill in hand. At least forty different composers set Metastasio's words to music, including Farinelli himself. Metastasio was court poet in Vienna from 1730 and his talent took him all over Europe. He met Farinelli in Naples, where they struck up a lifelong friendship and he wrote many songs for the singer. Metastasio was also in the service of the Spanish court when Farinelli was there.

The lyrics held by the two singers are clearly legible, and are for one of Metastasio's most famous poems. Farinelli himself wrote the score by which to sing them. The poem describes the sadness of a lover's departure. Since Metastasio had already left Madrid, its inclusion may refer to Teresa Castellini's intention to also leave the city, thus further breaking up the group of friends. It may also signal an impending change to the nature of the relationship between Farinelli and Castellini.

The work has a poignant sensibility as all the sitters are Italian, bonded in friendship in Spain, yet aware that they would soon be separating for life. X-radiographs reveal that Amigoni once painted the head of Farinelli's dog – whose collar bears the initials of the singer – in a much higher position than is seen in the finished work. The dog now holds his head quite low, in a pose that suggests it senses the despair of the parting friends. Overall, however, the painting is more a joyous expression of friendship than a melancholic one.

A fascinating aspect of this painting is that Amigoni identified each sitter by name with an inscription. This seems unusual because the work was painted for Farinelli, who obviously knew everyone in the painting. Perhaps Amigoni was sensitive to the phenomenon of the loss of identity in portraits through time, and he wanted to ensure that, in perpetuity, whoever saw the painting would know the people it portrayed by name.

Ted Gott & Laurie Benson

Jacopo Amigoni

Italiano (hacia 1685)–1752, activo en varios países de Europa

(hacia 1715)–1752

Retrato de grupo: El cantante Farinelli y sus amigos, (hacia 1750–52)

óleo sobre lienzo

172,80 x 245,10 cms

Galería Nacional de Victoria, Melbourne

Legado Felton, 1950 (2226-4)

Carlo Broschi Farinelli (1705-1782) fue el más famoso y popular cantante de su época, un castrato con una voz de deslumbrante registro y flexibilidad. Farinelli aparece en el centro de este íntimo, a la vez que exuberante, retrato del artista Jacopo Amigoni. En el grupo están los amigos más íntimos de Farinelli, de izquierda a derecha: el escritor Abate Pietro Metastasio, la soprano Teresa Castellini, el mismo Farinelli, el pintor Amigoni, el perro del castrato y su paje.

Todos los teatros de ópera de Europa requerían a Farinelli, que actuó para el público de Francia, Inglaterra e Italia antes de establecerse en Madrid, donde fue cantante de corte durante casi 20 años. Este retrato fue pintado en Madrid cuando Farinelli estaba al servicio del rey Felipe V (1683-1746), para quien, se dice, cantaba cuatro arias cada noche. Tras la muerte del rey, Farinelli permaneció en la corte bajo el patrocinio de Fernando VI (1713-59), quien le concedió la medalla de Caballero de la Orden de Calatrava que adorna su elegante vestimenta. Esta condecoración es una de las más antiguas y de mayor prestigio de España.

Teresa Castellini era la prima donna de la ópera de Madrid cuando Amigoni pintó este grupo. Era la alumna preferida de Farinelli y, según rumores, su relación era extremadamente estrecha. De hecho, Metastasio menciona en sus cartas que Farinelli estaba enamorado de Castellini. Ambos aparecieron juntos en los escenarios en varias ocasiones. Cantante de reconocida fama, fue muy conocida como intérprete de la música de George Frederick Haendel. Dejó Madrid en 1757, dos años antes de que lo hiciera Farinelli.

Amigoni incluye su autorretrato en el cuadro y la postura de su brazo sobre el hombro de Farinelli es una clara indicación de que el artista formaba parte del círculo de amistades de Farinelli (Amigoni era muy amigo de Farinelli y pintó su retrato en más de una ocasión). Su pose, con sus pinceles en la mano, indica que estaba trabajando en este mismo lienzo y es un detalle que da al cuadro un sentido de sencillez e intimidad. Nacido en Venecia, Amigoni fue una especie de artesano, que trabajó por toda Italia, Alemania, Inglaterra y España. En 1747 fue nombrado pintor de corte por el rey Fernando VI de España, donde permaneció hasta su muerte en 1752.

Pietro Metastasio, nacido en Roma, fue un escritor muy famoso, autor de numerosos libretos de ópera. Amigoni lo retrata pluma en mano. Al menos cuarenta compositores diferentes pusieron música a la obra de Metastasio, entre ellos, el propio Farinelli y Mozart, que basa en la obra del escritor tres de sus óperas. Metastasio fue poeta de la corte de Viena desde 1730 y su talento le llevó por toda Europa. En Nápoles conoció a Farinelli, con quien mantuvo una gran amistad durante toda su vida y para el que escribió numerosas canciones. Metastasio estuvo al servicio de la corte española al mismo tiempo que Farinelli, pero estaba en Viena, no en Madrid, cuando Amigoni pintó el retrato del grupo. Farinelli tenía varios retratos de su amigo y, probablemente, el pintor utilizó uno de ellos como modelo.

Los dos cantantes tienen en sus manos la letra de la canción, que es claramente visible y que proviene de uno de los más famosos poemas de Metastasio. Farinelli mismo compuso la música. El poema describe la tristeza de la despedida de un amor. Dado que Metastasio ya se había marchado de Madrid, su inclusión quizás se refiera a la intención de Teresa Castellini de dejar también la ciudad, mermando aún más el grupo de amigos. O, quizás, puede ser una señal del inminente cambio en la relación entre Farinelli y Castellini.

La obra es de una sensibilidad conmovedora, todos los personajes son italianos, unidos en España por una gran amistad, pero conscientes de que pronto se separarán para siempre.

Las radiografías revelan que, inicialmente, Amigoni había pintado

al perro de Farinelli, que lleva un collar con las iniciales del cantante, con la cabeza más alta. Una sombra casi etérea que se ve en la radiografía, pero no a simple vista, indica que el artista cambió de idea, y bajó la cabeza del perro en un gesto que sugiere la tristeza de los amigos que se separan. Pero, en conjunto, a pesar de todo, el cuadro es una expresión de amistad más alegre que melancólica.

Un aspecto fascinante y notable es que Amigoni identifica a cada uno de los personajes con una inscripción. Esto parece raro, dado que el cuadro era para Farinelli, que obviamente los conocía a todos. Quizás, Amigoni era consciente del fenómeno de la pérdida de la identidad de los retratos con el paso del tiempo y quiso asegurarse de que, en el futuro, cualquiera que viera su obra podría identificar a cada uno de los retratados.

Thinking and discussing before the visit

- In what ways have the arts and the way they are communicated changed since eighteenth-century Europe? Compare the people who appreciated the arts in the eighteenth century with those of today.
- Compare the tools, materials and mediums of artists in the eighteenth century with those available today.
- Research the development of oil paints. What new types of paints and paint colours became available in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and why?
- Carlo Broschi Farinelli (1705–1782) was the most famous castrato singer of his day. Find out what castrato singers were and why they were so popular in the eighteenth century.

Gallery visit activities

- What do you see in the painting? Who might the sitters be and what mood has the artist conveyed?
- What did the artist want us to know about them? Consider their dress, pose, facial expressions and the way they have been grouped.
- What clues in the painting suggest that the sitters portrayed are good friends?
- How has the artist indicated that the four adult sitters in the painting are involved in areas of the arts?
- Why might the artist have included himself in the portrait group?
- What do you notice about the clothing of the boy on the far right of the painting? What might his role be?

Discuss what role the arts play in our lives. Describe something you have seen, heard or read that has made you feel inspired, or allowed you to see the world from another perspective?

Spanish and other Hispanic cultures have a long tradition of deep engagement with the arts. Research the life and work of a famous filmmaker, painter, singer or writer from these cultures such as the Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez, Chilean writer Isabel Allende, Spanish filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar, Mexican artist Frida Kahlo, Spanish artists Diego Velázquez, Salvador Dalí and Miguel De Cervantes Saavedra, Spanish author of *Don Quixote*.

While the painting appears to reveal the happiness of four Italian friends united in Spain, they were soon destined to go their separate ways. The lyrics of the song held by the two singers were written by the famous writer Metastasio, seated on the far left. They describe the sadness of a lover's parting and may suggest the friends' imminent parting.

Gallery visit activities, continued

- What evidence suggests that Farinelli has been honoured by the Spanish King Ferdinand VI for his services to the court?
- What clue reveals who may be the owner of the dog?
- What aspects of the picture may suggest the artist's joy in painting?
- Describe the ways in which the artist has successfully conveyed a sense of three-dimensional space?
- How has the artist made the sitters stand out from the background?
- Amigoni's work is associated with the Venetian Rococo style characterised by fine detail, graceful and delicate forms, extreme highlights on the subject matter and pastel colours. Look for examples of each of these in the painting.
- If Farinelli were able to talk, what questions would you like to ask him?
- Farinelli was so popular in the eighteenth century that he had the equivalent status of a superstar today. Imagine how a contemporary artist might portray him if he were alive today. Consider the medium, pose, costume and setting.
- What can we learn about what was fashionable in terms of human beauty and clothing at this time in history?
- Discuss in what ways these ideas differ from today.
- Compare the harsh realities of life for most people in eighteenth-century Spain with the opulent atmosphere depicted in the painting.
- Discuss the amenities and scientific, technological and medical advances we take for granted today that were not available in Amigoni's lifetime.

Post-visit activities

- Jacopo Amigoni was appointed a court painter to Ferdinand VI of Spain in 1747. Research the life and works of other famous painters who worked for Spanish kings in this role.
- Compare other group portraits from different times in history with Amigoni's painting. In each case consider the medium, materials, style and purpose of the work.

Works could include:

- *You are what is most beautiful about me, a self portrait with Kell and Arella*, Del Kathryn Barton, winner of the Archibald Prize, 2008
<http://www.thearchibaldprize.com.au/winners/archibald>
 - *The bathers*, 1989, Anne Zahalka
http://www.roslynnoxley9.com.au/artists/3/Anne_Zahalka/245/35259
 - *The family of Felipe IV, or Las Meninas*, c.1656, Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez
www.museodelprado.es/en/ingles/collection/whats-see/1-hour-in-the-museum/obra/the-family-of-felipe-iv-or-las-meninas/
 - *The family of Charles IV*, 1800–01, Francisco de Goya y Lucientes
www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/goya/hd_goya.htm
- Create a photographic group portrait featuring your friends. Consider the mood, composition and location.

X-radiographs of the painting reveal that Amigoni once painted the head of the dog in a much higher position than is seen in the finished work. What might the lowering of the dog's head suggest about the mood the artist wanted to convey?

How many different ways can you describe Farinelli? Ask a student to choose one aspect of Farinelli (such as his facial features or expression, clothing, pose, physique) and describe it in detail. Encourage other students to build upon the description, adding new material. Then continue the same process with another aspect of Farinelli. Discuss as a class how this group description has deepened your appreciation and understanding of Farinelli.

Research the fascinating life of Farinelli and prepare an illustrated talk that explores his talent and special relationship with the Spanish court.