

Considerations on the relationship between vocal performance, repertoire choices, and self confidence

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Abstract: *This article examines the rapport between repertoire choices and self-confidence which ultimately impacts the quality of vocal performance. This research is based on semi-structured interviews with renowned opera singers that the author undertook during her PhD studies, as well as the author's own experience as an opera performer and voice teacher in higher education. The conclusion proposes that there is a complex interplay between vocal technique, personal identity and the performer's sense of artistic fulfilment.*

Key-words: *vocal performance, vocal technique, self-confidence, repertoire, opera*

1. Introduction

*"I think there are roles... for instance with Desdemona [Othello Rossini], even though I sang it well and for me it was a significant conquest of new territories... if someone had asked me to sing it again, I would have said 'no'. Because mental comfort is more important than vocal comfort."*²

In the quote above, internationally acclaimed mezzo-soprano, Ruxandra Donose refers to a moment in her career when she digressed from her usual lyric mezzo-soprano repertoire, into a different voice category, with the role of Desdemona in Rossini's *Otello*. This is a lyric soprano role that Rossini wrote for his wife, Isabella Colbran, a prima donna assoluta of the 19th century. Historically, Rossini's Desdemona has mainly been performed by sopranos, and exceptionally by mezzo-sopranos such as Joyce DiDonato. Donose's last sentence in the quote above brings into focus the complex mind-body connection: even when vocal comfort is

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² Ruxandra Donose quoted in Adriana Festeu 'Exploring Zwischenfach. Understanding vocal classification and its professional significance' (PhD diss., Royal Academy of Music, London 2016). Full interviews 9.

achievable, if a role challenges a singer's mental well-being, it might still be unsustainable as part of the singer's repertoire. Singers' vocal and artistic development represents a substantial area of research in performance studies – addressing advances in specific elements of vocal technique, mental aspects that influence peak performance, or issues of voice classification, which take into discussion specific repertoire. This paper proposes that throughout their training (and beyond), singers are confronted with a causality dilemma summed up as follows: singers are having to constantly assess their innate vocal qualities, to develop these qualities through building a suitable vocal technique, to apply said innate qualities and technique onto repertoire which (hopefully) complements the former, all of this, on a pre-existing mental framework of their own self-worth. The dilemma arises as these elements exist simultaneously and can influence one another either positively or less so.

2. Objectives

This article aims to explore the intersection and interaction between singers' repertoire choices, their vocal ability and sense of self-confidence. These aspects are discussed to enhance singers' awareness of the various components that contribute to the attainment of peak performance.³

3. Material and Methods

Vocal technique takes years to develop and is dependent on various factors such the information received from the voice teacher, the singer's processing and application of this information, as well as their own research and critical engagement with the knowledge they amass. Self-confidence represents the ability to trust one's abilities, judgements, or decisions, either in general or in relation to a specific situation or activity. In the field of sport psychology there are numerous studies that link self-confidence and peak performance (Woodman and Hardy 2003, 443–457). A performer's vocal technique is therefore deeply intertwined with their mental state. Repertoire is used both to reinforce the technical elements

³ While there might be some overlap with studies on performance anxiety, this paper does not focus on this aspect, which is otherwise widely disseminated. See for example: Miley, A., O'Connor, J., & Longphuir, E. N. (2024). 'Like a rabbit in the headlights': A psychoanalytically oriented exploration of performance anxiety in professional musicians in *International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies*, e1893. <https://doi.org/10.1002/aps.1893>

that the singer is working on, as well as to indicate a singer's vocal identity, which will influence their casting in opera or other artistic projects.

Soprano and voice teacher Pearl McGinnis acknowledges that the process of analysing a singer's vocal skill and their ability to sing certain repertoire needs to be assessed continuously (McGinnis 2010, 55). There are numerous resources to help guide singers in selecting the most suitable repertoire for their voices, most of them focusing on specific criteria such as range, tessitura, orchestral size, the presence or lack of agility, character considerations as well as tradition (Boldrey 1994, 9). Rudolf Kloiber's *Handbuch der Oper* (in its sixteen editions) and Richard Boldrey's *Guide to Operatic Roles and Arias* are the leading volumes in the field, in the German - and English-speaking countries respectively. There are many more such guides available and used by singers, voice teachers and casting directors alike. One of the common denominators for the use of such literature is that the repertoire choices made are suitable for the singer – so that they can perform the role frequently and comfortably. While any operatic role will bring various sets of challenges, Alma Thomas posits that the singer needs to achieve “a balance between skill and challenge. The singer needs to be challenged, but not beyond his/her skill level (Thomas 2019, 677). To this end, McGinnis discusses the importance of singers being aware of which roles they could perform “several times a week without vocal fatigue, especially if one has to rehearse new roles or perform others in rotation during the same period” (McGinnis 2010, 9). Mezzo-soprano Jennifer Johnston concurs, adding a very realistic dimension:

“Ultimately, vocal category is and always should be about comfort. When you have a busy diary and loads of music to prepare and not much time to spend on it, you have to be able to rely on your voice, so you need to know it well and choose appropriate repertoire that doesn't stress it out or ruin it. You also need to be aware that voices change and you have to be adaptable. What you start out singing may not be what you end up singing, so strap in and enjoy the ride!”⁴

The aspect of 'comfort', which is addressed here by Johnston, heeds back to Donose's quote at the beginning and the message can be summed up as follows: singers need a sense of vocal and mental comfort when singing their repertoire, in order to be able to perform consistently at a high level. To this end, some singers choose to market themselves (or their agencies market them) as a specific *Fach*, mainly performing repertoire from a specific period. The advantages of a narrow classification pertain to the idea that a performer becomes an expert in a specific

⁴Jennifer Johnston, quoted in Adriana Festeu, 'Exploring Zwischenfach', 39.

repertoire – therefore their performance has the potential to be vocally and stylistically superior to someone who performs a wider range of repertoire. Theoretically, this narrow categorisation is also beneficial for singers' vocal health, given they would be accustomed to the size of orchestra and weight of their specific repertoire. However, there is no consensus on this issue. Donose, a performer whose eclectic repertoire encompasses main roles from Vivaldi to Verdi, states *"I don't think that if I sang only music by one composer it would make me a better singer of that repertoire. Nor a healthier singer either because [vocal] health doesn't depend on the limits one imposes on oneself, but on the way, you know how to surpass or know your limitations."*⁵ Surpassing limitations alludes to a type of progress but the nature of the 'limitation' is important to address though, as the phrase itself suggests that the limitation exists only in perception.

McGinnis adds another realistic criterion to repertoire selection, to the traditional ones listed earlier – the element of desire. She explains that *"Quite simply this is whether the singer truly enjoys singing in a certain tessitura, or feels drawn to performing a specific style, such as dramatic, as opposed to lyric roles"* (McGinnis 2010, 8). This subjective aspect relates entirely to the artistic side of vocal performance, which is influenced by idealistic elements that are individual-specific, and it validates a singer's personal preference as an important factor in their selection of repertoire. The author suggests that McGinnis' newly proposed criteria is intrinsically linked to an individual's emotional system. Emotions are at the core of singing as an art form, and this aspect is mainly discussed in scholarship on operatic characters, or to address the impact of emotions on vocal performance. The relevant aspect in this research is the way in which emotions influence repertoire choices. In a move away from the split mind-body model of Cartesian philosophy, neuroscientists such as Jaak Panskepp, Joseph LeDoux and Antonio Damasio ground emotions firmly in bodily physical functions. Damasio considers emotion as a central element of human decision-making, thereby an assistant to reason (Damasio 1998). Pekrun et al., concur that *"emotions impact how individuals think and behave, as they are holistic responses that comprise affect and cognitive, psychological, and behavioral processes"* (Pekrun et al, 2002, 91-105). The emotional involvement that is inherent to singer's repertoire choices is obvious in their lived experience but this aspect is not addressed thoroughly in scholarship. The following excerpts from interviews with Lillian Watson and Yvonne Howard aim to start this debate. Soprano Lillian Watson developed her international career based on a very specific *Fach* - coloratura soprano, while mezzo-soprano Yvonne Howard's repertoire spans across various *Fächer* as well as voice categories, often in quick succession. In the excerpt below, Watson discusses

⁵ Ruxandra Donose, quoted in Adriana Festeu, 'Exploring Zwischenfach', 10.

the reason why she chose not to undertake the most well-known role in the coloratura soprano repertoire – the Queen of the Night:

“When Covent Garden offered me Queen of the Night I declined because I felt the role wasn’t right for me – even though I could sing all the notes. (...) When I was singing many Blöndchens, I was asked to sing Konstanze and I said ‘No – this is a step too far.’ It would have been wrong for me size-wise vocally and physically; I very rarely took on a role that I had huge difficulty with or didn’t like.”⁶

On the opposite side of the spectrum, Howard attributes the deciding motivational factor in her eclectic role selection as the emotional affinity she felt towards certain characters:

“(...) perhaps I’m a bit peculiar but I get so carried away with the character that it just makes my singing better (...) If I really want to sing that role and people tell me it’s difficult, if I really want to sing it I’ll find a way to do it.”⁷

Howard’s statement alludes to a sense of self-transcendence – of overcoming the limits of her voice, due to a higher commitment to the character that she is portraying. Her feelings are supported by various studies which correlate positive emotions with the enhancement of musicians’ motivation to perform and the self-perceived quality of their performance.⁸ Howard’s statement offers a practical example of motivational salience, which *“regulates the strength of goal seeking, the amount of risk taken and the energy invested from mild to extreme”* (Puglisi-Allegra & Ventura 2012). The author challenged Howard on the issue of her marketed vocal category (mezzo-soprano), which led to the following exchange:

“A.F. Having performed straight soprano roles such as Norma, Tosca, Leonore, Contessa, Alice Ford, Marschallin, Ariadne, Lady Billows – how does that work with the label of ‘mezzo-soprano’?

Y.H. I never considered myself as a soprano, I don’t want to be a soprano, I just can’t psychologically put myself in that place.”⁹

⁶ Lillian Watson, quoted in Adriana Festeu, ‘Exploring Zwischenfach’, 72

⁷ Yvonne Howard quoted in Adriana Festeu, ‘Exploring Zwischenfach’, 26

⁸ Guadalupe López-Iñiguez & Gary E. McPherson. "Regulation of emotions to optimize classical music performance: a quasi-experimental study of a cellist-researcher." *Frontiers in psychology* 12 (2021): 627601. Perdomo-Guevara E. (2014). "Is music performance anxiety just an individual problem? Exploring the impact of musical environments on performers’ approaches to performance and emotions." *Psychomusicology: Music, Mind, and Brain*, 24(1), 66–74.

⁹ Howard Yvonne, quoted in Adriana Festeu, ‘Exploring Zwischenfach’, 28.

Howard's and Watson's statements are on a par with Donose's first quote – they illustrate just how influential a singer's mental framework is when it comes to their repertoire and implicitly, their voice category. While Howard clearly had the mental and vocal capacity to tackle certain repertoire outside of her primary voice category, she felt a sense of psychological misalignment with the soprano category. In both cases, the singers' repertoire selection was influenced by their emotions regarding their vocal category and their relationship with certain roles.

Given that all the interviewed mezzo-sopranos (Howard, Donose and Johnson) also performed soprano roles, the author proposes that there is an element of status at play. Historically, there is a certain appeal to mezzo-sopranos tackling soprano repertoire, as seen when operatic superstars such as Cecilia Bartoli and Joyce DiDonato have engaged in such feats. In reviewing DiDonato's performance in the title role of *Alcina*, Tim Ashley implies that the reason DiDonato can transcend categorisation limits is due to her vocal technique:

*"The role is associated with high sopranos and she is a mezzo: it says much for her technique that she sounded comfortable in sustained passages in her upper registers."*¹⁰

There is an element of a specific type of 'transcendentalism of difficulty' here, where a performer not only transcends the inherent difficulty of a main role but transcends their own vocal and psychological confines in order to perform a main role of a different category.¹¹ Conductor Robin Newton believes this element constitutes an integral part of a performance:

*"(...) it's not just about art, it's also about sport; it's seeing and hearing someone rise to meet an extraordinary challenge. There's a visceral thrill about it, you can't wait to see whether or not they can do it."*¹²

Newton's statement above is central to the role the performer from an audience perspective. Voice classification often represents a narrowing of a singer's potential –

¹⁰ Tim Ashley, "Alcina Review: Vocal Brilliance from DiDonato," *The Guardian*, October 13, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/oct/13/alcina-review-joyce-didonato-vocal-brilliance-lacks-poetry> (accessed 01 October, 2024).

¹¹ The author was inspired by the concept of the 'transcendentalism of difficulty' in Brian Ferneyhough's compositions – whose chamber pieces are technically and musically challenging on purpose. Seeing performers grapple with this exceptional difficulty constitutes part of the thrill of being in the audience.

¹² Robin Newton quoted in Adriana Festeu, 'Exploring Zwischenfach', 108.

as seen in so many examples of singers performing roles outside of their *Fach*. The specific category that a singer is marketed as, represents - in the audiences' perception - the limits of the individual singer. For the audience, roles outside of the marketed category are perceived as a risky undertaking on the part of the singer. The 'visceral thrill' of the performance is therefore pre-established in the mind of the audience, while for the performer, the risk-taking element can be minimal. This gap between an experienced singer's complex proficiencies and the audience's perception of the singer's capabilities constitutes a useful marketing strategy.¹³

4. Discussion and conclusion

The exploration of repertoire choice, voice categorisation and the mental and emotional considerations of singers reveals a complex interplay between vocal technique, personal identity and the performer's sense of artistic fulfilment. As Ruxandra Donose and others have emphasized, mental comfort often holds as much significance as vocal capability. While the singer may possess the technical ability to tackle certain roles, the psychological alignment with those roles plays a crucial role in achieving a consistent, high-level performance. Singers like Yvonne Howard and Ruxandra Donose demonstrate how emotional connection and personal resonance with a character, or a role can drive them to transcend technical and categorization limits, while still respecting their own boundaries and preferences.

The audience's thrill in watching a performer 'stretch' beyond their vocal category, as noted by Robin Newton, is often a testament to the singers' resilience and adaptability. However, this 'transcendence' is not just about breaking technical boundaries but is deeply tied to the performer's inner journey of understanding, shaping and re-negotiation their own vocal and psychological identity. In the end, achieving peak performance is not merely a matter of technical mastery or fitting within a defined vocal category but rather requires a holistic approach that embraces the fluidity of personal and vocal growth. This journey underscores the importance of mental well-being and emotional authenticity, which are as essential as any vocal skill, making each performance not only an artistic endeavour, but a deeply personal expression.

¹³ "Cecilia Bartoli's repertoire focuses on the music of Rossini, Mozart, Handel and their contemporaries. Her extensive research into the vocal characteristics and roles of such legendary singers as Farinelli, Maria Malibran and Giuditta Pasta has also encouraged her to explore areas previously considered atypical for mezzo-sopranos." (www.ceciliabartoli.com/vita).

5. Acknowledgements

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