

The Valuation of the Original Text in an Opera Vocal Score: Meaning and Pronunciation

Traian ICHIM¹

Abstract. *The article is dedicated to the problems of working on the text of opera librettos in a foreign language in the process of learning the opera. The stages of this work are considered - from understanding the meaning, which makes it possible for the interpreter to approach the most appropriate interpretation of the composer's intention, to the elaboration of a foreign pronunciation as an important indicator of the vocalist's professionalism. The relevance of the subject is related to the practice of staging operas in the original language that has taken place root in the activity of opera houses in recent decades. The author offers modern methods of working on a text in a foreign language of an opera libretto and shares extensive practical experience in this field of activity. The idea is especially emphasized that the process of studying a vocal work in a foreign language should take place in stages: from reading and learning the text without music to understanding the idea of the work as a synthesis of music and words. The process organized in this way will allow to solve the task of creating a convincing artistic image. When practicing pronunciation, the importance of correct articulation and clear diction is noted and practical advice is given to improve them. Typical mistakes of vocalists in Italian and French pronunciation in singing are listed, ways to correct them are indicated. The author of the article emphasizes that a good knowledge of foreign languages is an indispensable tool condition for a vocalist who dreams of a successful career.*

Key-words: *pronunciation in singing, symbiosis of music and words, speech articulation, diction, recitative, vocal technique.*

¹ PhD. Transylvania University of Braşov, traian.ichim@unitbv.ro

1. Introduction

We start from the fact that *interpretation* is a living *action*, carried out linearly, always renewed and never definitively fulfilled, evolving over time and - as such - subject to constant changes, permanently under the influence of chance and the changing human mood; while the opera score, the written text, is a finite *object* (or *document*), definitively concluded, becoming timeless. As a result, the attitude of the performers has oscillated, in the course of history, between rigor and freedom towards the letter of the score. This relationship has evolved from a freedom going as far as arbitrary (in the name of subjective expression), to an ever-greater respect for the will of the original creator.

Working on the text of the music is very important when tackling a new operatic role or any other vocal work in a foreign language. The important task of the opera performer is to achieve a convincing and artistically justified interpretation of the creation. For this a perfect understanding of the literary text is necessary.

If the opera singer is not fluent in the language in which the work is written, interlinear translation will be of great help. He or she can try to do the interlinear translation himself or herself, which, by the way, is quite difficult, or he can turn to a specialist.

2. Meaning and pronunciation

An uninitiated person may have a question: why do we need interlinear translations if many repertoire works have already been translated to Romanian? It is certain that a literary translation often differs significantly from the original version of the text for many reasons, both linguistic and musical, since it is impossible to correctly and adequately translate the original text into rhyme, moreover, putting it into a certain number of measures.

Knowing the content of the performed score is also important, as the nature of the music may not always suggest the correct interpretation of the character image. Sometimes the composer deliberately introduces a contrast between the text and the melody, thus creating a situation of intrigue or comic effect. Often this technique can be found in *opera buffa*. Some interpreters of Laretta's aria from the opera "Gianni Schicchi", not understanding the nature of the character, interpret this aria as "tragic". Unfortunately, today many young singers have a superficial attitude to the text of a vocal work, a lack of skills in the dramatic and

psychological analysis of the text, and an inability to exist during the performance in the proposed circumstances (Singher 1990, 20-57).

Obviously, without a clear understanding of the text of the work, without knowledge of the subject itself, it is impossible to create a convincing image.

Of course, the singer may be able to perform the second task that arises when working on a vocal composition in a foreign language, namely, to perform a work with good pronunciation. He will probably be able to do this due to his good skills in imitating foreign pronunciation. These days, it's not hard to find recordings made by native speakers on the Internet. But to achieve the main goal - to create a convincing interpretation of the image of the protagonist of the performed role, more is needed, namely, the exact understanding of the entire text of the work.

If an opera singer dreams of a successful international career, knowledge of foreign languages is essential. Romanian singers who manage to appear on international opera stages notice that during the rehearsal process, directors and conductors find mistakes in the pronunciation of every wrong sound. And this is understandable: the audience present at the show does not want to hear a foreign accent.

It is important to have a clear pronunciation in recitatives, especially in *recitativo secco*, where it is impossible to hide behind the music and every word is audible.

Working for many years as a conductor at the Braşov Opera House and often attending singers' exams, the author of the article has repeatedly noticed the carelessness of pronunciation in singing in Italian. The situation is much worse with other foreign languages, for example, French, German or Russian. Sometimes, when listening to a vocal work, it is even impossible to understand in which language it is performed. According to experts, the ease of German pronunciation is only apparent, especially for some vowel sounds. The situation is even more complicated with French, where there are fifteen vowels, one-third of which are nasal. Unfortunately, these disciplines are not included in the curriculum of future opera singers. In this sense, David Adams' book can be very useful, in which the author offers a clear and pragmatic diction guide for singers and accompanists, but also approaches the subject with a fine ear for music and a deep understanding of the challenges that singers face in the symbiosis of music with the literary text (Adams 2022). Anything and everything needed to understand and execute beautiful, authoritative diction can be found in this book, in three different languages. A Diction Manual for Singers will make an invaluable addition to any singer's library. The work is a very practical book, full of details illustrated by

numerous musical examples. This book can be useful for singers as well as conductors or singing teachers.

Opera singers are not always responsible for pronunciation work. It is naive to count on the fact that the public does not understand any of this, that it “will”. Even if there is only one listener in the room who speaks the original language of the work fluently, or only one native speaker of this language, he will be able to form a negative opinion about the performers and share it with others. Correct pronunciation when performing works in foreign languages is a necessary component of the performers’ professionalism, even if they have beautiful voices, sing well and play their roles convincingly.

Correct pronunciation depends on clear articulation, that is, on the correct function of the speech organs: lips, tongue, palate, larynx. Therefore, when working with music students on a vocal work in Italian or French, the teacher should always draw their attention to the functions of the organs of speech, that is, stand opposite, pronounce a fragment of the text and ask the students to repeat, imitating the articulation. Then ask him to sing this passage, following the correct articulation. Moreover, speaking about the Italian pronunciation, the *bel canto* singing technique should be mentioned, this being associated precisely with the articulation specific to this language. If the sounds are correctly articulated, then the speech organs themselves are placed in a position that provides the best singing technique.

In recent years, opera houses, which plan to stage operas in foreign languages, invite so-called coaches, native speakers, to work on pronunciation. This is good practice, but since coaching is expensive, they only work with the singers for a limited period of time, such as two to three weeks at best. It is good if they are asked to read the text on a digital medium so that in the future the interpreters can refer to it for correct pronunciation. In practice, what often happens is that even if a good foreign language level is achieved at the premiere, the quality will decline without constant control over pronunciation and the introduction of new interpreters in the production.

A separate role in the process of working on pronunciation should be given to clear diction. Giuseppe Verdi, who himself worked on the staging of his operas, attached great importance to this. He repeatedly used to tell to the singers that the audience must understand the text being performed. A singer’s poor diction is an indicator of the artist’s misunderstanding of his or her professional duties (Colombati 2014, 12).

Diction depends on clear articulation and, above all, on the clarity of consonant sounds. Singers have a saying: “Vowels are the river, consonants are the

banks". Its meaning is that if the consonants are not pronounced clearly, then the vowels will become unclear, the "river" of the vowels will spread, and the text will become less clear. On the other hand, if you exaggerate the pronunciation of consonants, then the fluidity of singing can suffer.

If a singer has difficulty with diction, how can it be improved? In our opinion, an effective way is to read and memorize those "snippets of language"² for different combinations of vowels and consonants.

3. A few common mistakes in pronunciation

The most common mistakes that singers make in pronunciation are the following.

In Italian:

- pronouncing [a] instead of [o] in an unstressed position;
- softening of consonants before vowels i, e;
- the incorrect pronunciation of the letter combinations *gn* and *gli*;
- the pronunciation of the vowel [i] after *c*, *g* and the combination of letters *sc* before *a* vowel, for example, in the word *cielo*;
- pronunciation of double consonants as single;
- ignoring the rule of phonetic amplification³;
- pronouncing [n] instead of [m] before *b*, *p* and [m] with a nasal tone before *v*, *f*;
- pronouncing a hard *l* in the English manner, or conversely, too soft, in the French manner;
- incorrect pronunciation of the open and closed vowels *o* and *e*⁴;
- the incorrect pronunciation of the consonants *s* and *z*⁵.

² Tongue twists (tongue twists) are phonetic exercises, funny and useful not only in speech therapy, but also for practicing diction, which consist of pronouncing sentences or phrases made up of words with a high frequency of a sound or words that are difficult to pronounce, in which the sounds are difficult to combine

³ Amplification consists of doubling the consonant if the preceding short word ends in a vowel. You can check if amplification occurs in this case at the URL: <http://blog.codecode.it/dizione-e-pronuncia-imparare-a-parlare-bene-per-comunicare-meglio-parte-2/>

⁴ the veracity of the pronunciation (open or closed) of *o* and *e* can be checked at the URL: <http://blog.codecode.it/dizione-e-pronuncia-imparare-a-parlare-bene-per-comunicare-meglio-parte-2/>

⁵ one can check that *s* and *z* are read correctly at the URL: <http://blog.codecode.it/dizione-e-pronuncia-imparare-a-parlare-bene-per-comunicare-meglio-parte-2/>

The correct pronunciation of an Italian word can be easily checked at the URL: <http://www.dizionario.rai.it>, where the words are exemplified by TV announcers, native Italian speakers.

The most common mistakes in French pronunciation are⁶:

- fading of open vowels at the end of words;
- pronouncing [a] instead of [o] in an unstressed position;
- softening of consonants before vowels *i, e*;
- the tendency to pronounce the sounds [ɛ], [e], [œ] as in Romanian [e];
- ignoring or mixing nasal sounds;
- lack of pronunciation of the sound [r] in the French manner.

If we were to talk separately about the pronunciation of the sound [r] in the French manner, there are opinions that this procedure is not used in opera singing. This point of view has a historical justification and a rationale of its own. It is certain that until the beginning of the 20th century the French did not use this procedure. The fashion for pronouncing the fricative [r] was introduced by the Parisian “golden youth”, young aristocrats, who, wanting to emphasize their “exclusivity”, began to imitate the dialect of the poor in the Parisian suburbs (Warnant 1964, 1-23). So gradually it came into vogue and eventually became the norm in modern French. But, after all, most of the works of the classical repertoire were written in the 19th century, that is, during the period when the inhabitants of France still pronounced the regular *r*. The tradition of singing French vocal works without this sound developed even earlier in Russia. On the other hand, modern French, unless they are originally from the south of France, such as Marseilles, cannot speak and sing without using this way of pronouncing the letter [r]. At the same time, they have a rather loyal attitude towards foreigners who fail to sing using this method: not everyone can make this sound. Therefore, the question of whether or not to sing like this in French-language operas – should be decided by the performers themselves (Grubb 1979, 1-10).

Thus, when taking on a new opera role in a foreign language, the performer must learn as much as possible about this opera, about its literary source, about the composer, about the history of creation, to familiarize himself or herself with its libretto in order to be able to navigate with ease in the complexity of the subject matter and the motives for his character's actions. It is necessary to analyze in detail or seek the help of a specialist. When you understand the meaning of the text, it is easier to memorize. Then there is painstaking work on pronunciation,

⁶ one can check the correct pronunciation of separate French words at the URL: <http://www.larouss.fr/dictionnaires/français>, where they are pronounced by native speakers.

preferably also under the guidance of a specialist or, much better, a native speaker. If it is impossible to call such specialists, you can use audio or video recording, but an indispensable condition for such a recording is that it is sung by a native speaker. French opera, for example, should be sung by a Frenchman, not an Italian, German or American.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, we can say that pronunciation is practiced first by reading the text, then by singing it. The advice is to study the poetic text in detail, temporarily separating it from the music. Reciting the text aloud can be very helpful for later vocal interpretation. At the same time, great attention must be paid to the correct and clear articulation of the correct linguistic intonation, especially in recitatives. After analyzing and learning the foreign text in detail, the interpreter can proceed to the second stage - vocal interpretation. Only in this way will the synthesis of words and music be created in the best possible way, and this, in our opinion, should be the optimal method of working on the text and pronunciation of a part of an opera in a foreign language.

The musical text never ceases to raise questions for those who study it carefully. As Sergiu Celibidache said “you don't get to know the notes and the instrumental procedures”⁷, understanding by this that for real musicians, some even trained intuitively, the exact reading of the score brings a much greater wealth of information (received directly aurally and not named as such) than it would seem at first glance. And Sviatoslav Richter often repeated that “everything is written in the score” and he did not exaggerate. But he omitted to complete the essential: “for those who know how to read it”!

References

- Adams, David. 2022. *A Handbook of Diction for Singers: Italian, German, French*. London: Oxford University Press, 3rd edition.
- Colombati, Claudia. 2014. *Sintesi drammaturgico-musicali nella narrazione verdiana*. Rome: Libreria Musicale Italiana

⁷ S. Celibidache, interview in *Das Orchester*, Mainz, 1976

- Grubb, Thomas. 1979. *Singing in French: A Manual of French Diction and French Vocal Repertoire*. New York: Schirmer Books.
- Singher, Martial. 1990. *An Interpretive Guide to Operatic Arias: A Handbook for Singers, Coaches, Teachers, and Students*. Pennsylvania: The Penn State University Press.
- Warnant, Léon. 1964. *Dictionnaire de la prononciation française, deuxième édition revue et corrigée*. Gembloux: Editions Duculot.