

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: A COLLABORATIVE PIANIST'S SURVEY OF
MEZZO-SOPRANO TROUSER ROLES IN
OPERA

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Collaborative Piano

This dissertation consists of a recording accompanied by extensive program notes centered on ten iconic mezzo-soprano trouser role arias in opera, spanning from the Baroque to the early 20th century. The focus is on exploring the vocal, musical, and dramatic aspects of each aria, emphasizing both the technical demands and interpretive nuances required of singers and collaborative pianists alike. Each chapter delves into a specific aria, offering insights into the stylistic conventions of its time, the role's dramatic context, and its vocal characteristics. Through detailed analysis, the collaborative pianist's role is examined, offering practical guidance for preparing the orchestra reductions. Additionally, a spotlight is concentrated on the mezzo-soprano's versatile voice and the unique challenges presented in portraying male characters in opera, including how each composer utilizes the mezzo-soprano to enhance narrative and emotional depth.

The ten mezzo-soprano arias and duets which comprise this dissertation range from Handel and Mozart to Meyerbeer, Gounod, Humperdinck, Massenet, and concluding with Strauss. The recordings were made in Santa Fe, NM, during July and August 2024, and in Salt Lake City, UT,

in January 2025. Featured performers include mezzo-sopranos Ashlyn Brown, Kaylee Nichols, Shannon Keegan, and Sarah Coit, as well as sopranos Elisa Sunshine and Maureen McKay. The dissertation recording can be found in the Digital Repository at the University of Maryland (DRUM).

A COLLABORATIVE PIANIST'S SURVEY OF MEZZO-SOPRANO TROUSER
ROLES IN OPERA

by

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Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Musical Arts
2025

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Acknowledgements

I am extremely grateful to my dissertation committee members for their guidance. A special thank you to Prof. Rita Sloan, my teacher, for her unwavering encouragement, patience, and support. Each lesson with her was a joy, and source of inspiration.

Moreover, I extend my heartfelt appreciation to Maestro Craig Kier and Professor Justina Lee for their valuable guidance in the field of opera. Their expertise and dedication helped me tremendously.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

The following program notes accompany the recording created for this dissertation project; they examine the ten mezzo-soprano arias and duets which were recorded. The selected works were drawn from operas spanning the Baroque to early twentieth century periods, focusing on style, interpretation, and collaboration between singer and pianist (who is also often serving as a vocal coach). Each aria is introduced through its compositional language and dramatic function, followed by interpretive considerations for both voice and piano.

The selected repertoire includes two arias from Handel's *Rinaldo* that exemplify Baroque da capo structure and style; Mozart's "Deh, per questo istante solo" from *La clemenza di Tito*, a Classical rondo full of psychological nuance; and Meyerbeer's "Noble seigneurs, salut!" from *Les Huguenots*, a display of French grand opera elegance. Gounod's "Faites-lui mes aveux" from *Faust* blends Romantic lyricism, while Humperdinck's *Hänsel und Gretel* offers the Sandman's aria and "Abendsegen" duet, evoking magical instrumental writing within a fairytale world. Massenet's "Cœur sans amour" from *Cendrillon* provides French *fin-de-siècle* introspection; the Strauss duet and "Sein wir wieder gut" from *Ariadne auf Naxos* highlight emotional volatility and dramatic richness. Each piece presents unique challenges and opportunities for both performer and coach, reflecting the mezzo-soprano's capacity for dramatic versatility and expressive depth.

1.1 Goffredo's arias from *Rinaldo* by Handel

(due to copyright restrictions, these arias are not in the recording project)

George Frideric Handel's *Rinaldo* (1711) reflects early 18th-century opera seria tradition, where emotional expression, vocal virtuosity, and clear formal structures come together. Opera seria, the dominant style of the period, focused on historical, mythological, or biblical subjects, presenting noble characters in heightened emotional or moral conflicts. The structure moved between recitative sections that advanced the plot and *da capo* arias that explored individual emotions, often pausing the action to allow the singer to magnify a single passion through vocal display.

Arias in *Rinaldo* typically follow the ABA' *da capo* form. The return of the A section was never intended as a mechanical repeat; instead, it invited the singer to ornament and expand the material, revealing deeper emotional layers. Ornamentation was central to Baroque performance practice, it is not just technical display, but a deepening of expression. In this style, the music often creates a general emotional atmosphere rather than illustrating the text line-by-line. Vocal display, such as agility, dynamic shading, improvisatory phrasing, becomes an essential part of the character's psychological journey.

At the time of *Rinaldo*'s premiere, castrati singers dominated the opera world. Nicolò Grimaldi (Nicolini), the star castrato for whom the role of Rinaldo was written, exemplified the ideal: a voice with the brilliance and range of a soprano or mezzo, combined with the breath

support and physical power of an adult man. As Martha Feldman notes, castrati were “figures of wonder,” blending masculine strength with feminine vocal expressivity.¹

Although *Rinaldo* was composed during the height of the castrati era, and society was more impressed with the castrati enacting the female roles rather than with females portraying their own sex,² the role of Goffredo was actually sung by a woman at the 1711 London premiere. Elisabetta Pilotti-Schiavonetti, a soprano known for her powerful and flexible voice, created the role, continuing the early 18th-century practice of occasionally assigning heroic male characters to female singers when needed. However, the musical style Handel used for Goffredo still reflects the influence of the castrati tradition. In later revivals of *Rinaldo*, Goffredo was sometimes reassigned to male castrati such as Giacomo Boschi. Whether sung by a female or a male castrato, the role demands the combination of vocal agility, lyrical beauty, and emotional expressiveness that remain hallmarks of Handel’s opera seria. Since the vocal line sits relatively low, modern productions often cast Goffredo as a countertenor or contralto, preserving both the vocal richness and heroic presence of the character and composer’s original intent.

Set in Act II, “Mio cor, che mi sai dir?” follows the shocking abduction of Goffredo’s daughter Almirena by the sorceress Armida. Goffredo is distraught, but eager to act. As general of the Christian army, he must contain his emotions and continue the fight. Torn between grief and resolve, he sings to his own heart, searching for clarity amid turmoil. His despair is profound, but so is his determination to act. Here, we see Handel demonstrating his extraordinary sensitivity to character through music. The aria is set in G minor, marked *Allegro*, and features a restless

¹ Martha Feldman, *The Castrato: Reflections on Natures and Kinds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 10.

² Angus Heriot, *The Castrati in Opera* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1975), 26.

continuo line in constant motion. Rapid sixteenth-note scales are picked up by the violins in an evocative dialogue that gives the entire orchestral texture a sense of agitation and drive. In performance, the *da capo* return invites the expected ornamentation where one could be truly virtuoso, playing with timing in the question “che mi sai dir?” to emphasis the torment, and create flexibility with the rhythm to express both anguish and determination.

From Act III, “Sorge nel petto”, set in D major, is serene, calm, and pastoral. The classical eight-bar phrase signify a balanced and peaceful musical passage. The aria occurs after Goffredo has endured the turmoil of Almirena’s abduction and the uncertainties of the campaign; he is finally able to grant Almirena’s hand to Rinaldo. The orchestration is minimal, only bass and basso continuo support the voice, and *tutti* returning only during the *ritornello*. Its setting reflects Goffredo’s gentle authority and offers lyrical relief amidst the opera’s more dramatic turns. The aria calls for a narrative vocal delivery with its intimate setting. Every dissonant note should be savored, each phrase shaped toward its natural cadence. In the *da capo* section, ornamentation should be heartfelt and tasteful. Unlike the more virtuosic “Mio cor”, this aria requires sincerity, embellishments should express warmth and depth, always in keeping with the elegant Baroque style.

For the pianist, performing Handel in two settings, playing the piano reduction and performing the harpsichord continuo in the orchestra, requires distinct skills and mindsets. Playing the reduction demands a clear sense of dance pulse and a steady tempo, especially when navigating fast-paced arias filled with dense figurations that can feel awkward on the piano. Cadenzas or fermatas require close communication with the singer. When performing the harpsichord continuo part in the orchestra, it is not merely accompaniment but a tool for expressive coloring. A lively and rhythmically energized continuo line helps color the drive of the orchestra; in slower arias,

subtle ornamentation and affective inflection in the inner voices can reveal emotional nuance; for recitatives, it is everything.

Historical sources, including treatises by C.P.E. Bach and François Couperin, emphasize that the continuo player should vary the accompaniment according to the expression of the words, using rhythmic inflection, ornamentation, and improvised harmonies to mirror the drama on stage.³ Couperin further advised that harpsichordists should not always play the same chords, but should find various ways of expressing harmony, echoing the flexible, affect-driven approach necessary in Handel's operas.⁴ Thus, continuo playing is not merely harmonic filler but a responsive, expressive dialogue with the singer, shaped anew in every performance.

³ Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments*, trans. and ed. William J. Mitchell (New York: W. W. Norton, 1949).

⁴ François Couperin, *The Art of Playing the Harpsichord (L'art de toucher le clavecin)*, trans. and ed. Margaret Cage (London: Faber and Faber, 1974).

1.2 Sesto's Aria from *La clemenza di Tito* by Mozart

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *La clemenza di Tito* (1791) was composed in the style of opera seria under intense time pressure, commissioned for the coronation festivities of Leopold II as King of Bohemia. Mozart completed the opera in just about eighteen days. Despite this rushed schedule, the opera shows remarkable refinement, blending classical poise with deep psychological insight. It was Mozart's final completed opera before his untimely death later that same year (although he finished it before *Die Zauberflöte*, he began composing *Tito* later).

Unlike the earlier model represented by composers like Handel, where arias often paused the forward motion of dramatic action to explore a single emotional state through virtuosic display, Mozart's arias and ensembles often advance the character development. Here, the recitatives are more animated and emotionally charged, and the orchestra plays a far more active role in shaping the mood and responding to the singers. However, because of the short timeline for the commission, much of the *secco recitative* (the dry, continuo-only recitatives) was likely written or heavily assisted by Mozart's student Franz Xaver Süssmayr.⁵ As a result, the recitatives are generally considered less dramatically vivid than those in Mozart's earlier masterpieces like *Le nozze di Figaro* or *Don Giovanni*, where Mozart composed the recitative himself with greater musical imagination.

⁵ Julian Rushton, review of *La clemenza di Tito*, by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *Early Music* 21, no. 1 (February 1993): 164.

Opera seria had traditionally featured castrati in the principal male roles, emphasizing vocal brilliance and heroic stature. By Mozart's time, the dominance of the castrati was fading. In *La clemenza di Tito*, the role of Sesto was originally created for the soprano castrato Domenico Bedini. Some of Mozart's early sketches suggest that he may have initially envisioned Sesto as a tenor role. However, the impresario ultimately assigned the distinguished castrato, required by contract, to the role of Sesto rather than the title role of Tito.⁶ In modern performance practice, Sesto is most often portrayed by a mezzo-soprano in a trouser role, preserving the character's youthful vulnerability and passionate intensity.

"Deh, per questo istante solo" follows a rondo design, where there are more extensive and ambitious constructions (the thematic material of the slow section metamorphosed and nurturing the rapid section). The aria begins with a sublime *Adagio*, featuring some "raw" unaccompanied singing, tender yet resigned. It shows how Sesto is not simply pleading for forgiveness but revealing the internal weight of guilt and remorse. As Sesto's inner turmoil intensifies, the tempo accelerates through *Allegro* to *Più allegro*, mirroring the intensified emotion. Sesto uses this aria to remind Tito of their former bond and express his deep regret. Mozart's gradual quickening of tempo not only reflects the character's psychological unraveling but also enhances the dramatic arc of the scene.⁷

This aria demands a profound emotional expressiveness in the voice, rather than outward dramatic pleading. The singer must convey Sesto's crushing remorse through sustained, arching

⁶ Baroque Boston, "Mozart Aria: *La clemenza di Tito*." Accessed April 29, 2025, <https://baroque.boston/mozart-aria-la-clemenza-di-tito>

⁷ Ibid.

lines that remain controlled with no hint of hysteria. Breath support and an even tone from top to bottom are essential. Mozart's vocal style requires that even moments of emotional intensity move with graceful, forward motion toward the downbeat, aligned with the natural rhythm of the language. This style favors buoyancy, lightness, transparency, accuracy, and a clear legato phrasing, allowing the line to arrive naturally at each cadence full of emotional depth without heaviness. This continuous motion helps preserve Sesto's youthful quality and noble dignity, even as he collapses under the weight of his guilt.

As with the vocal line, playing the piano reduction for Mozart requires clarity, elegance, and rhythmic steadiness. As the aria accelerates, it's important to provide a tempo that suits the singer's needs while staying true to Mozart's intention, urgent but never rushed. Because Mozart's piano reduction writing sometimes is lean and transparent, the pianist should consider adding depth to the bass by doubling certain lines, such as omitted double bass parts that are not present in the piano vocal score. Throughout, lyrical articulation and stylistic lightness help preserve the Classical aesthetic.

1.3 Urbain's Aria from *Les Huguenots* by Giacomo Meyerbeer

Giacomo Meyerbeer's grand French operas reflect a "fusion of Italian melodic sensibility with German harmonic seriousness and French theatrical flair," a synthesis clearly audible in "Noble seigneurs, salut!" Urbain's Act I entrance aria from *Les Huguenots* (1836). This elegantly crafted aria distills hallmarks of Meyerbeer's *grand opéra* style: graceful vocal writing, courtly rhythmic gestures, and a text that both flatters and parodies aristocratic ceremony. The character of Urbain, a youthful page sung by a mezzo-soprano in a trouser role act as a messenger of civility, yet his sprightly delivery and poised mannerisms also reflect Meyerbeer's tendency to use even minor roles to sharpen the opera's social contrasts. In this sense, Urbain's brief, seemingly decorative aria becomes a subtle emblem of artifice: a musical bow before the storm.

The first ten measures function as an introduction, featuring quick ornamental runs (coloratura) and speech-like rhythms that immediately establish Urbain's youthful energy and graceful poise. The placement of the word "greetings" (salut), right after a fermata adds a touch of theatrical charm and humor, as though he relishes the attention. For the singer, this is a moment to show off the voice and personality. While the phrasing allows some freedom, this is French opera: expression is refined and speech-like, not indulgent. Clarity, elegance, and subtle timing are key.

The aria then moves into a 9/8 meter that gives it a graceful, dance-like flow. The rhythm evokes courtly ceremony; elegant, poised, and buoyant, while the vocal line becomes more *cantabile con grazia*. Yet Meyerbeer sprinkles this polished surface with playful details: coloraturas, fermatas, and quick turns that reveal Urbain's way of drawing attention; they punctuate the message and highlight his quick wit and youthful confidence. These expressive shifts should not feel dramatic or sentimental, they should land like natural inflections in speech or formal ritual.

Later, in the “Fear neither deception nor trap” (*Ne craignez mensonge ou piège*) section, the atmosphere subtly shifts. The orchestration becomes more supportive, with the strings warmly doubling the vocal line, creating a sense of unity, and assurance. The rhythm also starts to mirror the phrasing of the text more closely, responding more actively to the words and reinforcing their meaning. This tighter alignment between text and music builds momentum toward the aria’s final flourish. The ending is glorious and showy, giving the singer one last opportunity to dazzle with agility, clarity, and charm, wrapping up the aria with Urbain’s signature mix of elegance and youthful flair.

Since Urbain is a young male page, the mezzo in the trouser role must avoid sounding overly feminine. The vocal color should be youthful, clear, and flexible. Every note in the coloratura passages must speak precisely; clarity and articulation are more important than volume. Even in freer moments like *fermatas* or *tempo rubato*, French style demands control: freedom should follow the rhythm of speech, not emotional outbursts. The performance must always retain a sense of elegance and poise.

For the pianist and coach, clarity aids coordination, especially in cueing after *fermatas* or *rubato*. Singers must also learn how to handle the ending phrase, especially the return to the original tempo, so that collaboration and coordination with the orchestra feels seamless. The accompaniment should be rhythmically grounded yet flexible in supporting the singer’s phrasing, allowing space for the shaping of lines and melismas. It is essential that the pianist responds to the text and orchestration, helping create the atmosphere that brings Urbain’s character vividly to life.

1.4 Siebel's Aria from *Faust* by Charles Gounod

Charles Gounod's grand opera *Faust* (1859) stands as a pillar of the French operatic canon, renowned for its melodic elegance and expressive orchestration, complete with ballet and large-scale choruses. While inspired by Goethe's dramatic poem, Gounod, alongside librettists Jules Barbier and Michel Carré, reinterprets the narrative through a Catholic moral lens. The work focuses on the more intimate story of Marguerite's seduction and fall, emphasizing themes of sin, temptation, and divine forgiveness. Goethe's original work is more expansive and philosophical: the devil's wager is that if Faust ever feels satisfied with life, his soul is lost—while God watches from above.⁸ Gounod distills this into a moral drama centered on human weakness and redemption.

Musically, *Faust* occupies a transitional space between classical and romantic traditions. Despite its rich Romantic expression, the opera is not yet through-composed; each scene is structured with numbered sections and traditional labels such as cavatina, scene and chorus, duets, and ensembles. Siebel's aria "Faites-lui mes aveux", from the beginning of Act II (sometimes because of the edition, it's Act III) is marked as "intermezzo and song," indicating that the orchestra provides an introduction leading into Siebel's entrance.

The orchestra introduction begins in C minor, led by solemn horns calls over pizzicato strings, which alternates with gently swelling triplet string figures. Led by flute, a clarinet solo follows, singing a melody that feels longing, tender, narrative, and almost tragic in tone. While

⁸ "Faust by Gounod," *Simple Opera*, accessed April 20, 2025, <https://simpleopera.com/faust/>.

this passage sets up Siebel's entrance, the mood it evokes seems to be foreshadow Marguerite's fate more than it reflects Siebel's feelings.

Siebel, who was introduced in the opera's first scene as both Faust's student and a lad in love with Marguerite, now steps into the spotlight. The aria follows a modified ABA structure, with each section reflecting a different emotional phase of his journey. In this charming aria, Siebel expresses his love for Marguerite. He picks her some flowers, but due to Mephistopheles's curse, they wither in his hand. To break the spell, he uses holy water.

Siebel's entrance opens with a flowing A section in youthful C major. Gounod skips the first beat in nearly every phrase of the 4/4 melody, giving it a nervous, stumbling quality that perfectly captures the hesitations of adolescent love. When Siebel realizes that the flowers have withered in his hand, the aria transitions into a contrasting B section: the smooth 6/8 meter fractures into recitative-like declamation, and the harmony darkens. The orchestral texture thins, and only the strings carry the agitated rhythm forward. However, when Siebel touches the holy water, remembering how Marguerite prays here every evening, the woodwind orchestration here has a gentle, hymn like purity. As he breaks the curse, the harmony shifts triumphantly into D major, and he proclaims, "Satan, I laugh at you!" (Satan, je ris de toi!). The music then returns to the A' section, where the earlier melody blossoms again, now colored by joy and relief – topped with the flute's soaring line.

For the pianist, the orchestral introduction (often omitted when the aria is performed on its own) demands a sense of restrained emotion—steady yet expressive—as it sets the emotional temperature of the scene. The aria begins with a clarinet line which transitions from a tender, rubato phrasing into youthful, excited sixteenth-note *staccato* figures, shifting the tonality into a brighter major mode. The aria itself is full of triplet figures that require both buoyancy and steadiness.

These rhythms must never feel mechanical; instead, they should carry the fluttery energy of Siebel's adolescent infatuation. As the aria transitions into the B section, where the flowers wither, the pianist must become a storyteller. Much of the orchestral writing here reflects narrative turning points, and the performer should bring this dramatic arc to life through color and timing. It's also important to consult the full orchestral score. Adding in sustained woodwind harmonies that are absent from the vocal score can enrich the harmonic landscape and better support the singer. These subtle touches help bridge the gap between piano reduction and orchestral intent, allowing for a more emotionally faithful and supportive performance.

For the mezzo-soprano, this pants role presents both lyrical and dramatic challenges. Although the aria does not rely on vocal fireworks, it requires finesse in color and phrasing to fully embody Siebel's character. He is not confident like Faust or Mephistopheles; he's eager, nervous, and often uncertain. The role depends on subtle emotional shifts and the ability to bring Siebel's inner world to life with both voice and presence. It's important to sing lyrically over the buoyant sixteenth-note passages. The missing downbeat eighth note suggests a nervous energy and should be treated with a legato swing, to capture his youthful momentum and emotional sincerity. The line must not be chopped or shortened, as the drama is already written into the music.

1.5 Sandmännchen's Aria and "Abendsegen" from *Hänsel und Gretel* by Engelbert Humperdinck

When approaching *Hänsel und Gretel* (1892), it is immediately clear that Engelbert Humperdinck was deeply influenced by the musical language of Richard Wagner. While Wagner drew on the grandeur of Norse mythology and Humperdinck looked to the simplicity and symbolism of fairy tales, both composers ultimately created sound worlds rooted in fantasy.⁹ Humperdinck, a former assistant to Wagner, adopted many of his mentor's techniques: rich chromatic harmonies, continuous motivic development, and the use of orchestration not only to support the vocal line but to shape the narrative and atmosphere. *Hänsel und Gretel* often functions as a kind of miniature Wagner opera. The story may center on children, but the music frequently carries a level of complexity, richness, and integration more commonly found in large-scale Romantic works.

Humperdinck's Sandman's (Sandmännchen) Aria (mm. 1-9) dissolves reality into fairy-tale haze through *sordino* violins, harp arpeggios, and flute filigree, a texture the collaborative pianist must conjure alone. The violins' shimmering tremolo, woven like invisible thread, translates to a pianissimo right-hand murmur in the piano, sustained with featherlight touch. Additionally, the tremolo's pulse must never break in the piano, the harp's accompaniment and woodwind interruptions cast like magical spells, as if the magic depends on its continuity. The small pauses in the singing line between phrases heightens the audience's surrender to the dream.

⁹ Simple Opera, "Hänsel und Gretel by Humperdinck: The Fairy Tale Opera," *SimpleOpera*, March 17, 2025, <https://simpleopera.com/hansel-und-gretel/>.

From mm. 10-20, as the spell is cast, the viola's delicate music-box pulsations anchor the texture beneath the sustained woodwind voices, while muted violins add whispered trills at m. 14, their rapid flutters evoking the Sandman's flickering magic. The flute and clarinet then seamlessly take over the music-box role, their phrases accompanying the voice with fluid grace. As for the piano, while it is impossible to replicate every orchestral detail, the essential awareness lies in the texture's expansion, not through volume, but through growing warmth and color, with the awareness of the harmonic changes.

As the dream takes hold, the instruments and voice begin in a slower, peaceful unison with alternating phrases. Woodwinds trade the melody with the singer, eventually merging into a harmonized resolution where violin I and winds blend as one. Dynamics prove essential here: as the orchestra's texture expands, the composer shrewdly softens the accompaniment during the singer's lower notes, creating a delicate trade-off with the voice. This interplay ensures the vocal line remains crystalline amid the growing orchestral warmth, like moonlight piercing through mist.

The Sandman's portrayal hinges on the director's vision, whether as a unisex spirit, an ethereal fairy, or (as in my production experience) a wizened old man. The elderly interpretation demands a slower tempo, deliberate diction, and a darker timbre to convey paternal warmth and years of wisdom, all while navigating Humperdinck's long, suspended phrases. A soprano casting, though effective for a dream-sprite characterization, faces unique challenges: the low register tests tonal warmth and projection, while the German text requires *dolce legato* amid crisp consonants. The physicality transforms completely between versions, instead of darting movements, the Sandman might shuffle slowly across the stage, transforming the sand-throwing gesture into a solemn ritual rather than a playful trick. These adaptations fundamentally reshape Humperdinck's

original "tender" marking, offering rich possibilities for character development through vocal coloring and physical expression.

The "Evening Prayer" (Abendsegen) is peaceful and hymn-like, embodying the innocence of the children as they pray for protection in the forest. Its flowing melody and gentle arcs create a sense of calm, contrasting sharply with the opera's darker moments—such as the preceding scene where the children realize they are lost in the dark forest. That earlier section, with its chromatic harmonies and polyphonic texture, gives the forest a sinister, layered atmosphere. The tension and danger there stand in stark contrast to the gentle simplicity of the children's prayer.

For singers, the duet demands unified vowels and consonants to blend parallel motion, The marking of "with half sound" phrases might tempt singers to under-project, however the long legato phrases require steady and flowing breath support and an even tone across all registers. Intonation must be carefully maintained, especially in the close intervals and chromatic shifts of the duet's second half.

For pianists, this means prioritizing clarity, warmth, and balance in chord voicing while keeping inner voices blended, avoiding vertical heaviness. Pedaling should be subtle, with half-pedal techniques particularly useful to sustain the texture without blurring it.

Hänsel's trouser role thrives on youthful charm, with mezzo-sopranos historically embodying the role's boyish physicality through deliberate theatrical choices. The character's vocal color bright yet earthy, mirrors his dual nature as both a protective older brother and a mischievous child, while the German folk-inflected melodies reinforce his rustic origins. Onstage, actors emphasize Hänsel's restless energy through loose-limbed movement (staccato jumps during dance sequences, a quivering voice when scared), contrasting Gretel's femininity. The role's magic lies in balancing childish spontaneity with sincere brotherhood, all guided by Humperdinck's score.

1.6 Prince Charming's Aria from *Cendrillon* (Cinderella) by Jules Massenet

Jules Massenet's *Cendrillon* (1899) offers a lush, dreamy adaptation of the Cinderella story, infusing it with delicate French lyricism and gentle romantic fantasy. Massenet demonstrates a wide range of compositional tools and a distinctive vocal style, marked by sweeping melodic lines and richly textured orchestration. His writing often features unusual yet expressive vocal shapes, tailor-made for the coloristic possibilities of the mezzo-soprano voice. Observations by Steven Huebner:

*“With the banner of aesthetic independence raised ever higher in public polemics about opera in the fin de siècle, Massenet exhibited an older compositional mentalité, one that by no means shunned novelty, but that also showed nothing inherently wrong with writing to order and liberally using what had worked well before.”*¹⁰

This perspective supports what we hear in *Cendrillon*, a composer who is unapologetically eclectic, drawing on earlier models such as Humperdinck's *Hänsel und Gretel*¹¹, while still producing something unmistakably his own. The opera's orchestration itself is striking: a quick glance through the instrumentation reveals the care with which Massenet painted his pastel-colored tale. Viola d'amore, lute, crystal flute, fife, and gongs all add their distinctive, evocative tone to the score, deployed sparingly and for specific atmospheric effect.¹²

¹⁰ Steven Huebner, *French Opera at the Fin de Siècle: Wagnerism, Nationalism, and Style* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 26.

¹¹ The Metropolitan Opera, *Cendrillon Educator Guide*. New York: The Metropolitan Opera, 2017–2018. <https://www.metopera.org/globalassets/discover/education/educator-guides/cendrillon/cendrillon.17-18.guide.pdf>.

¹² Hugh Macdonald et al., "Massenet, Jules," *Grove Music Online*, Oxford Music Online, accessed April 26, 2025, <https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>.

What is notable in this version is that Massenet specified that both Cinderella and Prince Charming would be portrayed by mezzo-sopranos.¹³ It was quite unusual for a trouser role to take the male romantic lead in an opera, especially in France. Massenet may have intended to emphasize the prince's youth, a common feature in cross-dressed roles like Cherubino or Chérubin. As Margaret Reynolds notes, such casting draws on the view of woman as "undeveloped man," making it "perfectly proper for a woman to play a boy's part in the interests of verisimilitude."¹⁴

Prince Charming's aria "Cœur sans amour" appears in Act II, Scene 2, after the ball, in a moment of introspection and emotional vulnerability. Unlike grand declarations of love often heard from male leads in French opera, this aria is subdued and inward. The prince sings not to another character, but seemingly to himself. The aria begins with a brief recitative, introduced by string orchestra. Soon, it narrows to a bare texture of lower strings, creating the solitude atmosphere, with the English horn entrance supporting the prince's lonely confession. When Prince Charming sings "If the one who wants my soul should appear before me with open arms" (*si, me tendant les bras, je la voyait paraître, celle qui veut mon âme*), the rhythmic energy picks up slightly, with fluttering string figures that mimic the flutter of an excited heartbeat. This subtle increase in motion hints at the prince's rising hope.

At the aria's climax "I am yours. Take my youth!" (*Je suis à toi. Prends ma jeunesse!*) The harmony modulates into A major, a radiant and expansive key shift that reflects a moment of

¹³ Catherine A. Crone, *Negotiating the Trouser Role in Jules Massenet's and Henri Cain's Cendrillon* (Master's thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2015), 1.

¹⁴ Margaret Reynolds, "Ruggiero's Deceptions, Cherubino's Distractions," in *En Travesti: Women, Gender Subversion, Opera*, ed. Corinne E. Blackmer and Patricia Juliana Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 142.

emotional surrender. The orchestra, no longer sparse, swells around him, doubling the vocal line and elevating the prince's vision of love into something rapturous and exalted. It is as if he briefly steps into the fairy tale he longs to inhabit. By the end of the aria, the music returns to the solitude and stillness of the opening. After the Prince's brief outburst of hope and passion, Massenet draws the atmosphere back into quiet melancholy, underscoring the Prince's lingering loneliness. Even as he imagines love, it remains just a dream. He is still alone, yearning for someone who has not yet appeared. The return to the sparse orchestration and English horn color reflects this emotional vulnerability.

This aria is emblematic of Massenet's ability to blend text and music into a single, emotionally resonant gesture. It is neither a bravura showcase nor a show-stopping centerpiece; instead, it is a suspended moment of private yearning that reveals more about the Prince than any grand entrance or royal decree could. For singers, it demands the ability to sustain long, arching lines with delicate emotional shading, coloring the tone with youthful longing and restrained hope. The Prince is not commanding or outwardly heroic; rather, he is youthful, sensitive, and lost in a dream of love.

For the pianist, while the orchestral reduction does not contain many notes, the sparse writing is challenging to create the sustained sound without becoming percussive. In addition to playing the solo instrument vocally, the pianist should consult the full orchestral score to understand when to suggest missing sustained colors and to capture orchestral details, as well as adding the timpani's climactic role which it contributes to the aria's emotional architecture.

1.7 Duet and Composer's Aria from *Ariadne auf Naxos* by Richard Strauss

Richard Strauss's *Ariadne auf Naxos* (1912, revised 1916) occupies a unique space in the operatic canon, fusing comic and serious modes into a single layered evening. In both form and style, the opera reflects Strauss's late-romantic aesthetic: harmonically expansive, richly orchestrated, yet always theatrically purposeful. His writing balances sweeping emotional gestures with precise attention to psychological nuance, often shifting styles mid-phrase to match the character's inner state. Voices in Strauss's operas are never ornamental; they are fully integrated instruments in the dramatic and symphonic texture.

Strauss's use of trouser roles differs notably from earlier 19th-century conventions. While Romantic composers often used mezzo-soprano trouser roles to portray youthful charm or comic naivety, Strauss reimagines them as emotionally complex and dramatically central figures. His pants roles, most notably the Composer in *Ariadne auf Naxos* and Octavian in *Der Rosenkavalier* are not caricatures of boyhood, but fully dimensional young men in transition: idealistic, impulsive, and deeply vulnerable. Strauss uses this vocal and gender ambiguity to explore themes of artistic innocence, emotional awakening, and the instability of theatrical identity itself.

This intimate passage in the Prologue is not a formal duet in the traditional operatic sense; it functions dramatically as a duet of perspective, marking a turning point for the Composer. Occurring before his aria "Sein wir wieder gut," he finds himself unexpectedly moved or seduced by Zerbinetta during a short but revealing exchange that begins with "Sie hält ihn für den Todesgott..." and ends on the suspended, wonder-filled question "Ein einziger Augenblick?"

The scene begins in a speech-like style, as the Composer speaks freely, still caught in the passionate defense of his art. But Strauss subtly shifts the music from declamation to lyricism as the Composer becomes increasingly swept up in Zerbinetta's presence. His lines lengthen into arching phrases, supported by soft strings and woodwinds that paint the atmosphere with gentle warmth and hazy emotional colors. For her interruptions, Zerbinetta maintains her rhythmic clarity and comic vocal color. Her earlier lines are accompanied with sparse textures, often just piano or chamber-like instrumentation reinforcing her stylistic distance from the Composer's world. By the time the Zerbinetta reaches "One moment is not enough" (Ein Augenblick ist wenig), the vocal line blooms into lyrical radiance. Strauss subtly enriches the orchestration supporting her. Her reply is cushioned with warmer instrumental color, momentarily suspending her comic persona in favor of something more sincere. Even in moments of intimacy, Strauss keeps voices independent, as a way of reinforcing the collision between high and low styles. By the time the Composer reaches his final question, it is not philosophical agreement, but emotional surrender. Strauss avoids vocal blending or harmonic unison between them, but the warmth and shimmer of the orchestra creates the illusion of unity.

The role of the Composer in this duet demands both vocal control and emotional shading. Other than the wild range, and suspended breath control over the long-syncopated line, the vocal color shifts from dramatic declamation to genuine wonder. The psychological transition must be heard in the voice not through volume, but through color and tone. Zerbinetta's character style contrasts completely. Her lines are rhythmically alert, speech-like, and require clean articulation. However, her lines become more lyrical, particularly toward the middle of this scene. She must shift into legato with warmth, able to sing softly on high notes and move lightly and seamlessly between registers like gentle wind.

For the pianist, the texture often moves with sustained chords. Creating this sound world without percussiveness takes great imagination. The accompaniment must provide harmonic clarity and shimmer while shifting color to support each character's mood. Flexibility of touch, pedaling, and awareness of orchestral timbres are essential. Deep understanding of the full score helps the pianist anticipate mood changes, cue singers, and reflect Strauss's detailed psychological landscape.

"Sein wir wieder gut" brings the Prologue of *Ariadne auf Naxos* to an emotional climax. After the Composer's encounter with Zerbinetta, he who has passionately defended the sanctity of serious art suddenly finds himself overtaken by feeling. Strauss mirrors this transformation through an ecstatic vocal line, full of suspended phrases, wide leaps, and swelling orchestration. The aria unfolds as one continuous ascent, culminating in the fervent declaration "Music is the holy art" (*Musik ist die heilige Kunst*) reaching the emotional and musical peak.

But Strauss does not let this fantasy hold long. The music suddenly shifts into a chromatic frantic flurry as the composer, caught in his own self-made drama, is pulled back into the chaos he once tried to resist as the troupe assembles, the performance must go on. The Composer is left suspended: emotionally unsatisfied, yet utterly powerless to control the outcome.

The vocal writing of this aria is complicated, and every interval, rhythm and entrance must be placed with precision. One must shape and enjoy the lyrical line, the phrasing carries on the breath with a sense of emotional expansiveness as if sung by someone with a big heart. As the meter and harmonic language shift, so does the mood: the singer must bring high energy throughout, even in the calmer sections, which should still maintain passion.

For the pianist, the reduction requires clarity, supportiveness, and flexibility. When the rhythmic gestures appear, they should be steady, energetic, and grounded. In lyrical moments, Strauss's German Romantic phrasing calls for expressive expansion around high notes or climactic points, where a subtle, unnoticeable stretch can serve the phrase like a full *tutti* orchestra. When the singer is holding a long note, it's crucial not to drag; instead, the piano should provide forward motion to help the breath move through. Because the score is dense and complex, the pianist must know which line or gestures will be heard the most, and prioritize the clarity of melody, harmony, and rhythm over trying to play every single note.

Chapter 2. Recording project

<p>“Deh, per questo istante solo” from <i>La clemenza di Tito</i> Mezzo-soprano: Ashlyn Brown</p>	<p>Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)</p>
<p>“Noble seigneurs, salut!” from <i>Les Huguenots</i> Mezzo-soprano: Kaylee Nichols</p>	<p>Giacomo Meyerbeer (1791-1864)</p>
<p>Gounod “Faites-lui mes aveux” from <i>Faust</i> Mezzo-soprano: Ashlyn Brown</p>	<p>Charles Gounod (1818-1893)</p>
<p>Sandman’s aria from <i>Hänsel und Gretel</i> Sandman: Sarah Scofield</p>	<p>Engelbert Humperdinck (1854-1921)</p>
<p>“Abendsegen” with Pantomime from <i>Hänsel und Gretel</i> Gretel: Maureen McKay. Hansel: Sarah Coit</p>	<p>Engelbert Humperdinck (1854-1921)</p>
<p>“Cœur sans amour” from <i>Cendrillon</i> Mezzo-soprano: Ashlyn Brown</p>	<p>Jules Massenet (1842-1912)</p>
<p>“Sie hält ihn für den Todesgott...” from <i>Ariadne auf Naxos</i> Zerbinetta: Elisa Sunshine. Composer: Shannon Keegan</p>	<p>Richard Strauss (1864-1949)</p>
<p>“Sein wir wieder gut” from <i>Ariadne auf Naxos</i> Mezzo-soprano: Kaylee Nichols</p>	<p>Richard Strauss (1864-1949)</p>

Chapter 3. Conclusion

This dissertation has explored a selection of key mezzo-soprano trouser roles in opera, focusing on their vocal, musical, and dramatic dimensions. The recording portion of the project presents these arias in performance while the program notes give personal reflections on the layers of insight needed in order to interpret these multi-dimensional masterworks. The project also highlights the unique challenges faced equally by both singers and collaborative pianists particularly during the preparation process. Pianists in rehearsal and coaching settings not only need to support the singer's interpretation but also must understand the nuances of each aria's musical structure and character. They must assist in shaping the phrasing and emotional expression, ultimately ensuring that the singer is able to fully embody the character as comfortably as possible. The role of the pianist/coach needs to be subtle while still being as sturdy as a mountain. After all, the piano, in this case, is an entire orchestra.

It is important to note that this recording and analysis reflect one individual's interpretation; others may approach these roles with different perspectives. Such diversity of understanding is not only inevitable but essential to the continued vitality of operatic performance. However, it is my hope that these reflections can help others find their way to their own individualized study and performances of these ten masterworks; they are truly worthy of continuing exploration and interpretation.

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