

Women in Opera: A Four-Part Retrospective and Contemporary Analysis

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Arts & Letters IP Capstone Artist Statement

Every Thursday at 4:15, my sister went to singing lessons in a stuffy room on the lower level of the West Valley Mall, directly under the Orange Julius smoothie shop. Of course I always tagged along because I wanted my mom to buy me the Strawberry Dreamsicle shake, but also because I adored listening in on my sister's lessons. My sister had vocal nodules, so I am confident it wasn't *her* singing I liked listening to, but rather the music. I would sit next to the door for the whole hour, trying to get my own singing lesson for free. It took just one month of me spying on my sister's lessons until I finally convinced my mom to sign me up as well. For the next four years, I went to singing lessons every week and began performing in musical theater outside of school; I loved it.

When I got to middle school, my mom told me that because I was switching schools, I would have to switch teachers. My mom was ecstatic when she told me that she had found a singing teacher who had a room on my school's grounds, and that I was going to have the opportunity to be *classically trained*. My first thought was . . . absolutely not! In my head, classical music was stuffy, outdated, and reminded me of the car drives where my dad and sister fought over our playlist: Mozart or Nicki Minaj? Bad memories. So, as you can imagine, my sixth grade self dramatically bemoaned the approach of my first lesson. And then I had to contain my laughter when my teacher demonstrated an aria for me because I was only used to musical theater and thought that classical singing sounded absurd.

I stuck with it, though, and over the years, I have grown to love classical music. Last year, I was watching the 2018 movie *On the Basis of Sex*, when I started subconsciously humming the background music in one of the heartwrenching, emotional scenes. My mom told me to be quiet, and that I was ruining "the vibe," but I hadn't even noticed that I was humming an aria that I had learned a few months earlier, the "Song to the Moon" from the opera *Rusalka*. I felt very intellectual and well-versed because I recognized the song in the movie, and my superiority complex was through the roof when I walked out of the theater. But after I thought about it for a while, I realized more about why I love opera. It isn't restricted to the room where I take my singing lessons. I hear and see it all around me. It's played in the movies I watch, referenced in books I read, and the stories opera tells are the foundation for many contemporary works of art.

When I heard that there was an option to do an Arts & Letters IP in high school, I immediately knew I wanted to do something on opera. But I couldn't just write an all-encompassing essay: "Opera! Anything and Everything about It!" I remembered that my mom had sent me an article

written by Alice Coote who, like me, is a classically trained mezzo-soprano. Coote specializes in playing trouser roles, and her article discussed her experience in these roles. I had no idea what a trouser role was prior to this article, but I learned these roles are when a woman dresses as a man and acts and sings a male character. In her article, Coote also discussed gender bending in opera in general. While I had seen operas with a trouser role, like in *The Marriage of Figaro*, I hadn't given these roles much thought, and I definitely didn't know they had a name and extensive history. After reading Coote's article, I did my own research and started investigating how women have been portrayed in opera and the rich history of gender ambiguity, including trouser roles. I realized that opera has a long, complex history with gender, and that I had a lot to learn. On top of this, gender is a topic of much discussion today. Conversations and disagreements about gender are more prevalent now than ever. Art is often one of the best vehicles for those conversations, so I thought that studying gender in opera would enrich my understanding of contemporary gender issues too.

That is how I arrived at my research topic on how female roles in opera have changed over the centuries and how the portrayal of gender roles reflects social expectations. My first instinct on what to produce as a final project was to write a research paper. But I quickly realized this would not work for two reasons. For one, the Head of School remarked that research papers were kind of *yesterday*. And two, a research paper could not encompass all the aspects of opera I wanted to talk about. Although scores and scripts of opera are written, the audience experiences opera as a visual and auditory experience. In order to do it justice, I wanted my presentation to reflect the visual and auditory aspects of opera. I decided to do a video series of me talking about my opera with visual aids spliced throughout each episode. I would script out what I was going to say and then find videos off of youtube that could help explain the points I was making.

Next step was to consider who my audience was. If I were presenting to opera scholars who knew all of the jargon and history of opera, a research paper would have been a fine option. But since I wanted my presentation to be understandable to anyone, be it my teachers, my friends, or my 80-year-old neighbor, Joan, who is surprisingly invested in my musical career, I thought a video series would be more accessible than a research paper.

What I learned

Now that I knew what I was researching, and how I was presenting the project, it was time to embark on my journey through the vast ocean of internet sources, and so I raised my sail (opened my laptop) and set off. It turns out that opera is an art form with a non-linear and complex history, and there was much to unpack. I began with trying to assemble a timeline for the role that gender has played in opera. Although opera has thrived all over the world, I wanted to focus on Europe, and primarily Italy. I started in the Baroque era and somehow ended with contemporary operas on Steve Jobs and murders in Melbourne. I learned that in the Baroque era, women were banned from any type of performance on stage, and this resulted in the castrati.

Castrati were men who were castrated before puberty in order to preserve their prepubescent voice. The castration procedure stopped the boy's voices from dropping, and as a result, adult castrati could sing in a soprano's vocal range. After castrati were outlawed, women cross-dressed and played male roles, especially the heroic male lead. Once tenors — the highest male vocal part — rose in popularity, however, women were forced out of the heroic roles and were displaced into the role of the Romantic heroine or the comedic, childish trouser role. After making a simplified timeline, I started researching the implications of women's roles in opera, and how the changes in their roles reflected changes in society. Each period — the castrati, the heroic travesti roles, and the Romantic heroine roles — gives us a look into society's views of gender and sexuality.

In the era of castrati, society was strongly influenced by famous classical philosophers, such as Plato, who viewed both heterosexual and homosexual relationships as societally acceptable. Up until 1700, many Europeans presumed that men desired both women and adolescent boys. Because of this, the line between femininity and masculinity was blurred, and the idealized sexual figure was neither female nor male. But by the 18th century, the two-sex model emerged, codifying gender as male and female. In Thomas Laqueur's book *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, he proposes a theory that explains the change in society's attitudes towards gender and sexuality. These changes were rooted in scientific progress made through discoveries about human reproductive anatomy. Before the 18th century, people believed that women and men were two different versions of one sex, and men were the superior version. It was accepted as a truth that both women and men had the same fundamental reproductive structure; the only difference was that female genitalia was inside the body. The vagina was an "interior penis," with the labia as the foreskin, the ovaries as testicles, and the uterus as scrotum. However, scientific discoveries made near the 18th century countered this belief, and the accepted view became that there were two sexes that were directly opposite to one another. Society now had strict, distinct views of masculinity and femininity, and so castrati and the gender ambiguity they embodied fell out of fashion.

From the ashes of the castrati rose travesti roles; finally women were allowed to perform. The roles castrati played needed to be filled, and the only people who could sing the roles were women. The most typical role castrati played were the heroic male lead, so women crossdressed and sang these roles. With the emergence of the two-sex model though, society was not comfortable seeing a woman playing the heroic male lead, as it went against all traditional ideas of femininity and masculinity. So, sadly, women as the hero did not last long. Tenors rose in popularity, and they began to sing the heroic male lead. The women who played the heroic travesti roles began playing secondary trouser roles, typically the role of the immature, sex-crazed pageboy. With this shift in which gender played different roles came a shift in plot and the portrayal of gender. Opera entered the Romantic era in which the heroine almost always dies a gruesome death by the opera's conclusion. Feminist works such as Catherine Clément's

Opera, or the Undoing of Women talk about how society projected its misogynistic views of women onto the Romantic heroine. No matter what the heroine does, her fate is sealed the moment the orchestra begins warming up. Even in *Carmen*, the famous opera composed by Georges Bizet, where the heroine is rebellious and sexually liberated, she still ends up murdered by her ex-lover, and she is weak and powerless. *Carmen* was received by audiences as a powerfully disturbing figure because she showed audience members that there was a different way for women to live, unbridled and free. This was a dangerous portrayal of gender that went against society's view of women. *Carmen* has her fun in the beginning of the opera, and she dances around, flashes her bare legs, and flirts with men. But ultimately, when she disobeys a man in the opera's finale, she is punished. Opera's Romantic heroines are a perfect depiction of society's views of women; women can be flirtatious and sexually liberated for the titillation of men, but once they anger or emasculate a man, they must be punished in ways as severe as death.

After studying the progression of women's roles in opera and how they reflected society's views of gender, I looked at contemporary critiques of opera. Recently there has been a debate in the opera world about whether or not opera is an inherently misogynistic form of art in need of reform. On one side of the debate are those who argue that women in opera are repeatedly treated with unnecessary violence and have little to no free will. In an article published by *The Guardian*, Charlotte Higgins recalls how she started attending the opera when she was a teenager. She went to see her first three operas at the English National Opera: *Aida* (the heroine dies at conclusion), *Madame Butterfly* (the heroine commits suicide) and *Carmen* (the heroine is murdered). Reflecting on her childhood experience of opera, Higgins was angered by the canonical stories opera tells young women that enforce the patriarchy. Moreover, there are virtually no famous operas *composed* by women, both historically and to this day. Because of the lack of female-composers, the stories told in opera are always told from men's perspectives. The famous operas performed today were typically composed in the 19th and early 20th-centuries, so it is not surprising that we are told misogynistic, male-dominant stories about helpless women time and time again. Many feminists in the opera world are calling for reform in the portrayal of these violent endings in opera. In Brisbane last year, a forum consisting of Australian composers, directors, musicians and singers discussed the need to erase gender bias and sexism in opera. One of the first steps the forum sought to take was reducing unnecessary dramatized acts of violence against women in opera to be removed. Sally Blackwood, one of the organizers of the forum, said that opera is struggling to find a place in our contemporary world because of the arcane, violent stories opera tells about women. Blackwood thinks the opera world needs to reassess what opera could and should look like in the 21st century.

However, calls for reform have been strongly countered. For example, the artistic directors of Opera Australia, former singer Lyndon Terracini and composer/conductor Richard Mills reject the idea that opera needs to be changed. Terracini thinks that operas are artistic works of their time that never intended to victimize women. "The depiction of women in the past [...] is very

different from now, but it's never been about demeaning women. Often in these pieces it's quite the opposite, it's about women demonstrating extraordinary strength," says Terracini. He continues, saying that he does not "think we should be entertaining the idea of destroying or not performing or changing masterpieces that have stood the test of time and clearly hundreds of thousands of people want to go and see." Terracini thinks that changing an opera because of political disagreement, that would be "heresy."

Additionally, I had the opportunity to discuss gender in opera with Grammy-nominated opera composer Mason Bates. We talked about gender as a performance in opera. As with the immature, childish pageboy trouser roles, gender was used for comedic effect; there is dramatic irony because the audience knows that the boy is actually a woman, but the other characters on stage do not. Historically, gender bending was not intended to make any social commentary, but rather genders were swapped either because of the composer's vocal preference for a role or because the composer thought it would have a theatrical effect. With this in mind, should we look at gender in opera the same way we talk about contemporary gender issues? Is opera simply art, or should we view it as a reflection of society? These questions were what I wanted my audience to think about when listening to my video series.

Overall, I loved doing this project. I researched a topic I was passionate about, and learned about many new facets of opera. I also had the opportunity to talk to highly accomplished people in the operatic field. I was even able to interview Elizabeth Mullenix, the author of a book on trouser roles in the South during the Civil War. I also had email exchanges with women who have sung trouser roles professionally as well as a man who is countertenor in opera companies in San Francisco. In these interactions, I had fun, engaging conversations with people from all across the board in opera, something I would have never done if it were not for this project. I am very proud of the video series I produced, and I hope to continue learning about opera in the future!

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