

Boys Will Be Girls, Girls Will Be Boys: Cross Gender Roles in Opera

University at Buffalo Music Library Exhibit
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An exhibit focusing on the high-voiced male castrato singers and on “pants roles,” in which women sing male roles.

Created in conjunction with “Gender Week @ UB” 2003.
Curated by Nara Newcomer

CASE 1: Castrati : Introduction

The opera stage is one place where gender roles have always been blurred, disguised, even switched – possibly multiple times within the course of an opera! Italian composers of seventeenth and eighteenth century opera seria (“serious opera” – as distinguished from comic opera) were especially free in this regard, largely connected with the high-voiced male castrati. Such traditions are not solely confined to that era, however. This exhibit will examine gender roles in opera, focusing on the castrati and upon operatic travesty, specifically upon breeches parts (“pants roles”).

The photographs in the section of the exhibit on breeches parts come from the Music Library’s J. Warren Perry Collection of Memorabilia which includes over 2,000 photographs, largely operatic. Many of the photographs bear the singer’s autographs and are inscribed to Dr. Perry.

A castrato is a type of high-voiced male singer, produced by castrating young boys with promising voices before they reached puberty. Castrati rose to prominence in the Italian opera seria of the 17th and 18th centuries. They were the prima donnas, even the rock stars, of their day.

Somewhat ironically, however, the era of castrati both began and ended in the church. Castrati are known to have existed in Western Europe by the 1550’s and were present for centuries before in the Byzantine church. The “last castrato,” Alessandro Moreschi (1858-1922), was a singer of the Sistine Chapel.

Reasons for use of castrati were probably many, but generally stemmed from the desire for high voices combined with the ban on female singers in the church, (and for a time on the opera stage, as well) Thus, a substitute was necessary. Boys were no sooner trained than their voices broke, and falsettists’ voices were weak compared to those of castrati. Thus, the castrato emerged as the most desirable alternative.

Castrati sang women’s roles, costumed as women, as well as high-voiced men’s parts written specifically for them. Today, the castrato voice is gone. Many of the castrati-centered operas have fallen into disuse because of the difficulty in staging them. The castrato women’s roles are easily cast with female singers, but the high men’s parts present more difficulty. They may be sung by falsettists or the rare countertenor, or dropped an octave or two in range and sung by a tenor or bass. Another solution is to have a female sing the part, dressed as a male. This last option is perhaps the most accurate, as it was actually employed at the time, notably by Handel.

For example, the (male) title role in Handel’s *Radamisto* is a soprano role, intended for the castrato Senesino. When Senesino was unavailable (though other, lesser, castrati *were* available), Handel cast female soprano Margherita Durastanti in the title role. When, however, the opera was revived, Senesino was available and cast in the title role and Durastanti was given the leading lady role.

Italian mezzo-soprano castrato Caffarelli (Gaetano Majorano) (1710-1783) studied with the internationally famous Italian composer and singing teacher Nicola Porpora. Caffarelli made his debut in 1726, after which he quickly became successful. Handel wrote the famous Largo “Ombra mai fù” from *Xerxes* for Caffarelli.

“Caffarelli” Museo Teatrale Alla Scala, Milan. As reproduced in: Pleasants, Henry. *The Great Singers: From Jenny Lind to Callas and Pavarotti*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981, 65.



Castration of boys with promising voices signified their whole commitment to the vocal art. Thus, their entire education focused on this single goal, and their musical study was very intense. The regimen of a famous castrato, can be taken as an example:

In the morning:

- 1 hour singing passages of difficult execution
- 1 hour study of letters
- 1 hour singing exercises in *front of a mirror*, to practice deportment and gesture, and to guard against ugly grimaces while singing, etc.

In the afternoon:

- ½ hour theoretical work
- ½ hour of counterpoint on a *canto fermo* (in other words, practice in improvisation)
- 1 hour studying counterpoint with the *cartella* [music-staved slate]
- 1 hour studying letters
- The rest of the day was spent in exercise at the harpsichord, and in the composition of psalms, motets, etc.

Rosselli, John. “The Castrato as a Professional Group and a Social Phenomenon, 1550-1850.” *Acta Musicologica* 60:2 (May-August 1988): 146.

The career of alto castrato Antonio Bernacchi (1685-1756) was long and full. He is pictured here in caricature by Pier Leone Ghezzi. The date at the bottom of the drawing refers to his Roman appearances in 1731.

Ghezzi, Pier Leone. “Antonio Bernacchi.” Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Rome, ottob. lat. 3116, f.151V-152r. As reproduced in: Parker, Roger, ed. *The Oxford Illustrated History of Opera*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994: 426.



Portrait of Italian soprano castrato Carlo Scalzi (fl. 1718-1739) by Charles Joseph Flipart, in costume for the role of Sirbace in the autumn 1737 production of Nicola Porpora's *Rosbale*. Handel engaged Scalzi for the 1733-34 London season, though he made apparently little impression there. Metastasio, however, bracketed Scalzi with Farinelli as 'incomparable'. As reproduced in: Parker, Roger, ed. *The Oxford Illustrated History of Opera*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994: 64



CASE 2: Castrati: Farinelli

The Italian soprano castrato Carlo Broschi (1705-1782), known as Farinelli, was perhaps the most famous castrato. He was well-known, popular, and frequently represented in both caricature and portraiture. One famous story states that when Farinelli made his London debut in October 1734, a Mrs. Fox-Lane was so moved by his performance that she stood in her box and shouted “One God! One Farinelli!”

The earliest visual representation of Farinelli is a caricature of the castrato in female costume. A castrato usually made his operatic debut in his late teens, frequently in a female role. He also frequently took a stage name at this time. Ghezzi, Pierleone (1724), “Farinello Napolitano famoso cantore di Soprano” (New York, Janos Scholz.) As reproduced in Heartz, Daniel. “Farinelli Revisited.” *Early Music* 18 (1990): 432



The voice of the castrato was powerful, and, with their super-hero status, some could have large egos. The following account by eighteenth century music historian and lexicographer Charles Burney, though perhaps factually exaggerated, illustrates both points.

“[While Farinelli was in Rome] during the run of an opera, there was a struggle every night between him and a famous player on the trumpet, in a song accompanied by that instrument: this, at first seemed amicable and merely sportive, till the audience began to interest themselves in the contest and to take different sides: after severally swelling out a note, in which each manifested the power of his lungs, and tried to rival the other in brilliancy and force, they had both a swell and a shake together, by thirds, which was continued so long, while the audience eagerly waited the event, that both seemed to be exhausted, and, in fact, the trumpeter, wholly spent gave it up, thinking, however, his antagonist as much tired as himself, and that it would be a drawn battle; when Farinelli, with a smile on his countenance, showing that he had only been sporting with him all this time, broke out all at once in the same breath, with fresh vigour...”

Burney, Charles. *The Present State Of Music in France and Italy*. London, 1773. 213-14.

The castrati were stereotypically tall and ungainly, their legs and arms tending to develop to larger-than-normal proportions. This caricature of Farinelli by Anton Maria Zanetti capitalizes on this aspect.

(Venice, Giorgio Cini Foundation) As reproduced in: Farinelli Revisited.” *Early Music* 18 (1990): 434.



In portraiture, the castrati look less grotesque than in caricature. This portrait of Farinelli, Castelli and Metastasio portrays Farinelli in the center handing a song of his own composing to Teresa Castellini. The painter, Jacopo Amigoni, stands to Farinelli's left, and Metastasio to Castellini's right. Also included in the portrait are Farinelli's dog and page.

Farinelli and his Friends, Musical Portrait Group. Jacopo Amigoni, (c. 1690-1752),

1750-52. Oil on canvas, 172.8 x 245.1 cm. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Felton Bequest 1949-1950. As reproduced in: Parker, Roger, ed. *The Oxford Illustrated History of Opera*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994: 64



This painting of Farinelli, also by Jacopo Amigoni, is very similar to the group portrait, except that here Farinelli alone is depicted. In this painting, as well as the group portrait, Farinelli wears a medal from the king of Spain, who bestowed the Order of Calatrava on Farinelli in 1750. Amigoni, Jacopo. "Farinelli." (Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart). As reproduced in Heartz, Daniel. "Farinelli Revisited." *Early Music* 18 (1990): 433.



This portrait of Farinelli, by Bartolommeo Nazari, bears such similarity to the Amigoni paintings that we can be rather convinced the representations are historically accurate. Farinelli's dog appears in this portrait, just as in the Amigoni paintings, here in the lower right corner.

Nazari, Bartolommeo: portrait in oils of Farinelli, 1734 (London, Royal College of Music.) As reproduced in: Heartz, Daniel. "Farinelli Revisited." *Early Music* 18 (1990): 440.



CASE 3: Castrati: Senesino and Moreschi

The Italian alto castrato Senesino [Francesco Bernardi] (d. 1759?) was popular and highly sought after by opera companies. The stage name “Senesino” was derived from his birthplace, Siena. Handel composed seventeen original roles for Senesino.

Vanhaecken, Alexander. Mezzotint, after Thomas Hudson. (Royal College of Music, London.) As reproduced in: Barber, Patrick. *The World of the Castrati: The History of an Extraordinary Operatic Phenomenon*. Trans. Margaret Crosland. London: Souvenir Press, 1998.



Handel’s opera *Flavio* was composed for the 1722-23 season at King’s Theatre. The cast included female sopranos Francesca Cuzzoni and Margherita Durastanti and the castrati Senesino and Gaetano Berenstadt. This engraving by William Hogarth is a caricature of *Flavio*. Pictured are Senesino, Cuzoni, and Berenstadt.

Victoria and Albert Museum, London. As reproduced in: Barber, Patrick. *The World of the Castrati: The History of an Extraordinary Operatic Phenomenon*. Trans. Margaret Crosland. London: Souvenir Press, 1998: plates following 118.



Caricature of Senesino and the female mezzo-soprano Faustina Bordoni (1697-1781), in Geminiano Giacomelli’s *Gianguir*, 1729. Both Senesino and Faustina (as Bordoni was known) were among the greatest singers of their age. Ricco, Marco. “Senesino and Faustina.” (Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II/Royal Collection Enterprises, Windsor Castle). As reproduced in: Parker, Roger, ed. *The Oxford Illustrated History of Opera*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994: 59.



Though a certain amount of frankness about castration may have been present early on, the procedure became less openly acceptable over the course of the eighteenth century. Though the churches, conservatories, and opera stages still clamored for castrati, the operation itself became rather clandestine.

Charles Burney's account colorfully describes the situation:

"I enquired throughout Italy at what place boys were chiefly qualified for singing by castration, but could get no certain intelligence. I was told at Milan that it was at Venice, at Venice, that it was at Bologna, but at Bologna the fact was denied, and I was referred to Florence; from Florence to Rome, and from Rome I was sent to Naples. The operation most certainly is against law in all these places, as well as against nature; and all the Italians are so much ashamed of it, that in every province they transfer it to some other."

Burney, Charles. *The Present State of Music in France and Italy*. (London, 1771):312.

The Last Castrato: Alessandro Moreschi (1858-1922)

Sistine Chapel castrato singer Alessandro Moreschi became famous as "the last castrato." In 1902 and 1904, several recordings were made of Moreschi and the Sistine Chapel choir. These recordings are the only opportunity available to modern ears for hearing the castrato voice. In listening, however, one must remember that the recordings were made in the infancy of recording, and that Moreschi was probably not an especially good singer and was, in any case, in his forties when the recordings were made. On the other hand, Moreschi was relatively successful as a Sistine Chapel musician and was called "the angel of Rome." Moreover, the voice heard on Moreschi's recordings is definitely "other," neither female, nor boy soprano, nor falsettist. As such, these recordings give some hint of the now-extinct voice of the castrato.

Image not cited in source. Found in: *Alessandro Moreschi: The Last Castrato*. LP Recording Liner Notes. OPAL 823.



Alessandro Moreschi (figure in center of the photograph) with other singers of the Sistine Chapel in a photo dated 1889. On the bottom left is the director Domenico Mustafà, also a castrato.

Photographic archive of the Cappella Musicale Pontificia-Sisina. As reproduced in: Dall'Albero, Claudio and Marcello Candela. *Celebri Arie Antiche*. Milan: Rugginenti, 1998, VIII.



CASE 4: Breeches Parts

“Breeches parts,” or “pants roles,” in which a woman dresses as and sings a male role, occur in opera today for several reasons. Many of the parts originally written for castrati in seventeenth and eighteenth century Italian opera are today sung as pants roles. In addition, the practice of writing the leading male part for a high voice continued through about 1850, past the decline of the castrati in about 1800, thus, these parts were originally intended as pants roles. Another, distinct, tradition involves casting women to sing the parts of children and adolescent boys. Such parts were written as pants roles from the earliest times, and it is these pants roles which are among the most famous and frequently performed.

All photographs in the section on breeches parts are taken from the Music Library’s J. Warren Perry Collection.

Le Nozze di Figaro

The role of Cherubino in W.A. Mozart’s opera buffa *Le Nozze di Figaro* (“The Marriage of Figaro”), K492, is perhaps one of the most well-known breeches parts. Cherubino, an adolescent boy and the Count’s page, is written for female mezzo-soprano. Both American soprano Mildred Miller (b. 1924) and German mezzo-soprano Christa Ludwig (b. 1924) made their New York Metropolitan Opera debut in the role of Cherubino.

The young Cherubino, a self-professed “lover of all women” is mixed into this comic opera, wooing both Susanna (engaged to Figaro) and Countess Almaviva (married to Count Almaviva). The comic irony is heightened when, in Act Two, Cherubino is induced to disguise himself as a girl. Thus, the actor playing Cherubino is a female playing a male disguised as a female.

“Teaching Cherubino how to be a soldier” Mildred Miller as Cherubino and Kim Borg as the Count.
Photographer: LeBlang, Sedge. Perry Collection
Image ID: C20-025



Elizabeth Schwarzkopf (Countess Almaviva), Rita Streich (Susanna), Christa Ludwig (Cherubino) in a 1960 production of “Le Nozze di Figaro.”
Photographer: Sorensen, Nancy. Perry Collection
Image ID: C20-028



American soprano Mildred Miller (b. 1924) made her Metropolitan Opera debut in New York as Cherubino on November 17, 1951. These photographs show two separate productions in which she sang the role of Cherubino.

Photographer: LeBlanc, Sedge. Perry

Collection Image ID: C10-023

Photographer: Melancon, Louis.

Perry Collection Image ID: C10-025



American mezzo-soprano Rosalind Elias (b. 1930) as Cherubino.

Photographer: Melancon, Louis. Perry Collection Image ID: C04-060



Der Rosenkavalier

Richard Strauss's three-act Komödie für Musik *Der Rosenkavalier* ("The Knight of the Rose") includes another well-known pants role. The part of Octavian, young lover of the Feldmarschallin Marie Thérèse, is written as soprano/mezzo-soprano breeches part.

At the 1911 premiere, in Dresden, the role of Octavian was played by Eva von der Osten. Ever since, Octavian, like Cherubino, has been a frequently performed and is a well-known pants role. Many a young singer has made her operatic debut in one or the other of these roles.

As is typical of pants roles, and similar to Cherubino in *Figaro*, Octavian is the wooer of a the Marschallin, a woman whose military husband is frequently away. Also like Cherubino, Octavian at one point dresses as a female, here as chambermaid in order to conceal his identity and association with the Marschallin.

American mezzo-soprano Martha Lipton (b. 1913) as Octavian. The breeches parts Cherubino, Octavian, and Orlofsky were all among Lipton's prominent roles.

American mezzo-soprano Blanche Thebom (b. 1918) as Octavian.

Photographer: Not identified. Perry Collection Image ID: C17-007



American mezzo-soprano Frances Bible (b. 1927) as Octavian. According to *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*, Frances Bible was best known for her trouser and contemporary roles.

Photographer: Lackenbach, Robert. Perry Collection Image ID: C02-016



Czech soprano Jarmila Novotna (1907-1994) as Octavian.
Novotna gained distinction while singing this role as a
member of the Vienna State Opera (1933-38).
Photographer: Not identified. Perry Collection Image ID:
C11-022



Yugoslav soprano Sena Jurinac made her Vienna State Operatic
debut in 1945 as Octavian; here pictured with a rose.
Photographer: Piccagliani, Erio. Perry Collection Image ID:
C07-069



American mezzo-soprano Martha Lipton (b. 1913) as Octavian.
The breeches parts Cherubino, Octavian, and Orlofsky were all
among Lipton's prominent roles.
Photographer: Not identified. Perry Collection Image ID: C09-
020



Fidelio

The title role in Ludwig van Beethoven's (1785-1827) opera *Fidelio* [also known as *Leonore, oder Der Triumph der ehelichen Liebe* ('Leonore, or The Triumph of Married Love')], is actually a woman, Leonore. *Fidelio* premiered in 1805 with soprano Anna Milder as Leonore/Fidelio.

The role of Leonore/Fidelio is very different from traditional pants roles like Cherubino and Octavian for several reasons. First, the travesty is acknowledged within the opera; Fidelio's true identity as a woman is revealed within the context of the plot. Second, Leonore is dressed as an adult male, not an adolescent boy. Finally, her role and the purpose of her disguise are very different from the adolescent pants roles, her motive being not illicit desire but rather heroic love.

Norwegian soprano Kristen Flagstad (1895-1962), most famous as a Wagnerian, sang Leonore with the New York Metropolitan Opera in 1951.

Photographer: Not identified. Perry Collection Image ID: C05-031



1960 New York Metropolitan Opera production of *Fidelio* starring Norwegian soprano Aase Nordmo Løvberg (b. 1923) as Leonore.

Photographer: Melancon, Louis. Perry Collection Image ID: C19-003



Orfeo ed Euridice

The part of Orfeo in Christoph Willibald Gluck's (1714-1787) *Orfeo ed Euridice* was written for alto castrato in the original Italian version (1762). Twelve years later, Gluck revised it in a French version, this time writing Orfeo as a tenor, since castrati were not used in French opera (indeed, they were something of an object of ridicule.) Today, *Orfeo ed Euridice* is most frequently performed in a hybrid version arranged by Berlioz, and Orfeo is cast as a female breeches part.

American mezzo-soprano Risë Stevens (b. 1913) as Orfeo.
Photographer: Bender. Perry Collection Image ID: C15-037



Die Fledermaus

Johann Strauss (1825-1899) wrote the part of Prince Orlofsky in his comic operetta *Die Fledermaus* ("The Bat") (1874) as a mezzo-soprano pants role. *Die Fledermaus* is an example of a non-adolescent part originally intended as a pants role rather than for a castrato. As an Austrian operetta dating from the late nineteenth century, it is clearly outside of, though perhaps influenced by, the eighteenth century Italian castrati practices.

American mezzo-soprano Blanche Thebom (b.1918) as Orlofsky.
Photographer: LeBlang, Sedge. Perry Collection Image ID: C17-008

