

# The opera singer as an actor music essay



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In this dissertation emphasis will be placed on the marriage of three concepts namely: good voice singing technique, musicality and acting for opera (building the character) in the training of a successful opera singer – hereafter referred to as the singer-actor.

The purpose of the study was to explore and describe the essential skills that needed to be acquired by the modern opera singer. The rationale therefore, is to provide guidelines for the minimum requirements for the training of the opera singer as singer-actor. Taking into consideration the demands on opera singers when taking part in an opera, the study was guided by the following question:

How does the knowledge of good voice (a sound singing technique), musicality and building a character role benefit the opera singer's performance? Evolving from the main research question, the following sub questions were formulated:

What is a “ good voice” within classical voice training methods?

How can musicality contribute to an opera singer's performance?

What are the demands to build a character role?

### **General and specific aims:**

The general aim of this study was to determine how the knowledge of a good voice, musicality and building a character role, benefit the opera singer's performance.

## **Specific aims:**

The specific aims of this study are:

to define a good voice

To define musicality

to determine how building a character role contribute to an opera singer's performance.

Due to the limited nature of this study, only a literature study will be done. As an extension of this study, the researcher would follow an interpretivist paradigm with a qualitative approach which strives to comprehend the important skills an opera singer should have according to contemporary South African opera singers and their view of the importance of acting ability for successful opera.

The study will be conceptualised in terms of and based on the following frameworks:

The voice

Musicality

Acting ability

Relationship between music and text

For opera to retain its artistic relevance to, and impact on, the fabric of arts and culture, it can be argued that there are three fundamental elements to the performance of opera which need to be addressed, and which require

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academic input (herformulering), discipline regarding musicality as well as focussed tuition and practise (sweeping statement. Wie se so?).

In a world of ever-increasing media coverage of artistic and musical artists and events, together with an ever-increasing sophistication of a wider audience, it is becoming increasingly challenging for the artist, and in particular, the opera singer, to be successful in his career. Key to this challenge is that the opera singer is left with no choice other than to develop skills beyond the purely technical expertise. It is imperative that, in order to be extraordinary and thereby successful, the opera singer has to master three co-functioning disciplines, namely the good voice, musicianship and acting ability (sit bronne in).

Singers tend to take acting classes separate from their vocal training in order to improve their acting skills. However, they mostly discover that taking classes in spoken drama and dialogue helps up to a certain point, but when going back to singing opera, the acting strategies learnt in the drama class do not always migrate to the performance of the aria (cf. Bean: 2007: 167).

This lack of transition is a result of the unique relationship between the music and the stage character in opera, which is not taken into account in the training of purely spoken (non-musical) drama. Thus, the one aspect that separates the acting of a spoken drama from that of opera is the music that is performed by instruments and the human voice. (Bron) (Prof. Jak: kommentaar is dat dit self evident is, of vroeër genoem moet word).

The argument specific to this dissertation is that the preparation and development of the opera singer (or singer-actor) has to facilitate three

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equally important, inter-linked and overlapping platforms of the Good Voice (singing technique), the discipline of musicianship and The Ability to Act (building the character). ( dink dit is aan die begin gesê)

In order to deliver a masterful opera performance, the singer actor needs to depict a character successfully. The opera singer needs to be a singer-actor who has mastered the following three pillars (Good Voice, Musicianship and Acting Ability) of the craft and art of Opera Performance. Each of these pillars deserves equal attention with particular reference to the input, mentoring/development and training curriculum of the opera singer (Bron)

Further to the intention of the dissertation, it will be important that there are appropriate and comprehensive definitions of these three equally important elements that are based on the relevant literature and which build on the existing body of knowledge in this field. Specifically, this study will integrate the definitions of “ A Good Voice”, “ Musicianship” and “ Acting Ability” in terms applicable to the Singer-Actor’s optimal performance of Opera.

Furthermore, in this dissertation emphasis will be placed on singing techniques, the elements of musicianship, and various relevant acting strategies in the training of a successful opera singer.

This dissertation will also include the identification of relevant areas of scholarly attention and future academic research that will add to the existing body of knowledge in this arena.

An in-depth literature study of relevant and contemporary sources on these topics have been done to guide the research.

## **Method of research**

The following methods of research were used to answer the research questions:

Consulting of the following databases: JSTOR, Google Scholar, Periodical archive online and IIMP;

Literature study

Interpretation of information and conclusions

A study of Largo al factotum from Puccini's *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* on the basis of the score and recordings, in order to ensure a common understanding of how the study could apply to the aria

Before the conceptualized terms will be discussed, a concept clarification of the relevant issues at hand, will be provided.

### **1. 1 Concept clarification**

#### **The Good Voice / The self-amplified singing voice**

The “ good voice” can be defined as the ability of the opera singer to project the voice in a way that it's heard over and above the full orchestra accompanying the singers. This view correlates with the description of Gilfrey (2007: 1) who describes the voice as a “ classical” technique, a manner of singing that projects the voice over a large orchestra in a large theatre”. Four elements are essential to produce a sound, namely a vibrating object, a power source to make the object vibrate, a medium through which the vibrations are transmitted and apparatus to receive the vibrations (McKinney, 1999: 20). The “ self-amplified singing voice” as described by <https://assignbuster.com/the-opera-singer-as-an-actor-music-essay/>

Gilfrey (2007: 1) is the single most important element of opera; the one that distinguishes opera not only from spoken drama, but also from rock and pop music, from jazz and from musical theatre (as it is performed today).

## **Optimal Acoustic Output**

Acoustic output refers to the optimal projection of the voice to enhance the correct and optimal usage of the voice as an instrument. According to Titze (2002: 367 – 376) mean glottal airflow (or, alternatively, glottal resistance) has been a target for optimising vocal output power in voice therapy and singing training. Glottal airflow refers to the space between the vocal cords (the fleshy parts of the air passage inside the throat) which produce the sound of the voice by fast or slow moments, in which this space is repeatedly opened and closed (Longman, 1980: 484).

## **Generator / Breath Management / Breath**

Breathing is a natural process which begins at birth and ends with death. This is a natural process for which no training is acquired. The rate of breathing is governed by the body's need for oxygen and needs no conscious controls. The essential difference between breathing to live and breathing to sing, lies in the amount of conscious control exerted (McKinney, 1994: 46). In other words, the breathing process is a spontaneous event for the normal person, but a skill that needs to be mastered by the opera singer to optimise breath control and support for the voice.

## **Vibrator**

The word “vibration” of the voice refers to “The function of the vibrator is to set the column of still air in the throat – and also that in the windpipe – in

vibration". The vibratory element of the larynx consists of a highly skilful compromise on the part of nature which enable the opera singer to phonate without interfering with the breathing capacity (Kelsey, 1950: 66). This vibration is a function of the larynx; a device similar to the diaphragm of a sound-system speaker, is the anatomical device through which the sound is created while simultaneously allowing the singer to continue breathing through the same gap (or slit) by which the airflow is controlled. This control is the output of extensive skill learning, disciplined practise and deliberate conscious control (Kelsey, 1950: 66-67).

### **Structure and Function – Resonator / Supraglottic Activity**

The word resonator refers to an apparatus for increasing the resonance of sound (Longman, 1980: 942). For the purpose of this study, the word "resonance" can be defined as secondary vibrations produced by sound waves from another vibrating body (Lessac, 1997: 13). He also distinguishes between two types of resonance, namely direct or enforced resonance and indirect or sympathetic resonance. Direct resonance occurs when a vibrating body is placed in direct physical contact with another substance. For the opera singer direct resonance could be the sound resonating with the outer surfaces of your teeth. Indirect resonance occurs when the sound waves of a vibrating body set up vibrations in a substance some distance away.

Sympathetic resonance occurs as the vocal sound waves, travelling through air space from the vocal folds, make contact with the hard pallet and then with the nasal bone (Lessac, 1997: 13). The ability to resonate can therefore be described as the amplifying of the human voice. This amplifying can be divided into three sections, including the air contained in the lungs and



windpipe, the air contained in the throat and, that contained in the suprapalatal cavity. Each of these can be seen as air-conditioner.

## **Classical Technique (sit nog iets in of haal uit, PL)**

“ In popular usage, art or ‘ serious’ music as opposed ‘ popular’ music” The Harvard Concise Dictionary of Music and Musicians.

## **CHAPTER 2: The Good Voice in Classical Singing**

Before the good voice can be discussed, the anatomy of voice production needs to be clarified in short. Lessac (1997: 14) defines the term “ voice box” or “ human sound box” as the cavity or enclosure where the tone is strengthened, amplified and enriched by resonance and wave reflection. According to Lessac, the voice box comprises two areas: a major adjustable area right above the larynx and the oral cavity and nonadjustable area in the pharynx, the nose, the forehead and adjacent structures. This soundbox can be described as the singing mechanism of which all the parts interdependent of each other, each of which plays a crucial role in producing the good voice.

The “ good voice” as defined in par 1. 1 takes years of concentrated training. This focus on singing technique is the primary focus of most singers’ studies” (Gilfrey, 2007: 1). A whole voice approach is beneficial for both singer and actor; however actor training programs don’t include singing, and vice versa. Acting is becoming increasingly important for the opera singer, but is seldom supported by the prerequisites of theatre voice and movement (Melton & Tom, 2003: 135). Sê nog iets oor hoekom training belangrik is.

Singing is both a science and an art. Most teachers have at least some appreciation for a scientific singing method and those who don't often claim to have discovered some long-lost piece of wisdom. This "wisdom" is generally already incorporated in the teachings of a well-trained singer. There are some fads that come and go but a singer with good technique and access to his or her emotions will please any audience and have a much broader career with greater longevity (Brown, 2004: 97-104).

Technique is central to singing opera, but singing is also an art form, and no art form can be realised by the use of technique alone. Merging voice technique, musicality and emotion through competent acting skill is something that must be taught from the very beginning of the Opera Singer's development of his/her career. This is because, when occupied in the emotion of the moment, the good voice will acquire nuances that are quintessentially important to conveying the emotional elements of the opera and will thus elevate the singer to a higher level of performance and riveting engagement with the audience.

Gebruik onderstaande as daar nog inligting daaroor is, anders voeg saam, PL

Every aspect of the voice, used directly or indirectly affects the whole mechanism. For example alignment and breathing are integrally connected to the performer's range, resonance and articulation. For this reason, some of the relevant aspects affecting the good voice, will be discussed below.

## 2. 1 Vowel modification

### Vowel Modification and Primal Sound

Christy (1961) means that an important criteria for good singing habits is the homogenic shaping of vowels, in other words, they should sound as if they fit together, the vowels must be consistent with each other.

Many professional singers never master the art of even vocal production.

This can be ascribed to vocal coaches not fully grasping the concept of vowel placement. When this concept is fully understood it is impossible for a singer to not produce vowels freely and comfortably. In the first volume Christy states that once a single vowel is mastered the singer must focus on uniting the remaining vowels in accordance with that of the first. He means that the different vowels should attain a similar sound without losing its distinctive character. " ...this is another way of saying vowels have to be equalized by having a common, fundamental tonal characteristic."

The fundamental tone of the human voice is the " huh" sound. According to Christy this sound should be considered the basic reference to vowel placing because the " uh" sound is the most natural sound that can be produced, as the pharynx is relaxed and in its natural position. Oren C. Brown concurs with Christy, but describes the " uh" sound as the " primal sound":

" Primal sounds are involuntary. They are the sounds you were born with. In Beijing , Basel or Boston, a baby's cry at birth is his primal sound. In 1963, Peter F. Oswald mad a phonetic analysis of the baby's cry. He labeled the initial sound as a schwa [É™], (uh as in about), which linked the cry to a baby's first word, " mama" [mÉ™ mÉ™]. " Mama" is the first word spoken by

babies throughout the whole world. In Korea the word is “ ama”, with the vowel preceding the consonant.” - (Brown 1998) p. 1

The sound identified by both Brown and Christy can therefore be described as the primal- or natural relaxed sound. As practical advice Brown suggest testing the sound through a range of exploratory exercises: making the “ huh” sound in a short repetitive sequence (as if laughing), or a long relaxed sustained “ huh” (like a sigh). He also suggests sliding the “ huh” up and down the vocal range noting that the sound becomes lighter in the higher range and darker in the lower range. He means that this is natural and advises the singer to note his or her voice’s natural inclinations.

Judith Litante also mentions in *Natural Approach to Singing* (p32) that the vowels used in Italian forms a basis for the study of vowels in singing. She believes that “ they are pure”. The reason for this is that Italian vowels are a compact basis for both English and other non Latin based languages. In English one finds many diphthongs. She means that employing these “ pure” vowels or primal sound, as previously mentioned would eliminate the distorted pronunciation of diphthongs; for example extending the last syllable when singing “ say”, it becomes “ sayee” or “ kind” becomes “ kieend”. When the vowels are aligned and the vocal structures are in a natural position, these kinds of distortion is eradicated.

## **2. 2 Breath management**

Breathing techniques need to be considered holistically and consciously controlled until it becomes an unconscious competence. Sufficient and natural supply of air is needed for voice production. A good posture is an

essential part of breathing and should be developed to support the opera singer in his breath management (Brown, 2004: 17). This view is supported by McKinney (1994: 46-64) who state that there is a direct and positive correlation between correct posture (diaphragm control, and muscular movements of the chest, back and abdomen) and effective breathing in singing.

According to McKinney (1994: 48) breathing has four stages, namely a breathing-in period (inhalation), a setting-up-controls period (suspension), a controlled-exhalation period (phonation) and a recovery period. These stages should be repeated till the opera singer has the ability to go through the stages unconsciously. This process can be compared to the person who learns to drive a motorcar and has to concentrate on each step till he gets the ability to perform all the steps automatically. For the opera singer this refers to preparing to breathe, preparing for the phrase, physically singing the phrase and recovering in order for the process to repeat.

## **2. 3 The vibrator**

## **2. 4 The resonator**

## **2. 5 The articulator**

Classical Opera training and singing versus Singing pop or secular music

The single most important element of opera, the one that distinguishes opera not only from spoken drama, but also from rock and pop music, from jazz and from musical theatre (as it is performed today), is the “ self-amplified” singing voice. This is a voice produced with a “ classical” technique, a manner of singing that projects the voice over a large orchestra

in a large theatre. The learning of the singing technique this voice requires, takes years of concentrated training. This focus on singing technique is the primary focus of most singers' studies.

## **CHAPTER 3: Musicianship**

### **How the Classical Singer Accesses & Demonstrates Musicianship**

To acquire musicianship a high level of artistic interpretation of songs and knowledge of repertoire is required through years of training. One can not over emphasize the importance of musicianship. It is simply not suffice for a musician to have a musical ear, theoretical and musical knowledge, play an instrument or respond emotionally to music. The artist must be a musician i. e. a singer (Christy Vol 1: 7). According to Miller (Principles of singing p1) a singer can acquire musicianship through classes, studying an instrument (ex. Piano), performing in choirs or through private study and the self-exploration of music. Even though a singer that has exceptional vocal talent, he should receive professional music training and the participation in solo or choral ensembles especially in the first year of study. Many vocal teachers might disagree with this statement... A singer with a natural talent and an ear for music must be able to imitate sounds and pitches and not just hear this internally, for example; in a singing lesson the student listens to the vocal teacher and then imitates the vocal sound of the teacher. The same principle applies with rhythm. A sound inner sense of rhythm will contribute to the holistic musicianship of the singer.

Besides musicianship, there is also the interpretation of music. According to Christy (1961: Vol 2: 110) “ Interpretation is the emotional and artistic portrayal; the summation of all music.

According to Christy (1961: Vol2: 110) “ Musicianship is the science of music and interpretation “.

A good singer should be familiar with all styles of music and song literature. The singer must be trained in a style and in the interpretation of songs in a particular style. A song has a style that must be established and followed through to the end. It is possible for a singer to become comfortable with a particular style that he can do well in, but he will not realise that what he steers clear of could be very valuable for his musical development. Therefore the teacher should analyse, guide and discuss the songs with the singer, in order to identify the accompanying details of expression. (Christy 1961: Vol2: 110-111).

The basis of musicianship include the abilities to read and interpret rhythms and intervals, playing the piano accompaniments, acquiring knowledge of the basics of theory and harmony, music and musicians in terms of vocal and instrumental style, schools and song literature. (Christy 1961: Vol1: 7)

According to Christy 1961: Vol: 109, (quoting Curt Atler in the art of accompanying and coaching: 1965: 219) interpretation may be defined as the singer’s act of expressing and communicating meaning, mood and epic, a comedy, or just an expression set to music – all in capsule form. To interpret music is to express or reproduce it intrinsically by the singer, in the score. Due to the limitations in music notation, it is the responsibility of the

singer to interpret and express the fine distinction between tonal colour, tempo and intensity of the composer's interpretation. The expression can be found in the text and in the setting. According to Christy 1961: Vol2: 112, "when the same song is sung by two sensitive artists, it is highly unlikely that the general style, tone, colour and mood will be markedly different; however, dynamics, tempo, word accentuation, and innumerable details often are." Thus, the keys must be studied by the singer in order to express and keep the interpretation on track.

The two requirements for interpretation include the fidelity to the composer's intent and that it must contain an essentially creative element of the interpreter's own making, illuminating the subject with fresh light. (Christy 1961: Vol1: 190). Furthermore, the expression must be honest, sincere, simple and direct, which means that nothing must be added or placed over the music that will distract attention from the work itself. Also, the singer must reproduce the music with insight, imagination and vitality in his own unique way – it must not be copied from others.

Interpretation has four main factors including appropriate and fervent mood or emotion, eloquent diction, adequate technique and a natural, sincere stage presence. (Christy 1961: Vol1: 190).

## **EMBELLISHMENTS**

Embellishments comprise of, but are not limited to the appoggiatura, acciaccatura, mordent, gruppetto or turn, trill and the portamento. These are techniques that are of vital importance in the interpretation of music.



In the appoggiatura, the singer usually has to apply his own taste due to its indeterminate value. There are some accented notes in a melody that form the bass of the intervals since they lean on the next note to which they descend. The appoggiatura was used by singers long before it was written down, because of the enjoyable sound and is often absent in the score. (Shakespeare: 115).

The acciaccatura and mordent is different from the appoggiatura as it is written with a stroke through the stem and tail. This does not have an affect on the value of the next note but it is sung much quicker. The acciaccatura is usually a small note where as the appoggiatura is written as a whole note. (Shakespeare: 115).

The gruppetto or turn is a group of three or four notes. If the higher interval is a tone, the lower tone is a semitone and if both intervals are semitones it is known as a chromatic turn. (Shakespeare: 115).

Sung in rapid alternation with the note of the scale above it, the trill is an embellishment that has a principle note that belongs to the harmony of the composition. A trill is usually finished with a turn. (Shakespeare: 115).

The portamento carries the voice from one interval to the next, then passing lightly through the intervening tones. It also indicates a phrase and the Legato rendering of a passage. (Behnke: The technique of singing: 99)

## **Legato**

## **Slur**

Intonation

Colour in the voice – timbre (emotion)

Following the conductor

Discuss the concept of DISCIPLINE

## **Technical aspects**

According to Hayward (see 1994: 205) style can be interpreted in many different ways. Interpretation can be defined as communicating understanding. Interpretation can best be expressed in a person's own language according to James Nolan in his book Interpretation, Techniques and exercises. Expression and conveying of meaning, feeling and idea through sound can be defined as interpretation (Christy 1967: 109).

## **CHAPTER 4: Acting**

Within the South African context, this integration of The Good Voice, Musicianship and Acting is deficient. There are various reasons for this lack of attention given to the development of acting skills with singer-actors. One is that there are not many qualified tutors in South African institutions that combine the field of acting and musical performance. Another reason is the absence of appropriate development programs and relevant material in curriculums. As a result, there is less interest from students to pursue a career as a singer-actor.

In support of this argument, Knobel and Steinert (2002: 155) claim that the “acting teacher should be just as important to you as your singing teacher and can be of great help to you throughout your singing career.”

Interestingly enough, contrary to this understanding are the arguments of

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authors such as Bean, Goldovsky and Balk, who posit that “ acting classes ... are very often of little benefit to the singing actor” Bean (2007: 167). These two opposing views illustrate that there are no consensus among academics about the importance of acting skills (al dan nie) of the opera singer. This statement is underpinned by the neglect of some higher education institutions offering voice training, where little or no training in acting is provided.

In the quotation below, Bandelj truly captures the spontaneous physiological, psychological and emotional reactions which authentic acting can bring about in the actor’s performance. “ When a singer acts and sings in a mechanical way, it often comes across as disjointed or in some cases ridiculous. It is the emotion that breathes life into the song and makes it relevant, connecting with the audience and transcending facial contortions” (Bandelj, 2003: 393-394). To avoid that, an actor should utilise the all the involuntary muscle contractions that emotions evoke in the body, either by recalling their own past experiences or imagining themselves personally going through what the character is experiencing. This makes the whole action more believable.

Gilfrey, Bonavia agrees that “ the ability to act, though considerably underestimated, is not the only or the most necessary qualification for the operatic stage. Acting in opera is a comparatively modern accomplishment” (Bonavia, 1915: 79). This observation, by Bonavia, pays homage to the deeply rooted tradition of well-respected opera singers being famous for their magnificence of voice; “ but of their skill in acting there is hardly any mention to be found

anywhere” (Bonavia, 1915: 79). ( Dink hier aan enige ou opera wat opgevoer is en waar daar slegs aandag aan die sang gegee is)

Ultimately, Bonavia contradicts (to some extent) the previous argument by identifying an exception. That is Chaliapin who, according to Bonavia, provides the audience with “ ever-changing shades of facial expression ... the whole character left vividly impressed ... Chaliapin is the ideal actor” (Bonavia, 1915: 80).

In terms of the attempts made at acting within the Opera world, there is a history and tradition of operatic gesture and “ the surprising persistence of melodramatic effects and gestural overstatement” (Smart, 2004: 26). While this is certainly applicable to the Nineteenth Century, we need to be cognisant of how this tradition – of gestural overstatement – may be (erroneously) assumed to be the only “ acting” required of the singer actor in the twenty-first Century. That is, even in the times of Verdi, “ the role of gesture ... (grew) ... as formal conventions loosened” (Smart, 2004: 136).

The appropriate question therefore is, to what extent have formal conventions loosened further, particularly in a world hallmarked by electronic media and social networking? As indicated in the introduction, Television and DVD’s, have provided unrestricted access to Opera to an ever-increasing sophisticated and demanding audience in the entertainment space. This view is further reinforced by the writing of RePass (1953: 10-18) who states that .....(PL).

## **Building the Character**

The creation of a character role by the singer-actor is the basis and starting-point of the combination of singing and acting. While it cannot be doubted that an excellent singing technique ... (viz., The Good Voice and Musicianship) ... is essential to the success of any opera singer, other skills required for a convincing performance, among them acting, are often given less attention by singers and their teachers (Gilfrey, 2007: 1).

Innate talent is not the sole factor as the ability of a singer-actor to create a character role is severely impacted by the cultural beliefs of what acting is and also how it is measured. When keeping this in mind it becomes evident that the creation of a character, especially in the case of singer-actors, are based on the teachings of Konstantin Stanislavsky better known as the method acting technique.

The method acting technique is an approach that the Russian actor developed to whose approach stresses the internal preparation of actors (Bandelj, 2003: 393). This focus differs from that of the other schools of acting namely The English School of Acting, The Bertold Brecht's epic theatre and Japanese Noh Drama. The interaction experienced by the singer-actors on stage and the director with the constant feedback assures a more lifelike portrayal.

The fundamental driver of method acting is the wish to reproduce reality. All (acted) behaviours and interactions need to be seen to be psychologically, emotionally and socially authentic and plausible, while concurrently acting as an integrating mechanism to the plot and to the other cast members.

Drawing on his/her own experiences and observations the actor needs to appear spontaneous while using objects in both a symbolic (or metaphorical way) and a literal way (Bandelj, 2003: 393).

This, and the “ additional use of props to facilitate the portrayal of the situation, are all tied together by the passion of the actor and the pursuit of truth as art imitates life or indeed verisimilitude” (Bandelj, 2003: 394).

The quality of the voice has much more to do with the correct training and technique, rather than the singer’s natural endowment, especially later in life as the singer ages.

\*The “ W” questions to build a character role (also mentioned in the PowerPoint)

Who?

What?

Where?

When?

Why?

And HOW?

## **Contributing Elements to Building a**