Children in Opera: Sociological and Musicological Trends

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Abstract : In many ways, opera is not a natural domain for children. It is hardly surprising that from the thousands of works, comparatively few include roles for children. There are several possibilities for this, the dramatic themes in opera are often about the human condition from the adult perspective; the need for developed voices to project in large, theatrical spaces underpinned by orchestral accompaniment does not naturally suit the child's voice, and enabling children to cope with long runs of performances on top of their education requires vocal and physical stamina. In more recent times, the involvement of children contributes another layer of difficulty in terms of having access to young singers while adhering to laws that protect their working rights. Despite these points, children have been in opera since its inception in a variety of ways, but their contribution is often undervalued or ignored by musicologists and even the industry itself. In this paper, the phenomenon of children in opera from the late 16th century to the present day is explored through empirical, socio-musicological observations with reference to score analysis. Conclusions are drawn regarding the changing attitudes of composers when scoring for children's voices in relation to societal developments. From the use of 'kindertruppen' in the pre-enlightenment period to Handel's virtuosic writing for William Savage, to the darkness of the inter-war eras which saw a proliferation of operatic characters for children and the post-war era which saw children as the new frontier of building audiences for opera, the links between changes in society and the inclusion, portrayal and scoring for children in opera are largely congruent.