

Artistic training of the Opera singer, the foundation for a successful career

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Abstract: *This article is targeted at both students engaged in full-time study and those who guide them, who, through knowledge, professionalism, and discernment, assume responsibility to build successful careers together with those whom they guide. The voice, the frail tool that links spirit and matter, requires, beside native endowment, constant and persevering practice, under the careful guidance of a teacher, who has to create stages and doses of information so that at the end of the route covered, the student becomes an artist prepared to meet an impresario.*

Key-words: *teacher voice, opera singer, artistic training, artistic career, impresario*

1. Introduction: Opera, the syncretism of arts

The opera is a complete theatre experience. Nowadays, the public appreciates and waits artistic products comparable with those in the cinema industry and mass-media, and in order to be able to compete with these, we need not only trained voices, but also versatile musicians: people of culture and artistic deepness who integrate their experiences to the present requirements. The opera singer of the 21st Century has to possess a theoretical musical basis similar to that of instrumentalists, deep knowledge of music history and universal literature, to acquire the art of theatre performance and oration, and not least, to succeed by means of emotional intelligence well mastered in conveying to the public the personality of the character embodied.

“In order to develop your voice and to maintain it in good condition so that it maintains through the years of your career, you have to study incessantly”, (Fillebrown 1911, 31) said Thomas Fillebrown at the beginning of the 20th Century, and those who deal with artistic training of new generations of singers, know that

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the time of the interpreter, who was based only on voice and talent, no longer exists. The confession of the great conductor Nello Santi is eloquent for the demands of an artistic career today: *“I was lucky to learn from my own mistakes and to understand that my natural talent and even the memory I was endowed with can become drawbacks in my artistic development. If we entrust ourselves only to them, in short time we become improvisers and charlatans. Innate talent must be always seconded and doubled by study. Due to this unity between talent and study I can be confident when I am on the concert podium and I can inspire in my turn certainty to the orchestra and calm to the soloists!”* (Isotta 2001, 3).

For a great artist, full talent is never a solitary faculty, isolated from the realm of knowledge and of solid spiritual engagement. Full talent is *wisdom in act* (Pleșu 2017, 92-93). Talent is not a merit, but an inexplicable gift that needs to be honoured; a talent does not belong to you and you can become deserving of it only on the condition of multiplying it. To really serve it, an artist needs to learn shyness. Latin rhetoric knew this when it used, in order to indicate talent, the term of *ingenium*, which is nonetheless insufficient; it is only a possibility opened to education. Only through exercise (ascesis), talent (*ingenium*) becomes *facilitas*. For *facilitas* you can praise an artist. An artist becomes truly praiseworthy only when one offers a direction to one’s dexterity. In this sense, one’s artistic training comprises several essential stages, which cannot be skipped, as the ground of musical culture and abiding for the time necessary for educating such a frail tool as the human voice, essential to a long and successful career.

2. The route of musical education

The foundation of artistic education starts in childhood, at the same time with the sound study of an instrument and first reading. As C. Noica would beautifully say, culture can be considered the supreme value, the only one on which you can rely in a man’s life, unconditionally offering permanent joy through the freedom and maturity of the spirit. If in childhood we can talk about the education of musical hearing and of artistic sensitiveness, through the study of an instrument, singing in choir and watching as many shows as possible, sound vocal study starts after the period of puberty, after a body stabilises from a hormonal point of view.

The training of a voice and of an artistic personality is a long and laborious process, implying numerous risks, but also moments of fascinating explorations of the body, the psyche and the spirit (Radu 2017, 215).

“To initiate a lyrical profession, you cannot invent yourself from one day to the other. Between eight and ten years of study are necessary to reach a level of

preparation that guarantees professionalism", said master Claudio Desderi in an interview with Gloria Bellini (Bellini 2009, 5).

In this initiatory approach, the apprentice needs a master with whom one can communicate as deeply as possible.

*"When the pupil is prepared, the Master will appear"*³ and this meeting is essential, determining, transforming and vital in outlining the destiny of a future artist. What should be obvious for any youth that starts this profession is the awareness that he starts a life full of restrictions, efforts of self-knowledge, and self-discipline.

In her book, *"The inner voice"*, the American soprano Renée Fleming speaks about the acute issue of the appropriate teacher whom you should meet on time: *"it is very difficult to meet a teacher with whom you get along both technically and psychologically, who should support you, should supervise you permanently and to teach you correctly the basis of vocal technique, essential for a professional singer. Finally, nonetheless, it is yourself who stands alone in the study room and explores, using your creativity and imagination to apply the suggestions of the teacher. In the end, singing is not a science, but a very high way, sometimes almost perverse, of using our natural vocal potential to the most, and this implies a delicate and persistent study"* (Fleming 2004, 55).

3. The teacher and the first masterly meeting

The essential role of the teacher is that of being an ethical, moral, and professional model, revealing daily the basic principles of singing through a repertory adequate to the stage of study and vocal *fach*, offering technical solutions for solving the deadlocks, dosing vocal excesses and emotional exaggerations, at the same time stimulating new technical and interpretive investigation. A significant part for the development of a young artist is represented by the hours and days devoted to personal study... nonetheless, in the first years, an exaggerated study without an auditive control of the external ear by the teacher can do more harm than good. The study must centre round musical assimilation of the repertory, the development of a good rhythmical sense, of memory, and imagination. The human mind swiftly acquires new information, but the body needs a long time in order to assimilate correct attitudes in vocal emission and to turn them into reflexes. The progress of a singer is more rapid or slow depending on the time devoted to

³ A budhist saying

rehearsals, consistency, and insistence in conferring discipline to the body and mind.

The science of teaching singing is only a part of the pedagogical arsenal. In order to obtain good results, the teacher needs to be a very good psychologist. Knowing to enter the soul of the one you guide and to guide him with firmness and mildness to discover the gift with which he was endowed and to polish it with endless study hours in order to offer it to others epitomises the unequalled mission of those who can be called human and beauty builders. *“The teacher resembles a carpenter”,* said Petre Țuțea *“who takes a dirty piece of wood from the mud, washes it and turns it into luxury furniture”.*

The most important quality of the student-teacher relation is *trust* in the one who provides the information, in his capacity to discern what is good and correct at the present stage of study and in his honesty regarding the possibility of developing innate talent of a young singer. The development of a voice can be impressive if the guidance is optimum and there is a good communication between the two. On the contrary, important and far-reaching voices can be lost if they try a difficult repertory too soon, for which they are not technically prepared. An optimum repertory is one of the essential landmarks in developing a voice, outlining the route of a future singer. The honesty of the teacher in this relation is essential; the possibilities of a student being revealed in the first years of study and if noticed that a student does not have sufficient talent for this profession (hearing issues, rhythm, musicality, stage inertia, or emotional instability), professional reorientation can be recommended with a lot of pedagogical tact; being aware of personal possibilities in time can lead to a possible professional reorientation preventing subsequent unfulfillment and even tragedy.

Being a professional singer requires, beside *“all innate vocal qualities (specific timbre, extended pitch, homogeneous and sensual vibrato, clear articulation, natural and the dynamic of colours, phonogenia), mental (determination, focus, artistic intelligence), and physical (pleasant presence, health, application of effort) or those acquired (musical and general culture, correct technical habits in the emission and articulation of a sound, artistic versatility, pragmatic abilities in managing the chosen repertories)”* (Radu 2017, 215), a neuro-psychic and hormonal balance without which a lyrical career cannot be built. There are also moments of technical deadlock in the unfolding of a role on a stage and then one is saved by emotional intelligence, attributing the vocal imperfections of the moment to the psychological state of the character. But this must not become a habit as each technical “failure” unbalances the trust of the singer in one’s own possibilities, undermining one’s own possibility of expression. Therefore, the role of the one who guides careers consists in permanently guiding to self-knowledge,

in creating self-evaluation situations, in enabling to become their own teachers, in teaching them to know their value and shortcomings, and to become independent.

Dosing, the moment and the way in which the specialised information is provided are also very important. Too much information kills information...as a repertory improper for the time of artistic development can destroy a voice before time or it can induce major shortcomings related to impostation, and sometimes they are irremediable (Tartoni 1995, 60).

Scientific discoveries of the last century regarding the anatomy and functionality of the mechanisms of the breathing apparatus have led to multiple conceptual theories of singing, and to the crystallisation of the national singing schools (Italian, German, French, Russian, and American) each being rooted to the spoken language and subordinated to a certain type of breathing. Knowing the vocal phenomenon in its deepness has certainly its role and benefits in the context of the general culture of a singer, but experience proves that naturalness and beauty of singing are obtained when we are aware that at the basis of the functionality of all implied mechanisms lies *breathing* that we must control in a conscious manner. It is only so that we can by-pass the imperfections of our own instrument, deciphering this mystery which is the human voice and which mirrors the inner world of each body.

Homogeneity and using registers, resonance, timbre, and colour of voice depend on good breathing. Tone and support, the vibration of vocal chords and air pressure, are elements that must not be concerned either by the change in vowels or consonants, or by the height and intensity of the tone. This correct passage, without changing the timbre and the colours of vowels alongside the entire length of the voice, as well as the awareness and the development of the psychic factor in maintaining the colour of the sound is the main task of a pedagogue, the perfection belonging to the interpreter (Duțescu 2002, 92).

I find the classification made by Paul Lohmann in his book as being one extremely suitable for the focus of the team of pedagogue and interpreter during the period of study and perfecting the voice:

- “1. The length of each register;
2. The relation of breathing with each register;
3. The intensity of each register;
4. The attack and retreat of the tone in each register;
5. Typical resonance of each register;
6. The vowels and consonants typical for each register;
7. The colour and the degree of openness of each register; and
8. The psychic quality of each register” (Lohmann 1966, 62)

A good pedagogue knows and applies from case to case the method of voice education for the purpose of abiding by the eight points. There are many theories and treaties, there are great pedagogues starting with Perri and Caccini (1600), continuing with Tosi, Mancini (18th Century), then Duprez, Garcia, Cotogni (19th Century) and coming to Hahn, Lohmann, and R. Miller (20th Century); the challenge of this profession, which works with an *unseen tool*, is that the sensations are personal and different, and the genius of a teacher consists in his capacity to help one discover the sensations optimum to one's own body. Only this way will one be able to improve the quality of sound, attack and emission, homogeneity, an agile breathing technique, phrasing and articulation, performing a *messa di voce*, and passing from forte to piano and vice versa as well as the impostation proper for each musical style.

Over time, this concept of "singing sensations" was heavily disputed, certain skeptical specialists stated that these are more subjective opinions than physical sensations proper, although in musical experience singers confirm these sensitivities, according to which they guide their study. Even Raoul Husson describes in his book *Singing Voice* the relation between the localisation of this inner sensitivity and its influence in the "*ease and quality of vocal emission*" (Husson 1968, 62).

On the other side, *the best pedagogue is the heart*, said Tosti in 1723, and Aureliano Pertile underlined that art *begins where technique ends*. In his book, *Pages of Diary*, Wilhelm Furtwängler highlighted the traps of exclusive focus on technical issues: "If today someone believes that the technique of a singer, instrumentalist, conductor, can be taught and developed without a tight connection with the art itself, in relation to which the technique is allowed to be only a means, that person is mistaken. Today, the world is downright hypnotised by the issues of "technique", determining progress was made on its basis, especially as a result of modern biological concepts. Whether playing the piano or skiing, we are able today to attain higher performance in an interval much shorter than a few decades ago. Unlike skiers, artists did not become better for this, but, to the extent to which we have in mind the determining element as unmediated capacity of expression, weaker. Acquired as a means in itself, technique is very hard to influence, rather it influences; standardised technique generates a standardised art. The technical aspect in the case of an authentic interpretation is not allowed to separate from the *Soul* any instant; not even where it has an affect "in itself" (Furtwängler 1987, 54).

The study of singing cannot be restrained only to vocal practice and accumulation of strictly musical information, but it aims at forming an artistic culture that polishes the taste and sensitivity of a future interpreter, outlining an

artistic personality, who manages to impress the public. The horizon can be enlarged only by exploring with passion the various fields of art (painting, architecture, theatre, ballet, film, and photography), of culture, and of the human spirit.

4. The impresario and the perfecting of the artistic way

We can talk of two great essential meetings in the life of opera singer: *the pedagogue* at the beginning of development and *the impresario* at the beginning of artistic affirmation.

In the contemporary lyrical world, *the system of auditions* is most frequented, both by young singers and those already having developed a career, on the way to finding an engagement or an impresario. Project theatres frequently use auditions for the distribution of roles in various opera productions. For a beginner, the debut in this uncertain world with achievements and failures is a difficult period, difficult to manage emotionally. Finding an impresario is the key to being introduced in the process of auditions performed by small and large opera theatres over the world, without guaranteeing obtaining an engagement in a new production.

Renée Fleming in her book: *The Inner Voice*, speaks about the vicious circle of auditions at the beginning of a career: "For potential engagements, it is very difficult to receive an audition, if you do not have an impresario who represents you and it is almost impossible to find an impresario if you haven't already gained an audition".

The subsequent route of a singer's career and the extent of future engagements depend on success in auditions, so that preparation for these and self-control, accompanied by a good performance in stressful conditions, are objectives on which a young artist needs to focus. Determination, seriousness, perseverance, and self-confidence are qualities that must be cultivated in this approach, without forgetting that ambition must not replace passion for singing and music, and technical perfection is only the support for an artistic act that will impress only through an adequate presence and due charisma.

What distinguishes an artist, both in singing and as a presence, is one's personality; the charisma that has no connection to one's technical level. This is a gift; it is the grace without which an artist, no matter how well trained, cannot impress the audience.

The responsibilities of the impresario regard: the coordination of an artist's contracts (shows, concerts, recordings, media appearances); his counselling on a

professional plane regarding aspects of long-term career development; the performance repertory; media coverage; and also, of personal decisions that can affect the career. An impresario must know well: the lyrical repertory and the vocal typologies of singers; the adequate repertory at different stages of artistic development; how to read, understand and explain to the artist the terms of a contract; and how to act actively in promoting someone on the national and international artistic market. The impresario proposes, but the singer disposes. Learning to say “no” becomes essential in this profession, in which each singer is responsible for the consequences of the repertory or contractual related decisions that can affect his vocal and artistic integrity. Among the refusals that discipline the behaviour of a singer, there are: the refusal to sing in condition of sickness; the refusal to address a repertory unappropriate to his type of voice or to his stage of technical development; and also, the prevention of excesses.

As I said in my previous article⁴, prevention may save a career, any responsible singer will abide by the “four too much” about which the bass, baritone, phoniatician, specialist doctor, Gabriel Popescu Naruja, also spoke in an interview with Luminita Constantinescu: *“For an opera singer to be able to fulfil his career, he has to strictly abide by the four too much: never sing too much, too high, too loud and too often... These four “too much” are the condition sine qua non for preserving and capitalising on the vocal capital”*.

5. Conclusion

For a career to be prolific and long, the interpreter needs an extremely disciplined life, dosing effort, alternating periods of study, rehearsals, shows with mandatory sleeping hours, vocal repose, or minimising of speech, diverse and energising nutrition (excluding late dinners to avoid the gastro-intestinal reflux), sport, and a personal set of vocalisations for an efficient vocal warm-up.

Guidance to appropriate roles is extremely necessary in the first years and this is ensured by teachers and then by one’s impresario, although, unfortunately, the era of impresarios who loved theatre and artists has declined. Today distribution criteria are more centred on short-term gains and not on gradual development of the potential of an artist.

In his dialogue with Costin Popa, Stephan Poen makes a few interesting considerations related to the affects of excesses in singing, of too much air

⁴ Occupational Diseases of the Opera Singer: Connection and Therapy through the Breathing Technique/ published in BUT, December 2019

pressure upon the vocal chords (to obtain dramatic effects or for thickening the voice to over-dimension and creating the effect of a larger volume), and of the danger of the star-system temptations upon singers, mainly in prematurely performing some far-reaching roles. Comparing the successful, but meteoric career, of the tenor Rollando Villazon with the artistic longevity of the prestigious tenor Giacomo Lauri Volpi, Stephan Poen militates insistently in favour of the accumulation of artistic experience and the progressive and intelligent approach to roles (Costin 2009, 9).

The longevity of the career is related to self-knowledge and permanent self-discipline. Let us not believe that if we master a vocal and breathing technique we avoid problems. Nothing is more wrong than that...

As the Universe is in a perpetual change, and the human body is subjected to daily changes in climate, nutrition, and emotional factors, vocal technique really helps us to work with an instrument those changes from one hour to the other. This is the beauty, challenge, and the intelligence of succeeding in this career.

The human voice is part of our body that gets older day by day... and through persistence and discipline of work; we can develop it to function within optimal parameters as long as possible.

I conclude by a recommendation of the soprano, Karita Matilla that any singer on the path of artistic development should be aware of:

"Focus to become professional singers, not stars. Learn to know your limits and qualities, how the vocal instrument functions, and be in balance in all the aspects of your lives. Do not hurry. Think that you have to sing 30-40 years. I am grateful that I had the occasion to experience and I managed to learn from my own mistakes. But I am happy that any mistake was not so great as to stop my career for good" (Chan 2002, 73).

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