

OBERTO Conference 2012

‘Operatic Masculinities’



Oxford Brookes University, Tuesday 11 September 2012

OXFORD
BROOKES
UNIVERSITY

RMA
ROYAL MUSICAL ASSOCIATION

CONFERENCE PROGRAMME

9.30-9.45am Introduction and Welcome

9.45-11.15am Session 1: Non-Heroic Masculinities (Chair: Peter Franklin)

Corrina Connor (Birkbeck College): “Hier Gibt es einen Spass!” – Who or What is Prince Orlofsky?’

Christian Thomas Leitmeir (Bangor University): ‘The Birth of Negative Andrology? New Perspectives on Masculine Otherness in German Opera before Wagner’

Freya Jarman (University of Liverpool): ‘Pitch Fever: The Castrato, the Soprano, and the Question of Masculinity in the Operatic Star System’

11.15-11.45am Coffee

11.45-1.15 Session 2: Queer Masculinities (Chair: J. P. E. Harper-Scott)

Daniel Somerville (University of Wolverhampton): ‘Resistive Masculinity: Masculine Operatic-ness in a Queerly Gendered Art-Form’

Katherine Williams (Leeds College of Music): ‘Mainstreaming the Marginal: Opera and the Operatic in the Music of Rufus Wainwright’

Jun Zubillaga-Pow (King’s College London): ‘Transvestism as Transference: Musical Demasculinisation in 17th-Century Venetian Opera’

1.15-2.15pm Lunch

2.15-3pm Session 3: Tippett’s Masculinities (Chair: Christopher Chowrimootoo)

Jessica Collins (RHUL); Kenneth Gloag (Cardiff University); Michael Graham (RHUL)

3-4.30pm Session 4: 20th-Century Masculinities (Chair: Nanette Nielsen)

Marc Brooks (KCL): 'Re-hearing Heroic Masculinity in Zemlinsky's *Der König Kandaules*'

Hugo Shirley (*Opera*): 'Vater bist du's? – Constructions of Patriarchal Absence in the Strauss-Hoffmannsthal Operas'

Nathan Seinen (Clare College, Cambridge): 'A Lover not a Fighter: The Soviet War Hero in Prokofiev's *The Story of a Real Man*'

4.30-5.30pm Group Discussion (Chair: Barbara Eichner) and Refreshments

5.45-6.30pm Lecture Recital: Mozart's Men

Benjamin Hulett (tenor), Gulliver Ralston (piano)

'Dies Bildnis ist bezaubernd schön' Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)
Die Zauberflöte K 620 (Vienna 1791)

'Welch fremde Stimme hörte ich' Benedikt Schack (1758-1826)
Der Stein der Weisen oder die Zauberinsel (Vienna 1790)

'Un aura amorosa' Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
Così fan tutte K588 (Vienna 1790)

'Pupille amorose' Stephen Storace (1762-1796)
Gli equivoci (Vienna 1786)

'Vedrommi intorno' Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
Idomeneo K366 (Munich 1781)

'Nell' odio costante' Johann Christian Bach (1735-1786)
Lucio Silla (Mannheim 1775)

Drinks Reception

ABSTRACTS

Mark Brooks (King's College London)

Re-hearing Heroic Masculinity in Zemlinsky's *Der König Kandaules*

The plot of Zemlinsky's *Der König Kandaules* (1934-5/1996) outwardly conforms to the archetypical fairy tale, in which heroic male aggression is rewarded with the kingdom and the beautiful princess. However in the original play *Le roi Candaule* (1901), André Gide inverted the traditional roles so that Gyges, who murders and sexually performs his way to power, becomes the villain and the King, who wants to share his wealth and happiness, its tragic hero.

Sherry Lee has recently shown how marginal female subjectivity acts as a mirror for male narcissism in Zemlinsky's earlier opera *Eine florentinische Tragödie* (1917); and Robert Fagley, how the protagonist in Gide's *The Immoralist* (1902) reinvents a new masculinity in opposition to entrenched gender identities. Building on their work, this paper looks at the parallels between Gide's homosexuality in *fin-de-siècle* Paris and Zemlinsky's Jewishness in 1930s Austria, asking what *Der König Kandaules* meant in its new context. Turning to the music, it first asks how the aesthetic debates in the libretto relate to Zemlinsky's 'integrative' technique, which eschewed stylistic purity by layering different musical styles upon one another. Then, how the opera negotiates the aggression-sensitivity dichotomy exhibited in the two types of masculinity staged. And finally, how – or even if – it avoids glamourizing the sexual prowess of its hero-cum-villain in the nude scene that forced the exiled Zemlinsky to abandon work on the opera. One conclusion is that straight men too have a stake in contesting the self-annihilative equation of virility and violence and establishing a plurality of male identities

Jessica Collins (Royal Holloway), Kenneth Gloag (Cardiff University), Michael Graham (Royal Holloway)

Tippett's Masculinities

Michael Tippett's personal identity as a gay man is now well known, and the composer professedly used opera as a vehicle to explore his personal interests in psychology, gender, and sexuality. Human relationships and the musical and dramatic representation of male and female are integral features of Tippett's operas. Remarkably, however, scholarly engagement with matters relating to

gender and sexuality in Tippett's stage works has been scarce. This session will therefore offer a discussion of operatic masculinity in Tippett's first three operas: *The Midsummer Marriage* (1955), *King Priam* (1962), and *The Knot Garden* (1970).

The opening paper will focus on King Fisher from *The Midsummer Marriage*. King Fisher is the central source of political and patriarchal power in the opera. Ultimately, however, he embodies a caricatured and doomed version of masculinity. His anachronism is suggested by his being based on T. S. Eliot's reinvention of the impotent, wounded fisher king of grail legend in *The Waste Land*. The second paper will explore affirmations and subversions of traditional masculinity and femininity in *King Priam*. This opera is broadly based on Homer's *Iliad*, and draws heavily on the traditions of fifth-century Athenian tragic drama with respect to myriad aspects of its construction, such as its representation of gender and the relationship between the biologically male and female. The final paper will offer sketches of several male characters from *The Knot Garden*, an opera based on Shakespeare's *The Tempest* which focuses on the attempts of several modern-day individuals to achieve individuation. Particular attention will be paid to the androgynous figure of Dov, a character with whom Tippett expressed an autobiographical affinity.

Corrinna Connor (Birkbeck College)

'Hier gibt es einen Spass!' – Who or what is Prince Orlofsky?

The enigmatic Russian aristocrat who presides over a chaotic gathering of Vienna's bourgeoisie in Johann Strauss's *Die Fledermaus* is an ideal subject for an investigation of operatic masculinities. Previous discussions of the role of Orlofsky focus on such areas as national difference (Camille Crittenden), and diva-worship (Terry Castle), but leave unexplored many more of the more thought-provoking aspects of the Prince's character, the interpretation of the role, and its casting. Another preoccupation is with the empowerment, or otherwise, of a woman singing a 'male' role: Prince Orlofsky is often examined in the context of other 'travesti' roles such as Cherubino or Octavian, particularly as some singers make a speciality of performing these three parts. However, analysis of the origins and evolution of Orlofsky make it clear that there are more differences between Prince Orlofsky and other 'travesti' roles than there are similarities – not least of these differences is that the part can also be sung by a tenor – and counter-tenors are making more frequent incursions into the mezzo-soprano's domain. My paper considers the factors that contribute to the masculinity of Prince Orlofsky, and how this masculinity is constructed by female and male singers. To explore these questions I examine

how different voice-types in the role can satisfy, or confound the expectations of the audience, and how history, and changing stereotypes of nationality, gender, and power contribute to the analysis and understanding of this character.

Freya Jarman (University of Liverpool)

Pitch Fever: the Castrato, the Soprano, and the Question of Masculinity in the Operatic Star System

The last castrato, Allesandro Moreschi, died in the year before Maria Callas, the ‘diva of divas’, was born. Although not an opera singer himself, Moreschi’s death represents the end of a tradition that had once been central to the operatic star system; Callas’s continued fame exemplifies the increased importance of the soprano in the post-castrato star system. One important figure sidelined in such a narrative is the tenor. Much can be said on the connections between the declining trend for castrati and the attendant rise of *travesti* parts around the long turn of the nineteenth century (see André 2006); rather less has been written on the castrato-tenor connection during the same decades (Potter 2006 notwithstanding). This paper’s central concern is the place of the tenor in the operatic star-system, and how that place is framed by the castrato-soprano connection. The move from the former to the latter as the stereotypical star of the opera house was made along not biological lines – from castrato to tenor – but along pitched ones, from castrato to soprano. While Barry Emslie (1991) puts this down to the “supposed greater colour, agility and expressive potential” of the soprano’s voice, this paper argues that the shift can be understood in cultural-political and music-cultural terms, as it occurs at the intersection of a nineteenth-century concern with the crystallisation of gender norms (see Laqueur 1992) and the position occupied by opera as a place where success is founded on excess of persona, of drama, and of voice.

Christian Thomas Leitmeir (Prifysgol Bangor University)

The Birth of Negative Andrology? New Perspectives on Masculine Otherness in German Opera before Wagner

Catherine Clément’s provocative thesis of the ‘undoing of women’ (1979), while earning some criticism, rings essentially true for Romantic opera: Especially in Richard Wagner’s works, the heroine finds her destiny in death – either as a (self) sacrifice, often for the salvation of an otherwise irredeemable

male character (Elisabeth, Senta, Isolde) or as punishment for the failure to comply with unattainable (masculine) norms (Elsa, Kundry). Recently the dominant feminist perspective was challenged in an equally spirited essay by Christoph Kucklick, which identifies men as the real victims of the Romantic construction of gender polarities (*Das unmoralische Geschlecht. Zur Geburt der negativen Andrologie*, 2008). While Kucklick is concerned with the analysis of philosophical and aesthetic discourse, his ideas resonate with a corpus of German Romantic operas before Wagner that are significantly different from the Cleméntian-Wagnerian paradigm of redemptive femininity.

A (previously unrecognised) alternative is found especially in the works by Heinrich Marschner. His opera *Der Vampyr* (1827) centres on the fate of serial killer Lord Ruthven, who gets under the spell of evil forces to irredeemable extent. In *Hans Heiling* (1833), the eponymous ruler of earth spirits renounces his supernatural powers to find salvation through love, which the human girl Anna is unable to give. In both operas, the outsider is either doomed to hell (Lord Ruthven) or resignation (Heiling), after being rejected (even betrayed) by the lead female character. When male heroes betray a supernatural bride in favour of a human companion, however, as in the *Undine* operas by Hoffmann (1816) and Lortzing (1845), they join their beloved in the spirit world, but only through a gender reversal of the Wagnerian love-death.

Nathan Seinen (Clare College, Cambridge)

A Lover not a Fighter: the Soviet War Hero in Prokofiev's *The Story of a Real Man*'

Three of Prokofiev's four 'Soviet' operas are set during major Russian wars – the War of 1812 (*War and Peace*), the Civil War (*Semyon Kotko*), and the Second World War (*The Story of a Real Man*). All three are centred around male characters, of the kind that were expected in Soviet opera to serve as archetypal exemplars of heroic masculinity – singing versions of the central icons of socialist realism that artists in all fields were called on to represent in order to inspire the masses. All three operas failed in this representation, not only because Prokofiev's classical inclination caused him to eschew the grandiloquence favoured by Stalinist authorities for the purposes of propaganda – the manner of Verdi or Wagner refurbished for a mass audience – but equally because his conception of an individual bourgeois subject was at odds with the *Übermensch* of Stalinist ideology. The two earlier operas were rejected by officials primarily on the basis of their deficient male roles, and expectations were even higher for *Real Man* (1947-48) since it concentrated on a Soviet hero

rather than on his historical precursors in tsarist and revolutionary Russia. Boris Polevoy's novel (1946) is the story of an airman who loses his lower legs in battle yet overcomes seemingly impossible physical and psychological obstacles to fly and fight again. This paper contrasts the contemporary transpositions of this narrative in Prokofiev's opera and in Aleksandr Stolper's 1948 film. Prokofiev's male characters were introspective lovers, not the superhuman warriors of the Stalinist stage and screen.

Hugo Shirley (*Opera*)

'Vater bist du's?' – Constructions of Patriarchal Absence in the Strauss-Hofmannsthal Operas

The operas of Richard Strauss and Hugo von Hofmannsthal are often admired for their beautifully drawn female characters. As such, these works have earned their creators a reputation for remarkable cross-gender empathy, even if many of these heroines are left, when not 'undone', then at least safely confined to (and constrained in) a stable relationship. Many of these 'happy endings' are contingent on paternal consent, and sometimes the father is indeed there to oblige – Faninal to give Sophie away *Der Rosenkavalier*, for example, and Waldner his daughter in *Arabella*. On other occasions, however, most notably in *Elektra* (1909) and *Die Frau ohne Schatten* (1917), the father figure is almost deafeningly absent: in both cases his very absence serves to intensify his influence. Strauss's scores make this clear: motifs traditionally assigned – usually in language that resonates with tropes of patriarchal authority and strength – to Agamemnon and the mysterious Spirit King Keikobad open each work. This paper sets out, on the one hand, to expand on Carolyn Abbate's re-reading of the 'Agamemnon' motif as 'Elektra's voice', and, on the other, to position these constructions of absent patriarchy within contemporary psychoanalytic theory. It concludes by asking what such a phenomenon can tell us about Strauss, Hofmannsthal and their time.

Daniel Somerville (University of Wolverhampton)

Resistive Masculinity: Masculine Operatic-ness in a Queerly Gendered Art-Form

This paper will queerly theorize the term 'operatic' and present an argument that views opera as an art-form that, through a brief survey of operatic conventions, phenomenon and subject matter, is not merely a form containing queer content but which 'becomes' essentially, always and already queer.

Wayne Koestenbaum's contribution to reception of opera by opera queens and Susan Sontag's *Notes on Camp* will further strengthen this position, while Judith Butler's theory of performatively constructed gender leads us to a position where opera begins to operate according to the dynamics of Gender Performativity. In an attempt to gender the art-form, following Friedrich Nietzsche and Catherine Clément, opera appears to resist an essential gender. If opera can be considered to 'be' its own gender, a queerly constructed 'third zone' described by Naomi André in reference to *castrati* and *travesti*, then attempts at imposing masculinity in performance become resistive. In a new paradigm where opera is queer and exists as a dominant culture, expressions of masculinity are performed as a queering of the queer. Masculinity in performance is here identified through its gestural parody of masculinity, regardless of the gender of the performer, and through what will be argued as non-embodiment of music.

Katherine Williams (Leeds College of Music)

Mainstreaming the Marginal: Opera and the Operatic in the Music of Rufus Wainwright

Famed for his live shows and musically complex albums, Canadian-American singer-songwriter Rufus Wainwright has brought together the worlds of opera and popular music – arguably marginal and mainstream influences on popular culture respectively – since the beginning of his performing and recording career in the late 1990s. Wainwright has been openly homosexual since his early teens, and sings many autobiographical songs from the gay perspective. However, he manipulates constructions of gender further by singing in the first person from a female perspective, and by employing female vocal styles such as the 'Maria Callas moment' (Lake, 2009) in 'Vibrate'.

In this paper, I explore Wainwright's adoption of operatic devices in order to appropriate definitions of masculinity from outside the popular music sphere. In contrast to performed masculinities in pop over the last half century—from macho characterizations in 1950s rock and roll, through 'good boy' representations in 1960s rock, to androgyny in 1980s disco, I argue that by using *musical* (rather than bodily) allusions to opera, Wainwright constructs a fluid and shifting masculinity.

Through consideration of the musical (his use of operatic forms, allusions, quotations, and European languages in his pop songs), and the extramusical (his career decisions to perform in art music venues in Europe and America, and to compose and stage his own French opera in 2009), I suggest that Wainwright

has manipulated his masculinity to take pop music to the margins and bring opera to the mainstream.

Jun Zubillaga-Pow (King's College London)

Transvestism as Transference: Musical Demasculinisation in 17th-Century Venetian Opera

Cross-dressing and gender ambiguities appear throughout seventeenth-century Venetian opera and its predecessor, sixteenth-century Elizabethan theatre. Given the increasing interest in gender and queer theory, it is not coincidental that the role of gender and sexuality in early modern society has been examined and grounded in the current postmodernist scholarship.

For Kristina Straub, the sexist perception of the theatre and opera patrons requires a didactic enlightenment to ‘unpack the dominant constructions of the commodified feminine spectacle as unambiguously oppositional and other to the spectatorial, consuming male gaze’ (1991). However, Susan McClary was quick to refute that ‘the role of “male” demanded many kinds of social performance; masculinity was not reducible to the body as such’ (2000). The objectified male/masculine and female/feminine duality should not be reduced solely to the erotic desire of the audience’s sexual gaze.

By liberally envisaging multiple readings of sexuality, musicology, in this case of seventeenth-century Venetian opera, has not only allowed one of nature’s pathologies to surface, but also freed both theatrical and societal transvestism from its past conservative objectivity. In this paper, I will exemplify my case by analysing the role of operatic cross-dressing with the aid of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. Via the trope of a ‘phallic tuck’ as symbolic to the music, this thesis attempts to construct a case of demasculinised tendencies through a unique characterisation of sexual physiology and psychology in a scene from Monteverdi’s 1643 opera, *L’incoronazione di Poppea*.