

A new singer's profile (?)

Vocal approaches for new opera making within the HEIs. How do we see it?

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Opera has been facing, since the baroque period and until the 20th century, challenges and transformations that are consequence of the positive or negative interaction with the socio-cultural and artistic context of each moment in history. Surprisingly, in the last decades, there is a feeling that opera is losing the ability to rethink itself in line with the referred artistic and socio-cultural context of our contemporaneity. In the midst of the major opera houses in Europe we read statistics that point to the continuation of the demand for the *Grand Opéra*, with monumental interpretations that tend to be conservative. However, the proliferation of an alternative circuit around the opera is evident, with new repertoire being created or with bold approaches to an existing repertoire. Once again, the socio-cultural, artistic and also economic context has played an important role in this gradual transformation.

The transformation of the professional opera world is underway. Our question is: *how are higher education music institutions (HEIs) answering these changes within their vocal departments? Are we ready to face this change or do we assume there is none? Are we providing the most suitable path for our students in preparation to the labor market? Are we reflecting on the need of a new approach to a professional opera singer vocality or we consider we are covering all the skills required in this growing stream of challenging tradition?*

This reflection does not aim to undermine or devalue the importance of tradition, but rather to call attention to the construction of a profile of singers increasingly adjusted to contemporary demands.

The construction of a more available profile to accept and dominate new vocalities, new ways of relating to the body, new ways of relating to the text and its semantics and new ways of relating to the practice of collaborative and co-creative work.

A profile that creates proactive and attentive professionals to the reality that surrounds them.

For obvious reasons in this reflection, we will have to focus on a more specific scope related to the voice and, inherently, also on the body. We have inquired the vocal departments of the member institutions of the European Opera Academy (EOA) to find out how HEIs are responding to the gradual but clear change in the requirements of the professional environment. From this sample, we will draw a sort of reflexive summary on this topic.

"We frequently hear the question, what is opera? followed by an answer conceding defeat." (Martín, 2002, p. 116)

"Is opera dying? [...] One is tempted to declare <<Opera is dead>> but [...] could one make such a declaration without immediately having to follow it with <<Long live opera>>?" (Cermatori, 2013, p. 4)

Opera isn't dying but it's changing. The world is changing, isn't it? Is Europe dying in 2021 or it's just undergoing in an inevitable transformation (as anything in life)? "Opera reflects every historical era's particular aesthetics needs and concerns" (Martín, 2002, p. 116) so why don't we accept that?

Eventually we should stop posing these same questions "What is opera?" or "Is opera dying?" over and over (these questions are also exhausted as arguably opera is), stop worrying about the survival of the genre and focus in reflecting upon what we want opera to be in the 21st century, within our era's needs and concerns. Does it make sense - excluding the relevant issue of museum preservation of the event as an object of value - to keep thinking opera as it was thought in the 18th and 19th centuries, for example?

As, an elucidative reminder of what could be the opera's contemporary thinking essence, we should understand that opera not only consists of arias and scenes, but rather reflects on the human existence.

Peter Konwitschny goes a bit further saying that:

"The theatre is not a museum. (...) The purpose of a theatrical performance primarily consists in having a dialogue with the audience about essential themes in society as well as in the lives of the individual". (Konwitschny, 2021).

Any worthy work of opera should provide in itself enough material to start this dialogue, whether through new repertoire or through contemporary approaches to an existing repertoire.

These reflections about opera relation with this society and its context have been slowly changing the opera labor market and presenting new challenges for all the players involved in the genre. Singers, composers, directors, librettists, musicians, opera houses, cultural entities, audiences, stage designers, promoters, music academies, higher music education institutions (HMEI) [...], all of them face these challenges and they all have their share of responsibility in shaping the future of opera.

It's probably fair to state that the HMEIs are aware of a change of the opera labor market of our days. This was unanimously stated in the answer to our query which somehow confirmed our own perspective about these changes. The "demand and proliferation of an alternative circuit is evident" in two different identified strands: 1) the new repertoire and 2) contemporary approaches to an existing repertoire.

If this change is clear for the institutions, apparently the reaction to this fact hasn't been sufficiently able to address those changes from the curricula, inside the academy. We all know the burden of academic validation that those institutions carry and that makes adaptation movements become slow and painful. We are able to collect a sense that the resistance to the needed adjust of the school to the labor market is often created internally, i.e., teaching staff but also students themselves which sometimes resist to new repertoire mainly by the challenges the repertoire implies, musically and vocally. The strong tradition where opera has lived in the last centuries is an additional issue that hold back the possibility of incorporating changes. One should not neglect that some of these key players (singing teachers for instance) keep this strong position because it's comfortable to maintain the status quo, because that's their comfort zone (musical and vocally) but also because some of the contemporary proposals have been poorly sustained. It would be interesting, in future studies, to develop this questioning about the reasons why this happens. Does it have to do with pre-university education or a cultural conception of

opera? Why is it that the opera wants to remain unchanged from within itself? Will it be a perspective of survival via the validated and known? Is it fear of jeopardizing the genre?

“There is no standard solution” as the national contexts in Europe are quite diverse, in terms of opera labor market but also in terms of Higher Education regulations, expectations and/or tradition.

Some of the answers to this questionnaire show that some HEIs are trying to adapt their curricula to the identified changes but it's assumed that it's a slow and long process also due to the overload of the actual curricula.

But what are the skills needed for a singer in this changing context?

As said before there isn't a universal solution or answer to this question specially because it should relate to the specific context where this question is made. What is clear is that an opera singer is not just someone who sings. Some believe this was always the case, but we have also those who argue that, historically, the voice was almost all that mattered neglecting the body within space and time and even the language (leave alone the issue of co-creation of the singer's role or interpretation freedom). Following this last perspective, the singer was considered a figure excluded from the creative process and mostly answering to the requests of the *mise-en-scène* and of the musical director.

What surpasses from the vocal departments of EOA's institutions is mostly the need of some skills to be added to the ones already in place for many decades so the alumni, when entering the labor market, would be able to tackle both traditional approaches (still considered the biggest slice of opera market) and show more flexibility to properly address contemporary repertoire and/or contemporary staging. These new skills identified in this poll are body work, text/language work, improvisation technics and vocal/ear extended technics. Entrepreneurial, social and communication skills were also pointed out as important extra musical features to strengthen the student's profile. It's noted that these new skills should be “built on the fundament of core skills” and that the profile of the young singers should grow a wider general artistic drive and an updated insight of the social and political positioning of opera of the 21st century transforming their mindset.

Due to its relevance and persistence in the majority of answers received we need to stress the identified need of developing a new and organic relation between voice and body (we dare to add to this system the thought, building the tryptic *thought-body-voice*).

*“There is no voice without body nor body without voice.”
(Pereira, 2016, p. 22)*

The body work, together with language work are considered as must have within the curricula. Even if most of institutions claim they tackle these issues it's still not clear how transversal they are, and which weight have inside the curricula. The body work seems to be already in place in several curricula around Europe but the issue of language work, considered of utmost importance and assumed as a skill by default, not always find the right place in the curricula or the right relationship between the study of the languages and its fusion with the singing practice. Sometimes voice students are “just supposed to have the [language] skills”. The institutions with drama departments have an additional plus with the possibility of sharing the actors' training both in terms of body work and speaking voice.

“I am now working in baroque singing department [...]. As funny as it may sound, we are standing with one foot in deep past- ancient Greece - where text meaning, rhetoric and body language is extremely important, and with another leg we are (I dare to say) one step forward that what we call classical opera. Firstly, the text, emotions and rhetoric lead the ornamentation, the character, how will the singer sing it, tempo... Smart singers must be like researchers, with ability to read a lot, to educate themselves, to be ready to experiment a lot. Not to be afraid to search for new sounds, to search for new movements, to be able to talk through body.” (Monta Martinsone, 2021)

As previously implied, we feel there is still a considerable gap between the identified needed skills to the present and future labor market and the curricular answer of the HMEIs while preparing the future professionals. Naturally the size of this gap is different in each institution and respective curricula. It's also noted that even if the curricula don't explicitly convey these new skills, there are regular extracurricular activities that intend to bridge the aforementioned gap. This is probably a first step for future implementation in the curricula.

Some EOA institutions report they have already officially embedded text and body work in their curricula, promoting new opera performances within the study plan while improvisation and vocal extended techniques are mainly approached in a workshop basis. It's also important to mention that some report a scarce investment in the referred areas of improvisation and extended techniques.

The feedback received also touches on an interesting point that we should take into account. The role of the teachers, namely the singing teachers. It is said that this gap widely "depends on your singing teacher". It is added, in other testimony, that some "teachers speak a lot about those questions during classes, however it is not included in our curricula as teaching object". We find this info relevant and, if not at all surprising, should not be dismissed. This fact should make us reflect on the real need for curriculum revision, increasing the possibility that all students have access to training that is more adjusted to the needs widely identified by the contemporary aesthetic and the labor market. Music HEIs surely trust their teaching staff and we are assuming that all teachers do their best in their role. Therefore, this reflection is also addressed to the teachers themselves so that they can carry out a deep and honest self-reflection on the adequacy of their teaching to our *zeitgeist*.

Let's assume, just for the sake of this exercise, that we've reached an agreement on the new skills needed for the singer of the 21st century.

How should we cope with the integration of these new skills? Should we add these to the ones existing in the traditional singer education or should we have a new/modern singer education, a new course?

Overviewing the collected answers, it remains clear that the best methodology considered is to integrate the new skills into the traditional opera singer's education. If the voice is well founded "old and new skills match" and what is needed is a "strong essential skillset as the bottom line for additional artistic tools". The different skills don't "really disturb each other" and as it's clear that we need to include new skills answering the new needs it also becomes clear that the traditional educational model is still relevant. It's noted, once again, that the students are inevitably at the core of the needed change. It was mentioned that a considerable high number of students are not interested in the suggested changes: "very few students are interested in other musical languages or other approaches to opera". Institutions offering optional subject on improvisation and contemporary ensembles claim that those subjects are "not very popular with the students".

EOA's vocal departments were also questioned about **what could change in the curricula and in the teaching methodologies that would benefit the creation of a profile of a singer of 21st century**. From the answers we may identify topics such as the methodological interest in 1) interdisciplinary work, 2) producing contemporary operas and new approaches to early music repertoire within the curricula, 3) working on performances and also on technique at the same time (considering the possibility of multiple teachers work sessions), 4) connecting, as much as possible and in as many different ways, with the "outside world".

"We should let musicians from different fields to search together."

With all the aforementioned in place we could imagine, more and more, **opera singers playing a new interactive role in the socio-cultural and political context of this 21st century world. What about now? Is this already happening?**

Our poll mostly points us to a YES as an answer to this question.

“The socio-cultural, artistic and also economic context have been playing an important role in the gradual transformation of Opera, allowing and obliging many singers to choose an alternative circuit to the field of opera, demanding the choice of new ways of relating to the practice of collaborative and co-creative work around the Opera and the Music Theatre. This need for a more flexible and open profile of a singer may create proactive and attentive professionals to the reality that surrounds them. In this sense, the opera singer may turn opera into this new artistic and cultural performance practice process which allows it to become intrinsically significant in the communities’ history and also in the audiences’ development.” (António Salgado, 2021)

The student’s profile that has been discussed here would grow a critical community of professionals that have the chance of building a possibility of rethink opera as an active and alive genre in the relation with its audience, with its stakeholder, with its professionals and with its time.

Opera, by its textual nature, addresses themes of contemporaneity and as it did in the past (just consider, for instance, Mozart’s Don Giovanni, Puccini’s La Bohème or Verdi’s Otello) and share its critical lens over society. “Culture and society can only benefit from that”. This new profile might also provide a higher level of artistic singularity and create a space for the singer/artist bigger than only his/her voice. There were, nevertheless, doubts about the students’ awareness of their power and impact as individuals and as professionals.

In this small article we mainly touched the role of the institutions and the teachers as it was the main core of this investigation. Nevertheless, it’s perfectly clear for us that the student is the core of this reflection and a key element in this learning process. The student’s mindset is essential in building the individual profile of the future professional. The academic context must favor and instigate the student, but he/she is the main responsible of the success of this journey. The students’ openness and critical perspective to the contemporary world are also fundamental for their own sake but also as a lever, by their active and responsible action inside the institutions, to the needed transformation.

Disclaimers

We got only 12 answers to our questionnaire. The sample is not big but, somehow, several institutions, from 7 different countries participated which make us consider that the results are interesting. They show clear tendencies and common concerns even if the contextual gap between countries and institutions is quite evident.

These answers were the kickoff point for the authors’ critical analysis and this small article should be read as such. Nevertheless, we hope this analysis is relevant for the reader individual positioning about the studied subjects.

The questionnaire was answered from the beginning of January until the end of February 2021.

We will quote from the answers of the questionnaire mostly anonymously in order to preserve the privacy of the respondents.

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