

## The role of operatic repertoire in young singers' professional development

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**Abstract:** *This article documents and analyses the current curriculum of operatic repertoire in higher education in order to establish its role and usefulness in young singers' training, their first auditions, competitions or recitals. The aim is to identify the way in which the repertoire selected for students in higher education institutions can influence their first professional auditions. Repertoire selection constitutes an important aspect in students' musical education, as it encourages the development of their artistic personality as well as of their vocal identity. To conclude, repertoire has various roles in young singers' development and they need to make informed choices when selecting their audition repertoire. This needs to be realistic – ready to be performed on stage straight away, and it needs to pertinently illustrate the vocal and artistic qualities of the young singer.*

Key-words: *opera , vocal classification, vocal categorisation, Fach, repertoire, music education*

### 1. Introduction

The selection of repertoire for young singers is an important element in their musical education as it encourages both the development of their artistic personality and their vocal identity. Selecting appropriate repertoire has consequences for singers' marketing potential, but also on their ability to express themselves freely through their voices, uninhibited by uncomfortable tessituras or unsuitable orchestrations. Conservatoires constitute an important step to singers' professional life and are constantly making efforts to improve the student provision, to ensure they are equipped with the necessary skills for the current competitive environment.

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## 2. Aims and methods

The aim of this article is to identify the role of repertoire in young singers' training and its influence on their first professional auditions in the industry. This article is based on the documentation of my practical experience as a voice teacher in higher education in the UK and Romania. It also relies on my training experience in two Young Artist Programmes (Royal Academy Opera and British Youth Opera). These experiences informed my current views, which I discuss in tandem with reviewing the existing literature on these topics. To these perspectives I add the opinions of opera professionals – performers, conductors and agents – whom I interviewed as part of my PhD dissertation – *Exploring Zwischenfach: Understanding Vocal Classification and its Professional Significance* (2016).

## 3. Results and discussions

Perhaps the most common path of developing an operatic career is training in a conservatoire. Young singers also try to bring themselves to the attention of decision makers through taking part in competitions, masterclasses and auditions of opera productions for young singers. Outside of the training offered in higher education institutions there is an abundance of Young Artist Programmes whose main aim is to mimic the work environment of professional companies, in order to give young singers the practical experience they need for their chosen career. Dullea (2017) documents the practical experience gained by singers on such programmes, allowing us to appreciate their effectiveness. Her case study explores the unique way in which learning takes place in one of these programmes: Irish Youth Opera's 2014 production of Britten's *The Rape of Lucretia*.

The journey from the first years of training to that of creating a full role for a young artist programme is one that assumes in-depth learning of many skills. At the outset, the most important elements in developing a performance career are securing a reliable vocal technique and learning a varied repertoire to showcase the vocal and artistic potential of each performer. In the first years of undergraduate studies, vocal technique and repertoire are mutually enhancing: students learn basic concepts regarding breathing, phonation and resonance, through exercises and then through repertoire. The repertoire choices at this stage aim to establish the first notions of legato singing, clarity of vowels, good diction as well as the flexibility required in melismatic passages. In my teaching experience at higher education institutions, I noticed that the repertoire of first-year singers typically consists of Vaccai and Concone vocal exercises, Arie Antiche and some introductory

Mozart or Schubert lieder. This type of repertoire is suitable owing to the limited range and short duration, as well as the opportunity to transpose the pieces to suit the students' abilities. This repertoire also enables voice teachers to introduce basic techniques of music learning (if needed), of vocal technique and interpretation. This first year allows student and teacher to get to know each other's work style and to establish principles of work ethic that are crucial to the success of the singer's remaining study years and future career.

It is also in this incipient phase that the first opinions regarding a student's voice category begin to form, based on their preferred tessitura, elements of registration and *passaggi*, timbre and weight. The literature specialising in voice categorisation and repertoire discusses the characteristics of each of these elements: Kloiber – *Der Handbuch der Oper* (2011 13<sup>th</sup> ed.), Doscher – *The functional unity of the singing voice* (1922), Boldrey – *Guide to operatic roles and arias* (1994), Miller - *Training Soprano Voices* (2000), Clark – *Guide to Aria Repertoire* (2007), McGinnis – *The opera singer's career guide* (2010) and others. This becomes more important as repertoire presents more complex elements such as longer phrases, more challenging coloratura and more voice-type specific tessitura. Based on the students' initial progress, this type of repertoire is introduced, through opera arias of Handel, Vivaldi and Mozart. Whilst generally there is some consensus with regards to the role of each element in categorisation, I wish to address range, as it is probably the most contentious. Barbara Doscher goes as far as stating that range is 'the least reliable and most dangerous way to classify a voice' and she offers the example of young sopranos who have not yet mastered their higher register and therefore are classified as mezzos' (Doscher 1994, 196). Whilst I agree with her view in general, I also believe that range needs to be taken into account at this stage, not as a defining element of classification, but as a guiding tool for finding suitable repertoire. At first, repertoire will be set within the limits of the young singer's range, whilst also taking into account the other elements of classification. The main issue in Doscher's example above, is the fact that classification occurred too early – there needs to be some level of technical fluency before such a decision is established. In the case of any beginner it is normal for repertoire to be in tandem with their natural abilities, and then for it to develop in time. Certain voice types, particularly the extremes (coloratura soprano and any bass) will need the range as well as the vocal colour, as their core roles depend on their ability to consistently and reliably sing extremely high or low notes. Therefore range, whilst remaining a contentious element of vocal categorisation, can play a very practical role in establishing suitable repertoire. At this stage the vocal category can still be indeterminate, but an incipient idea is still possible and for some it can be quite clear from the outset. Pearl McGinnis gives

the example of the young soubrette soprano whose flexible and youthful voice makes it suitable for its roles as early as eighteen, if well trained (McGinnis 2010:49). It is important to mention that, for some singers, the process of establishing their most suitable voice category is difficult, particularly when it comes to 'bigger' voices. Doscher (1994) discusses how easily sopranos and mezzos can be mistaken for one another: 'If a young female has a naturally darker singing voice than her peers, she generally is classified as a mezzo. Many, a big-voiced soprano has sung as a mezzo into her mid-20s, only to find that her voice was misclassified' (Doscher 1994, 196). The main point is that at this stage the teacher will most likely start forming an opinion on the student's most suitable voice category but their views should be very flexible and ready to change if needed. Students will often want to know their voice-type early but they have to understand that this very much depends on their voices maturing, and on their techniques becoming more secure. In this context vocal maturity refers to the ongoing process of cartilage transforming to bone (ossification). Scott McCoy explains that in young people the 'laryngeal cartilages are soft and relatively flexible', which can lead to vocal instability and laryngeal elevation (McCoy 2019, 173). These physical processes cannot be rushed, as is the case of vocal technique – therefore vocal categorisation can pass through a few stages before being decided upon.

In the following years most curricula gradually introduce arias from operas by composers such as Rossini, Bellini and Donizetti and in the final years of undergraduate and postgraduate training, repertoire becomes increasingly varied, to include the works of composers such as Bizet, Gounod, Massenet, Beethoven, R. Strauss, Wolf, Dvořák, Janáček, Verdi and even Wagner. This repertoire poses sophisticated technical problems and complex characters to portray, therefore its approach might seem premature during training. Also, famous opera arias come with a set of high expectations from an audience. However, a gradual approach of such pieces is crucial in developing all of these elements – which requires many years of continuous refinement and performance in a safe, institutional environment. Stephen Smith states that continuous professional development should be the training foundation of any singer (Smith 2007:129). Mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato echoes this aspect in her popular masterclasses. In her graduation speech for the Juilliard class of 2014, DiDonato reflects on the idea that as an artist 'you will never make it (...) you will never arrive to a final destination' as she encourages the young in front of her to commit to the journey of continuous discovery.

I can only support this idea myself, both on a personal level and in a professional capacity. I started working on Rosina's Cavatina from Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia* as a second year undergraduate (2004); at the time I could not sustain the B5 that was traditionally added in the final cadenza – therefore I

created a cadenza in which I only sang the note in passing through a coloratura phrase. With time and practice, I managed to sustain the sound, and I introduced the cadenza as written, whilst concurrently refining the aria and learning the whole role. I performed the role for the first time on stage in 2012 for a UK company, but in the intervening years used the aria in numerous auditions - beginning its study early in my training proved to be very beneficial.

In conversations with other voice teachers or singers I have often come across conflicting views regarding this aspect. Some discourage students from attempting such repertoire prior to their technique being 'finalised' as they believe it encourages the development of vocal faults, owing to attempting to sing it at all costs. These faults can lead to vocal and mental health damage which, once lost are difficult to re-establish. Mason discusses the link between mental health and sound quality; he mentions that 'a singer's psychological state can have a profound influence on sound quality' (Mason in Potter 2000:204). This perspective is valuable as it recognises that vocal technique requires a fine sensory-motor co-ordination which can only sediment in time. Approaching repertoire that is overtly challenging too soon can perturb this process. The solution lies in recognising when a piece is much beyond the vocal capabilities of the student. This aspect always needs a transparent and honest conversation between student and teacher, to ensure that the student is not discouraged, but has a realistic understanding of what is suitable and what isn't.

The opposite can also happen; teachers can become overconfident in what their students can do. Oftentimes both student and teacher manifest excitement about a particular repertoire and become impatient in approaching it (Ragan 2016:299). This combination of excitement and impatience can be understood in both cases; for voice teachers it is tempting to escape a sometimes monotonous repertoire (such as hearing *Batti, batti ad infinitum*); as for the student who discovers new repertoire, it is normal that they would get excited about performing it – it's part of a youthful, artistic impetus. It is also important to recognise that there are students with certain vocal qualities who can approach a more complex repertoire than their peers. Each singer has their own individual innate qualities and needs to strike their own balance between nature and nurture. During a masterclass Joyce DiDonato recounts a conversation with Marilyn Horne about the trill. DiDonato recalls with humour Horne's confident statement, that 'trills come naturally', whereas DiDonato herself describes her own detailed work on the ornament, demonstrating alongside her explanations. In these cases, when the teacher recognises some exceptional innate abilities, it is probably good to introduce a more complex repertoire, as long as the student aware of these qualities - so that they can appreciate, maintain and develop them rather than take them for granted. Any young singers that look to emulate the trajectories and

experiences of their idols that had stage debuts at a very young age (such as Mirella Freni, Bryn Terfel, Angela Gheorghiu, etc.) need to view these cases as exceptions than as rules. This is difficult to do because these are such high-profile singers; what young singer hasn't tried to imitate a favourite artist heard on recordings? It is the teachers' responsibility to guide these youthful, energetic impulses with rationality whilst at the same time being careful not to crush the student's motivation. This should not cause disappointment, but rather lead to a realistic assessment of one's own individual qualities and place in the continuum that constitutes artistic development. At this stage, young singers should start recognising that the voice is part of the individual in an integral way and is in a state of continuous change. I believe that the singers who are known for their excellent vocal technique have a very high level of self-knowledge and they are able to make constant, small adjustments of any element necessary in order to be consistent in their vocal manifestation on the long run. Approaching a wide, complex repertoire needs to be consistent with the level of development of each student as this is crucial in ensuring optimal technical development and building a repertoire that is appropriate. During training the role of repertoire is also to build vocal stamina as well as the students' ability to focus in detail on various elements of interpretation for the length of time of a recital, oratorio or opera. Vocal, mental and emotional stamina can only be achieved in time through performing appropriate repertoire in public. All these aspects need to be understood and thought through in depth as they all contribute to the formation of a healthy vocal regimen for the career ahead.

Another important aspect of repertoire is its role in the artistic development of young singers – if at the beginning of training, the repertoire is usually selected by the teacher, in the years to follow students will be exposed to hearing a varied, mix of repertoire, both in their institution and outside of it. This exposure inspires most of them to form their taste and establish their own repertoire, according to particular affinities with style, period or language. This beginning of artistic independence is to be guided and supported by the teacher as it can have a pivotal effect in building their career. It is during their studies that students will establish their preference for a particular genre, be it choral, opera, oratorio, chamber music, musical theatre and others, whilst the teacher's role is to recognise whether the student's preferred genre suits their voice and other capabilities. We live in a time where finding a professional niche can offer more confidence in the quality of what is being offered – reflected in the careers of singers who focused on a particular repertoire. Therefore students need to be guided in the direction in which they are most likely to succeed. Their affinity to a particular repertoire has significant artistic value, as it supposes a greater freedom of expression. After all,

any form of singing is intimately connected to the desire to communicate through the voice and repertoire becomes a medium through which this communication can take place, uninhibited. Understood in this context, the role of repertoire during the training years is crucial in the refinement of vocal and artistic development.

A particularly important role of repertoire is also that of achieving audition success – which any student will dream about. During their training, singers will work on developing a portfolio of arias and song cycles to be used in auditions and competitions. The issue of appropriate repertoire for young singers in auditions is frequently debated and creates disagreement between voice teachers, coaches, agents and conductors. Given that during training voices are still maturing, any decision on voice categorisation will have a big impact on the future development of a singer's career. In my experience as a performer and teacher, I observed that at this stage of first auditions most singers have decided their optimal voice category (*Fach*). My PhD (Festeu 2016) research suggests that the identification of this category can have a positive impact on their first auditions as they come across as more professional and settled to a panel. In this transition period between studies and professional life singers perform for a wide range of panellists in different audition contexts and can receive conflicting advice regarding their most suitable repertoire. These differences of opinion between a potential agent and a voice teacher can create a significant existential crisis, which needs to be managed tactfully and intelligently, particularly since the artistic environment is populated with very strong personalities. Ultimately, in the case of conflicting advice, the singer needs to choose what they feel is best for them – at the risk of making the wrong decision. It is a common occurrence and it is an important part of building a career.

Evidence to support the above mentioned arguments are provided in own research based on interviewing internationally renowned opera performers and agents. Among the issues discussed as part of the interviews there are some precisely tackling the issue of what repertoire is most suitable for young singers who freshly graduated and are making their first attempts in the audition circuit. One of the questions asked specifically whether the respondents recommend auditioning with arias from operas that they have already performed or studied in their entirety, or whether this is irrelevant. Most of the interviewees agreed that an aria presented in this context offers a panel more confidence in the young singer's ability to sing a whole role. Mezzo-soprano Della Jones encapsulated the opinions of many professionals: 'The one thing I do say if you're going to audition for a company: don't sing an aria if you can't sing the whole role, having not worked through the whole role' (Festeu 2016, 184). Industry agent James Black developed the following on his reasoning: 'I'd be very nervous about a singer offering to a company a role that they haven't at least studied in its entirety and are sure are

able to sing' (Festeu 2016 Appendix 3, 81). Mezzo-soprano Ruxandra Donose also makes the point that certain roles are ideal for young singers because of the characters' age: 'It is important to be able to represent on stage what they are representing with their voices. I think a very clear tendency of our business is that all the Mozart and Rossini roles are cast with young people' (Festeu 2016, Appendix 3, 11). And mezzo-soprano Jennifer Johnston also points out that the reason why this is important is to do with vocal health: 'Ultimately it should always 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' (Festeu 2016, Appendix 3, 39). Interestingly, of my interviewees, those working in HE or who worked constantly with young singers tended to err on the side of caution and converge on the above. However there are prominent voices arguing that singers should just 'sing what feels good' in auditions, as did mezzo-soprano Frederica von Stade, who stated that 'I think it's great if they know an entire role but it's not necessary for an audition' (Festeu 2016 Appendix 3, 68) and mezzo-soprano Jennifer Larmore: 'Explore arias that make you happy and relaxed' (Festeu 2016, 184). Mezzo-soprano Susanne Mentzer also echoed this, but her work in HE in the US enabled her to pinpoint both points of view: 'I tend to want my students to show what they can do so if they sing an aria really well but could not do the role I still advise them to work on it as I learned so much by taking on challenges I never thought capable of. Very few young singers are capable of singing huge long roles but the listeners and people who hire would at least use their imaginations. It is a double-edged sword though. I adjudicate many competitions and I know that some panels are highly critical of rep that does not fit a Fach or excerpts from roles the singer is not totally ready for' (Festeu 2016, 180). The resulting data from my research supports the fact that, on balance, it is safer for young singers to present an audition portfolio of arias from roles that they have either performed in their entirety or as part of scenes, or at the very least studied in full. It gives them more credibility in front of a panel. This adds importance to the roles that students are cast in during their training: they will not only be useful because it gives them practical stage experience but it can add weight to arias performed in auditions.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Repertoire selection can therefore be a complex process with various functions in the professional life of a young singer. It is the responsibility of the individual to discern between which repertoire is most suitable for a particular situation.



Students can have a repertoire that is required for exams and another that they use in recitals and competitions. They might sing some pieces to explore their vocal capabilities, even though these may not be suited for a public performance but they are important in their development. These differences mean that repertoire that is studied during training will not necessarily be the one performed on stage later on. It is important to make this distinction as the transition between conservatoire and professional life must be accompanied by a thorough selection process of the repertoire that is most representative of the young singer's abilities. The teacher's role will always be a guiding one, alongside the other professionals guiding the young singer, but the final decision must belong to the singer as it is part of their process of becoming mature artists. One of the most concrete aspects of training is the repertoire accumulated during this time: audition arias, song cycles, opera and oratorio roles. Various opera role guides as well as my own research conclude that it is important for singers to present a 'realistic' repertoire list during auditions, comprising roles that they could perform straight away, rather than speculative roles that they could only achieve in a few years' time. Conservatoires are aware that students rely on the practical experience they will accumulate during their training, to serve as a start to populate their CVs prior to sending them to opera companies or agencies with the aim of obtaining auditions. This transition between training and professional life constitutes a difficult step for many singers, which defines their upcoming career. In order to have a positive experience in the first auditions, the young singer needs to present the panel with a 'complete package' which combines musical and vocal fluidity, the ability to convincingly portray the characters they interpret and a realistic approach to the repertoire presented. Given the extremely competitive environment that existed even prior to the current pandemic, it is crucial that in an audition situation repertoire is used to put the performer in the best possible light. Therefore the undergraduate and postgraduate years constitute an introduction to a process that does not end with graduation, but only begins.

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