Emotional Expressivity in the Interpretation of Lyrical Characters. The Role of the Dramatic Training of the Opera Performer

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Abstract

In the doctoral dissertation *Interpretive alternatives of Shakespearean Characters Born of Their Emotional Universe* we assumed the benefit of understanding the characters played in their psychological complexity as if they were real people, so that their behaviours and goals are interpreted from the perspective of their personality core. For this I proposed the analysis of emotions according to established psychological theories and with the help of psychological tools. Given the multitude of opera performances inspired by his pieces, we consider that this approach could be useful for students-lyrical performers. In order to bring sufficiently strong arguments in support of this statement, we conducted a review of research on the reception of the expressiveness of vocal lyrical interpretation versus gestural postural expressiveness. The research results confirm the students' concern for lyrical performers for the technique and expressiveness of the voice that sings to the detriment of expressiveness through non-verbal means and, at the same time, the need of directors and audiences for integrated expressiveness. As a result, we consider useful the multidisciplinary development of future lyrical artists, in the sense of concern for the emotional expression gestural-postural in parallel with the vocal one. The training modules could be greatly improved through interdisciplinary collaboration with acting schools, just as student actors could benefit from the experience of transmitting emotion through song. In this way, the terms “actor” and “singer” will come mutual closer, for the benefit of the performing arts and the spectators.

Keywords: personality, actor's art, character, psychology, emotion, opera, acting, singers.

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The art of singing is a channel for communicating emotion that transcends culture or time, as shown by a variety of musical representations common throughout the world over centuries: from lullabies – as a typical expression of parental love – to religious and spiritual songs – as a typical expression of mystical feelings. In Western music, the emotional expression of the singing voice is inexorably linked to Italian Opera which, from the 18th century (through the development of bel canto) to the 19th century (with the emergence of Verdi's melodrama) placed a strong emphasis on the dramatic-emotional interpretation of opera characters. Dramatic art, poetry, visual arts and sometimes dance interact with music to create a unique alchemy that changes from one performance to another, from one production to another. All four essential elements contribute to the emotional expressiveness of the opera performance – the libretto, the music, the staging, and, above all, the vocal art of the performers.

The libretto is the "script" of an opera. It can be an original creation, sometimes written by famous poets or novelists (such as Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Stefan Zweig for the works of Richard Strauss), but it is often an adaptation of plays (Shakespeare was a great source of inspiration for librettists), stories or novels. The subjects developed in libretti are diverse – forbidden love, infidelity, revenge, lust for power, war, ancient myths or various historical events. As in theatre, all human passions are represented in opera, with love, tragedy and death often being at the centre of the plot. The characters, sometimes dramatically torn between feelings and duty, face extraordinary situations, and their emotions are often exacerbated. Love at first sight, sacrifice, courage, suicide or murder, all extremes of behaviour can be played out on stage. Some characters are punished for their actions, others find salvation or are struck by remorse, and sometimes there is a happy ending, but regardless of the story told by the script or libretto, the audience seeks in the performance the reception and experience of the emotion

conveyed by the performers.

The question is not whether lyrical artists need to be convincing actors, but how they might train as good actors, given the complexity of the artistic act they deliver. Current trends are increasingly broadly multidisciplinary and continue a complex tradition that constantly reframes the idea of what a musician could be beyond his technical vocal competence. In the introduction to *Stanislavsky and the Art of the Scene*, David Magarshack argues that

> [Stanislavsky] thought for a time of becoming an opera singer himself and took lessons from the famous Theodore Komisarjevsky... however, he soon realized that he was not cut out for opera and devoted himself entirely to dramaturgy. Some thirty years later, he was once again active in the lyrical theatre, but this time as an acting teacher"

and began working with opera singers at the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow, applying the same techniques and methods of his system. Since many of the findings reflect a contemporary imperative for lyrical artists to interpret realistic and believable characters, *Stanislavski on Opera* (Stanislavsky and Rumyantsev, 1975), a collection of writings on Stanislavski's innovative direction at the Bolshoi in the 1920s, offers yet another approach to dramatic character that is just as relevant today. A current reference is *Acting for Singers: Creating Believable Singing Characters* (Ostwald, 2005), which offers a methodical approach to dramatic performance for lyrical artists[1].

In a study on the acting performance of opera singers (Hamilton, 2015), the results revealed the importance that audiences attach to physical and emotional expressiveness in opera performances, an expressiveness that young artists are not always very aware of, being more focused on vocal performance technique. All participants in the study commented that the ability to express emotional information with the body/face is a primary requirement. All results also reflected the fact that there is an expectation on the part of singers, but especially directors, that they are physically well-coordinated enough to be able to sing demanding vocal lines while acting with naturalness and credibility. These expectations are probably determined by the influence of High-Definition cinema in the entertainment

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industry. Some directors wished that lyrical performers were more competent in this area, while some singers felt that certain directors lacked an understanding of the physical demands of singing, which were particularly demanding in order to make room for emotional expressiveness with the body/face and were focused on what their voice could convey. However, the conclusions were unanimous in stating that a high level of coordination of vocal expressiveness with body and face expressiveness is a very necessary requirement for being involved in an artistic production today.

Directors and conductors expect performers to have a strong relationship with the text, so the first step for singers is to have a deep and detailed understanding of the characters and the narrative of the performance they are performing. These expectations are linked to the assumption that lyrical artists should be as well prepared as actors, able to improvise on stage, an ability that comes from studying and understanding the psychology of the role they are playing, that is, to express emotions as Stanislavski recommended in his system of actor training – for Stanislavski, emotions are produced through the use of actions, through analytical research of the given circumstances of the text, and through imagination, the result being a truthful performance within a play (or opera in this case). To break it down in simpler terms, Stanislavski asked actors to use the "Magic If". They had to ask themselves questions such as "What would I do if I were in my character's situation?" Also, while examining the given circumstances, including the character's actions, Stanislavski believed that actors must look beyond the character's actions to find their motivation for performing one action or another. He also emphasized the importance of goals, namely what the character's goal is in each scene and the need for it to be in line with their overall goal.

In my doctoral thesis *Interpretive alternatives of Shakespearean Characters Born of Their Emotional Universe*, I assumed the benefit of understanding the characters played in their psychological complexity as if they were real people, so that their behaviors and goals can be played from the perspective of the core of their personality. For this, I proposed the analysis of emotions according to established psychological theories and with the help of psychological tools. Given the multitude of opera performances inspired by William Shakespeare's plays, I considered that this approach could also be useful for lyrical artist students.

The first dimension on which the student-performer is invited to reflect is

the character's temperament – this side of his personality, then the identification of his cardinal traits. I also found useful the clinical model, the accentuated side of the characters, with examples from the works of William Shakespeare. The analysis of the character's attitudes is the next step and I believe that, given the specificity of the opera performance, body and stage movement are essential means of expressiveness, beyond the vocal score. Attitudes represent the orientative component of personality, by far the most visible aspect of relational behaviours. I consider this approach important because, during their student years, young performers are focused mainly on perfecting their vocal technique, to the detriment of emotional expressiveness, and it is natural for this to be the case, to a point. Moreover, students find through their own experience how emotional expressiveness affects the acoustic parameters of the performed scores, and the most appropriate way to balance it is to deepen the means of emotional-gestural expression and behavioural movement, in congruence with vocal expression. Most likely, vocal communication of emotion evolved for two functional reasons: to allow the person expressing himself to adequately inform the social environment regarding the assessment of the present/potential situation and to allow the observer a degree of prediction during an interaction with him. The artistic act rendered on stage must be both logically predictable and surprising. Apparently, this situation is paradoxical, but the surprise comes from the sequence of events, the recognizable and predictive character of the emotional expression ensuring the veracity of the character. Starting with Darwin's monumental monograph (1872) on the expression of emotion, the study of how different emotions are expressed (with the face, voice, and body) and how well the underlying affective states can be recognized by specific observers has been and continues to be a favourite area of emotion research.

In a relatively recent review of the research literature, Scherer et al. (2015) showed that the results of 135 studies provide an overwhelming amount of evidence of the human ability to infer a person’s emotion from their nonverbal expression, with a degree of accuracy that far exceeds expectations. In the aforementioned doctoral thesis, I proposed training for students in the recognition of emotional expressions (especially based on photo-video materials). Lyrical performers-students are mainly focused on the recognition and rendering of vocal expressiveness, with studies showing that posture and gesture receive less

attention. However, the comprehensive review shows that there is now a satisfactory amount of evidence that emotions can be recognized adequately as in vocal expressions (using meaningless vocalizations). An important aspect of this evidence is that accuracy rates differ across expressive modalities, with some emotions being more accurately recognized from the face (e.g., disgust) and others from the voice (e.g., anger). In recent years, significant progress has been made in developing tools that allow sophisticated analyses of the specific features and configurations that characterize the production (or encoding) of specific emotions in different expressive modalities. Thus, in the work of Ekman and his collaborators (Ekman and Rosenberg, 1997) "facial action units" (AUs) were corroborated with the domain of vocal expression, and advances in digital acoustic voice analysis techniques have led to a series of major investigations into the pattern of acoustic parameters that characterize the vocal expression of specific emotions (Juslin and Laukka, 2003; Juslin and Scherer, 2005; Scherer et al., 2015; Ververidis and Kotropoulos, 2006).

Research on the expression and recognition of emotion through nonverbal aspects of speech (e.g., voice quality) has focused almost exclusively on the speaking voice. Consequently, an examination of similar modes of expression production that can be found in the singing voice is of great interest, as well as whether emotions are equally well recognized from singing and speech. This is to be expected since both opera and song performances rely heavily on the performer's ability to convey authentic emotions to the audience, suggesting that listeners can correctly recognize the expressive intentions of the singer. Compared to the relatively large number of studies on the nature of vocal expression of emotions in speech, which generally use acoustic analyses of emotional performances by professional and non-professional actors (Juslin and Laukka, 2003; Russell et al., 2003; Scherer et al., 2013; Scherer et al., 2015), we found few published studies on emotional expression through singing (Coutinho et al., 2014). Early in his research, Sherman (1928) had a singer convey different emotions by repeatedly singing a single note and simple melodic sequences, asking observers to name the intended emotions (surprise, fear-pain, sadness, and anger-hatred) and concluded that both single tones and melodies can convey emotional meanings to the listener. In another early study, Kotlyar and Morozov (1976) asked professional singers to sing different vocal scores to describe four basic emotions – happiness, pain/sadness, fear and

anger – and asked listeners to recognize the respective emotions. Performances recognized as sad were characterized by a slow tempo, while perceived anger was associated with a higher average pitch and faster syllable onsets and decreases in sound pressure. In the study by Jansens et al. (1997) 14 professional singers were asked to sing a phrase from Schubert's "Der Erlkönig" that describes four different emotions – anger, joy, fear and sadness – and the listeners were asked to rate the strength of the perceived emotions for each performance. An analysis of the acoustic parameters related to these perceived emotions showed that anger was associated with the presence of vibrato, while sadness was characterized by the absence of vibrato with longer durations and lower vocal intensity. In a case study, Sundberg et al. (1995) asked a professional singer to sing excerpts from opera and lieder repertoires in two contrasting ways: as in an imagined performance/concert situation and in an emotionally neutral way, i.e., without any special interpretation or emotional nuance. A panel of experienced experts then judged both versions according to the degree of expressiveness and the specific emotion conveyed (calm, love, sadness, happiness, fear/fright, anger, and hatred). Acoustic analysis showed that portrayals of emotions characterized by higher levels of arousal (calm, happiness, fright/fear, anger/anger, and hatred) were associated with louder singing (higher sound pressure level), faster tempos, and a higher rate of intensity variation (calm, love, and sadness). Juslin and Laukka (2003) concluded that the acoustic patterns in the frequency, energy, spectrum, and time domains for the expression of different emotions are similar for speech and music (including vocal performance), so we believe that the training of lyrical and dramatic artists could involve a common body of disciplines, as there is research evidence that emotional expression is no different from the point of view of the receiving audience. In addition, there is research showing that there are emotions that cannot be expressed by the singing voice. A review of the results on the accuracy of recognizing vocally presented emotions (Scherer et al., 2015) showed that contempt, love, serenity/calm, and emotional tension are not well recognized from the voice.

In *Acting for Singers: Creating Believable Singing Characters*, David Ostwald creates a set of dramatic interpretation rules for performers. He urges his students to let their characters believe that they are real people, who have their own thoughts running through their heads. He also argues that, in music, the composer

interpreted the feelings of the characters and not the other way around. The performer must not forget who he is, must not deny who he is, but must transform himself interpretively by selecting the traits that he emphasizes or minimizes. Ostwald advocates for believable characters with whom the audience can identify through an empathetic extension, and to be believable, the performer must reproduce the details of what is happening in reality, which is why a permanent response on stage is needed even to the smallest gestures of the stage partners. We agree with these opinions, with the amendment that the lyrical artist also needs to be a fine connoisseur of human psychology in order to give congruence to the expressive dynamics of the characters they interpret.

In conclusion, we believe that it is advisable to further develop the multidisciplinary training of future lyrical artists, in the sense of focusing on dramatic emotional expression, gestural-postural, in parallel with vocal expression. Training modules could be greatly improved through interdisciplinary collaboration with acting schools, just as student actors could benefit from the experience of transmitting emotion through song. In this way, the terms "actor" and "singer" will become increasingly closer, to the benefit of both performing arts and the audience.

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