

The Voice as a Character in Opera: Between Instrument, Identity and Dramaturgy

Elena HEBEISEN-MOŞUC¹

Abstract: *This article explores the voice in opera as a living musical instrument with a specific sonority, but also as an autonomous character, through the prism of my personal experience as a performer. Starting from my own repertoire in bel canto, Verdi and Puccini, the analysis highlights how timbre, register, agility and vocal expressiveness build the identity and psychology of the characters. In bel canto, agility and ornamentation serve to define the lyrical character and outline the scenic contrasts. In Verdi's operas, the voice is used to express drama and inner tensions, while in Puccini's work, emotional intensity and vocal crescendo function as narrative and dramaturgical elements. The voice is configured as a "parallel text" capable of revealing hidden emotions and tensions, capitalising on the interdependence between music and theatre through vocal performances. It becomes an actor, situated between instrument, identity and dramaturgy.*

Key-words: *opera, character, voice, instrument, identity, dramaturgy*

1. Introduction

In the history of music, few art forms have placed the human voice in such a complex and paradoxical light as opera. From the first Florentine attempts at the end of the 16th century, the lyrical genre has transformed the voice from a simple means of sound into a character in itself – a living instrument, situated at the border between body and idea, between sound and meaning. In opera, the voice is not only the expression of a stage role, but becomes a space of identity, a place where emotion and technique, reason and instinct, symbol and affect meet. In this tension, the voice takes on a dual nature: it is both a musical instrument and a dramaturgical entity, conveying emotion and meanings that go beyond the words of the libretto.

¹ PhD National University of Music Bucharest, elena.mosuc@bluewin.ch

Scarlatti and Caccini, with their innate vocal instinct, developed their considered theories from the sensations of sound they perceived while singing. They were artists who first made vocal history, and from vocal history directly emerged operatic history. They understood how to exclusively portray the living sound and its almost unlimited possibilities. Their high vocal culture inspired universally; and the human voice was more than just an artistic medium. It initiated – as has already been mentioned – truly works of art of considerable stature. For an initially unforeseeable period, the Italians succumbed to this phenomenal phenomenon, which emerged as both complex and breathtakingly exciting, but whose true roots lay in the all-conquering power of beautiful singing. It seemed as if the Italians understood this power as something unassailable and insurmountable”² (Roth 1993, 16).

From its beginnings, opera has been an art of synthesis: music, theatre, poetry and scenography come together in a common space, around the voice. Words become sound, and sound is transformed into theatrical emotion. In this context, the voice can no longer be treated as a mere instrument. It has its own stage presence, capable of creating meanings, defining identities and, sometimes, even undermining them. A timbre, a breath, an inflection can radically change the perception of a character – more than a director's instruction or a phrase from the libretto. Studying the voice as a “character” therefore requires a complex approach that goes beyond traditional musicological analysis and involves aesthetic, anthropological and semiotic dimensions.

At the heart of the lyrical experience, the voice becomes an act of self-revelation. The singer – whether soprano, tenor or baritone – does not merely render a score, but exposes their own sonic body, their own balance between the human and the ideal. The voice thus stands between two worlds: that of the instrument disciplined by technique and that of identity, charged with emotion and

² “Scarlatti und Caccini hatten mit ihrem angeborenen Gesangsinstinkt aus Klangempfindung, die sie beim eigenen Singen wahrnahmen, ihre überlegten Lehren entwickelt. Sie waren Künstler, die zuerst Gesangsgeschichte machten und aus der Gesangsgeschichte wurde unmittelbar jene Operngeschichte. Sie verstanden sich darauf, ausschliesslich den lebendigen Klang und seine schier unbegrenzten Möglichkeiten darzustellen. Ihre hohe Gesangskultur regte universell an; und die menschliche Stimme war mehr als nur ein künstlerisches Medium. Sie initiierte - auch davon bereits die Rede – wirklich Kunstwerke beachtlichen Format. Für eine zunächst nicht absehbare Zeit erlagen die Italiener dieser phänomenalen Erscheinung, die ebenso verwickelt wie atemberaubend spannend zutage trat, die aber ihre eigentliche Wurzel in der alles bezwingenden Kraft des schönen Gesanges hatte. Es sah so aus, als begriffen die Italiener diese Kraft als etwas Unangreifbares und Unüberwindliches” (Roth 1993,16). The author's translation in the text above.

singularity. From this confrontation arises the very dramaturgy of opera – a continuous tension between control and abandonment, between the sound that aspires to purity and the voice that claims the palpable presence of the body.

Opera has often been described as “total art”, the perfect synthesis of music, poetry and stage imagery. But at the heart of this grandiose construction lies the human voice. Not just as a technical means or support for a text, but as a living, autonomous force that sometimes becomes a character in its own right. From the first Baroque experiments to contemporary lyrical creations, the voice has fascinated, disturbed and shaped worlds. It is not just „what sings the role”, but a presence in itself: it has colour, breath, intention, and through these traits it takes on a life of its own. Fragile or monumental, transparent or incandescent, the voice is an invisible actor, capable of constructing and dismantling sound universes.

Overall, the “miracle” achieved by the Italians consisted in giving the human voice the character and perfection of a virtuosically mastered instrument. The seekers of the new bel canto certainly wanted to preserve perfection, but they also wanted to add a warmer vibrational component that moved in other, unquestionably 'more spiritual' dimensions. They wanted a beautiful singing style that was truly human – a bel canto that embodied the unity of word and sound, that enhanced and elevated the word, and that, when brought together, took hold of its comprehensible essence and could eliminate half the effect. Their efforts were directed towards singers who were sufficiently talented to preserve the natural sound in the interests of the dramatic idea”³ (Roth 1993, 18).

This article aims to explore how the voice becomes a true character in opera, transcending its strictly musical role to acquire dramatic and identity value. The analysis will be conducted in three directions: the voice as an instrument (in its relationship with the orchestra, technique and timbre), the voice as identity (in relation to gender, role and performer) and the voice as a dramaturgical vector,

³ „Im Ganzen betrachtet, bestand das von den Italienern vollbrachte „Wunder“ darin, der menschlichen Stimme den Charakter und die Vollkommenheit eines virtuos beherrschten Instrumentes gegeben zu haben. Die Sucher des *neuen* Belcanto freilich wollten die Perfektion erhalten, jedoch eine wärmere, sich in anderen, unbedingt „geistvolleren“ Dimension bewegende Schwingungskomponente hinzufügen. Sie wollten einen Schöngesang, der menschlich wahrhaftig sein sollte, - einen Belcanto, der die Einheit von Wort und Ton verkörpert, der das Wort er- bzw. überhöht, und der zusammengekommen seine begreif-Besitz ergreift, und die dazu angetan ist, eine *halbe* Wirkung zu eliminieren. Ihre Bemühung galt dem Sänger, der ausreichend begabt war, den natürlichen Klang im Interesse der dramatischen Idee zu bewahren“ (Roth 1993, 18). The author's translation in the text above.

capable of creating or dismantling scenic worlds through its mere sonic presence. We will look at the voice not only as a means of expression, but as a complex character with its own existence – technical, aesthetic and psychological – always in dialogue with the performer and the audience.

2. The voice – a character in opera

2.1. The voice as an instrument

Before being a means of expression, the voice is a mechanism. It belongs to the body, but in the context of opera, it is subject to a rigorous discipline that transforms it into an instrument with its own acoustic and aesthetic laws. “Vocal technique is not only a means of producing sound but a tool for expressing character and emotion on stage” (Ihunwo 2012, 15).

Since the days of the Camerata Fiorentina, the ideal of the “perfect” voice has been understood as a search for balance between nature and art – between the spontaneity of experience and the control of musical form. In this sense, the opera singer becomes a craftsman of sound: he shapes his breathing, resonance and articulation with the same precision with which a violinist tunes his instrument.

However, the voice differs from any other instrument in one essential way – it carries its sound material within its own body. The body becomes a space of resonance, and sound becomes an extension of an intimate, hybrid identity. For this reason, the voice cannot be completely objectified: even with the most perfect technical control, it remains imbued with the personality of the person producing it. Each singer thus possesses a unique „instrument”, determined not only by anatomy, but also by sensory, emotional and even biographical memory.

“Honest operatic performance involves bringing humanity's most natural musical instrument to dramatic development, making it representable and thus perceptible to the eye”⁴ (Roth 1993, 23).

In opera aesthetics, the voice as an instrument is part of a classification and hierarchy system: soprano, mezzo-soprano, tenor, baritone, bass – each category defines not only the register, but also a dramatic archetype. For example, the lyric soprano often carries innocence and tragedy, while the dramatic baritone embodies authority or conflict. This correspondence between timbre and character transforms the voice into a theatrical sign – a sound code that conveys the character's identity before they utter their first word.

⁴ „Zum ehrlichen Opernspielen gehört, das natürlichste Musikinstrument der Menschen zu dramatischer Entfaltung zu führen, es darstellbar und somit auch für das Auge wahrnehmbar zu machen” (Roth 1993, 23). The author's translation in the text above.

“The phenomenon of sound depends on many imponderables. And it requires excellent hearing if we want to be able to help and control it productively”⁵ (Roth 1993, 71).

From a technical point of view, the opera voice is a „humanised” orchestral instrument. It follows the same principles of projection, intonation and colour as the instruments in the orchestra, but possesses an unrivalled expressive freedom. The relationship between voice and orchestra is not one of subordination, but a dialogue of sound forces: the voice pierces the orchestral texture like a luminous thread, asserting its central presence. In the pages of Verdi, Puccini or Wagner, the orchestra not only accompanies the voice, but amplifies, contradicts or reflects it, thus giving rise to a lively dramatic flow. The voice, as an instrument, lives between two opposing impulses – that of control and that of freedom.

The true art of song has always been possessed and will always be possessed by such individuals as are endowed by nature with all that is necessary for it – that is, healthy vocal organs, uninjured by vicious habits of speech; a good ear, a talent for singing, intelligence, industry and energy (Lehmann 2006, 19).

Between technical exercise and emotional abandonment, the singer experiences constant tension: the desire for perfection clashes with the vulnerability of the human being who breathes in front of an audience. It is precisely this tension that gives the operatic voice its uniqueness. Unlike conventional instruments, the voice cannot hide the presence of the body – in every sound, one can hear the breath, the effort and the fragility of the being.

“Each tone, each letter, is connected closely with the preceding and following; the expression of the eyes and of the soul should be appropriate to that of the glorified peace of nature and of the soul's happiness. The last phrase should soar tenderly, saturated with warm and soulful colouring” (Lehmann 2006, 134). Thus, in opera, the voice is not just a musical instrument, but a living instrument, capable of articulating both *music and humanity at once. Beyond technique and virtuosity*, it becomes the place where man is transformed into art, and art into a sonorous body.

⁵ „Das Phänomen des Klanges ist von vielen Imponderabilien abhängig. Und es bedarf schon eines vorzüglichen Gehör, wenn wir, um helfen zu können, produktiv kontrollieren wollen” (Roth 1993, 71). The author's translation in the text above.

2.2. The voice as identity

If, at first glance, the voice can be perceived as an instrument subject to the rules of music and the rigours of technique, a deeper analysis shows that it becomes the emblem of an identity – artistic, corporeal, and symbolic. In opera, each voice has a unique, unmistakable imprint that reflects not only the vocal category, but also the individual presence, the sonic subjectivity. The singer does not simply play a role: he projects his own sonic identity into the universe of stage fiction, becoming simultaneously the interpreter and creator of his character.

“The voice has its own narrative, independent of what the libretto tells” (Abbate 1991, 12). The voice thus asserts itself as more than just a channel of expression – it is a form of artistic existence. It speaks of belonging, gender, age, temperament and even the history of the performer's physicality. A black soprano, a contemporary countertenor or a mezzo with an androgynous timbre bring not only acoustic variations, but also new identity configurations to the opera space. The voice becomes a territory of diversity, a space where traditional norms of representation can be reinterpreted or challenged.

“In most dramatic music, there are both female and male characters, and usually (though not always) the musical utterances of characters are inflected on the basis of gender” (McClary 1991, 57).

The history of opera abounds with examples in which the voice has explored fluid or ambiguous gender identities. The Baroque practice of castrati produced voices that transcended the biological and cultural limits of masculinity, transforming singing into a form of transgression. In the modern era, “travesti” roles (such as Cherubino in *Le nozze di Figaro* or Octavian in *Der Rosenkavalier*) continue to question the relationship between voice, body and identity: a female body creates a female voice to embody a male character, generating a subtle interplay between the real and the fictional. In these contexts, the voice not only reflects identity, but shapes, multiplies and destabilises it. However, vocal identity goes beyond the score. During performance, it bears the mark of history, singing school, culture and the era in question. The voice of a Verdi singer from the early 20th century differs from that of a contemporary singer, even if both sing the same aria: vocal identity is also a cultural construct, a product of taste, teaching techniques and the aesthetic ideals of the time.

Beyond genre and era, the voice is also an emotional expression. It conveys emotion directly, without visual or narrative mediation. Its vibrations convey restlessness, desire, love, pain or death. This exposure of emotion makes opera singing a deeply vulnerable act: a place where the self is revealed through the fragility of sound. When the singer reaches an extreme high note or a delicate

pianissimo, they not only demonstrate technical mastery, but also risk a part of their own identity, of their own being. „An opera singer's performance is a synthesis of vocal prowess and theatrical expression, requiring mastery of both disciplines” (Abdullaev and Bobozhov 2010, 12).

Thus, the voice in opera is twofold: on the one hand, an instrument subject to the rigours of art; on the other hand, an identity matrix, a space in which the human meaning of the performance is constructed and negotiated. Each voice tells a story, creates a sonic portrait of the person who carries it, and remains a testimony to how society and culture define what it means to be “heard.”

2.3. The voice as a dramaturgical vector

If the voice, as an instrument, belongs to technique, and as an identity belongs to the person, then, as dramaturgy, it belongs to the performance. “In opera, the voice is not only a vehicle for text or emotion, but a vehicle for dramatic expressiveness”⁶ (Enescu 2015, 89). It creates tension, space and meaning, sometimes even beyond the action of the libretto. The voice is the force that animates the narrative, giving each scenic-musical moment its own direction, relief and energy. To achieve this performance, the singer must develop a technique that allows for the most natural and faithful interpretation of the opera, guided, as Truculescu observes, by „the best teacher of interpretation: the heart”⁷ (Truculescu 2011, 116).

The dramaturgy of opera is based not only on the conflict between characters, but also on the conflict between voices. In a duet, ensemble or aria, the interaction of timbres, registers and inflections builds a sound architecture that communicates the story even before the lexical meaning is understood. For example, the contrast between the soprano's bright voice and the baritone's deep timbre can suggest the opposition between innocence and power, between love and authority. In this way, the voice becomes a dramaturgical vector, defining the power relations and emotional dynamics of the opera. An eloquent example is Wagner's vocal writing, where the voice is no longer a simple melodic ornament, but an element of dramatic architecture: it integrates into the orchestral texture, takes on leitmotif functions and actively contributes to the symbolic construction of the opera. In contrast, in 19th-century Italian aesthetics – from Donizetti to Puccini

⁶ „În operă, vocea nu este doar un vehicul pentru text sau emoție, ci un vehicul al expresivității dramatice” (Enescu 2015, 89). The author's translation in the text above.

⁷ „cel mai bun pedagog al interpretării: inima” (Truculescu 2011, 116). The author's translation in the text above.

– the voice remains the centre of emotion, the place where dramaturgy condenses into sound. A broad phrase, a suspended breath or a passionate crescendo can express an entire destiny on their own.

In this sense, the voice has the power to create time and space. An aria is not just a pause in the action, but an expansion of the present, in which the character experiences the intensity of an absolute emotion. “The essence of an artist's image is the extent to which it conveys his unique and inner emotion to you. If the actor-singer finds in every stage movement or action his own inner justification, then the character will be believable, the life drawn from the flow of the action is authentic, ensuring perfect integration between vocal emission, acting and stage movement” (Hebeisen-Moşuc 2024, 157). This suspension of the narrative transforms the voice into an instrument of revelation: dramatic time is concentrated in sound, and the audience is invited to contemplate not the deed, but the being. When Violetta performs “Addio del passato” or Desdemona intones “Ave Maria”, the drama is no longer just in the text, but in the sonic corporeality of the voice – in its tremor, in its exposed vulnerability, in the difficulty of sustaining the sound perfectly. The voice as dramaturgy is not reduced to technique or expression; it is pure performativity. By the simple fact of producing sound, the singer transforms the stage into a space of meaning: he does not “play” emotion but generates it sonorously. The voice thus becomes the bridge between the character's destiny and the performer's living presence, between fiction and reality.

Michel Poizat explains this dramaturgical role of the voice: “In opera, the voice does not express the text – that is what theatre is for; the text expresses the voice... it is because a logic of vocal jouissance is at work and is driving at the cry” (Poizat 1992, 145). Thus, the voice can “act” independently of the character's physical movements, guiding the audience's perception and building tension, emotion and dramatic meaning. Through its own dramaturgy, the voice breathes, suffers, exhausts itself and is reborn; it is the material from which theatrical emotion is born and, at the same time, the last sign of humanity in an art built on transcendence. Opera itself can be seen as a metaphor for the voice: man's desire to transform the sound of his own being into art, but also the impossibility of completely separating art from the body.

“The voice is a cry of pleasure and pain, an excess that escapes meaning” (Poizat 1992, 56).

3. The dimensions of the voice

3.1. The technical dimension

The human voice has unique features: timbre, register, colour, intensity. These are not simply „qualities“ of sound, but attributes that give it a distinct personality:

- a bright timbre can suggest innocence.
- a low register can express authority or fatality.
- a fluid legato conveys melancholy, while an incisive staccato can evoke irony or anger.

Thus, the voice itself becomes a character with its own traits, beyond what the singer is interpreting. The technical dimension refers to the mechanics of sound and how the voice is produced, controlled and projected. It includes breathing, resonance, agility, intonation and phonetic articulation. In opera, the singer's body becomes a calibrated acoustic instrument: the vocal cords, resonance cavities and respiratory system are used to produce intense, precise and expressive sounds. For example, for a coloratura soprano, agility and breath control are crucial for ornamentation and high notes. For a dramatic baritone, the emphasis is on powerful projection and a low timbre, capable of cutting through a dense orchestra. This dimension is developed through years of training and teaching methods specific to vocal traditions: Italian, German, French.

“Pure voice commands instant attention... the sonority is disturbing perhaps because such vocalising so pointedly focuses our sense of the singing voice as one that can compel without the benefit of words” (Abbate 1991, 30). Each type of voice has its own requirements: sopranos reach very high notes and require extreme agility; mezzo-sopranos manage middle registers with a warm timbre; tenors need resonance and control of long phrases; baritones and basses sustain middle and low registers with projection and stability. The technical dimension ensures the physical viability of sound, without which artistic expressiveness would not exist.

3.2. The aesthetic dimension

In the history of opera, the voice has often been more important than any other element. Bel canto transformed the voice into a veritable centre of gravity: the audience came to listen to the voice, not the story. Even in the following centuries, when dramaturgy gained importance (Verdi, Wagner, Puccini), the voice remained the emotional core: it not only translates the text, but creates emotion directly, without intermediaries. The aesthetic dimension concerns the beauty of the sound, the expressiveness and artistic character of the performance, including timbre, legato, dynamics and the ability to convey emotion and dramatic meaning.

“Each tone, each letter, is closely connected with the preceding and following; the expression of the eyes and of the soul should be proper to that of the glorified peace of nature and of the soul's happiness. The last phrase should soar tenderly, saturated with warm and soulful colouring” (Lehmann 2006, 134). Tone colour, the choice of vibrato or phrasing can transform the perception of a character. For example, the warm, velvety voice of a mezzo-soprano can express tenderness and melancholy, while the clarity of a coloratura soprano suggests purity or innocence. The voice thus becomes an aesthetic and expressive object.

“The sound of the singing voice becomes, as it were, a 'voice-object' and the sole centre for the listener's attention” (Abbate 1991, 5). The aesthetics of the voice transform technical sound into an expressive presence: sopranos convey purity or passion, mezzo-sopranos depth and mystery, tenors heroism and sensitivity, baritones authority and inner conflict, and basses solemnity or comedy.

3.3. The historical dimension

The voice also conveys drama and meaning in a historical context. From castrati to the great tenors and sopranos of the 20th century, the voice has been perceived as a phenomenon. Performers were not just „singers of roles”, but ‘possessors of a voice’ recognised as a unique and unrepeatable entity.

The historical dimension traces how vocal performance and vocal typologies have developed over time, influenced by style, aesthetics and pedagogical tradition:

- In the Baroque period, sopranos and castrati dominated the stage; ornamentation and travesty roles were essential. „Beginning with the rise of opera in the seventeenth century, composers worked painstakingly to develop a musical semiotics of gender: a set of conventions for constructing 'masculinity' or “femininity” in music” (McClary 1991, 7-8).
- In Classicism, the emphasis was on the balance between voice and orchestra, on controlled expressiveness and clarity of phrasing.
- In Romanticism, the voice became central to dramatic expressiveness; Verdi and Wagner wrote scores that demanded extended timbres, range and intense emotions. Historical study explains why certain voices or roles became archetypes of the operatic genre.
- Contemporary music explores psychological expressiveness and unconventional timbres.

“Wagner never wanted a declamatory voice placed close to the shout. He knew the importance of melodic and vocal content. It was the rule, not the exception. Wagner’s concept of singing was sublime and highly sensitive. In his later years, this approach was lost, and what Wagner never intended happened: the focus shifted to the orchestra, and a disastrous consequence was the spoken word”⁸ (Roth 1993, 23).

Susan McClary emphasises the connection between vocal technique, expressiveness and historical style: “Tonality itself ... is the principal musical means ... for arousing and channelling desire” (McClary 1991, 9-10).

In conclusion:

- Technique enables expression; without breath control, resonance, and agility, there can be no colour or expressiveness.
- Aesthetics transforms technical sound into a recognisable artistic message, capable of conveying emotion and character.
- History contextualises and shapes timbre, range and roles, explaining why certain vocal types are preferred for certain characters and eras.

Thus, each voice becomes a character in itself, and the entire work is constructed from the interaction of these dimensions.

4. Specific vocal types and their analysis

An opera role exists not only through the text of the libretto, but especially through the voice. It writes the real drama, bringing the character to life. By connecting the analysis of the dimensions of the voice with specific vocal types – soprano, mezzo-soprano, tenor, baritone and bass – we can examine for each:

- Technical characteristics: range, timbre, agility, projection power;
- Aesthetic dimension: colour, expressiveness, emotion conveyed;
- Roles and historical context: representative scores, emblematic roles, evolution in the history of opera.

⁸ „Wagner wollte niemals den dicht beim Rufen angesiedelten Deklamator. Er wusste Bescheid um die Wichtigkeit des melodisch-sänglichen Gehalts. Er war im Regel, nicht die Ausnahme. Wagners Gesangsbegriff war sublim und hochempfindlich. In der Nachfolge verlor sich dieses Denken, und es geschah, was Wagner nie wollte: der Schwerpunkt wurde nach dem Orchester verlagert, und eine schlimme Folge war das gesprochene Wort” (Roth 1993, 23). The author’s translation in the text above.

4.1. The soprano voice

4.1.1. Technical dimension

The soprano is the highest female voice, with a high tessitura and the ability to reach extreme notes (C6-C7 for coloratura). Soprano technique includes:

- Controlled breathing: essential for long phrases and high notes, through intelligent management of the diaphragm (Maria Callas);
- Resonance and projection: the timbre must cut through the dense orchestra, maintaining clarity and purity (Montserrat Caballé, Joan Sutherland);
- Agility: indispensable for rapid coloratura and complex ornamentation. (Edita Gruberova, Beverly Sills).

Technical examples:

- „Der Hölle Rache” from Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte*, where the coloratura soprano must reach F6 with precision and agility;
- „Bel raggio lusinghier” from Rossini's *Semiramide*, a veritable fireworks display full of coloratura and virtuosity.

4.1.2. Aesthetic dimension

The soprano can convey innocence, purity or emotional intensity, depending on the role and style:

- Tone and colour: bright, delicate, luminous (lyrical) or grave and expressive (dramatic);
- Legato and phrasing: sustained and fluid melodic phrases accentuate the beauty of the sound;
- Expressiveness: the soprano becomes the emotional vehicle of the character.

Aesthetic examples:

- Mimi (*La Bohème*, Puccini) – fragility and delicacy;
- Tosca (*Tosca*, Puccini) – passionate strength;
- Violetta (*La Traviata*, Verdi) – vocal transformations that reflect drama;
- Queen of the Night (*Die Zauberflöte*, Mozart) – cosmic symbol, not just dramatic realism.
- Lucia (*Lucia di Lammermoor*, Donizetti): the famous „mad scene” would not have the same power without the vocal fractures, without the sudden changes in register that make the voice a mirror of emotional turmoil.

4.1.3. The historical dimension

The soprano has played a central role in the evolution of opera:

- Baroque: predominance of sopranos and castrati with complex ornamental arias (e.g. operas by Handel);
- Classicism: Mozart developed lyrical sopranos with harmonious phrases (e.g. *Le Nozze di Figaro*, *Don Giovanni*);
- Romanticism and verismo: Verdi and Puccini wrote dramatic roles with an extended range (e.g. *Il Trovatore*, *Madama Butterfly*);
- Contemporary: emphasis on expressiveness and unconventional timbres (e.g. *Le Grand Macabre*, *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk*).

4.1. The mezzo-soprano voice

4.2.1. Technical dimension

The mezzo-soprano has a lower tessitura than the soprano, with flexibility and a wide range of expressiveness:

- Breathing and support: for middle and low registers, maintaining clarity in high notes (Agnes Baltsa);
- Rich resonance: warm and velvety timbre (Luciana D'Intino);
- Moderate agility: possibility of ornamentation and trills, exceptions: Cecilia Bartoli, Marilyn Horne.

Technical examples:

- The aria „Oh, come da qual di” from Rossini's *Semiramide*.

4.2.2. Aesthetic dimension

- Tone and colour: warm, rounded, with dark nuances;
- Expressiveness: maturity, mystery, authority, passion;
- Legato and phrasing: more rounded melodic line, emphasis on emotional continuity.

Aesthetic examples:

- Carmen (*Carmen*, Bizet) – seduction and passion;
- Rosina (*Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, Rossini) – agility and comedy.

4.2.3. Historical dimension

- Baroque and classicism: travesti roles symbolising youthful energy and comic acting (e.g. Cherubino);
- Romanticism: lyrical and dramatic roles, contrasting with sopranos (e.g. Amneris, Aida);

- Verismo and modernism: darker timbre for psychological expressiveness, passionate roles expressing jealousy, malice or cynicism (e.g. Carmen, Principessa de Bouillon).

The mezzosoprano's voice weaves a rich tapestry of warmth and depth, effortlessly and dramatic intensity.

4.2. Tenor voice

4.3.1. Technical dimension

The tenor is the highest male voice, with a technique that involves:

- Breathing and support: essential for high notes and long phrases (Luciano Pavarotti);
- Resonance and projection: clear, powerful timbre that cuts through the orchestra (Mario del Monaco);
- Agility: ornamentation and rapid phrases, less elaborate than coloratura sopranos (Juan Diego Floréz).

Technical examples:

- „Nessun dorma” from *Turandot*, Puccini.

4.3.2. Aesthetic dimension

- Tone and colour: bright or full, depending on the subtype (lyrical, dramatic, spinto);
- Expressiveness: heroism, passion, sensitivity;
- Legato and phrasing: fluid and controlled melodic line.

Aesthetic examples:

- Rodolfo (*La Bohème*, Puccini) – romantic fragility, emotional delicacy;
- Manrico (*Il Trovatore*, Verdi) – passionate heroism;
- Calaf (*Turandot*, Puccini) – power and agility.

4.3.3. Historical dimension

The tenor has evolved throughout the history of opera as follows:

- Baroque: roles for castrati; elaborate ornamentation;
- Classicism: Mozart – clear timbre, elegant phrasing;
- Romanticism: Verdi and Puccini – extended range and intense expressiveness;

Contemporary: emphasis on coloratura and psychological expressiveness.

Historical examples:

- Tamino in Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* – clarity and lyrical purity

- Don Ottavio in Mozart's *Don Giovanni* – noble character full of elegance
- Manrico in Verdi's *Il Trovatore* – romantic heroism, dramatic intensity
- Rodolfo in Puccini's *La Bohème* – lyrical expressiveness and emotional sensitivity.

The tenor and the soprano form the couple of voices that have been and will always remain the king and the queen of opera.

4.3. Baritone voice

4.4.1. Technical dimension

The baritone lies between the tenor and bass, with a medium range and full timbre. The technique involves:

- Breathing and support: long phrases and middle notes (Leo Nucci);
- Resonance: rich timbre, capable of dominating the orchestra;
- Flexibility and agility: lyric baritone vs. dramatic baritone.

Technical example: „Di Provenza il mar” from *La Traviata*, Verdi.

4.4.2. Aesthetic dimension

- Tone and colour: warm, grave, with nuances of authority, melancholy or humour;
- Expressiveness: inner conflicts, irony, tempered passion;
- Legato and phrasing: contrasts between registers.

Aesthetic examples:

- Figaro (*Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, Rossini) – humour and agility;
- Rigoletto (*Rigoletto*, Verdi) – dramatic tension;
- Scarpia (*Tosca*, Puccini) – authority and cruelty;
- Germont from *La Traviata* by Verdi (lyric baritone) – paternal authority and emotional expressiveness;
- Jago from Verdi's *Otello* – dramatic baritone, with an evil, manipulative and cunning character, motivated by resentment, jealousy and envy.

4.4.3. Historical dimension

- Classicism: comic and travesty roles (e.g. Figaro, Mozart);
- Romanticism: central baritones for dramatic conflicts (Rigoletto, Germont);
- Verismo and contemporary: exploration of unconventional timbres and complex expressiveness (Jago, Miller, Claggart).

The baritone voice commands a bridge between warmth and authority, carrying both intimacy and power with every phrase. This voice carries the soul's

calm thunder – dark velvet tones that linger long after the last note fades, resonating not just in the air but in the heart, where they settle like a gentle, unforgettable echo.

4.4. The bass voice

4.5.1. Technical dimension

The bass is the lowest male voice. The technique involves:

- Breathing and support: long phrases and low notes (Nikolai Ghiaurov);
- Resonance: full, rich timbre, sufficient for dense orchestration (Feodor Chaliapin);
- Flexibility: lyric bass vs. dramatic bass.

Technical examples: „La calunnia” from *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, Rossini.

4.5.2. Aesthetic dimension

The aesthetics of the bass voice are characterised by:

- Tone and colour: deep, full, with nuances of authority, solemnity or humour;
- Expressiveness: the bass often expresses authority, strength, but also wisdom, mystery or humour;
- Legato and phrasing: phrases are clearly articulated, with an emphasis on sustaining the sound and the contrast between registers.

Aesthetic examples:

- Sarastro in Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* (deep bass) – solemnity, authority and moral balance;
- Don Basilio in Rossini's *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* (comic bass) – humour, agility and theatrical expressiveness;
- Boris Godunov from Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* (dramatic bass) – strength, intensity and psychological depth.

4.5.3. Historical dimension

The bass has evolved significantly throughout the history of opera:

- Baroque: the bass was used for authoritative or antagonistic roles; phrases were elaborate and ornate to emphasise the gravity of the character.
- Classicism: Mozart wrote elegant music for the bass, but with a distinct timbre, for authoritative or comic roles (e.g. Sarastro, Osmin).

- Romanticism: Verdi and Wagner developed dramatic bass music, with an extended range and intense expressive capacity, often for kings, antagonists or tragic figures.
- Contemporary: The modern repertoire explores psychological and dramatic nuances, with the bass becoming a complex expressive instrument, not just a deep voice. It can be a sinister, authoritarian bass, a symbol of moral oppression (Claggart in Britten's *Billy Budd*) or a symbol of power (Doctor Schön/Jack the Ripper in Alban Berg's *Lulu*) with atonal music or a diabolical bass, inspired by the tradition of Mephistopheles, with modern irony (Nick Shadow in Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress*).

Historical examples:

- Sarastro in Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* – solemn bass, moral authority;
- Don Basilio in Rossini's *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* – comic bass, agility and expressiveness;
- Boris Godunov from *Boris Godunov* by Mussorgsky – dramatic bass with psychological depth;
- Wurm in *Luisa Miller* by Verdi – like Jago, he is an evil character, full of jealousy and manipulation.

5. The voice as an „invisible actor” and audience perception

There are, in fact, two actors on stage: the performer and his voice.

- The performer controls but also listens to the voice.
- Sometimes the voice takes the initiative, and the singer becomes the channel through which it expresses itself.

“In bel canto, the voice organises the drama more than the libretto itself” (Gossett 2006, 233).

From personal experience, there are moments when the voice „decides” to take on an unexpected nuance, to illuminate a passage differently or even to surprise the performer. These moments create the sensation that the voice has a life of its own, independent of the intentions of the director or the singer.

Basically, the stage uses a permanent play and exchange of affections between actor, character and audience. In the genre of opera theatre, the manifestation and communication of affect starts from the libretto, through music, with the help of the human voice educated for this purpose (Hebeisen-Mošuc 2024, 163).

The voice in opera often functions as an invisible actor: it expresses the character's intentions, emotions and psychology even when the performer is not visible or making obvious dramatic gestures. This emphasises the fact that the voice is not just a musical instrument, but a dramatic subject in itself.

Roland Barthes distinguishes two levels of voice in music:

1. Pheno-song: belongs to the musical structure and meaning, rationally interpretable;
2. Geno-song: it has to do with the body, breathing, the materiality of the voice and the physical sensation of sound.

The „grain” is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs. The grain is the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue; perhaps the letter, almost certainly significance. It is a materiality that doesn't lend itself to language. The „grain” is thus the encounter between a language and a voice, the space where the pheno-song the structure of the music, its form, its meaning) and geno-song (the body of the singer in his or her gesture of singing) meet (Barthes 1977, 182).

The grain represents the place where the body is given meaning and the voice becomes language. This dimension makes the voice the bearer of an invisible presence, capable of conveying emotion and identity without visual elements.

“The voice is what is really at stake in modernity – the voice as specific substance of language everywhere triumphantly pushed forward” (Barthes 1977, 180). The voice can act independently of the character's physical movements, guiding the audience's perception and building tension, emotion and dramatic meaning.

In terms of audience perception, the audience does not perceive the voice as merely a technical means; it becomes an immediate presence:

- Even before understanding the words, the listener is touched by the vocal vibration;
- The voice generates primary emotional reactions: tears, chills, joy, anxiety;
- The audience perceives the voice as a character with whom they enter into a secret dialogue.

In the digital age, the voice has expanded its autonomy: listened to on the radio, in recordings or streaming, it can evoke emotion even without visual context. Thus, the voice becomes a character independent of the stage, costumes or decor.

“The sound of the singing voice becomes, as it were, a „voice-object” and the sole centre for the listener's attention” (Abbate 1991, 5). The voice becomes a central sound object, and the spectator is drawn to the pure presence of the sound, the way in which the timbre and phrasing convey emotions and character. “The

application of psychological realism in opera allows for a more nuanced portrayal of characters, bridging the gap between singing and acting" (Busse 2012, 29).

The audience's perception depends not only on technique or timbre, but also on cultural and historical expectations. The audience expects vivid, authentic, exciting and captivating figures: „The cultivated public should be willing to accept only the best; it should ruthlessly condemn the bad and the mediocre" (Lehmann 2006, 131).

6. Conclusion

Throughout the history of opera, the voice has proven to be much more than a simple instrument of artistic expression: it is a living presence, a principle that generates the entire lyrical universe. Looking at it from three perspectives – instrument, identity and dramaturgy – we discover a complexity that goes beyond simple aesthetics: the voice is sound matter, a sign of the self and a narrative force.

As an instrument, the voice requires discipline and technique, transforming the body into a true mechanism of sound. We breathe, we sustain, we vibrate – all so that the sound is not only heard, but felt. At the centre of this art, however, remains the living human being, with all their sensitivity and vulnerability.

As an identity, the voice bears the mark of the performer. It reflects the singer's biography, culture and sensitivity. The voice speaks to us about gender, history and emotion, becoming a space for expressive freedom, exploration and self-discovery. It is a unique, unrepeatable signature that transforms each performance into a singular experience.

As dramaturgy, the voice becomes narrative, movement and tension. It creates narrative through sound, shapes the time and space of the opera and transforms emotion into a palpable theatrical event. When singing, the voice does not just tell the character's story: it is the story, a living act of experience and transformation.

“Opera is impossible to conceive without the centrality of the voice; it is dramaturgy itself” (Taruskin 2005, 422). This idea shows us that every opera, every aria and every role is built around the human sound, which becomes both character and story at the same time. Each type of voice – from the bright soprano to the deep bass, from the lyrical to the dramatic – represents not only a range of notes, but also its own expressive and dramaturgical universe. Studying these typologies, their roles and their emblematic musical moments helps us understand how the voice, in all its diversity, becomes a complete character, with life, identity and strength. Through its technical dimension, the voice becomes feasible and powerful. Through its aesthetic dimension, it becomes expressive and emotional. Through its historical dimension, it shows us how tastes, traditions and cultural

context shape the way it is heard and appreciated. Through its role as an „invisible actor” and its impact on the audience, the voice becomes a central element of opera: it is the dramatic expression, the vehicle of the characters' identity and the emotional link between the stage and the spectator. Thus, the voice in opera is never just an instrument: it is dramaturgy, identity and living presence. Opera itself is, in essence, an art of human sound, with the voice in the leading role.

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