

## The principle of versatility in the technical and interpretative approach of vocal music

Cristina RADU-GIURGIU<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** *Two apparently opposed, but often complementary ways in artistic practice open in front of modern singers, at the beginning of their career: specialisation and versatility. In this article, I intend to debate the significance of versatility in vocal art and different ways one can express himself as an artist in a versatile way, in the contemporary world. By accomplishing several musical genres or styles - to taking upon oneself some complementary branches of one's art, such as pedagogy or musicological research, the modern singer has multiple options to gain from one's talent and passion. Versatility is the fruit of sustained assimilation of work, research, study, and of distinguishing oneself in multiple genres or fields. It is a quality that can lead to a high degree of professionalism and artistic excellence, in a different (but not incompatible) manner as compared to choosing a specialisation that offers a more restricted framework.*

**Keywords:** *artistic versatility, classical singer, modern age, study*

### 1. Artistic versatility in modern times

From the Latin term **versatilis** or the French **versatile**, we find *versatil* in Romanian with ambiguous connotations... It can mean both the ability of a person to communicate in various environments and ways, and to be changeable (often understood in a pejorative meaning of inconstant, unstable, undetermined, one who easily changes views). From the same source, in English, a versatile person is capable of turning to varied subjects or tasks and have a wide variety of skills. In sport, versatility indicate that one is able to practise several types of sports, such as tennis, swimming, jogging; a master chef's versatility means he possesses extensive knowledge of French, American bistro, Italian, and Spanish cuisine. In any art form, *versatility* is a precious ability that can lead to elite performance.

---

<sup>1</sup> Transilvania University of Braşov, E-mail: [cristina.radu@unitbv.ro](mailto:cristina.radu@unitbv.ro)

In singing, *versatility* can have many forms: from applying to various genres of vocal music (such as Opera, Oratorio, Lied, Musical, Jazz, Rock and so on) to experiment stylistically different fields and repertoires – within the same musical genre (for instance, *baroque*, *classical*, *romantical*, *verist* and *modern* opera works).

The vocal versatility, can be understood as the adequate performance of an extended range of different genres and styles - by the singer who possesses the necessary vocal and interpretative resources for this target.

By definition, an opera singer is a versatile artist. Through the nature of his job, he must master the art of sounds (the technique of a correct vocal emission and of a nuanced interpretation) but also the art of acting (such as intelligible and eloquent declamation, dance skills, convincing stage movement and costuming). The versatility of an opera singer is seen in both the *stylistic versatility* mentioned above, and in one's availability of constant adaptability to different directing views of *the same role*. Because every opera role and character can be singed and played in many possible interpretable variants.

The art of sounds mirrors almost all cultural fields of human society. An elite interpreter doubles and refines one's native talent through substantial work in polishing one's natural vocal qualities, but also through adequate cultural training, so necessary for ambitious horizons of art. As an opera artist, one can embody an archaic king or an Egyptian slave, a fiery Gypsy woman or a witch, an ascetic monastery monk or a scholar, a corrupt politician or a legendary hero, a barber or a count. Knowledge of history, philosophy, psychology, literature, musicology, acting and the aesthetics of art, are necessary to achieve excellence in such a profession, because all these outlining the versatility of a complete artist.

In modern times, artistic versatility can be viewed from several perspectives. A musician can manifest oneself as an artist, contributing both in stage art, where we are most accustomed to finding one (such as concerts, opera productions, or different shows with various syncretism formula projects) as well as in: pedagogy, musicology (scientific research), interviews and shows in mass-media, in writing, and in journalism, audio video recordings, film and television (documentaries, artistic movies, opera movies). In the suffocating agglomeration and intense competitiveness of modern world, one artist cannot distinguish himself and survive on the artistic market without resorting to publicity, which is often provided most easily on the Internet. So, in this point, we can name some *transverse abilities* (extra-musical abilities) of a versatile artist in the modern world: besides speaking international languages used in singing (Italian, French, German, and English) and use an extended knowledge in fields such as history, literature, psychology, or fine

arts, an modern artist should have at least a minimal IT knowledge for operating on intelligent electronic devices, in order to advertise an event in the virtual space of Internet (an attractive concert poster, a presentation blog/site, an online recording, a photograph, or a CV and so on).

Why are we more than ever preoccupied by versatility in modern times? Because the public's taste for diversity has grown exponentially and the competition in the classical artistic and entertainment market is tough. Another cause can be identified in the accelerated transformations and in the multiple experiments done in music in 20th Century and in the present. If in old times, musical styles could last even some hundreds of years (*Renaissance* continued over a period of almost 300 years), in modern times, a style does not last more than three-four decades (Voiculescu, 2006). All these, along with the multitude of genres and forms embodied by vocal music – from popular to religious forms, from classical to entertainment, from opera to musical – offer a very diverse and dynamic artistic framework for a modern artist.

## **2. Two complementary ways: versatility *versus* restrictive specialisation**

Versatility is an ability extremely appreciated in the artistic field. The adaptability of an interpreter can ensure a safer survival in the modern world. Versatility practised at a high level can be considered the elite sign of an authentic artist. It does not reject specialisation in a certain direction, but it encourages a certain openness to diversity. I believe that a balanced attitude of accessing the repertory can reconcile these apparently opposed directions, rendering them complementary.

On the other side, specialisation is often a sign of professionalism and of passionate devotion to a certain musical genre/style. It can display various forms:

- Specialisation in a specific genre (such as Opera or Oratorio or Musical...)
- Specialisation in a stylistically defined area (such as *baroque music* or *verism*)

There are also cases in which interpreters decides to centre their repertory on the creations of certain composers. But most of the time, the specialisation in a certain direction is not related only to artistically affinities of the interpreter, but also to the natural capacities of one's voice, to one's qualities and limits, psycho-physical propensities, but also the necessities of the artistic environment in which one works.

The advantages and disadvantages of these two complementary ways (versatility/or specialisation) are noticed in artistic practice:

Versatility offers diversity and a larger framework for the artistic expression. It requires but also develops in the interpreter various abilities of comprehension and expressing stylistically different scores. This way can be through knowledge of experience and more outstanding personal development. In the case of an approach characterised by maximum professionalism, it can attain elite performance. Additionally, the versatility of an interpreter can ensure one a safer survival in the modern world. But, on the other side, there is a danger that a multifarious approach may lead to a loss of attention to detail (Câmpeanu 1975). Cultivated without discernment, versatility can be also a way of wasting the artistic forces, which can lead to mediocrity, or to a strictly commercial and consumerist direction. Additionally, too diverse or too disordered repertory may ruin the singer's voice if he doesn't learn to recognize his own limits (Radu 2017).

Specialisation in a certain musical genre or in a stylistic direction comes along with more thoroughness and accuracy, which can lead to a raised degree of professionalism for a more accurate application of the score. Specialisation, even if more restrictive, may facilitate the outlining of an authentic interpretative style and it can create the possibility of reaching the highest level of performance. On the other side, any hyper specialisation may lead to a loss of overall vision. A thoroughness limited to a single direction may lead to one's artistic sterility over time.

### **3. Aspects related to vocal technique, interpretation and creativity**

Although each artist develops in his career his personal interpretative style, in the *tradition* of the international singing schools emerged in time some *interpretative manners* considered as adequate in accomplishing musical creations belonging to different artistic epochs. Musical writing, with its technical and expressive particularities, but also certain interpretative views taking root through *vocal tradition*, have led to building of some *patterns*, commonly accepted in the performance of scores, from different musical genres and styles.

In order to become a good singer, knowing and assimilating these models turns to be the basic of the training. It is also let to an artist's ability to be versatile and manage these information with intelligence and ingenuity. Often, these can also become the subject of a long lasting specialisations of the interpreter, in one direction or another.

By a comparative analysis of two opera arias, one composed in the baroque, the other in the romantic epoch, we can remark a series of technical and interpretative demands that outline the two different musical styles. If in the baroque, for instance, the *vibrato* of the voice is treated as an ornament and a linear singing (*non-vibrato*) is preferred for the rest of the discourse – in Romanticism, the vibrato of the voice is a necessary, continuous norm, used in phrasing both for the beauty and expressivity of the discourse, but also for ensuring the sound penetration of voice over the denser wave of the orchestral sound. Another aspect treated differently is the problem of ornaments. In baroque, there is a great number of ornaments (simple or complex) that colour vocal lines. The style is prominently based on improvisation, especially in the *da capo* segment of the aria, and the singer is left with the freedom to display a wide palette of his vocal virtuosity. Things are different in Romanticism. Ornaments are not strictly left at the disposal of the interpreter's creativity and taste, but they are expressly noted by the composer into the score. Most often, ornaments are used in the Romantic epoch with a well-defined expressive aim, not only for displaying vocal virtuosity.

For a singer, the vast amount of the musical and extra-musical information about a score, or the vocal technique, style and interpretation – must not lead to fixed, preconceived ideas nor to a paralysis of his creativity. Vocal and interpretative flexibility and freshness, mental openness to new or alternate interpretations, text enhancing possibilities, imagination, or the freedom to make new and unusual connections, are the features that turn the versatility of an artist into real value.

When we talk about *versatile skills* in *vocal technique*, we refer first to a permanent maintenance of vocal flexibility, capable of achieving a variety of dynamics and high virtuosity. And also, to be able to act rapidly and easily in adapting the vibrato in leading musical phrases, even when the voice tends towards ampler emissions, specific to dramatic roles. It is also a matter of constant attention dedicated to an intelligible articulation of the text, in any register, in any vocal tissue, in any nuance and in any tempo. In brief, it is about the capacity of a singer to adapt the capacity of his vocal parameters to the specific demands of the different musical styles.

When we talk about *versatile skills* in the *interpretative technique*, we refer to some certain abilities of the singer to use and change(!) rapidly and in a convincing manner, *all interpretative parameters* – vocal and stage ones – in the construction of a character, of an emotion. We talk about the intonation and the

colour of the voice, the walk, the look, the body language and so on. The possibility to embody roles, characters, and different and carefully nuanced states – not only being limited to a single vocal typology or (in acting) to a character typology (comical/ dramatical/ soubrette *versus* tragedian). We also talk about the possibility of an artist to establish a neutral point (*a zero point*, say) – from which one can set off, through various procedures and effects, premeditated and elaborated, interpretative elongations in any area of expression.

#### **4. How to make students familiar with analytical thinking in their study**

In order to become a versatile artist, one needs intelligence, talent, an analytic skills, imagination, a certain taste for playing and of course, a lot of work! In order not to suffocate a young person's enthusiasm, when we he is placed in front of a huge quantity of information and range of demands, a good professor will know to give students a good weapon: a simple and efficient study method.

The student should be familiarised with the stages of the musical study and how to planning it. This stages includes: documentation; text translation; reading carefully the score and the text (also the source of the text/ libretto); being aware of the technique and interpretative demands of the artistic work; focus on resolving musical and vocal difficulties while studying; learning the score by heart.

When we talk about paying attention of the details of the scores, we refer to a more elaborate work such as: identifying the musical style in the chosen work (such as identifying the stylistic characteristics of the era, particularities of the composers works), the belonging of the musical score (an aria can be a cut out from an opera or an oratorio or a larger artistic work; a Lied can be part of an extended cycle) and its inclusion in the period in which it was created by the composer (if this has a certain significance or it presents certain particularities that deserve being highlighted). We also refer to identifying the *character*. Each vocal work is attributed to an *explicit* character (in opera or in oratorio) or *intuited* character (in lied, concert arias, other genres of vocal or instrumental works) – that has a *psychological profile* and a *message* of which it is good that the interpreter be aware. A thorough understanding of the score also requires focusing on details related to musical and extra-musical writing (the message of the composer) as well as being aware of the *map* of the tops (climaxes) and minimum intensities or of dramatic moments. Localising the technical difficulties in a score (such as extended ambitus, phrases that require an ample respiration, virtuosity, passages) and

identifying interpretative challenges brought out by the dramatic context comprised in a chosen work.

In the *documentation* stage of the study, there are few steps also: a good and succinct analyse of the whole work (for instance: watching the entire opera for the studied aria and analysing the cutting out proper, together with other arias or significant moments in the work attributed to the same character for an overall vision); reading various sources from which the work has been created (such as the novel underlying the libretto, documentation regarding the era and the historic moment for the works inspired from real life) and studying thoroughly the chosen character. Documentation about the composer, the time when he lived, and stylistic particularities. Technical study and assimilating the scores, learning by heart, are best to be carried out as strictly related to study on the work's expression. Challenges come from both study areas: the technical and the expressive, requiring suitable solutions. Technique and vocal expressivity are always tightly interdependent: without adequate technical means, expressive intentions can fade away; and without a vision rich in imagination and expressivity, the interpretation of a work remains sterile if it is centred only on technical virtuosity.

## 5. A few examples of versatile modern artists

**Maria Cebotari (1910-1945)** – a Romanian soprano from Basarabia, with a prestigious lyrical career in interwar Germany, spreading over opera, theatre and cinema! She excelled in operas signed by Mozart, Puccini and R. Strauss. She was cast in the cinema movies *Odessa in Flames*, *Maria Malibran*, and *Il sogno di Butterfly*. Richard Strauss dedicated to her the leading role in the *Salome opera*.

**Nicola Rossi-Lemeni (1920-1991)** – Russian-Italian bass singer, known by his contemporaries as a Renascentist personality: opera singer with an important international career, poet (he published four volumes of poetry), talented painter, highly interested of world history and numismatics, competent collector of antiques. He applied a varied repertory of Italian, Russian and French opera, excelling in *Boris Godunov*, *Don Giovanni*, *Mefistofele*, and *Faust*. He carried out numerous recordings, together with prestigious artists, such as the sopranos Maria Callas, Renata Tebaldi, the conductor Carlo Maria Giulini.

**Maria Callas (1923-1977)** – the charismatic Greek soprano changed forever the opera world, raising the concept of *singer-actor* to a level of excellence difficult

to equal. Her stellar career in opera was accompanied by a rich recording career that made her known over the whole world and keeps her even now in the top of the best sold artists of all times. Among her signature roles there were *Norma*, *Medeea*, *Traviata*, *Tosca*, and *Gioconda*. She acted in a cinema movie (*Medeea* by Pasolini), she directed, and she delivered *Master Class* courses at Julliard School in New York. Her versatility was manifest in opera, where she accomplished a range of roles that were extremely varied stylistically from Gluck to Wagner, from Bellini to Puccini, with an *asolutta* vocal range, from a lyrical coloratura soprano to dramatic roles and even as a mezzosoprano (applied in studio recordings but not on stage).

**Placido Domingo (n.1941)** the Spanish opera singer is one of the most versatile and long-living established artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. His motto: *If I rest I rust*. He accomplished an impressive number of opera roles in Italian, French, German, Russian, and he even sang in Chinese. He sing also roles in other genres (oratorio, Italian canzonetta or zarzuela). Domingo is also a pianist coach, conductor, opera director. He founded the international vocal music contest *Operalia*, and he published eight books, some in collaboration with other authors. He made an impressive number of studio recordings and opera films, obtaining international acknowledgement and numerous awards during his career. Domingo sings today too, but not as a tenor, as he was known but as a baritone..

**Renee Fleming (n.1959)** – the American soprano is now at the climax of a prestigious lyrical career and she performed a varied repertory of opera, oratorio, lied, contemporary music, jazz, and film music. She carried out numerous sound and video recordings, singing easily in different languages: Italian, French, German, Russian, Czech and of course, English. Her complex personality also manifests as a promoter of music and literature, in numerous interviews, news stories, and documentaries (sometimes as a reporter). She is the author of the famous volume: *The Inner Voice: the making of a singer*.

## 6. Conclusion

The versatility of a singer manifests in one's ability to accomplish:

- several musical genres (such as opera, oratorio, lied, operetta, musical, jazz...);
- various composition styles (such as baroque, classical, romantic, modern);
- complementary branches of one's art (pedagogy, musicology, recordings); and



- different interpretative or directing views, in different stage version of the same work, using different technical methods convincingly adapted to various expressive demands.

Versatility is the fruit of sustained assimilation work, research, study and the ability of one artist to distinguish himself in multiple genres or fields (interconnected or not). It is a quality that can validate a high degree of professionalism and artistic excellence, in a different (but not incompatible) manner as compared to choosing a specialisation that offers a more restricted framework. Versatility is also a way of surviving given the tough competition of the modern artistic world, and a way of always testing new artistic challenges.

## References

- Batta, András. 1999. *OPERA. Composers. Works. Performers*. Cologne: Editura Konemann.
- Burlui, Adela. 2005. *Concepte interpretative în muzica vocală a secolului XX*, [Interpretative Concepts in Voice Music of the Twentieth Century], PhD thesis. Iași : Universitatea de Arte George Enescu.
- Callas, Maria. 1991. *Leçons de chant, Master classes à la Juilliard School 1971-1972, transcrites par John Ardoin*. Édition Fayard / Van de Velde.
- Câmpeanu, Liviu. 1975. *Elemente de estetică vocală* [Elements of vocal aesthetics]. București: Editura Interferențe.
- Fleming, Renée. 2004. *The Inner Voice: the Making of a Singer*. New York: Penguin Group.
- Iliuț, Vasile and Anamaria Călin. 2011. *O carte a stilurilor muzicale* [A book of musical styles] vol.III. București: Editura Muzicală.
- Radu, Cristina. 2006. *Ce înseamnă să fii artist de operă al timpului tău?* [What it means to be an opera artist of your time?] Volume of the Symposium *Portretele muzicii românești* [Portraits of Romanian Music]. Brașov: Editura Universității Transilvania din Brașov.
- Radu, Cristina. 2017. *O viziune modernă asupra formării cântărețului de operă* [A modern vision on the formation of the opera singer]. București: Editura Muzicală.
- Truiculescu, Marin-Marius. 2011. *Cântul vocal profesionist. Respirația corectă, tehnica de emisie vocală și interpretarea nuanțată pentru toate genurile de cânt, de la cântul bisericesc, popular și alte genuri, până la cel de operă* [Professional vocal cant. The correct breathing, the vocal emission technique

and the nuanced interpretation for all genres of singing, from the chant, popular and other genres, to the opera]. Cluj-Napoca: Editura Renașterea.

Voiculescu, Dan. 2006. *Drama muzicii moderne* [The drama of modern music] Anniversary discourse published in the volume *Aniversările muzicale 2005-2006* [Musical anniversaries]. Editura Universității *Transilvania* of Brașov.