

Children in Opera

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By

Andrew Sutherland

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

CONTENTS

List of Figures.....	xii
Acknowledgements	xxi
Chapter 1	1
Introduction	
What is a child?.....	4
Vocal development in children	5
Opera sacra	6
Boys will be girls	9
Changing attitudes to and regulations for children on stage	11
Children writing operas.....	14
The early child opera stars	18
Casting children to play children	23
Parameters and limitations	25
Chapter 2	28
European beginnings	
Italy.....	30
Page boys in Cavalli's operas and his contemporaries.....	31
France	36
Psyché, Jean-Baptiste Lully, 1678.....	37
David et Jonathas, Marc-Antoine Charpentier, 1688	39
Germany	44
WA Mozart, <i>Apollo et Hyacinthus</i> , 1767	44
Tarare, Antonio Salieri, 1787	48
Die Zauberflöte, W.A. Mozart, 1791	51
England	53
Venus and Adonis, John Blow, 1683	57
Rosamond, Thomas Arne, 1733	58
Alcina, George Frederic Handel, 1735.....	60
Giustino, George Frederick Handel, 1736.....	63
Faramondo, George Frederick Handel, 1737	65
The Children in the Wood, Samuel Arnold, 1793	69
Epilogue.....	73

Chapter 3	75
Children's solo roles in the nineteenth century	
Tannhäuser, Richard Wagner, 1845.....	77
Boris Godunov, Modest Mussorgsky, 1873.....	79
John Farmer, The Pied Piper or Rat-catcher of Hamelin, 1884	82
La Bohème, Giacomo Puccini, 1896	85
Pelléas et Mélisande, Claude Debussy, 1898.....	88
Tosca, Giacomo Puccini, 1900	90
Epilogue.....	93
Chapter 4	94
The Emerging Children's Chorus	
La damnation de Faust, Hector Berlioz, 1845.....	96
Carmen, George Bizet, 1875.....	98
Parsifal, Richard Wagner, 1882	101
Werther, Jules Massenet, 1885-87	103
Jakobín, Antonín Dvořák, 1887	106
Dítě Tábora, Karel Bendl, 1892.....	109
Hänsel und Gretel, Engelbert Humperdinck, 1893	114
Otello, Giuseppe Verdi, 1887	118
L'Enfant et les Sortilèges, Maurice Ravel, 1925	121
Turandot, Giacomo Puccini, 1926	125
Epilogue.....	127
Chapter 5	130
Lost innocence in the early twentieth century	
Osud, Leoš Janáček, 1905.....	131
Königskinder, Engelbert Humperdinck, 1910	134
Gianni Schicchi, Giacomo Puccini, 1918	137
Wozzeck, Alban Berg, 1922	139
El retablo de maese Pedro, Manuel de Falla, 1923	140
Příhody lišky Bystroušky, Leoš Janáček, 1923.....	142
Der Jasager, Kurt Weill, 1930.....	146
Porgy and Bess, George Gershwin, 1935.....	150
The Second Hurricane, Aaron Copland, 1937	152
Brundibár, Hans Krása, 1938.....	156
Street Scene, Kurt Weill, 1946.....	159
Epilogue.....	162

Chapter 6	163
Post-modernism and operas with children	
Ein Landarzt, Hans Werner Henze, 1951.....	168
King Priam, Michael Tippett, 1962	171
Don Rodrigo, Alberto Ginastera, 1964	175
Miss Julie, Ned Rorem, 1965.....	178
Bomarzo, Alberto Ginastera, 1967	180
Casanova's Homecoming, Dominick Argento, 1985.....	182
Julius Caesar Jones, Malcolm Williamson, 1966	184
Pollicino, Hans Werner Henze, 1980.....	187
Punainen viiva, Aulis Sallinen, 1978	191
Harvey Milk, Stewart Wallace, 1995.....	194
The Little Prince, Rachel Portman, 2003.....	197
The Love of the Nightingale, Richard Mills, 2007	200
The Jailer's Tale, Malcolm Singer, 2010.....	202
The Riders, Iain Grandage, 2014	204
Der Wind in den Weiden, Elena Kats-Chernin, 2018.....	207
Epilogue.....	209
Chapter 7	211
César Cui (1835-1918)	
The Snow Bogatyr, 1905	213
Little Red Riding-Hood, 1911	216
Puss-in-boots, 1913.....	219
Ivan the Fool, 1913	222
Epilogue.....	225
Chapter 8	226
Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)	
Albert Herring, 1947.....	227
Let's Make an Opera! 1949	230
The Turn of the Screw, 1954	232
Noye's Fludde, 1958.....	236
A Midsummer Night's Dream, 1960	240
Curlew River, 1964.....	242
The Burning Fiery Furnace, 1966	244
The Prodigal Son, 1968.....	246
Epilogue.....	249

Chapter 9	251
Gian Carlo Menotti (1911-2007)	
The Medium, 1946.....	252
Amahl and the Night Visitors, 1951	254
Maria Golovin, 1958.....	259
The Death of the Bishop of Brindisi, 1963	260
Martin's Lie, 1964	262
Help, Help, the Globolinks! 1968	264
The Trial of the Gypsy, 1978	267
Chip and his Dog, 1979	269
The Boy Who Grew Too Fast, 1982.....	271
The Singing Child, 1993	275
Epilogue.....	277
Chapter 10	279
Peter Maxwell Davies (1934-2016)	
Taverner, 1970.....	280
The Two Fiddlers, 1978.....	282
Cinderella, 1979.....	285
The Rainbow, 1981.....	289
Dinosaur at Large, 1989.....	291
The Great Bank Robbery, 1989	293
Jupiter Landing, 1989	295
Dangerous Errand, 1990	297
The Spiders' Revenge, 1991	298
The Selkie Tale, 1992	300
Kommilitonen!, 2010.....	302
The Hogboon, 2015	305
Epilogue.....	306
Chapter 11	309
Children-only operas	
La Cenicienta, Jorge Peña Hen, 1966	311
All the King's Men, Sir Richard Rodney Bennett, 1968	315
The Happy Prince, Malcolm Williamson, 1965.....	320
Cassations, Malcolm Williamson	322
The Moonrakers, 1967	
Knights in Shining Armour, 1968	
The Snow Wolf, 1971	
Genesis, 1971	
The Stone Wall, 1973	

The Winter Star, 1974	
The Glitter Gang, 1974	
The Terrain of Kings, 1977	
The Valley and the Hill, 1982	
The Devil's Bridge, 1982	
Eloise, Karl Jenkins, 1997	325
Epilogue.....	329
Chapter 12	330
Conclusions	
Television talent shows.....	333
The future.....	334
Education	336
Referenced operas involving children	339
References	350
Index.....	366

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1 Satirino's recitative and aria <i>Chi creda a femmina</i> from Act 2, scene iv of Cavalli's <i>La Calisto</i> . Transcribed from the original manuscript. Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Venice (I-Vnm): Mss.It.IV.353.....	34
Figure 2.2 Excerpt from Cupid's recitative with Psyché, Act II, scene vi, from Lully's <i>Psyché: Tragédie Mise En Musique</i> [Facsimile of the first edition, Paris, 1720] New York, NY: Broude International Editions, (2002), p. 85	38
Figure 2.3 Recitative as Jonathan dies on stage. Act III, scene iv from Charpentier's <i>David et Jonathas</i> , [Full score], Nicolas Sceaux (Ed.), (1688), pp. 224-225. Permission given.....	42
Figure 2.4 Opening melismatic phrase of Melia's aria in <i>Apollo et Hyacinthus</i> . [Full score], Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, (1879). Plate W.A.M. 38, p. 32. Piano reduction by Andrew Sutherland.....	46
Figure 2.5 Opening section of recitative in Act III between Hyacinth and Oebalus in Mozart's <i>Apollo et Hyacinthus</i> . [Full score], Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, (1879). Plate W.A.M. 38, p. 64. Orchestral reduction by Andrew Sutherland	47
Figure 2.6 Elamir's recitative in Act II, scene vii in which he announces Tarare as next leader of the army. Salieri, [Full score], Nicolas Sceaux (Ed.), (2018). pp. 291-292	50
Figure 2.7 Extract from the finale of Act II in Mozart's <i>Die Zauberflöte</i> . [Full score] Ed. Fred Nachbaur, Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial Share Alike 3.0, (1998), p. 63	53
Figure 2.8 Cupid's opening recitative in Prologue of Blow's <i>Venus and Adonis</i> , The Old English Edition. No.25. [Full score] London: Joseph Williams, Oxford: Parker and Co., (1904), pp. 10-11	58
Figure 2.9 Opening phrase from Oberto's Act 3 aria; Barbara; <i>io ben lo sò</i> . In Handel's <i>Alcina</i> [Full score] Leipzig: Deutsche Händelgesellschaft, (1868). Plate H.W. 86, pp. 136-137.....	61
Figure 2.10 Extract from La Fortuna's aria in Act I, scene v of Handel's <i>Giustino</i> [Full score], Friedrich Chrysander (Ed.) Leipzig: Deutsche Händelgesellschaft, (1883). Plate H.W. 88. pp. 21-22	65
Figure 2.11 Act 1, scene v. A section of Childerico's recitative preceding Rosimonda's aria; <i>Vanne, che più ti mori, più cresce il mio dolor</i> . "Ausgabe der Deutschen Händelgesellschaft", Leipzig, 1884, p. 18.....	67
Figure 2.12 Act 2, scene i. A further extract of recitative preceding Rosimonda's aria; <i>Si l'intendesti, sì, è questala mercè</i> , "Ausgabe der Deutschen Händelgesellschaft", Leipzig, 1884, p. 50.....	67
Figure 2.13 Act 3, scene ii. This is the most substantial section of recitative for Childerico. "Ausgabe der Deutschen Händelgesellschaft", Leipzig, 1884, p. 85	68

Figure 2.14 Duet between Josephine and Boy in “The Children in the Wood. A Comic Opera in Two Acts, for the Piano-Forte, Harpsichord, Violin &c. as performed at the Theatre Royal Haymarket, the music composed by Dr. Arnold. Organist & Composer to His Majesty.” London: Longman & Broderip	72
Figure 3.1 Excerpt from Shepherd boy’s scene in Act I, scene iii from Wagner’s <i>Tannhäuser</i> [Full score], Leipzig: C.F. Peters, n.d. [1920]. Plate 10352. Felix Motl (Ed.), p. 158.....	78
Figure 3.2 Excerpt with Feodor in Act II, Mussorgsky’s <i>Boris Godunov</i> . New York, NY: Dover Publications, Inc. [Full score], (1987), pp. 265-266.	80
Figure 3.3 Gretchen’s ballad from Farmer’s <i>The Pied Piper or Rat-Catcher of Hamelin</i> , ‘Archbishop Hatto, Years Ago’. The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford	83
Figure 3.4 Final chorus in John Farmer’s <i>The Pied Piper or Rat-Catcher of Hamelin</i> . The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.....	85
Figure 3.5 Extract from chorus parts in Act II of Puccini’s <i>La Bohème</i> , Milan: G. Ricordi & Co., [Full score] (1920) pp. 142-145	86
Figure 3.6 Solo boy in Puccini’s <i>La Bohème</i> , New York, NY: Edwin F. Kalmus [Miniature orchestra score] (1953) p. 163	87
Figure 3.7 Excerpt of vocal-lines between Yniold and Golaud from Act III, scene iv of Debussy’s <i>Pelléas et Mélisande</i> . [Full score], New York, NY: Dover, (1985), pp. 220-221.....	89
Figure 3.8 Shepherd boy aria (in a clear voice but very distant) in Act III of <i>Giocomo Puccini’s Tosca</i> , Mineola: Dover Publications. [Full score] (1991), pp. 364-369	91
Figure 3.9 Extract from chorus scene in Act I of Puccini’s <i>Tosca</i> . Mineola: Dover Publications, [Vocal score] (1991), pp.114-115	92
Figure 4.1 Children’s chorus parts from final scene in Berlioz’ <i>La damnation de Faust</i> [Full score], Plate H.B. 29-30. Charles Malherbe and Felix Weingartner (Eds.). New York, NY: Breitkopf und Härtel (1901), pp. 425-427.	97
Figure 4.2 Excerpt from first children’s chorus in Act I of Bizet’s <i>Carmen</i> [Full score], Plate A.C. 3795. Paris : Choudens Père et Fils, n.d. [1877]. Reprinted by Budapest : Könemann, 1994. Plate K 1005. pp. 42-43. Piano reduction by Andrew Sutherland.	99
Figure 4.3 Excerpt from children’s chorus in Act III of Bizet’s <i>Carmen</i> [Full score], Plate A.C. 3795. Paris: Choudens Père et Fils, n.d. [1877], pp. 521-522. Piano reduction by Andrew Sutherland.....	100
Figure 4.4 Extract from children’s chorus, end of Act I, Wagner’s <i>Parsifal</i> [Full score], Leipzig: Edition Peters, n.d. (ca.1920). Plate 10261. Felix Mottl (Ed.), pp. 206-208.	102
Figure 4.5 Excerpt from children’s chorus in Act I of Massenet’s <i>Werther</i> . Autograph manuscript [Full score], (1887), pp. 18-25.....	104
Figure 4.6 Excerpt from children’s chorus in the final scene of Massenet’s <i>Werther</i> . Autograph manuscript [Full score], (1887), pp. 688-690.....	105

Figure 4.7 Excerpt with children's chorus from Act II from Dvořák's <i>Jacobín</i> . Ed. Karel Šolc. Prague: Souborné vydání díla, series 1, vol. 10 [Full score] B.200 (1966) pp. 307-309	108
Figure 4.8 Excerpt from children's chorus in Karel Bendl's <i>Dítě Tábora</i> [Piano/vocal score] H 238/4. Unpublished score: Národní divadlo, hudební archiv (National Theatre, music archive), Praha (Prague), Czech Republic, H 238/1	112
Figure 4.9 Extract with children's chorus in Act III of Humperdinck's <i>Hänsel und Gretel</i> [Full score], Mainz: B. Schott's Söhne, (1894). Plate 25617. pp. 315-316	116
Figure 4.10 Extract from chorus in Act II of Verdi's <i>Otello</i> [Full score], Mineola: Dover Publications, (1986), pp. 213-214	119
Figure 4.11 Excerpt from the scene with the Mathematical Man and children's chorus from Ravel's <i>L'Enfant et les Sortilèges</i> , [Full score], Plate D. & F. 10,755, Paris: Durand & Cie, (1925), pp. 110-121 Durand.....	123
Figure 4.12 Children's chorus from Act I of Puccini's <i>Turandot</i> [Full score], Arranged Franco Alfano, Milan: Ricordi (1926), Plate P.R. 117. pp. 62 – 65.	126
Figure 5.1 Extract from Act II, scene iv from Janáček's <i>Osud</i> , Complete Critical Edition of the works of Leoš Janáček, Volume 5. Czech Republic: Bärenreiter Praha [Full score] (2016) pp. 260-263. Check rhythm in second line.....	133
Figure 5.2 End of Act II from Engelbert Humperdinck's <i>Königskinder</i> , Leipzig: Max Brockhaus [Piano/vocal score] (1910), p. 226. Piano reduction with text by Rudolf Siegel © Edition Max Brockhaus © Bärenreiter-Verlag, Kassel ..	135
Figure 5.3 End of Act III from Engelbert Humperdinck's <i>Königskinder</i> , Leipzig: Max Brockhaus [Piano/vocal score] (1910), p. 317. Piano reduction with text by Rudolf Siegel. Edition Max Brockhaus © Bärenreiter-Verlag, Kassel	136
Figure 5.4 Extract from Giacomo Puccini's <i>Gianni Schicchi</i> , Milan: Ricordi, n.d. (ca.1918). [Piano vocal score] Editor, Carlo Carignani, pp. 269-270.....	138
Figure 5.5 Extract from Act III, scene v of Alban Berg's " <i>Wozzeck</i> , Oper in 3 Akten (15 Szenen), Op. 7". © Copyright 1926 by Universal Edition A.G., Wien/UE7379. [Full score] (1926) pp. 483-484.....	140
Figure 5.6 Trujamán's aria in Act I of de Fallas' <i>El retablo de maese Pedro</i> : Adaptacion musical y du un episodio "Et Ingenioso Cavallero Don Quixote de la Mancha" de Miguel de Cervantes. London: J&W Chester Ltd. [Full score] (1924) p. 18.....	142
Figure 5.7 Entry of the cricket and locust in Act I of <i>The Cunning Little Vixen</i> . Copyright ©1968 Universal Edition (London) Ltd., [Vocal/piano score] (1952), p. 11	144
Figure 5.8 Entry of the frog followed by other animals played by children in Act I, <i>The Cunning Little Vixen</i> . Copyright ©1968 Universal Edition (London) Ltd., [Vocal/piano score] (1952), p. 14.....	145
Figure 5.9 Extract from Kurt Weill <i>DER JASAGER</i> (The Yes-Sayer) (He Who Says Yes): School Opera in Two Acts. Libretto by Bertolt Brecht, adapted from Elisabeth Hauptmann's German translation of Arthur Waley's English version of the Japanese play <i>Taniko</i> . Copyright © 1930 by European American	

Music Corporation (for the U.S.A, Canada, and other British reversionary territories) and Universal Edition (all other countries) Copyright renewed. All Rights Reserved. [piano-vocal score] p. 34.....	149
Figure 5.10 Excerpt from opening chorus of Copland's <i>The Second Hurricane</i> . [Full score], New York, NY: Boosey & Hawkes, (1936), pp. 6-7. © 1938 The Aaron Copland Fund For Music, Inc. Copyright Renewed. Boosey & Hawkes, Inc., Sole Licensee	154
Figure 5.11 Jeff's aria from Copland's <i>The Second Hurricane</i> . [Full score], New York, NY: Boosey & Hawkes, (1936), pp. 158-162. © 1938 The Aaron Copland Fund For Music, Inc. Copyright Renewed. Boosey & Hawkes, Inc., Sole Licensee	156
Figure 5.12 Chorus in scene iii from Hans Krása's <i>Brundibár</i> : Children's opera in two acts, [Piano / vocal score], Berlin: Boosey & Hawkes (2004), p. 17. Editor: Blanka Červinková, English version by Joža Karas. © Copyright 1993 by Boosey & Hawkes Bote & Bock GmbH, Berlin.....	158
Figure 6.1 Prime form of tone row in Henze's <i>Ein Landarzt</i>	169
Figure 6.2 Extract from scene xiii in Hans Werner Henze's <i>Ein Landarzt</i> [Study score], © Schott MUSIC, Mainz (1951), p. 54.....	170
Figure 6.3 Children's chorus from scene xiv in Hans Werner Henze's <i>Ein Landarzt</i> [Study score], Mainz: Schott, (1951), pp. 65-66	171
Figure 6.4 First scene with Paris as a boy singing to his elder brother, Hector from Tippet's <i>King Priam</i> : Opera in three acts (1958-61) © Schott & CO. LTD., London [full score] (1962) pp. 46-47.....	173
Figure 6.5 Rodrigo Series from which the material for Rapaz and Zagala is taken	176
Figure 6.6 Extract from the opening of scene ix from <i>Don Rodrigo</i> : Opera in three acts and nine scenes, Op. 31 by Alberto Ginastera. Boosey & Hawkes [Vocal score] (1969), pp. 158-159. © Copyright 1967,1969 by Boosey & Hawkes, Inc.	177
Figure 6.7 Entry of Wildcat Boy in Act I of Ned Rorem's, <i>Miss Julie</i> . New York, NY: Boosey & Hawkes, Inc. [Vocal score] (1965), pp. 16-17. © Copyright 1965 by Boosey & Hawkes, Inc. International Copyright Secured.....	179
Figure 6.8 Extract from the shepherd boy's opening aria in Ginastera's <i>Bomarzo</i> . [Vocal score], Boosey & Hawkes (2013), p. 12. © Copyright 1977 by Boosey & Hawkes, Inc.	181
Figure 6.9 Marcantonio's opening scene with Cassanova from Argento's <i>Casanova's Homecoming</i> . [Vocal Score] Boosey & Hawkes Inc., 1985, pp. 11-12. © Copyright 1985 by Boosey & Hawkes Inc.....	183
Figure 6.10 Extract from Act II, Malcolm Williamson's <i>Julius Caesar Jones</i> : Opera in Two Acts, [Vocal score] Josef Weinberger Ltd. (1966) pp. 117-118. © Josef Weinberger Limited, London; reproduced by permission of the copyright owner	186
Figure 6.11 Extract from children's chorus in Act I, scene i of Hans Werner Henze's <i>Pollicino</i> , [Study score] Mainz: Schott Musik International, (1980), p. 19	188

Figure 6.12 Extract from Pollicino's aria in Act I, scene iii of Hans Werner Henze's <i>Pollicino</i> , [Study score] Mainz: Schott Musik International, (1980), pp. 36-37	190
Figure 6.13 Extract with two children from Act I, scene iii from Punainen viiva, <i>The Red Line</i> , by Aulis Sallinen. Sevenoaks, Kent: Novello and co., [Vocal score] (1982) pp. 149-152. English translation: Stephen Oliver	193
Figure 6.14 Excerpt from Act I, part I, <i>The Closet</i> , with Young Harvey in Stewart Wallace's <i>Harvey Milk Reimagined</i> [Piano/vocal score], © New York, NY: Sidmar Music (1995), pp. 37-38	196
Figure 6.15 Opening chorus from Rachel Portman's <i>The Little Prince</i> . New York, NY: St. Rose Music Publishing Co. [Piano/Vocal score] (2005), pp. 7-9. Libretto: Nicholas Wright. All Rights Administered by Chester Music Limited. Printed by Permission of Hal Leonard Europe Limited	199
Figure 6.16 Extract with Itys from Act I, Richard Mills' <i>The Love of the Nightingale</i> . [Piano/vocal score] Unpublished score, (2010), pp. 66-67	201
Figure 6.17 Extract from Malcolm Singer's <i>The Jailer's Tale</i> [Full score] (2010). Unpublished, pp. 494-499	203
Figure 6.18 Extract with Billie, Act III, scene iv, from Iain Grandage's <i>The Riders</i> [Piano/vocal score], unpublished score provided by the composer, version 2.0, (2016), p. 113	206
Figure 6.19 Opening extract from Act I, scene xiii, <i>A Day in Court</i> from Elena Kats-Chernin's <i>Der Wind in der Weiden</i> , [Piano/vocal score], Berlin: Boosey & Hawkes (2019), pp. 33-34. English translation by Benjamin Gordon. © Copyright 2018 by Boosey & Hawkes Bote & Bock GmbH, Berlin	209
Figure 7.1 Opening chorus of the Princesses in Cesar Cui's, <i>The Snow Bogytir</i> [Vocal score], Moscow: P. Jurgenson (1906), p. 10. English translation by Edgars Raginskis.....	214
Figure 7.2 Opening children's chorus in César Cui's <i>Little Red Riding-Hood</i> [Vocal score], Moscow: Pechatnik, (1912) (as a supplement to the journal Светлячок, printed by Печатник) p. 6. English translation by Edgars Raginskis.....	218
Figure 7.3 Riding-Hood's first two questions to Grandma in César Cui's <i>Little Red Riding-Hood</i> [Vocal score], Moscow: Pechatnik, (1912) (as a supplement to the journal Светлячок, printed by Печатник) pp. 32-33. Text translation by the author	219
Figure 7.4 Opening trio of three sons from César Cui's <i>Puss-in-Boots</i> [Piano/vocal score], Moscow [?]: Svetliachok, (1913) pp. 8-9. English translation by Edgars Raginskis.....	221
Figure 7.5 Ivan's opening aria from César Cui's <i>Ivan the Fool</i> [Vocal/piano score], Leipzig: Balaieff, (1914), pp. 4-5. English translation by Edgars Raginskis.....	224
Figure 8.1 Act I, scene ii, Emmie, Cis, and Harry from Britten's <i>Albert Herring: A Comic Opera in three Acts</i> Op. 39 [Full score] p. 140. Text © Copyright 1947 by Hawkes & Son (London) Ltd. Music © Copyright 1948 by Hawkes & Son (London) Ltd. Copyright for all countries.....	229
Figure 8.2 Extract from Audience Song III, scene xiv, <i>The Night Song</i> from Britten's <i>The Little Sweep: The Opera</i> from "Let's Make an Opera!": An	

Entertainment for Young People, Op. 45, [Full score], pp. 80-81. © Copyright 1950 by Hawkes & Son (London) Ltd.	231
Figure 8.3 Scene from Act I with Miles and Flora in Britten's <i>Turn of the Screw</i> . Op. 54. London: Boosey & Hawkes [Vocal score] (1955) pp. 64-65. © Copyright 1955 by Hawkes & Son (London) Ltd.	234
Figure 8.4 Extract from Miles' 'Malo' aria in scene vi, 'The Lesson' in Britten's <i>Turn of the Screw</i> . Op. 54. London: Hawkes & Son. [Vocal score] (1955), p. 67. © Copyright 1955 by Hawkes & Son (London) Ltd.	235
Figure 8.5 Extract with Sem and children's chorus from Benjamin Britten's <i>Noye's Fludde</i> , Op. 59. [Pocket score], London: Boosey and Hawkes, (1958), pp. 55-57. © Copyright 1958 by Hawkes & Son (London) Ltd.	238
Figure 8.6 Britten, Benjamin. <i>A Midsummer Night's Dream: An Opera in three acts</i> , Op. 64. [Full score], pp. 218-219. © Copyright 1960 by Hawkes & Son (London) Ltd. International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Copyright Renewed in 1988.	242
Figure 8.7 Excerpt from Spirit of the boy scene in <i>Curlew River: A Parable for Church Performance</i> Op. 71. London: Faber Music Ltd. [Full score] (1964) pp. 132-133. Text by William Plomer. Music by Benjamin Britten © 1966 by Faber Music Ltd. Reproduced by permission of the publishers. All Rights Reserved	243
Figure 8.8 Scene with Entertainers from Britten's <i>The Burning Fiery Furnace: Second Parable for Church Performance</i> , Op. 77. Faber Music Ltd. [Full score] (1966), pp. 33-34. Text by William Plomer. Composed by Benjamin Britten © 1983 Faber Music Ltd. Reproduced by permission of Faber Music Ltd. All Rights Reserved	245
Figure 8.9 Scene with treble off-stage 'Distant Voices' from Britten's <i>The Prodigal Son: Third Parable for Church Performance</i> , Op. 81. Faber Music Ltd. [Rehearsal score] (1968), pp. 66-67. Composed by Benjamin Britten © 1968 Faber Music Ltd. Reproduced by permission of Faber Music Ltd. All Rights Reserved	248
Figure 9.1 Scene with Monica singing to Toby, Act I, <i>The Medium: Tragedy in Two Acts</i> , [Orchestral Score] pp. 12-14. 1997. Piano reduction by A. Sutherland. Words & Music by Gian Carlo Menotti © Copyright 1946 Chester Music Limited trading as G. Schirmer. All Rights Reserved. International Copyright Secured. Used by permission of Chester Music Limited trading as G. Schirmer.	254
Figure 9.2 Excerpt from Menotti's <i>Amahl and the Night Visitors</i> , [Piano/vocal score], (1997), pp. 3-4. Words & Music by Gian Carlo Menotti © Copyright 1997 Chester Music Limited trading as G. Schirmer. All Rights Reserved. International Copyright Secured. Used by permission of Chester Music Limited trading as G. Schirmer.	257
Figure 9.3 Excerpt from Menotti's <i>Amahl and the Night Visitors</i> . [Piano/vocal score], (1997), pp. 10-11. Words & Music by Gian Carlo Menotti © Copyright 1997 Chester Music Limited trading as G. Schirmer. All Rights Reserved. International Copyright Secured. Used by permission of Chester Music Limited trading as G. Schirmer.	258

- Figure 9.4 Extract featuring children's chorus from Menotti's *The Death of the Bishop of Brindisi* [Full score], New York, NY: G. Schirmer, (1963), pp. 21-22. Words & Music by Gian Carlo Menotti © Copyright 1963 Chester Music Limited trading as G. Schirmer. All Rights Reserved. International Copyright Secured. Used by permission of Chester Music Limited trading as G. Schirmer.....261
- Figure 9.5 Scene with Christopher and Martin in Menotti's *Martin's Lie: Opera da Chiesa* in one act, [Piano/Vocal score], New York, NY: G. Schirmer, Inc. (1964), pp. 186-191. Words & Music by Gian Carlo Menotti © Copyright 1964 Chester Music Limited trading as G. Schirmer. All Rights Reserved. International Copyright Secured. Used by permission of Chester Music Limited trading as G. Schirmer.....263
- Figure 9.6 Emily, Tony, the bus driver, and children's chorus in *Help, Help, The Globolinks!* [Vocal Score], 1969, pp. 18-19. Words & Music by Gian Carlo Menotti © Copyright 1969 Chester Music Limited trading as G. Schirmer. All Rights Reserved. International Copyright Secured. Used by permission of Chester Music Limited trading as G. Schirmer.....266
- Figure 9.7 Extract from opening chorus, *The Trial of the Gypsy* (A Dramatic Cantata for Boys Choir), Words & Music by Gian Carlo Menotti [Vocal Score]. 1978. New York: Schirmer, pp. 2-3. © Copyright 1978 Chester Music Limited trading as G. Schirmer. All Rights Reserved. International Copyright Secured. Used by permission of Chester Music Limited trading as G. Schirmer.....268
- Figure 9.8 Opening scene from Menotti's *Chip and his Dog*. [Vocal Score]. Words & Music by Gian Carlo Menotti © Copyright 1979 Chester Music Limited trading as G. Schirmer. All Rights Reserved. International Copyright Secured. Used by permission of Chester Music Limited trading as G. Schirmer270
- Figure 9.9 Children's morning recess scene in Menotti's *The Boy Who Grew Too Fast* [Vocal score], 1985, p. 21. Words & Music by Gian Carlo Menotti © Copyright 1983 Chester Music Limited trading as G. Schirmer. All Rights Reserved. International Copyright Secured. Used by permission of Chester Music Limited trading as G. Schirmer273
- Figure 9.10 Scene from Menotti's *The Singing Child*. Singing Child, [Vocal score], (1993), pp. 46-49. Words & Music by Gian Carlo Menotti © Copyright 1993 Chester Music Limited trading as G. Schirmer. All Rights Reserved. International Copyright Secured. Used by permission of Chester Music Limited trading as G. Schirmer.....276
- Figure 10.1 Extract from "Boy's" aria, Act I, scene i from Peter Maxwell Davies' *Taverner* [Vocal score], London, UK: Boosey & Hawkes, (1972), p. 28. © Copyright 1972 by Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd.282
- Figure 10.2 Extract from Act II, scene ii of Peter Maxwell Davies' *Two Fiddlers* [Vocal score] London, UK: Boosey & Hawkes (1978), pp. 74-75. © Copyright 1978 by Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd.284
- Figure 10.3 Excerpt from opening chorus (train) with *Cinderella* in Peter Maxwell-Davies' opera, *Cinderella: An opera in two acts for children to play and sing*.

London: J. & W. Chester / Edition Wilhelm Hansen London Ltd. [Full score] (1980) pp. 2-4	286
Figure 10.4 Excerpt of recitative section from Act 1, in Peter Maxwell-Davies' opera, <i>Cinderella: An opera in two acts for children to play and sing</i> . London: J. & W. Chester / Edition Wilhelm Hansen London Ltd. [Full score] (1980) pp. 9-10	287
Figure 10.5 Chorus extract from trio of Three Ugly Sisters from Peter Maxwell-Davies' opera, <i>Cinderella: An opera in two acts for children to play and sing</i> . London: J. & W. Chester / Edition Wilhelm Hansen London Ltd. [Full score] (1980) p. 120.....	288
Figure 10.6 Scene with Pat and Donkey in Peter Maxwell Davies' <i>The Rainbow</i> , London: Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd. [Conductors Score] (1982) p. 42. © Copyright 1982 by Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd.	290
Figure 10.7 Extract from Peter Maxwell Davies' <i>Dinosaur at Large</i> , [Full score], Harlow, UK: Longman Group, (1991) pp. 11-12.....	293
Figure 10.8 Extract from scene i with chorus from Peter Maxwell Davies' <i>The Great Bank Robbery</i> [Full score], Harlow, England: Longman Group, (1990), pp. 7-9.....	294
Figure 10.9 Extract from scene i from Peter Maxwell Davies' <i>Jupiter Landing</i> [Full score] Harlow, England: Longman Group, (1991), pp. 19-20	296
Figure 10.10 Extract from final section of Maxwell Davies' <i>Dangerous Errand</i> [Teachers score], London, UK: Chester Music (1991), p. 48.....	298
Figure 10.11 Extract from final chorus from Maxwell Davies' <i>Spider's Revenge</i> [Full score], London, UK: Chester Music (1995), pp. 97-99	300
Figure 10.12 Extract with Selkies, scene iii, No. 11. Peter Maxwell Davies' <i>A Selkie Tale</i> , [Vocal score], London: Chester Music, (1995), p. 32	301
Figure 10.13 Extract with two children from Act I of Peter Maxwell Davies' <i>Kommilitonen!</i> [Full score], London: UK, Chester Music, (2011), pp. 122-123	303
Figure 10.14 Extract with children's chorus from Act I of Peter Maxwell Davies' <i>Kommilitonen!</i> [Full score], London: UK, Chester Music, (2011), pp. 128-131	304
Figure 10.15 Entry of Magnus in Act I of Peter Maxwell Davies' <i>The Hogboon</i> [Full score], London: Schott, (2015), p. 8. © Schott Music Ltd., London	306
Figure 11.1 Opening aria in Jorge Peña Hen's <i>La Cenicienta</i> [Piano / vocal score] Unpublished, reproduced with permission. p. 1	313
Figure 11.2 Vocal line from final chorus excerpt from Bennett's <i>All the Kings Men: An Opera for Young People</i> . Copyright (c) 1968 by Universal Edition (London) Ltd., pp. 150-153.....	316
Figure 11.3 Final aria sung by the Drummer boy in Bennett's <i>All the Kings Men: An Opera for Young People</i> , London: Universal Edition. (1968), pp. 159-161	318
Figure 11.4 Malcolm Williamson's <i>The Happy Prince: Opera in One Act</i> . [vocal score], London: Josef Weinberger. (1965), pp. 3-4. © Josef Weinberger Limited, London; reproduced by permission of the copyright owner	321

Figure 11.5 Excerpt from The Courts of the Kings section from Malcolm Williamson's <i>The Winter Star</i> , [Vocal score], London, UK: Josef Weinberger, (1973), p. 9. © Josef Weinberger Limited, London; reproduced by permission of the copyright owner	324
Figure 11.6 Excerpt from Chorus of Drogmires and Vamps from act 1 of Karl Jenkins' <i>Eloise: An opera for young people</i> , London: Boosey & Hawkes, [Vocal score], (1997), pp. 26-28. © Copyright 1998 by Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd.	327
Figure 11.7 Finale: 'Spoons', from Karl Jenkins' <i>Eloise: An opera for young people</i> , [Vocal score], London: Boosey & Hawkes, (1997), p. 101. © Copyright 1998 by Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd.	328
Figure 12.1 Extract with Boy and Brian in Nico Muhly's <i>Two Boys</i> [Full score], New York, NY: St. Rose Music Publishing, (2013), pp. 215-216. All Rights Administered by Chester Music Limited. Printed by Permission of Hal Leonard Europe Limited.	336

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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 Mélisande*), 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 Mélisande* 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 Monastery 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 Gregorianum 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 permitted 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.