

# Voicing Challenge: Trans\* Singers and the Performance of Vocal Gender

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**Abstract:** This paper investigates the impact of trans\* singers on the discursive framework of the gendered systematizations in classical singing, focusing on the opera industry and its casting and voice classifications. Whereas research on voice and gender has been a part of New Musicology for the past two and a half decades, inquiries into, e.g., cross-casting have largely happened against a backdrop of binary gender norms and have not prominently considered trans\* voices and trans\* identities. This paper investigates the current presentation of trans\* voices within opera through press coverage, casting practices, and self-statements and engages with materials on three singers as a qualitative sample. Narrative patterns are singled out and applied to questions of gender in opera, thinking of trans\* singers as a vital part of the equation and coming to the result that, while opera has always had spaces that move beyond cisgender norms, opera singing is still strongly guarded by binary gender conventions. A stronger presence of trans\* voices throws these conventions into stark light and allows challenging ideas of normative gender performativity in opera and beyond, though it also raises ethical concerns regarding the instrumentalization of marginalized identities in theoretical discourse.

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## 1. Introduction

While Western, secular classical singing since the late 16th century has always entailed performance practices that move beyond a cis-heteronormative representation of gender, it largely reframes and restrains these practices to a stage diegesis, while maintaining and reconfirming binary conceptualizations of gender in its infrastructure. This is both a legacy of 19th-century gender norms and of 20th-century staging and casting traditions, with the availability of these traditions on record exerting a continuous influence on vocal aesthetics. These aesthetics, in turn, are imbedded into a heavily gendered fach system that is not sufficiently understood as historically flexible.

An emerging generation of classically trained trans\* singers—this paper considers the careers and media (self)representation of heroic baritone Lucia Lukas (Lucas n.d.), male mezzo-soprano Adrian Angelico (Angelico n.d.), and bass-baritone Aiden K. Feltkamp (Feltkamp n.d.)—is currently drawing new attention to the limits of the fach system and its categorization of voices as men’s and women’s foremost. Trans\* singers also call into question binary traditions of operatic cross-casting (Knaus

2011), the (im)possibility of an ungendered stage body (Barba 1995, pp. 9–11), and the performativity of gender identity at large (Butler 1990). Following that, I trace the historical construction of vocal gender and its assessments in musicological research, to then question its configuration through the lens of trans\* singers' careers and presentations.

## 2. Historical Development

The 19th-century reframing of gender as an essentialized biological dichotomy echoed in mental and affective dispositions—which casts earlier configurations of power, class, and gender such as the *femme forte* aside—limited the earlier scope of onstage gender expression in opera. With singing voices being divided into men's and women's voices first, earlier flexibility was largely abolished. Bass, baritone, and tenor were codified as exclusively male vocal profiles. They were also codified as the only profiles available to men, while contralto, mezzo-soprano, and soprano became equivalent female sound ranges. This binary set-up was mirrored in gendering technical approaches, such as the use of chest and head register. From the 1840s onward, it left only marginal space for so-called cross-casting practices that saw male roles embodied by female singers and, scarcely, female roles written for male singers (Hadlock 2001; Seedorf 2015). Within those operatic spaces, there will likely have been singers who might have identified, in current terminology and current cultural settings, as trans\*. Some interpretations—theirs and others—will have been queerer than the available terminology depicts. A detailed historic case study should delve into that. Here, I merely want to stress that the term 'cross-casting', which implies exchanging one thing for another as if it were a binary scale achieving an inverted balance, can obscure prior presence of trans\* performances. The term 'cisgender' carries similar coinage of opposites (Enke 2012). It is used here with the intention to visibilize essentialized ascriptions.

Male roles written expressively for cisgender female singers as of the mid-19th century fell exclusively into the realm of adolescent contested masculinity, framed most popularly in the figure of the pageboy (Hadlock 2001; André 2006; Charton 2012a). These parts could not be taken on by a grown cisgender male singer without destabilizing his masculinity. Some of these parts were even written within an emerging consciousness of lesbian identity that in turn overrode the gender assignment of the stage diegesis (Reynolds 1995, pp. 132, 143–46; Charton 2012a, pp. 298–99). It served to fetishize women's bodies for a male gaze, while at the same time offering an involuntary space of queer self-recognition (Blackmer and Smith 1995).

Women's roles for male singers appeared rarely and were generally stigmatized as negative, e.g., with the tenor casting of the Witch in Humperdinck's *Hänsel and Gretel* or the hellish Cook in Prokofiev's *Love for the Three Oranges*.

These castings worked against the backdrop of a gendered voice system that assigned absolute tone ranges to men's and women's voices. Since tone ranges largely overlap, even if in different parts of a voice (i.e., the highest notes of a bass or baritone may equal the lowest notes of a high soprano) (Grotjahn 2005, p. 36; Nadoleczny 1923, p. 30), this system also prescribed a gendered approach to those ranges to clearly differentiate sound as either male or female. This is most evident in the debates concerning the use of chest register in women's voices, seen as poor in taste, and of *voix mixte* and use of head register in male voices. The male falsetto was judged as effeminate and unartistic for most of the 20th century (Fuchs 1967, p. 120). It is obvious in these ongoing negotiations of gendered vocal spaces that there are no fixed male or female tone ranges and that categorizations depend on shifting notions of gender, both in relation to voice and at large (Grotjahn 2005).

The pre-1840s opera repertoire offers a glance at vocal embodiments of heroic masculinity which was tied to a high voice range, independent of the sex of the singer taking on the role. Heroic femininity was situated in the same voice range. Absolute tonal ranges were not gendered until the late eighteenth century, in particular in the core genre of *opera seria*. The soprano voice, embodying an also metaphorical height that placed it close to the celestial, was the preferred range for the vocal depiction of Baroque heroes and heroines alike (McClary 2013), whether emitted by a body presenting as male or female offstage. This allowed for casting practices that did not tie gender performance exclusively to identically sexed bodies (Seedorf 2016, pp. 205–9). It still largely reified a gender binary in an array of heroic and marginalized male or female identities, but allowed for exceptions and placed less importance on a singer's sex.

The role repertoire of Early Baroque and Baroque opera frequently includes supernatural, allegorical, and mythical roles which also go beyond a simple assignation of male or female. While they may not fully escape gendered notions toward a nonbinary conceptualization, they move and shift instead between the numinous sphere of the deities of Antiquity and the trickster-like gender fluidity of commedia dell'arte-inspired roles.

Reassessing these spaces outside of a binary matrix, and the diverse histories that may be attached to them, is necessary in the presence of classically trained trans\* singers. They make clear how much casting practices in the opera industry still rely on a gender binary rooted in the 19th century. Trans\* singers also invite us to critically reevaluate the stance of queer musicology and its preconceptions in addressing gender in opera. Although musicological research of the past twenty-five years has investigated classical singing as a space where queer gender expression has held a place for centuries, this space has been largely thought from a cisgender and binary perspective of cross-casting.

Vocal gender and the recognition thereof is not a given; it is learned and performed and read as such. It can, if applied rigidly, limit spaces of artistic expression. Thinking of trans\* voices both as singing voices and as identities expressed as part of the choir enriches classical singing: they challenge notions of fixed vocal classification and exclusionary casting practices that ultimately limit chances of artistic expression for all singers and their audiences.

The growing field of Transgender Studies (Stryker 2006) is echoed by a more largely visible scene of trans\* and nonbinary artists. Contemporary composers who may identify as trans\* or nonbinary address specific voice-related issues of transitioning, such as vocal mutation linked to testosterone, in their work (Hennies 2017; Veloce n.d.; Hülcker n.d.). Neo Hülcker's collaborative performance *Konzert für Stimme im Stimmbruch* (2018), e.g., addressed his own vocal mutation into lower tonal range.

Research in musicology that addresses the construction of vocal gender and the relation of gender, singing, and stage performance from a queer perspective, in particular as gay and lesbian perspectives, can be traced back to the mid-1990s (Koestenbaum 1993; Brett et al. 1994; Blackmer and Smith 1995; Abel 1997; Smart 2000). It built on earlier feminist research (McClary 1991). Nonetheless, while this research opened a space for thinking gay and queer identities in classical music, it largely conceptualized queerness through an implicitly cisgender lens, though genderfluidity was, in the vocabulary of the time, addressed (see, e.g., Heller 2003, pp. 220–62).

Applying a later terminology—such as “trans\*” and “cis”—to earlier timeframes is necessarily anachronistic. An existing terminology elevates and marginalizes, it shapes how we describe ourselves and how we can imagine ourselves. It governs self-expression and available identities. Talking about one era with the tools of another is a work both frustrating and inevitable, as the tools have not been made for that specific context, yet we do not have others at our disposal. Considering the long history of opera and history of queer musicology alike, there will always have been instances that, in a later terminology, we would now describe as queer or trans\*. Just because these words—these tools—were not present then, it does not mean that the desires and understandings they address and frame were not present. They were—and they were tied into different wordings inside different social and cultural realities. Sometimes, they were silenced by a lack of terminology. Some of them, we can uncover. Others, we can only guess at. To consider past voices, to make them audible without denying their historic specificity, is an ongoing challenge. The past thirty years of historiographical research in relation to the terms ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ are a good example of that. It runs the gamut from an assumption of absence (since specific words did not exist or were not applied in that manner) and denial of past realities to imagined genealogies uncritical of specific contexts.

The epistemological cornerstone against which much of the research on gender as (musical) performance was conducted in the 1990s and early 2000s was Butler's *Gender Trouble* (Butler 1990). The most prominent site of discussing gender transgression beyond a cisgendered framework was the castrato (e.g., Bergeron 1996; Herr 2002; Freitas 2003). For a discussion of research approaches, see the summary in Charton 2012a, pp. 214–20). These discussions often focused on the castrato's body as a site of gender definition and overlooked the agency of the castrato voice in and through performance. This approach has since changed (see, e.g., Feldman 2015). Trans\* singers, whose bodies may or may not have been surgically altered in relation to gender, readdress the agency of performance as a site of establishing autonomy, both in regard to bodies and to identities.

The Performative Turn that swept across the Humanities as of the mid-1990s resonated doubly across Theatre and Performance Studies. Here, investigating gender (and sex) as performative practices of identity could connect to established thought patterns of meanings derived through (stage) performance. Western research on the classical singing voice in this context has been preoccupied with dismantling the notion of a given vocal gender and an essentialist distinction between voices as men's and women's voices, respectively (Grotjahn 2005, pp. 36–39; Charton 2012a, pp. 90–95); it has shown the historic variability in how voices were thought in relation to gender, if they were thought so at all.

Until the disappearance of the castrato singers in the late 18th and early 19th century, the soprano voice was not understood as exclusively feminine. Rather, 'soprano' was a universal voice type accessible independent of gender. It was a tonal space and range occupied by women, boys, castrato singers and falsettists alike. Traces of a continuous practice can still be found and concern classical singing and popular music alike (McClary 2013; Jarman-Ivens 2007). This connection between genres of classical and popular music should, however, not overshadow the fact the "invention of vocal gender" (Charton 2012b, pp. 39–40) was coined specifically within Western classical singing. A mere glance at international singing practices, such as the *katajjaq* of the Arctic First Nations, is enough to showcase the absurdity of constructing tonal ranges as limited by gendered biology. Nonetheless, early to mid-20th century remarks tried to argue exactly that: The male falsetto, e.g., would only be valid for cross-gender travesty (Nadoleczny 1923, pp. 28–29; Fuchs 1967, p. 120). This illustrates the perception of falsetto as a place of unstable and illegitimate femininity and exemplifies how the high tonal range was, in a system of gendered vocalities, perceived as exclusively feminine—a perception now counteracted by the emergence of male falsettists in opera.

The presence of more out trans\* singers will similarly unravel inflexible notions of vocal gender. It will hopefully aid in developing an industry that will cast roles based on range and timbre, without excluding singers for an offstage gender identity

that differs from the role in question. Events and publications centering trans\* voices show that a more inclusive future is already happening (Jackson Hearn and Kremer 2018; One Voice:: Transgender Voices Festival 2018 n.d.; Cayari 2019, p. 119, Solomon 2019).

### 3. Materials and Methods

This paper investigates how, currently, trans\* singers question the way gender is still often conceptualized in classical singing. This applies in particular to opera, where a stage performance is added to a vocal one. To this purpose, I focus on the careers of three trans\* opera singers through a selection of media (self)representation.

Trans\* experiences are varied. “There is no universal trans experience. My experience is singular. It might resemble someone else’s, but it equally might be completely different.” (Feltkamp 2019a) I have therefore tried to include different experiences and perspectives regarding voice types, repertoires, positions in the opera industry, and media presentation.

Lucia Lukas, a heroic baritone who sings mostly male roles, has worked inside the German *stadtheater* system and was employed in Karlsruhe during her transition. She is now an internationally booked freelance singer whose U.S. debut as Don Giovanni with Tulsa Opera took place in early May 2019. She occasionally blogs about her life as an opera singer, including writing on trans\* issues (Lucas 2014).

Adrian Angelico is a male mezzo-soprano who debuted under this name, after a prior career, in 2017. He works internationally as a freelance singer and specializes in trouser roles. He recently completed a 2019 run as Octavian in Strauss’ *Der Rosenkavalier* at Norske Opera Oslo (Den Norske Opera 2018).

Aiden K. Feltkamp is a New York-based, self-described “opera creator” (Feltkamp n.d.). They work as a librettist, educator and singer, and founded OperaRox, a nonprofit opera company, in 2015. They identify as trans\* nonbinary and work primarily outside the established opera house system. Feltkamp, after having trained initially as a mezzo-soprano and after having, over the course of their transition, sung as a countertenor and a tenor, currently trains and performs as a bass-baritone. They advocate against inflexible and gendered voice classifications (Feltkamp 2019a).

All three singers address their having been assigned a different gender at birth in some way in their media appearances. All three have appeared on opera stages before their transitions. I do not reference their earlier names here. Assigned designations are often a sensitive issue for trans\* people, and it is not my place to link their current careers to former designations. I did ask myself whether this approach would exclude vital materials from this paper, but since my interest here is in how these three singers are portrayed now, as out trans\* singers, I found the prior materials to be negligible. My focus is on how trans\* singers can inform a reconceptualization of vocal gender.

My researcher position is that of an outsider: I am writing this paper as a cisgender person. My aim is to lend my expertise as a performance and voice historian to a more inclusive examination of (vocal) gender in opera.

Trans\* singers' unique position in this debate—one usually gained at great personal expense—inevitably leads to the question of whether thinking about trans\* singers as an epistemological figure of un/doing gender equals an instrumentalization of trans\* lives in the line of theoretical discourse. To answer these concerns, I have decided to primarily use materials that are interviews, refer to interviews, or are self-statements. This confers as much agency as possible on the individual singers, while I still examine public perception and the reflection of casting practices. I have included the professional websites and, if applicable, adjacent blogs, though not private or partly private social media accounts.

In this paper, I am using the term trans\* with an asterisk to mark the variety of trans\* experiences as well as the fluidity and expansiveness of conceptualizations of trans\* from within the trans\* community.

The materials considered for my analysis are, for Lucia Lucas, her official website, her Operabase page, her blog, an interview feature by Lucy Nurnberg for Accent Magazine, an announcement for her 2019 Oklahoma debut that ran on NBC News, an interview with Aidan Quigley for GCN Magazine, and a portrait by Barbara Opitz for Stern Magazine (Lucas n.d., n.d., n.d.; Nurnberg 2017; Eaton 2018; Quigley 2017; Opitz 2017).

For Adrian Angelico, I turned to his official website and Operabase page, his page on the website of his management, the production page for the 2019 run of *Der Rosenkavalier* at Den Norske Opera Oslo, a short FRK video featurette, and two brief reviews of his Prince Orlofsky at Elbphilharmonie Hamburg on New Year's Eve 2018 (Angelico n.d., n.d.; Stellis Polaris n.d.; Den Norske Opera 2018; Nygaard 2017; Hamburger Abendblatt 2018; Nellissen 2019).

For Aiden K. Feltkamp, I concentrate on their personal website (Feltkamp n.d., 2018) and their four-part draft of a nongendered system of vocal classification (Feltkamp 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d).

The questions I ask in relation to these materials are grouped around repertoire, casting practices, and challenges that trans\* singers face. What repertoire does each singer sing, and where? Are there changes in repertoire linked to transitioning, and how is this framed in description? Are discriminatory casting practices recognizable?

Is being trans\* mentioned, in particular when relating to singing and voice, either by the singers themselves or by interviewers and authors? Is trans\* exploited as otherness and/or misrepresented? What suggestions, if any, are made to improve the situation of singers who identify as trans\*?

Within a wider perspective of gender performativity in opera, I ask how the singers position themselves, and how are they positioned, in navigating onstage and offstage gender identities. Are trans\* singers' specific contributions recognized?

#### 4. Results

The repertoire of all three singers is governed by voice type first, and by available repertoire second. Lucia Lucas, as a dramatic baritone, is predominantly singing 18th- and 19th-century male roles. She has debuted successfully as Wotan in *Die Walküre* in Magdeburg in late 2018, a role she cites as her dream role since before becoming a singer (Lucas n.d.). She made her U.S. debut as Don Giovanni in May 2019. Her repertoire (Lucas n.d.) has not changed through transitioning. Her fixed contract in Karlsruhe, where she was under contract during her transition, was not extended following a change in management, citing vocal reasons (Opitz 2017). While Lucas continues to be booked both nationally and internationally, she arguably sang in bigger houses before transitioning.

Adrian Angelico's website begins his biography with his 2014 debut at the Royal Opera House (Angelico n.d.). It makes no mention of female roles, although there are two early photos of him in female roles in his photo gallery. The website of his management adds that he "also sings female roles in the mezzo range", lists his prior last name, and cites an interpretation of Carmen that occurred pre-transitioning (Stellis Polaris n.d.). Angelico now sings primarily male roles in mezzo range, especially the late-19th- and early-20th-century trouser role repertoire originally written for female singers. He is booked by high-profile venues (Royal Opera House, Elbphilharmonie Hamburg) internationally. Repercussions or discrimination in casting related to his transition cannot be assessed, since Angelico chooses not to address transitioning in his narrative. His management's website, however, prominently cites a 2017 review for his Marquise de Merteuil in *Quartett*, a role that switches back and forth between male and female presentation. The review explicitly praises Angelico for being uniquely qualified for this role (Stellis Polaris n.d.). Angelico's Operabase page goes back only to 2015 (Angelico 2019) and lists female, male and—with Merteuil—genderqueer parts. If Angelico has been offered female roles since presenting as male, it is possible that he has rejected these offers. Likewise, it is possible that no such offers have been made.

Aiden K. Feltkamp studied as a mezzo-soprano and was transitioning at the time this paper was written; they present as transgender nonbinary (Feltkamp n.d.). Their work is centered around writing and educating, although they continue to sing, chronicling openly the changes and challenges of switching fach and register due to testosterone. Their repertoire pre-transitioning included both female roles (Donna Elvira in *Don Giovanni*, Ottavia in *L'incoronazione di Poppea*) and trouser roles



(Cherubino, Hänsel, Valletto in *L'incoronazione di Poppea*). Additionally, they have sung queer roles in New Music, such as Elizabeth in Griffin Candey's *Sweets for Kate*.

Feltkamp's repertoire has changed completely due to their transitioning, as their voice range has moved from mezzo-soprano to now bass-baritone. Feltkamp also addresses the change in technical approach brought on by the changes of their vocal chords: "(T)he mechanism that I've spent years training as a mezzo-soprano feels and operates completely differently since hormone replacement therapy caused it to change." (Feltkamp 2019b) Feltkamp, of the three singers considered here, is the only one who has gone through a fundamental change of voice range and technique. It is, in their case, impossible to discern repertoire changes and discrimination in casting within the same voice type. They had not previously debuted anywhere on the denser European opera circuit but had positioned themselves as an advocate for inclusive New Music within a field that both gives them agency and is inclusive of their being trans\* nonbinary.

A similar story of a change of voice range after having completed an education as a mezzo-soprano is that of Holden Madagame (Madagame n.d.), who now trains as a tenor and was featured in 2017 as one of the participants of Glyndebourne's diversity-oriented young artist's Academy (Madagame 2017).

The second complex of questions addressed trans\* narratives in relation to gender and voice.

Both Lucia Lucas and Aiden K. Feltkamp describe themselves as trans\* activists. They also appear in New Music performances that center explicitly queer and trans\* perspectives. They are both very open about their transitioning processes; Lucia Lucas in particular has shared personal aspects of her journey such as facial operations that could be linked to technical aspects of singing but are not usually framed this way. Press coverage of Lucas uses this personal angle as an avenue of positive identification. A 2017 *Stern* feature spins a melodramatic but very supportive tale that echoes 1940s film star and queer icon Zarah Leander in describing Lucas as a "woman singing in a dark baritone voice" (Opitz 2017). In an interview with *GCN*, Lucia Lucas connected her own to other trans\* stories (Quigley 2017). Her *Accent* portrait (Nurnberg 2017) is accompanied by a series of body-positive photos that prevent exploitation through taking agency. Lucas owns her being trans\* so openly that misrepresentation is difficult to be construed. While she does not address the situation for trans\* people in the opera industry on a systematic level, she does so for her own repertoire and separates onstage and offstage gender expression: "Lucia Lucas spent so long trying to play a boy/man in real life, she is adept at playing men and is always happy to play a man onstage (so long as she doesn't have to play one in real life). She welcomes the majority of her work to be masculine presenting and her personal life to remain personal." (Lucas n.d.) Press coverage of her Don

Giovanni debut did connect on- and offstage gender performance in an NBC article in a sensationalizing, but ultimately positive way (Eaton 2018).

Like Lucas, Feltkamp openly discusses their transition, which they frame as an ongoing journey (Feltkamp 2019a). They situate their story within the mechanisms of the opera industry and actively work toward a more inclusive future through educating other opera professionals (Feltkamp 2018). Feltkamp displays their early mezzo-soprano repertoire on their website (Feltkamp n.d.), which may also be linked to general visibility. As they are only beginning to build a repertoire for their new voice range, there is not much else to be displayed yet. Since they move largely out of the mainstream opera circuit and within New Music that more easily undoes gender conventions of mainstream repertoire, they are situated within a context that makes exploitation of their trans\* identity less likely. In addition, much like with Lucia Lucas, their openness partially prevents misrepresentation.

Adrian Angelico does not address his transition or his prior career on any of his official outlets. His website's tagline is simply "male operatic mezzo-soprano" (Angelico n.d.). Merely his management's website mentions his being assigned female at birth (Stellis Polaris n.d.). If not for the late romanticist repertoire he sings, he might at first glance be taken for a cisgender countertenor. Angelico is not visibly involved in trans\*-related activism, though it could be argued that living recognizably as a trans\* person is already an act of activism. Through choosing not to address his transition as much, it is possible that Angelico is more vulnerable to misrepresentation and exploitation. Notably, one of two stills chosen by Den Norske Opera to promote their 2019 *Rosenkavalier* shows Angelico as Octavian in bed with the Princess Werdenberg—a common iconographic choice—with a wide-open shirtfront that capitalizes on his surgically altered body (Den Norske Opera 2018). Moreso, Angelico's being cast in the semi-staged *Fledermaus* at Elbphilharmonie Hamburg in 2018 raises questions as to him being fetishized as a trans\* person. He was pigeonholed into the traditionally flamboyant gender performance of the trouser role of Prince Orlofsky, placed in an outfit that more resembled a dress, with reviews describing him as "confusingly androgynous" (Hamburger Abendblatt 2018) and having a "subtly lascivious physicality" (Nellissen 2019). These descriptions echo an idea of gender as originated by a cisgendered body and not through a performance that is then temporarily covered by another layer of performance for the stage.

My third and final set of question is concerned with the wider perspective of gender performativity in opera and navigating onstage and offstage ascriptions.

Lucia Lucas, due to her voice range and type, is singing primarily male roles, which she matter-of-factly addresses: She would be excellently trained, through her personal experience, to present as male (Angelico, perhaps echoing her, uses the same argument in a 2017 interview: He would have ample training in presenting as female (Nygaard 2017)). It could hence be argued that a specific trans\* contribution

is singled out here. Clearly, Lucia Lucas does not see her femininity destabilized by appearing onstage as a man, and she frames stage performance as separate from offstage identity in terms of gender.

Lucas has, in the *stadttheater* system, gained the broadest repertoire among the singers discussed here (Lucas 2019). Changing her learned repertoire based on paralleling her gender onstage would limit her job opportunities drastically, as there are barely any female roles written in baritone range in the mainstream repertoire. Lucas would, in that case, have to rely on adaptations and New Music written specifically for female baritones. Lucas' repertoire is framed differently than cross-casting. It illustrates how the operatic convention of cross-casting is actually confined to very specific eras and parts. It is generally based on binary-sexed bodies for a commentary across the fourth wall, such as having (presumably) female singers take on marginalized masculinities, or framing female roles embodied by (presumably) male singers as ridiculous or unnatural.

Aiden K. Feltkamp positions themselves as a creator of inclusive new opera as well as a consultant the industry, eschewing questions of a limited repertoire. Their questioning of the fach system (Feltkamp 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d) does not argue from a viewpoint of historic variability, but from the personal experience of vocal change that is not limited to a trans\* experience. Likewise, it does not mirror all trans\* singers' experiences: Both Lucia Lukas and Adrian Angelico continue to sing in their trained range and fach. Feltkamp points out that the rigidity of the fach system limits cisgender and transgender singers alike. They give the common example of a mezzo-soprano moving into soprano fach and offer a performer's perspective on the casting process. Citing prior repertoire would cast into doubt the new voice fach; omitting repertoire would mean less visibility of qualifications (Feltkamp 2019a).

Feltkamp also addresses the issue of gender paralleling and cross-casting. They highlight how in the hurried and conventionalized process of auditioning, a difference between gender presentation (in their case, as trans\*masculine) and listed repertoire (in their case, mostly female mezzo-soprano roles) could easily result in not being considered as a contender for a role (Feltkamp 2019a).

Feltkamp moves beyond the issue of cross-casting when they question the gendered matrix of the fach system at large. They suggest instead a classification that allows for fluidity without centering gender: listing tonal range from 1 (low bass voice) to 12 (high soprano range), with adding qualifiers of timbre and heft. These could then be traced on flexible scales of "lyric" to "flexible", of "light" to "dramatic" (Feltkamp 2019d). How adjectives such as "lyric" carry gendered semantics would be a topic for a follow-up discussion. Feltkamp themselves does mention the difficulty of untangling vocal color from gender (Feltkamp 2019c), though using established vocabulary from within the industry allows for easier applicability.

As a nonbinary performer, Feltkamp does not position themselves explicitly regarding repertoire they would take on or not in relation to gender. They address their vocal journey beyond limits of gender (Feltkamp 2019c). Their focus on such flexibility to accommodate voice changes and to create new inclusive repertoire is not limited to trans\* voices, but Feltkamp's specific trans\* expertise is recognized by the community and the local and national industry (Feltkamp 2018).

The onstage gender identities taken on by Adrian Angelico largely align with his offstage gender presentation. In that, it parallels a pattern of most cisgender singers, in particular that of cisgender men. Cross-casting is addressed differently here, as Angelico sings a repertoire written for cisgender women as an embodiment of marginal masculinities. It is a power imbalance that he, as a male singer, calls into sight as well as into question. Angelico has gone on record saying that he would also sing female roles again, "in drag": "I have a life-long experience pretending to be a woman ( . . . ) Just hand me some fake boobs and a wig, then I'll 'drag' for you" (Nygaard 2017, 00:02:14). This quote is taken from a short 2017 TV featurette on NRK, conducted by Arnfinn Nygaard and filmed around Angelico's debut as Adrian Angelico, in the role of the Composer in Strauss' *Ariadne auf Naxos* in Bodø.

The featurette at least partially reifies a normative essentialized gender binary in asking Angelico prominently about his top surgery and mentioning his prior name. It also shows him presenting as female prior to his transition in a glittering evening gown during a concert performance. Angelico is also asked how he feels about being in the men's dressing room (Nygaard 2017, 00:00:34) and whether he would now be "finally" his "complete self on stage" (Nygaard 2017, 00:05:21). This implies that an offstage/onstage gender parallel is mandatory and ties onstage interpretation to offstage presentation in a problematic manner. A different issue would be a trans\* singer wishing to focus on repertoire paralleling their gender, which none of the singers featured in this paper have expressed.

An aspect touched upon in passing is transitioning under future contracts. Angelico and his management had to inform houses that the singer they had booked was a man and would fulfill the engagement now presenting as such. It is not mentioned whether Angelico has lost contracts due to his transition. Neither is it addressed whether he is not cast for specific roles any longer. His contributions as a trans\* singer are not explicitly reflected in the materials available, although the director of the Bodø opera, Katharina Jakhelln Semb, is asked in the video feature whether the opera industry is "ready for transgender singers". Semb answers slowly, weighing her words. Her answer is: "It simply has to be." (Nygaard 2017, 00:04:16)

## 5. Discussion

### *Careers and Transitioning*

As the analysis of the various media materials shows, experiences of trans\* singers differ greatly. Any conclusions drawn in this discussion should thus not

be taken as applying to trans\* singers at large. Commonly shared influences on career trajectories are, foremost, whether transitioning entails a change of voice range, which does not only change the repertoire, but also technique. As Feltkamp puts it, “I’d expected the change from my ‘female’ voice box to a testosterone-affected one to be more like learning how to play the violin after playing the cello. Instead, it’s much more like giving up the cello for the trumpet” (Feltkamp 2019c).

Other factors are the sites of a career (such as high-profile international houses, a stable community theatre contract or avantgarde work outside the mainstream industry) and the point in time in relation to the career. Lucia Lucas was already established as a baritone when she transitioned and held a stable position. Angelico transitioned within running contracts. Feltkamp worked outside the house system. This also relates to geographies. Job opportunities for opera are denser in Europe, whereas influence of conservative donors in a largely privatized opera industry, as mentioned by Lucas (Quigley 2017), can be an added risk of losing work.

Repertoire beyond voice range is another site affected by transitioning. Singers who are well-established in New Music, or who in general have an established concert career beyond the opera stage, may experience fewer repercussions than singers who are anchored in the mainstream opera repertoire of the late 18th to early 20th century with its rigid gender conventions.

### *Rethinking Repertoire*

While trans\* roles for trans\* singers are created in contemporary music, trans\* singers need not be confined to New Music. Neither need they be confined to trans\* and nonbinary roles, though individual singers might choose to do so.

Beyond the important issue of creating new and more diverse opera that also counteracts the sexism and racism inscribed into many of the industry’s conventions, trans\* and nonbinary singers can inspire fresh perspectives on existing works. This, in turn, could lead to more trans\* representation not just in singers, but also in roles portrayed. Roles in Early Baroque opera may more easily be read as genderfluid or nonbinary, but smart staging concepts are discovering new ways to interrogate gender also in the mainstream canon, which may contain more queer history than we know of.

A hundred years ago, the early-20th-century Handel revival in Germany overwhelmingly transposed male parts in mezzo range to tenor or baritone. Now, such practice of moving range would be frowned upon. This example illustrates that casting conventions do change: They reflect societal realities. Likewise, the castrato singers of the Baroque age explicitly replaced falsettists, yet today, falsettists are overwhelmingly singing castrato repertoire. Whether it should matter whom parts were originally written for—in gender and vocal color—is another question that builds a framework for casting. Since the contexts of earlier works, their conventions,

and their conceptualizations of gender (for both artists and audiences) cannot be reproduced, a narrative of ‘true origin’ will always be unstable.

While there is an established repertoire of male and genderfluid roles in high voice range, female and genderqueer roles written for low voice range appear more frequently in Early Baroque repertoire. They are only rare occurrences in 19th and early-20th-century repertoire. In early 21st century contemporary music, parts are beginning to be written specifically for trans\* voices, such as the part of Caitlin Jenner in Dana Kaufman’s *Opera Kardashian* (Johanson 2018), which Kaufmann insists be cast only with trans\* women. In this, she creates a space for trans\* voices and highlights trans\* qualifications.

### *Gender and Performance*

Rethinking repertoire for trans\* singers does have a ripple effect in framing onstage gender performance at large. Can stage gender be thought completely apart from offstage gender, as Barba states in the context of theatre anthropology? Barba understands anybody on stage as a neutral entity that only then begins to create its meanings, including gender (Barba 1995, p. 9). Or would offstage and onstage performances commenting on each other also be a powerful tool to frame issues of social justice?

As long as the commenting level is not a tokenization that takes away agency or exploits marginalized identities, both approaches can coexist. Opera roles should be cast based on voice. Opera casting should not prioritize elements like gender, race, body type or disabilities of the singer. Nonetheless, casting conventions, in their biases, also invite reflection that could possibly be echoed in social change. Concordantly, opera’s self-narrative of gender inclusiveness needs to be interrogated further. While there are genderfluid roles and non-cisgender casting practices, the overwhelming majority of the repertoire is still strictly gendered as male or female and cis-cast, which also obscures earlier flexibilities.

Bubbles of established gender transgression—such as the trouser repertoire or the older turn-about wet nurse parts in Early Baroque opera—are confined to a limited repertoire that does not belong to mainstream canon. In addition, practices of cross-casting still rely heavily on a binary gender opposition and tend to exclude trans\* and nonbinary singers.

Gender conventions in opera do extend beyond the stage and heavily govern not only auditions, but also competitions. There, the expected gender presentation is not just cisgender, but also highly standardized, allowing little to no leeway in questions of hairstyle, dress or movements. An upper middle-class, white setting is entrenched in this and is equally problematic.

### *Increasing Inclusiveness*

It is no coincidence that all three singers discussed in this article are white or white-passing (Adrian Angelico is sometimes introduced as Sámi-Norwegian,

marking his identity as a member of the ethnic minority of the Sámi (Nygaard 2017); the briefly mentioned Holden Madagame identifies as Native American (Madagame 2017)) and work on the Western opera circuit. Opera is still overwhelmingly white and elite as an industry. Additionally, while addressing the situation of trans\* singers is a central issue at this moment, it is notable that none of the trans\* opera singers more widely present in the media is a person of color. Within the European hegemony of ethnicities, it is telling that there are no Eastern European or Southern European names on the map.

Opera casting largely disregards age, though women may be placed at different disadvantages depending on their voice type and repertoire. Nevertheless, in particular in dramatic repertoire, singers will most often be older than the age they have to portray onstage. This productive separation of onstage and offstage presentations does offer a casting framework to also address issues of race, ethnicity, and gender.

Nonetheless, while casting is slowly becoming more racially and ethnically diverse (which raises issues of unequal pay and orientalist stereotyping), conventional stagings of 19th-century canon works still largely fetishize non-white and non-Western roles and continue to blackface or whitewash them. How the axis of gender in opera will be affected and possibly reframed by a growing presence of trans\* singers remains to be seen. How these changes will intersect with issues of race and age should be equally considered by the industry and in scholarly work.

## **6. Conclusion**

This paper set out to trace how the construction of vocal gender is heavily tied into a historical gender binary, an issue musicological research has not yet addressed sufficiently from a trans\*-inclusive perspective. Examining media (self-)representation of three trans\* singers, my analysis then tried to glean how trans\* singers are challenging the opera industry within a greater context of vocal gender, and gender as performance.

All examples cited in this paper are recent. The singers discussed were born in the 1980s; they transitioned between 2014 and 2019, in years with a higher media presence of trans\* people than previously in many Western countries. Transitioning did have an impact on their careers. It did mean work in smaller houses, without a stable contract or with a smaller repertoire. In the case of Feltkamp, it even meant not working primarily as a singer. When discussing the change in discursive framework that trans\* singers bring to gender performance in opera, it should be remembered that this change involves trans\* singers risking their professional livelihoods. Lucia Lukas, Adrian Angelico, and Aiden K. Feltkamp have all stated that being who they are is ultimately more important to them than their opera careers (Feltkamp 2019a; Nygaard 2017; Nurnberg 2017). What if they could have both, though?—“More

and more trans artists are realizing that they can be both trans and an opera singer, something I once believed impossible,” Feltkamp writes (Feltkamp 2019a). Opera as the proverbial impossible art form may indeed have proven a beacon for queer artists precisely because it makes the affective performativity of gender perceptible.

Trans\* singers highlight issues of vocal and physical change that affect all singers. A more flexible framework of thinking voices and voice types would benefit singers at large. It would offer a chance to untangle opera casting from an early-20th-century construction of vocal gender that is, in its essentialism, already defied by the variety of repertoire from different centuries performed today. Trans\* singers are dismantling fictions of essentialized gender that limit artistic expression and scope of roles for all singers. When Lucia Lucas stars as Don Giovanni in 2019, her offstage gender identity should, on the one hand, not influence opinions on her onstage portrayal. On the other hand, casting Don Giovanni with a woman in the age of #MeToo is perhaps the most forward way to investigate the romanticized umbra of the role: a way that requires a female baritone.

Moving forward, the presence of trans\* singers offers a chance to rethink gendered implications of the fach system, to design inclusive contemporary music, and to develop more diverse staging concepts for established repertoire.

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