Children in Opera

Children in Opera

By

Andrew Sutherland

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

Children in Opera

By Andrew Sutherland

This book first published 2021

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Front cover: ©Scott Armstrong, Perth, Western Australia

ISBN (10): 1-5275-6166-6
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-6166-3

In memory of Adrian Maydwell (1993-2019), the first Itys.

CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Biblioteca Buenos Aires
Biblioteca Nacional de *Chile*
Camilo Andres Mendez San Juan, Hong Kong Baptist University
European American Music Distributors Company
Elena Kats Chernin
Finchley Children's Music Group
Grit Kurth, Hauptstaatsarchiv Weimar
Iain Grandage
Jan Smaczny, Queen's University, Belfast
Jane Southcott, Monash University
Malcolm Singer
Maria Fedora Peña
Marjaana Launonen, Finnish National Opera and Ballet
Martin Holmes, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford
Matěj Dočekal, National Theatre, Prague
Nella Camarda Valenza
Nico Muhly
Perry Joyce
Richard Mills
Schott Music
Simon Lawford
Stewart Wallace

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

> "Music is spiritual. The music business is not."
>
> Claudio Monteverdi

In many respects, opera is not a natural domain for children. It is hardly surprising that from the thousands of works, comparatively few include roles for children. There are several possible explanations for this; the dramatic themes in opera are often about the human condition from the adult perspective; the need for developed voices to project in large, theatrical spaces underpinned by orchestral accompaniment does not naturally suit the child's comparatively underdeveloped voice; and enabling children to cope with long runs of performances on top of their education requires vocal and physical stamina. In more recent times, the involvement of children contributes another layer of difficulty in terms of having access to young singers while adhering to laws that protect their working rights. It is quite possible that the contribution of children in the earliest operas will remain unacknowledged due to the underdeveloped appreciation of what a child was in the seventeenth century. Despite these points, children have been performing in opera since its inception in a variety of ways, but their contribution is often undervalued or ignored by musicologists and even the industry itself.

Since the meetings of the Florentine Camerata developed their new form of opera, if children were included in early productions, it was likely a matter of convenience. Musicologists do not agree upon the precise role of children in some of the earlier productions. Some suggest that boys were used in the chorus as they were in plentiful supply in many local church choirs around Florence. Others point to the prevalence of castrati in the all-male *Accademia degli Invaghiti*, which provided the substantive cast for Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* (1607). I do not attempt to add insight to the discussion. The available primary material for many documented operas provides scant detail about the age of many of the performers. I have included what available evidence I could find about specific evidence of the role of children in the development of opera in the seventeenth century and

tried not to add conjecture. Detailed discussion about the use of children's chorus is, with rare exception, not helpful until the nineteenth-century compositions that are scored for them explicitly. In examining scores and documents relating to the earlier works, I have been drawn to the operatic roles that seem appropriate for children. The prevalence of mythology as a theme for libretti is helpful here, but the use of the castrato muddies the waters. Determining the name, age and gender of the first singer for the role, looking at the clef, range and tessitura used in the score and any evidence such as *livrets*, programmes or diary entries discussing the features of the singer's voice or physique was not possible for each work. The most interesting point at which a discussion about children in opera should begin is perhaps not in Florence, but in Rome.

The inclusion of children is integral for some opera narratives. How composers approach the use of young, developing voices alongside experienced and highly trained adult vocalists is a concern for the child's long-term vocal health. Operas involving children can involve large, orchestral forces and benefit from substantial vocal projection unless the skills of the composer allow a less competitive accompaniment. Operatic directors may cast adults in the role of child characters, but this can be seen as a betrayal of the composer's intentions as well as creating a problem of credibility for the audience.

A number of questions arise, which scholars and industry seem reluctant to address. If composers imagined children's roles to be performed by children, should directors remain faithful to the composers' intentions? If not, then where do the parameters for decision-making lie? If yes, then what are the reasons for casting adult performers in children's roles? Could the desire for *bel canto* singing techniques over authenticity and realistic character casting be a fad? Such decisions would never be taken seriously in the world of music theatre or film.

As opera developed over the centuries, several important attempts were made to allow realism to be reflected on stage. The Enlightenment brought a move away from typical themes of mythology, towards libretti that addressed the human condition. *Verismo* attempted to show a reflection of regular, middle-class society in the characters. In the twentieth century, the innovation of television provided opera with a new medium in which the audience were up-close and personal, and the suspension of belief a far greater imposition for the audience. When Menotti's *Amahl and the Night Visitors* (1951) was televised, the composer was adamant that the lead role should be sung by a boy. He stated in his production notes,

> It is the express wish of the composer that the role of Amahl should always be performed by a boy. Neither the musical nor the dramatic concept of the opera permits the substitution of a woman, costumed as a child. (Menotti, vi)[1]

There had been up until this point a common practice of casting a soubrette in roles such as Yniold (*Pelléas et Mélsande*), the Shepherd Boy (*Tosca),* or Jano (*Jenůfa),* but the advent of televised operas in the mid-twentieth century both in America and the United Kingdom, called for a dramatic authenticity which would challenge certain musical considerations. In 1994, the English National Opera staged Janacek's *Jenůfa,* and cast the role of Jano with an experienced and reliable treble. After the first orchestral rehearsal however, he was fitted with a body microphone.[2] The large size of some opera houses can make it difficult for young voices to be properly heard. When a production of *Pelléas et Mélsande* was staged at the Metropolitan Opera in New York in 1995, one reviewer observed,

> This production also follows what's become common practice, in casting a boy as Yniold, and, good and true though [he] is, nobody should have expected him to cope with singing in a theatre of this size. (Griffiths 1995, 115)[3]

Music theatre developed alongside opera throughout the twentieth century with several notable convergences to be explored later. With its contemporary context, the musical did not have to worry about how to deal with the outdated use of the castrato providing trouser-role headaches. Nor did the composers of musicals need to worry about projection and amplification undermining a purist approach to opera performance. As such, if a role was written for a child, there was no reason for an adult to play it. The idea of Billy Elliot, Annie, Matilda or the Von Trapp children being portrayed by an adult with a more developed voice seems ridiculous in a sophisticated age of varied entertainment platforms. Some opera productions can seem out of step in this regard, and the decisions made by casting directors about certain roles continue to divide audiences and critics.

---

[1] Menotti, Gian Carlo. 1951. *Amahl and the Night Visitors, Opera in One Act*, New York: G. Schirmer.
[2] Barnes, Jennifer. 2003. *Television Opera: The Fall of Opera Commissioned for Television*. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press.
[3] Griffiths, Paul, "Stops and Starts." *The New Yorker,* April 17, 1995, 115.

What is a child?

The concept of the child has changed over time and meant different things to societies in different countries. The Romans divided the early years up until the age of 25 into three phases: *infantia,* was from birth until the age of seven; *pueritia* was from seven to fourteen; and *pubertas* was considered from fourteen and older. Many centuries later, legislators and social observers would provide descriptors for what was appropriate at different ages. Giles Jacob stated that, "At Fourteen, which is his *Age* of Discretion, he may consent to marriage and chuse his guardian; and at Twenty-one he may alien his Lands, Goods, and Chattels"[4] (Giles, 1729, n.p.). According to Robert Chambers, "Till seven we are infants and incapable of crime. At fourteen we become regularly answerable for moral actions…" [5] (Chambers, 1986, 328). Fourteen was considered an important turning point in seventeenth-century England. It was the age of sexual consent for boys although the age for girls is less clear. Girls were legally permitted to marry at the age of twelve.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth-centuries, the appropriate age to leave home and begin an apprenticeship was between ten and twelve. Apprenticeships necessitated entry into the adult world and indeed child labour laws in the nineteenth century stipulated that childhood ended between the ages of nine and thirteen. During the sixteenth century, the expected age for entry to university was around seventeen, but by the nineteenth century, this had shifted to around twenty. The definition of adolescence and childhood is not able to be given strict parameters, however for the purposes of this book, I have used a more modern understanding of childhood which generally operates on the basis of school-aged boys and girls which I apply to all periods of history.

With change of the average life expectancy came the delayed start to operatic careers. To début on the operatic stage between the ages of 16 and 19 was relatively common for women. For castrati in Italy, with vocal development uninterrupted by puberty, a similar age was expected, but in the seventeenth and eighteenth-centuries, they were generally considered adults. Gioacchino Conti, (aka Gizziello, 1714-1761) was reportedly

---

[4] Jacob, Giles. 1729. *A new Law-Dictionary: containing the interpretation and definition of words and terms used in the law, etc.* London: E.& R. Nutt & R. Gosling. Entry under "Age"

[5] Chambers, Robert. 1986. *A course of lectures on the English law: delivered at the University of Oxford 1767-1773*. Vol. 1. University of Wisconsin Press.

performing operas by Leonardo Vinci (1690-1730) from around the age of 15.

Vocal development in children

Children that have been vocally trained are able to project their voices to be heard in large buildings, and above the accompaniment of an orchestra. According to Howard, Williams, and Herbst (2013), the vocal quality linked to this projection is often referred to as 'ping' or 'ring' and in the *bel canto* tradition, 'squillo' or 'twang'. Such a quality varies with each voice and its increased presence in vocal output can dramatically increase the level of decibels as well as the number of prominent harmonics. When child singers physically and consciously engage their 'ring' quality, the effects are best observed around the upper end of the pitch range; in particular around F5 (second f above middle C)[6] (Howard, Williams, & Herbst, 2013).

Changes in the voice during adolescence manifests differently in boys and girls. With the onset of puberty, the male larynx enlarges anterior-posteriorly (front to back), whereas the female larynx develops with more of a rounding in height and width. As well as an increase in the size of laryngeal cartilage, it becomes heavier with calcification or ossification. This continues through adulthood, which ultimately makes the vocal mechanism more stable. During the sudden growth period, the laryngeal muscles are weakened for boys and girls, resulting in problems with vocal control.[7]

Many vocal habits have become established by the age of eight, and from then need to either be reinforced or corrected. Children between the ages of seven and ten can generally operate a singing range of two octaves. Children with vocal training can often utilise a larger range. As the pitch goes higher, usually the volume increases.[8] Children can often easily switch between 'head voice' and 'chest voice'. Singing low in the range in a loud dynamic generally encourages chest voice singing and if used for prolonged periods can result in vocal damage manifested by a hoarseness from strain. Putting

[6] Howard, David M., Williams, Jenevora & Herbst, Christian T. 2014. "“Ring” in the solo child singing voice". *Journal of Voice* 28. No. 2. 161-169.
[7] Sweet, Bridget. 2018. "Voice Change and Singing Experiences of Adolescent Females". *Journal of Research in Music Education.* 66, No. 2: 133-49.
[8] Schneider, Berit., Zumtobel, Michaela., Prettenhofer, Walter., Aichstill Birgitta., & Jocher, Werner. 2010."Normative Voice Range Profiles in Vocally Trained and Untrained Children Aged Between 7 and 10 Years". *Journal of Voice.* 24, No. 2: 153-60.

the larynx under too much strain can ultimately lead to the formation of vocal nodules and other disorders that impair vocal quality.

Opera sacra

Opera may have been born in Florence, but it was not long before the new art form was brought to Rome. Various orders, in particular the Franciscans and the Jesuits saw the format of 'poetry to music' as a didactic way of perpetuating thinking. Princes and prelates of the church sought to transform ancient literature to represent themes of Christian devotion. Emelio de' Cavalieri (c. 1550-1602) staged his *Rappresentatione di Anima et di Corpo* (Portrayal of the Soul and the Body) in February 1600, to a libretto by Agostino Manni (1548-1618) with the support of the Oratorians in a production involving men and boys. Fully staged, and with the new form of '*recitar cantando*' (recitation in singing), some regard this as the first opera.

In 1606, written for pre-Lenten carnival at the Roman seminary, came *Eumelio* by Agostino Agazzari (1578-1640). The male title role is written for a soprano. As the use of women, and indeed the monstrously sacrilegious castrato in such theatrical fare, was totally inappropriate, it is most likely that Eumelio was played by a well-trained boy. In Act III, scene ii, Mercury refers to Eumelio as 'the betrayed boy' when the chorus of Vices strip off their disguises on stage. Poesia, appearing only in the Prologue, is also a soprano role, and Corbante the messenger, and Aecus are alto roles.[9] Agazzari as with Cavalieri before him was composing works for performances in the Seminars, training grounds for young priests, and the need for boys in the chorus of Shepherds and the chorus of Vices would likely have come from the nearby choirs.

David Musicus (1613) by Ottavio Catalani followed the same approach as with Cavalieri and Agazzari's work in that there is a distinct lack of female character, and an absence of romantic theme. These three works preceded the Courtly productions of the Florentine composer Filippo Vitali (1590-1654) based on Greek and Roman mythology, and the Barberini operas of

[9] Johnson, Margaret F. 1971. "Agazzari's 'Eumelio', a 'dramma pastorale'." *The Musical Quarterly*. 57, No. 3: 491-505.

the 1630's. They represent an epoch of libretti created before the introduction of sex, defiance and buffoonery.[10]

Although the oratorio developed to allow biblical narratives to be performed during Lent, didactic sacred operas still flourished in the early part of the seventeenth century. The Barberini family in Rome were patrons to many such works and although the sacred libretti became better suited to the Oratorio in the latter part of the century, several examples persisted. One anonymous *operina sacra* written in 1686, celebrates the Franciscan clothing of Princess Olimpia Chigi. She was clothed in the Franciscan habit worn in the Monastary of St Jerome, known as 'Campanzi' in Siena. The work comprises three roles, all of which were to be played by children aged ten. The tradition of sacred opera as an explicitly allegorical work is observed here with three characters: Divine Love, Delight, and Innocence. Initially, Innocence admires Delight but is jealous that Delight loves all virtues. Innocence flees and Delight is despondent to the point of suicide. Divine Love intervenes and enlists Delight to be his messenger, offering words of love to Innocence who in turn reunites with Divine Love. Two of the three singers were twin sisters of Princess Olimpia; Maria Maddalena Chigi (Divine Love), and Teresia Maria Chigi (Innocence). The third singer was Geltrude Petrucci (Delight). The work was clearly influenced by the singers involved with small-scale arias, some less than 25 bars, and modest technical requirements, the range often staying within an octave. The diminutive term *operina* seems appropriate. The Chigi family formed a dynasty in the Franciscan church. Olimpia's great-uncle, Fabio Chigi was Pope Alexander VII (1655-1667) and ten of the eleven children of his nephew Agostino took monastic vows.[11]

The order of the Jesuits was responsible for several early operas involving children. The Jesuits were founded by Ignatius of Loyola and approved by Pope Paul III in 1540. They were active evangelists and considered education to be their weapon of choice. They embraced the arts as a way of enhancing their evangelism throughout the world. As opera developed in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the Jesuits realised its potential for promoting the ideals of the church; the Jesuit theatre could be seen as a large-scale pulpit. Concurrently, the college boys could ideally undergo transformative experiences in representing the acts of good and evil

[10] Murata, Margaret. 1984. "Classical Tragedy in the History of Early Opera in Rome." *Early Music History.* No. 4: 101-34.
[11] Plank, Steven E. 1982. "A Seventeenth-Century Franciscan Opera: Music for a Chigi Princess." *Franciscan Studies* 42. No. 1: 180-189.

of their assigned character. Although not artistic in any way, Ignatius insisted that Jesuit colleges produced theatre productions as part of the students' training.[12] The Jesuits trained, provided, and employed the best musicians of the time and musical training was central in the three Roman Colleges; Collegium Germanicum (founded 1552), Roman Seminary (founded 1564), and Venerable English College (founded 1572). Music was also considered important in the Collegium Gregoranium in Munich (founded 1572), Collegium Ferdinandeum in Graz (founded 1574), and other colleges in Vienna, Prague, Cologne, Mainz, Augsburg, and Dillingen.

Prior to the development of opera in late sixteenth-century Florence, dramatisations with the addition of music in a variety of structures such as *intermedi* were staged by the Jesuits with the involvement of children. One such production, which was particularly lavish, was the play, *Hester* in 1577. It took place in a number of locations around Munich and among the 1700 costumed performers to take part in the procession on foot, included; trumpets, kettledrums, cornets, trombones, bagpipes, drums and pipes. In addition, a carriage for the musicians along with a group of singers including three boys and musicians with instruments and books were involved.[13]

Charpentier's *David et Jonathas*, produced in 1688 is one such work which will be discussed in detail later in this book, but several others deserve mention here. Johann Bernhard Staudt (1654-1712) wrote *Patientis Christi memoria* which was first performed at the Jesuit College in Vienna in 1685. As women were not permited on the Jesuit stage, it is presumed that the role of Delor (Pain) was performed by a boy. Staudt also wrote music for a theatrical production called *Mulier Fortis* (Strong Woman, 1698) written by Johann Baptist Adolph (1657-1708).[14] The premiere was attended by Leopold I and his third wife, Eleonor Magdalene of Neuburg on the feast day of St Ignatius and Eleonor's name day. Much of this work is spoken but it includes monodic lines with continuo accompaniment. The extant cast list

[12] Kevin J. Wetmore Jr. 2018. "Jesuit Theatre and Drama". *Oxford Handbooks Online,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1-19.
[13] Franz Körndle. 2016. "Between Stage and Divine Service: Jesuits and Theatrical Music". In *The Jesuits II: Cultures, Sciences, and the Arts 1540-1773,* edited by John W O'Malley, S.J., Gauvin Alexander Bailey, Steven J. Harris, T. Frank Kennedy, S.J., 479-497. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
[14] Takao, Makoto Harris. 2019. "'In what storms of blood from Christ's flock is Japan swimming?': Gratia Hosokawa and the Performative Representation of Japanese Martyrdom in Mulier fortis (1698)". In *Changing Hearts: Performing Jesuit Emotions between Europe, Asia, and the Americas*, edited by Yasmin Haskell & Raphaële Garrod, 87-120. Boston: Kloninklijke.