

HUMAN VOICE - A MEANS OF COMMUNICATION IN LYRICAL PERFORMANCE

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Abstract

The paper approaches the possible interpretations of the manners in which human voice may transmit feelings, emotions, experiences, by means of professional singing. Stress is laid on some objective aspects of communication through singing, and a brief historical survey of the art of teaching vocal music - based on the own experience of the author - is offered. Also evidenced are the differences among the various types of voices and the methods for their full valorisation, for transmitting quite different artistic messages, alongwith the qualities of human voice and some of its possible shortcomings. Aspects of vocal technique are also discussed, as well as the manner in which they may be transformed into vehicles of artistic messages, for the achievement of genuine masterpieces of musical interpretation.

Keywords: *voice, communication, lied, opera, sonorous message, timber, master.*

The theme to be discussed in the following is almost impossible to approach: the ascent of human voice from its primeval condition up to perfection. The feeling experienced in the moment in which I started to write down my first ideas on human voice was almost identical to that described by the great Ion Luca Caragiale, illustrated in his sketch "A speech": "... posters, newspapers, letters, persons, all of them keep on announcing that I am going to deliver a speech, at the Society for the Protection of the Dacian - Romanian muses, entitled *What is art?*". Needless to say that, even few minutes prior to beginning his lecture, Caragiale had no idea on what was he expected to talk about. The situation is the same for me: what am I expected to say, how should I begin to talk about the misterious and intangible human voice, the essential communication agent of any lyrical performance? How should one frame this divine gift given by God to people within the vast domain of human

relationing, more precisely of interpretation in the art of sounds? The same Caragiale gave us a clue, in the already mentioned sketch, where he explains that "art is - how could I express it more appropriatley? It is the strive of the human spirit to satisfy one of its loftiest aspirations, the accomplishment of which requires another spiritual satisfaction which, in his turn ...". I think that such a definition of art is wholly explanatory.

We shall try, in the following, to explain, to define human voice, being fully conscious that, among the audience, several distinguished specialists may do this - possibly, even better.

One of the first manifestation of a human being, in the very beginning of its extrauterine life, is the cry. Everybody is happy and relieved when the new-born starts to cry. In this way, he announces us that he is alive and probably, healthy. The significance of the first shouts of the one who leaves the warm and protecting "residence" of his mother womb is unanimously known, so that stress will be laid on the sonorous sign which everybody produces when entering the world. Starting with the very first seconds of life, the human creature communicates by means of his/her voice, uttering sounds and transmitting messages. One may entitedly answer that it is not only the human being to do this - mention should be made in this respect of other mammals, the scope being the same: to communicate. Yes, but, unlike the other creatures, along his life man uses his voice in a most different way, so that several aspects are to be analyzed in this respect, from both an objective and subjective-type perspective.

Objectively, human voice is used for communicating with other fellow beings - here involved being the word, distributed in various

languages. Quite interesting is that, again objectively, people understand each other only if/when speaking the same language – otherwise, what one utters is wholly meaningless to the other, appearing only as senseless sounds.

Things are completely different when discussing the subjective aspect of human voice, as present in such cases is the essential element of communication, sensitivity, in our opinion, a feature of divine origin, as, among all creatures endowed with it, capable of expressing one's feelings in most different ways are only the humans. A first and suggestive example is the way in which humans "address" animals and elements of nature. Dogs and cats, as well as other animals surrounding are, in most cases, treated in a most special manner. Usually, we address our fellows – the postman or the flower girl – in a most common way, politely, yet not affectionately, while we talk to our pets most kindly, while caressing them, thus transmitting them our affection and love. Such friends of ours, – quite improperly defined as dumb – are, in most occasions, our unique confidants, to which we disclose our secrets, and, in numerous cases, a understanding look from their part miraculously solves our problems, bringing us the comfort we so much need.

The environment, nature, with its forest, hills and mountains, the sky, the sun, the moon and the stars make us even more sympathetic and sensible. Urged by his sensitivity, the human creature often feels the impulse of addressing them, uttering special words, as to some supernatural elements, even if the most special words sometimes may appear as poor or devoid of any meaning. In such cases, man resorts to the song! The result of such a combination is a plenary, joyful human manifestation!

When did man sing for the first time? How did he discover that he may use his voice to utter different sounds? When did he become aware of the difference between the guttural noise and the harmonious sounds, and of the different messages they transmit? No exact answers could be ever given to such questions. Why? Because, approached here is, actually, one of the main differences between science and art. As everybody knows, science operates with precise, objective, measurable notions, while art is almost wholly a

manifestation of subjectivity – both of those who produce it and of those to whom it is addressing. No one can doubt the elementary arithmetic formula $1 + 1 = 2$. However, if writing it several times, in green, then in red, blue and yellow, we shall see that we are attracted more by one of these colours. Why? No one knows.

The above comparison is related to fine arts, as it includes colour. In its turn, music also "wraps" its message in certain colours, obtained from the various combinations of the sonorous transmitters, namely human voices and musical instruments.

Specialists know that a human creature can sing both with his mouth open and shut – the so-called mute singing. Singing with an open mouth does not always involve uttering of words, but of vowels, consonants or of various syllables. However, such aspects are beyond the scope of the present study which – once devoted to the lyrical performance and to the interpretation of the messages transmitted by this form of sonorous art – will necessarily call for a discussion on the stages of the history of music.

Along the evolution of the human society, to which the evolution of the art of sounds is linked in an intricate manner, man has constantly used his voice, discovering its new possibilities of expression and communication, as well as various other instruments he invented and improved. Along certain historical periods, vocal singing was preponderant: mention should be made, in this respect, of the vocal music schools from the European West, in the early Middle Age – such as the French School of Notre Dame, in Paris, the minstrels, meistersingers and the minesingers from Germany and Netherlands, followed, in time, by the magnificent explosion of vocality during the Renaissance, in Italy and in the England of Queen Elisabeth I. Such glorious vocal developments have been followed by equally flourishing epochs of impetus of instrumental music, represented by the prestigious instrumental schools of the baroque France and Germany. All these manifestations created and imposed a different type of relations among people, a new manner of sonorous communication and also a new method for inducing and transmitting new human feelings and sensations.

Fortunately for them, people of the Middle Age were quite close to God, one of the consequences of such attitudes being the tremendous development of religious music, best represented by missa and motet. Equally, one and the same person may have his/her own feelings and experience of the daily, laic life, which explains the production of madrigals and canzonets, musical genres based on secular texts. Both the sacred and the laic productions were sung by a choir, with no accompaniment, namely - to use a musical term - *a cappella*. Palestrina, Gesualdo, Orlando di Lasso, John Dowland, John Bull are only a few of the master minds of vocal music, and not only in their epoch!

Considering the above-mentioned genres, how could we detect the communication needs that led to the creation of opera performance? The reasons are multiple, so that only part of them will be here discussed. The great feudal lords, kings, princes and high noblemen used to surround themselves by high-rank courtiers who competed among them by organizing various syncretic artistic manifestations involving music, dances, pantomime performances, costumes and scenery, more and more ample and rich, all such celebrations being dedicated to various fashionable events of those times: enthrone ceremonies, sumptuous marriages, princely visits, etc. For example, at the royal court of Paris or at the imperial court of Vienna, gorgeous manifestations - which first preceeded then even came to represent the opera genre - were frequently organized. The richer was the organizer, the higher were the expenses for such magnificent feasts, all such performances offering the occasion for demonstrating one's richness, luxury and artistic taste, in a perpetual competition with numerous rivals.

Another cause which explains the appearance of opera is the development level attained by various genres of the vocal and instrumental music, included here being not only the musical technique, but also aspects related to communication. A combination of voices and instruments had been already experienced in the XIIIth - XVth centuries, especially in those strange *misteries* performed in the squares of the early Middle Age towns. Singers and strolling

actors, accompanied by instruments such as lutes and flutes, used to recite texts meant at thrilling the audience. Towards the end of the XVIth century and beginning of the following one, vocal music was combined with the instrumental one, starting with texts from various chapters of the Greek and Roman mythology, extended in time to topics describing the everyday life of the contemporary people. Complex ideas need more sophisticated communication means! Crystallization of the new genre lasted more than a century, its development assuming various stages, as a function of the country involved, its first manifestations being registered in royal and noble courts, followed - in subsequent stages - by performances addressed to an audience representing all social categories, staged in special theatrical spaces, where entrance was permitted only after buying a ticket. The initial improvisations grew into original creations of professional composers and librettists, performed by soloist singers and orchestras with numerous instruments, which interpreted famous and difficult scores.

Another extremely important element in the economy of this musical genre is the text, whose essential function is that of assuring direct communication. Its message and eloquence, the feelings the interpreter is expected to transmit to the audience (the receiver) through his voice are decisive in the general evolution on the stage. No opera composer, in no epoch, starting with the XVIIth century until today could have ever ignored the message of the text. Music transmits exactly the same feelings as those expressed by the text upon which it is has been based, so that a possible denaturation of this unitary entity, realized by the composer in his score, might be caused exclusively by talentless singers. To achieve the unity of the work of art, the message addressed to the audience should be first intimately assumed and experienced by the composer. He is expected to identify himself with the text - a necessary condition for composing valuable music, the best example in this respect being that composers of genius often succeeded in transforming middling librettos into exceptional opera works. The more a composer will assimilate the text he is working on, and its deep meaning, the more faithfully will music

reflect its message, fused with the text, while also assuring a better communication with the receiver. From the composer, the score, now including the message of both text and music, is given to the vocal interpreter. What has he to do for giving life to his characters, for most adequately expressing the feelings and actions characterizing them, how is he expected to act for transmitting a highly credible artistic "information"? Without the competence and support of communication, this question is very difficult to be answered. It remains a mystery, an enigma the manner in which some very difficult music appear as overwhelmingly simple in some interpretations, as well as the reason for which other, extremely simple scores, become boring and meaningless when interpreted by a poor artist.

A first aspect to which every singer should pay constant and special attention along all his artistic life is the vocal technique, which includes all procedures and modalities for a healthy – yes, healthy – vocal emission. There exist persons endowed with a native vocal emission, who make no effort for uttering sounds with their vocal cords and who, in most cases, have no idea on the phonatory processes developed through their vocal organ. If such people become aware of the gift God put into them and are sufficiently lucky to find an experienced teacher of vocal technique – not necessarily canto – they may become good, very good or even exceptionally good singers. However, some of them will remain just singers, the so-called interpreters of vocal symphonic music, namely oratorios, missae, cantatas, in other words musical works with no theatrical action and fancy-dressed characters. To become real opera singers, such musicians should have another divine gift, namely scenic talent! Involved here is the ability to communicate, an inborn endowment which, as well as native emission, may be improved under the careful and professional guidance of a master, in such cases an opera stage director. It goes without saying that such a combination of gifts in one and the same person is quite rarely met, more numerous being the ones which possess only one of these qualities.

The selection for those who intend to become opera singers also includes another gift, essential

for a genuine artist. Paradoxically, many, and yet few of them are endowed with this gift: intelligence! Human society includes many intelligent people, however, one has to admit that only few of those who want to conquer a top position in lyrical art have been endowed with a native vocal emission, real scenic talent, a brilliant brain and, above all, the ability of making them known! Besides, they are determined to take all the necessary efforts – numerous and extremely laborious – to reach their goal. And yet, thank God, such rare talents do exist! When embodying some opera character, interpreting the score written by a great composer, such artists convince us, the outsiders, the critics, the error hunters, the dry analysts in whom God put none of their native endowments, of their art, by simply enchanting us! The mystery of their interpretation is equal to the mystery of the feelings they provoke in our souls. As a matter of fact, their great art is of impressing, sometimes up to paroxysm, a heterogeneous audience as to its instruction, sensitivity, availability, etc. How? By the manner in which they communicate to us the messages – the manifest and, mainly, the most subtle ones – of their art.

Resuming the idea of the necessity of a skilful professor of vocal technique, it is essential that he should make his people assimilate correct skills, even in cases of a healthy voice, if considering the too numerous cases in which incorrect techniques may affect singer's health condition. In our opinion, a good teacher should know that mastering of a complete and correct vocal technique is a longer or shorter process, while health care and vocal hygiene should last along one's whole life. It is only when such an idea is fully understood that the singing teacher should make familiar his pupil – gradually and most carefully – with the rules of the correct vocal technique, with the repertory of different vocal genres and musical styles.

Why two teachers – a vocal technique one and a repertory one, why one single teacher is not sufficient for solving all issues, by communicating to his pupil all necessary information? We strongly recommend the necessary presence of two teachers, for both singers and instrumentalists, and consider that the technique should be studied

separately, as some teachers are better prepared for transmitting technical notions, while others offer information related to interpretation. There existed situations in which the singing teacher was focusing on interpretation, even if the elements of vocal technique had not been yet solved, which created long-term difficulties to the young student. The two teachers are expected to cooperate for some years, prior to their pupil admission to the class of scenic interpretation, under the guidance of an opera stage director. However, this is not applicable to all future singers, a strict selection being recommended for their separation. In such a moment, some will continue their preparation for a lied or vocal symphonic career, and only the ones having demonstrated their scenic talent will be selected for creating lyric characters and for putting on – both properly and figuratively – their clothes. If, along his training years, the student will be capable of assimilating all information and advices he gets from his teacher of vocal technique, from his singing teacher and also from the stage director, it is only then that he will be well-prepared to interpret opera on the stage. Mention should be here made of the overwhelming importance of the manner in which teachers communicate both among them and with the one they are preparing for becoming a real artist.

A long parenthesis now follows, in the attempt of providing additional explanations to such an exciting theme. Both along the years of study and also after that, an opera artist should be especially careful to cultivate his voice, to enrich and improve his vocal qualities, to solve possible deficiencies. Mention will be made in the following of some qualities which we consider indispensable to any opera voice, with no hierarchical scale as, in our opinion, all are equally important. Even if they may appear as different, all are related to the capacity of communicating, of establishing relations with those to whom the singer addresses by means of his art.

A first peculiarity of a voice is its intensity, strength, force, capacity of sonorously penetrating large audience halls. There exist the so-called "feeble" voices, opposed to the so-called "ample" ones, among which the "normal" voices – as to their intensity - rank. Obviously, any comparison

will involve only voices of the same type, for example between a tenor and another tenor. The force of a voice is a native quality, related to the physiology of the respective person, which should not be mistaken with the procedure to which some singers resort in certain cases, of singing "with force", actually, of forcing their voice.

Another vocal feature refers to its agility, the easiness of playing passages with numerous notes and words. The usual perception is that "feeble" voices are more agile, whereas the "ample" ones are more clumsy, being a norm related more to the mental approach of the opera singers, when they choose their repertory. It has been nevertheless demonstrated that, when faced with the necessity of interpreting scores which impose agility, even "ample" voices can successfully surpass any difficulties. In this respect, a good example is that of the bass singer voice, which can approach both the monumental roles of *Mefistofele* by Boito or *Faust* by Gounod, as well as the playful Dulcamara in *The Elixir of love* by Donizetti.

In the same context of the "feeble" and "ample" voices, another vocal quality should be here mentioned, namely its ambitus, its stretch, more precisely its area - from the most grave up to the most acute sound. Here, too, an amazing diversity – quite difficult to classify - occurs. Once again, the comparison refers to the same type of voice, such as, for example, a soprano. As known, several soprano types exist, from the most acute – colorature - up to the most grave – dramatic - one. However, as if to defy such a classification, a rare case is also possible: the so-called dramatic coloratura soprano! In relation with the ambitus of a voice, one should observe that it is characterized by three - grave, medium and acute - segments, called registers. Opera singers also use another concept, that of passage register, which assures transition from the medium to the acute one. Each vocal interpreter should be constantly concerned with equalizing these registers, in order to assure a natural passage from one to another, for maintaining a normal sound emission, whichever the register to which they belong. Objective? A suitable, natural and easy-to-understand communication method.

An incorrect mastering of vocal registers may negatively affect both interpretation and reception, the singer being expected to assure brilliance, consistency or, on the contrary, fragility and elasticity to each register in part. Obviously, an important support in this respect comes from the expression means, such as the chest voice (exaggerated in the medium towards grave and grave registers), the tubed voice (a modality of placing the sound in the sonorous cavity for increasing its intensity), the nasal voice, the head voice. From the perspective of the conductor, an observation to be made is that numerous singers have difficulties with three emission modalities: falsetto voice, *sotto-voce* emission and the so-called mark. All these are aspects strictly related to the vocal technique, consequently to the singing teacher. The first two modalities contribute to the expression of the vocal line, where they are of particular interest for the composer, whereas the last one represents a means of avoiding vocal fatigue, while maintaining interpretative expressiveness.

The above observations on the dramatic coloratura soprano referred mainly to the vocal timber, in other words, to the colour of each voice. Similarly with the painting domain, in music there exist some standard vocal colours, which – once combined – may produce extremely pleasant surprises. To discover the affiliation of each sound, to correctly define it and to apply the most appropriate methods for an optimum development and evolution of the respective voice represents an extremely difficult, highly-responsible task even for an experienced educator. This is possible in incipient phases, when the young singer interested in cultivating his voice addresses a mentor who will guide his evolution. In time, an unequivocally objective fact is manifested, alongwith the development of each voice. Similarly with the whole human organism, the voice suffers physiological, quite natural transformations, which may nevertheless produce a major discomfort to opera singers. In most of the cases, the voice becomes "thick" with the advance of age, the voices most exposed to such a phenomenon being the soprano and the tenor, sometimes the baritone one, too. Such a transformation affects the capacity of transmitting specifically-artistic messages, so that it involves

modification of the repertory, which may be quite a long process, demanding an exceptional will and also psychic resistance. This quality of the voice may be compared with the human genetic structure. In the same manner in which each man is a unique entity, the timber of his voice is distinct and irrepitable. The voices of two persons may be similar, but never identical! It goes without saying that they will be felt as such.

Stress will be laid, in the following, on a series of qualities not related to voice, in its physiological sense, but of major importance in defining the personality of an opera artist. Apart from numerous traits expressing the concept of musicality, an opera singer should have a special rhythmic sense, whose existence in various ratios makes the difference between an artist and another. More precisely, the most extraordinary voice of the world may be affected by some moments, if the soloist is not capable of mastering the rhythm. The earlier are such deficiencies observed and remedied, the more rapidly will be his career launched. Non-observance of rhythmic deficiencies, even if met in few singers, will inevitably lead to failure or, in the best case, to a too modest career for his native vocal gifts.

Essential for any artist - actor or singer - who makes use of his voice is diction. Failure to understand the words uttered by an artist prevents transmission of any message, be it obvious or implicit. If actors are performing, in an overwhelming ratio, in only one language, singers can approach scores whose texts are written in any language of the world! This is an important aspect, indeed, which sometimes requires from the part of the artist a maximum capacity of study and adaptation. Most creations of the great repertory have been written in Italian, German, French and Russian, but numerous other masterpieces have been created in other languages. In such cases, if a less perfect pronunciation of a, let us say, Romanian interpreter in Czech may be excused, an incorrect diction in his native language will be never tolerated! Solving of all aspects of diction facilitates expressiveness, puts into evidence the hidden valencies of the text, while permitting, among others, detachment off the score and experiencing that sort of trance which assures an

unique artistic interpretation. The opera singer has the most difficult role of impressing his audience even when they do not understand all words of the text interpreted in a foreign language. Vocal expressiveness, the accuracy of pronunciation should make the public understand the literary message, in the absence of understanding all words. Once again, this is an extremely difficult task, accomplished by the great art of some opera soloists.

Another aspect related to the qualities of human voice refers to its capacity to attend to the style of the work and to adequately transmit it. The existence of Wagnerian voices among opera singers is a well-known fact. The syntagm does not refer exclusively to some vocal colour, it also assumes the capacity of the artist to identify himself with the style of the creation he is interpreting. Wagnerian operas require profound thinking, thorough knowledge of the characters and of their feelings and states of mind, much more than in the case of other lyric works. The same holds true for the masterpiece of Enescu, *Oedip*, whose ideal main character is quite difficult to find. Identification with the style of an opera requires a solid general culture, a complete knowledge of the historical musical stage in which it had been composed, thorough information on the process of its creation. One has to admit that one of the greatest challenges in the activity of any artist, the more so of an opera singer, is his ability to understand the style he is to interpret, with which he is ultimately expected to identify himself for bringing to life a credible character. In such situations, one's self-knowledge is seriously tested and, sometimes, the result is a failure, caused by the fact that artists are not capable of understanding the style of the work, being thus exposed to embarrassing situations. In such cases, the message transmitted to the audience is denaturated, at most: incomplete – anyway, far from the communication intention of the composer.

Analyzed in the following will be – again – the moment in which the young artist, endowed with native voice and the necessary knowledge taught by his mentors, goes up on the stage. The first one to appear in front of the audience is the

conductor, who – we all know this, some from direct experience – may be either loved or detested by vocal interpreters. Their relation with the head of the whole sonorous assembly is necessary, in most cases beneficial, contributing to the success of the artistic manifestation in which all participants are involved. Almost concomitantly with him there appears the scenographer, interested to valorize his costumes according to his vision on the show and, if such be the case, the ballet master, entitled to ask the singer to move as he wants, maybe even to dance. It goes without saying that dance, too, should be included among the disciplines of study for the lyric singers to become. Indeed, a difficult job! The creators of the performance, namely the conductor, stage director, scenographer, coreographer, all expect from the artist to act according to their own vision, while the chorus singers whisper, convinced that they would accomplish the job much better, but, unfortunately, they did not have the chance to demonstrate their wonderful talent, obviously because of the intrigues of the others ... while the audience is always capricious, sometimes so warm and generous with its applause, other times reserved and reticent in appreciating artists' intentions. What about musical critics? Who needs such people, such ineffectual musicians, capable neither to play an instrument nor to sing, so that they began writing, in most cases, only pieces of folly? They can be accepted only when they praise you but, even in such cases, some dignified distance should be always maintained.

Closing this benigne satire, we all should accept the idea that a lyrical interpreter is the most complex one among all musicians. Representing quite different characters, he must transform himself, enter their skin, communicate their messages, yet in his own, personal style, different from that of other interpreters. Along all his life, the opera soloist is continuously struggling, on multiple battle-fronts. First with himself, as he has to give up his own comfort, to recognize his shortcomings, to be capable to have them remedied. He has also to fight with the exigency of his teachers, the personality of his singer fellows, with his audience and sometimes with his own family, which have – or do not have

- the capacity and desire to understand him, to accept his personality and behaviour. Another battle is that with the diseases of the various biological seasons and ages, with the danger of having, in time, a modified silhouette, a less fresh complexion, with other aspects related to his own physiology. Equally, the opera soloist is permanently confronted with his own pride, with his self-sufficiency or his inner doubts, with his envy *versus* the others and of the others on him, with the - either prosperous or poor - times in which he is living, and so on, and so forth. How difficult is to select a repertory suitable to one's own voice, how painful and difficult to accept is the decision to leave the stage prior to exhaustion - actually, quite natural - of one's physical forces. Equally difficult is the decision taken by some singers to become teachers, as one's long-life experience on the stage is undoubtedly a warrant, but it is not always sufficient for transforming one in a good pedagogue. A possible conclusion might be therefore that the life of a musician, especially of an opera singer, has always been and continues to be a difficult, tormented one, yet rewarded by unique human and professional satisfactions.

Another possible aspect to discuss would refer to the manner in which human voice communicates by means of the lyrical performance. The author does not know whether - starting from the first cry of the new-born baby, mentioning some episodes related to the history of music, to vocal didactics, to the gifts a singer should possess, to discussions on colleagues, audience, diseases, struggle with life, up to the huge satisfactions given by such a difficult profession - his approach was a successful one. He took a roundabout way, in the same manner as Caragiale did when demonstrating what art is by discussing the manufacturing of a pair of boots. We do hope, however, that some ideas on the miracle and divine mystery represented the human voice have been put forward!

CONCLUSIONS

Man has always made use of his voice to transmit messages to the surrounding world.

Starting from the guttural noise uttered by the primitives up to now, a gradual evolution occurred, both in the meaning of the transmitted messages and in the manner in which human voice, the issuing element, transmits emotions and sentiments by means of artistic tools. We discussed the notion of "beauty" as an aesthetic "information", and explained the manner in which a singing voice can assure a highly refined communication. A long time study, finding of skilled masters, the struggle with the inherent hardships of life are the main landmarks characterizing the evolution of an artist - the vocal one included - towards perfection. How can one define perfection in art? As the ideal modality of transmitting a feeling, an emotion, a truth, an illusion...

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