

## Research Article

# Trouser roles in Turkish opera<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

In the early stages of opera, castratos assumed female roles thanks to their physical appearance and voice, instead of women who cannot and were forbidden to go on stage. Since the era of castratos came to an end, mezzo-sopranos and contraltos that constitute the vocal types suitable for the roles previously played by castratos started playing those roles. The study concerns the state of trouser roles that all mezzo-soprano and contralto singers come across in their opera careers and how singers in Turkey prepare for these roles. Volunteering mezzo-sopranos from the Istanbul venue of the State Opera and Ballet were interviewed during the pandemic. Consulting with some experts, a semi-structured interview form was prepared. As for the research model, this is a case study. The responses of the participants were transcribed. The themes and sub-themes of the responses are presented in the paper with an inductive approach. The data were analyzed with descriptive and content analyses. Results show that trouser roles are very common in Turkey as with the rest of the world and that mezzo-sopranos make much effort physically, psychologically, and musically to do justice to their roles.

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### Introduction

Female singers started to play the male roles towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Prior to this, male performers had taken the female roles or parts composed for women since women were not allowed to sing in the church or go on stage in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. This is why historically, it took some time for women in opera to start performing on stage. As women were performing very well on stage and doing a great job in the roles of castratos who had started to disappear, opera acquired a new repertory.

The art of opera emerged as a branch of performance art in the 16<sup>th</sup> century as the interludes called '*intermezzo*' attracted more attention than the main play. Intermezzos that are not independent plays had the parts that exist in the current opera, such as solo, chorus, and ballet. The opera called '*Dafne*' composed by Jacopo Peri (1562-1633) is accepted as Da the first opera in the history of opera. *Dafne*, composed based on the lyrics by the composer and poet Rinuccini and combining the Greek art of narrative with music, was first staged at Palazzo Corsi in Florence. After the success of *Dafne*, whose scores are missing today, Jacopo Peri was asked to compose another opera to honor the wedding of Marie de Medici and Henry IV of France. Peri composed *Euridice* that was again based on the lyrics by the poet Rinuccini. The opera was staged in 1600 and its scores were published the same year. Another composer, Giulio Caccini (1548-1618) wrote other versions of *Dafne* and *Euridice* after seeing the success of Peri's operas, which established the modern opera. With their pieces, Monteverdi, Scarlatti, and Perlogesi who were the important opera composers at the time contributed to the development of opera that can be considered as the Renaissance of Italian music. This era of the history of Opera is when the beauty of the singer's voice and virtuosos came into prominence. However, female roles were performed by the male singers called "*castratos*" because women cannot play those roles due to the pressure from the Church. These boys called castratos were castrated to raise as sopranos or altos. The first castratos recorded performed in the cities of Ferrara and Rome between the years 1550 and 1560 (Heriot, 1974: 87). The castration operation was performed before the child hits puberty. The

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aim of the operation was to maintain the voice of the boys before puberty, protecting it against the effect of the androgenic hormone. Castratos were in the center of focus due to being the most popular and earning the most money amongst European musicians in the 17th and 18th centuries. Castratos existed not only in Italy but also in Spain and some cities of Southern Germany. Castratos gave way to the birth of the opera form called '*opera seria*' (serious opera). They were the ones that used 'bel canto', the method of singing beautifully, the best and they attracted more attention than the romantic opera stars of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The two important castratos of the time were Pier Francesco Tosi and Giovanni Battista Mancini. As of 1740, castration operations were increasingly rebuffed, hence, the number of castratos got quite low in the mid 17th century (Heriot, 1974: 91). Castration was forbidden by a law enacted by the Sistine Chapel in the Apostolic Palace in Rome after the unification of Italian states in 1861. Although castratos were banned by Pope Leo XIII to sing in the church, they continued singing until the end of the century. In 1902, the Sistine Chapel banned castratos for good, which ended the era of castratos.

### Trouser Roles

After the French Revolution, the presence of women on the stage began to be accepted as a result of the enlightenment in opera, as in other fields. Italian composers composed operas with roles that needed to be adapted for female artists, who used to be mostly in minor roles during the era of castratos. Today, female singers, especially mezzo-sopranos play the roles of father, warrior king, and lover since the era of castratos is over. After this era, women assumed the roles previously played by castratos, under the name of 'trouser roles'. The deep female voice is more similar to the voice of a young man than a mature male voice. The timber of the female voice is preferred because it sounds younger in these roles. For this reason, the mezzo-soprano and contralto voice types are more convincing in young male roles. Although it was initially found disturbing by the audience when the male roles were sung by a woman, the female voice preference of composers and playwrights later turned into a common idea with the disappearance of castratos. Composers used to think that there were no vocally-trained young men who could deliver the grace of a young man's role. Thus, trouser roles had an important position in the repertoire of mezzo-sopranos and opera at the time.



**Photo 1.**

*Simone McIntosh as Prince Orlofsky in Opera McGill's Die Fledermaus (Trouser Role)*

### Turkish Opera

The interest in opera that is mentioned in the journals of the Ottoman ambassadors in Europe first emerged in 1797, during the reign of Selim III. Subsequent to Verdi's operas performed in Italy, they were also performed in Istanbul. After the Republic of Turkey was founded, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk made a musical revolution. On the basis of the state music policy, the first Teachers School of Music was established in Ankara. Afterward, *Dariilehan* ('the Tune House') was founded in İstanbul. These developments were significant steps towards a hopeful future for composers and performers in opera. The first opera of the Republic of Turkey was the opera titled *Özsoy*, which was composed by Ahmet Adnan Saygun upon the visit of the Iranian Shah Riza Pahlavi in 1934. The composer then composed the operas *Taş Bebek* and *Bayönder*. Seeing the success of the first national operas, the Ministry of National Education started working on the establishment of a state conservatory in Ankara with the directives of Atatürk. To this end, the famous German composer Poul Hindemith and theater director Carl Ebert were invited to Ankara. According to the report that was the product of the investigation by the two invitees, the very first state conservatory classes were opened in the same institution, with the participation of some young, talented people who were selected among the students of the Teachers School of Music in 1936. A law enacted in 1940 suggested the organization of the conservatory in nine branches, six of which were musical arts and three of which were performing arts. Over time, they developed into a new state institution with the branches of performing arts, theater, opera, and ballet (Okuyay,

2013: 15). Ankara State Conservatory, which operated under the Ministry of Culture and Tourism until 1982, was included in the scope of the Higher Education Institution in the same year and connected to [Hacettepe University](#).



**Photo 2.**

*Ankara State Conservatory*

### **Opera Institutions in Turkey**

The State Opera and Ballet was administered under the management of the State Theaters until 1958 and remained a department of the State Theaters until 1970. In 1970, the State Opera and Ballet was assigned to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism as an "Affiliate" in accordance with the "Establishment Law" and was named the General Directorate of State Opera and Ballet. The State Opera and Ballet was the cultural reflection of the new modern Turkish society that emerged in 1923 as a completely new idea. The Ankara venue of the State Opera and Ballet was established as the center of the institution, with the 'establishment law' dated 1970 and numbered 1309. Opera and Ballet Ensemble in Istanbul, which had been continuing its activities as a separate local organization since 1960, was also connected to the central structure as a branch under the name of Istanbul State Opera and Ballet Directorate in 1970. Later, İzmir (1982), Mersin (1990), Antalya (1997), and Samsun (2008) Directorates were established as separate units and connected to the center in Ankara (Özhancı, 2009: 202). Then, various operas from world literature -past and present- began to be produced in the Turkish opera stages, the number of which reached six. In these operas, the artists who took on the roles at issue tried to interpret this in the most beautiful way, both technically and visually, with great effort. Any role in any opera was to be analyzed psychologically, socially, and philosophically to do justice to the role even though elements reflecting the period of the opera such as costume, make-up, hair-wig, directions, decor, and light helped a lot. It is an indisputable fact that every role is difficult and requires great effort. Among these roles, trouser roles in which female artists take on a male role, have greater difficulty in order to play a character of the opposite sex. This study was carried out especially to investigate the situation of mezzo-sopranos playing trouser roles in operas in Turkey. The questions of this study concern what roles participants play, the preparation processes of the roles, the costume design, and interpretations of trouser roles.

### **Research Questions**

The aim of this study to examine the opinions of opera singers who have played trouser roles in Turkey about the processes of performing these roles. The main research question is the following:

- What are the views of opera singers in Turkey about trousers?

The other questions of the study are:

- What are the opinions of the opera singers in Turkey about the operas in which they played a trouser role?
- What are the opinions of the opera singers in Turkey about the preparation processes for trouser roles?

## **Method**

### **Research Model**

This is a case study based on qualitative analysis. A case study is carried out in a natural environment such as a classroom, a neighborhood, or an organization. It aims at a holistic interpretation of the environment or events that are the subject of the study (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2000: 190). Research conducted by means of case study scanning models provides more detailed and realistic information than those conducted by means of general scanning models. Case studies make it easier to observe the possible 'why's and 'how's of events. This is why, in cases where general surveys seem insufficient, case studies are performed (Karasar, 2000: 86). In the current study, the data were collected in a semi-structured interview form.

## Participants

Four mezzo-soprano soloists who are on the permanent staff of the Istanbul State Opera and Ballet took part in the study. Participants were selected based on the purposive sampling method. By doing so, the aim was to collect data from opera singers who often play trouser roles in Turkey.

**Table 1.**

*Demographics of the Participants*

P.No	Institution	Title	Gender	Age	Rank
P1	Istanbul State Opera and Ballet	Soloist	Female	32	State artist
P2	Istanbul State Opera and Ballet	Soloist	Female	45	State artist
P3	Istanbul State Opera and Ballet	Soloist	Female	35	State artist
P4	Istanbul State Opera and Ballet	Soloist	Female	38	State artist

## Data Collection Tools

### Semi-structured Interview Form

In order to elicit the opinions of the opera singers about the trouser roles, considering the important points in these roles determined based on the literature, the interview questions were prepared. These questions were shown to two field experts to get their opinions. Accordingly, necessary corrections were made and the form was finalized. The semi-structured interview form consists of 10 questions (See [Appendix 1](#)).

### Data Analysis

The data were analyzed by means of content and descriptive analysis methods. First of all, the opinions of the opera singers were collected and transcribed into text. With the inductive approach, the themes and sub-themes are presented in tables.

## Results and Discussion

In this section, the answers to the questions asked to the participants were subjected to content analysis thematically. It is shown in tables.

**Table 2.**

*Views of Participants' Concerning Performed Trouser Roles*

Theme 1: Title of the Opera and Name of the Character		f	Quote
<b>Sub-theme 1. Baroque Opera Works</b>			
Giulio Cesare in Egitto	Giulio Cesare	3	"I played the role of Cesare." (P2)
	Sesto	1	"The first role I played was Sesto." (P3)
Orfeo ed Euridice	Orfeo	2	"It was the second role I played." (P4)
<b>Sub-theme 2. Classical Opera Works</b>			
Le Nozze di Figaro	Cherubino	2	"Cherubino is a role I played from the classical era." (P1)
<b>Sub-theme 3. Romantic Opera Works</b>			
I Capuletti e I Montecchi	Romeo	4	"The role that I played the most was Romeo." (P2)
Les contes d'Hoffmann	Nicklausse	2	"The first trouser role in my career was Nicklausse" (P1)
Hansel und Gratel	Hansel	1	"My first child role was Hansel." (P4)
Die Fledermaus	Prince Orlovsky	2	"Orlovsky was my first trouser role in an operetta." (P3)
Lucrezia Borgia	Maggio Orsini	1	"Orsin was my third role." (P3)
Der Rosenkavalier	Octavian	2	"The last role I played was this." (P4)
Ariadne of Naxos	The Composer	1	"From the late romantic period operas, I played the Composer." (P2)

It can be seen from Table 2 that 3 sub-themes emerged from a theme of opera works and characters. These are opera works from the Baroque, Classical, and Romantic periods, respectively. When we look at the table, we see that all of the artists played the character of "Romeo" from the opera I Capuletti e I Montecchi.



**Table 3.***Participants Views about the Preparation Process of Trouser Roles*

Theme	f	Quote
<b>1. The Preparation Process of Trouser Roles</b>		
<b>Sub-theme 1. Physical Preparation</b>		
<b>Observation</b>	4	"I start with observing men." (P1-P2-P3-P4)
<b>Masculine Posture</b>	4	"I try to understand how men stand, how they sit." (P1)
		"I start to observe men in social life." (P2-P4) "I grasp the male posture through long rehearsals." (P3)
<b>Hair and Make-up</b>	3	"... It takes long to do the hair and make-up." (P3) "My director wanted me to wear a wig." (P1-P2-P3)
		"Hair and make-up makes it easier to embody the role." (P1-P2-P3)
<b>Costume</b>	4	"The more detailed the costume is, the more realistic the acting is." (P1-P2-P3-P4)
		"It makes it easier for me to adapt to my role." (P1-P2-P3-P4) "It creates a comfort zone for my performance during the play." (P1-P2-P3-P4)
<b>Sub-theme 2. Psychological Preparation</b>		
<b>Character Analysis</b>	4	"I look at the literary work and try to understand my role." (P1-P2)
		"I consider whether my role is a good or bad character, and I embody it on stage accordingly." (P1-P2-P3-P4)
<b>Musical Preparation</b>	4	"I do musical exercises considering the special requirements of the period and the composer." (P1-P2-P3-P4)
<b>Purpose of the role in the work</b>	4	"I analyze the role looking at his sociological background, his age, and his social stratum." (P1-P2-P3-P4)

In Table 3, the opinions of the opera singers are put together under two themes related to the preparation for trouser roles. These two themes concern the physical and psychological preparation processes. Looking at the table, we can see that all of the participants made observations and mentioned the importance of masculine posture and costume. Three participants expressed their opinions about hair and make-up.

Pickard (2019:488) stated in his study that the physical preparation process is a very important factor in understanding and maturing trouser roles. The findings of the study show parallelism in this respect. In the sub-themes related to the psychological preparation process in the second theme, it is seen that all of the participants have a common opinion, and they all put emphasis on character analysis, musical preparation, and the purpose of the role in the work. On this issue, Pickard (2019) stated that female singers who play trouser roles need to believe in the role and understand the purpose of the roles they play in the work to understand their roles. It is understood that the participants whose opinions were taken went through similar processes with respect to the sub-themes. Thus, the findings of this study point to a common ground. For women, and especially the mezzo-soprano, roles with trousers are part of their lives as singers. Therefore, it is necessary to understand how the roles of trousers arise. In trouser roles, beyond singing like a man, it is very important to understand the function in the role and internalize the character (Iwamoto, 2012).

### Recommendations

Trouser roles encountered in the history of opera is an area that requires in-depth examinations with regard to the art of opera. In this study, the opinions of the mezzo-soprano soloist opera singers in Turkey who have played trouser roles before were collected. Looking at the answers of the participants during the interview, it is seen that the following trouser roles have been played: **Romeo** from "I Capuletti e I Montecchi" by V. Bellini, **Nicklausse** from "Les Contes d'Hoffmann" by J. Offenbach's, **Hansel** from "Hansel und Gretel" by E. Humperdinck, **Prince Orlovsky** from "Die Fledermaus" by J. Strauss, **Orfeo** from "Orfeo ed Euridice" by C. W. Gluck, **Cherubino** from "Le Nozze di Figaro" by W. A. Mozart, **Maggio Orsini** from "Lucrezia Borgia" by G. Donizetti, **Octavian** from "Der Rosenkavalier" by R. Strauss, **Giulio Cesare** and **Sesto** from "Giulio Cesare in Egitto" by G. F. Handel, and

**the Composer** from “Ariadne of Naxos” by R. Strauss. Among these roles, Romeo and Cherubino are the most played ones.

The opinions of the opera singers who have played trouser roles about the preparation processes of these roles suggest that they need to consider not only the expectations of the period or the composer of the work but also the physical, psychological, and sociological characteristics of the role they play. To this end, the participants were found to use especially the observation techniques in the physical preparation process, to plan how their character would act with respect to his age and stratum, to focus on the movement and posture of the character by observing the opposite sex, to watch former performances to form the physical appearance of the character. Also, it was found that they try to understand the psychology of the character by evaluating the physical features of the role in parallel with the wishes of the director. After starting to visualize the character in their minds, they try to physically teach the character they study to their body and rehearse it on stage in the light of the information regarding the costume, accessories, and hair deemed suitable for the character by the costume creator.

It has been found that everything that they think musically, in parallel with the physical characteristics of the role and the wishes of the director, affects the physical movement. In the psychological preparation processes, they primarily work on the text, learn about the composer and period of the subject, study the psychology of the character arising from his sociological background. Consequently, they reinforce their work according to the wishes of the director.

The participants emphasized that they make a preliminary evaluation by watching video recordings of the role, then they start thinking about the role to be interpreted. They stated that there are at least three cast members who play the same role and each interprets the role differently, which is because of the person's feelings. The participants state that they leave the idea that they are a woman the moment they step on the stage and focus on the male role, that they can easily return to their own persona when they get off the stage, but that when they focus too much on the role, they convince themselves that their role is male the way they walk changes and they use a lower vocal register. As for the musical preparation of the role, they learn their part thoroughly, they perform their roles by following the recording samples made before and considering the period of the piece, and the special requests of the composer. When it comes to the musical practice, if, for example, they are working on a baroque opera, they mostly perform baroque pieces. It has already been found that they delicately practice every musical sentence of the passages with technical agitation and pay attention to the style of the arias of the role, considering the aspects of the period of the opera.

The costumes of the role to be played help the singer sing accordingly to the gender to which she does not physically belong. While the make-up and hairstyle suitable for the male role change according to the period of the work, trousers that cover the delicate lines of the female body, boots suitable for these trousers, bandages that suppress the breast, and accessories are the physical details of the costumes. The costume and these details were considered to enable the singer to convince herself that she plays a male role, which is reflected in her physical appearance and voice. Thus, she can convey the role to the audience as well. It has also been observed that the participants do not push it too much to the point they look phony because it would repel the audience. Instead, they try to unravel their masculine side by means of the costume that psychologically help them. Although the experiences and preparation processes of the participants while playing trouser roles differ, they all aim to understand the psychology of these roles and to reflect the opposite sex with a real male feeling. In this case study, the data were collected from four participants. However, the action research method can be used to obtain more comprehensive data from participants who play trouser roles about all the processes they experience.

The following can be recommended to researchers who want to investigate this issue;

- Focus group interviews can be held with everyone involved in trouser roles.
- A large-scale survey study on the opinions of opera singers who take part in trouser roles all over Turkey can be conducted.
- Researchers should be experienced and knowledgeable about the preparation processes of opera singers who take part in trouser roles.

**Biodata of the Author**

**Lec. Elif Gülfem KISTIR (Ph.D)** was born in İzmir in 1978. She studied violin İzmir Anatolian Fine Arts High School. In 1996, she started studying Opera singing at Bilkent University Faculty of Music and Performing Arts, and graduated in 2001. She completed her master degree in Dokuz Eylül University İzmir State Conservatory. In 2010, She started to work as a lecturer in Dokuz Eylül University Buca Faculty of Education Department of Fine Arts Education. In 2014, She played trouser role of “Giulio Cesare” at İstanbul State Opera and Ballet and the same year she played the role of “Suzuki” at İzmir State Opera and Ballet. In May 2016, She played role of “Preziosilla” at İzmir State Opera and Ballet. Gülfem Kıstır continues her studies as a lecturer from Dokuz Eylül University Buca Faculty of Education Department of Fine Arts Education **Affiliation:**Dokuz Eylül University, Buca Faculty of Education, Department of Fine Arts Education, Izmir, Turkey. **E-mail:** [elif.kistir@deu.edu.tr](mailto:elif.kistir@deu.edu.tr) **ORCID:** 0000-0002-4990-3062

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**Internet Resource**

<http://www.konser.hacettepe.edu.tr>

<https://www.flare.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Simone-McIntosh-Opera>

## **Appendix 1.**

### *Interview Questions*

#### **Semi-structured Interview Questions**

1. How often are trouser roles performed in Turkish Opera?
2. How does the audience reacts when they hear a female voice and see a male profile in a trousers role?
3. How does speaking and acting in a role of the opposite sex affect you emotionally as a female singer?
4. How do you prepare for the roles psychologically and physically?
5. What are the advantages and disadvantages of appearing like a man on stage while playing a trouser role?
6. Which trouser role you played impressed you the most?
7. While preparing for these roles, how do you prepare for singing musically?
8. How does the costume design for trouser roles affect your performance physically?
9. While preparing for these roles, have you experienced psychological and physical changes in your daily life?
10. What do you pay attention to when playing these roles?