

Boston Lyric Opera Stretches The Gender-Bending Roles In 'The Marriage Of Figaro'

April 27, 2017 By [Keith Powers](#) 



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“An idealized version of puberty.” You would never expect to hear anyone utter those words, and you have to wonder if the inherently embarrassing junior high period could ever be “ideal.”

However, Laurence Senelick, Fletcher Professor of Drama and Oratory at Tufts University, is actually talking about breeches. And how a woman wearing breeches could actually replicate “an idealized version of puberty.”

Women dressing like men is nothing new in society, but in opera it has a name. Or several names: Breeches roles. Trouser roles. Pants roles.

No matter what the name, women singing as men has a storied place on the operatic stage. One of the most famous breeches roles is that of Cherubino, the randy page in Mozart’s opera “The Marriage of Figaro.”

Being [staged by the Boston Lyric Opera](#) in the John Hancock Hall from Friday, April 28 to Sunday, May 7, “Figaro” involves romantic intrigue, false identities, feckless noblemen getting a comeuppance and Cherubino trying to bed nearly every female in the cast.

The fact that the male page Cherubino is actually a woman, played in this production by mezzo Emily Fons, who also gets cross-dressed -- or is it cross-cross-dressed? — back into a woman during the course of the story, multiplies the comic possibilities.

Breeches roles have a colorful and changing history. Women were only allowed on the dramatic stage in the 1600s, and they had to be hidden in male clothes. By the time Mozart wrote operas, women in breeches were actually inheriting the castrati tradition — when young men with beautiful, high voices were -- well, you

know -- in order to preserve their vocal range.

Even though that practice thankfully ended, the prominence of the high voice in opera never did.

In “Figaro,” the cross-dressing serves an operatic purpose, but also helps bring Cherubino’s persona to life.



Laurence Senelick, Fletcher Professor of Drama and Oratory at Tufts University. (Courtesy Liza Voll Photography)

“Cherubino as a boy would come across as a clodpole,” Senelick says. “He is on the cusp of becoming a mature human being, but he feels the stirrings of love. The most delicate way of showing that is to have a woman in the role.”

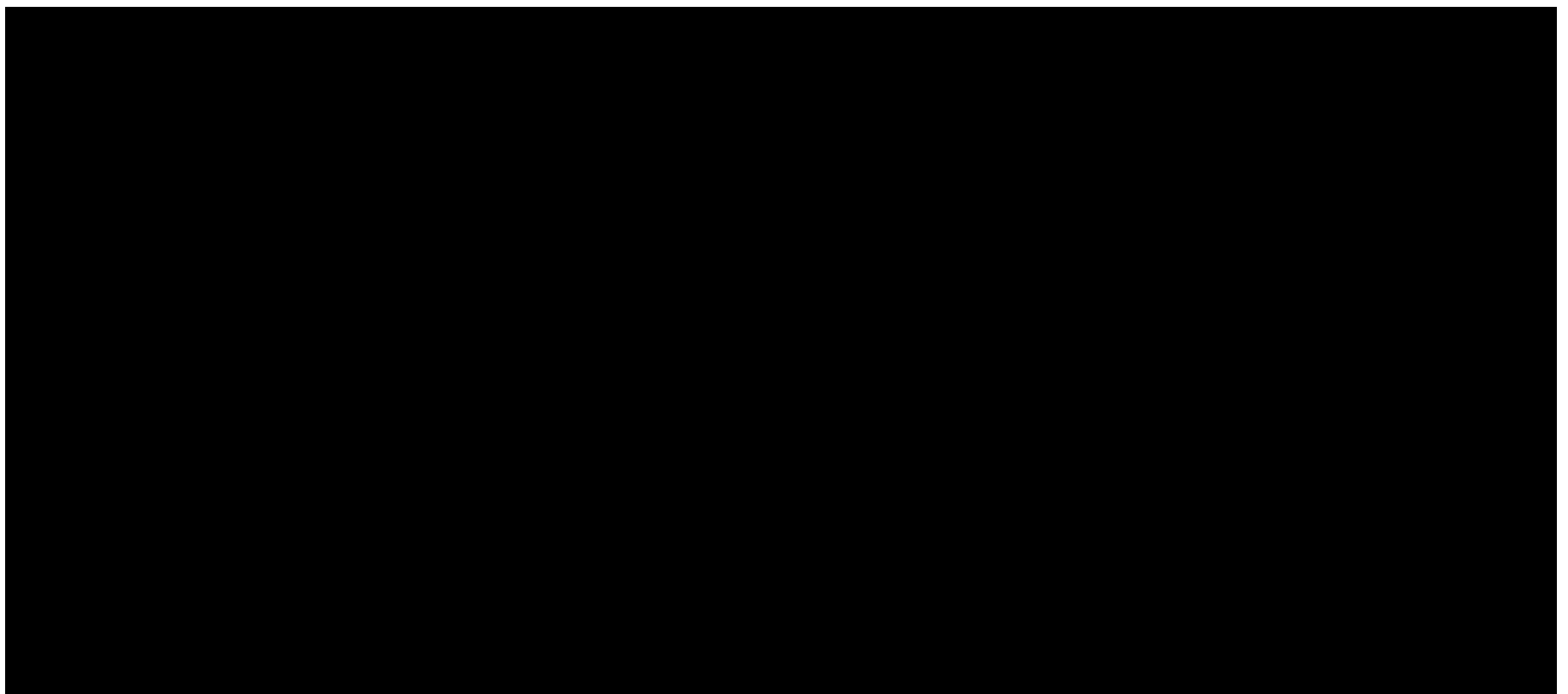
Mozart's librettist, Lorenzo Da Ponte, took inspiration directly from Beaumarchais' trilogy of plays about Figaro (others did too). "Beaumarchais insisted that Cherubino be played by a woman," Senelick says, "and Mozart and Da Ponte would have known that."

"It's very much an attempt to create something androgynous," he says. "Besides that, Cherubino is a page; he's a subaltern, at the mercy of everyone in the play, and therefore a figure of vulnerability. That is helped by having him played by a woman."

Fons, who as a mezzo attracts her share of breeches roles — "most of the time, actually," she says — doesn't really change the way she sings when dressed as a man.

"In general it's the same principal — staying to true what I think is good, healthy singing," she says. "Perhaps the recitative might be different. And some vocal choices are specific to the character, not necessarily whether it's a trouser role or not."

Here's Frederica von Stade singing Cherubino's "Voi che Sapete," the character's best known aria, in 1973:



“As an actor onstage, it’s less about trying to become a man, and more about trying to find a physical neutral. That’s how I approach every trouser role: You find what is neutral, and that dictates the character. And then you let the text and the mood dictate the physical choices.”

The sets and costuming for this production of “Figaro” are loosely inspired by the 1954 Billy Wilder comedy “Sabrina,” with Audrey Hepburn, Humphrey Bogart and William Holden. Placing “Figaro” in modern times complicates the idea of breeches roles — if women are already wearing “breeches,” how does wearing them make them look like men? — but for Fons this approach is more about atmosphere.

“It’s a lighthearted interpretation,” she says of the production, which was crafted by director Rosetta Cucchi and BLO artistic adviser John Conklin, with costumes by Gail Astrid Buckley. “It’s really a playful way of looking at the opera, telling the story in a new way. This type of production tells an audience to keep an open mind.”

Fons doubts there is any part of her own coming-of-age that reaches the character of Cherubino.

“One thing I’ve clearly never experienced is being a man going through sexual awakening,” she says, stating the obvious. “But I certainly have the outside perspective of begin a woman witnessing men going through it.”

The Boston Lyric Opera’s production of [“The Marriage of Figaro”](#) runs April 28 through May 7 at John Hancock Hall in Boston.

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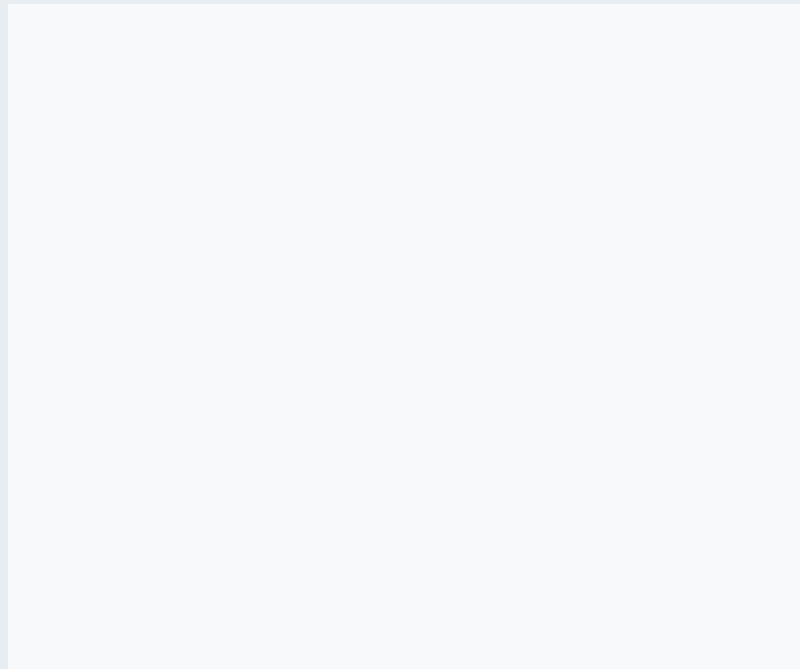
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