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“She Wears the Pants: Gender, Misogyny and Feminism in the Opera World”

“She Wears the Pants: Gender, Misogyny and Feminism in the Opera World”

An Annotated Bibliography

Abstract

Historically, opera has been a difficult realm for women to create in. Women (have been subjected to a toxic culture both in the music and on the stage. From the inherently anti-woman concept of castrati and the outright exclusion of women in early opera to the way women are portrayed in productions as hyper-emotional or non-female (literally, as boys), finding a place for women to be comfortable in these roles can be difficult. This environment has changed through the Twentieth Century and continues to change with the rise of the Intersectional Feminist movement. This annotated bibliography will explore these areas and continue the discussion of feminism in the opera world, toxic elements currently existing in the system, and how we can improve the creative environment for women.

Annotated Bibliography

Alessi investigates the origins of female voices used in classical works, specifically the mezzo-soprano voice, how this voice type fits into today’s operatic system, and how a mezzo-soprano may approach singing early music. The mezzo-soprano voice was recognized in the Eighteenth century, but Alessi believes singers can use historical clues and early performance practices to guide their vocal studies. She includes a chart detailing a YouTube search of Purcell’s “When I am Laid in Earth” to exemplify the cross-over between soprano and mezzo-soprano works and to show the reader the ambiguity with women’s voice types in early operatic

works. She also discusses the influence of the major schools (Italian, French, English, German) on mezzo-soprano voices.

Alessi, Patricia. “Dost Thou Know Thy Tongue’s True Tune?: Discovering the Early Opera ‘Mezzo-Soprano’ Voice for Today’s Interpreters.” *Limina: A Journal of Historical and Cultural Studies* 19, no. 2 (2014).

<http://www.limina.arts.uwa.edu.au/volumes/special-2014/alessi>

André begins the essay with an analysis of traditional gender roles in opera, such as the tenor saving the soprano and the baritone being the villain. Her discussion continues with how this narrative was different for people of color (using Verdi’s *Otello* as an example) and how that narrative was influenced by the culture of racism in the Nineteenth century. She leads into the concept of the “corruptible tenor”, exemplified in Twentieth-Century operatic works such as *Peter Grimes* (Britten) and *Wozzeck* (Berg), which is contrasted with a discussion of *Jonny spielt auf* (Krenek) and *Porgy and Bess* (Gershwin) and how the culture of racism had changed in this time period, which is reflected in opera works.

André, Naomi. “From Otello to Porgy: Blackness, Masculinity, and Morality in Opera” in *Blackness in Opera*, ed. Naomi André, Karen Bryan, and Eric Saylor, 11-31. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2012.

DeMarco discusses the “new” voice type of countertenor and its use to revive castrati roles in Handel operas. She believes true countertenors are rare since they sit at the extreme of the male vocal range, though countertenor voices may sit in different ranges. She differentiates between countertenors and male altos and explains historical differences in the two voice types.

DeMarco includes a brief discussion of why certain vocal parts may be sung by countertenors, including mezzo-soprano “pants roles”, and what this means for the future of opera.

DeMarco, Laura. “The Fact of the Castrato and the Myth of the Countertenor.” *The Musical Quarterly* 86, no. 1 (2002): 174-185. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3601006>

Feldman introduces castrati with an overview of the general history of castrati and how their existence fit into history, specifically Napoleon’s rule. She then focuses on castrati in opera, their performance in the royal courts and how this coincides with the decline of the castrato singer. She includes an analysis of musical excerpts and why singers may engage with different versions of the same material. She also includes a brief transcription of material sung by a castrati and reveals how it is different than the original source material.

Feldman, Martha. “Shadow Voices, Castrato, and Non” in *The Castrato: Reflections on Natures and Kinds*, 211-261. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015.

In this chapter, Ford presents a character analysis of Donna Elvira (*Don Giovanni*) and Fiordiligi (*Così fan Tutte*) and how the portrayal of women in these productions is a caricature of feminine characteristics. Ford includes musical content to express this idea, and to emphasize the stereotypically “feminine” aspects of these characters. For example, the inclusion of dissonance and lines started by the singer and finished by the orchestra are seen as stylistically “unladylike”, according to Ford. He also implies that dissonant intervals (sevenths, seconds, etc.) are contributors to the “unfeminine” quality of their character.

Ford, Charles. “The Musical Ridicule of Female Intentions” in *Music, Sexuality, and the Enlightenment in Mozart’s Figaro, Don Giovanni, and Così Fan Tutte*, 127-133.

Surrey, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2012.

Freitas discusses the “castrato problem” which deals with how opera defines “masculinity” and the physical body of castrati. He discusses different interpretations of these topics and how castrati were categorized in their own way in relations to sexuality, gender, and voice. Freitas references the transition from one-sex model (men being seen as better than women) to a binary model (men being completely different than women) and how castrati fit (and don’t fit) into those systems. According to Freitas, castrati were seen as being youthful and powerful, boyish and manly. He believes current standards of masculinity don’t necessarily fit into the previous system, which was more androgynous.

Freitas, Roger. “The Eroticism of Emasculation: Confronting the Baroque Body of the Castrato.” *The Journal of Musicology* 20, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 196-249.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/jm.2003.20.2.196>

Grim discusses stereotypes of male gender in opera and how male characters play into a structure where masculinity is associated with action, and femininity is connected to suffering. He mentions the heroic male qualities of Orpheus, Don Giovanni, and various Wagnerian characters and how sexual identity plays into their actions, thoughts, and music. He also mentions the dissolution of the stereotypical operatic male in operas like *Wozzeck* and *Lulu*, and the contrast of a passive male character with a strong feminine character.

Grim, William. “The Male Heroine in Opera.” *Opera Journal* 30, vol. 3 (September 1997): 2-12. <https://search-proquest-com.du.idm.oclc.org/docview/1159101?accountid=14608>

Hadlock presents the origins of the “pants role” or “trouser role” for mezzo-soprano voices and discusses the gender stereotypes these roles are subjected to. Hadlock reminds the reader of the extra work singers must do when presenting pants roles – the suspension of reality, presenting gender in a different way within the stereotyped opera framework, all while maintaining a “strong” vocal quality. She presents the pants role of Cherubino in *Le Nozze de Figaro* (Mozart), considering he is an important part of the storytelling in *Figaro*. Hadlock alludes to the ideas of queer women and eroticism that pants roles present to an audience, whether intended or not.

Hadlock, Heather. “The Career of Cherubino, or the Trouser Role Grows Up” in *Siren Songs: Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Opera*, ed. Mary Ann Smart, 67-92. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000.

Kotnik presents the idea that an opera is not only a historical and cultural benchmark of the period in which it was written, but also highly adaptable to new (and/or modern) cultural dynamics. He emphasizes the barrier-breaking aspect opera can have and how audiences can find human connection in the material, with the singer-actors, and with other elements. Kotnik emphasizes the creative connections the singers have through their art – namely, connecting with different cultures (the singer’s own cultural identities) via a shared art form (opera). He emphasizes that these connections are what will keep opera relevant in the future.

Kotnik, Vlado. "The Adaptability of Opera: When Different Social Agents Come to Common Ground." *International Review of Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 44, no. 2 (December 2013): 303-342. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23594802>

Kramer begins with a discussion of the movie *Two or Three Things I Know about Her* (1966), a movie about a housewife moonlighting as a prostitute. Kramer connects this story to different operas, some more obvious than others, such as *La Traviata* (Verdi). Kramer highlights the underlying power structure of the film and further connects this narrative to works by Strauss and Wagner. He contrasts this power dynamic to the stereotypical or "traditional" opera framework but reminds the reader that this dynamic changes as time continues. Kramer believes opera becomes a medium for expression of sexuality, eroticism, and empowerment.

Kramer, Lawrence. "Opera: Two or Three Things I Know About Her" in *Opera and Modern Culture: Wagner and Strauss*, 19-41. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2004.

McClary discusses the changes in culture of gender representation and how the culture of gender has changed. She mentions how androgyny is more accessible with modern artists, and how this can be compared to Italian opera of the mid-seventeenth century. She discusses how female characters were empowering, despite being subjected to the culture of "erotic male fantasy". McClary includes how castrati fit into this system and how this compares to vocal qualities of present-day musicians.

McClary, Susan. “Gender Ambiguities and Erotic Excess in the Operas of Cavalli” in *Desire and Pleasure in Seventeenth-Century Music*, 104-125. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2012.

In this dissertation, Philips presents four modern operas (*Regina*, *Trouble in Tahiti*, *The Ballad of Baby Doe* and *The Crucible*), focusing on the mezzo-soprano roles in the operas and comparing these roles to those of previous classical opera works. Philips emphasizes the strength and capability of these women, as well as the unique American element of these characters and operas and how these traits (in combination) are inherently feminist. Philips includes detailed character analyses of each role, notable singers of the role, and comparisons to other operatic mezzo-soprano characters.

Philips, Mackenzie. “Mid-Twentieth Century American Opera and the Rise of the Unconventional Leading Mezzo-Soprano.” DMA diss., University of Kansas, 2018. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.