

Why critics who said opera singer was too heavy for role hit such a bum note

Reviewers caused a storm by implying Irish soprano Tara Erraught was too heavy for her role in a new production. Jessica Duchen says the incident may be a wake-up call for the opera world

26 May 2014

The critics reported Erraught in terms including "dumpy" and "puppy fat", arguing that her build made her unsuited to the "trouser role" of Octavian – a 17-year-old page boy embroiled in a passionate affair with an older woman – despite praise for her vocal accomplishments. In one furious rebuttal, the mezzo-soprano [Alice Coote](#) retorted: "OPERA is ALL about the voice."

How did we reach the point at which the visual element of opera threatens to carry more weight than the aural? As the TV presenter said to the tattoo artist, where do you draw the line?

Blame has been apportioned across the industry: the rise in importance of directors, as opposed to conductors; the popularity of HD cinema relays; the visual orientation of society in general.

A number of singers have risen to fame with "the whole package" of looks and voice: [Angela Gheorghiu](#), [Anna Netrebko](#), [Jonas Kaufmann](#) and [Juan Diego Florez](#), for instance. But that doesn't mean that the voice should not come first. Indeed, it has to come first – otherwise we might as well ditch the music and go to a fashion show.

Large female singers have long faced censure for their shape.

[Maria Callas](#) once lost 40kg in a year; in 2004, [Deborah Voigt](#) was dropped from the [Royal Opera House](#)'s production of Strauss's *Ariadne auf Naxos* because her character's costume, a little black dress, did not suit her size.

Scandal ensued. Voigt elected to have stomach-stapling surgery.

Questions were later voiced as to whether Callas and Voigt's voices had survived their changes of girth intact; extreme weight loss can affect the voice because of its impact on the muscles of the torso.

Both women were gambling with their entire *raison d'être*. No singer should be obliged to do that. Compared to the aforementioned ladies, incidentally, Erraught is not remotely oversized.

Opera's men do not face the same problem. Take the eponymous hero in Wagner's *Siegfried*. Like Octavian, he is probably meant to be about 17. But we don't generally hear

complaints about the hefty Heldenentors who sing him not looking like petulant adolescents. Consider this at leisure.

There's nothing in *Der Rosenkavalier* in any case to suggest that Octavian must be a conventional Adonis, rather than a cherubic, gawky boy. Why shouldn't the women in his life be attracted to personality rather than height? Besides, he spends half the opera disguised as a girl. Richard Jones' production offers a bright, sassy, postmodern approach, ditching every one of its tradition's sacred cows – Octavian included.

There's another side to this. The visual impact of opera is indeed vital; a critic has to be able to comment on the look of a production. Banning references to a singer's appearance would be counterproductive. Again, it is about drawing a sensible line.

It's tough at the top: any performer must learn to withstand the slings and arrows of outrageous criticism.

But in the end art has to be its own defence. Tara Erraught must have had a nasty shock, but ultimately it is her singing that will prove her worth.

As for the opera world, the incident may prove a wake-up call. Perhaps it is time to refocus priorities and put them back where they should be: on the voices.

And from now on, as Octavian stabs the ghastly Baron Ochs in the backside for treating his fiancée like a farmyard animal, perhaps an extra cheer or two will go up from the house.