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An Analysis of Pants Roles in Operas

By

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This document assesses the introduction of pants roles in opera and includes a historical overview to understand the background of these roles. This dramatic conceit concentrates on the development of the operatic art form from the seventeenth to twentieth centuries. In Italy during the seventeenth century, the castrato voice, which had been a crucial aspect of church music, was now developing a position in opera. Within this document, the castrati’s transition from sacred music to the opera, where lies the bulk of their success, will be studied. As opera expands rapidly throughout the music scene, the demand of singers, specifically castratis, grew. The document will also deal with the introduction of castrati operatic roles. Gluck’s “Orfeo ed Euridice” is analyzed. Gluck’s opera exhausted several editions and demonstrates how the role Orfeo, as well as other castrati roles, evolved once castrato slowly went extinct. The terms referring to cross-dressing roles, and their specific repertoire, as well as the process in which women came to assume these roles will also be discussed. The shift from male to female in operatic repertoire is examined, as well as the traditional pants role for women in opera. The document will also discuss the pants role Cherubino as an example. This is the embodiment of a young boy in love, experiencing the admiration of a woman for the first time, as well as the vulnerability of his feelings for a woman. Cherubino’s arias are analyzed as well as a description and explanation of his possible intentions while singing his arias will communicate the subtext of the character. This document also discusses similar characters in Italian and French repertoire. The German repertoire for pants roles is separately presented and is based on the role of Octavian in Strauss’ Der Rosenkavalier. It is interesting that although the roles of Octavian and Cherubino were developed centuries apart, it is possible to compare similarities between the characters, from their creation, librettists’ perception and the composers’ execution in their compositions. This analysis was intended to exhibit the evolution of the pants role in opera and how writing current pieces for women in pants is an entirely different challenge as it was in previous centuries. In an attempt to expose different viewpoints on the subject, these questions will be addressed. The characters addressed so far are the pants; when a woman represents a male character.

Meanwhile, there is a discussion about how a pants roles should be classified, although the pants role is the representation of a man played by a woman, she is not attempting to convince the audience that she is a man. The alteration of sex of a character when it is visible to the audience, and the conversation of categorizing a pants role; for example, the role of Leonore in Beethoven’s Fidelio, is debatable.

“For there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others—and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.” Matthew 19:12 One of the most ancient reasons for the induction of male hypogonadism by castration is found in the Bible. Although with time, this practice would mostly be done by those who would choose to serve in the church for their religious beliefs. In opera, the reasons for castrations are different. In seventeenth century Italy, this surgical procedure was commonly performed on young boys that showed musical ability, especially in singing. This procedure was done around the pre-pubescent age, to
preserve their “unbroken” male voice. In opera the practice started in the first half of the seventeenth century, reached its peak during the eighteenth century, lasting until the later part of nineteenth century. There is no information on who began the practice of castration. What is known is that women were not allowed to sing in church. Some say that it is certain that church used the words of St. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, to forbid women to sing in the church. “Let your women keep silent in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also says the law. And if they will learn anything, let them ask their husband at home: for it is a shame for a woman to speak in the church.”

However, decades later women could be found singing in church services, outside of Naples, with the understanding that they did not cause any disturbance, scandal or offend. It is known that the castrated boys would work as choir singers in the churches. Also, it was not solely for religious purpose that persuaded them to choose to do the operation; there were other advantages to the surgery as well. In order for the procedure to take place, the boy had to give consent to the operation several times. At the age of eleven or twelve, a boy could not decide if he wanted to be a singer. The parents, with the knowledge their child was musically gifted, knew this could be an opportunity for a fulfilling career. It could be a way for the boy to be financially stable as well as a way for the family to save money. Once the adequate amount of consent was given, the boy would be shipped to the conservatory and parents would have fewer monetary expenses. Reading about a famous castrati background, such as Farinelli and others, it was very common to verify that they came from extremely humble, modest families, in the countryside south of Italy. For these reasons, in case the boy showed music skills but did not show any interest in pursuing music as a career, it was still a possibility to find an excuse for the operation. To continue with the surgery the family might use excuses such as malformation from birth, an accident while riding, a bite from an animal, or even a kick from a friend. Although there is not many details, it was said by the Swedish traveler Grosley that in Florence it was discovered that young boys were objects of commerce. A wealthy person would go to a Foundling Hospital and “adopt” a boy. They would support and train them, arranging instruction time for musical activities. When the boy came of age, they would insure that the surgery was done. Although there are no confirmations to the fact, it was understood that these boys would be sold in Rome, giving the “patrons” all the profits.

For those boys who chose the path of a singing career looking towards the dream of becoming a “superstar”, as did Farinelli, their way tended to be more prosperous without pain and displeasure. Life in music started to blossom during the seventeenth centuries in significant centers, such as Naples. Old orphanages became exquisite schools of music in that time. After a century of plague, disease, poverty, war, and starvation, the first half of the 17th Century was a period of restoration but also of preservation. This led the Italians to hold onto what was theirs and to carry their musical traditions. The conservatory was developed from this ambition: Conservare, which means to keep, is a term that is still applicable to music schools today. Castrati were a
musical fashion icon and the seventeenth Century was the the time of their growth. The Italian theatres and churches administered many opportunities for musicians. People would receive stipends for bringing young boys to be trained in the conservatory. The singer’s work as a musician was hard, enduring a six to ten year heavy program. They dreamed about acquiring a position as a choirmaster while studying. Their daily routine in the conservatory consisted of concentrated exercises on breathing, one of the key differences of a castrato and a female singer. These series of exercises aided them to develop a major ability in air control. The famous castrato Farinelli, whose given names was Carlo Broschi, was able to withstand a note for more than one minute. He also had amazing abilities with melismas and coloratura, singing more than 200 notes in one single breath.

Angus Heriot, in his book, “The castrati in Opera” has a chart demonstrating a typical routine of study for a singer, including voice exercises to not overexert the voice, but also composition, theory of singing and instrumental lessons such as the harpsichord. The singing tessitura transformed during the century. The audience had no interest in the advertisement of high notes. The public enjoyed being amazed by the phenomenon of different singing technique. The most famous works usually had a short range. For example, the music could have a range from A2 to C4. The many years of study in the conservatory helped young boys to obtain a controlled use of breath as well as the growth of their body. With an expanded rib cage and the breathing technique, the castrati had a climatic advantage on women singers. Another inequality between them is the size of their larynx. After the operation, a man’s larynx, which is larger than a woman’s, tended to increase in adjacency to the resonators, intensifying the sound.

The seventeenth century was also the period of the emergence of opera. At the turn of the century, Peri’s Dafne (1597), Euridice (1600), Monteverdi’s Orfeo (1607), and Vitali’s Aretusa (1620) were the first Italian dramas composed in the new genre. At first, the castrati would serve the Church, singing in the masses, and even making extra money, singing in funerals, ceremonies, coronations, and other events. However these singers’ real fame and fortune was found in the theatre. It was normal to train the singers for the Church services and then watch them migrate to the opera, where money was easier to earn. The opera was the first popular form of entertainment yet a great international achievement. Opera singers became celebrities and their performances and reputation started to spread to other countries. Italy was synonymous of opera and served as reference for this genre. Also, Opera was associated with Castrati, and, although there was a strong prejudice, it was also possible to have women singing a few smaller roles in opera. Castrati were considered superior to women: their musical training was much more rigorous and effective. The Neapolitan style monopolized the opera stage in Europe, with the exception of France, that was stubbornly clinging to ancient traditions and refused to accept the Italian singers. There were those that would be enthusiastic about these singers, as was Goethe: “I reflected on the reasons why these singers pleased me so greatly, and I think I have found it. In these representations, the concept of imitation and of art was invariably more strongly
felt, and through their able performance a sort of illusion was produced. Thus a double pleasure is given, in that these persons are not women, but only represent women. The young men have studied the properties of the female sex in its being and behavior; they know them thoroughly and reproduce them like an artist; they represent, not themselves, but a nature absolutely foreign to them.”

Since music is universal, it is constantly developing. It was and is in constant changes. Music started to go through stylistic advances, moving towards a more pure, natural, simple expression. Composers such as Gluck, would still write for castrato, but not in their style, such as fioritura, which was the castrati specialty. Another great influence on music was the appearance of Opera Buffa (comic opera). It reached a point where castrati were not crucial to opera anymore. This genre showed, a more was simple, lively, conception of music. The use of women in opera, and also male voices – tenor and bass, increased, bringing what it was essential in order to achieve a natural sound and expressiveness. The comic opera soon spread to other regions and countries. In Germany it was called Singspiel; there was the English ballad opera, in Spain it appeared the Zarzuela, and the Opéra Comique in France. Because it was commonly in local dialect, it was sensible to people in general. Some composers used to work in both, the serious and comic style. In some cases they would use the castrati. As the end of the century approached, a substantial historical event in society changed and influenced music: Napoleon’s invasion of Italy. This invasion created more than just political consequences. The war also impacted Italian music. In the dramatic side of opera, the Prior the invasion Italian opera themes were based on ancient Greek mythology. French revolutionary “rescue opera” spread to Italy, as well as the subject material adapted within the drama of the opera, including kings and important social figures. This greatly influenced Donizetti and Verdi.

A heavier type of orchestration, music written for a bigger number of instruments started to be accepted in Italy. All these innovations in music started to affect the supremacy of the castrati. By the late of 18th Century, it was clear that the castrati’s’ era had come to an end. The last composer to write a castrato role was Meyerbeer. The role Armando in Il crociato in Eggito in 1824 was especially written for Velutti, one of the last castrati. Meyerbeer only reached his peak a few years later, composing in the new genre Grand Opéra. Although castrati were banned from the stage due to the new taste, they remained substantial in the churches for a little longer. At the same time, one can say that there was a movement against them. Some of these attitudes could be described as prejudice. They were a target of unkind abuse and an increasing hatred. One of the reasons they were accused of homosexuality and therefore, were deemed evil creatures. The church turned against the use of castrati singers, and in 1878 Pope Leo XIII forbid them to sing in the church, but they continued in church music throughout the century. In the Sistine Chapel, for example, only in 1902, the castrati stopped being accepted.
One of the most significant impacts of the French revolution was the elevation of women’s social status. Among the results of the enlightenment in opera was their approval on the stage. It did not take long for this more natural sound to dominate the performances in opera. During the castrati era women would be permitted to perform a small role, and perhaps even pretend to be a castrato pretending to be a woman. The respect and admiration that the revolution brought to women was essential; however, there were still several issues and steps to take in order for females to be accepted by the musical universe, by the composers, musicians and of course, the audience.

For women to achieve a secure status they had to undergo a difficult, hard road, as they were seen as inferior to male singers. In musical quality, it was a fact that women were less technically capable than the castrati. First, because music written thus far was composed to fit a specific type of voice. Due to the operation on the boy, their voice did not change during adolescence. As a result of the surgery, the castrato larynx ended up being similar to an adult female. Secondly, it is important to remember and analyze the difference between their training. The numerous hours that the castrati would spend in music and vocal training would always be supplementary to what women had at their disposal. Tenor and bass voices were not considered the primo uomo, until the turn of the century, at which point the tenor voice takes on the personification of masculinity, assuming the role of the new heroic voice. There were more voice choices for the composers: sopranos, contraltos, tenors and basses. The castrati were furthermore less needed. Women began to assume the roles that were once written for castrati. They were being admitted in the opera and on stage, they were taking the place of a function that already existed. Several roles that were originally composed for castrati, were now being performed by women (mezzo/contralto or soprano) with the same range. Some roles are extremely controversial. Composers from the primo ottocento are the ones that produced operas with roles that needed to be adapted to the female singers. Even before that, Mozart in his Idomeneo had written the role Idomante for a castrato. Suffering the changes of taste, he had rewritten the role for tenor. Nowadays, this same character is played by high lyric mezzo-sopranos, as a travesty role, although originally, it was not Mozart’s basic conception.

Before Mozart, in Händel’s Ariodante, the title role was written for a castrato. Today, the same role is being done by mezzo-sopranos. The range is the same and nothing has changed in Händel’s music. There are several roles that fit the description above. Originally, they had been written for castrati (soprano or mezzo/contralto). From the nineteenth century to our present days, women acquired these trouser roles, which are, presently considered the pants role. It is essential to highlight that this practice of writing for women instead of men was not an innovation or a daring step. It was not very common, but it was not impossible for women to be on stage. Of course, they would have to deal with the prejudice and discriminated status. Sometimes, they would be on stage, impersonating a castrato, and by doing that they would also be pretending to be a woman in a castrato body. Cross-dressing is an ancient practice, demonstrated by a
large number of historical figures. Some of which are from old Greek mythology. In 1600, it was not a woman who would be dressed as a boy. During Shakespeare’s era, boys would often dress as a girl. Through the years, the scenario in the theater evolved, and women replaced men. The changes were sudden and, soon, not only would women be on stage performing, but they would even play trouser roles, which remained an attraction on British stages for centuries. In opera, a register can be point out from 1744, the Teatro della Pace, in Naples, in which a woman, Antonia Cavalluccio was cast as a castrato singer, giving the title of primo uomo. This also occurred in 1747, with two other women: Angela d’Alessandro and Berenice Penna. Lord Mount Edgcumbe, after seeing the comic opera by Sacchini, La condatina in corte, with the castrato Giorgetto as first man, added: “There were also the uomo serio, the donna seria, generally the second man and woman of the serious opera.” (ANGUS, 1974, p32). He had previously specified the ‘second man’ to have been a soprano. Sopranos and Contralto/Mezzos started playing warriors, lovers, kings and fathers. Although the castrati were a phenomenon in Italy and around Europe, in France they remained hesitant. After the revolution, it was logical that Italy would be influenced by the French culture. The taste for the castrati, their voices, and their social representation in Italy were as dubious as they were in France from that point on.

Today, it is also usual for a man to sing the roles written for castrato. The counter-tenors have developed a technique to reach the high notes similar to a castrato. It would be a director’s choice of casting them. He could have a trouser role sung by a woman or a man. The result being that the director either has a woman figure dressed as a man, or a man figure sounding like a woman. Mistakenly, there is a miscomprehension of the term trouser role. In fact, there are others terms, such as breeches role, pants role, travesty, and even skirt role (female character sung by a male singer). From Italian, travesty refers to any role sung by the opposite sex. Breeches roles, pants roles and trouser roles, are terms for a woman singing a male character. Beside these, there are also disguised roles which are a woman who sings a role of a woman who appears on stage disguised as a man. There are very few roles of this kind in opera. There is an early example in Handel’s Alcina where Bradamante has disguised herself, and there is Leonore in Beethoven’s Fidelio, Matilda in Rossini’s Elisabetha Regina d’Inglaterra, Gilda in act 3 of Verdi’s Rigoletto, and Zdenka in Strauss’ Arabella. This kind of role tends to be more elevated, but they also offer a familiar model of female self-sacrifice that is not very inspiring.

As for trouser or pants roles, the list is lengthier. This is due, in large part, to the historic fact of the rise and demise of the castrato. The fact of opera’s absolute persistence upon its own esoteric rules, where voice and music come first and realism has no place, is also a result to this vast list. Trouser roles start with Handel, who wrote the part of Sextus in Julius Caesar for the female soprano voice. Another young boy character is Mozart’s Cherubino in Le nozze di Figaro and Annio in his La clemenza di Tito. Also, in Goethe’s Faust there is a prominent pants role. In Rossini and Donizetti
operas there are several roles such as, Enrico, Pippo, Malcolm, Arsace, Jemmy, Smeaton and Pieretto. There are two significant roles in the twentieth century. One being Octavian in Strauss’s Der Rosenkavalier and the Composer in his Ariadne auf Naxos. Early Italian and German opera repertoire include roles specifically written for castrato. Monteverdi composed the roles of Nero and Ottone in L’in-coronazione di Poppea, Orpheus in Gluck’s Orfeo ed Euridice, roles that nowadays are commonly executed by mezzos. The list is vast in Handel’s compositions. From Giulio Cesare, which included Caesar, Sextus and Ptolemy, to Alcina with Ruggiero. Mozart also wrote for castrati, with Idamante in Idomeneo, as well as Rossini and Meyerbeer.

A woman dressed as a boy has been established since Shakespeare’s time and remained popular on the opera stage well into the nineteenth century. Numerous works were composed in the last period of Opera Seria. These were written for castrati who played heroes who rescue cities and defeated foreign enemies. After their decline in number and in popularity, female singers (especially mezzo-sopranos) became the warriors, fathers, kings, and lovers. Many baroque operas, especially Handel’s, are very ambiguous. Some of his works have a “flexible central casting”. In Monteverdi’s Orfeo and L’incoronazione di Poppea there are examples of how the roles such as Orfeo, Ottone, Arnalta, and Nero can be played by either women or men. Simultaneously, roles intended by the composer for women in travesty became a commonplace. During that period the composer had the choice of writing for the castrati or a female in trouser. It is found in the 18th Century with Mozart’s Cherubino in Le nozze di Figaro, Bellini’s Romeo in Il Capuleti ed I Montecchi, through the twentieth century with Strauss’ Octavian in Der Rosenkavalier. Although they all intended a miscomprehension and confusion when writing to women disguised as men, it is clear that they represent different intensions in the characters. Cherubino’s image and representation in Le nozze di Figaro cannot be compared as equal to Der Rosenkavalier’s Octavian. One represents the young boy, with a fresh heart and idolization of love. The other role could suggest the “re-sexing” of the composer’s intention. Not only in terms of male and female cross-dressing but the presence of the lesbian in the opera, as a character.

Margaret Reynolds in her essay Ruggiero’s deceptions, Cherubino’s distractions, presents opera and everything that evolves around it, connected to sex. Peoples’ social class, sexual options, education degrees are characteristics that will determine the relationships they have with opera and what they expect of it when going to the theatre and watching a show. Understanding the trouser role in opera is also to understand the importance that they have as a sexual icon, even if it is covered and only exist inside peoples’ minds, in the audience, and also inside the singers’. With the exception of the numerous roles that were once written for castrati and are now performed by women, trouser roles written intentionally for woman is a way of exposing the sexuality in some way. It will be either a character of a young teenager speaking of an immature love or a young man, awaking the imagination, as Strauss uses Octavian for his expression. These three different types of trouser roles (castrato, young boy/page and mature love)
will be discussed and exemplified with a role in opera. A fourth type is the one when a travesty role is disguised to the dramatic plot. A good example is when Cherubino, when he is dressed as a woman and hides in the closet. The audience is clued in to the intention. Some people would include the role of Leonore in Beethoven’s *Fidelio* in this travesty role. The soprano, in the rescue opera, is determined to save her love that has been arrested. She dresses as man, to gain access into prison in order to save him. Her cross-dressing is made aware to the audience and this is a role that should be in a different category.

In analyzing trouser role, the first to be discussed are those originally composed but now performed by woman. They are numerous since they are from the period in which women were not allowed to be on stage. Therefore, all the works were composed for castrati. It is interesting how this repertoire suits the female voice. The castrati’s voice range is equivalent to the sopranos and mezzo-sopranos. These voices types were substituted for the castrati once they were out of fashion. Tenors also sing some of these roles, but what is most recent in this transformation are the counter-tenors that are trying to step back into the roles of the castrati, although their voice power is much less effective than original singers. The appearance on stage of the castrati is dated from the earliest operas. Monteverdi’s work L’Orfeo from 1607 included the participation of the castrato, although they were not yet singing the lead roles. Later, in Agrippina, Monteverdi wrote the role Nero for this type of voice. Nowadays this role is sung by a soprano. Another Handel opera that includes a castrato role is Alcina, in which Ruggiero is now sung by a mezzo-soprano. The range is much more central and it goes from a B4 to a G5. Mozart’s Idamante in Idomeneo has been performed by mezzosoprano, but it was also originally written for a castrato. It could be said that all works from early Italian opera until Meyerbeer’s Il crociato in Egitto (1824), the last opera with a written castrato role of Armando, are now performed mostly by mezzo-sopranos. Meyerbeer’s role was specifically written for the castrato Giovani Battista Velluti who had just sung another work written for him, the role of Arsace, by Rossini, in the opera Aureliano in Palmira (1823). Today Armando and Arsace are sung by a mezzo-soprano and a contralto, respectively. With the lack of male sopranos and changes happening in music and taste, there was an urgent demand in filling the gaps left by the castrati singer. Gluck’s Orfeo ed Euridice is an example of how an opera went through these changes, to adapt to the new demands of music. The work was written in 1762 and is considered a “reform” opera. The composer’s new ideas influenced later composers such as Mozart, Weber and Wagner. The movement was against the coloratura in long sections of the da capo aria. It was innovative in bringing a fuller orchestration, and a type of more continuous music. More importantly was the clarity and symmetry of the music. The embellishment figures in the vocal line no longer stood in the way of understanding the text. This type of music was based in simplicity. It was Gluck’s intentioned harmonically open-ended section that led people to hold applause by the end of each stanza. He optioned for simplicity in the melodies. To avoid
sharp contrasts, he made use of recitativo accompagnato using the orchestra instead of
continuo.

‘Symphonies for the voice’ for it was practically impossible to understand the text
and transmit any meaning with the abuse of the coloratura use. Metastasio was an
important figure, along with other poets, whose librettos were not favorable or
constructed to simplify the singer’s approach. Calzabigi, Gluck’s librettist in Orfeo,
insisted that ‘one note should always be sufficient for one syllable. Orfeo ed Euridice
has two versions and is the first of Gluck’s so called ‘reform operas,’ if not one of the
most famous. The first version, with the libretto by Calzabigi is from 1762, and it was a
great success, being well accepted by the audience. The cast consisted by only three
people. The leading role was primary written for alto castrato. Euridice and Amore were
written for a soprano. The opera went through several changes. In its revival in 1769,
Gluck conducted it himself as part of a triple bill. For this specific performance, the
opera was given without an intermission and the leading role of Orfeo was transposed
up for the soprano castrato, Guiseppe Millico. In 1774, this opera was presented in the
Académie Royale de Musique, at which time the composer once again revised, and
chose to put the role of Orpheos for the haute-contre to sing. In France, the castrati
were not accepted the way they were in the rest of Europe. There, the haute-contre was
used to sing the heroic roles. The castrati and hautecontre had a similar sound,
according to documents; however, they were not dynamic as powerful as the Italians
castrati. To perform the work in France, Gluck’s revisions were beyond adapt Orfeo and
Euridice last recitativo accompagnato before her death in the underworld. He added
more vocal and instrumental numbers, as well as a ballet and the number of
instruments increased. Pierre Louis Moline wrote the French version after Calzabigi,
with some additions in the text. Although Gluck wrote both versions himself, the Italian
is more commonly performed. The opera continued going through changes. During the
nineteenth century, another version arose, however this time by another composer,
Berlioz. In 1859 he made his edition of the opera and the leading role was designed for
a female singer. In this case it was specifically made for Pauline Viardot, contralto. She
was not the first woman to sing the role. In 1813, Damoselle Fabre had performed the
role of Orpheus in Milan. Berlioz’ edition combined both Italian and French versions. He
would maintain some Italian material only if he thought it was superior in comparison to
the other version. The opera was set in four acts, and there were cuts, such as the third
verse of Orpheus’ lament ‘object de mon amour’, the act 3 trio and the final
divertissement.

At the same time, he made changes in chorus. He also modified the text, which
was adapted by Moline. In 1889, Ricordi published the opera. Still, it was not the original
work by Gluck. Actually, during the nineteenth century, many other versions were made
besides Berlioz’. But his version was the most recognized. The Ricordi edition version is
a combination of Gluck’s original version and Berlioz’. It is in three acts and the Orfeo
was still for a contralto singer. Some music in the French version was put back in the
publication. This is the version that is being used since then. There was also another
adaptation of this opera was written for a special occasion, in which the role was transposed lower for baritone. Both Hermann Prey performed this edition as did Fischer Dieskau, who then recorded. Orfeo had lost Euridice in the first act. Amore tells him that he may go to the underworld and rescue her. There was only one condition. He could not look at her until they reached the earth. If he looked at her, Euridice would die. He accepts and goes to the underworld to find his beloved. Orfeo finds the furies on the way to Hades that would not let him in. With his lyre and his beautiful singing he is able to calm the creatures. In the third act, he finally finds Euridice. He does not look at her. On the way back to earth she starts to question him the reason him and asks why he would not look at her. Her concludes that he no longer loves her and declares her wish to dies. Orfeo cannot take anymore and look at her. She dies again. He sings the aria as soon as he loses her.

Today the role of Orfeo, can be performed by either a contralto or a mezzo-soprano. Che farò senza Euridice presents the simplicity of melodies, no fioratura or coloratura that were the typical characteristics of earlier castrati arias. Set in a lilting, upward melody in a major mode, this aria has been a subject of discussions. Why Gluck used a major key in a text of sorrow? In this aria, in both versions, Orfeo had just lost his beloved for the second time by looking at her as he was leading her out of the underworld. This music is a lament and critics observed that it could easily be used if the text had the exact opposite meaning. Because of its key – C major, this music might achieve a different type of mood or emotion instead grief. It is complicate to understand why Gluck chose to set this music in a major mode; however, Goethe’s words may explain the deep meaning of a lament sung by a God. “And although man be stricken dumb in woe, a god did grant me words to tell my sorrow.” The differences between the versions are clear by only reading the libretto. They are set equivalently at the same time in the opera: the third act. In the original version, the act is shorter, because it does not have the duet (Euridice and Orfeo) that the French version has, neither the repetition of her aria “Fortune Ennemie.” The recitative that precedes the aria has different music between the versions. It is easy to see how the French language is set differently in music than Italian. They differ in the number of syllables in a word. Looking at the libretto in each one of the versions it is possible to see the length of each. This will modify the music in the later version. The list of castrati roles which are now performed by women is long. They are mature, heroic, and in the plot they are fighting for something greater. For this reason, the quality of the voice is important. Women are performing the roles that were once written for men. This means that the female voices have the challenge of singing music that was not composed for their type of voice. One of the advantages of using castrati was the enormous breath control, which was developed due the long strenuous hours of study. Long phrases, coloratura passages, and voice effort, were characteristics of a man’s voice in the castrato condition. Roles in this category include: Rinaldo in Rinaldo and Amadigi in Amadigi di Gauda by Handel, Sesto in Mozart’s La clemenza di Tito, Arsace in Rossini’s Aureliamo di Parma (the only role that he wrote for castrato).
Early Italian and German opera contains a large number of castrati roles, often two male leads in the same opera. Under this heading come the roles of Nerone and Ottone in Monteverdi’s L’incoronazione di Poppea (1642), Orpheus in Gluck’s Orfeo ed Euridice (1762), and, Aria Form of Gluck’s Che far’ll senza Euridice especially, in a great many Handel operas, from Julius Caesar (1724), which included three major castrato roles in Caesar, Sextus and Ptolemy, to Alcina (1735), where only Ruggiero was created for a castrato. Later castrato roles were written by Mozart in Farnace and Sifare in his Mitridate (1770), and he also wrote the part of Idamante in Idomeneo (1781). And as being said previously here, the last notable castrato roles written by Rossini in his Aureliano di Parma and Meyerbeer’s Il crociato in Egitto.

Unlike these roles previously listed, there are others that fit a different category. These are the pants roles intentionally written for woman. This is looked upon differently because here we will find a character that will most likely be a secondary role. It does not have the singing demand of the heroic leading role. They were designed for woman especially because of the physics and sound characteristics of their voices. The characters usually represent a young boy, or a page. It is expected that their voices correspond to their personality. As for the physical appearance, there is a necessity of the singer having a slim, boyish body. This category still demands of voice with lightness, clearness, regardless the timbre. There are many examples of roles from the early operas to the modern ones. Travesti roles started with Handel, who wrote the part of Sextus in Julius Caesar (1724) for a female soprano voice. This character is portrayed as a young boy, and the pattern continues with Mozart’s Cherubino in Le nozze di Figaro (1786) and Annio in his La clemenza di Tito (1791). In Rossini and Donizetti there are plenty of travesty roles, including Enrico, Pippo, Malcolm, and Arsace in Rossini’s Elisabetha Regina d’Inglaterra (1815), La gazza ladra (1817), and Semaramide (1823), respectively, and Donizetti’s Smeaton and Pieretto in his Anna Bolena (1830) and in Linda di Chamounix (1842). They are not warriors or heroes but they are constantly defending a different fight, their love. This role is used in opera when an adolescent boy is in love with an older woman who has a husband or is promised to someone else who does not appreciate her or for some reason cannot be with her. The list continues, with such role as Romeo in Bellini’s I Capuletti e I Montecchi (1830), Sièbel in Gounod’s Faust (1859), and the shepherd Andreloun in his Mireille (1864). Jemmy and Isolier in Rossini’s Guillaume Tell (1829) and Le Comte Ory (1828), and Hänsel in Humperdinck’s Hänsel und Gretel (1893), Urbain in Meyerbeer’s Les Huguenots (1936), Oscar in Verdi’s Un ballo in maschera (1859), and Tebaldo in his Don Carlos (1867). In the nineteenth century, the number of travesty roles decline. There were still other composers who wrote travesty roles. Johann Strauss with his Count Orlofsky in Die Fledermaus (1874), Massenet’s Jean in Le Jongleur ne Notre Dame (1902), and the title role of Cherubin (1905) are some of these examples. In the twentieth century there are two important roles: Octavian in Richard Strauss’s Der Rosenkavalier (1911) and the Composer in his Ariadne auf Naxos (1916). The roles cited above are not heroic, they are young men or boys, and they are very often foolish, or even portrayed as idiots. To illustrate this type of roles, a good example would be
Mozart's Cherubino. The composer's works come right in the middle of a change in opera, the decline of Castrati. He still composed works for them, inspired in Handel's opera seria, with recitativo secco and da capo arias and its use of transgender roles. But he also wrote opera buffa where form was associative and developmental, where the subjects were romantic love, and where boys were boys and girls were girls. Drafted in only six weeks, Le nozze di Figaro is Mozart's most popular opera today. The operatic version of Beaumarchais's play Le Mariage de Figaro was produced for the first time in 1876 in Vienna with an outstanding cast whose character and skills contributed to the success in its premiere. Sadly, there were only nine performances of the opera in that year. The Viennese preferred other works. Even though Vienna was not fond of Le nozze di Figaro, it was well received.

As was mentioned previously society was changing during this time. The period of the castrati's decline began in the 1790's on, so that by the 1810s and 1820s there was a dearth of singers. Then by 1844, the castrati were practically extinct. This puts their demise at the same time as the period of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars. The major concern at time was that men were no longer men, and women were no longer women. Women were appearing in the public eye, demanding reforms, equality of sex, taking part in barricades. Mozart's great works come from this political discourse. He was definitely influenced by the ideas of this society in transformation. Even his opera Idomeneo, which has a castrato role, Idamante, was rewritten for a tenor. This movement left Mozart with the possibilities of sex transgender roles for the female travesty. And Cherubino is one of the greatest roles in this category. Donald Grout, in his book A Short History of Opera, introduces Mozart's characters in Le Nozze di Figaro poignantly: “No characters in any opera give more strongly the impression of being real persons than do Figaro and Susanna ... Cherubino, and even the lesser figures of this score.” He describes the characters as “human beings, each feeling, speaking, and behaving under certain vital circumstances very much as any other human being of like disposition would under similar conditions, whether in the eighteenth century or the twentieth.” What is interesting in the role is that, for the first time, the cross-dressing is explicitly about sex. He was not one of the old-fashioned, largely innocent travesty roles where the voice was what mattered and the body beneath was irrelevant. When Pierre Beaumarchais wrote his program notes for the characters of his Le Nozze di Figaro (1785), upon which Mozart’s Le Nozze di Figaro is based, he said of Cherubino: “The part can only be played, as it was in fact, by a young and very pretty woman: we have no very young men on our theatre who are at the same time sufficiently mature to appreciate the fine points of the part.” – Notes on the characters in the first edition of Le mariage de Figaro (1785). Mozart created more than a trouser role. Cherubino, besides being a woman dressed as a boy, is also a character whose most relevant characteristic is explicit sexuality. In the whole opera, this thought is present as well. Act 1 begins with the imagination of a bed, act 2 takes place in the Countess' boudoir, and act 4 shows the garden temple where lovers meet each other. Dressing and undressing (even Cherubino is dressed as a woman) are constant activities and all in the eye of the audience. Cherubino has a cross-dressing nature as
both male and female, although the public knows that he is a male character. He crosses gender and question sexual differences; and he crosses class being both aristocratic and yet at home with the servants.

Cherubino is about finding out his identity as a young man, a rascal. Beaumarchais’ preface to Le Mariage de Figaro addresses the “moral inquisitors” who may be scandalized by his Chérubin, insisting on the innocence of “my page” and placing responsibility for any “shameful” interpretations on the spectator. He explains about Chérubin’s forbidden yearnings that “perhaps he is no longer a child, but he is not yet a man,” and with this he calls him harmless because of his immaturity. To accomplish the same innocence on stage, he represented the page’s desire with safe words addressed to the trees, the clouds, and the wind. C.S. Lewis in The Allegory of Love characterizes Cherubino as “that boy-like blending ...of innocence and sensuousness which could make us believe for a moment that paradise had never been lost.” Cherubino, as with all adolescent boys, is going through some physical changes. He has just started dealing with the emotional, physical, mental awkwardness, especially in the presence of Susanna, Countess and the ladies of the palace. The result of his expression of desires play to the women’s pity or amusement. It is not expected that someone will answer reciprocally. Beaumarchais’s words explain the character’s intention in his play: “Haven’t I seen the ladies in our very balconies love my page to distraction? What do they want of him? Alas! Nothing: it is an interest, to be sure; but, like that of the Countess, a pure and naïve interest, an interest that is... disinterested.”

One can conclude that this character’s most interesting characteristic is that, Chérubin, has no sex at all. Beaumarchais explains how he is not a child, but not yet a man. In his preface, we may accept the travesty casting on the terms of a heterosexist logic that defines woman in trousers as a creature who can at most achieve a sexless imitation of masculinity. The work replete of scenes of veiling, revelation, and disguise, allow us to forget the cross-dressing. Cherubino first appeared as a boy in act one, and he stays on stage during the trio. His body is necessary in the scene, although he doesn’t sing with this ensemble. The same thing occurs in the finale of first act, with Figaro dressing him as a soldier. In the second act, Cherubino is again undressed from his military uniform and dressed as a regular girl by Susanna. All of his clothes changes during the opera remind us of the original disguise. After disguised as a girl Cherubino needs to hide from the Count in the closet. Could this be interpreted as the closet being a female body in the closet? The character is not a lesbian. In fact, in the sequel, La mère coupable, the Countess has Cherubino’s illegitimate child. In this work, he remains solitary, gazing, yearning, and singing about love to “myself.” From Rossini onward the nineteenth century opera became the ideal stage for the tenor and baritone voices. Once neglected in Handel’s time, they were given a new prominence. The lead romantic role was sung by a tenor; a baritone sang his rival or friend, and their voices were celebrated in the great dramatic duets. As for the soprano, it was the voice of an angel, not incorporeal, but a womanly, spiritual. In this new opera
scenario women were undone, and the cross-dressing role was entirely demolished. There was only space for these new travesty roles, the clean versions of the innocent young boy, or associated with nature as shepherds, or childish pages. Grand opera confined its travesty characters to the permanent adolescence in which we left Cherubino, propagating the type in such roles as Urbain in Meyerbeer’s Les Huguenots, Oscar in Auber’s Gustave III, ou Le bal masque, Siébel in Gounod’s Faust, and Stefano in his Romeo et Juliette. The page in this repertoire often stands in for men spying on and peering at women.

Cherubino’s arias express the emotions that are inside of his body. They differ in how he tries to control the feelings that torment him. In the first aria Non so più, he shows how he doesn’t have any control on what he feels. After a recitative with Susanna, in which he talks about how he has an admiration for the Countess, the aria follows his emotions. In the conversation with Susanna, he gets agitated when speaking how lucky she is, for she is the one who dresses and undresses the lady of his dream. He exchanges his canzonetta (Voi che sapete) for a piece of ribbon that Susanna had before. He finishes saying how he desires every woman/girl in the Count’s, and as soon he finishes, the aria starts. Mozart decided to write a brief introduction for this aria. It combines with the previous conversation and the subject of love expressed by Cherubino. Looking at the score, we see that the composer did not want to separate the recitative from the aria. It is filled with abundance of emotion. The agitated accompaniment in the orchestra symbolizes a body full of uncontrolled desires. It is almost like the music does not give one a chance to breath. The result is a declamation, a breathless expression. Naomi André, in her book Voicing Gender exemplifies how there is a relation between his music and his personality. In the second measure, the vocal line has an interval of a major sixth (between Eb to C). In a female voice this corresponds to the break, a passagio. Depending on the approach of the singer, this could sound like a register break – chest to high voice. A similar passage happens two measures later. This time, at leap of octave (between F to F). This is more exposed than the first leap. But isn’t this the torment that he had inside him? Mozart is brilliant in showing these details in a simple composition. Do these leaps in the music say exactly what he is trying to explain? His body is going through the exact same thing as his voice and music is sounding is expressing the up and down of emotions.

The second aria, Voi che sapete, is presented as a song in the opera. This is what Cherubino used to trade for the piece of ribbon in act one. The composer calls this song ‘arietta’. However, it is common to see ‘canzona’ when describing this composition. This term is used when it is presented as a song sung outside the dramatic action. Cherubino is called by Figaro to look for Susanna. They had a plan to disguise him as a woman to play with the Count instead of Susanna. Once he gets in the room, Susanna shows his song to the Countess who tells Susanna to get the guitar and start playing. Lucky for Cherubino, this arietta has a longer introduction compared to the first. In that aria, because of his agitated feelings, he did not have any chance to compose himself. It was a declamation. In the second aria, the introduction gives him
time for to prepare for his performance for the Countess. The opening measures of accompaniment present the tuneful melody played by the clarinet against the sixteenth notes played by the strings. The orchestration is light and simple. In the action, Susanna is playing the guitar, to support Cherubino. This matches with the harmonies and lightness in the orchestra.

A trouser role that can be a parallel to Cherubino is Octavian from Strauss’ Der Rosenkavalier. The original name of the 3 act comic opera was Ochs von Lerchenau. The opera Der Rosenkavalier premiered in 1911 in Dresden. It soon became a huge success, and was translated to Italian two months later. The work was based on the piece Les amour des chevalier de Faublas by Louvet de Couvrai, and Moliere's comedy Monsieur de Pourceaugnac. Strauss, very fond of female voice, decided to have four main characters, from which three are women. Marschallin, Sophie von Faninal, Octavian and the Baron Ochs are the principal quartet in the opera, two sopranos, a mezzo-soprano in trousers, and bass, respectively. The librettist Hofmannsthal had worked previously with Strauss in Elektra. However, they were already thinking of this new work, and a few months after Elektra premiered, they started working on this new project. The collaboration between Strauss and Hofmannsthal was ideal. During the conception of this work, the letters between them showed that they were in great tune with one another. This is Strauss’ reply letter to the librettist after reading the first script: “the opening scene is delightful: it’ll set itself to music like oil and melted butter: I’m hatching it out already. You’re da Ponte and Scribe rolled into one.” The piece had originally three great parts, the Baron Ochs and Octavian and Marschallin. However, Strauss decided to bring more life to Sophie. The love triangle worked. The opera became well known for the female trio and the last duet, which ends the opera. The twentieth century opera had its debut in 1911 and it was a great success. Critics response was very positive, as well as the public. Strauss set music for three major female roles (Sophie, Octavian and Marschallin), developing the love triangle between the characters.

Strauss had already written operas of great success, including Salomé. The topic of sexuality in his operas was not new to him and he definitely knew what he was doing. The fin-de-siècle aesthetic movement influenced Strauss. This is also referred to as decadence, and is closely associated with the emergence of the gay and lesbian subculture. Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century psychologists and scientists started to question the absolute value of the division: masculine to men, and feminine to women. Obviously, homosexuality was not an issue in society. It was the action of identifying and giving a name to it. The name given back then was ‘sickness.’ Soon the society was aware of that homosexuality reaching the theater. In the opera there are some works that influenced Der Rosenkavalier. First, Johann Strauss in Die Fledermaus (1874), created the role Prince Orlovsky. This character does not cross any boundaries but suggests the lesbian choice to the audience. Especially when singing "Chacun a son gout" to an audience from the 1870’s. Massenet's Cherubin, brought alive the idea of having a trouser-role with an explicit sexual charge.
In Der Rosenkavalier the first scene in act one is a connotation to a sexual act between Octavian, 17-year-old-boy and Marschallin 35-year-old woman. For what it seems, this relation is full of ardent and sensual young love. In the orchestra introduction of act 1, there are two motifs. One represents a masculine figure and the other a feminine. They characterize the two characters that will appear as soon as the curtain goes up, Octavian and Marschallin. Octavian motifs in the opera are characterized by the leaps, punctuation, dotted rhythms, but in a very conscious way. It represents the immature emotionalism of a 17-year old boy. This cannot be compared to Cherubino, who is much younger and is still in the process of recognition of these feelings. Octavian knows and is already in a physical relation with Marie Thérèse. The opening of the first act consists of a lyrical love scene. Strauss used the introduction as a way to place the sexual action in the opera, except that nobody sees it, and only realize that it happened when the curtains go up. The librettist’s original idea was that the couple should still be lying in bed at the rise of the curtain. However, due to society’s conservative mind, it was only possible to set them in a sofa. Today it is possible to follow Hofmannsthal original plan. Surprised by her cousin’s visit, the Marschallin, who is in an unhappy marriage, chooses her lover, Octavian, to deliver the rose to Sophie, his desired love. What she did not know is that this meeting could put in risk her own relationship with Octavian. The love triangle is created.

It is possible to identify similaries between Mozart/Ponte’s Cherubino and Strauss/Hofmannsthal’s Octavian, and what they represent in opera. The composers chose to use a woman to play these roles. Strauss had used before, as Mozart did, a libretto from the maligned of his own generation, in his 1905 adaption of Oscar Wilde’s Salome. In 1909 the librettist Hugo von Hofmannsthal already had it in mind that the part of Octavian should be played by a woman. He wrote to Strauss: “It contains two big parts, one for baritone and another for a graceful girl dressed up as a man, à la Farrar or Mary Garden.” Reynolds says that Strauss was fully aware of what he was doing. As in Mozart’s opera, Der Rosenkavalier also starts with a bed in the first scene. In Le nozze di Figaro, he is measuring the bed that he and Susana will share after their marriage. Also, it is interesting how Cherubino’s attraction to the Countess and Octavian’s relationship with the Marschallin are the same, since both love couples have one of the partners involved in an unhappy marriage. During the opera the Countess sings how she is insecure about her husband and marriage. The relationship between the Marschallin and Octavian is similar, however it could be said that they are Cherubino and Countess a few years later. The sexual connotation is real in Strauss’ opera.

However, the treatment between the couple remains similar. Marschallin treats Octavian as “du,” which in German is a second person singular, usually used towards children, someone in the family or old friend. It implies that Octavian is inferior and the relationship once seen in Le nozze di Figaro, also applies in this opera. Strauss and Hofmannsthal, unlike their predecessors up to and
including Massenet, no longer treat female travesty as a problem or a challenge, and their opera contains no trace of ambivalence about the practice: their frank staging of the relationship between Octavian and the Marschallin puts the female lovers in a spotlight, that they clearly intended to show. The process of maturation in a young boy is the underlying theme of Der Rosenkavalier. The comedy mirrors two phases of existence in a human being. The opera is the transition within him from one phase to the other. It is a fact that many young singers built their careers singing trouser roles in the beginning of their artistic journey. For young mezzo-sopranos, this is definitely a firm step, since it is very rare to find a solid mature low voice at such a young age. There are several cases which the student is not put in a category or do not know for sure what type of voice she is. The first years of studying can be a little confusing and it may take a while for the singer and the teacher to really understand and identify the type of voice they are dealing with. Mezzo-sopranos is a type of voice that demands years of study, years of dedication. The achievement of a balanced technique comes with time. It may take years for a singer to achieve a solid technique. A singer that is starting to study knows how long the studies can last. But it is a fact that for lower voices this period requires patience. The same thing happened to me. Although I had been singing all my life in children choir and later in a young choir, things were different when I started taking voice lessons. Everything that I knew about voice division did not apply for this type of singing.

There are usually, with the exception of some, such as Octavian, smaller roles in the opera. Small roles in opera are not necessary less important, but they serve as an opportunity to acquire experience on stage. Sophie Koch, Anne Sophie von Otter, and Tereza Berganza are a few of many singers that have started in opera with these roles. In their youth, this was the bulk of their repertoire and continued to remain roles of choice even when they achieved successful careers. The young boys played by these singers are remembered by the life that was given to these characters, and the singers gained respect, for having played these roles with seriousness and dedication. There are mezzo-sopranos with a great facility for agility. They are called coloratura and their voices fit the singing of the earlier opera. The heroic roles. Handel, Rossini, Mozart operas, those which were originally written for castrati, have innumerable roles for coloratura singers such as Joyce di Donato, and Cecilia Bartoli, who have developed projects in order to revive and record these types of works exclusively. I find it important for people to understand and to be more familiar with the development of the trouser role and the specifications of this type of role. For women, and in particular the mezzo-soprano, this will be part of their life as a singer. Therefore, I believe singers should understand how the trouser roles all came about. Knowing of this development, the singer would definitely understand better and this issue could be more deeply interpreted if singers knew the intention behind each role and the time they were conceived in opera. It is not simply putting on a pair of pants and sing a boy’s song. It is important to understand the character, which includes appreciating where he came from and what is his function in the opera.
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