Voice classification: terminology and practicality

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Abstract: *Voice classification constitutes an important part of singers' vocal identity, development and careers. The issue of inconsistent terminology within classification therefore has repercussions on singers' livelihoods. The main aim of this paper is to identify a functional and consistent way in which the term Zwischenfach can be used in the operatic industry. The materials presented illustrate the ongoing issues of the voice- and role-classification systems, contextualising therefore the main topic of Zwischenfach's meaning and use. As part of the conclusion regarding the integration of the term, my research supports that its addition as a new category would not render the Fach system more functional. Instead, I am proposing integrating the term as a description of timbre; such a meaning would encourage its further use without changing the categorisation system.*

Keywords: *Voice classification, Fach, Zwischenfach, Opera*

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the issue of unclear terminology in voice- and role-classification and the effect this has on singers' development. The article is based on my doctoral research: 'Exploring Zwischenfach: Understanding vocal classification and its professional significance', which I completed in 2016 at the Royal Academy of Music.

I will focus particularly on the term *Zwischenfach* (Ger. in between categories) and use it as a case study to illustrate my arguments. This issue is important because singers' careers rely on effective communication of complex technical and interpretative issues during their training and beyond.

Accurate' vocal classification constitutes an important part of the vocal identity of singers, who make life and career choices based on an assumed common understanding of the core professional language. Therefore, any lack of international/regional consensus regarding the meaning of specific terms has repercussions on singers' careers and livelihoods.

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2. Objectives

My aim is to illustrate the differences between the voice- and role-categorisation systems and to identify a functional, consistent way in which the term *Zwischenfach* can be used within the operatic industry.

3. Context and Methods

I became interested in this subject whilst studying on the opera course at the Royal Academy of Music – I started the programme as a mezzo but soon the head of department suggested that I was in fact a soprano. As a result, I began exploring new repertoire in order to re-establish my vocal category; in this process my voice was frequently labelled as *Zwischenfach*. This caused me some serious confusion, particularly when I discovered the inconsistent use of this term's meaning, both in aural traditions as well as in the literature I started consulting. Meanwhile I had the opportunity to discuss these issues in depth with Frederica von Stade and Kiri te Kanawa, during the Masterclasses of the Georg Solti Academy. I also began questioning whether refining my own vocal technique would clarify the issue, therefore I began lessons with Lillian Watson and coaching with Della Jones. It is within this context and with the support of this team that I began my doctoral research into *Zwischenfach*.

The current article is based on a section of the extensive literature that I reviewed as part of my thesis. This fragment provides an overview of the current functionality of systems of voice- and role-classification, specifically the *Fach* system. This context is relevant to the follow-up analysis of the way in which the term *Zwischenfach* emerged and evolved until the present day. The research design I employed was based on qualitative methods in order to achieve my aims. I aspired to generate theoretical knowledge from my practical experience as a performer. The study employs the model of unstructured observation within observational methodology. In order to further establish integrity, a process based on methodological triangulation was used: a series of semi-structured interviews with opera professionals, in-depth analyses of nine roles traditionally associated with *Zwischenfach* and an auto-ethnographical study, which includes a reflective analysis and portfolio presentation. The most recent research that has emerged on the subject of *Zwischenfach* tends to limit itself mainly to American literature, which is generally convergent and therefore does not reveal the significant tensions that exist between different international opinions and approaches; these tensions are only fully evident when materials are presented side-by-side.

3. Materials

Prior to discussing *Zwischenfach* itself, it is necessary to contextualise the conundrum of the voice-classification system, versus the German *Fach* system.

Historically, categorisation took different forms, depending on whether it was bound to social hierarchy – the best singer took the lead role (Holmes 1993, 100), higher voices were more 'important' than lower voices (Wistreich in Lawson and Stowell eds 2012, 41), the physically unappealing singers performed mainly male roles (Burney 1789 Vol. 2, 841 and Hiller 1780, XXII-XXIV), and so on; or on vocal considerations – the mezzo-soprano emerged so as to fill the gap between the sopranos and contraltos once the repertoire of the former developed a higher *tessitura* (Framery and Ginguené 1791–1818, 429; Feldman 2015, 96, 110 and Parrott 2015, 135). In the early days of opera as a genre the terminology regarding voice classification evolved constantly; although the names of voice types existed they were seldom employed, as singers' reputations preceded them so the connection was made directly between the newly composed role and its first performer. The main role of the early voice-classification system was to provide some broad information about the range and preferred *tessitura* of a specific singer. Particularly in Italian opera, where most roles were written for specific singers, this was recorded in the original edition of the score. Furthermore, regular use of transpositions made the issue of clear categorisation less pressing at a practical level (Carter & Kite-Powell eds 2012, 290; Parrot 2015, 149,159).

Meanwhile, in the German lands, vocal categorisation took a distinct route in 1817, when Carl Maria von Weber made efforts to build an opera company that would specialise in German-language opera. In a letter to his patron, Count Vitzthum, he justifies his need to form a 'functional' ensemble, organised differently to the Italian opera companies. Weber presents the problems inherent in Singspiels, of having opera singers with good singing voices cast in parts which require much speaking, and vice versa – actors whose singing abilities are limited, cast in parts where singing is a main feature. He argued, therefore, that in order to create a company that would rival in quality the Italian company, he would need singers and actors to be cast in specific roles, and he made a list comprising thirteen 'types' of singers and actors who would be cast to roles according to their primary quality (Weber 1981, 228). Post 1850 there was a discernible surge of interest in vocal categorisation, which became much more culture-specific: score editions of different nationalities attach diverse categorisations to roles, some of them quite intricate, such as 'chanteuse forte', 'primo mezzo-soprano', 'hoher Sopran'. This was clearly an attempt made by each nationality to mitigate between theory and practice. However, singers' repertoire was still very mixed at this point;

as a result, the inscriptions on scores were confusing, which could explain their eventual disappearance. During the twentieth century, once the impact of an individual singer's megastar status became less standardising, a more generic classification system became consistently employed in scores, by referring solely to whether the role was a 'soprano' or 'mezzo-soprano'; yet this still does not accurately reflect the practical usage of the vocal classification terminology, which became increasingly complex. Once Kloiber's 'Taschenbuch der Oper' was published in 1951, its criteria for subdividing became a central debate among singers and teachers, and considerable pedagogical literature emerged. From here onwards the distinction between the terms '*Fach'* and 'voice type' is implied/made in the works of several authors who specialise in issues of classification: Rudolf Kloiber (1951), Richard Boldrey (1997), Sandra Cotton (2007), Pearl McGinnis (2010) and Peter Anton Ling (2013/2014). The broad consensus among these authors is that voice classification is physiologically determined with the main criteria being voice colour/timbre, weight, agility, preferred tessitura and (possibly) range. Whilst the *Fach* system groups roles into categories, based on features such as whether the role requires particularly strong acting skills, musical and vocal criteria. The criteria for the two systems present an overlap – however, the *Fach* system is subject to socio-temporal tastes and *Fächer* shift accordingly – see Kloiber's 'Handbuch der Oper' across six decades (1951–2011). The literature focusing on repertoire selection usually consists of comprehensive lists of roles, grouped in particular categories, providing brief descriptions of the characteristics of each category. Furthermore, in his 'National Schools of Singing'*,* Miller (2002) demonstrates that national differences in tastes and training also have a role in influencing categorisation, as subjective vocal features such as 'colour' are perceived differently internationally.

It is within this framework that I wish to discuss the term *Zwischenfach*, which is currently being used in the context of overlapping voice categories, roles, and traditions formed by extraordinary performers (McPherson and Welch ed. 2012, 572). The infrequent usage of the term in operatic literature is disproportionate to its frequent use in professional life. Recently there has been a surge of singers and singer-researchers (Jennifer Allen and Elisabeth Harries) who call for the recognition of *Zwischenfach* as a 'legitimate vocal category'. Their reasons are the following: it would contribute to a richer artistic community, by including singers who might otherwise fall in between the cracks of a rigid classification system; it would provide a category for roles that used to be performed by sopranos up until the mid-twentieth century but that have shifted to mezzo-sopranos since.

According to Ling (2008), the first written record of the term *Zwischenfach* emerged in the 1930s, when Kloiber advertised that the theatre in which he was conducting was looking to hire singers of certain *Fächer*, which included the '*Zwischenfachsängerin*'; the term also appears in Ritter's 'Künstleralmanach 1934: Lexicon für Oper, Konzert und Funk' (Ritter 1934, 23-30). Here it features exclusively as a *Fach* of the soprano category. The almanac lists the names of 292 sopranos active in that period, and out of these, 32 are listed as *Zwischenfach*.[2] Of them, twelve are also listed as *Hochdramatisch Sopran* and two as *Jugendlich Dramatisch*. The common denominator of the nine singers listed here as *Zwischenfach* is that they all have other *Fächer* listed next to their names and they performed soprano roles by Wagner, R. Strauss and Puccini. Subsequently, the term *Zwischenfach* is discussed by Franziska Martienssen-Lohmann (1943) and then by Kloiber (1951). The two formulate the earliest 'definitions' of the term that I was able to establish. Table 1 below contains a selection of the most representative 'definitions' of the term, which point towards a varied understanding and usage of the term *Zwischenfach*.

Name	Year/Page	Definition/ Opinion expressed on *Zwf*[3]
Martienssen-Lohmann	1943 /50	"The *Zwf* singer is very close in vocal shape, character and creative design to the highly dramatic [*Fach*] but requires nothing like the 'heroic' strike of Brünnhilde."
Kloiber	1951/ 733 2011/897	"The second category is the so-called *Zwf* or dramatic *Fach*, by which is understood as lying between the lyric and the heavy vocal *Fächer*." [The categories of 'dramatic mezzo-soprano' and 'character soprano' are listed as *Zwf*]
Miller	(1977) 2002/141	"Literally a singer in-between categories – is a type of soprano in the German lyric theatre which requires dramatic power and yet which must retain a quality of lyricism."
Boldrey	1994/25	"*Zwf* is a category between categories and refers in opera to roles or voices that cannot be classified precisely in one *Fach* or another. Though the term could be applied to 'bari-tenors' or to 'mezzo-contraltos' or even 'bass-baritones' it is commonly understood to refer to that shadowland between soprano and mezzo-soprano."
Miller	2000/11	"Has a large voice with good command of low range and is most comfortable in dramatic roles that, while requiring relatively high *tessitura*, evade exposure of the very top of the voice for extended periods of time. She is 'between

[2] For example: "Schnau, Olga, Zwischenfachs[ängerin]" (Ritter 1934:28).

[3] For the purpose of this table, the term *Zwischenfach* is abbreviated to *Zwf.*

Name	Year/Page	Definition/ Opinion expressed on *Zwf*[3]
		categories'. (…) Possessing the weight and colour of the dramatic soprano, she can manage much of the same literature as the dramatic, but her most comfortable range is closer to that of the mezzo-soprano."
Ling	2008 repr. 2013/73	"The pedagogic definition is that *Zwf* is a category between lyric and dramatic; the term remains unclear because it is not established between which voice categories it lies."
Allen	2009/ 17, 37	"Today the term *Zwf* is widely recognized as a voice that lies between vocal categories. (…) One unique way the *Zwf* voice excels is in its freedom to remain undefined."
Hoch	2014/206	"Someone who 'swings' between two *Fächer*, usually adjacent ones (i.e. mezzo-soprano and soprano, tenor and baritone). True *Zwf* singing is rare at the highest echelon of the professional world and is usually only found at the regional and amateur levels. A young dramatic soprano, for instance, might primarily sing mezzo-soprano repertoire while occasionally 'trying out' heavier soprano arias and before attempting an entire dramatic soprano role. Whilst professionals shift *Fächer* (and thus repertoire) as they age, most professional singers tend to focus on one *Fach* at a time (and for an extended period of time)."

Table 1. *Definitions of Zwischenfach*

5. Results and discussions

The figures (drawings, diagrams, images) and the tables will be included, in order, within the text, centred. It is important to note that both the *Fach* system and the voice-classification system exist in order to enable artists to identify their optimal repertoire. The *Fach* system is used by opera companies, agencies and casting directors to enable them to make efficient choices when assigning singers to roles. The voice-classification system is used to enable singers to form a cogent representation of their vocal capabilities, which will in turn assist them in selecting their primary (and secondary) Fächer. Both systems also serve as a guide to good vocal health, by clearly delineating singers' vocal limits and grouping together roles that share similar features. In light of the above information, there are three research-based possible uses of the term *Zwischenfach*.

5. 1. A new voice category

This one is in between soprano and mezzo-soprano, with lyric and dramatic as *Fächer*. The separation between lyric and dramatic *Zwischenfach* would be necessary, as Allen and Harris support, in order to differentiate between the wide diversity of roles suggested for this category. This notion of separating a lyric and a dramatic *Zwischenfach* is also supported by my interviewees in another section of my dissertation. The literature review conducted here supports this to be the way in which the term is mainly understood and used in the United States. The distinction between dramatic and lyric *Zwischenfach* is not mentioned in practice but given the wide variety of repertoire that is suggested, this would be an option.

5.2. As a Fach

Between the lyric and the dramatic; the literature review supports this to be the term's original definition, and my own experience and those whose views I have collected for this research support the fact that this is still the way the term is understood and used in the German-speaking countries. The difficulty with this definition is the inconclusiveness as to which in-between category it should refer. I suggest that the term would not be useful in the soprano category, as in between the 'lyric soprano' and the 'dramatic soprano' *Fächer* there is the 'spinto soprano', which combines vocal features of the two. In the mezzo-soprano category, there is no such transitory *Fach* in between the 'lyric mezzo-soprano' and the 'dramatic mezzo-soprano' but (arguably), there is no need for it as the repertoire is quite clearly divided: simply put, the Handel, Mozart, Rossini, Bellini and some French trouser roles belong to the lyric (and coloratura) *Fach* whilst the Donizetti, Verdi, Wagner and French Grand Opera roles belong to the dramatic. Therefore, the only 'location' left untapped would be for *Zwischenfach* as a *Fach* in between the 'lyric mezzo-soprano' and 'dramatic soprano' categories and *Fächer.* The argument for this integration could potentially be supported by certain roles which require both vocal features. However, arguably, a '*Zwischenfach* soprano' would potentially be at a disadvantage in relation to a '*Zwischenfach* mezzo-soprano': it could imply that the mezzo-sopranos possess qualities which enable them to stretch their voices beyond their 'normal' capabilities and sustain a high *tessitura* usually associated with sopranos; whilst '*Zwischenfach* soprano' would imply that the voice in question possesses a limited top, which is why she specialises in roles that require a high *tessitura* but exclude the very extremes.

Therefore, it is most likely that the term could be integrated as a *Fach* of the mezzo-soprano category as follows: a *Zwischenfach* mezzo-soprano would perform roles that display both lyric and dramatic features, which stretch between the 'dramatic soprano' and the 'lyric mezzo-soprano' repertoire.

5.3. As a misnomer

Hoch's definition brings together three notions that are traditionally associated with the term *Zwischenfach*:

- It refers to a voice that sits between two adjacent *Fächer*
- Young dramatic sopranos might begin their careers through singing certain mezzo-soprano repertoire
- The concept that a 'true' *Zwischenfach* voice is 'rare'

However, whilst there is ample evidence to suggest that young dramatic sopranos begin their careers by approaching mezzo-soprano repertoire it would be interesting to learn what evidence supports Hoch's statement that "true Zwischenfach singing is rare at the highest echelon of the professional world." My own interviews with professionals reveal a range of opinions on this issue, but do not support his assertion. Although Hoch's opinion does not exclude the possibility of *Zwischenfach* as a category, he associates it with singers who have yet to solve technical issues, which causes them to be confused as to their best placement within the *Fach* system.

6. Conclusion

The history and evolution of voice- and role-classification is often presented to young singers as an orderly, well thought-through system, with clear rules, known and understood proficiently by everyone in the industry. My current research on *Zwischenfach* suggests both systems to have evolved organically, more as needs-based constructions and at different times in history.

Given that this dissertation is specifically aimed at young singers, I have reached the conclusion that integrating *Zwischenfach* as a category or a *Fach* would not be helpful for several reasons: firstly, the meaning of the term is not internationally agreed upon and so a new 'category' by this name cannot function. Furthermore, such a classification might deter young singers from developing a functional technique; this is

because inevitably, the current information regarding the term would continue to circulate and singers would be encouraged to 'wait' because of the belief that these voices take longer to mature. It would discourage singers from finding a suitable category in the first place; because there are some singers who, by chance, identify with certain categories closely, *Zwischenfach* would encourage those who do not reach a conclusion as early as their peers to self-classify as *Zwischenfach,* therefore the category would remain generalised as one for 'misfits' of all shapes and sizes. It would create a precedent and encourage further subcategorisation in the future and the value of such a process is debatable. It would add further confusion to the variation in definitions of *Fach* that are apparent at the international level. It would encourage the 'uniformisation' of singers whose voices and repertoire would otherwise be more 'personalised'.

This is why I have come to believe that, on balance, adding an extra category – regardless of its definition – does not add value to the classification system: any such system can always be subject to further subcategories but this does not necessarily render it more effective or useful. If indeed a new category is to be considered, I suggest that it be subject to thorough historical, practical as well as scientific research first. In this way a peer-reviewed debate that is transparent and up-to-date would ensure a more balanced view of issues that have a profound influence on the lives of young singers.

Last but not least, I would like to consider Wittgenstein's assertion that 'meaning is use' because despite advising against the integration of *Zwischenfach* into any vocal or role classification system, I do not however advocate the complete eradication of the term from operatic language. Clearly, its current widespread use vouches for its usefulness and I propose that we continue to employ it as describing a voice's <u>timbre.</u> In the same way that we refer to a 'silvery soprano' or a 'mellow mezzo-soprano', we could use *Zwischenfach* to refer to those singers who present features from their neighbouring categories in a more noticeable way: a mezzo-soprano with a *Zwischenfach* timbre would therefore describe a singer whose vocal colour is similar to a soprano's yet whose other vocal characteristics (range, preferred *tessitura*, vocal weight) establish her category as mezzo-soprano. This advice is inspired by Fischer (1993:128), who declares that "*Zwischenfach* is to do with a voice's timbre, and it has no functional meaning". The implications of using the term in such a way are that it could continue to be used in a very similar way, with a clearer meaning but without undermining the current classification system. It would encourage singers with such a timbre to continue to work out their most 'suitable' category with an open mind, and it would embrace the inherent subjectivity that comes with vocal classification.

Whilst I realise that as a term, *Zwischenfach* ('between categories') is very different to the characteristic terms used to describe timbre, I am encouraging its use as such because it is 'descriptive'. It describes not only the intangible features of a voice but also a whole century's aspiration of uniting voice and role categorisation, in order to deliver opera in a way that is both aurally and visually convincing.

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