

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

OPERA

A Handel on history

BY STEVE DOW

PANTS would seem an unlikely choice for Australian mezzo-soprano Fiona Campbell. As the glam blonde opera singer in black skirt removes her heels and gamely stands on a chair at the photographer's whim, it's curious to imagine her as the prince Ariodante or the knight Ruggiero.

Yet opera has for centuries swirled confusion around sex and gender in some of its great arias. Many of these "pants roles" — women playing men — were originally written for men castrated before puberty, given the musical fashion of the day for stratospherically angelic voices, although today countertenor males, with their high voices but tackle intact, are sometimes cast too.

Having women be fellows on stage was historically part sexual allure — there struts a lady in a man's fancy leggings; nudge, nudge — and, in the case of opera at least, part realpolitik given the dimming of the castrati as baroque's supernovas.

But back in 1735, for instance, when Handel's operas *Ariodante* and *Alcina* premiered in London three months apart, the respective key roles of Ariodante and Ruggiero were filled by the famous castrato Giovanni Carestini.

"It's really fascinating stuff; it was quite barbaric," says the 40-year-old Perth-based Campbell, who will front a series of concerts, *Haunting Handel*, with the Australian Brandenburg Orchestra, involving several costume changes to segue from male to female and back again.

Consider the last two arias of the program. One moment, Campbell will be playing the Crusade leader's daughter Almirena from *Rinaldo*, Handel's first opera written for London, in 1711, singing the aria *Lascia ch'io Pianga*. That role was first occupied by soprano Isabella Girardeau; evidence that not for lack of big female voices did Handel cast the castrati.

Then, Campbell will be the vassal prince Ariodante from the three-part opera of the same name, singing *Dopo notte*, just as the neutered Carestini first did 276 years ago.

According to delicious legend, the tall, beautiful and majestic Carestini initially rejected the score of Handel's next opera, *Alcina*, as

below par. "You dog!" fumed the German-born composer. "You think you know better than I do what is best for you to sing? If you don't sing, I won't pay you."

But Handel needed his castrated prima donna, thus Carestini went on to star as Ruggiero in *Alcina* as planned. The castrati history "horrifies me", muses Campbell, in Sydney for rehearsals. "If they actually made it to those dizzy heights, they were the lucky few out of thousands of boys whose lives were ruined."

Some 4000 boys were castrated each year at the height of the castrati fashion; Italy finally banned the practice in 1870. "Of the few who made the prima donna status, when they got there that's all they had," says Campbell. "And they were teased quite mercilessly . . . they had long legs and extended ribs, which gave them tremendous breath ability. So they were kind of freaks."

Campbell will also play Ruggiero as Vivaldi imagined the knight, singing *Sol per te mio* (both Handel and Vivaldi worked from the same source, poet Ludovico Ariosto's 16th century epic *Orlando furioso*). She says the mezzo voice such as hers, deeper and thus a different colour to the "shimmering" soprano, allows an audience to suspend disbelief and imagine a young passionate male lover singing.

But there will be no prima donna antics for Campbell, the daughter of an electrician and school teacher, working-class Glaswegians who settled in Western Australia. Growing up, her mother insisted she learn piano. "For years, it was torturous and boring; I didn't see any relevance, it just seemed a chore to me."

It wasn't until her second year of studying at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts when her singing teacher said "maybe you could take this on professionally". It hadn't occurred to Campbell that she might make it as a singer; she wanted to be a conductor. But she switched her ambitions.

In the 1990s she spent several years honing her craft with the Glyndebourne Chorus in Britain, but her biggest break came in 2008 when US mezzo-soprano Susan Graham pulled out of two concerts with Jose Carreras, and Campbell took her place next to the Catalan tenor on a Tokyo stage.

Hence Campbell describes herself as a "late bloomer", and 2011 is one of her busiest concert schedules yet, with a new CD just released — *Baroque Duets*, with countertenor David Walker — and a solo CD awaiting release.

She is married to Brendon Ellmer, the general manager of the new \$100 million State Theatre Centre of Western Australia, which officially opened in January, and they have two children, son Alex, 10, and daughter Jasmine, almost nine.

"I'd love to live in Sydney, or in Melbourne," Campbell admits. "I always thought I'd live in Melbourne but the west has been very good to us. We've got a beautiful life there, but if an opportunity comes where we can move, we certainly will."

■ *Haunting Handel* will be performed in the Melbourne Recital Centre's Elisabeth Murdoch Hall on May 22 and 23. melbournerecital.com.au

Wearing the pants: Fiona Campbell is used to playing male roles.

PICTURE: MARCO DEL GRANDO



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