

Learning to Sing vs »Regietheater« Exploring a Problem and a Eurythmic Model for the Training of Singers

Part 1

The profession of the opera singer in the context of a changing approach to opera

Although opera looks back on four hundred years of history and is considered a great-grandchild of Greek drama, this form of art has always reflected its respective contemporary context in its choice of topics and its form of representation. Opera mirrors "zeitgeist". Especially the manner of its story-telling is closely linked to its social context: society. The repertoire of opera houses walks the thin line of "ritualization" and "self-invention", of conventions in the process of ageing whilst new ones are being established. Be they opera "classics", rare re-discoveries or world premières – the repertoire in an opera house's season programme reflects these antagonistic forces.

In the 1960's, Pierre Boulez made a radical demand: "Blow up the opera houses!" Were they no longer stimulating, thought-provoking, relevant to him? Did he see them as being out of touch with developments in society? In the aftermath of WWII, European societies entered a phase of fundamental changes, in which a new generation raised the question of responsibilities. The quest for discovering the essential substance of a work of art began. At major theatrical playhouses a sometimes heated debate erupted both on-stage and off-stage. Since then, the opposing parties in this discourse either favour faithful representations of the original work or contemporary, individualistic interpretation. Aesthetic boundaries are tested and occasionally exceeded. The significance of the stage director in regards to the piece at hand, the theatre as an institution and the audience has increased substantially. The term "Regietheater" has become widely spread.

In Germany, following the development in spoken-word theatre with some delay, opera houses are hiring artists that not only represent or illustrate their topics but rather submit them to a conceptual interpretation. This turns well-established repertoire operas into veritable adventures.

However, this practice requires a new type of interpreting artist – not singers, but singer-performers. Whether in spoken-word or musical theatre, next to language, diction and voice, the physical body of performers has become more important as a means of narration. This process of an increased "embodiment" of a dramatic character goes back to the liberation of the body at the beginning of the 20th Century. An example would be the dissemination of the Stanislavsky method and the foundation of leading dramatic schools such as the Seminar of Max Reinhard in Berlin (who, by the way, also attended one of the famous summer fêtes in Hellerau).

The future development of opera as an art form is influenced by Artistic Directors/Company Managers, stage directors and – by purchasing tickets – by the audience. It is a fact that opera houses are endeavouring to attract young audiences. These, however, decide in favour or against attending an opera performance based on their own experiences with media and communication.

The young audience has grown up with:

- Movies – emotions in close-up shots;
- Computer games – thrill, speed and action;
- the World Wide Web and social media – ubiquitous communication channels;
- Mp3 Players – offering a global variety of musical styles and aesthetics in perfect sound quality.

These media are available everywhere and almost instantaneously – and seemingly offering the complete package. However, they lack the physicality of performers. And this is where live performance could come into play: Technology and media offer a lot – but not the fragile, intimate encounter of the singing protagonist and the audience in a shared space.

Singer-performers and their scenic and physical presence let the audience share the intensity of the performative moment. Singer-performers inspiring empathy and thus invite their audiences to be a part of the performance by means of

- emotions vibrating in the voice;
- emotions in the body-language;
- real-time interactions between the protagonists.

As a rule, the rehearsal period of a new production lasts for 6-8 weeks. By the start of this period, the singer will have been allocated his/her part, will have studied it with a pianist and will have memorised it. For an opera singer, this will be the point where the actual work starts, whereas a concert singer would proceed to the performance from here. Within a few weeks, the following elements of a staging will accumulate and then amalgamate:

1. Visual and acoustic communication with the conductor and, later on, with an ensemble of instruments
2. orientation within the acoustical space of the set and decorations (blocking, resonances, audibility)
3. interaction with partners on stage, with props and stage elements
4. dramatic interaction – i.e. the creation of a self-motivated dramatic character with its emotional journey and the related of physical states of tension and characteristic speed of movement.

The challenge for the singer therefore not only lies in mastering the vocal part but also coming to terms with the complexity of the stage(d) actions. The challenges may appear insurmountable – especially to novices to the stage. The less a voice student has become accustomed to experiencing musical and dramatic expression as a unified physical act with manifold variables of manifestation during his/her training, the more insurmountable those challenges will appear.

After having taken up singing professionally, there rarely are many opportunities to work further on this convergence of the physical and the vocal expression. Once a broad band of synapses has been consolidated – and thus defining one specific way of utilising the body whilst singing – the more limited the singer will be in deploying his/her physical body for the sakes of acting. Stage directors will then often hear: “I cannot possibly sing like this”, by which singer at hand will often mean sequences of movements or positions that will work for his/her colleagues. Having to work against developed physical-vocal habits may result in shame, helplessness and fear of failure at some later point. This complex of problems is not congruent with the theatres’ intention of hiring open-minded, flexible performers.

Evaluating the complexity of this situation, it becomes evident that a complex and methodically interlinked system for developing the necessary skills of singer-performers is called for. One of the possible consequences would be to design an integrative approach to teaching the necessary skills rather than an additive accumulation of physical and dramatic methods during the singers’ education. Music colleges rely on their students to perform said integration themselves. But why would this deserve to be called “education”?

If it is possible to bring out the best qualities in a singer in possession of “good vocal material” through a reliable singing technique, then training singers in the dramatic deployment of their vocal and physical qualities for the stage should not be left to chance. Is it all a question of technique?

Part 2: Observations on the training of singers.

Since 2004, I have been working with voice students in their years of training. My job is not only based on my special interests but on a profound knowledge in vocal matters obtained during my training as a choirmaster, and also on methodological paradigms from my degree in Eurythmics and my expertise in analysing movement qualities which I acquired during an extra-occupational training as a movement and

dance educator in the Chladek® -system.

During my ten years of teaching at a private, officially recognised Dramatic Arts School in Western Berlin, I became acquainted with the laborious process of becoming a stage performer, whilst at the same time teaching as an associate professor for vocal and movement improvisation at the University of Arts in Berlin for 15 years. Both occupations proved to be a comprehensive laboratory providing experiences for future employments.

One of my current fields of activity is to assist young singers in scenic rehearsals during their first years of working professionally at an opera house. Most of them have been on stage in college or independent productions. My deductions from what I have observed in this context are based on the assumption that their learning process may be considered universal to a certain extent. For one, because they are following the »normal« path of gathering stage experience, secondly, because they have in common their education in a Bachelor/Masters degree programme at a German Music College.

According to my observations, singers need to be enabled to coordinate the following aspects of physical functionality and dramatic action:

A) Vocal and physical skills as means of expression

1. Adaptable, yet repeatable, states of body tension during the act of singing;
2. Variable focussing of modes of perception (hearing, seeing, feeling) without interrupting the act of singing;
3. Experience in singing in various body positions;
4. Casualness/Naturalness of singing whilst executing/experiencing different types of movement;

B) Vocal and physical skills within a framework of variable parameters of action

1. Quality of motion: to proceed from improvisation to dramatic repeatability by means of analysis, or to comprehend and reproduce demonstrated movements;
2. Vocal demands: feedback on physical functionality (respiration, utilisation of the voice, body tension) outside or within the musical sequence;
3. Emotionality: linking functional movements and states of emotion;
4. Procedures in time and space: coordination/isolation of simultaneous actions;
5. Dramatic statement: flexibility of action; to abstract dramatic action from emotional content.

These skills cannot be separated completely from each other; they rather focus on one specific aspect of a dramatic action and are useful for the analysis when “things are not running smoothly”. They are based on profound kinaesthetic self-awareness. However, they should be considered intrinsically valuable rather than adjunct to the dramatic requirements, since the latter are already borne by meaning and intent on a higher level. Acquiring these skills of dramatic functionality would help the singer manage the challenges of rehearsals with more ease. Above all, they are prerequisites for acting within the contexts of diverse story-telling conventions (abstract, symbolic, or realistic), and allow the expression of various subtexts of an action. The inherent ambiguity of the textual or musical artwork can then be dealt with in a “congruent” or “in-congruent” manner.

Part 3: Propositions from Eurythmics classes: a cooperative model

My observations made from the auditorium, in class and my own experiences as a singer and performer have coalesced into a methodological proposition. I have created a structure of elementary skills for professional singers which I summarised as a concept of a complementary curriculum named “voice-movement”. Over six years ago, I presented this concept to the faculty of the Akademie für Tonkunst in Darmstadt. In the meantime, this curriculum has been implemented in the course structure of the artistic and educational Bachelor degrees. A few of the classes that I teach in the Vocal/Opera Department I have structured as follows:

1. Eurythmics I: Group/Elementary level (50')

2. Eurythmics II: Group/Advanced level (50')
3. Eurythmics III: Individual coaching of students – per voice teacher or voice class (25')
4. Eurythmics IV: Ensemble/Scenic creation by means of dance (75')

In the group classes (Eurythmics I & II) the following topics are developed in increasing levels of complexity:

- Experiencing body tension and movement theory; activeness vs. passiveness (according to Chladek®);
- Coordination of functional motion sequences and voice/respiration;
- Free movement improvisation, analysis and combination of movements (focus on perception) ;
- Vocal improvisations: accompaniment of own movement/stimulation (interconnection of voice vs. interconnection of the body) ;
- Chronological organisation of states of tension/speech/objects/partners (coordination/isolation) ;
- Examination of musical works; interpreted in correspondence and contrariety (emotional/abstract comprehension);
- Shaping musical parameters in correspondence with a quality of movement (variable behaviour).

The voice as respiration/sound is nearly always included, joined to the exploration of movement or “muted” according to a specific assignment.

The individual classes/coaching in movement (Eurythmics III) takes place in close consultation with the voice teachers. The first coaching always includes the student and his/her main voice teacher.

Communication among teachers of different professions is of fundamental importance, in as much as it

- 1) Enables to define together the challenges each student is faced with
- 2) Enables to develop a common language regarding the individual process of development
- 3) Enables students to transfer his/her experiences from moving to singing (and vice versa) directly
- 4) Enables students to develop a positive approach to their own physicality when singing without receiving contradictory advice.

The individual coaching is normally offered for one semester, sometimes alternating bi-weekly with another student. The individual coaching is an extra-curricular course which may be offered on demand by the students or the teachers. The emphasis lays on physical and mental posture, approaching difficulties in coordinating the functionalities of respiration/voice/body, or, in the case of graduates, on “the finishing touch”, preparing them for the requirements in dance of the final exams or of further applications.

The class in Ensemble/Scenic creation by means of dance (Eurythmics IV) has two aims: Firstly, the students work on topics corresponding to their assignments of the Opera Department. The Head of the Opera Departments makes assignments based on the students' requirements which he witnesses in their scenic work. These assignments can fall into the category either of “behavioural” – such as “falling”, “fighting”, “touching” and different types of gait – or of working on a choreographing subject from the opera repertoire. Secondly, in keeping with the performative objective of Eurythmics, performances should be created relating to a wide range of topics in order to encourage students to try themselves out and to stimulate unconventional programmes. These projects take place in cooperation with students from the Instrumental Music Department to explore cross-media interrelations and explore aesthetic boundaries.

Part 4: A proposition worth copying?

From my way of formulating the problem and my pedagogical approach to its resolution it should have become clear that I am an instructor of Eurythmics. My methodological views were influenced by my Polish mentor Monika Skazińska and my Austrian master Rosalia Chladek – both linked to the Bildungsanstalt in Hellerau. However, I do realise that this field of activity would not be suited for every Eurythmics instructor. Singing and the opera business follow their own set of laws, the knowledge of which is essential. This notwithstanding, I would advocate exploring this particular field of work further. With Eurythmics, we have much to offer.

In everyday eurythmical practice, this spectrum is no longer present – with some exceptions.

On the other side of the table, we are met with another problem: today's curricula in the Performing Arts studies are no longer "aware" of Eurythmics. At the end of the 1990's, a study-guide for German Music Colleges still mentions Eurythmics as a mandatory group of classes. In the meantime, it has become as rare as stage fencing. The Bachelor degree programmes introduced at the beginning of the new millennium have manifested a unifying tendency.

In my view, it is up to instructors of Eurythmics to offer a contemporary version of our field to the Music Colleges and to think together about elementary qualifications for teachers/instructors.