Playing on Stage:

The Evolution of Child Roles in Opera

by

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ABSTRACT

While opera often portrays young heroes and heroines in love, only recently have children taken center stage as principal characters in opera. This paper outlines the evolution of child characters in the standard opera repertoire, beginning with the famous trouser roles of Cherubino from *Le nozze di Figaro*, Siébel from *Faust*, Stéphano from *Roméo et Juliette*, Octavian from *Der Rosenkavalier*, and Hänsel from *Hänsel und Gretel*, and ending with principal child roles written for boys (Amahl from *Amahl and the Night Visitors* and Miles from *The Turn of the Screw*). Examination of the history of childhood and the casting of children in opera reveals that the two are closely related; as children gained more legislative protection against child abuse and labor, children also appeared more frequently in opera. The evolution of children in opera culminates in the mid-twentieth century, when children perform principal roles in operas like *Amahl and the Night Visitors* (1951) and *The Turn of the Screw* (1954).

The study of trouser roles and roles for children in opera also reveals the heteronormativity and misogyny that is deeply engrained in the art form. While trouser roles might have reached popularity because of the vocal aesthetic created earlier by castrati, it is possible that heterosexual composers, librettists and audience members may have wanted to objectify the women playing those roles. Although trouser roles may have also been conceived as a way to create vocal or comedic variety, the strength of these roles has been their openness to multiple interpretations. The primary advancements for children in opera are entwined with this ambiguous history of trouser roles, as this paper will show. These milestones only seem to occur for boys instead of girls; for the most part, if a girl character appears in opera, she is portrayed by an adult woman. This paper

will also discuss heteronormativity and misogyny in opera while following the evolution of child roles and child actors in the art form.

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CHAPTER 1

THE HISTORY OF CHILDHOOD IN EUROPE

Introduction

The presence of children and child characters in opera seems to correlate with the history of childhood in Europe. As children gained more rights in society, they participated more frequently in opera.[1] Jerome V. Reel Jr. expands on this theory in "The Image of the Child in Opera," where he summarizes major legislative changes in Europe that benefited children, and compares them to advancements in opera. This chapter will expand upon Reel's theory by outlining the major societal shifts relating to European children in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, eventually comparing these shifts to children's roles in opera. This chapter will also define the term "child" for the sake of more specific discussion of child roles in this document.

The study of the history of childhood is a relatively new field, with the most significant sources published around the 1960s.[2] Many historians state that there was "no concept of childhood" prior to the seventeenth century. This theory was first discussed by celebrated childhood historian Phillip Ariès in *L'Enfant et la Vie Familiale sous l'Ancien Règime* (1960).[3] Historians like Ariès interpreted sources such as portraits of children, popular books on parenting during the time, and statistics of infant mortality rates in

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[1] Jerome V. Reel Jr., "The Image of the Child in Opera," *The Opera Quarterly* 1.2 (1983): 73.

[2] Linda A. Pollock, *Forgotten Children: Parent-Child Relations from 1500 to 1900* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1.

[3] Ibid.

developing his theories.[4] Ariès believed that early portraits portrayed children as miniature adults and did not distinguish between childhood and adulthood in either physicality or dress. He further argued that the emergence of the concept of childhood occurred when children began to receive specialized clothing and toys, and were allowed to behave like children.

Other historians also see a shift in attitude towards children around the eighteenth century. The idea of original sin was widely accepted in England during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, so society viewed everyone, including children, as inherently sinful, sometimes regarding them as pests.[5] During the mid-nineteenth century, however, childhood was seen as the epitome of innocence. Literature from this time sentimentalized children, portraying them as angelic and pure. This created a stark contrast to the reality of childhood during the Industrial Revolution (ca. 1760 – 1840), when many children worked as hard and long as adults and were often mistreated by their employers.[6]

Theories on the origins of childhood during early centuries (until about the seventeenth century) are by no means consistent, but modern legislation protecting children did not arise until the nineteenth and, in places, even the twentieth centuries. Therefore, it is presumed that concepts such a child's right to education and protection from abuse, neglect, and exploitation did not arise until the nineteenth century. Similarly,

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[4] Ibid., 31.

[5] John C. Sommerville, *The Rise and Fall of Childhood* (London: Sage Publications, 1982), 174.

[6] Ibid., 132.

the concept of adolescence did not appear until the turn of the twentieth century, and is still fluctuating today, as young adults remain in school until well into their twenties. The most significant changes for children occurred in the nineteenth century, when authorities passed legislation in three major areas: child labor, education, and abuse.

Child Labor During the Industrial Revolution

While children certainly worked prior to the nineteenth century (i.e., on family farms, performing household chores, for examples) the high point of child labor use in Europe occurred during the Industrial Revolution. Children could operate the new machinery without needing formal training, as required for more specific crafts. Additionally, employers could pay children less than adults, so hiring children was more cost-effective.[7] Children primarily worked in cotton mills, as chimney sweeps, and in coal mines. In England, children composed almost half of the workforce in cotton mills by the 1830s.[8] They began working in the mills when they were ten to twelve years old, though some did start when they were as young as seven or eight.[9]

Accounts from child workers during the Industrial Revolution are similar in regard to their long working hours, difficult working conditions, and abuse from employers. Children were often beaten or whipped if their working pace was not satisfactory. One girl spoke of being splashed in the face with boiling water by her

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[7] Ibid., 160.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Colin Heywood, *A History of Childhood: Children and Childhood in the West from Medieval to Modern Times* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 132.

employer when she was working too slowly. Another boy talks about having a nail driven through his ear when he was not making nails quickly enough. Cruelty like this was called discipline, and some argued that the children performed better after these severe punishments.[10]

In *A History of Childhood: Children and Childhood in the West from Medieval to Modern Times*, Colin Heywood outlines an interview given by an anonymous boy mill-worker before Parliament in 1832. The interview provides an excellent example of the difficult hours, health risks, and abuse that many children faced while working in the mills. The boy testified that he sometimes worked from 5 am until 9 pm, with an hour break for dinner. He first began working when he was eight years old, and continued working for four years. He noted that he was sometimes late because he had difficulty waking up after working such long hours the previous day, and he was consequently beaten for his tardiness. Beatings also punctuated the end of the day, when the children were fatigued from their work and therefore could not keep up with the pace of the machinery. The boy also noted that a doctor attributed his stunted growth to the boy's work at the mill. The boy said his hands were constantly bloody from the work and he had no time during the day or evening to go to school.[11]

Although many children's accounts are similar, some authorities seemed completely oblivious to their young workers' suffering. Some believed the children were lying, but one such authority, Andrew Ure, focused on other childhood behaviors:

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[10] Ibid., 137.

[11] Ibid., 161 – 165.

> They seemed to be always cheerful and alert, taking pleasure in the light play of their muscles – enjoying the mobility natural to their age. The scene of industry, so far from exciting sad emotions in my mind, was always exhilarating. It was delightful to observe the nimbleness with which they pieced the broken ends, as the mule-carriage began to recede from the fixed roller-beam, and to see them at leisure, after a few seconds' exercise of their tiny fingers, to amuse themselves in any attitude they chose, till the stretch and winding-on were once more completed. The work of these lively elves seemed to resemble a sport, in which habit gave them a pleasing dexterity. Conscious of their skill, they were delighted to show it off to any stranger. As to exhaustion by the day's work, they evinced no trace of it on emerging from the mill in the evening; for they immediately began to skip about any neighbouring playground, and to commence their little amusements with the same alacrity as boys issuing from a school.[12]

Eventually, however, authorities began to notice the reality of children's suffering in factories, and several pieces of legislation were passed in order to help improve child labor conditions. These early laws were meant to regulate child labor rather than abolish it completely. Legislation tended to set minimum ages, regulate hours based on children's ages, ban work during the night, enforce sanitary measures in the workshops, and require a limited amount of schooling for child workers.[13] Heywood summarizes the most influential legislations on child labor:

> The British paved the way in 1802 with an act that limited itself to protecting apprentices in cotton mills, moved on to a broader but still ineffective one in 1819, and had to await Althorps' Act of 1833 for the first workable system of inspection. Among later landmarks, the 1842 Mines Act attempted to ban all females and boys under the age of 10 from underground work, the 1844 Factory Act pioneered the half-time system, permitting children to divide their time between work and school, while the 1867 Factories Extension Act finally branched out beyond the textile industries. Prussia and France in their turn began tentatively about 1840 with child labour laws that were hamstrung by feeble means of enforcement, and went no further until 1853 in the former case, 1874 in the latter.[14]

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[12] Quoted in Sommerville, *The Rise and Fall of Childhood*, 166.

[13] Heywood, *A History of Childhood*, 142.

[14] Ibid., 141.

Another influential child labor law was the British Factory Act of 1833, which prohibited children younger than nine from working in textile mills, limited children under thirteen to working nine hours per day, and required mills to provide six hours of schooling per week. This law, along with many others, was widely ignored, however.[15]

Many historians consider child labor during the Industrial Revolution to be hallmarks of adult indifference towards children. To many historians, the fact that both employers and parents allowed children to work under such brutal conditions shows a certain lack of concern for the wellbeing of children. Linda A. Pollock points out in *Forgotten Children: Parent-Child Relations from 1500 to 1900* that many parents employed their children out of necessity rather than indifference. Interviews from the records of the British Children's Employment Commission of 1831 – 1832 show that most parents did not want their children to work, but needed the extra income. Parents supported parliament's efforts to pass a bill that would limit the hours that children could work and set a minimum age requirement for child workers. Parents hoped that these restrictions would discourage factories from employing children and employers would, instead, hire more adult workers.[16]

Finally, by the end of the nineteenth century, child labor had decreased significantly. Many historians attribute this reduction in child labor not necessarily to the legislative measures that were passed earlier in the century, but instead to the introduction

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[15] Sommerville, *The Rise and Fall of Childhood,* 167.

[16] Pollock, *Forgotten Children*, 63.

of mandatory and free education for children.[17] Even so, nineteenth-century governmental concern about child labor shows a societal shift for the well-being of children. Instead of being a source of cheap labor, children needed to be nurtured and educated.

Educational Reform in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

Childhood historians agree that two main authorities helped pave the way for modern ideas of education in Europe: Englishman John Locke and Frenchman Jean-Jacques Rousseau.[18] Locke's *Concerning Education*, written in 1693, was the most popular book about children of its time.[19] Locke believed that children were blank slates that could be molded to a parent's or teacher's will. Children were neither good nor bad until they had developed the concept of morals, and they were neither intelligent nor simple until they could be taught.[20] Locke had strict theories about discipline, even suggesting that children wear leaky shoes during the winter months to strengthen their immune systems. He also believed that children would become lazy if they were taught art, music, or poetry.[21]

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[17] It is also important to note that literature during this time, like Charles Dickens's classics *Oliver Twist* and *David Copperfield*, began to depict working-class children in a more realistic light. Prior to Dickens's works, there was a disconnect between the purity and innocence of children in literature and the reality that working-class children faced.

[18] Sommerville, *The Rise and Fall of Childhood*, 121.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid., 122.

[21] Ibid., 122-123.

In contrast, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Emile* (1762) is often seen as the dividing line between the previous, stricter attitudes towards children and the modern ideas of child innocence.[22] Rousseau took a much gentler approach to parenting and education, encouraging children to act like children, and not necessarily condoning a hierarchy between teacher and student. Author John C. Sommerville said of Rousseau's theory on education:

> Teacher and pupil are equals in their search for knowledge, the teacher trying to sustain their mutual wonder at the wisdom and variety of nature and opening the child's eyes to what is around him. Rousseau does caution that the tutor must not be the child's slave, for that would only teach him to be a tyrant. He should be given liberty, but never power.[23]

Rousseau also believed that children should learn from nature and could set the pace of their own education. Rousseau advised adults to "Respect childhood, and leave nature to act for a long time before you get involved with acting in its place."[24] Rousseau was also one of the first authorities on childhood and education to refer to different stages in a child's development. He divided childhood into three stages: the Age of Instinct during a child's first three years, the Age of Sensations from ages four to twelve, and the Age of Ideas, around puberty.[25] This approach to childhood seems similar to the modern concept of education, where children are separated by age and taught more advanced concepts as they mature.

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[22] Ibid., 127.

[23] Ibid., 128.

[24] Quoted in Heywood, *A History of Childhood*, 24.

[25] Ibid.

While both Locke and Rousseau were certainly leading figures during their time, their advice mainly applied to private tutelage at home rather than a public system of education. Prior to the eighteenth century, the majority of children were taught to read and write by their parents.[26] This presented a problem to lower-class families, where a lack of education on the parents' part meant that they could not, in turn, teach their children to read, write, or perform basic arithmetic. Churches, however, provided a certain amount of schooling so that children could read and understand the Bible.[27] Wealthier families could afford to send their children to boarding school, where they could receive a more formal education.[28]

Education came in the form of apprenticeships during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[29] Apprenticeship training, unlike public education, prepared children for a specific skill, so parents often taught their children to read and write before they went off to an apprenticeship. Apprenticeships were mainly available for young boys who studied their trades sometime around the ages of ten to twelve. Common-class girls would instead become servants around the same age and embark on a life of domestic work. Apprenticeships began to go out of fashion during the Industrial

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[26] Ibid., 159.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Pollock, *Forgotten Children*, 13.

[29] Heywood, *A History of Childhood*, 157.

Revolution, when children could operate machinery without such formal and skilled training.[30]

Education was finally made compulsory and free in Europe during the eighteenth century.[31] Lower-class families, however, greatly ignored these laws because they needed their children's wages to supplement the family income. Not until the Industrial Revolution did laws specifically meant to keep children in school and out of the factories help encourage lower-class families to send their children to school. One such law was the Education Act of 1876 in England, which prohibited the employment of children between the ages of five and ten, and required children of ten to thirteen to demonstrate a certain level of education before they were allowed to work.[32]

Even when education became free and mandatory, it was not always equally available to all classes and genders. As before, wealthier children tended to get a better education; their families could afford to have their children in school rather than working. Boys and girls also learned very different subjects. While boys were taught reading, writing, arithmetic and Latin, girls were taught the domestic arts of cooking, cleaning and sewing in order to prepare them for their future lives in the home.[33] This gendered education existed for all classes, not just to prepare young girls for a life of servanthood, but also to prepare wealthier girls to be good mothers and wives. Regardless of the

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[30] Sommerville, *The Rise and Fall of Childhood*, 160.

[31] Pollock, *Forgotten Children*, 13.

[32] Carolyn Steedman, "Children of the Stage," in *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority, 1780-1930* (London: Virago Press, 1995), 131.

[33] Heywood, *A History of Childhood*, 165.

differences in education, the idea that all children should receive a free education showed a growing concern for the child's growth into adulthood. Efforts to keep children in school regardless of class and gender show that society increasingly valued childhood and viewed children differently than it did adults.

Government Involvement in Child Abuse

Perhaps the largest indicator of society's concern for the well-being of children lies in legislation meant to protect children from neglect and abuse. As with education and child labor laws, authorities did not begin to interfere with a child's home life until the nineteenth century. Heywood writes that "Before the nineteenth century, the idea that the state should intervene in relationships between parents and their children was almost unthinkable."[34] In previous centuries it was considered the duty of the parents (specifically the father) to discipline a child, so if the child was being abused it was not the government's place to intervene.[35] In discussing former attitudes towards child abuse, historians Ivy Pinchbeck and Margaret Hewitt referred to a rather graphic case of violence towards a child. A woman who worked for the church intentionally blinded a child she was looking after so that the child could go begging and earn money. Pinchbeck and Hewitt claim that it was only because the woman was employed by the parish that her cruelty was prosecuted. Had the woman been the child's mother, no one would have

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[34] Ibid., 106.

[35] Ibid.

bothered to intervene, since the accepted view at the time was that parents could treat their children as they wished.[36]

Pollock points out that the lack of legislation preventing child abuse at the home does not necessarily mean that such acts of cruelty were widely accepted. Many newspaper articles of the time report cases of abuse in a way that showed their disgust at such violence. Pollock does admit to periodic fluctuations in the occurrence of child abuse:

> There was, however, a definite increase in severity in the early nineteenth century, particularly in Britain. During this period, some children were subjected to intense brutality at home and even more so at school. The autobiographies of this period, especially the upper-class texts containing evidence on school discipline, in particular document the ill-treatment endured by children.[37]

It is not exactly clear why there was an increase of child abuse during the nineteenth century, especially during a time when, in some corners, children were thought to epitomize innocence. The rise in abuse did lead to a series of laws protecting children from violence across Europe. In France, societies for the protection of children formed around the 1860s, and would monitor working-class homes to make sure they were keeping good hygiene. Many families, however, refused to let these societies into their homes, or brought their delinquent children back home from correctional facilities where they were being kept.[38] French governments further intervened in cases of child abuse with the 1889 Roussel law, which took away parents' rights if they were convicted of prostituting their children or committing other crimes against them. The law would

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[36] Pollock, *Forgotten Children*, 91.

[37] Ibid., 200.

[38] Heywood, *A History of Childhood*, 107.

also strip a parent of their rights if “by their habitual drunkenness, their notorious and scandalous misconduct, or by their physical abuse, [the parents] compromise the health, the safety, or the morality of children.”[39]

The final stage in French child abuse legislation occurred in 1898, when the government set up the first version of foster care for children who had been victims of abuse or neglect.[40] German Protestants created their own version of foster care in the mid-nineteenth century with the introduction of the *Rettungshaus* (House of Salvation), a pious home with the sole purpose of providing a place of refuge for wayward children. In 1847, forty-seven *Rettungshäuser* were in operation, but by the 1870s, many critics believed that the homes were not sufficiently equipped to combat a growing social disorder.[41]

Authorities in London were also concerned with preventing child abuse during the nineteenth century. The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children was formed in the 1880s in order to reform family issues and protect children from abuse and neglect. The Prevention of Cruelty to Children Act of 1889, also known as the Children’s Charter, allowed courts to take a child into care when they had been abused or neglected. The law provided an example of gendered legislation, as it also punished adults who abused boys under the age of fourteen and girls under the age of sixteen.[42]

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[39] Quoted in Heywood, *A History of Childhood*, 107.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Ibid., 108.

[42] Ibid.

As was the case with child labor and education, government intervention in the case of child abuse and neglect shows a growing concern for children during the nineteenth century. Although children were seriously mistreated during this time, they were also viewed as the epitome of innocence and in need of protection. No attitude toward children was universally accepted, and these differing opinions instead provide two ends of a continuum: persisting acceptance of abuse and the perception of children as innocent. By protecting children through legislation, however, more progressive elements of society showed that they saw children as distinct from adults, perhaps in such a way that they should be celebrated, rather than harassed or exploited. This shift in attitude toward children was also evident in opera, where children's roles became increasingly prevalent over the course of the nineteenth century.

What is a Child?

While history shows a growing concern for children over time, what constitutes a child is still not quite clear. Society over the course of history has embraced different concepts of childhood, which makes defining childhood for the sake of study problematic. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, apprenticeships began around the age of ten to twelve, when children were deemed old enough to leave the home and begin working on a specific skill. Apprentices were becoming a part of the adult world, even though they were not quite adults themselves.[43] Child labor laws during the nineteenth century established that childhood ended around the ages of nine to thirteen; many laws provided those ages as the time when children could work the same

[43] Sommerville, *The Rise and Fall of Childhood*, 180.

hours as adults. Laws on child abuse give an even older maximum age of childhood, since many laws protected children up until the ages of fourteen to sixteen.

The main issue with defining childhood deals with the concept of adolescence—a relatively stable concept today, but also new to the history of childhood. The concept of adolescence began during the nineteenth century, when adults began to perceive the developmental shift that children experienced around puberty.[44] Children were seen to have entered adolescence either when they became apprentices, or when they went to university. Adolescents went to university later and later as time went on: English students started university around the age of seventeen during the sixteenth century, but by the nineteenth century, students entered closer to the age of twenty.[45] This shifting definition of childhood and adolescence persists today, as psychologists continually strive to determine when people fully mature into adulthood.

For the sake of this paper, the definition of "child" will consist of operatic characters younger than about fourteen years old. More important than age are the child-like qualities of the characters. Operatic characters that will be discussed here have the expected innocence and pre-pubescent sexuality of children, and also a natural dependence on the adult characters around them.

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[44] Ibid., 179.

[45] Heywood, *A History of Childhood*, 180.

The Presence of Children in Opera

Prior to the French Revolution, child-performers and child-characters almost never appeared in operas.[46] Although some minor works contained principal roles for children, the most prominent child characters in the standard opera repertoire during the late-eighteenth century consisted of Pages, such as Cherubino in Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro* (1786). These Page characters were always sung by women, were never central to the plot, and generally represented children around the ages of twelve to fourteen years old. Already by the start of the nineteenth century, younger child characters appeared more frequently in operas. These roles were generally mute, but central to the plot.[47]

Children's choruses appeared in grand opera during the mid-nineteenth century, when laws protecting children against child labor, abuse, and requiring education were formulating. These children's choruses required boys only, as seen in the boy's chorus in Bizet's *Carmen* (1875).[48] Another major development during this period was the use of adults in the part of children's roles, such as Feodor in Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* (1874). The role was written for a mezzo-soprano and originally sung by Aleksandra Krutikova in the 1874 premiere.[49]

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[46] Reel, "The Image of the Child in Opera," 74. Boy soprano William Savage provides an exception to this statement; he played the child role of Oberto in *Alcina* in 1735 when he was around fourteen or fifteen.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Ibid., 75.

Professional operas featured children as major characters by the end of the nineteenth century.[50] A notable example is Engelbert Humperdinck's first opera, *Hänsel und Gretel* (1893). Not only are the children principal characters, but the opera itself was intended as an opera for children. The title roles were still written for adults, however, since child actors were not yet given such central roles in operas. Child actors did begin to have solo parts in "adult operas" during this time as well: Tchaikovsky wrote a speaking role for a boy in *Pique Dame* (1890), and a boy sings a solo in Act II of Puccini's *La Bohème* (1895). Finally, in 1914, Alban Berg wrote the first principal role for a child in *Wozzeck*.[51] More prominent children's roles appeared after World War II, including Amahl in Gian Carlo Menotti's *Amahl and the Night Visitors* (1951) and Miles in Benjamin Britten's *The Turn of the Screw* (1954).

Although children continued to gain a greater presence in opera over the course of the nineteenth century, children were not cast in principal child roles until the middle of the twentieth century. This shows that, while the society at large was certainly showing concern for children, audiences still did not find the plight of children as interesting as the struggles of adults until quite recently. By the mid-twentieth century, the modern attitude toward children was in place: the majority of European children went to primary and secondary school instead of working at home or in factories. Corporal punishment was considered immoral either at home or in school, and governments took extra care to protect children from abuse and neglect. The plight of the child seemed to finally interest audiences when children officially gained rights in society. Coming-of-age stories

[50] Ibid.

[51] Ibid., 76.

appealing to audiences of adults recognized the importance of children's growth into young adults.

The following chapters will discuss some of the most well-known principal child characters in further detail, beginning with Pages and ending with preadolescent characters. These roles will be discussed in chronological order to better demonstrate the evolution of child characters in opera. In general, as children gained more rights in society, child characters in opera became younger, were written for actors the same age as their character, and explored more difficult subject matter than the beginning of their conception.

CHAPTER 2

THE PAGE CHARACTER IN OPERA

Origins of the Trouser Role

Trouser roles, male roles written specifically for women, are among the most common roles for lyric mezzo-sopranos. Cross-dressing was by no means new to the theatre world when composers began to use them in opera; men often played female characters in plays before women were allowed to perform on stage. Shakespeare often required his female characters to disguise themselves in male clothing for comedic effect, and castrati sometimes portrayed women in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Italian operas.[52] Joy Ratcliff says that "The theatre has its own reality, and audiences are not meant to be fooled when the gender of the character and that of the actor playing that character do not match. Audiences accept the convention, and the drama is not disturbed by this 'cross dressing.'"[53] Women play trouser roles not because they easily fool the audience into believing that they are boys, but because audiences found women in these roles to be aesthetically pleasing, interesting, and funny, both vocally and physically.

Many scholars attribute the beginnings of trouser roles to the popularity of castrati in Baroque opera.[54] Audiences preferred a higher vocal timbre for younger male characters because they were used to hearing castrati sing the romantic male leads in

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[52] Joy Ratliff, "Women in Pants: Male Roles for the Mezzo-Soprano or Contralto Voice" (DMA diss., University of Maryland, 1997), 16.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Ibid., 32.

opera. It seemed natural to write younger male roles for women after the use of castrati went out of favor in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, since the female timbres more closely matched that of a castrato. Other scholars think that women were cast in these young male roles because their physicality more closely matched that of an adolescent boy than did a grown man.[55] In most sources, either timbre, physicality, or a combination of both is used to justify the use of trouser roles in opera beginning around the end of the eighteenth century.

Other scholars expound more gendered explanations of the trouser role's popularity. Heather Hadlock, one of the leading authors on gender and sexuality in opera, argues that the trouser role grew in popularity because 1) audiences could easily admire the female figure if she was dressed in pants, and 2) dressing a woman as a man cancelled out her sexuality, so her character would never be able to feel sexual desire.[56] These two viewpoints mirror the misogynistic and heteronormative ideas of the time, and therefore might not be so far-fetched. This view of the trouser role will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

Today, many trouser roles represent heroic male roles that were originally sung by castrati, such as the title role in George Frideric Handel's *Giulio Cesare* (1724). The first true trouser roles, originally intended to be sung by women, consisted of male

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[55] Ibid., 37.

[56] Heather Hadlock, "The Career of Cherubino, or the Trouser Role Grows Up," in *Siren Songs: Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Opera*, ed. Mary Ann Smart (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 70.

characters between the ages of twelve to fourteen.[57] Many of these teenage boy characters were courtly pages.[58] The Page character became a staple in late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century opera; similarities resonate from opera to opera. The Page is always young, between the ages of twelve and fourteen. He is a secondary character, and his music (i.e., ariettas in upbeat tempos that are not virtuosic), is generally lighter than that of the other characters in the opera. In tragedies, he often provides comic relief for the story. Finally, the adolescent Page is always infatuated by the idea of love, but is never a real player in the romantic plot of the story. He may pine after the heroine, but his efforts are always overshadowed by those of the hero.

The First Trousered Page: Cherubino

Although the character of Cherubino in Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro* (1786) was not the first trouser role, he was the first archetypal Page role in opera.[59] The character was based on the page Chérubin from the original play, *Le Mariage de Figaro* (1778) written by Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais. Even in the original play, Beaumarchais intended for Chérubin to be played by a woman. About casting the role, he said, "The role can only be played, as it has been, by a young and very pretty woman . . . we do not have in our theatre any young men mature enough to

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[57] The first trouser role was Sesto in *Guilio Cesare*, originally sung by soprano Margherita Durastanti.

[58] Isobel Bartz, "The Origins of the Trouser Role in Opera" (DMA diss., University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2002), 104.

[59] Ibid.

understand its nuances."[60] It seems only natural, then, that the role of Cherubino would also be sung by a woman in Mozart's opera.

Cherubino sets the standards for the Page character in opera: he provides comic relief, he is a secondary character, and he is infatuated by the idea of love. The first time the audience meets Cherubino, he sings passionately about the new feelings he is discovering for every woman in the Count's palace. He spends the whole opera asking about love or being caught in women's rooms by the Count. Even though Cherubino is a secondary character, Mozart made his relationship with love crucial to the story. The ever-jealous Count feels threatened by Cherubino – he is constantly finding Cherubino with women whom the Count himself wants to seduce – but the women never take the Page's advances seriously. Rather his love for women, and for the Countess in particular, is regarded as innocent and endearing.

Beaumarchais adds another layer to the trouser role by cross-dressing Chérubin yet again, a plot twist that librettist Lorenzo Da Ponte retained in Acts II and III of the Mozart work. In both acts, Cherubino is dressed in women's clothing, first in an effort to ensnare the Count, and again to tease the Countess. Having the original actress who is dressed as a boy then dress up again as a girl is a comic technique – a sort of wink at the audience – that briefly reminds them that a female is singing the role. This comic gesture of calling attention to the trouser role comes back periodically in theatre, even in more modern examples, such as the movie *Victor Victoria* (1982).

The role of Cherubino sets standards for the Page character musically, as well. He has two ariettas in which he sings about love, but otherwise has very little music in

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[60] Quoted in Hadlock, "Career of Cherubino," 71.

comparison to the other characters in the opera. His music is hopeful and energetic and shows his youth and exuberance. All of these musical characteristics, so masterfully crafted by Mozart, become traditions for the Page character. After *Figaro*, Pages often had at least one arietta, but otherwise sang much less frequently than the other characters. Further, again following Mozart's lead, the Page's lively music reflects his youthful energy.

The Epitome of Innocence: Siébel

While *Le nozze di Figaro* is a comedy, the Page also became common in nineteenth-century tragic operas, mainly to provide comic relief in the tragic plot. Charles Gounod wrote two of the more famous Page roles in his two best-known operas: Siébel in *Faust* (1859) and Stéphano in *Roméo et Juliette* (1867). Unlike Cherubino, both Page roles were either expanded from the original source material, or were created specifically for the operatic setting.

Gounod became intimately acquainted with Goethe's *Faust* during his first stay in Rome from 1840 – 1843. He said of the play: "The work did not leave me; I carried it everywhere."[61] The Goethe play inspired many other French artists, writers, and composers, including the painter Ary Scheffer and the writer Michel Carré.[62] Over the course of his career, Scheffer created eleven paintings based on the *Faust* story, eight of which depict the Gretchen character (also known as Marguerite in French adaptations).

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[61] Steven Huebner, *The Operas of Charles Gounod* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 99.

[62] Ibid., 101.

Carré must have had Scheffer's paintings in mind when he wrote his own adaptation of the *Faust* play. His version, *Faust et Marguerite* (1850), focuses more on the character of Marguerite than the original Goethe work, in much the same way that Scheffer's art seemed to center on Marguerite. Carré also kept a change that Scheffer had portrayed in his portrait, *Marguerite sortant de l'église*. In this painting, Scheffer depicts Marguerite leaving the church as the epitome of innocence and virtue, before she meets Faust. Although Gretchen meets Faust on a street in the original Goethe play, Carré specifies that Faust should encounter Marguerite as she is leaving church.[63]

Gounod contacted both Carré and his librettist, Jules Barbier, to create the libretto for his new opera, but Carré was not interested in working with Gounod. Instead, he wanted to work with Giacomo Meyerbeer, who had already contracted both Carré and Barbier to write the libretto for his new opera, *Le Pardon de Ploërmel*. The two librettists eventually agreed that Carré would collaborate with Meyerbeer, and Barbier would be the librettist for Gounod's *Faust*. Carré gave Barbier permission to borrow whatever he needed from *Faust et Marguerite*.[64]

One of the main changes Carré made to the original *Faust* story was the expansion of secondary roles, reportedly to create a more dynamic plot. Among these roles, Carré greatly expanded the role of Siébel, who was only a minor character in Goethe's *Auerbachs Keller* episode.[65] Barbier kept this expanded version of Siébel in the opera; he is Faust's student, who is helplessly in love with Marguerite. Gounod edited the

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[63] Ibid.

[64] Ibid., 104.

[65] Ibid., 105.

role of Siébel slightly in later versions of the opera, removing a trio for Siébel, Faust, and Wagner in Act I and Siébel's *couplets*.[66] Steven Huebner, author of *The Operas of Charles Gounod*, writes: "Truth be told, the trimming of Siébel's part is not a great loss. Whereas plot development may compensate for lack of philosophical substance in the play, music should bear that burden in opera, and at no stage was Siébel an indispensable component of a strong musical situation."[67] Such a perspective on Page characters is common. Since the Page's music is always light, short and fun, he is also less crucial to the musical structure of the opera. He certainly provides comic relief and an extra layer to the plot, but he is rarely seen as essential.

Siébel continues the Page traditions that were begun by Mozart in the eighteenth century; he is a young secondary character who is hopelessly in love with the heroine. Siébel's love is meant to contrast with Faust's infatuation with Marguerite, rather than provide comic relief. In Siébel's famous arietta, "Faites-lui mes aveux," Siébel leaves a bouquet of flowers for Marguerite in order to show his love for her. Although the flowers first wilt when he touches them (he has been cursed by Méphistophélès), he dips his hands in holy water, and finally rejoices when his ability to touch the flowers without damage is restored. Marguerite, however, overlooks his bouquet and instead chooses the jewels that were left for her by Méphistophélès on behalf of Faust. Marguerite's preference for the jewels brings out her vanity and materialism, since they were literally left by the devil to tempt her. Siébel and his flowers, however, are the epitome of innocence and purity. He successfully rids himself of Méphistophélès's influence by

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[66] Ibid., 119.

[67] Ibid.

immediately dipping his hands in holy water, and his naïve choice of gift shows that he is not yet driven by the value of material possessions.

Unfortunately, Marguerite does not accept Siébel's meager flowers. He is, after all, a young student: a Page. He is no match for his master's charm and wealth. Nevertheless, Siébel is one of the opera's more sympathetic characters. His admiration for Marguerite does not waver, even after she is shunned for having Faust's illegitimate child. He alone stands with her and pleads with her brother Valentin to forgive her for her sins.

A Page of Consequence: Stéphano

Gounod's other famous Page character, Stéphano, bears many similarities to the young Siébel. Peter G. Davis says in a review of *Roméo et Juliette*, "If [Stéphano] seems vaguely familiar, that's because we've already met a boy very much like him in *Faust*, where his name was Siébel."[68] Like Siébel, Stéphano is a stereotypical Page. His function in *Roméo et Juliette* is similar to that of Siébel in *Faust*: he is a secondary character, meant to bring some lightness to the tragic plot. He is also distinctly different from Siébel in many ways.

The first major difference between Siébel and Stéphano is that the latter was added specifically for the opera. Romeo's page does not appear in the original Shakespeare play, which Barbier and Carré chose rather than one of the many adaptations

[68] Peter G. Davis, "Fade-Out, Fade-In," *Opera News* 70.8 (February 2006): 25.

as the source material for the libretto.[69] Barbier and Carré recognized that the original play would translate well to opera, and therefore their libretto is largely faithful to the Shakespearean tragedy. The one major change they made from the play was to give Roméo a Page, Stéphano. Many scholars believe that the librettists added Stéphano in order to satisfy the need for the then-standard trouser role, or to create musical variety.[70] Their motivation, however, may have been deeper than just logistics, because Stéphano's role in the plot is much more crucial than any other Page's to that point in opera. Stéphano becomes the chief instigator of the fight between Mercutio, Tybalt, and Roméo. During his aria "Que fais-tu blanche tourterelle," Stéphano teases Roméo from afar for admiring the young Juliette, but also mocks the Capulets surrounding him. His mockery instigates a fight between Stéphano and the Capulet servant, Grégorio. The principal characters then rush to Stéphano and Grégorio's aid, and in the ensuing battle Tybalt kills Mercutio, causing Roméo to take Tybalt's life in revenge.

This battle is crucial to the plot, of course, because Roméo is exiled for murdering Tybalt, but Stéphano's involvement in the fight is vital. Like Siébel, Stéphano epitomizes innocence, although his demeanor is not as sweet as Siébel's. Stéphano relishes the idea of a battle, glorifying it in his aria. Being a child, though, he does not yet understand the devastating effects of violence. His play leads to a dangerous fight in which his own life is threatened, and he loses a friend and idol in the process.

Although Stéphano displays many qualities of the Pages before him, his role is slightly elevated from his predecessors. He is certainly a secondary character, but his aria

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[69] Huebner, "The Operas of Charles Gounod," 155.

[70] Ibid., 162.

is crucial to the plot. His music is also much more substantial than that of Siébel; his aria is longer, shows more contrasting styles, and has a larger range. Stéphano certainly fits in with the Page trope, but through him, Gounod began to expand the possibilities of the character.

The Page Triumphs: Octavian

The character of Octavian from Richard Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier* (1910) provides a stark contrast to previous Page roles.[71] While Octavian is not a child character, it is important to discuss this role because he marks the end of the Page's evolution and provides the exception to the long-established Page trope. Octavian has been described as "the ultimate trouser role," because he is on stage more than any other character in *Der Rosenkavalier*.[72] He does meet certain requirements of the typical Page, but he breaks many others, making him the ultimate end to the Page's evolution.

Like his predecessors, Octavian provides comic relief in places, he is relatively young, and he professes love throughout the opera. Even so, he is also distinctly different from his precursors in many ways. For one thing, he is slightly older than previous Pages: around seventeen years old. Although he was not given an aria, his music is substantial and more mature than that of previous Page characters. Octavian is on stage more than any other character in the opera, and his music is virtuosic and vocally challenging, attributes that were not seen before with Page characters. Most importantly, Octavian is

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[71] Additional famous Page characters include Oscar from *Un ballo in maschera* (1859), Nicklausse from *Les contes d'Hoffmann* (1881) and the Prince from *Cendrillon* (1899).

[72] Ratliff, "Women in Pants," 28.

the first Page to be a principal character and, because his love is taken more seriously, he is the object of two women's affections in the opera.

Librettist Hugo von Hofmannsthal originally intended for Octavian to be a trouser role. Hofmannsthal wrote Strauss in a letter of February 1909:

> I have spent three quiet afternoons here drafting the full and entirely original scenario for an opera, full of burlesque situations and characters, with lively action, pellucid almost like pantomime. . . . It contains two big parts, one for the baritone and another for a graceful girl dressed up as a man a la [Geraldine] Farrar or Mary Garden.[73]

Hofmannsthal intended for the plot to center around Baron Ochs and Octavian, two very different men. While the Baron Ochs is old, rude and blunt, the Page, Octavian, is young, sensitive and romantic. Thus, Hofmannsthal reverses stereotyped class expectations. It makes sense then that Hofmannsthal would make Octavian a trouser role. If his goal was to create a stark contrast between the two characters, there is no better way to do that than by casting them not only as different voice types, but also different genders.

While the characters of Cherubino and Octavian stand at opposite ends of the operatic Page's evolution, Octavian shares many similarities with Mozart's ground-breaking trouser role. Like Cherubino, Octavian is in love with his mistress, in this case the Marschallin. Octavian also disguises himself as a maid over the course of the opera. Octavian, however, is successful in ways that Cherubino is not. His affections for the Marschallin are returned in the opera, while Cherubino does not successfully woo the Countess until after the opera has ended (a fact that the audience learns in the final Figaro play *La Mère coupable* (1794), which features the Countess and Cherubino's illegitimate

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[73] Quoted in Gary Le Tourneau, "Kitsch, Camp, and Opera: Der Rosenkavalier," *Canadian University Music Review* 14 (1994): 92.

son as a principal character). Also, Octavian's disguise is successful, while Cherubino's is not. Cherubino is originally dressed in Susanna's clothes to trick the Count, but his deception is revealed early in the opera. Octavian's disguise does work; he successfully tricks the Baron into believing he is a maid and becomes the object of Baron Ochs's flirtations. The similarities between the two Pages are certainly not coincidences, as Strauss and Hofmannsthal wanted to create an opera inspired by *Le nozze di Figaro*.

Der Rosenkavalier represents the Page character's triumph. Before Octavian, a Page's pronouncements of love were never taken seriously. After all, what woman would see a boy's declarations of love as anything more than adorable? Octavian is not only successful in his pronouncements, but he becomes more mature as a result of the love he feels. Thus, *Der Rosenkavalier* is not just a romantic comedy, but a coming-of-age story. Just as the character of the Page has evolved over time, Octavian himself evolves over the course of the opera. His feelings grow from basic lust and affection for the Marschallin to sincere and abiding love for the young Sophie. Octavian remarks on his transformation with the words he says after first meeting Sophie: "Ich war ein Bub', da hab ich die noch nicht gekannt. Wer bin denn ich?" (I was a boy; I did not know her yet. Who am I now?). In this moment, Octavian acknowledges that his earlier affections for the Marschallin were child's play. Through his mature love for Sophie, he grows into adulthood.

Adolescence in Opera

The role of the Page is the first major character trope representing children in opera. While these Pages are certainly not little boys, they are also not yet adults. Beaumarchais recognized this gray area with the character Chérubin, saying that

"Perhaps he is no longer a child, but he is not yet a man."[74] What Beaumarchais is describing is the concept of adolescence, which, as mentioned in Chapter 1, did not truly materialize until the nineteenth century; however, librettists and composers had begun to notice their characters' adolescence. These Pages all fall into a traditional view of the teen years, based not only on age but also their enthusiastic discovery of their sexuality, a developmental change that often marks the onset of puberty.

Interestingly, Pages are not the only teenage characters in opera. In fact, many romantic leads such as Romeo and Juliet are also teenagers, but they are treated like adults. What makes the Page different is that, until Octavian, he was not successful in his pursuit of love. Children were discouraged from exploring their sexuality when many of these works were written, so it makes sense that Pages, treated like children in their operas, do not find success in love.[75] Although sexual repression is certainly not something to be proud of, for these characters it shows a recognition that, developmentally, people in their teens are different from adults. Pages may be for the most part minor characters, but their very existence is a triumph for adolescents because they were recognized for their particular stage in life instead of being forced into adulthood prematurely. The presence of the Page is a more nuanced acknowledgement of pre-adulthood than had appeared before.

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[74] Hadlock, "The Career of Cherubino," 69.

[75] Sommerville, "The Rise and Fall of Childhood," 205.

CHAPTER 3

PRINCIPAL CHILD ROLES IN OPERA

The Decline of the Page and the Rise of the Young Child

The majority of sung child roles in standard eighteenth- and nineteenth-century opera repertoire were those of the Page. This character was often around twelve to fourteen years old and always sung by a woman. As children gained more rights in society, younger child roles became more prominent in opera. Although these young roles were first sung by women, composers eventually cast children in their principal child roles by the mid-twentieth century. This chapter will look at three principal child roles in opera and examine why composers chose to cast these roles with women versus children.

Women Take the Lead in *Hänsel und Gretel*

It is not surprising that Engelbert Humperdinck's *Hänsel und Gretel*, which was written at the very end of the nineteenth century, features women in the title child roles; at this point, children were not used soloistically in operas. Humperdinck's choice of subject matter also follows theories of children's theatre. In the United States, authorities in children's theatre believed that fairy tales would be suitable subject matter for child audiences up until the 1930s. It was the wider belief at this time that children should not be exposed to plays that dealt with social or psychological issues, and therefore fairy tales

were an appropriate source material as long as they were not too violent.[76] While *Hänsel und Gretel* was written in Germany, this theory correlates to the subject matter of the opera. Although using the Grimm fairy tale as the source of the story may seem like an odd choice (Grimm tales are notoriously violent), Humperdinck's version of the story is much tamer, and in fact is more likely based on the version of the story told by Ludwig Bechstein.[77]

The libretto was written by Humperdinck's sister, Adelheid Humperdinck Wette, though many other members of the family also had input in the story. Humperdinck nicknamed the libretto "Das Familienübel," meaning roughly "The Family Headache," which probably reflected the fact that the input that Humperdinck and Wette received from their father, Wette's husband, and Humperdinck's fiancée was not always helpful.[78] Their father, Gustav Ferdinand Humperdinck, said of the opera "Perhaps the libretto should not have followed Bechstein so closely – I find the Grimm version preferable."[79] Bechstein's versions of fairy tales are known to be less violent and frightening than the Grimm tales. In *Hansel and Gretel*, the Grimm brothers portray the Stepmother as an evil woman who purposefully sends the children into the woods to get rid of them, and the Witch as a frightening cannibal with red eyes. The Bechstein version gives Hansel and Gretel a biological mother who is more tired than cruel, and while the Witch still eats

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[76] Suzan Lucille Zeder, "A Character Analysis of the Child Protagonist as Presented in Popular Plays for Child Audiences," (PhD diss., The Florida State University, 1978), 73.

[77] Steven R. Cerf, "Too Grimm for Words," *Opera News* 61.7 (December 28, 1996): 15.

[78] Michael Slade, "Into the Woods," *Opera News* 72.6 (December 2007): 34.

[79] Related in Cerf, "Too Grimm for Words," 17.

children, she at least is potentially more comical. Wette and Humperdinck's version of the story is even tamer. Instead of abandoning the children, the mother sends them into the woods to collect berries for dinner. The Witch also is no longer a cannibal, but rather turns the children that she captures into gingerbread before eating them.[80]

Humperdinck's "Family Headache" paid off in the end, because *Hänsel und Gretel* remains his most successful opera, despite the fact that it was the first theatrical piece he composed. *Hänsel und Gretel* originally began as a series of folksongs and evolved into a Singspiel before finally becoming a full-fledged opera.[81] The work is considered a "children's opera," since children are the intended audience, and while the story has been edited for a younger audience, the music is rich and complex.[82] Humperdinck was heavily influenced by Wagner, which is evident in the score. Richard Strauss, who conducted the premiere, once said "It's devilishly difficult, this little Hansel!"[83] Strauss referred to the complex chromatic harmony and thick orchestration of the work, both of which are associated with Wagner. Conductor Vladimir Jurowski, who conducted the 2007 production of *Hänsel und Gretel* at the Metropolitan Opera, said that part of the difficulty of the piece lies in "how to make it sound transparent and light. It looks light on paper, but it is deceptive. The mezzo and soprano who sing Hansel and

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[80] Ibid., 16.

[81] Amanda Glauert, "Humperdinck, Engelbert," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*.

[82] Reel, "The Image of the Child in Opera," 75.

[83] Quoted in Slade, "Into the Woods," 35.

Gretel . . . and must act and sound like children . . . usually have great difficulties passing through the Wagnerian orchestra."[84]

Humperdinck wisely chose to write the title characters of his opera for grown women. Children would have a hard time being heard over the dense orchestra because their voices would not be fully developed. This choice also allowed Humperdinck to compose more virtuosically. Gretel has an aria in the piece, and while Hänsel does not have an aria, the range for the role is wide for a mezzo-soprano, spanning two octaves (A3 to A5).[85] Even though the story is significantly tamer than the Grimm fairy tale or even Bechstein's version, the subject matter may still have been deemed too violent for child actors; Hänsel and Gretel are still captured by the Witch and eventually push her into an oven in order to escape. Even so, *Hänsel und Gretel*, with its complex score and classic story, was a terrific beginning for children in the world of opera.

Sentimentality in *Amahl and the Night Visitors*

Perhaps surprisingly, the most frequently performed opera around the world is not a grand opera, but rather Gian Carlo Menotti's *Amahl and the Night Visitors*.[86] Menotti's one-act Christmas story receives more than five hundred performances annually world-wide, partly because it is short, easy to produce, inspiring, and extremely effective on stage. *Amahl and the Night Visitors* was the first opera created specifically for television

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[84] Ibid.

[85] Engelbert Humperdinck, *Hansel and Gretel* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1893).

[86] Ken Wlaschin, "Amahl and the Night Visitors," in *Gian Carlo Menotti on Screen: Opera, Dance and Choral Works on Film, Television and Video* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1999), 11.

and, in 1953, was one of the first color television programs.[87] The televised opera was so popular that it was repeated twice the year after its premiere. The story of *Amahl and the Night Visitors* was very special to Menotti because it reflected events from his own childhood. Menotti says of the subject matter in Amahl:

> You see, when I was a child I lived in Italy and in Italy – before it became Americanized – we had no Santa Claus. Our gifts were brought to us by the Three Kings, instead. . . . My favorite king was King Melchior, because he was the oldest and had a long white beard. My brother's favorite was King Kaspar. He insisted that this king was a little crazy and quite deaf. I suspect it was because . . . Kaspar never brought him all the gifts he requested.[88]

True to his brother's idea, King Kaspar does constantly ask Amahl to repeat his lines in Menotti's opera because he cannot hear them. Kaspar also sings a lively aria about his box of magical and medicinal stones, which he carries with him always.

Menotti recollects that when he came to the United States, he soon forgot about the Kings, even though he owed them "the happy Christmas seasons of my childhood."[89] In 1951, he was commissioned by the TV network to write an opera by Christmas. He had no idea what to write about, and then, in November, he saw *The Adoration of the Magi* (ca. 1475) by Hieronymus Bosch while walking through the Metropolitan Museum of Art: "And as I was looking at it, suddenly I heard it again . . . the weird song of the Three Kings. . . . They had come back to me and had brought me a gift."[90]

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[87] Ibid.

[88] Quoted in John Gruen, *Menotti: A Biography* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1978), 108.

[89] Ibid.

[90] Ibid.

Menotti also bore strong similarities to the character Amahl in addition to his close relationship to the Three Kings. One of Amahl's defining features in the opera is that he is physically disabled. At the end of the opera he is miraculously healed when he offers his crutch as a gift to the baby Jesus. Menotti was similarly disabled for a short period during his childhood. He remembers that as a last resort, his nurse took him to see a Madonna in the sanctuary of Sacro Monte, which was known to work miracles. His leg was blessed in front of the image of the Madonna, and shortly afterward, his leg healed. He walked normally ever since.[91]

Menotti also had strong feelings about how the character Amahl should be portrayed. Menotti warned against the temptation to over-sentimentalize the character of Amahl: "I like my Amahl to be a naughty little boy – a little devil. The character should be impish. He tells lies, he is disobedient."[92] It is unclear whether Menotti's opinion of Amahl's bad behavior is a reflection of his own childhood, but nevertheless it creates a more realistic character and a stronger relationship between the Mother and her son. While Amahl does not disobey his mother much in the opera, she keeps referring to the fact that Amahl often lies, and does not believe him when he tells her about the Three Kings at their door. The relationship between the two is realistic and touching. The Mother often sings about how poor they are and how they will have to go begging, and while Amahl finds the idea fun, she is clearly worried about their prospects. When Amahl is healed and decides to go with the Kings to Bethlehem, Amahl and his mother share a touching duet, wherein they vow to see each other again.

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[91] Ibid., 109.

[92] Ibid., 111.

Amahl is played by a boy soprano in the opera, not only because of Menotti's own connection with the role, but also to clarify the relationship between mother and son that is so important to the story. This relationship would not be as straightforward if two women were singing the two principal roles. The use of a boy soprano also creates a contrasting timbre between the Mother's mature soprano voice and Amahl's youthful sound. Preadolescent children have an inherently breathy and somewhat thinner sound because their voices are not fully developed. Menotti also composed relatively simple music for the opera; the music is mainly recitative throughout, with a few short arias, intensifying at the climactic moments.[93] The orchestra is also more of a chamber ensemble, with mainly single players on the wind instruments, plus harp, piano, percussion and strings. Not only does the use of a child in the title role clarify the relationship between mother and son, but Menotti's writing allows for the boy soprano to shine in his role.

All Rules are Broken in *The Turn of the Screw*

Both *Hänsel und Gretel* and *Amahl and the Night Visitors* seem to follow logical "rules" that can be associated with writing opera that includes child characters. It is better to cast women in the child roles if the subject matter is violent or too mature for children, or if the singing is virtuosic. Children may play child roles to help create a more realistic portrayal of the story, but the music must be simple in order for them to be heard over the orchestra. Almost all of these "rules" are broken in Benjamin Britten's *The Turn of the Screw* (1954). This opera is the first adult opera with children's characters that has been

[93] Ibid., 110.

visited in this paper. The libretto is based on a short story by Henry James, in which a newly appointed Governess discovers that the children she cares for are being possessed by ghosts. The story does not clarify whether or not the ghosts really exist; the Governess may have lost her mind, which would cause her to hallucinate. Britten and librettist Myfanwy Piper chose to have actors play both ghosts on stage, so the audience accepts that they really exist, but the Governess's growing hysterics throughout the opera also make her insanity a real possibility.[94]

Britten wrote roles for children in many of his operas, and through them dismantled the idea that children's roles should always sound sweet and pure. He created child characters that sound like real children, belting and shouting instead of singing sweet, precious melodies. Many of the vocal lines in *The Turn of the Screw* mimic the natural sound of children playing, and Miles's "Malo Song" imitates a nursery rhyme.[95] Although *The Turn of the Screw* has two children in principal roles (Miles and Flora), only Miles was sung by a child in the premiere. Even though Flora is written for an adult, the role of Miles is just as complex. In his article "Opera From the Playground: Benjamin Britten's Roles for Children's Voices," author Kevin Zakresky writes that "The vocal demands placed on the singer performing Miles are as varied as they are immense. . . . The vocal stamina required of Miles is unprecedented in Britten's works for children's

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[94] Philip Brett, "Britten's Bad Boys: Male Relations in *The Turn of the Screw*," in *Music and Sexuality in Britten: Selected Essays*, ed. George E. Haggerty (Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 98.

[95] Kevin Zakresky, "Opera from the Playground: Benjamin Britten's Roles for Children's Voices," 511 and 514.

voices."[96] The role of Miles has a vocal range almost equivalent to that of Hänsel in *Hänsel und Gretel*, spanning B-flat 3 to A5.[97] Britten's music is also difficult to learn because of its bitonal and modal complexities, although Britten does use a chamber ensemble for the instrumentation, which would simplify projection for a young voice.

While writing Miles for a mezzo-soprano might have eased the vocal demands of the singer, it seems that Britten had motivations similar to Menotti's in casting Miles as a boy. Like Menotti, Britten had many similarities to Miles, and casting him as a boy clarifies his relationship between the adult characters. While Menotti's motivations for casting a boy soprano were mainly sentimental, Britten's came from a much deeper emotional realm, mainly from his own experience with sexuality. Britten was homosexual,[98] and while he never openly talked about his sexual orientation, many people deduced as much when he began to live with his long-time partner tenor Peter Pears.[99] Many also believed that Britten had pedophilic tendencies towards little boys, although according to his biographer Humphrey Carpenter, Britten never actually had intercourse with any boy.[100] Instead people made assumptions based on the affectionate

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[96] Ibid., 514.

[97] Benjamin Britten, *The Turn of the Screw* Op. 54 (New York: Boosey & Hawkes, 1955).

[98] Menotti was also homosexual; he had a long-term relationship with composer Samuel Barber. His homosexuality, however, does not factor into *Amahl and the Night Visitors*.

[99] Michael Wilcox, "This Queer Life," in *Benjamin Britten's Operas* (New York: Absolute Press, 1997), 63.

[100] Ibid., 65.

hugs and kisses he would give to the boys he knew.[101] Whether or not this was pedophilic or just misunderstood fatherly affection is hard to say, but the boys that Britten interacted with did not seem too threatened by his affections. David Hemmings, who played Miles in the premiere of *The Turn of the Screw*, said "Of all the people I have worked with, I count my relationship with Ben to have been one of the finest . . . was I aware of his homosexuality? Yes, I was. Was I aware that he had a proclivity for young boys? Yes, I was. Did I find that threatening? No."[102]

Despite the question of Britten's preferences for young boys, most critics accepted the fact that the relationship between the ghost of Peter Quint and the young Miles is pedophilic. This relationship is not only apparent in the opera, but in the original short story.[103] Prior to the opera's time span, Miles was described as being expelled from school for "an injury to his friends," which many interpret as a euphemism for homosexual acts with his schoolmates.[104] As the story unfolds, Quint teaches Miles to live freely and abandon the morals that have been imposed on him by society. Quint's relationship with Miles is a cause of concern for both the Governess and housekeeper, Mrs. Grose. The short story is told from the Governess's point of view and the following excerpt describes an exchange between the two characters: "[Mrs. Grose:] 'Quint was much too free.' [The Governess:] This gave me, straight from my vision of his face –

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[101] Ibid.

[102] Ibid., 69.

[103] Brett, "Britten's Bad Boys," 88.

[104] Wilcox, "This Queer Life," 67.

such a face! – a sudden sickness of disgust. 'Too free with *my* boy?' 'Too free with every one!'"[105]

The ending of the opera adds a final layer to the mature content in *The Turn of the Screw*. Not only must the actor who plays Miles learn difficult music and pretend to explore his sexuality with an adult, he must also die in the end. *The Turn of the Screw* may seem too mature for children, but Britten must have thought differently. In many ways Britten was ahead of his time, already asking his child actors to explore social issues that they would not have had to face in the more traditional fairy-tale operas and plays.

All the World's a Stage . . . For Boys, That Is

Composers chose to cast women instead of boys in their operas for a variety of reasons. Earlier in the twentieth century, composers would not have thought it possible for children to sing the music, and perhaps the subject matter in an opera like *Hänsel und Gretel* would have seemed too violent for children. Composers did not conceive of casting children in child roles at this point in history. Later in the century, beginning with operas like *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, composers would cast boys in child roles, possibly to clarify the relationships between the adult and child characters. Composers may have wanted to realistically portray childlike innocence and playfulness, or perhaps they themselves identified with the child in the opera. Composers also began to realize that children could sing more virtuosic music and could visit more mature themes in their stories. In all of these cases, the world for opera began to open for boys.

[105] Quoted in Brett, "Britten's Bad Boys," 88.

Unfortunately, this progress seems to be true only for boys, not children in general. In all three of the operas discussed in this chapter, child characters that are played by children are only played by boys. In the earliest forms of these child roles, it is boy choirs and boy solos that are added, but no solos for girls. Similarly, both Amahl and Miles are sung by boys, while Flora was played by a woman instead of a girl. The same is true for other Britten operas that feature child roles; if there are boy roles present they were sung by boys, but girl roles were always premiered by women.[106] The use of boys instead of girls is not new to the classical world; boy choirs existed long before girl or mixed children's choirs, stemming from sacred traditions since the sixteenth century.[107] The synonymous use of women and girls in opera, however, is worrisome.

This presence of boys but not girls shows a degree of sexism in the portrayal of children in opera: according to the casting, there is not a significant difference between women and girls to justify casting their ages realistically in operas. Moses Goldberg, an authority on children's theatre during the 1970s, suggests one reason for writing for boys versus girls:

> There is a feeling among many children's theatre practitioners that the hero of a children's play should be young (slightly older than the children who see the play), virtuous (although not perfect), and male (because [girl audience members] can theoretically identify with boys easier than 'vice-versa').[108]

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[106] An exception to this was the role of Barbarina in *Le nozze di Figaro,* which was premiered by Anna Gottlieb when she was twelve years old. Gottlieb also premiered the role of Pamina in *Die Zauberflöte* at the age of seventeen.

[107] The long-standing tradition of boy choirs and boy solos in classical music could also be the result of the societal perception that girls' voices were breathier than boys' voices.

[108] Quoted in Zeder, "A Character Analysis of the Child Protagonist," 3.

Granted, this quote is over forty years old, but it is still unsettling, and may explain the absence of girls in solo roles on stage. Still, the lack of girls in opera follows a trend of misogyny and heteronormativity that is present everywhere in opera. The next chapter will discuss these issues in greater detail, and relate these observations about marginalizing characters to the use of children and child roles in opera.

CHAPTER 4

SEXUALITY AND GENDER BINARY IN OPERATIC CHILD ROLES

Misogyny and Heteronormativity in History

Contemporary authors point out heteronormative or misogynistic biases inherent in trouser roles and children in opera. Although these issues are something all directors and singers must eventually face, they were rarely addressed prior to the mid-twentieth century. Most operas were written during a time when women and children had very few rights, so these biased attitudes toward their roles in opera are not surprising. Many authors talk about the inherent sexism in the young, innocent, and virginal heroine and her inevitable demise that is prevalent in opera. Fewer authors make the connection between the male-driven realities of operatic creation and the similar ways women and children are treated in opera.

This similarity may seem surprising at first, but it too has a basis in history; prior to the nineteenth century, women and children were treated in much the same way. Both women and children were expected to be seen and not heard, and gender binaries began at a young age, when boys and girls were educated differently. Referring to gender binary in education in preindustrial Europe, John C. Sommerville writes that "the two sexes hardly seemed to belong to the same world."[109] Jean-Jacques Rousseau's pivotal novel about education, *Emile* (1726), addresses girls' education at the end of the story when Emile needs to marry. Sommerville writes "[Rousseau's] sexist theme is that 'Woman is specifically made for man's delight.' For that reason there is no need even to teach girls

[109] Sommerville, *The Rise and Fall of Childhood*, 180.

to read. Their minds ought not to be awakened, except to think what other people will want them to do."[110]

Girls drew more attention during the Romantic period, and were even featured as main characters in fictional stories. Parents, however, still saw innate differences between boys and girls that were apparent in theories of child rearing. Colin Heywood writes, "By playing together, it was hoped that 'the girl's weakness [would be] strengthened, and the boy's roughness softened.'"[111] Traditionally, weakness is often associated with femininity and childhood, as both women and children are thought to need protection from stronger, more masculine figures. The association of weak and feminine also appears in the earliest discussions of music and modality, and Gretchen A. Wheelock points out that the minor mode was often given to female characters in eighteenth- and-nineteenth century opera because it was a "weak" mode.[112] While many children and Pages sing upbeat songs in the major mode, two famous songs for children are in the minor mode; Amahl's story about being a shepherd is in minor, and Miles's "Malo Song" consists mainly of minor thirds, though it is not necessarily in a key. Using or referring to the minor mode in these two pieces certainly reflects the characters' sadness and nostalgia, but also helps establish the child's innocence and vulnerability.

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[110] Ibid., 130.

[111] Heywood, *A History of Childhood*, 39.

[112] Gretchen A. Wheelock, "Schwarze Gredel and the Engendered Minor Mode in Mozart's Operas," in *Musicology and Difference*, ed. Ruth A. Solie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 202.

Children were thought to be the epitome of innocence during the nineteenth century, and the ideal woman during that time was also innocent and pure. These trends were reflected in nineteenth-century opera; many female heroines in opera are young, virginal and innocent. Many child characters (even the Page, who is obsessed with love) are also virginal, and preadolescent children rarely explore their sexuality. Children's sexual neutrality in opera also has a basis in history. Children were discouraged from exploring their sexuality during the repressive Victorian era, most significantly by teaching that masturbation was harmful. Many medical texts condemned masturbation. Doctors claimed that masturbation was linked to baldness, epilepsy, and insanity. The idea of the adolescent gradually began to form beginning in the early 1800s, partly because of adults' fear or acknowledgement of teenagers' sexual awakening.[113] Germany and France did not see a decline in sexual repression of children until after the 1920s, while in Britain and the United States, the greatest concern was from 1850 to 1880.

It is not new information that opera is sexist or heteronormative, but focusing specifically on sexuality and gender binaries surrounding child roles in opera gives an interesting perspective on the subject. Some scholars argue that trouser roles in opera objectify women and perpetuate opera's heteronormativity, while others see these same roles as ways to challenge gender binaries and give homosexuality a place of possibility. Many of the opinions represented in this chapter show antiquated ideas of sexuality and gender, but these views change as society becomes more accepting of homosexuality and feminism. This chapter will discuss these differing opinions in detail, as they relate to the future of the child in opera.

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[113] Sommerville, *The Rise and Fall of Childhood*, 205.

Heteronormativity and Misogyny in Trouser Roles

Chapter 2 addressed the reasons trouser roles became standard in opera; composers and opera-goers thought that the vocal timbre of a soprano or mezzo-soprano was similar to that of a castrato,[114] or that women looked more boyish than grown men,[115] and some librettists believed that women, rather than children, had the mental maturity to play the roles convincingly.[116] Many scholars also present more heteronormative reasons for the popularity of trouser roles. Hadlock, for example, assumes that casting a woman as a boy was the best way to make the character devoid of sexuality, since a woman dressed as a man was seen as being sexually neutral.[117] Others believed that casting a woman in these roles created sexual neutrality because society failed to recognize the possibility that women could be sexually attracted to other women. This latter belief is exemplified with the role of Peter Pan in the original staged play in 1904. Michael F. Moore writes "Although Peter Pan was a boy, he was traditionally played by a woman. The reason given by producers was to ensure that the love between Peter and Wendy was pure. Nothing sexual was to come between them."[118] In keeping with the times, the producers' logic here denies the existence of homosexuality, though same-sex desire is as old as humankind.

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[114] Ratliff, "Women in Pants," 16.

[115] Ibid., 37.

[116] Hadlock, "Career of Cherubino," 71.

[117] Ibid., 70.

[118] Michael F. Moore, *Drag! Male and Female Impersonators on Stage, Screen, and Television* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1994), 40.

This same logic is sometimes used to describe Mozart's Cherubino, as well. Even though Cherubino constantly sings about his sexual desire, he does not succeed in his sexual endeavors with the mature women in the opera because "he" was actually a female underneath the costume. Beaumarchais commented on the curse of Chérubin's sexual desire: "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."[119] While it is true that Cherubino is one of the best-loved characters in *Le nozze di Figaro*, many audience members enjoy his sweetness and innocence instead of taking him seriously. Arguably, Mozart and Da Ponte most likely intended for Cherubino to be more farcical, since he functions as a comic character in the plot rather than a romantic lead. Chérubin does eventually have a sexual encounter with the Countess, since she bears his illegitimate child in the no-man's-land between *Le Mariage de Figaro* and *La Mère coupable*, but the audience never sees the page in his sexual maturity and he dies before the third play begins. Beaumarchais's Chérubin, and by default, Mozart's Cherubino, can only exist in limbo, a dramatic space often crucial to operatic plots.

A more sexist view of trouser roles is that their popularity grew because audiences enjoyed more direct visual access to the female figure. During a time when women only wore floor-length dresses in public, seeing a woman on stage in pants and tights was likely desirable to heterosexual male audience members. Hadlock writes "The travestied Page is a trim young woman in tights, which provides a double pleasure: the spectator may look at women 'through' the gaze of the ardent boy, and look 'at' the

[119] Quoted in Hadlock, "The Career of Cherubino," 70.

woman who impersonates the boy."[120] Though the woman playing trouser roles is thus objectified, theatrical genres succeed on devices such as these. Hadlock argues that the audience's entire experience of Cherubino is physical. Figaro's aria, "Non più andrai," places focus on Cherubino exchanging his Page outfit for a soldier's uniform. Most significantly, in Act II, the Countess and Susanna tease Cherubino as they replace his soldier's uniform with Susanna's clothing.[121] These instances remind the audience constantly of the "travesty" of a woman's body in boy's clothing.

The objectifying nature of trouser roles complies with casting choices, since many librettists and composers specified during the premieres of their works that the actress playing the trouser role should be pretty, young, slender and feminine.[122] Even women who sang heroic male leads were criticized by reviewers if they were deemed unattractive or too "masculine." Benedetta Rosmunda Pisaroni (1793 – 1872) was one such singer. Pisaroni was well known during the nineteenth century for her portrayal of male leads such as Malcom in *La donna del lago* (1819) and Arsace in *Semiramide* (1823).[123] Although Pisaroni was famous during her time, she was still criticized for her rough

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[120] Ibid., 73.

[121] Ibid., 70.

[122] See quote in Chapter 2 by Beaumarchais: "The role [of Chérubin] can only be played, as it has been, by a young and very pretty woman . . . we do not have in our theatre any young men mature enough to understand its nuances." Quoted in Hadlock, "Career of Cherubino," 71.

[123] Heather Hadlock, "Women Playing Men in Italian Opera, 1810 – 1835," in *Women's Voices Across Musical Worlds*, ed. Jane A. Bernstein (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004), 294.

demeanor and appearance. One such criticism comes from Fétis's account of Pisaroni's 1827 debut as Arsace at the Théâtre Italien:

> I will never forget the effect she produced on her audience when, entering and turning her back to the public to contemplate the interior of the temple, she made us hear, in a formidable and admirably produced voice, the phrase: 'Eccomi al fine in Babilonia!' Unanimous transports of joy greeted these vigorous sounds and this grand manner, so rare in our times; but when the songstress turned and let us see those features, horribly disfigured by smallpox, a sort of cry of horror followed close on our enthusiasm, and one saw spectators close their eyes so as to take pleasure in the talent without being compelled to look at the person.[124]

Despite such accounts of Pisaroni's appearance, no portrait of Pisaroni shows the grotesque features that critics describe; if anything, writes Hadlock, she appears a little plain, but not ugly.[125] Either the artists were being generous when portraying her looks, audiences overreacted to her level of attractiveness, Fétis exaggerated for journalistic effect, or she was a thoroughly convincing actress.

Catherine Clément has also written about societal perceptions of "weakness" in trouser roles during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

> Not surprisingly, these [characters'] feeble voices are closely related to the supposed weakness of so-called femininity. They run the gamut of nineteenth-century stereotypes of women: fearful, grasping, treacherous, weak, and complaining. Conversely, one can recognize a certain feminine weakness in the voices of mezzo-sopranos disguised as young boys: Cherubino in *Le nozze di Figaro*, and Octavian in *Der Rosenkavalier*.[126]

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[124] Quoted in Hadlock, "Women Playing Men in Italian Opera," 293.

[125] Ibid., 294.

[126] Catherine Clément, "Through Voices, History," in *Siren Songs: Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Opera*, ed. Mary Ann Smart (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 25.

Cherubino and Octavian are not the only Pages that are described as weak or feminine; Mietze Annemarie Dill believes that Siébel, in fact, represents femininity and womanhood in *Faust*:

> Siébel is shy, insecure, non-assertive, non-violent, and humble . . . . One can argue that he actually embodies many of the female nineteenth-century characteristics. Gounod's decision to make this character a breeches role is therefore so befitting, because Siébel is in essence performing a 'woman.'[127]

One of the many character tropes accepted in the operatic canon connects weakness, innocence, and meekness as traditional notions of femininity. These adjectives make women appear to be fragile and in need of protection from men. Child trouser roles like Pages represent an ingenious refinement of this trope. Although the characters are male, audiences seem not to be able to look past the actress portraying the male character, in essence, emasculating him.

Failure to see past the actress in the trouser role has led to mixed critical responses to Octavian in *Der Rosenkavalier*. While Octavian was previously described as the triumphant Page in Chapter 2, he is not always received so openly by critics. Some were horrified by the opening scene when Octavian and the Marschallin appear in bed together, and blamed Strauss and Hofmannstahl for the "lesbianism" in the work. Charles Osborne felt that this opening scene created unnecessary eroticism:

> Anyone unacquainted with the opera might easily mistake the situation at the rise of the curtain, and think he was witnessing a lesbian relationship. This adds a certain irrelevant piquancy to the flavour of the scene, but it is difficult not to feel

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[127] Mietze Annemarie Dill, "A Gendered Faust: The Portrayal of Gender in the Opera *Faust* (1859) by Gounod (1818 – 1893)" (MM diss., University of Pretoria, 2013), 49.

> that Strauss ought perhaps to have risen above his lack of interest in the tenor voice, and written the role of Octavian for a youthful lyric tenor.[128]

William Mann seems even more opposed to the sexuality in the same scene:

> It seems distasteful that Hofmannsthal should have cast so sexually virile a figure as a female role, particularly in the opening scene which demands overt demonstrations of the most passionate love – it is seldom that the two actresses involved manage to avoid suggesting a repellent sort of Lesbianism as they hug and caress one another, crooning torrid endearments. As if to atone for this disastrous miscalculation, Strauss leaves no doubt in the introduction to the first act that Octavian is a proper man.[129]

The critics' response to the open sexuality that they witnessed in the first scene may have been a result of the new concept of homosexuality. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term "homosexual" was not used until 1892 in the *Pyschopathia Sexualis.* While homosexuality certainly existed before the late nineteenth century, the fact that it was not given a name until then reflects lack of understanding, denial of its existence, or acceptance of "a love that dare not speak its name" as long as it was never shown in public.[130] The critics' homophobic response to the opera, while certainly not acceptable today, is at least understandable during the shifting cultural climate of the time.

It is no coincidence that Strauss and Hofmannstahl chose for their romantic lead to be a trouser role, though they most likely were not trying to make a political statement about homosexuality. As previously discussed, Hofmannstahl intended for Octavian to be sung by a woman, partly to differentiate musically between the page and the Baron Ochs.

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[128] Quoted in Gary Le Tourneau, "Kitsch, Camp, and Opera: *Der Rosenkavalier*," *Canadian University Music Review* 14 (1994): 92.

[129] Ibid.

[130] This often-repeated phrase was written by Lord Alfred Douglas, "Two Loves," in 1894.

Der Rosenkavalier also draws many parallels to *Le nozze di Figaro* and other eighteenth-century comic operas, where trouser roles were prevalent. Strauss may have wanted to bring the evolution of the Page full circle by showing Chérubin's success at wooing his mistress on stage. Strauss may have also made Octavian a trouser role in order to compose duets and trios for sopranos, a convention begun by Mozart in *Le nozze di Figaro* with the famous duet between Susanna and the Countess, "Sull'aria."[131] Strauss enjoyed writing for the female voice, and the sonorities that he composed for Octavian, Sophie, and the Marschallin throughout the opera create a sensuous and transcendent experience for both the singers and the audience.

A Homosexual View of Trouser Roles

While many authors describe the misogynistic and heteronormative views of trouser roles, their remarks about physical attraction to and objectification of women in trouser roles assume a heterosexual audience for the productions. Homosexual authors have a different and more positive perspective of trouser roles and opera in general. Homosexual audiences during the late-twentieth century related to the high stakes and eroticism in opera because of their own sexuality repression. Mitchell Morris goes into more detail on this subject:

> If the members of an oppressed minority find on stage adequate and cathartic representations of an emotional state central to their affective lives as shaped by the repressive social order surrounding them, it is no wonder that they invest so heavily in the art form. Gay men (and lesbian women) who attend the opera find

[131] Hadlock, "The Career of Cherubino," 74. Strauss may have also been drawn to this vocal aesthetic because of his experience conducting *Hänsel und Gretel*. The majority of the roles in the opera are sung by women, and create similar sonorities that Strauss writes in *Der Rosenkavalier.*

> that it provides a situation where most of their rigidly controlled desires and attitudes may have free rein without social censure.[132]

Certainly homosexual audience members enjoy the same theatrical and musical elements of opera that heterosexual audience members are drawn to, but this quote provides another reason for a homosexual's attraction to opera. A person required to conceal such an important part of themselves naturally would in turn relate strongly to the raw emotions and sexuality of opera, even if the relationship presented in the story is written as heterosexual. Homosexual communities, like other marginalized populations, regularly trade in double entendre and coded language.

Writers concerned with homosexuality in music also believe that trouser roles help to transcend gender binaries. Homosexual scholars agree with the idea that trouser roles are genderless, but they do not see that a character's lack of gender in turn makes the character devoid of sexuality. Sam Abel says on the subject:

> The transvestite transgresses against societal norms not by switching from one gender category to another but by occupying multiple spaces of representation, providing an excess of gender information that breaks apart the comforting binarisms of normative categories and precludes a simple and unambiguous reading of the performer's gender. . . . Transvestism thus becomes one focal element of opera's queerness, a cornerstone of its systematic refusal to submit to sexual binaries.[133]

Abel's positive view of transvestism, a human trope which lies at the root of the trouser role's popular, pathetic, or comedic qualities, shows that a character can still have sexual desire without necessarily being defined by a gender. Calling trouser roles androgynous

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[132] Mitchell Morris, "Reading as an Opera Queen," in *Musicology and Difference*, ed. Ruth A. Solie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 192.

[133] Sam Abel, "Women-As-Men in Opera," in *Opera in the Flesh: Sexuality in Operatic Performance* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), 148.

rather than sexless might be a more accurate description, and empowering view, of the characters. Trouser roles are both man and woman instead of being neither gender. By simultaneously being both genders, trouser roles can defy typical descriptions of weak femininity or strong masculinity.

The transvestism in trouser roles is also powerful because of its female-to-male cross-dressing. Male-to-female cross-dressing is more common in popular culture, and often portrays men in drag as comic or over-the-top. Abel describes the power behind the female-to-male transvestite:

> The female-to-male cross-dresser, however, always poses a threat. Women dressed as men violate male hegemony by attempting to reject their secondary social role and to assume male power or, more powerfully, to reject the whole concept of binary gender division. . . . Men in drag are funny; women in drag are powerful, and so dangerous.[134]

Men in drag partly appear funny because of the supposed "weakness" of femininity. By assuming the woman's "secondary social role," men might be taken less seriously or become comical. Women in drag, on the other hand, step into the "stronger" role of men and therefore must be taken seriously. Abel remarks that trouser roles in opera may provide comic relief in the story, but they are never caricatures like drag queens might be perceived in other forms of entertainment.[135] Opera and trouser roles can also provide a safe space for all audience members. While a heterosexual male may objectify a woman in pants, a lesbian or transgender woman might also relate to the same woman. Thus, opera's power to reach all people is strengthened.

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[134] Ibid., 151.

[135] Ibid.

Sexuality in Preadolescent Characters

While the operatic Page character is generally defined by the exploration of sexual desire, most preadolescent characters in opera do not encounter sexuality. The major exception to this is the Miles character in *The Turn of the Screw*. The actor who plays Miles has a difficult job: not only must he explore his sexuality, but he must also allude to having sexual relations with a male adult and die at the end of the opera. Although homosexuality is hinted at in *The Turn of the Screw*, it is not the bright coming-out story that organizations such as The Trevor Project choose to use today. Biographers such as Phillip Brett suggest such characters may have reflected Britten's feelings toward his own sexuality.

Britten wrote *The Turn of the Screw* during a time when homosexuals were being persecuted by the British government. Phillip Brett describes how this may have effected Britten's portrayal of homosexuality in *The Turn of the Screw*: "Sometime in January of the same year (or slightly earlier), Britten was interviewed by Scotland Yard, whose gentleman's agreement with the leisured classes was terrifyingly abrogated during this period, as part of their 'definitely stepping up their activities against the homosexuals.'"[136]

It is unclear why Scotland Yard did not arrest Britten after his interview. Although Britten never publicly said that he was homosexual, it was still public knowledge at the time. Still, it is easy to see how Britten might have felt the need to express himself musically if he was under scrutiny for his sexuality. Britten often

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[136] Phillip Brett, "Eros and Orientalism in Britten's Opera," in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, ed. Phillip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C. Thomas (New York: Routledge, 2006), 250.

portrays outcasts in his operas, which is generally thought to be a representation of his own feelings of being ostracized by society. His portrayal of Miles, who is confused and sometimes ashamed of his actions, could certainly be a reflection of Britten's struggle with society's view of his homosexuality.[137] Brett writes about the struggle that Miles faces throughout the opera:

> Seen from Miles's vantage point of abjection ("I am bad, aren't I?"), moreover, the ambiguities of the tale recede a little as we see the lovable boy caught between a dominating lover and a possessive mother in a struggle that no side wins and that ends inevitably in death – a catharsis even more intense than the capitulation of Peter Grimes to society's persecution and his own internalized oppression.[138]

This negative depiction of Miles's sexuality helps provide an autobiographical connection with Britten's experiences as a gay man living in a society that deemed homosexuality illegal. For this reason, the work may be seen as a veiled commentary on the culture's heteronormative expectations. If anything, *The Turn of the Screw* would provide a lesson in why society should not force someone to be something that they are not. The act of suppressing Miles's sexuality, which culminates in the struggle between the Governess and Quint to reclaim Miles's soul, eventually kills him at the end of the opera.

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[137] Henry James, the author of the original short story, was also homosexual. While he never overtly says that Miles is homosexual as well, it is a widely-accepted belief that he too was portraying Miles's struggle over his own sexuality.

[138] Ibid., 249.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Summary of Previous Chapters

This research paper outlined the evolution of children in opera and discussed some of the differing opinions about the heteronormativity and misogyny that critics and authors associate with child roles. The first chapter outlined the history of childhood and its relationship to the use of children in the standard opera repertoire. Children gained many rights in the nineteenth century, including their right to an education and protection against forced and inappropriate labor, neglect, and abuse. The concept of adolescence also appeared in the nineteenth century, as adults recognized the changes that children experienced around puberty. Similarly, children were used more frequently in opera during the nineteenth century, culminating with children performing principal child roles in the mid-twentieth century (i.e., *Amahl and the Night Visitors* (1951) and *The Turn of the Screw* (1954).

Chapters 2 and 3 more closely followed the changes in operatic child roles by focusing on famous Page roles (Cherubino, Siébel, Stéphano and Octavian) and preadolescent child roles (Hänsel, Amahl, and Miles). The Page became an archetypal role in eighteenth- and nineteenth century opera, and generally was a trouser role who was secondary to the plot and pined for love. The Page culminated with Octavian, who was the first to have sexual encounters on stage. Composers and librettists then began writing principal child characters for children in the standard opera repertoire during the mid-twentieth century, and adapted the vocal and instrumental writing in their works to

allow for young voices to sing operatic roles. Composers wrote principal child characters for children to better define the relationship between the children and adults in the opera, or because of the composers' own similarities to the children represented in the story.

Chapter 4 dealt with some of the negative views expressed by critics and authors about trouser roles in opera. Many of these opinions reflected the heteronormativity and misogyny surrounding trouser roles during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. More recent observations reveal that these same roles can help transcend gender binaries, and help homosexuals in the audience relate to the characters and situations on stage.

Where Do We Go from Here?

Many opera companies are challenged by debates on the relevance of opera today. With so many works that portray women (i.e. Mozart's *Così fan tutte* (1790), which literally translates to "All Women are Like That"); other cultures (i.e. Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* (1903), which stereotypes Japanese people); and homosexuals (i.e. Britten's *The Turn of the Screw* (1954) in a negative light, how can companies still produce these works today? Although many operas are problematic, it is still worth performing these works if companies are aware of the issues surrounding certain characters or aspects of the plot. These operas also provide terrific opportunities to teach society today about its previous shortcomings. Clément provides excellent advice for companies that wish to present originally misogynistic, racist, or heteronormative works:

> The public will always accept a description of the world that is tailored to its own historical dreams. . . . There is no other way: either directors cling to the factual historical moment in which the opera was born and are thus condemned to repeat an old, dead history, or else they adjust to our dreams, to the questions of our world. I would even go as far as to say that, as long as they have their own moral

> values, stage directors have a political duty to adjust the collective dream of any opera to suit the times. . . . Whether or not they adjust to the current issues and questions, directors must deal with the social role and stereotypes imposed by voices themselves.[139]

This seems to be an excellent lesson when it comes to the heteronormativity and misogyny of child roles in opera. Perhaps the initial creation of trouser roles was indeed a way to objectify women, or it lacked an understanding of homosexuality. These same roles can transcend the gender binary, or help homosexual and transgender individuals in the audience relate to the characters on stage. Opera, as film has done, can also show children exploring their sexuality and the problems that people face when they are forced to suppress who they are.

Art must always strive to challenge the audience, and to question what society deems true and right. If operas raise questions about sexuality and gender norms, and audiences are exposed to subjects that they would not necessarily encounter on their own, then opera is helping to do its part to end prejudice. It is true that opera has a way to go in portraying children. Many existing girl characters still need to be sung by girls instead of women if it is vocally possible, and new roles, portrayals of children coping with social issues that children are exposed to in everyday life, must be written. At the same time, by giving children a voice in opera, composers joined the movement toward bringing children into a place of relevance. One can only hope that the future of opera will continue to grow in a positive way for children and child characters.

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[139] Clément, “Through Voices, History,” 28.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Mezzo-soprano Miriam Schildkret received her Master's degree in Opera Performance from Arizona State University in 2014, and she graduated *summa cum laude* from Ithaca College in 2012 with a Bachelor of Music in Voice Performance. She has performed many roles with ASU's Lyric Opera Theatre, including "Lumee" in excerpts from *Prism*, "Third Lady" in *The Magic Flute*, "Kate" in Benjamin Britten's *Owen Wingrave*, the title role in *Dido and Aeneas*, "Dorabella" in *Così fan tutte*, "Estrella" in *La Périchole*, and "Prince Orlofsky" in Lyric Opera Theatre's ariZoni award-winning production of *Die Fledermaus.* Other roles include "Mrs. Nolan" in *The Medium*, "First Shepherd" in Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*, and "Kate Pinkerton" in *Madame Butterfly*. She was the study cover for "Cherubino" in Arizona Opera's production of *Le nozze di Figaro* in 2013, and she joined the Arizona Opera Chorus that same year in *The Flying Dutchman* and *La Bohème.* In 2017, Ms. Schildkret was a Teaching Artist in Arizona Opera's outreach troupe OperaTunity, where she sang the role of "The Sea Witch" in their abridged version of *Rusalka.* In addition to performing in various operas, concerts and oratorios, Schildkret has been actively teaching and working behind the scenes during her time at ASU. She was an Adjunct Faculty member at Central Arizona College for two and a half years, where she taught private voice and Music Appreciation. She also served as the Lyric Opera Theatre Outreach Program (LOOP) Coordinator for four years, where she organized outreach performances and visits for local schools. After graduating with her doctorate, Schildkret hopes to continue performing, and introduce children and young adults to the world of opera and classical music.