



Opera

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Opera, an eclectic synthesis of voice, drama, music, costume, visual arts and spectacle, has played an integral role in queer culture since its development in seventeenth-century Venice.

As opera intermingles the sublime and the absurd, and has embraced unabashedly high artifice, unfettered emotion, melodrama and improbable, convoluted plots, it shares many of the qualities that define queer sensibility, through a combination of idealistic romantic identification and camp travesty.

Holding up an allegorical and larger-than-life mirror to the incongruous experience of many gay men and lesbians, opera revels in cross-dressing, illicit romance, intrigue, gender-bending, despair and triumph, passion and death, and the cult of the diva.

The Origins of Opera

Opera, or *dramma per musica*, developed in early seventeenth century Venice, where a combination of Renaissance humanism, anti-clericalism, and, perhaps most important, a large, mixed public audience willing to pay for entertainments that appealed to popular tastes sustained and informed this new genre. Hence, opera could exercise some autonomy from Church censorship and aristocratic patronage, resulting in plots that celebrated the human rather than the divine and that punctured caste hierarchies.

Typically, these operatic plots, replete with intrigue, reversals of fortune, byzantine complication, and masquerade, valorized human passion and created an idealized form of romantic heroism. While many of the plots featured contemporary characters and subjects, most were based on Greco-Roman sources, given a popular, deflationary, or erotic twist. For instance, Pier Francesco Cavalli's *La Callisto* (1651), Giacomo Castoreo's *Pericle Effeminato* (*Effeminate Pericles*, 1653), and Aurelio Aureli's *Alcibiade* (1680) utilized ancient Greco-Roman figures or plots to legitimize representations of male and female homoeroticism, although numerous detractors deemed them "immoral."

Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643), the most renowned composer of early Venetian opera, developed stylistic conventions to express "affections," particularly desire, rage, madness, grief, and despair in both female and male characters alike. The individual, and her overpowering personal emotions and conflicts, was thus culturally valorized through the aesthetic vehicle of musical virtuosity, which could transform madness into sublime or quasi-divine possession.

Such artistically controlled loss of control was featured in operas such as Monteverdi's *La Finta Pazza* (*The Feigned Madness of Licori*, 1627), Francesco Manelli's *La Maga Fulminata* (*The Raging Sorceress*, 1638), Cavalli's *Ercole Amante* (*Hercules in Love*, 1662), and Antonio Vivaldi's *Orlando Furioso* (*Orlando Enraged*, 1713), to cite but a few.



Scenes from two operas that featured roles for women playing men:
Top: *The Marriage of Figaro* (1786) by Amadeus Mozart. Anonymous watercolor.
Above: *Der Rosenkavalier* by Richard Strauss. This painting of a 1912 performance was created by Ernst Edler.

That emotion could overwhelm both female and male characters in this new art form contributed to the gender-bending characteristic of opera in the following centuries.

Gender-Bending and Cross-Dressing

From its beginnings, opera has not merely allowed but also in many instances encouraged cross-gendered casting. Although most operatic gender-bending involves women playing male roles, in the earliest operas male singers also at times performed female roles for various reasons, including legal strictures against women performing in public and the vocal ranges of available performers.

For example, in Monteverdi's best known opera, *La Favola d'Orfeo* (*The Fable of Orpheus*, 1607), the role of Orpheus, the mythological poet and musician, has been sung by either a soprano or tenor. His later opera, *L'incoronazione di Poppea* (*The Coronation of Poppea*, 1643), which narrates the rise of Poppea from Roman courtesan to empress, features numerous roles that have been sung by either male or female performers.

Poppea's lovers, Ottone and Nero, have been sung by female contraltos, male castrati, or male tenors, as has suited the custom or taste of the time. The comic role of her nurse, Arnalta, conversely, has been more frequently performed by a tenor. The one decidedly male voice in this opera, the philosopher Seneca, is condemned to death, to the great rejoicing of the other characters. (Indeed, opera is antithetical to the stoical self-restraint Seneca championed.)

Such artistically self-conscious gender play also informs the works of eighteenth-century opera composers; for example, George Frideric Handel (1685-1759) and Christoph Willibald Gluck (1714-1787).

This period also witnessed the zenith of castrati, male singers who were castrated before puberty to retain their high tessitura (i.e., high vocal range). Possessing voices of fabled power and angelic purity, such legendary castrati as Senesino, Farinelli, and Caffarelli enthralled audiences and were the eighteenth-century equivalent of international superstars.

However paradoxically, castrati usually played heroic and "masculine" roles as generals, gods, and emperors, although their capacity to transcend conventional gender assignment through their vocal prowess associated the most powerful human beings with the androgynous and quasi-divine.

Handel, himself probably gay, remains best-known for his *Messiah* (1741), but he concentrated much of his artistic energies on distinctly profane operas that took gender-bending and cross-dressing to new heights of confusion.

For instance, the lead role of his *Serse* (*Xerxes*, 1738) was originally written for the castrato Caffarelli, while two of the other male characters were played by female mezzo-sopranos. With the eclipse of the castrati, female mezzo-sopranos play the roles originally written for castrati, which means that modern productions of *Serse* and many other Baroque operas have become, for visual and aural purposes, lesbian romantic and political melodramas.

Even before the practice of castrating prepubescent male singers was gradually abolished toward the end of the eighteenth century, composers such as Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) created the so-called "trouser" or *en travesti* roles specifically for female mezzo-sopranos and contraltos, who usually played adolescent males. This new role remained popular from the late eighteenth through the early twentieth century.

Mozart's most notable trouser role, Cherubino in *Le Nozze di Figaro* (*The Marriage of Figaro*, 1786), worships Countess Almaviva but also seduces Barbarina, the gardener's daughter. Mozart thus uses gender play in his comic political assault on aristocratic privilege.

The nineteenth century witnessed an increasing number of female singers in male roles, who either played the kind of heroic "armor roles" once the province of castrati or young romantic heroes.

Gioacchino Antonio Rossini (1792-1868) made spectacular developments in the "armor roles" in works such as *Tancredi* (1813), *La Donna del Lago* (*The Lady of the Lake*, 1819), and *Semiramide* (1823). In the latter, Semiramide, Queen of Babylon, falls in love with the mezzo-soprano Arsace, commander of her army and also, indeed, her long-lost son by Nino, the husband she had conspired to murder. In the meantime, Arsace becomes enamored of the Indian Princess Azema, and seeks vengeance for the murder of "his" father.

While nominally representing heterosexual intrigue, *Semiramide* marks the moment in the history of opera in which elaborate gender-bending devolves into the incoherent, unconsciously camp, or kitsch spectacle of an adulterous and murderous woman falling in love with a girl in armor who is not only her actual son but also in love with another woman and out to avenge "his" father's murder by killing Semiramide's former paramour.

Although Rossini's opera fell out of fashion by the mid-nineteenth century, the use of female singers in the roles of young male lovers continued even into the early twentieth century in many notable operas from Vincenzo Bellini's *I Capuletti ed I Montecchi* (1830) to Richard Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier* (1911), perhaps the first opera to present an explicit love scene performed by two women.

Over the course of the nineteenth-century, opera became increasingly concerned with political themes of nationalism, often resulting in heterosexual romance plots functioning as microcosmic representation of political struggles. This is not to say that there were no homoerotic aspects in nineteenth-century opera; love between two men or two women is a crucial factor in such operas as Bellini's *Norma* (1831), Giuseppe Verdi's *Don Carlo* (1867), Georges Bizet's *Les Pêcheurs de Perles* (1863), and Richard Wagner's *Tannhäuser* (1845) and *Parsifal* (1882).

Twentieth-Century Opera

The twentieth century witnessed three major developments in opera relevant to gay men and lesbians: the representation of openly gay and lesbian operatic characters, the cult of the diva, and camp treatments of traditional operatic plots and themes. Moreover, antibourgeois works such as Strauss's *Salomé* (1905, based on the Wilde play) and *Elektra* (1909) early in the century signaled a new openness in dealing with sex and sexuality.

Also of significance, gay modernist composers such as Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) and Virgil Thomson (1896-1989) typically abandoned traditional heterosexual plots in favor of modes that explore the psychological, metaphysical, and social parameters of individuality and community, often emphasizing themes that are at least implicitly relevant to the gay and lesbian experience.

For example, Ravel's *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges* (*The Child and the Enchantments*, 1925), with libretto by Colette and set in a magical child's world in which injured animals and objects become speaking subjects, considers the relationships among mother identification, destructiveness, creativity, and ethical responsibility. Thomson collaborated with Gertrude Stein to produce two highly original works, *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1934) and *The Mother of Us All* (1947), the latter presenting the struggles of the feminist movement in America.

Implicitly gay and lesbian concerns also surface in the work of Francis Poulenc. In his compelling *Dialogues des Carmélites* (1957), Poulenc returns to the scene of the French Revolution to explore how a community of women, the Carmelite nuns of Compiègne, respond to their scapegoating and martyrdom at the hands of the all-male revolutionary authorities.

Gay and Lesbian Characters in Opera

Alban Berg's *Lulu* (1937) presents the first self-identified queer character in opera, the Countess Martha Geschwitz. Lulu, an attractive if amoral femme fatale, has many suitors, but only the noble and self-sacrificial Geschwitz seems genuinely to love her, and emerges as the only admirable character in an otherwise selfish and brutal social realm.

Gay composer Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) wrote three operas that, like *Lulu*, deal with social exclusion, scapegoating, and death to characters who are or who are perceived to be gay.

Peter Grimes (1945) concerns a misanthropic fisherman suspected of murder and pederasty, and *Billy Budd* (1951)--with libretto by E. M. Forster and Eric Crozier after Herman Melville's novella--presents a beautiful sailor sacrificed, in Christ-like fashion, because his evil superior Claggert cannot tolerate his romantic and sexual longings for Billy. *Death in Venice* (1973), based on Thomas Mann's novella, sustains Britten's interest in the relationships among youth, gay desire, and death, as the dying writer Aschenbach becomes hopelessly infatuated with the beautiful if ever inaccessible Venetian adolescent Tadzio.

In contrast to such modernist queer tragedies, Leonard Bernstein's *Quiet Place* (1983) makes a bisexual male character the symbol of social mediation and conflict resolution, while Libby Larsen's and Bonnie Grice's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1993), based on Virginia Woolf's novel of repressed homoerotic desire, reinvokes queer modernist concerns.

In his recent *Harvey Milk* (1995), Stewart Wallace pays tribute to a heroic pioneer who, in 1977, became the first openly gay man to win elected office in the United States and, in the following year, was assassinated, along with San Francisco Mayor Moscone, by Dan White, a former police officer and city supervisor. White, in his infamous "Twinkie defense," claimed that junk food had undermined his reason, and his seven-year sentence was widely perceived as reflecting societal homophobia. Wallace's opera is perhaps the first operatic representation of a historical gay tragic hero.

The increasing visibility of gay and lesbian artists and audiences in opera in recent years has also affected the world of opera. Not only have earlier Baroque works been revived, but productions of mainstream operas have explored the homoerotic possibilities of familiar and ostensibly heterosexual plots. Newer compositions, such as John Corigliano's *The Ghosts of Versailles* (1991) combine the pleasures of camp masquerade with serious considerations of issues of personal liberty, sexuality, scapegoating, and misogyny.

Diva Worship and Camp Opera

While queers, like opera fans in general, have probably worshipped the larger-than-life figure of the diva since opera's emergence as a popular art form, in the twentieth-century gay and lesbian identification with or adulation of such figures became both documented and an explicit feature of queer culture.

For various reasons, early twentieth-century lesbian opera fans adulated Emma Calve, Mary Garden, Olive Fremstad, Geraldine Farrar, and Kathleen Ferrier.

Lesbian novelist Willa Cather saw in Fremstad, the renowned Wagnerian soprano who had also dared to play the title role in the American premiere of Richard Strauss's *Salomé*, the embodiment of the serious woman artist "married" to her art and to artistic perfection. Mary Garden, who became the "directa" of the Chicago Lyric Opera, specialized in *en travesti* roles, and, for decades, exerted considerable power in the operatic world.

Gay male culture produces the "opera queen," a fan notable for his fetishistic, indeed perhaps obsessive knowledge of opera plots, productions, and recordings, along with an equally extensive lore of gossip and speculation about the scandals, rivalries, romances, breakdowns, and triumphs in divas' personal lives.

Onstage and off-stage converge in this extravagant figuration of the diva, who is perceived by her devotees as a quasi-divine mediatrix, both redeemed and imperiled by the extremities of her existence. Maria Callas (1923-1977), the Greek-American dramatic coloratura soprano, became the focus of this worship, and, to a great extent, remains so, even more than a quarter century after her death.

The extraordinary artistic virtuosity required to sing opera, on the one hand, coupled with the high artifice, emotional extravagance, and melodrama of this art form on the other, makes opera an art form that veers between aesthetic sublimity and camp absurdity. For modern audiences, the ornate plots and elaborate gender-bendings of Baroque opera, for example, can provide as much camp pleasure as parodic treatments of nineteenth-century "serious" opera.

The all-gay male La Gran Scena opera company, founded in 1981 by artistic director Ira Siff, presents hilarious camp renditions of famous operas but also, in keeping with opera's profound commitment to the beauties of the rigorously trained human voice, insists on quality singing. Siff, as a member of the company, has adopted the camp stage name Vera Galup-Borszkh, and other members bear names such as Fodor Szedan and Kavatina Turner. Also known to his audiences as the "traumatic soprano" or "La Dementia," Siff has poked affectionate fun at the long-suffering heroines of many nineteenth-century operas through his aria, "La suicidio."

Although La Gran Scena recently disbanded because, according to Siff, contemporary opera divas no longer display the kind of extravagant excess that enables camp appropriation, queers' long involvement with this art form promises to continue and to take new directions in the ongoing revival of Baroque operas and the creation of new operas on specifically gay and lesbian plots and characters.

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