

SOTTO VOCE



A S H O R T F I L M B Y

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OVERVIEW



Sotto Voce is an original feature short that tells the fictional story of a modern-day castrato (a term used to describe 18th and 19th-century male singers who were castrated as young boys to preserve their pre-pubescent singing voice.) For roughly 150 years, countless young boys (mostly Italian) were subjected to this cruel act and sent to special schools where a rare few became mega stars and fabulously wealthy.

What if this tradition didn't become extinct, but instead went underground and was the dark secret behind some of the world's most famous singers? What lines would you cross for great art? For a chance at global fame?

(Images and people are for inspiration only.)

SYNOPSIS

The story opens in a flashback, an 11-year-old SAM arrives with his mother for an interview with what will become his teacher, HANS. We then flashforward to a 19-year-old Sam speaking portentously to his fans via social media from a hotel bathroom.

Earlier that day, Sam rehearsing the famous “Queen of the Night Aria” from Mozart’s *The Magic Flute* with the Met Opera. He becomes distracted by the appearance of his old teacher Hans with a new young boy.

Later in the dressing room, Hans enters and does his usual negging, but Sam is pulled away by BLAKE, his manager.

They make their way back to the hotel / “war room,” to do press for Sam’s big album release. He is about to become a legit crossover success.

Sam does an interview with NPR from his bedroom. The sight of the young boy has really thrown him. He washes a pill down with some vodka to keep the anxiety at bay, but overdoes it. As the interview progresses and he explains his voice, he spontaneously reveals that he was castrated to preserve his singing voice. The interview ends abruptly thereafter.

We flashback to Hans and young Sam.

Later that night, Blake and her team manage to fall out. Hans comes to the room and Sam decides to confront him.

In spite of Hans’ gas lighting efforts, Sam takes his revenge, singing his highest, loudest note into Hans ear, bursting his eardrum.

END

Runtime: 22m

CHARACTER

Breakdowns



SAM
The Chosen One
(20^{ish})

The first time Sam ever felt comfortable, at ease in his skin, was when he sang.

It didn't really matter where—concert choir, children's theater productions, alone with his Youtube followers, or in the church choir he joined when he was eight. Singing was both safe and engaging. The ceaseless discomfort of existence evaporated along with time itself.

And so when he was recruited into an elite musical conservatory at age 11, he felt absolution. He also felt like he had a family for the first time.

Sam grew up an only child in Manhattan. He lived in a small two-bedroom with his mother. The apartment belonged to his father who was well-meaning, but absent as he had moved to Nairobi to be a photographer when Sam was four. His mother (24 when she

gave birth) was always convinced that “this next thing” (law school, a jewelry business, tech sales, whatever) would be the ticket and would finally get her life on track,

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what that really means.**



clean up her act, stop the partying and the coke, and the drinking. Sam was one of those things for a while. But the drinking won out.

At the Conservatory, Sam's training was beyond intense and he loved it. And when he is presented with an opportunity to bottle the magic of his boyhood voice and grow it into something other-worldly, he is prepared to make the sacrifice, even if he doesn't understand what that sacrifice fully entails.

And as Sam the student becomes Sam the young adult, the artist, will he be able to face the reality of what happened to him? As the perverse reality of his situation comes into focus, the shame overwhelms him. He tries to numb it with drugs or project it onto the world, his teachers, his mother, but it always seems to boomerang back onto himself. It will be a long road before Sam can find peace.



HANS

The Philosopher Salesman

(40s)

Hans is the Musical Director of The Conservatory, a pope-like position, elected by committee, but whose authority is absolute and whose duty comes directly from “god.” His sole job is to protect and preserve the institution which has been the Julliard for castrati since its founding in 1610 in Venice. When Napoleon took Italy in 1797, the school went underground and effectively became a “clandestine” operation.

Hans is equal parts maestro, philosopher, teacher, salesman, C.E.O. and master manipulator. From his perspective, he is not sadistic or exploitative – no more than any “tough” teacher – rather he is on the side of angels, literally. He finds the rarest of talent and guides it to transubstantiated greatness. Castration is but a minor bump on the long, lonely, grinding road to success.

Incidentally, Hans has a deep baritone voice.



BLAKE

The Dealmaker

(30s)

Blake has a no-nonsense, seen-it-all cynicism, with a light comic touch.



ANDREW

Low-Key Oracal

(30s)

The actual smartest “guy” in the room, but no one, including himself, has fully realized it yet.

Historical **CONTEXT**

The castrati were male singers castrated before puberty to prevent their voices from dropping, allowing them to reach high-pitched notes that were particularly prized in the 17th and 18th centuries in Italy and across Europe. The practice had its roots in the Byzantine Empire, but it achieved its highest form in Italy, where the castrati became the superstars of their day, with the most famous among them earning fabulous wealth and prestige.

The castration was usually performed between the ages of seven and nine, before the onset of puberty, to ensure that the individual retained a childlike voice into adulthood. This procedure was dangerous, and mortality rates were high. The potential rewards for families were considerable, however, and so many were willing to take the risk.

Once castrated, the young boys would enter a rigorous educational and training regimen that could last for several years. Their education was primarily focused on developing their vocal skills, but also included training in music theory, composition, and often in playing musical instruments. They were taught by the leading music masters of the day in dedicated conservatories or in the homes of wealthy patrons.



Their vocal training was intensive and highly disciplined. They would learn to control their breathing, extend their vocal range, and perfect their technique. The most talented castrati often had extraordinary vocal ranges, with the ability to hit notes across several octaves.

The rise of the castrati coincided with the Baroque period, a time when the human voice was the central instrument in musical compositions. The castrati were celebrated for their ability to express the deep emotions evoked in the music of the time. However, by the 18th century, the practice began to wane, as evolving musical tastes and growing moral opposition to castration led to a decline in the popularity and acceptance of castrati. Eventually, in 1870, the practice was officially banned by the Vatican, marking the end of an era for these unique performers.

MOOD
& References



Whiplash, Damien Chazelle



Black Swan, Darren Aronofsky



The subject is dark, but the mis-en-scène will be warm and rich with color.

LEITMOTIF

& other thematic chestnuts



***OLD WAYS
OUT-OF-TIME
WITH THEIR
SURROUNDINGS***

Interview with a Vampire



Death in Venice



The Idol

***THE CULT
OF BEAUTY,
OF FAME
& OF TALENT***