

# A SINGER PREPARES

## Act I: Musicianship



*Christophe Rousset conducts Sandrine Piau in dress rehearsal of Handel's "Alcina" at La Monnaie, Brussels 2016. (Photo from personal archive)*

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*I deeply wish to thank  
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## ACT I: MUSICIANSHIP

1. Prologue	7
2. Introduction	9
3. Episode 1: L' Invitation Au Voyage	10
Episode 2: Pack your Stuff	12
<i>Technique</i>	12
<i>Intonation</i>	19
<i>Research</i>	20
<i>Score Study</i>	21
<i>Style</i>	22
<i>Diction &amp; Languages</i>	23
Episode 3: My suitcase Part I	25
4. Exodus	31
5. Bibliography	32



## *Prologue*

Please? Will you allow me? Ladies! Gentleman!  
Excuse me if alone I present myself.  
I am the Prologue.  
Since our author is reviving on our stage the masks of ancient comedy,  
he wishes to restore for you, in part, the old stage customs,  
and once more he sends me to you.

But not, as in the past, to reassure you, saying,  
"The tears we shed are false!  
So do not be alarmed by our agonies or torments!"  
No! No!

Our author has endeavored, rather to paint for you a slice of life.  
His only maxim being that the artist is a man,  
and that for men he must write.  
Truth is his inspiration!

Deep-embedded memories stirred one day  
within his heart, and with real tears  
He wrote, and marked the time with sighs!

Now then, you will see men love as in real life they love,  
and you will see true hatred and its bitter fruit.  
And you will hear shouts both of rage and grief, and cynical laughter!

And you, rather than just looking at our outward garb,  
consider our souls.  
For we are men of flesh and bone,  
and just like you, we breathe the same air of this orphan world!

The concept I have told you.  
Now listen how it is unfolded.  
On with the show! Begin!

- The Prologue to Pagliacci  
by Leoncavallo



## Introduction

This essay accompanies my first voice recital as a graduating Master in Voice student and focuses on how does a singer prepare. Distinguished singers combine two virtues: that of *musicianship* and that of *musicality*. Even though it is meaningless to practice one without the other, this first part of the essay focuses on musicianship the most, while the second part more on musicality.

Mention is made on how does the very first glimpse of desire to interpret a piece of music is born. Undoubtedly, this experience is extremely personal. It almost reminds of they way writers in ancient Greece would call upon the daughters of Wit and Charm: the Muses, in order to be inspired by them. The same way Homer called upon Calliope, the muse of epic poetry, in the very first lines of *Odyssey*. In our case, that would be Euterpe, the muse of music.



Euterpe, Vatican

Furthermore, a singer has to be prepared for the technical challenges of a work. That is to allow him/her to be free to express the deeper meaning of the musical and literal text. Singing, like acting and dancing, is a performing art, and as every art and virtue, it can be practiced (Aristotle).

The basic elements of musicianship that are highlighted in this essay are competent technique, right intonation, historical research of the piece, scrupulous studying of the musical score, profound knowledge of style, natural diction and working knowledge of language the performer sings in.

These are the preparations and cautions a singer has to make before going on a long journey to meet his/her absolute technical freedom of expression.

Finally, I present to you portraits inspired by the pieces of music I chose to perform. In their turn, those portraits inspired also my interpretation on the pieces.

What is important to capture are the symbols in this essay, together with my urge to have fun still while doing serious and conscious work (“**Synamfoteron**”, the ancient Greek conception that everything, even opposed, co-exist in the Whole). The symbolization was inspired by the fact that everybody wants to listen to a good story and people who have traveled lot, usually, have the most exciting stories to tell:

**The Invitation to a Trip:** What creates the desire to make music, *to tell a story*.

**Packing:** How to obtain the craftsmanship required to do music and finally *tell the story*.

**Trip:** The daily friction with the musical text. The physical, emotional, mental, spiritual and intellectual approach. The coloring, the redirecting of *the story*.

**Destination of the trip** is the performance, which equals the **Narration of the Trip:** *the telling of the story*. The performance/the narration/ the storytelling inevitably serves as a new Invitation to a Trip for the listeners... and thus the circle is nourished.

## *Episode 1: L' Invitation Au Voyage*

A strong performer combines two qualities: **musicianship and musicality**. For example, singing on pitch is considered a basic tenet of musicianship, but there is a difference between *musicianship* and *musicality*. Musicianship is accurately demonstrating what is written in the score – correct rhythms, pitches, tempos, dynamic markings and text. In other words, musicianship is also craftsmanship. Musicality is giving expressiveness to the elements of musicianship.

The qualities most people associate with “being musical” include phrasing, shaping the phrase, performing varying dynamics, showing variety of colors in the sound, and demonstrating appropriate changes of tempo. These elements, which seem to give emotion and expressiveness to the music, are inherent to the vocal instrument:

For example, when a singer sings a scale, the vocal folds become longer and tighter for higher pitches and shorter and looser for lower pitches, **which create a natural dynamic shift**. Also, the phrasing in most instruments is an imitation of **the natural way a singer breathes** and it is considered a hallmark of musicality. Moreover, instrumentalists intentionally change the speed of vibrato to show difference between calm or exciting moments in music, whereas singers, without intending to, change the **speed of vibrato according to the emotional intent of the music**. Also, because singers make sounds through words, the variety of vowels and emotions associated with the word meanings naturally and inevitably cause a **variety of color in the timbre**. **Variations in tempo** also happen naturally in conjunction with the mood of the piece and breath demands of the phrase. These hallmarks of musicality are things that singers must do so that the voice can function properly –musicality will happen on its own if the singer acquires a technique sensitive to what the text conveys, as the human voice naturally is musical.

*Singers should learn to sing like singers*. They should not try to imitate an instrument that has been trained to imitate the human voice. Of course in contemporary art, there might be such indications of the voice imitating instruments, but that is certainly not the rule.

Superb musical art is disciplined and well prepared –something that requires training and growing. However, the superb musical artist performs as if each note is being conceived for the first time. Singers have the additional obligation to perform as if each textual or dramatic idea is being conceived for the first time.

It all starts from the need to communicate, the desire to express something. All musicians were born listeners –not only with their ears, but also with conscious listening, hearkening to the world’s vibe. All professional musicians must remember a moment when they became aware of their desire to express something. That could be a concert, or listening to a record or even when reading the lyrics of a song or playing through a score. For me, the score/the concert/the records are an invitation for a trip.

This kind of invitation each listener receives on a different level: somebody from the audience might connect to the performance and “take the trip” to the composer’s or the interpreter’s world. Musicians grow up while taking all these different trips – meaning they expose voluntarily themselves to performances and reading of new scores. And then, after having taken their personal trips, they start inviting the audience.

I see the score/text as an Invitation itself. You grow up as a performer in order to take the trip and when you come back, to invite the audience to take the trip to, you talk to

them about what you have seen and they live through your stories. In this sense, the performer resembles the freed prisoner in Plato's Cave: the one who was freed from the chains of ignorance, the one who understands shadows give a not-even-close idea of what the real objects causing the shadows look like, the one who travels to the light and finally returns to the cave again to tell all the others what is out there. In this sense, the performer-philosopher- freed prisoner is a highly social figure, like man in general. Exactly as Aristotle put it in his Politics: "*Man is by nature a social animal; an individual who is unsocial naturally and not accidentally is either beneath our notice or more than human. Society is something that precedes the individual. Anyone who either cannot lead the common life or is so self-sufficient as not to need to, and therefore does not partake of society, is either a beast or a god.*"

Almost always, composers indicate the existence of a role in a score. That is natural when writing an opera. Moreover, a lot of times performers understand what their character is by the context of the text –especially in lied/chanson where characters are not always so concrete. Taking a trip to meet these characters is essential in order to bring them to life, or practically speaking, on stage.

To construct a role is to be a person you are not for a while. Of course the performer may have a lot of things in common with this or the other character and that is a well of knowledge to drink from. But it could also be that you have nothing in common with this persona.

*Art is the proper task for life*  
–Nietzsche.

An artist has to drink from the drink that his character has drunk. In order to be able to perform the emotional changes, actions and reactions of a role, it is important to understand it and that might mean that the performer must search in his/her emotional, active and passive memories for clues that might fit. And if he/she does not possess any, he/she must start the treasure hunt. And this is exactly where the invitation of a journey announces itself...

## *Episode 2: Pack Your Stuff*

### 1. Technique

Before leaving for a place unknown, and when you do not know when you are coming back, it is important to carry first-aid with you. The first-aid kit for a singer is carefully prepared through out years and years of training and is called “Technique”.

*“Conductors, singers, all virtuosos should know, or recall that the first condition that must be fulfilled by anyone who aspires to the imposing title of interpreter, is that he be first of all a flawless executant”*

*-I.Stravinsky*

As Bernac mentions in his book “The Interpretation of French Song”, in order to become a “flawless executant”, one must first have complete respect for the written work, but one must also have mastered a technique that makes it possible to do full justice to this work. It is by overcoming technical problems that the singer succeeds in performing the musical line correctly. Technique is usually the most boring and uninspiring process for the young students. We tend to separate technique from interpretation, sentiment and fantasy while on the other hand; technique could be taught accompanying and enhancing all the previous.

### *But why do we even need technique?*

To think that somebody can go on singing without technique just because he/she was gifted with a beautiful voice, is like thinking that somebody who was born with two hands but has no violin technique, could make a Stradivarius violin sound amazing just because these particular violins can produce such a beautiful sound. This means that it is not the instrument itself that creates the beautiful tone, but the use of it. And that is what technique is all about. Why cannot somebody who sings rock, jazz, blues, folk, musical, pop etc, sing classical repertoire with the same “sound” and why do all of the above kinds of singers have to study classical placement of the voice at some point of their training?

- Classical singing technique optimizes voice range, resonance, power, and vibrancy. Classical singers perform unamplified and access a much wider range than singers in most other genres. They learn how to amplify their voice so that it delivers clearly over a large space without straining the voice. So, apart from enhancing the expressional means of the voice, technical practice is essential due to the need for singers to sing unamplified in theatres, with orchestra. Also, technique helps singers learn new repertoire when they are not used to another style/period of music. Last but certainly not least, technique helps to maintain the voice healthy and assuring longevity by eliminating bad habits or tensions. The latter could be the main reason technique is so important, as voice is an instrument that comes and goes with us, and if it breaks, no one can buy you a new one. The voice (the vocal folds) is an instrument situated in the body, and of course it is affected by its condition as well as manipulated by the mind. Our entire person is our instrument; everything about us – our physical, emotional, intellectual, psychological and spiritual state of being – affects the physical and acoustical aspects of singing. As with athletes, world-class singers such as combine natural muscle ability with targeted training.

## *Good technique is not knowing what is going to happen.*

Technique should be automatic, not mechanic. It should always be applied to what the singer is going to perform. That means the context of the lyrics as well. For example, if the singer is working on widening vocal range, he or she should take into account that it is not only the notes that make the song, but the lyrics and the emotions created as well. That would mean that a soprano could find very different the high B flats of Pamina (Mozart) than the high B-flats of Fiordiligi (Mozart) or Laetitia (Menotti) just because the characters differ very much from each other: Pamina is devastated (“Ach, ich fühl’s”), Fiordiligi tries to drive admirers away (“Come scoglio”) while Laetitia wants to lure one man closer (“Steal me sweet thief”).

## *Singing is a performing art*

Because singing must be constantly created in the moment, we must have a technique for it that moves through time as well. Good technique is not knowing what is going to happen when we sing; rather, it is being very clear and sure about what we are doing and the parameters in which those actions occur.

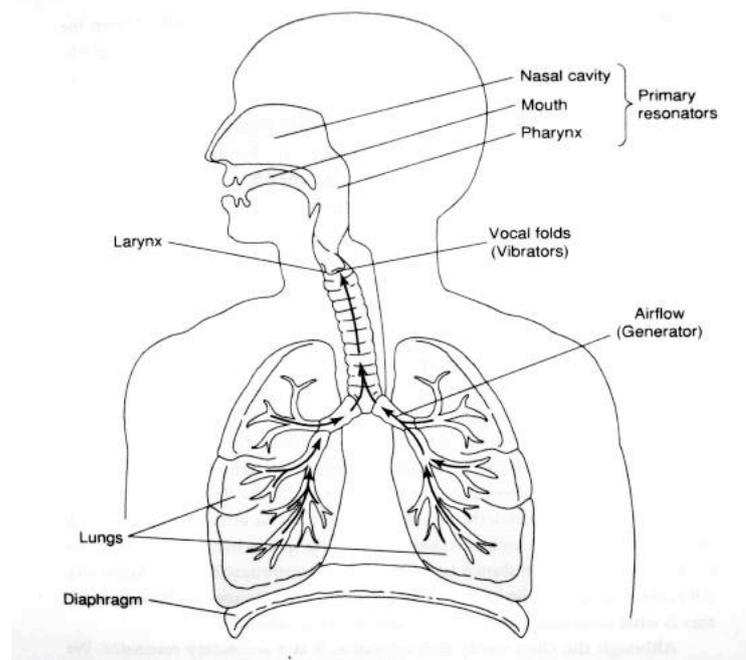
Just like a professional ice skater is in constant motion, singing must be constantly moving and changing. Skaters don’t gain stability by standing still – they constantly flow and move around the ice. They move through time. They draw balance and strength from constant forward motion..

**The best technique would be the one that gives to the singer complete freedom of expression.** In order to reach that, the singer has to know how the voice functions. The singer must be familiar with the mechanism of human voice production.

### **a. Acquaintance with Phonation Mechanism**

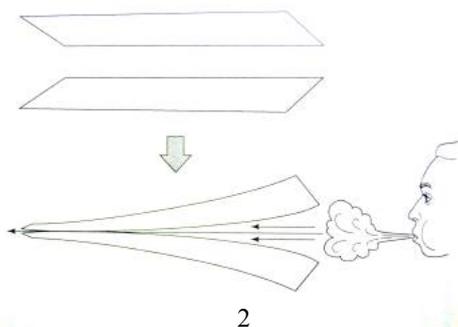
In order for the human voice to be produced, there are three ingredients required:

1. *a generator* - the airflow from our lungs
2. *a vibrator* - the vocal folds, attached in the front of the larynx
3. *a resonator* – primary: nasal cavity, mouth and pharynx and secondary: the whole body



1

The slight inward movement of the lower abdominal muscles (not portrayed in this picture) causes the upward movement of the diaphragm: air flows (generates) from lungs through the bronchial tubes, into the trachea where it unites with the vocal folds (vibrators), which are located inside the larynx, causing them to vibrate. When the vocal folds are abducted /pulled together, *phonation* is taking place: As air comes up underneath the folds, they start to separate under the pressure. As the folds open, an amount of air comes through and then sucks them back together. This suction is known in physics as the **Bernoulli effect**, the same effect that causes airplanes to fly and baseballs to spin:



2

A simple example about how the Bernoulli effect works is experienced by cyclists everyday: riding along, a large truck passes the cyclist. Its speed creates an area of lower pressure; it draws in the surrounding air as it passes the cyclist, and the latter feels being sucked towards the truck -which in fact he is.

The Bernoulli effect also draws in the same way vocal folds: the intrinsic muscles of the larynx bring the vocal folds together, so that the space

between the glottis and the folds is essentially closed-off. Once they are closed, the air stream creates pressure against the closed vocal folds until they are blown apart. As the air rushes through the very narrow, constricted opening, it must accelerate to get through. This high-speed air, much like the truck in the example above, creates suction vertical to the direction of its flow, meaning, it draws the side of the opening in. This process is repeated, producing vibrations in the vocal folds.

So the Bernoulli (picture 2) effect occurs when two objects are pulled together by air passing between them. However, during phonation there is not constant abduction and adduction (opening and closing) of the folds. They are always adducted, but air flowing through causes them to touch and separate many times per second.

#### *Primary resonators:*

After going through the folds, the air meets the primary resonators situated right above the trachea: the mouth, the pharynx (behind the mouth and above the throat), and the nasal cavities (behind and above the nose). All these cavities are connected by air passages. It is the vibration in these resonators that increases amplitude and quality to our sound. The shape of the mouth and the pharynx constantly change as we articulate words (vowels and consonants). We cannot voluntarily change the shape of the nasal cavities although their shape can change due to sinus congestion. So resonance is always changing as we change the size and shape of the mouth and pharynx.

#### *Secondary resonators:*

The entire body is a resonator because all the tissue of the body will vibrate sympathetically to some degree with the vibration in the vocal folds. The chest cavity also resonates because it is a large cavity near the vibrators (the vocal folds), and it vibrates sympathetically. Vibrating sympathetically is exactly what happens when we sing towards the piano with free strings (pedal pressed down) and we hear the chords of the piano producing sound in sympathy of what we just sang.

## **b Acquaintance with the Breath Mechanism**

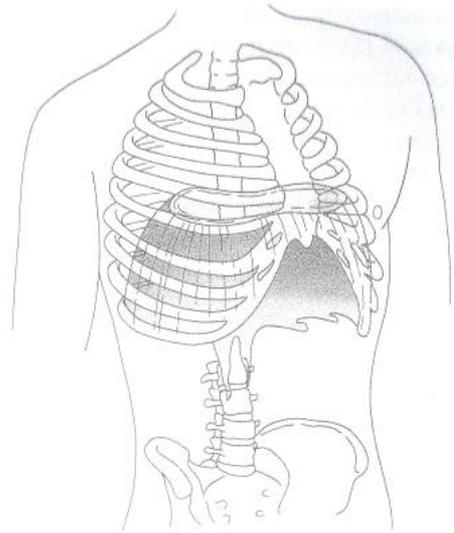
To breathe is to live. Breathing happens involuntary, instinctively. When we take a breath, oxygen enters the bloodstream and supplies life to the rest of the body. If oxygenated blood stops flowing to a part of the body that part slowly dies. In order to “breathe life” into a role, first of all, it is the singer that has to breathe – and most important, the singer has to breathe the same air that his character breathes. But to begin with, it is crucial to erase some misconceptions young singers tend to have. Firstly, it is often that some voice teachers direct singers to breathe “in their belly”. That is of course to encourage them to take a “low” breath. However, the young singer must be aware that the only internal organ that fills up with air in the torso is their lungs.

Breathing consists of two functions: Inspiration (Inhale) and Expiration (Exhale).

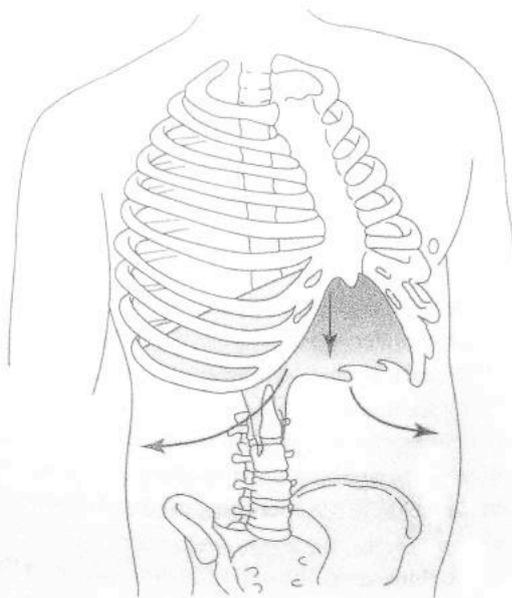
*Inspiration:*

I prefer to use the term “inspiration” instead of “inhalation” because more than inhaling, by inspiring we breathe into what we are about to say. (Aristotle considered how the breath interacts with the soul. The word “Spirit” comes from the Latin *spiritus* - breathing or breath of god/ life. Related to the Latin word *spirare* - to breathe.)

The major muscle of inspiration is the diaphragm. The diaphragm is located at the bottom of the rib cage, it is higher in the front and lower in the back –so the rib cage is “encasing” the diaphragm. When relaxed the diaphragm has the shape of a dome –like a bowl turned upside down (picture 3).



1



2

During inspiration, diaphragm contracts and flattens causing the bottom of the rib cage to expand. To accommodate the lowering of the diaphragm, the abdomen should expand as well (picture 4).

Due to the position of the diaphragm (higher in the front and lower in the back), it is natural that during inspiration, when the diaphragm flattens, the abdomen naturally expands more in the front, with some expansion in the back. In addition, the lungs expand (with air) to fill up the newly vacated space. So, the lowering of the diaphragm causes all that.

Although the concept of inhalation is easily understood, a lot of people tend to develop unnatural and harmful breathing habits. Often when people are asked to breathe deep, they expand their chest instead of the abdomen. It is

true that in such a way lungs have space to fill up, but the natural way of breathing, and the only way that can assure an exhalation released from tensions, is the inhalation with the expanding of the abdomen. If someone inhales expanding the chest cavity, the muscles around the neck and shoulders tense, making it impossible to sustain a sensing line and in a further amount of time, it can even cause damage to the function of the vocal folds because it tenses the larynx as well.

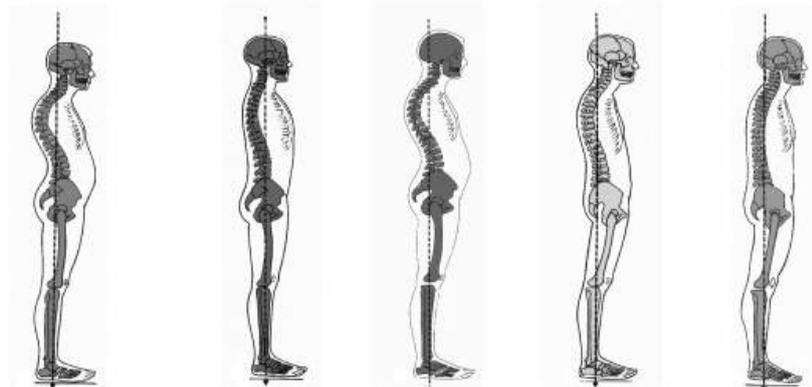
Through breathing we calm our emotions, eliminate pain, focus our minds and connect to our souls. It is our anchor, our inner pulse. We breath into what we are about to say. This happens naturally in everyday speech. Actually, in normal conversational speech we do not have to think about breathing at all, yet every breath we take unconsciously while speaking serves as a preparation for the next moment of speech. For example, one does not take a big breath to say “Hello, how are you?”. However, if someone is enraged over somebody he would take a rather big breath before starting to scream towards the person who upset him/her. **This shows that once we are charged emotionally over something, our body works instinctively to our benefit.**

Most of the times, tensed breathing is associated with stress. It is unarguable that the world today dwells in stress. So if we want to see how natural breathing occurs, we should take a look at somebody who is not part of this stressful routine: If we watch a sleeping baby, we will notice that its stomach expands while inhaling and relaxes while exhaling. The simplest we think about breathing –after knowing how it works, the more natural we will breathe. After all, we should never forget that the human body is centuries older than the human mind.

However, a stressful and demanding environment can also result to bad body posture – and that would prohibit healthy breathing. All young singers have gone through directions such as “feeling as if an imaginary hook lifts them softly from the head” or that “stand as if you swallowed a stick” or “bend your knees as if you are surfing” etc. All these directions are given in an attempt to align the body so that it stands comfortably and without any effort.

The head rests comfortably over the rest of the body. The spine feels stretched and relaxed. The chest is pulled slightly up and the shoulders and arms hang freely to the sides. So we have an evenly balanced head, a neutral spine and a high chest.

Due to the poor everyday standing posture, techniques such as Alexander Technique were developed. Proper body alignment is necessary for free flowing air. If the body is aligned and free of unnecessary tensions, the inhaling takes place only below the diaphragm. That happens because the chest is already expanded. The feeling is that the spine supports the torso, and the whole upper body rests on the legs. **When somebody finds his/her own alignment, it feels as if the body is carrying you rather than you carrying your body.**



**Kyphosis-Lordosis**

**Ideal**

**Lordosis**

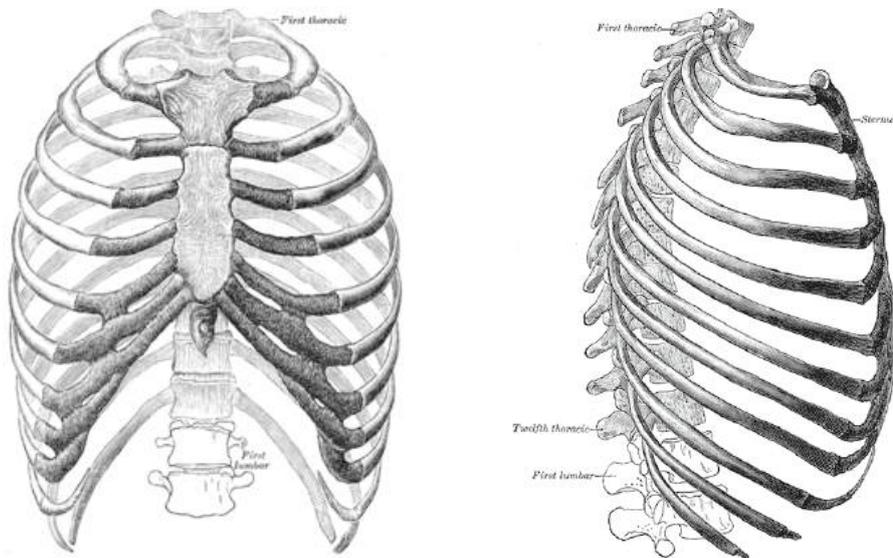
**Sway Back**

**Flat Back**

5

Something also very important is that singers must understand how the thoracic cage functions. The ribcage has three basic functions:

1. *Protection*: It encloses and protects the heart and lungs.
2. *Support*: Together with the skin and associated fascia and muscles, the rib cage makes up the thoracic wall and provides attachments for the muscles of the neck, thorax, upper abdomen, and back.
3. *Respiration*: It consists of 24 rib bones, along with the sternum, 12 on each side. All ribs are attached to the thoracic vertebrae (all from 1-12). In addition, ribs 1 through 7 are each attached in front to the sternum by a costal cartilage, and therefore called "true" ribs. Ribs 8 through 10, the "false" ribs are not attached to the sternum but to the costal cartilage of the 7th rib above. Ribs 11 and 12 are called "floating" ribs, they are only attached to the vertebrae.



3

A lot of singers, in fear of taking a high breath (expanding only the chest), they tend to immobilize their entire upper torso. That is also not useful because they do not allow the ribcage to move with the diaphragm in order to fill up the lungs. Ribs are flexible, specially the "false ones" (8-10) and the "floating ribs" even more. So it is natural that the ribcage will slightly expand to the front when we breathe in (to the front because the ribs are attached to the sternum with flexible cartilage).

Recapitulating, when the diaphragm flattens for inspiration, it is tense. As it relaxes, it returns to its dome-shaped position and compresses the air out of the lungs in a reverse path through the bronchial tubes, trachea and finally the mouth or nose. This is the basic process of breathing. However, in singing the voice vibrates in a wider range than normal speech which requires more energy and intensity in the vocal folds which are stressed much longer. Singing requires a bigger breath response, so we need to breathe deeper than we would normally do for speaking.

#### *Expiration:*

Simply put, in order to exhale, we release all the muscles of inhalation. As a result the air flows out freely. Many people are not comfortable with the idea of releasing the breath because they fear that this will cause the chest or the rib cage to collapse. However, while releasing the breath, the whole body should not relax, rather it should maintain its proper alignment; if we relax completely we will lose our body

alignment. We should simply release the muscles of inhalation. When we use the word “relaxation”, we do not mean that this or the other muscle is “sleeping”, rather that it is freed from any *unnecessary* tension and it is ready to contract.

As mentioned before, singing requires a bigger breath response or what we so often hear, a “supported sound”.

### *Support and Appoggio*

Support and Appoggio technique is not the same thing. Actually to support is a part of the Appoggio technique: Appoggio is what we would call “balanced support”. If we simply let all the air out at once, we would not be able to sing long phrases. This is why we need to exhale slower and with constant airflow. The lower abdominal muscles start the exhalation by moving up and in, and the diaphragm should stay low in order to balance the pressure (causing the internal organs to squeeze). If the diaphragm goes up together with the lower abdominal muscles, then all the air is gone at once.

Here lies the danger: there are multiple ways to have a slower exhalation. Singers who do not use Appoggio technique, manipulate exhalation using glottal pressure. It is easy to distinguish those singers as they tend to tense their muscles around the neck. Some singers even get red on the face and the neck because of this pressure. Also, what is very evident to singers with no Appoggio technique is the obvious change of register. Singers with no Appoggio technique are bound to work with “Placements”, meaning evident registers (head, middle, chest etc).

Of course it is important to understand that in this essay there is no critical intention towards artists. There have been many explicit examples of classical singers with no Appoggio technique that the audiences loved and still do over the years, because of their musicality, expression, passion and glow on stage. That is not to criticize them but only an approach to how does the voice function properly.

A healthy voice (healthy meaning rich in overtones and having attained longevity) sings always in a mixture of registers. For example, a chest register would not “pass” the orchestra if it did not contain also overtones from the head register. In other genres, like jazz, rock and pop, the voices work more on the chest voice, without enclosing so much of the head register and this is what makes us distinguish a pop/rock/jazz voice from a classical/operatic voice. Of course, each use of overtones and portions of registers serves for a different cause. For example, a pop singer uses a microphone so there is no need to multiply his/her volume. On the other hand, there are the folk voices that use mainly chest register in order to achieve an explosive and piercing sound (Balkan), but for them there is no need to surpass an orchestra.

So as mentioned before, it is possible to manipulate the airflow using glottal pressure, but after years of this usage, it is more likely that the voice will wear out. That is due to the fact that the muscles around the vocal folds are over-worked in tension, and also because the vocal folds do not vibrate freely and in constant airflow. What is also essential to know is that the vocal folds do not have as many neurons as other muscles, and this is why we do feel pain there. On the other hand, singers who struggle with technique might feel pain. What truly hurt are the muscles around the vocal folds (larynx). And of course this is evidence that also the vocal folds “secretly hurt” and then the singer must change tactic...

Most of the times, problems in technique are the wrong tensions being created. There are tensions which we need such as the rapidly occurring tensions in the articulators

(mouth cavity and jaw) in combination with the lower abdominal that create consonants.

*“Tense singers try to control with muscle fibers what they should be controlling with neurons. We should think of singing as brain work first, muscle work second”*  
- Barbara Conable

Of course easier said than done, as in order to sing with Appoggio, the singer must be calm. Actually, when we are stressed, diaphragm comes up, preparing for short and fast breathes, exactly what the body needs for the “fight or flight” situation. It is essential that the singer is calm during a performance, in order to be able to sing freely.

What an Appoggio singer experiences, is “one voice” and not breaks between the registers. Also, he/she experiences free muscles around the vocal folds, thus more singing freedom. Finally, he/she is always on the search of balance. We should not forget that what is rigid, falls, and what is constantly moving, survives.

**Singing with Appoggio is a constant balance of pressure between the diaphragm and the lower abdominal muscles, which allow the articulators (glottis/tongue/larynx etc) to be free from unnecessary tensions, enriches the voice with overtones and volume, gives unity of sound in all registers, and last and most important of all, helps to the voice to live long.**

## 2. Intonation

It is seldom that bad intonation is occurring due to hearing problems. That is because singers must always hear the pitch “in their heads” before they sing it. Of course, all instrumentalists are trained to develop internal hearing before they play each note, like “singing internally”, but singers have no other option. For example, violin players know where to press in order to produce an A. In other words, they do not have to hear it in order to produce it. On the other hand, a singer may not be able to even approximate an A without hearing it first or without hearing another note so he/she may relate to it. That means that singers must always imagine/hear internally the pitch in order to sing it and they almost always need a reference to start from (the very note or another interval that they can relate theirs to). Even singers with absolute hearing may not be able to always sing in tune, as the voice is not always absolute.

**If the singer can imagine the proper pitch, and his/her technique allows them to, then intonation will be right.**

*Tomatis method declares that the voice contains only what the ear hears. If you change hearing, the voice is immediately and unconsciously modified. So we sing wrong when we do not hear right.* And not only do we sing out of tune, but we also create tensions in the articulators that may cause serious fatigue on the vocal chords after years of straining.

But to be in tune is something more than singing the correct pitch. I learned that when I realized how different A. Copland’s “As It Fell Upon A Day” (for voice, flute and clarinet) was sounding when I was studying it with piano: I would arrive into rehearsal with two unquestionably gifted wind instrumentalists, and it seemed I had to relearn how to sing it with wind instruments because intonation worked differently from that with the piano.

I am consciously referring to “right” or “proper” pitch instead of “correct” pitch. If everyone in the orchestra played with a tuner, it would result in a nightmare pitch wise speaking. The right intonation comes when blending, melting together the different sounds and that occurs after practice. Moreover, singers should bear in mind that different vowels have a different set of harmonics. That makes some of the vowels “brighter” or “darker” (more of that in the Language and Diction).

This idea first came to me in a Yoga class. First thing in a beginner’s class, is that we all start chanting “Ohm”, just a long note travelling slow from “O” to “M”. Everyone starts in his or her personal frequency. It is almost always that each one has a different pitch. We all start at the same time, so it cannot be intentional. However, after forty minutes of practice, we chant again and everybody is singing the same pitch! Obviously it has to do with being in harmony, in communication and exchange with your environment and that certainly affects your pitch.

However, if a singer tends to sing out of tune even when singing freely, then he or she should check it. Personally, I went through an adventure last May-June: I have had an unsuccessful root canal treatment that occurred in the same side with my surfacing “wisdom” tooth (I am an exceptional medical case since the treatment went wrong because a dentist forgot a small part of a tool inside my tooth, which infected it seriously.). As a result, I suffered a small inflammation and swelling on the lower back part of my jaw. This inflammation affected my hearing because it attacked the basic neuron that stretches along the jaw and up to the ear. I had serious intonation issues that internal hearing and free singing did not seem to solve. But after my teeth were healed, intonation problems disappeared. So it is always advised for a singer to check with his/her otorhinolaryngologist (plus, find a good dentist!)

### **3. Research**

If we were preparing for a trip, we would make better use of our time, energy and money if we did a little research before taking the trip. Plus, we would **enjoy** even more our trip and we would be prepared in case of something unexpected. We should do the same before going through the musical text.

*“... and, as always, you will first of all enter the spirit of the character you are impersonating, you will absorb his/her reactions in the certain situations, and then, only then, will you take a first look at the score!”*

-W.A. Mozart, letter to A. Weber, 1778 Paris

The preparation process begins long before any notes are plunked on the piano and continues after the final double bar. **Learning a piece of music and discovering its character requires research in two space-times: that of the composer and that of the character.**

#### **a. Composer’s Present:**

*History of the piece:* This is the historical environment of the composition and the life of the composer. When, why and for whom was it written? How did the premiere go? Which concerts/plays/books influenced the composer? Etc.

*Place in Music history:* In what general style/genre is the piece composed (Verismo? Baroque? Art Song? Opera? Oratorio? Etc.) Which composers were also active at that time?

#### b. Character's Present:

*Context of the story:* The singer needs to place the story in history, country, social structures and political/historical events. If he/she desires to accurately portray a character, he/she needs to know its customs, beliefs and traditions. He/she can research the country's culture that the story is taking place, or the culture in which the poet of an art song has dwelled. This will help to color the singing as understanding the turmoil of the persona.

*World of the story:* The singer must understand the world of the story. How do people behave in that world? What are the social, religious, political and economic systems? How do people dress, move and express themselves within this world? In this society, what is acceptable behavior for the particular character and what is taboo? –The latter is one of the most important aspects as it is what almost all stories are circling around: **a broken taboo**. A taboo of 19<sup>th</sup> century might be something normal today.

*Who I am this time? :* Who is the character? What does he/she desire? What is happening to him/her? A singer needs to “draw” a psychological map of the persona. That is easily understood by following the rhythmical patterns, progression of harmony and melodic lines when reading the score...

#### 4. Score Study

A piece of music, if not an improvisation of the artist, has been conceived by the composer and notated on a paper. However, the signs penned on a paper are mere symbols; they lack the actuality of the sound. In order for the musical work to be completed, composers have no other choice but to trust it to interpreters.

*“A work of music, which is only a piece of writing, is a cheque drawn on the fund of talent of a possible performer.”*

-Paul Valéry

Performers come to know musical works by reading the musical signs. They decode the composer's writings: **they follow his/her path on the opposite direction** (Furtwängler). First the composer captures the idea, the emotion and then writes it down, while the performer has to read it first and then re-create the idea and emotion already conceived by the composer.

A singer should read the whole score and not only the vocal line. It is almost a rule that the deeper shades of an interpretation are “hidden” in the accompaniment. In theatre nothing really makes sense if there is no other object that the act can relate to – even in monologues. The true and complete image of the vocal line is always underlined by the musical surroundings. For example, as Erich Leinsdorf points out on Mozartian style, “The tradition was to write out everything for the instruments, while treating the voice part to a different spelling of the same cadential phrases. In the days of Beethoven and earlier, it could be assumed that singers knew the tradition, and would amend the written part accordingly in performance”.

However, it is crucial for all musicians to understand that it is not their goal to demonstrate the score. The piece of music is not the score itself. The musical score is a sum up of indications, which the composers hope, will be expressed as if they are created on the moment – a sort of improvisation -let us be reminded that music is not

a visual art, its object is created on the spot. Also, let us keep in mind that most composers compose while improvising. The score is not the whole performance. **It is only the navigator for a trip and not the trip itself.**

Furthermore, the work we perform belongs in a musical era and musical eras, like in fashion, dress themselves with “style”. Style knowledge is extremely important as the lack of it could lead a musical idea to shatter into pieces...

## 5. Style

*Whatever you do, do it with style...*

I was born in a family that loved anything from folklore to extreme pop/soul, including Celine Dion. Personally, I began singing in rock bands (or at least how rock sounded back in the ‘90s, as every generation has its own perception of what is truly rock). Then I listened to the band *Nightwish* that played symphonic metal music and the lead singer was a lyric classical trained soprano and her voice intrigued me to start discovering the world of opera. Later on, as a student at the University of Macedonia in Thessaloniki, I had the amazing chance to meet Athena Katsanevaki, my teacher of Greek Traditional Folksong. So, on top of Operatic and Rock function of the voice, I learned to sing in the Greek Traditional way plus the Balkan way. My passing from Celine Dion, folklore and rock to opera must have lasted something around 6 years: Now I am a classical lyric soprano, who can belt with chest voice up to F5.

Although it took sometime to happen, it did happen: I got completely lost. I had discovered so many different placements of the voice that I did not know what I wanted or worse, what was the right for me.

The answer came when I joined Kris Defoort’s Improvisation class at the Koninklijk Conservatorium of Brussels. It was not the first time I was improvising: I have performed and directed a lot in Greece in shows that were based on voice and body improvisation. But what happened in the first lesson got me thinking:

To make an acquaintance with each other in the class, the teacher asked us to perform something. I told him I had brought “Die Nacht” by R. Strauss, a greek folksong and that I would also improvise. After I had used every effect I knew in improvising, he asked for the Strauss piece. There came the operatic voice. Afterwards, he asked for the folksong. And there went the “explosive Balkan timbre”. And then, just to experiment, he suggested that I should sing just for that occasion, the Strauss piece in a folkloric manner. I did. It was extremely difficult.

This experience was an eye-opener for me. Not only didn’t the Strauss piece sound nice in a folkloric manner, but also the folkloric tunes did not seem that interesting when sung with a classical “set” of harmonics in the voice. That was when I understood what “style” meant in music.

For me, **style is what brings a piece of music to its most exciting version.** So, for instance, nor should we erase all portamentos in Puccini’s music, neither should we add portamentos everywhere in Oratorio music.

*“Virtue is the golden mean between two vices, the one of excess and the other of deficiency.”*  
-Aristotle

Almost all composers used a musical language that was closer to what he/she wanted to express. It is natural that taste on music changes over the passage of time, but it

should not lead to changing the identity of a piece of music in order to make it acceptable in terms of the current fashion or aesthetics. This would actually make it uninteresting and even incomprehensible.

## **6. Diction & Languages**

Singers are musicians and even more, they have an important mission: the text. Music is something that audience can still enjoy even if they do not read music. But text is something that needs to be clear in order for the message to reach the listeners. Otherwise, the piece of music becomes dull, no matter the virtuosity of the singer. On the other hand, **legato line should in no case be sacrificed in order to achieve perfect diction.** Even the glottal separation in German should happen in legato, still present but without “dropping” the phrase. I have actually noticed that when singers over-pronounce, text sounds unnatural and hard to understand, even for a native speaker. That is because native speakers do not over-pronounce. In any case, **singing differs from speaking the same way singing with microphone differs from acoustic singing. So singers must find the balance between natural speech, projected speech and hyper-enunciation.**

More than pronouncing comprehensively and in legato, singers must colour their lines and special words. To “colour” means to find why does the character say that and why did the librettist/composer choose the particular words. Such a thing would be even harder in a piece by Britten for example, where often the words mean exactly the opposite (irony). Thus, it is undisputed that singers must become familiar with the languages in which opera is most frequently performed. They must gradually develop a working knowledge in Italian, German, and French. That means understanding the basic grammatical structure of each of these languages and have enough vocabulary to be able to translate their own scores and to understand the word games. For example, often in German, verbs come in the end of a sentence, and that could lead to a surprise during long sentences. A verb can change the whole meaning of sentence. Nouns and adjectives exist as ideas but take part in the action only when linked to a verb.

Singers must know what every single word they are singing means, and what every single word their scene partner is singing means as well. They also ought to have creditable diction in every language they sing in. Moreover, they must understand the cadence and flow of the language they sing in and never learn the text phonetically.

No diction coach can substitute real understanding of inflection, alternate meanings of words and the cultural traits innate in a particular language. The musicality of that language has surely influenced the composer, and it is in the singer’s best interest to spend as much time on language as on vocal production, as one shapes the other.

Singers must train their articulators for good *singing* diction. The way we habitually form vowels and consonants while speaking is not free and resonant enough for classical singing, so singers need to learn new, efficient ways to make each sound. In speech, the jaw, tongue and lips all move together but they are capable of moving independently from one another in ways that are much more efficient for singing.

Singing and speech both involve the larynx and the vocal folds modulating air as it is pushed out of the lungs, they stem from different sides of the brain. When we speak, the left-hand side is involved – the part that controls word formation and sentence structure. But when we sing, it is the right hemisphere that we rely upon, to produce the rhythm and melody of music. So someone might have a speech impediment but it

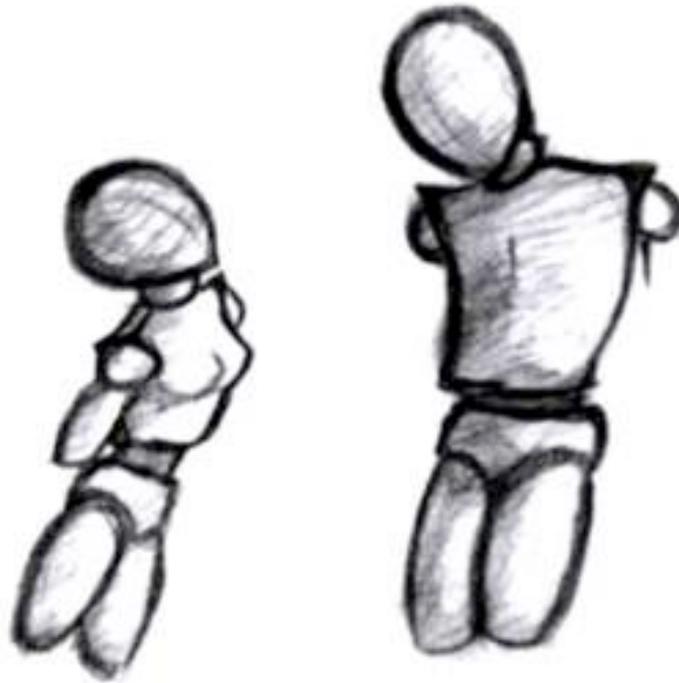
will not be apparent when they sing - because it's a different part of the brain. Even heavy regional accents are less apparent.

On the other hand, singers should be very careful when singing in their mother language. They tend to focus less on diction, thinking there is no need for that because they are fluent speakers of that language. However, the trap is that there are differences between singing and speaking: **Singing is glorified speech**. All those differences are expressed in the word “glorified”. That means that we have to exaggerate in articulation but without losing the natural sound of the language.

It is very common that diction coaches on English for example might not be English/American. People who had to learn to sing in a foreign language, had to go through the process of forming new sounds, while native speakers never had to reflect on that. That gives an advantage to foreigners, because they are conscious of how the language projects while singing.

Moreover, singers should bear in mind that different vowels have a different set of harmonics, as they require different air pressure (meaning a different movement of the diaphragm). That makes some of the vowels “brighter” or “darker” even if sung in the exact same pitch. That results into some singers having some favorite vowels and some “nightmare” vowels. However a singer should work into bringing richness to all his/her vowels (Imagine how much time that takes for the 15 –or 16 according to some- French vowels).

## *Episode 3: My suitcase Part I*



At this very moment, I would like to show you my suitcase. On top of all the above, I have my personal way of discovering the characters I sing. This idea first came to me when Maya Jantar asked every singer in the class of Opera Project at the Koninklijk Conservatorium of Brussels to associate a movement/gesture or object with the personas each of us would be incarnating. We would not necessarily use it as part of the final performance, but she encouraged us to do this as an exercise. It immediately appeared to me that this was all about getting intimate with the role.

I also work as a photographer, so to me this works as portraits, and it is exactly what I took initiative to do in this essay. A close friend of mine, Ioulia Spanou, helped in this. It is intentional that I painted Ioulia's face white, as I wanted to show that just for the purpose of **role study**, I shall use the model as a model and not as an interpreter (that is my job). Actually, I wanted Ioulia and her different dress codes to serve as the manikin wooden doll that artists use as a reference. The images are created in order to help me understand and get familiar with the characters. This works the same way a teacher asks for a sound like "hot chocolate" or "dark velvet" –of course it is metaphorical, but it does affect the actual outcome.

These portraits were created for this role study only and in the future, it is only natural that I would create a different portrait for each character, as I would also grow and change as a performer. These portraits highlight sides of the characters that "spoke" to me and helped me get around the ladies. It is natural that another reader would emphasize on different aspects and that is what makes interpretations so different from each other.



### THE PENELOPE FIORDILIGI

Recitativo and Aria “Temerari - Come scoglio” Opera *Così Fan Tutte*, K.588 by W.A.Mozart and libretto by Lorenzo Da Ponte, first performed on 26 January 1790, at the Burgtheater in Vienna, Austria. Two mysterious Albanians that are really Guglielmo and Ferrando in disguise have shown up at the sisters' door accompanied by Don Alfonso and attempt to woo the sisters. Fiordiligi will have nothing to do with it though. She declares her loyalty to Guglielmo and asks the strangers to stop attempting to win them. She is, as Guglielmo mentions, another **Penelope**, like the wife of Odysseus, also wooed by suitors: she had devised tricks to delay her suitors, one of which was to pretend to be weaving a burial shroud for Odysseus's elderly father Laertes and claiming that she will choose a suitor when she has finished. **Every night for three years, she undoes part of the shroud.**

According to William Mann, Mozart disliked prima donna Adriana Ferrarese del Bene, da Ponte's arrogant mistress for whom the role of Fiordiligi had been created. Knowing her tendency to drop her chin on low notes and throw back her head on high ones, Mozart filled this *showpiece* aria with constant leaps from low to high and high to low in order to make Ferrarese's head "bob like a chicken" onstage. The biggest challenge in this aria is to maintain unity in the voice in all registers. One should treat these leaps as part of the character's anger and decisiveness. Appoggio technique, legato phrasing and clear diction can guide the performer safely to the end of this nevertheless exciting piece.



### THE THIEF

Die Nacht from Letzte Blätter, Op.10 by Richard Strauss, published in 1885. Poem by Hermann von Gilm. The song is written in 4 strophes. Tension rises in the two marked breaths for both the singer and pianist. The beginning sounds almost empty, reduced, the same way the night reduces everything. These 6 first notes attract immediately the attention of the listener as if it was an alarm sounding. (It is almost like a leitmotiv for the night in Strauss: also in his "Heimliche Aufforderung" which starts with a festive and joyous accompaniment and suddenly, on the third strophe, everything is reduced into one note.) It could also be the heartbeats that have risen because something beyond physical level is about to happen: The night is coming out from the forest and steals away all the things that make life beautiful. The poet's fear that **it will also steal away his beloved one**, casts its shadow on the whole song - only being expressed in a "Rachmanian" pp climax, as if only to utter the words causes great agony. Strauss colors the tone of the last strophe with tons of "mixture" chords starting in minor i, not very convincing tonic given the D major before this - and we don't come anywhere near tonic again until the end. By using these borrowed chords to "cloud" the quality of tonic, Strauss gives a backdrop of uncertainty and unresolvedness over which to express the text. This is the climax of the piece - and it seems strange that even at the end, although we get a series of major I chords, they are "resolved" from bVI6 giving a sense that the issue is not yet resolved, a question hangs unanswered in the air: "Will the Night steal you away from me, too?"



## LEILA

Recitativo and Cavatine “Me voilà seule dans la nuit – Comme autrefois dans la nuit sombre”, *Les Pêcheurs des Perles*, opera by George Bizet and libretto by Eugene Cormon & Michel Carré, first performed on 30 September 1863 at the Théâtre Lyrique in Paris. Leila is a virgin priestess whose prayers ensure the safety of fishermen on the island of Ceylon (Sri Lanka). She vows to stay pure, not have friends, husband or lover. Zuniga, the leader of the fishermen, promises her that if she stays loyal, they will give her **the most beautiful pearl and then she will be worthy of a king**. But if she breaks her promise, she will be condemned to death. She is given the chance to decline while it is still soon, but she has heard Nadir in the crowd, so she decides to stay. **Leila is prisoner of a promise she knows she will have to break**. In Act I, Nadir sings “Je crois entendre encore” which has many similarities with the cavatina of Leila. He thinks he can still hear her, so his aria is a remembrance of Leila’s song, but the audience gets to understand this only after listening to Leila’s aria in Act II. Both pieces are written in 6/8, however, the melancholic dotted rhythm makes Nadir’s aria sound more like a Barcarole, while the equal eighth notes in the accompaniment of Leila’s cavatina give a secure and calm atmosphere. Also, in Nadir’s aria, the accompaniment is playing the entering melodic line of “Comme autrefois” in minor scale (A minor). Also, the oboe’s appoggiaturas are alike the ones of the horns’ in Leila’s aria. Finally, in the second strophe of Nadir’s aria, Bizet has given the violin some “birdy” motives that continue until the end of his aria and which are very similar to Leila’s motives in her prayer “O Dieu Brahma” (“*Mon chant léger comme un oiseau*”) which is also in 6/8. So it could be assumed that since Nadir is singing about his memory of Leila, the accompaniment of his aria is what Leila’s song sounded like back then when he saw her for the first time. In Act II, Leila, knowing that Nadir has come to for her, sings with happiness and joyfulness.



### THE BLISSFULL LOVER

Liebst du um Schönheit, Gustav Mahler, Rückert Lieder, poems by Friedrich Rückert (Kindertotenlieder). The song has four strophes all starting with “Liebst du um Schönheit/Jugend/Schätze” (triadic) and finally “Liebe”. The only minor chord falls on the word “Jugend”, disclosing its ephemeral nature. The interlude sounds almost intoxicated in its chromaticity, giving the feeling of sinking in a warm bed or hot bath or the caring hands of the most precious person. Moreover, the accompaniment is written in unison and counterpointed line, mostly following an opposite direction than that of the voice, except in the very last words, “dich lieb’ ich immer, immer dar” where accompaniment and voice move in tranquil thirds, showing a parallel dance, an agreement, a resolution before sinking again into each others arms (last four bars of accompaniment). This song was a present from Mahler to his wife Alma: It is the voice of a poor artist who has very little money or physical attractiveness, and who is surely not going to stay young forever, a predicament which Mahler related to himself. This is the only portrait of my collection in which the “Manikin” opens her eyes: now we can see through *the windows of the soul* and that is what this piece is for me. We see now behind the work of art, we see the person, the soul, which is not perfect, has no treasures to offer and will not be fresh forever. But this soul has one purpose in life, **this soul can love forever**. I could not find better words to describe the spirit of this song but a fragment of Alma Mahler’s memoirs:

*“He had composed for me the only love song he ever wrote-“Liebst du um Schönheit”-and he slipped it in between the title page and the first page of the Valkyrie. Then he waited day after day for me to find it; but I never happened to open the volume, and his patience gave out. “I think I’ll take a look at the Valkyrie today,” he said abruptly. He opened it and the song fell out. I was overwhelmed with joy and we played it that day twenty times at least.”*



ROSINA

Aria “Una Voce poco fa”, *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, ossia *L'inutile precauzione*, Opera buffa by Gioachino Rossini and libretto by Cesare Sterbini (based on Pierre Beaumarchais's French comedy *Le Barbier de Séville*, 1775). The disastrous première of the opera took place on 20 February 1816 at the Teatro Argentina, Rome. The original French play endured a similar story: poorly received at first, only to become a favorite within a week. Here we meet Mozart's Countess (*Nozze di Figaro*) in a young age. From her initial appearance onstage, Rosina demonstrates **cunning** and quick thinking, specifically the ability to *improvise* her way out of difficult situations. The redeeming quality of Rosina is **spontaneity** resulting from an absence of calculation. Her ruses are not elaborately planned deceptions; instead they arise from the immediate need of a given situation. Beaumarchais justifies her exploits as the result of a noble motivation: love. She wants to outwit Bartholo, not merely to escape his imprisonment, but to gain access to the affection of the Count. Rossini's Rosina was the first to be written for contralto (Paisiello's Rosina is a soprano). It is true that a rich low register will add to the character a **Spanish** and **passionate** note (The reason we associate Spanish characters with lower voices could also be because of their traditional music, where more chest voice is used, also with their lower speaking register). However, in opera, lower voices are also associated with older characters, which is not the case for Rosina. Also, Rosina is not Carmen: Rosina has not known men. Rosina should be sung by a singer –mezzo or not, gifted with *a rich low register* and *a brilliant high register* in order to highlight Rosina's **youth zeal and vivaciousness** (*Zwischenfach*). In this portrait, she wears a necklace of red hot chilly peppers which I find describe Rosina's main aspect: **crisp and spicy**.

## Exodus

If we were to replay this first part of “A Singer Prepares” in fast forward this is what we would hear more or less:

The symbols of this essay (Episode 1):

Every artist at some point receives an “*invitation to a trip*”, the urge to discover one’s self as well as to discover other musical worlds, cultures, ways and more.

In order to be a voyager and not an aimless wanderer, one has to plan the “trip” and prepare for it. So in the airport’s/train X-ray control scanner, the security will witness the full packed valise as follows (Episode 2):

1. Technique: **The best technique would be the one that gives to the singer complete freedom of expression hand in hand with longevity of the voice.**
2. Intonation: **If the singer can imagine the proper pitch, and his/her technique allows them to, then intonation will be right.**
3. Research: **Learning a piece of music and discovering its character requires research in two space-times: that of the composer and that of the character.**
4. Score Study: **The musical score is only the navigator for a trip and not the trip itself.**
5. Diction and languages: **Singing is glorified speech.**
6. Style: **Style is what brings a piece of music to its most exciting version.**

\*\*In my personal suitcase they would also find some peculiar pictures (Episode 3).

Arriving to the end of first act, I should say that one should not use this essay as a manual to singing but only as a reference as it does not claim to be complete. This essay can never replace an inspiring teacher the same way one cannot expect to be healed only by reading books of medicine.

Also, reading through it myself, I came to notice that I refer to balance all the way through (No, has nothing to do with my zodiac sign, even though I am a Libra (Balance)). I believe that the different schools of singing are like all the different religions: all of them want to “climb the mountain” to the truth, just each takes a different road to reach the top. That means that singers must be listeners of what their heart, body and mind tells them to do (emotional, physical and mental observer). *A one-way ticket to this trip is not practical, as you do not gain spherical knowledge.* Most of the times knowledge comes from rejection (“**reduction to the impossible**”, Aristotle, Euclid). One must take into account all different sources and choose what works best for him/her and of course what serves the music the best.

So, although to generalize is to be a fool -as William Blake would say, I will attempt to say that **singing is a balancing act –and what is special about balance is that it cannot be forced. It can only be reinforced.**

Moving on to second act “Musicality”, we are finally taking the trip...

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