

# A SINGER PREPARES

## Act II. Musicality



*Anne Sofie von Otter teaching during the Udo Reinemann sessions in Brussels, February 2016 (photo from personal archive).*

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## Bridge

In Act I we received an Invitation to a Trip – we have known the desire to make music, *to tell a story*. We gladly accepted and started packing our things – training in order to obtain the craftsmanship required to do music and finally *tell the story*. Act I shows how does a singer *prepare* for that trip to unknown, how does one gain musicianship.

In Act II we are taking the first of the millions of steps a singer will take on his/her way of becoming a vibrant performer, a sensitive interpreter and an exciting communicator. This journey could also be what will make the singer meet his/her true self as one gains self-consciousness throughout the journey. Act II shows scenes from the trip - the daily friction with the musical text, the physical, emotional, mental, spiritual and intellectual approach, the coloring and redirecting of *the story*. We see all the different factors that affect **musicality**.



Melpomene, Vatican

First thing to do while boarding is to identify passengers using their “travel documents”: The voyageur learns what his/her place is in the musical production and what are his/her guidelines: what is the role, what are the roles suited for him/her (Episode 4).

Continuing, we see highlights of the interpreter’s trip. What is discussed is how does one learn and incorporate fully the role (Conquering land), how does one deal with the Muse’s capricious nature (Inspiration), how to conquer the fear of being unique (Fear), how to ride the wave of emotions and how to hearken to one’s personal need for support (Emotion and La Vie Intérieur), how to avoid watering the flowers of impatience (Frustration), how to avoid being a lawyer of your interpretation (Conviction), how to preserve a fine antique after you have put all your money on it (Maintenance), to what extend are singers also actors (Actors), how to travel faster and cheaper (Vibrancy and Buoyancy) and finally, remembering that anything could change last minute (Control is an illusion) (Episode 5).

We finally arrive at destination: the performance. Here musicianship meets musicality. Here Euterpre. Muse of music, meets Melpomene, Muse of tragedy. The singer has gone through a long journey both external and internal, to enhance technique and discover possibilities. In this journey life learns to speak the language of music and music the language of life. Now is the moment to return home, to be member of the society, to be Plato’s philosopher: the one who left to learn, the one who returns to share. The performance inevitably serves as a new Invitation to a Trip for the listeners (Episode 6). Finally, the first act of this essay closes with a description of how did I personally prepare for the second half of my final recital examination. The description is accompanied with portraits that I created for each chosen piece of music (Episode 7).

## *Episode 4: Travel Documents*

It is a translation of the Prologue from Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* that serves as a Prologue to this research (Act I). With these opening lines, Tonio assures and reminds us that it is not his duty to inform us of the validity of the version of events about to be presented on stage. Rather, he is there to present 'a slice of life' -that what we are about to see, is a reflection of existence itself, the source of his inspiration and art being none other than real life-the ultimate Truth and Truth itself.

Reading through this prologue, one sees theatre passing from its didactic and educational character, to the portraying of life and realism. For example, in ancient Greek tragedy, murder, or any crime, was not shown on stage, because it was believed that theatre should educate the younger members of the society, and so, brutal scenes were omitted in order to avoid being reproduced in real life. Since then, we have seen the murder of Desdemona, Lulu, the madness of Salome, *Otello*, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, the suicide of *Tosca*, *Madama Butterfly* and many more "don't try this at home" behaviors on stage. Opera works seem to have changed from merely a display of vocal fireworks, with Rossini's and Donizetti's works, to dramatic story-telling. The contemporary opera singer is very far from the baroque one. Even if we still perform works from past centuries, the approach is different. Now the actor does not have to be a beautiful distant ideal. Now the actor has to be real: *uno squarcio di vita*, the actor is a slice of life.

It is crucial for every aspiring singer to hearken to the sound of his/her era. Cultures experience evolution over the centuries and communication means come along, too. Reading librettos of Gounod or Bizet we might think it is too poetic thus not so realistic, but we must always take into account, how did people choose their words to communicate during the time that these librettos were created. The same way, it is wise for a singer to adapt to the contemporary means of communication and expression in order to then show his/her individuality as a performer.

So is a singer also an actor? A singer sings and an actor acts: sometimes an actor sings but we do not say he is a singer. We say he/she is an actor with a good voice. And what does an actor do? – He/she acts in the context of a role. And what is role?

**Role:** "part or character one takes," c. 1600, from French *rôle* "part played by a person in life," literally "roll (of paper) on which an actor's part is written," from Old French *rolle*. Meaning "function performed characteristically by someone" is from 1875. In the social psychology sense from 1913. *Role model* first attested 1957. At some point in its history, and sometimes in chronologically overlapping times the French word "rôle" was written: "rolle", "role", "roole", "roule" etc. All these etymologies originated from the Medieval Latin word "rotulus" that corresponds to the Vulgar Latin "rollus" which designated a form of rolled parchment on which were written the lines an actor had to memorize. It is clear that this literal Latin definition changed at some point in history and came to designate *the broader sense an acting role has today*.

Choosing what relates to this essay, a role is what a composer/writer creates on a paper, and what a singer/actor is called to perform on, to bring "to life". And classical singers do that all the time. It does not matter if it is Opera or Lied/Chanson or Oratorio. The singer is always performing in the context of a treaty, a role. Part of this is due to the fact that rarely do we sing our own compositions in classical music (hardly ever). Then someone could

perform expressing his personal adventures, but when a role is asked, singers have to express the adventures/sentiments/emotions/thoughts of that particular role.

So, to construct a role means to give *life* to a character, to choose the colors to paint the different shades of its personality, to build and reconstruct your posture according to what your role demands, to create and justify your silent movements and of course, to find your position towards the rest of the cast (no matter being the same “fach”, a Puccinian Manon Lescaut cannot go around walking like his Madama Butterfly).

Moreover, in some art songs we can see clearly that the poet and composer give us some clues about who the personage is. As for example in F.Schubert’s “Gretchen Am Spinnrade”, “Mignon” and “Erlkönig” (in the latter there are actually 4 characters!).

### ***Here and Now***

The performing arts, such as music, dance and theatre, differ fundamentally from the visual arts –painting, sculpture, photography. A sculptor’s or painter’s or photographer’s creative process takes place in his/her studio: It’s finished, fixed, framed and then presented to the public. On the other hand, performing art happens as we move through time, and **audiences are affected as the art is being created**. It is as if the composer and poet have already taken the trip and now it is the performer’s turn.

However, it is very common from singers to perceive their art as being one of the visual arts: they arrive in front of the public to demonstrate the work that has taken place in the practice room. It occurs very often that singers appear detached from what they sing in their performances, thus dropping the chance to create something fresh and new. Of course, a lot may say that it is the stress of being exposed to public that causes this sort of “cold” performances. On the contrary, there are singers that appear overemotional –especially in dramatic pieces of music, thus creating tensions to their muscles that result in poor musical performance. They are trapped in their character’s drama, thus not being able to convey it to the public. The common problem in both cases is that each of the singers, the “ice” and the “fire” ones, have not found the truth in the character they are giving life to.

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.

### **1. Identification**

It is unquestionable that a singer ought to find his/her true voice in order to access an original interpretation. Singers must use a different voice for each different song says Bernac. I absolutely am of the same opinion however this needs to be handled carefully in order not to create misconceptions: True voice is one. One might get confused exploring the extraordinarily big number of colors the human voice can change -but the free phonation sound is one; it is the core of the voice, present in every shade of it.

A lot of singers might find it easy to imitate. This is their gift and curse at the same time as imitation is the killing of artistry (Lotte Lehmann) because imitation can only be on the surface, on the outside. A singer with imitation skills might be copying the big generation of singers in terms of timbre, vibration etc however what one must keep in mind is that

what made those sacred monsters of music what they were, was the finding of their true voice. It is amazing how young singers try to imitate the legends because there is safety in looking alike. It is understood why somebody would go for a tested recipe, however that could even damage his or her vocal folds. I remember watching an interview from Bobby McFerrin saying that he stopped listening to recordings of other singers for two years (!) because he knew he would try to imitate and thus he would never *be free*. Along with finding and getting familiar ones' own true voice, comes also accepting the uniqueness of each one's self. Suddenly we become conscious about the fact that our instrument is one of a kind and we were born with it! One has to discover what he/she is made of: a guitar made out of cedar will never sound the same as one made out of spruce, each has their own color and sound development process, and no one expects them to sound alike.

However, apart from the numerous colors of the voice, what might affect the resonance of a voice is the style that every piece is written. Therefore, we must be very careful with the polishing of our style.

The process of learning to sing is connected to the singers' personal development. So go mad, go completely crazy, improvise, and lose control of the voice otherwise you will never know its limits. **The biggest mistake I have done was to be afraid to be mistaken.** Fearing that my voice would crack or would sound "edgy" I always tried to sing "beautifully" and stayed within a certain range that I could manipulate without "crack". Problem is this way I would never discover what my true voice was.

*The most beautiful things are those, which madness inspires and reason writes.*  
-André Gide

## **2. Choice of Repertoire & "Pandora's Fach"**

As mentioned before, singers must use a different voice for each different song. It is not a different fach. I would like to mention here the danger of "fach" when a singer is still developing. One should not try to put one's self in a box before agents will do it for them. Agents so to deal with the signing contracts in professional world created the Fach system. Apart from that, composers did not think of Fachs when writing, but colors. That is why we have roles like Violetta Valery in Verdi's Traviata which according to Sonya Yoncheva, three different voices are needed: a coloratura soprano, a full lyric and a dramatic voice. But what is truly needed is a voice with ability, stamina, good taste and an amazing actress. All the above mentioned, I find that every singer should work towards to. Singers more than actors use their voices to express different situations.

On the other hand, if composers did think in Fachs, then the most prominent of composers have written for sacred monsters like Maria Callas, Victoria de los Angeles etc who have sung from mezzo roles and dramatic soprano repertoire to the highest coloratura roles. Moreover, my personal opinion is that what made these legendary singers what they are was not only their vocal abilities but even more, their interpretative and acting skills. Vocally, I am of the opinion that singers should be trained thoroughly in all their vocal range. In other words, as my teacher Dinah Bryant says, a soprano is not a voice without low register, and a mezzo is not a voice without high register –this opinion can also be reinforced from Callas' Julliard Masterclass, working with a soprano on Rossini's "Una voce poco fa". **It is not our *limits* that should define what kind of voice we are, but our abilities.** My

teacher used to remind me: **“Study everything and choose repertoire in which does your voice sound the most exciting”**.

What can define the course of a singer is the choice of repertoire. Many young singers worry about that and end up singing a small repertoire. But when the true voice has been welcomed and trained, repertoire will chose the singer. Of course this is not a one-way road as by singing new things we see how does our voice react. Voice changes through time and is very likely and has been seen so often in the international music scence that singers move through different repertoires. Moreover, singers should always sing what excites them because that is the only way to give an exceptional performance.

Furthermore, there is a misconception that Mozart should be sung only by light voices. That is certainly not true. However, we sse that a mozart is imposed in almost every audition and examination a singer will ever have to do. The reason is because Mozart requires a certain transparency. Technically, Mozart demands much of the singer: right breath management; ample resonance; An equal scale; A clean attack; A steady sostenuto;a smooth legato; An elegant use of portamento; A well-graduated messa di voce; Flexibility and agility and the ability to sing absolutely in tune. Beyond these there are matters of musical interpretation, rhythmical sense, language, dramatic feeling, and interpetation, which take us back again to the relaionship between the notes and the actual performance (Rita V. Beatie).

*Not everyone has the voice or technique to become a great Mozart singer, but the study of his music has a beneficial influence on any voice and will help the development and growth of every singer.*  
-Eleanor Steber

### ***The Gender Issue***

Strange as it may be, the “fach” boxes enclose also the choice of Lieder and melodies (!). There exists an opinion that women should not sing Lieder that according to the poem are written for a man. It is believed by some that it weakens the poetry. But why should be a singer denied a vast number of songs if he/she can communicate the meaning to the audience? This opinion, if applicable, then arises another question: Why would we even sing some Oratorio parts like angel Gabriel’s arias in Haydn’s Creation if we cannot find an angel to do it? That would be quite a performance! Also then, why would we even sing roles that are younger than us. Madama Butterfly is only 17 years old when singing the dramatic last act in Puccini’s masterpiece, but I have seen nor heard of any soprano who sung this role succesfully at that age. As a singer of traditional music I have sung a lot of texts written for men and it never seemed inappropriate. I think that one should focus more on the story telling and then the gender “issue” seems meaningless.

# Episode 5: Take The Trip

## 1. Conquering land

*Roll down the role*

The time has come. We are ready to take off, to conquer new musical landscapes. What makes a great conqueror is efficient strategy and here I display the basics:

How to learn a new piece:

- a. Text: The fundamental difference between instrumentalists and singers. A singer has to start from the literal text. If the text is not written in a language he/she already speaks, then a **word-to-word** and a **phrase-to-phrase translation** is necessary in order to achieve the **Seele-an-Seele** of composer and performer (soul to soul). For example, I found that despite knowing what every word meant, I could not make sense out of a Russian poem without using a phrase-to-phrase translation, because Russian is a poetic and perceptual language with a lot of differences from the Latin based languages (Russians do not have the verb “to be”). Even Russians need time and imagination to understand a poetic text. Moreover, it is not only about knowing what the words mean but also what does the composer/poet wants to say. Only when we learn that can we choose to say something else using these words and music, creating thus a new reading, a new interpretation of the piece.
- b. Speak It: The performer may now speak the next in monotone – the same way we “solfège” before really singing. After knowing the meaning and correct diction this will help to feel how the language functions, how it “buzzes” in the articulators and ears, how does it stress the intonation and how does it release. Secondly, ones should speak a sentence in his/her mother language and immediately after speak it again in its original language. This way the performer connects to the literal meaning of the words. Finally, hopefully by now the performer does not sing as if translating in his/her head, but as if he/she really speaks in this language. To perform a dramatic reading of the text.
- c. Groove It: First look at the musical text and learning of the rhythm. Now the singer speaks the text not in a monotone, not in a natural, speaking flow but on the rhythmic patterns. It is very important for a singer to come to realize now the differences between a text when spoken and when sung: in singing, vowels are refined and they last longer. Consonants are more stressed and precisely intonated but should not be anticipated when singing on a vowel. It is also crucial for the singer to study the rhythm in a pulse. Learning rhythm with pulse works like a GPS for the singer: it shows the turns and crossroads, but still the surroundings, so the singer can orientate. Also, helps the singer maintain a free flow of air and a legato line. Last, singers should not use the rhythm of a piece of music to understand where a word or sentenced is stressed because there are composers like G. Faure that tend to intone words “opposite” to what they sound in every-day speaking.
- d. Wuthering Heights (Pitches): Why I name this part Wuthering Heights is about how chaotic it stills seems to me for a singer to get the pitches into his/her head for a singer

has no frets or keys. The voice is not an “equal temperament” instrument. It is not an instrument that can tune before going on stage. A singer has to tune always on the spot. My teacher says: “Singing is does not have geographical dimensions. It is space travelling!” Until now, singers learn their parts using the piano because it gives a concrete *idea* of the intervals and pitches of the score. However, since singers are literally intellectual instrumentalists, they can be misguided by the image given when studying on the piano. For example, someone might think that has to make an upward movement when seeing an upward interval. As a result to this, we see the singer breathing “high”, expanding the thoracic cavity, causing also the larynx to clench and go higher. And then here comes the Rooster: the voice *breaks*. Same happens when seeing a low note or downward interval. This is a very sensitive process as the singer might end up thinking that he/she does not have the range to sing that piece. What he/she needs to keep in mind is the so –called “gegenbewegung” (opposite movement) or “gegenstütze” or “support”. This means that a singer has to keep the abdomen muscles active and low when he/she is aiming for a high pitch. I like to of this using the image of tree: **The higher a tree is, the deeper its roots are.**

Apart from his “part”, the singer needs to know the pitches and harmonies of everything that surrounds his/her line. It is a blessing if a singer can play his/her part on the piano him/herself. If not, then one should work with an accompanist. It is not recommended to play and sing at the same time in order to learn one’s part, as it is extremely hard to assure that the singer will not “push” the voice or that he/she will nourish it with free airflow. Moreover, if the singer is preparing to sing with orchestra, it is helpful to listen to a recording with an orchestra just to have a general idea.

And so we arrive to a very important matter: Recordings. As mentioned before, recordings give a general idea of how something should be performed technically. We can only approximate a perception of how the musicians function when listening to them perform on recording or video. But that is not the purpose of course of a recording. It is made to communicate a message from the composer and performers and not to demonstrate technique. In other words, you can only guess the backstage (the “**kitchen**” as Inge Spinette would say)\_when seeing a performance. A lot of singers have the ability to imitate and I had to learn the hard way, as I am one of them. I could instantly imitate how a singer phrases/pronounces/vibrates etc but all I was doing is imitating the outside, while those performers had deep “roots”. You cannot learn to support just by listening to recordings of Caballé or Pavarotti. You have to grow your own roots.

The same way, a singer should never, ever learn his/her pitches by listening to recordings. This leads to poor musicianship because the singer does not “generate” the music on his/her own. Also, even the best singers on the best recordings occasionally make mistakes in rhythm, pitch, pronunciation, and technique. It is only after the singer knows the piece of music very well, that he/she should listen to recordings in order to broaden the spectrum of interpretative choices.

- e. Sing: The reason for going through all this process is to get to the point where there is no more guessing about text, rhythm, or pitch. When there is no guessing, there is assurance and security, which is followed by calmness. Only then can a singer start *re-creating* the piece of music. Often people say about Callas that she gives the feeling of writing the score on the spot. Well, another thing we know about Callas is that she always had a profound knowledge and understanding of the literal and musical text, in other words, the score.

As most of singers are often so excited about singing a new piece that immediately start singing it in order to try it, it is recommended that instead of doing this 5-step process in the whole text, that the singer can go through it working a phrase at a time. Moreover, it is very likely, that after going through this process a few times, that the singer will not need to do it for every line but only for the problematic ones. The rest that work already, we should not try to fix: *Voice material is sensitive to “perfection” due to danger of loosing excitement.*

## **2. Inspiration**

*“Genius is one percent inspiration, ninety-nine percent perspiration”  
–Thomas Edison*

Ancient Greeks thought the Muses gave inspiration. Later on, it was believed that God breathed inspiration to artists and another opinion that dominated until beginning of our century was that hard work intrigues inspiration. Yet there are some moments — after much steady work and after the technical skills have been mastered — when the mind and spirit take flight. We call these moments of inspiration. They steal upon you, longed for and unexpected. Moments of inspiration don’t make sense by normal logic. They feel transcendent, uncontrollable and irresistible. When one is inspired, time disappears or alters its pace. The senses are amplified. There may be goose bumps or shivers down the spine, or a sense of being overawed by some beauty. Inspiration is always more active than mere appreciation. There’s a thrilling feeling of elevation, a burst of energy, an awareness of enlarged possibilities. The person in the grip of inspiration has received, as if by magic, some new perception, some holistic understanding, along with the feeling that he/she is capable of more than he/she thought. But as prescriptive as we may get about the pursuit and attainment of inspiration, its very nature remains ever elusive.

Personally, when inspired, I lose sense of time and forget obligations. Moreover, I do not believe what they say that inspiration comes when somebody is sad. However, it is true that most of the compositions or beautiful interpretations come from “a broken heart”. I am profoundly convinced that this happens because of the fact that in moments of grief or pain, we are more **conscious** than in those of joy. Deep consciousness arrives when in sadness, because suddenly the person feels that there is a need to escape this situation, and so the mind starts to analyze, why or how did we come to this state and where is the exit. On the other hand, being joyful, we are being in the moment rather than trying to escape it. In other words, we are as much as conscious as there is need to be.

So I am of the opinion that **inspiration comes hand in hand with consciousness and awareness**. In order for inspiration to bloom, it needs fertile ground: that is our perceptiveness, our **synesthesia**. **When one is open-minded, he/she is not afraid of being a little crazy, and that is where it all begins:** What if I told you that I see Debussy’s “Apparition” as orange and Rachmaninoff’s “Son” as deep blue with shades of purple? I think you would think I am a little bit silly. However, a lot of times I do see colors when listening to music or I get images when hearing numbers. I was aware of that because I thought it was silly and I should be serious and see things for what they are. The issue is that something can only exist within my consciousness and awareness: if I do not see/sense something then how will I know it exists? Or what if I do see something but I choose not to see it because I fear it is silly? Well, this is how brilliant ideas fall in the bin. I used to be like that until I started writing all my ideas down to paper. After winning some poetry

competitions I thought, well maybe my silly ideas are fancied and maybe they are not that silly. This is how I allow inspiration to bloom in my garden. I left some place for the “crazy” flower. The nature of inspiration is elusive, is “Carmen”.

*If you do not expect the unexpected you will not find it, for it is not to be reached by search  
or trail.*

*-Heraclitus*

They say that everyday little things inspire big artists. I find that absolutely true. The reason this happens is because these artists work a lot, but are also aware and conscious of the everyday things.

Now, how do we become aware and conscious? The way I chose was through meditation. But I soon realized that meditation is not strictly staying in “lotus” cross-legged position humming “Ohms”. Meditation is anything that reduces emotion thus lowering the brain frequency. Simply speaking, meditation is a state that the mind and soul are in harmony. Scientists have measured this from 7.5 to 14 Hz (brain cycles) and it is commonly being referred to as “Alpha” state. The Beta state is measured 14-40Hz and is the frequency we operate when awake and alert. It is a state of light anxiety that can develop to stress and even range. On the other hand, the Delta frequency (0.5-4Hz) is the slowest of the frequencies and is experienced in deep, dreamless sleep and in very deep, transcendental meditation **where awareness is fully detached**. This is why Alpha state of mind is what one should aim towards to: One is still awake but conscious and perceptive. I have personal experience that this is the state that inspiration strikes. One can go into Alpha state when meditating and one can meditate while gardening, cooking or studying: meditation is literally living in the moment without allowing the past or future to cause anxiety. This is, in my opinion, why it is thought that inspiration comes with *mindful* work. Well then again, easier said than done...

### **3. Fear**

*Expose yourself to your deepest fear; after that, fear has no power, and the fear of freedom  
shrinks and vanishes. You are free.*

*-Jim Morrison*

Is there anyone out there having stage fright?

Fear is born when security has fled. Security blooms in masses. The feeling of belonging, of being in a team, a “pack” assures that we are safe. This is a feeling that singers get when singing in a choir. Being a soloist is to stand out from the “pack”. What a soloist wants to say is a personal statement. Of course, that does by no means underestimate the artistic offer of choral or ensemble singers, yet, being a soloist requires another set of skills. Every singer answers a call coming from the inside. But a soloist has received a special “invitation” to journey through music alone. There are so many talented singers that prefer singing in choirs instead of going solo; their inside call is different.

Being a soloist, one receives another kind of training than a choir singer. In choirs, singers have to “melt” their sound with each other; that often leads to “straight” singing with no vibrato and also results in a more “airy” or “falsetto” placement of the voice. Being a member of the Academy of La Monnaie and having to sing in the choir I realized how different it is to be a soloist. A choir represents the people, the society, the mass. A choir has to have a unified sound. On the other hand, it is expected and desired that the soloist

will stand out vocally. Even when singing passages with the choir, we need to hear the soloist more projected. Even more, when soloists sing in ensembles (ensemble opera or oratorio passages), still it is crucial that every voice differs and is still in character, because that is exactly the meaning of the ensemble of soloists: to hear all the different voices/desires/thoughts all at once. For examples, if in Verdi's Otello quartet in Act II with Otello -Desdemona -Iago -Emilia sang blending their voices, we would have no jealousy-pleading –cunningness –disapproval but instead we would have one color and thus we would lose all the sense of plot.

*“With great power comes great responsibility”*  
-Voltaire

The soloist must choose exposure. **One must embrace their identity. Only then their purpose can be revealed to them.** Accepting the gift is accepting responsibility as well. However, some performers are intimidated by their very own emotions...

#### 4. Emotion or la Vie Intérieure

*Ride the wave*

Emotions cannot be permanent. That's why they are called “emotions” –the word comes from “motion”, movement. They move; hence, they are emotions.

Emotion becomes a problem only when not “canalized”. It has been related mostly to negative situations such as singers being too emotional that lose their breath/intonation/blush/shake/having excessive vibrato or even tremolo in their voice. In my opinion, the problem initiates in the way we perceive emotion: as quantity and not as quality.

In order for a product to be of excellent quality, it has gone through a process of distillation. In the same way, our emotion meets the emotion of the character we are impersonating, and the final extraction, the final distilled product should not be adulterated by other doubts or fears.

I have been singing Puccini's Mimi arias from La Bohème, it's been around 5 years now. I brought the first aria (Si, mi chiamano Mimi) in lesson with my teacher, Dinah Bryant. I just could not get through the aria without bursting into tears somewhere in the middle. At least, I stopped later and later in the piece in each lesson but yet I could not ride my wave of emotions. Instead I was being “over flooded” by how strong was my pathos for this character and the situation she is in. Last time, I remember I stopping once more because my voice was trembling and I said I was sorry. My teacher then looked at me and said: “Don't be sorry! You must cry again and again. Only then will you be able to sing it on stage without crying!” She then told me something I will never forget. She told me that her teacher, Tito Gobbi told her that:

**“You cannot take us to a place you've never been.”**

These were the very words that gave birth to my thesis and to all my musical interpretation. My teacher then told me something more that was an eye-opener for me. She told me “Don't be sad here, it's still first act. She is only dying in third act!” That was it! The reason I could not get through the aria was because in my head I already knew I was going

to be abandoned by Rodolfo and get to see him again only when I will be dying, which by the way was going to happen in the next few months. So, to conclude, the reason I was emotional was because I had not found the *right* emotion for the piece I was singing. My emotion was not distilled. I realized then, that not only did I have to know the libretto very well but I should also learn how to forget it and rediscover it every time I was going to sing it! Emotions are very precise, even more than ideas. Ideas develop, only emotions are absolute. **Emotions are a part of the interpretation and thus, a part of the rehearsal as well.**

A singer gets to taste fragments of other lives through incarnating different personages. But a singer of course has personal life, the life when behind the door, the Interior life. I know of no person that always sang under the best circumstances. All musicians at one point are confronted with the obligation of a performance, while experiencing personal problems. I found joy and comfort in singing. I found also that the audience should not be involved in what troubles me, only if the piece of music allows me to embody it in my performance and make it thus my interpretation. All troubles should be ceased during a performance and should only appear if the performer can “exorcise” them through the music, yet without disturbing the music. In other words, the show must go on, and if a performer cannot set aside his/her troubles, then it is healthier to postpone the performance. Audiences will only want the best out of the performers, and that is where the responsibility of the great gift lies.

## **5. Frustration**

To be a classical singer requires a balanced combination of intelligence, expressiveness, love for music itself and the biggest virtue of all: **patience**. A singer does not arrive into being a vibrant artist after a Bachelor’s or Master’s degree. One must not only work, but also **work intelligently**, without wasting the voice. It is also crucial to be able to work without stress, anxiety, fear of failure and disappointment. It is true that singers sometimes have to work for years and years on a demanding piece of music and still not be satisfied from their rendering. In other words, one must be able to *work without emotion*. Now allow me to explain as of course I do not mean that a singer should not feel in general. Emotion is whatever feeling that has the word “like” or “dislike” attached to it. One must not be concerned about he or she likes when trying to overcome a technical difficulty.

*“I gave this earth my tears, now it owns me back flowers”*  
-Madama Butterfly

When working on demanding passages, it is important to be able to keep a cool head. It is true that most of the times emotion assists a difficult passage. However, when we have worked and worked, and some technical demands are still not fulfilled, then one must draw back the feeling and observe the instrument, the voice. One must understand **why** does it not work. Repeating the difficult passage over and over again hoping that something will change is not going to solve any problem.

Allow me please a reference to the world of athletics, as I grew up near athletes until the age of 20 and I find that classical singing has a lot to do with elite sports. My aunt, Voula Patoulidou started training for 100-meter hurdles at the age of 25. She had already gone through other sports, all at professional level, and finally she decided to take the leap and start training for hurdles. Of course, everyone told her that it was too late to start training,

as 100-meter hurdles is a highly technical sport and athletes usually run slower and slower after the age of 21. She had already gone through an operation in her abdominal muscles, which was already reducing the chances for success. The day of the finals, her biceps muscles got severely injured during the semi-finals. She arrived at the finals with the help and cautiousness of the Olympic medical team. My aunt, Voula Patoulidou, won the golden medal in 100-meter hurdles in 1992, in Barcelona. She is the very first Greek woman to have won a golden medal in Olympics. She told me that apart from the daily double morning-evening trainings, what had really given her the strength to go through all the rejection, angst and stress was the **control of the emotion**. She would go mentally through the whole procedure of the games. She told me “You cannot escape your fears, but you cannot also escape you desires”. **You can train emotion and you can train mentality.**

*“When will and imagination are in conflict, imagination will win.”*  
–Emil Coue

The mind is a mechanism. We are not the mind. We use the mind. We can train and direct the mind. The only way to achieve this is through canalizing the emotion. Absence of emotion lowers brain frequency, which allows the mind to work “clear” and undisturbed. An intelligent singer analyses and learns from failure. What matters the most is not the quantity of work, but the quality. And it should be well understood by young singers, that to **rest** is part of the training, and should be done with quality as well.

## **6. Conviction**

As a student, I did not only attend lessons actively but as an observer as well. Actually, sometimes I realized I could come to understand even better by observing. Nevertheless, observation has to be accompanied by personal experience. Otherwise, development and improvement are impossible. But the voice is a strange instrument, and a lot of times I feel like we, singers, are flying an airplane through a storm with no visibility, only thanks to ground-control-center’s directions –meaning that most of the times, what we, singers, hear when singing is very far from what arrives to the listener. Same thing happens with interpretation. A lot of times, our emotion becomes very much introverted: we are overwhelmed by it but we do not communicate it. This is why we need somebody we can trust to give us directions: our teacher, our coach etc.

However, one of the approaches I found misleading was that of the commonly heard “What you do is not convincing” kind of feedback. This example falls in the same category with the “breathe into your belly” direction (discussed in Act I, Episode 2: Technique) which of course is used with the best of intentions but leans more into creating misconceptions to the student. What I have noticed is that when we ask a singer to convince us, we are trapping him/her instead of helping him/her –and most of the times the performer tries and tries but we are still not satisfied, still not convinced.

To convince is an intellectual process. Undoubtedly, singing has also an intellectual nature but it is not only that. It is like saying that music is mathematics but yet it cannot be only that, for then all mathematicians would be musicians as well. But it takes more than intellectuality to be a musician. I have noticed also, that a technically perfect performance can only satisfy a demanding mind, but the heart of the listener asks for more. Sometimes it is almost like there *must* be a mistake, flaw in order for us to appreciate a work of art. There can be no explicit beauty without flaws and I honestly believe that what we accept as

beautiful is what we can detect as natural. Allow our itinerary to be derailed for a while into the world of painting:



Sandro Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus* (c. 1486). Tempera on canvas. 172.5 cm × 278.9 cm (67.9 in × 109.6 in). Uffizi, Florence.

The Birth of Venus is undoubtedly one of the world's most famous and appreciated works of art. However, the goddess of love and beauty is depicted as physically disproportional. If one takes a closer look it will soon be revealed to him/her that the beauty of Venus lies in the imbalances of the body: She appears to have no shoulders, chest and her left arm hangs strangely at her side. Her breasts are perfectly round and very small for her body. Her torso is very long and the belly button is very high on the abdomen. All of the weight falls on the left hip causing us to wonder how does she stand in the shell. But the

defects do not spoil the picture. Botticelli **chooses elegance over realistic representation**. Her posture might not meet the anatomic standards (it does not *convince* us anatomically), however, the painting stands as one of the most beautiful visualizations of Venus.

Back into the world of music, legendary performers have not always done what was written in their “travel warrant”: Pavarotti has always been singing Puccini’s “E lucevan le stelle” prolonging the ending vowel of his phrase “e muo io disperato!” until the beginning of the next bar which is of course not what Puccini wrote yet, it is exactly what makes the piece exciting. Another example would be the general thought that Maria Callas was sometimes singing out of tune, which is true but yet, why does everybody -even listeners who are not fond of her singing- appreciate the truth in her every performance? I must say that Callas was never out of tune and the reason is simple: **every note she sang had the right emotion and intention**. We must not forget that making music is not about getting all the pitches and rhythms correct, but is more about making colors. **The images musicians create are seen with the heart and mind, not with the eyes**. Performers need to create these images first inside of them and then invite the listeners to join them there. A listener who wants to be convinced cannot join the big picture; he/she is not perceptive but judgmental. This is exactly why music is such a miracle: in order for somebody to enjoy and get the most out of musical performance, he/she needs to drop criticism in order to reach communication, synesthesia, sympathy. This is what unites humans: the will to understand and not the intention to examine and evaluate. Singing to convince is like writing committed poetry: It will be appreciated in terms of a very particular situation and next generations will try to show sympathy for it.

To conclude, in my opinion, artists should not try to convince anybody about their intention. They must be the intention. They need to **be natural: Nature is. Nature does not imitate. Nature is not concerned about convincing.**

## 7. Maintenance

*Mens sana in corpore sano*  
A sound mind in a sound body  
-Satire X, Juvenal (10.356)

So far so good with our trip. In Episode 2 (Act I), the mechanism of phonation was presented. “La Voce” is the only instrument that inhabits our body and therefore we cannot see it. That also means that if something goes wrong, we cannot just fix it with our hands as if we would replace a broken chord on a string instrument or a broken key on a clarinet. And if “La Voce” breaks down, we cannot buy a new one. In this part of the journey it is important to discuss “Vehicle Maintenance”.

A healthy singer is a healthy human being. The physical body encases the vocal folds and it is also a part of the singing instrument itself. This is why singers need to take extra care about their physical state. Learning to sing affects a person’s life. A singer is a singer every moment of his/her life.

The amount of water in the human body ranges from 50-75%. Water helps to lubricate muscles and joints thus immunizing their smooth function. The vocal folds are contained in the body. So body hydrated is vocal folds hydrated. The only way to hydrate vocal folds is by hydrating the whole body. In that case, as commonly known, the human body needs a lot of water on daily basis. The amount is regulated by one’s gender, age, weight and special health condition. The reason we need the vocal folds to be hydrated in order to maintain longevity, is because when dry, lubrication is not produced, and the vocal folds flap against each other very quickly and heat up, which can cause them to irritate. If irritation is not allowed to “cool down” then vocal pathology is not far from appearing (nodules etc.).

At this point, it is easy to understand why smoking is highly not recommended for singers: apart from eliminating lung capacity, it drives the vocal folds dry, forcing them to operate when all moisture is drawn by the surrounding tissue. Stories go around about great singers who smoked, but yet, the risk is too big to be taken. Some singers report that smoking helps them relax and thus perform better. But we should not need assistance to experience the comfort of the performance. In any case, my assumption is that an addicted person cannot sing freely because he/she is not free. Addiction to anything can regulate your timetable, endurance and sometimes mood. Also, as mentioned before in “3. Fear”, facing your fear and weaknesses helps you overcome them and finally be freed from them. The psychology of an addicted person is that when “rainy days” come, they can always find comfort in their addiction. Same way, an addicted person will find ways around a technical difficulty in music in order to hide their weak points. Of course, generalization is not a wise thing and exceptions always exist but generally, a person is free when not addicted. And a **free are the acts of a free person** as well.

Moreover, singers should be aware of the vocal dehydration antihistamines can cause. We use them to quickly get over congestion, but we should not neglect to compensate by drinking additional water. In general, singers should take extra care about the type of medication they might be receiving. It is very common for singers to take medication, which contains cortisone, aiming for a quick fix when they cannot cancel a show. Cortisone and other steroids are the most dangerous of all medication for singers and the reason is that it only temporarily reduces the swelling but the next day a slap-back effect occurs and the voice is even more tired. Relying on steroids will destroy a singer’s voice because instead of fighting the problem, which could range from poor technique to flu, it fights the symptoms, which are back again the next day.

Here another crucial matter rises: singers should have the courage to cancel when not in good shape. Others might be able to pull through. Performance conditions eliminate cold symptoms because of high production of adrenaline. But yet, the singer is performing under harsh conditions and even if the voice is there, interpretation can lack energy –or the opposite. One of the reasons vocal training is so important is because singers get to test their abilities. It is always better to cancel a performance than going for it and not doing it as well as you know you could. As my teacher says: “It is not brain surgery! It is singing!”

Furthermore, singers should be aware of how they use their voices apart from singing: every day vocal use can be even more dangerous for creating nodules on the vocal folds. For example, if the singer is working in a loud environment such as a restaurant –even part-time, he/she will have to yell and scream to be heard. On the other hand, also whispering can strain the voice. Trying to speak in “high” position in an attempt to protect the voice is a false as well because what is common to all the above is that the voice is stressed, pushed, and not aloud to operate freely. Coughing and clearing the throat for a long time can be dangerous as well.

Another aspect, which affects vocal health, is diet and exercise. Diet should be balanced to the point that we receive necessary nutrients and calories not more than what we burn. Singers who go on a diet will immediately notice a difference on their singing due to weight loss or gain: the heavier a person is, the slower their diaphragm ascends during singing. So there is a little truth in what they say about the “fat opera lady”. Bigger singers might find it easier to sing higher while thinner ones have to gain great technical skill in order to do so. On the other hand, when in low register, “bigger” singers need to take care of the airflow as it might get them some air in the voice. Also, diets might cause a slight enervation. What is the most dangerous part of weight loss is that singer’s perception of the voice alters and it might be that they will force the voice in order to hear the sound the way they did before loosing weight. In any case, given that the whole body is our instrument, the singer will need to train and learn all from the start how to sing in his/her new body-instrument.

Exercise is always a benefit for our physical and mental state, and should also assist singing. Singers should aim for aerobic type of exercise because this type engages full inspiration and expiration process. If a singer starts lifting too heavy weights during exercise, or going through harsh training, what will happen is that the glottis is over adducted and the vocal folds are squeezed together. A lot of singers underestimate the results of Yoga training, however, yoga can provide exactly what a singer needs: detoxification, increasing of stamina, forming long and flexible muscles instead of rigid ones, engages free airflow, relaxation of the phonation muscles. Moreover, when combined with meditation, a singer learns to gain awareness of the environment and of his/her place into it –something crucial for someone performing for big audiences. To conclude, any kind of exercise is of benefit to the singer when done mindfully and taking care of vocal fold relaxation.

Last but not least, however banal that may sound, a singer needs to be calm. Not sluggish and indolent, but aware, energized and cool-headed. When a person changes mood, his/her voice inevitably changes. I always found amazing how my parents could understand if I was stressed from the way I would say “Everything’s fine!” All emotions are embodied in our sounds and that is why the voice is the most expressive instrument.

All of the above can drastically ameliorate singing. But we are not done yet, singers are also called to sing a lot of hours and thus develop techniques to help themselves that might have some drawbacks as well:

Mark: What a lot of singers do when in rehearsals is to mark, meaning not to sing their part full voice, but to sing on falsetto, using a smaller part of their vocal folds. However, not every singer can mark without creating tension. If one cannot mark freely, he/she will end up singing tight which can cause vocal pathology. It is highly recommended to sing full voice or sing a comfortable octave in rehearsal if one cannot mark in a healthy way.

Prima Vista (Sight-reading): this technique is an excellent tool but a tool and only shall it remain. Tools are used in order to make a work of art, and not to be the work of art itself. When a singer is doing prima vista, there is nothing there to appreciate interpretation-wise –if there is any. Actually, **a singer might hurt his vocal mechanism if doing prima vista very often, as the phonation happens with no intent, no inspiration. A singer should breathe in what he/she is about to say, and if they do not know that, then free airflow is prohibited.**

*“Hear it, breathe into THAT, and sing into THAT. Do not take a breath to sing; take a breath that is already the thought.”*

-Thomas Hampson

Of course how can one be able to breathe in the thought when they didn't have the time to “dwell” on a piece and connect to its meaning? The singer in prima vista executes but does not interpretate. Prima vista is a purely intellectual process that engages also the instinct and that is as far as it gets. The only emotion engaged is that of stress as adrenaline rises. It is not recommended to sing under any stressful circumstances for the fear of troubling the phonation mechanism. Prima vista is asked mostly for choir singers but this is easily understood having explained the differences between a choir singer and a soloist (3.Fear). However, choir singers should be cautious about prima vista as well.

Finally, as mentioned before in “Emotions and La Vie Intérieur”, emotions are a part of the interpretation and thus, a part of the rehearsal as well. This is one of the reasons a singer should not rehearse an enormous amount of hours: Not only because of the physical, mental and psychological fatigue, but also because of the danger of losing excitement over a piece. That is, in my opinion, the worst thing that can happen to a performer.

## **8. Actors**

*I know that I am a singer and an actor, yet in order to give the public the impression that I am neither one nor the other, but the real man conceived by the author, I have to feel and to think as the man the author had in mind.*

- Enrico Caruso

It is of no doubt that a singer must possess acting skills to convey the drama in music –and this is why singers take acting classes. It is possible to be taught how to act, however acting functions quite different for singers than for actors –the same way an actor is trained differently for theatre and cinema.

Actors often need to internalize drama so to be in the same position as the character they are portraying is. Some even go to extremes like method actors (Stanislavski method). Admiring Stanislavski's system (who did also teach opera singers), I tried to apply it into preparing for singing roles only to see it was not possible.

Being a method actor means to literally change skin: the body must respond with the proper muscular tension to each emotion. That kind of muscular tension is more likely to inhibit the free airflow. A singer is an actor on the voice. Whatever we want to convey, be it drama, emotion, idea, we cannot do it the same way an actor would: **Singers function more as a vessel for the drama than a participant in it** (Stephen Smith). If singers were to respond physically to emotions the same way as in real life, their voices would become very tight – thus making it impossible to express all the needed colors. At this moment let us be reminded how Alexander Technique was born: by the need to save an actor's damaged voice, something which often occurs to theater actors. This is also why a singer's vocal part is so much more elaborate than an actor's: singing is glorified speech and the word "glorified" explains the years and years of training.

On the other hand, it is wrong to think that sublime vocal ability is all that is needed. We need the body and face to express the music, but in a way that does not entangle and bind the voice. Simple as it may sound, what singers really need to do is mean every single word they are saying. Even kilometers of vocalize have a meaning, a situation to be communicated. One should never underestimate the power of intention: there exist singers with flawless diction, which we do not understand a word of what they are singing because there is no intention to what they are saying. Another mistake would be that of a singer trying to color each and every word separately. That would equal an actor's awkward movements in order to indicate the meaning of what is said. What singers should do is to search the meaning of the words in order to assess the emotional truth of the situation – **the composer's intent**- and the use of legato technique, diction, facial expression, acting, and musical expressiveness to convey that idea with as much clarity as possible. Sometimes one might think that the whole base of interpretation is the performer's answering the question "Why did the composer write this and that?"

*"Exercise the unseen"*  
–Maja Jantar

The closest a singer will ever get to an actor is in condition of Recitatives. I am consciously excluding the prose/parlato parts of a singspiel as there the singer is for a while purely and 100% an actor. Recitative is the situation where a singer really balances between singing and speaking because recitatives are often closer to the speaking register than the arioso parts. More over, what makes recitatives so realistic is that they are sort of performed in "real" time while arioso parts are often speech stretched in time.

Nevertheless, Method acting for singers could be a very interesting field to explore. The differences is that often singers have to perform a very short piece and they must set the situation all by themselves (there is no scenery on a singing recital). An example could be F. Schubert's outstanding "Erlkönig" where the singer has to be four different characters (Narrator, father, son and the Elf king).

To conclude, it is highly advised that singers go through the same research an actor would do. **One must become a student of behavior.** Certain cautions should be taken though: it is common sense that one should prepare for Puccini's Mimi falling sick. On the other hand, a singer should also keep in mind if his/her physical appearance can fit that of the characters he/she desires to impersonate. It is true that all more and more opera companies want their singers not only to have the vocal capacity to pull out a role but also to look like

the personage. So that would make it very hard for an overweight soprano to sing Violetta (La Traviata) but again, that is not the rule and there still exist opera companies that focus exclusively on the vocal side.

However, the research can only *inform* the performance, it cannot *be* it. When the time comes to perform all the research is left behind and communication takes place. When we perform we stop thinking what does every word mean, we *are* the words. *Research and rehearsals* are the *repetitive* actions done to give birth to a sincere performance.

## **9. Vibrancy and Buoyancy**

Anything that is alive transmits energy. Energy travels with mechanical waves affecting mass or space, creating vibrations. **Sound is vibration.** Sound waves travel through mediums such as air and water before reaching our ears. Our ears vibrate in sympathy with the original source of the vibration, allowing us to hear many different sounds.

The reason giving existence to this chapter is the rising demand for “straight” voices, voices that can match the sound of an oboe or clarinet for the purposes mostly of chamber music and baroque pieces of music. But what we hear in Maria Callas’ seminars in Julliard and what I have been told by Anne Sophie von Otter in the Udo Reinemann sessions is quite the opposite: “*Always vibrate. It is the only way for the voice to carry*”. I was singing J.Sibelius’ “Säv, säv, susa” in class with Anne Sophie von Otter. I was singing the first and last part with no vibrato, trying to reach a “pure” tone, not allowing my voice to vibrate, as I know that due to its “dark” color it would immediately give a dramatic color to the piece. But alas, I had intonation problems here and there and my voice was sounding as if I had put a sourdine in front of my mouth. Von Otter soon stopped me to ask: Are you trying to sing straight?” I told her yes and she advised me not to.

I remember bringing Bach’s “Blute nur” in lesson with my teacher Dinah Bryant: I was trying to sing the piece with a baroque, straight sort of singing and my teacher stopped after the aria’s first part to ask me: “Are you trying to imitate a baroque violin?”

What got me into thinking is that both used the verb “trying” as if singing straight was not something natural. In both cases, as soon as I left the voice to vibrate freely, intonation problems disappeared and the voice gained in volume and richness without force. I soon understood that in order for the voice to perform to its best, one has to trust it and stop trying to manipulate it.

I had the chance to have lessons with Markus Hadulla during the Udo Reinemann sessions and I apply to the voice what he says to every new piano he has to play on:

*“Hello, I don’t push you and you give me what you got!”*

Straight singing should be used as an effect of emptiness, the same way as excessive vibrato should be used in moments of great emotional charge. It is not possible that a sound wave does not vibrate. The only sound that has no vibration is the sustained note on the machine, which shows that heartbeats have stopped. However, when a voice is vibrating to the edge of tremolo, almost reaching a different pitch, then that is a sign that the singer’s technique is poor, or that at the given moment, the emotional state of the singer works against him/her (stress). So the vibrato that would naturally happen from the appoggio, a singer tries to imitate relying on the larynx’s flexibility. But of course a trained ear will immediately understand the absence of free airflow.

Only with natural vibrato can a singer achieve **core**, “**squillo**”, **brilliance** in sound and a tasteful tonal accuracy. Only then can the sound “float” free and rich instead of having to “pierce” thus being forced and aggressive.

## 10. Control is an illusion

*Welcome, we have been waiting for you.*

When you control, your mind is constantly checking. The mind creates an image, a goal, works towards that and then checks what has passed in order to confirm its prediction. However, if the mind is constantly checking, during performance or rehearsal, that means that the mind is occupied with what has passed (or possibly with what is coming) and not with what is. In classical music there is always a direction, a constant forward movement. Once the mind is caught in doubting and examining what has passed, this or that interval or passagio, immediately the performer is not 100% in the moment.

I have noticed that in deep meditation, the sense of time is lost. Actually, one understands that has reached deep meditation only after coming out of it. The same way we understand we have slept very deep only after waking up. I believe that an out-standing performance is based on being in the moment. I remember watching Victor Borge's amazing improvising on Czardas, completely free and open to any new idea that appeared to him. I then realized that I had the exact same feeling when improvising: when creating music on the spot.

Then I joined the Free Improvisation class of Kris Defoort in Koninklijk Conservatorium of Brussels. He would ask us to improvise with a choice of players, creating thus small ensembles. It was visible to everybody that the players who tried to control sound and who spent brain capacity to judge on the spot what they liked or what they did not, were the ones most "detached" from the rest of the ensemble. One must always judge in the end of a performance but that does not come naturally to everyone. So one should make it a purpose and exercising on letting go of control.

One should lose control on purpose: join an improvisation class or form an improvisation team or even improvise alone. However, improvisation is so much more than just an exercise. It is instant composition, is meditation, is rediscovering your instrument. By improvising I discovered different timbres on my voice. Improvisation can ignite ideas and even solve technical issues. It drugs you back to the initiation of sound production. If a singer can intergrade the feeling of improvisation in classical pieces, then their performance immediately sounds more organic, as if the ideas and emotions are created in real time.

Improvisation can assist in finding the internal vibe of each musician. For example, I always found myself to be more mellow-legato-long line type than the type of singers that just go on scattling. And that portrait perfectly matches the feedback I used to get that I had a sad expression even to my most "happy" pieces. What I then had to do was to expose myself to what I felt uncomfortable with. So I started improvising in other ways, more extroverted and with faster pulse. Soon I could intergrade that feeling into my happy songs. It is extremely hard to be a musician nowadays and the reason is all around us: The World Wide Web. Everything we do can be recorded and uploaded to public view at any time.

It is extremely hard to do music on the spot for a public that is better satisfied with YouTube videos and iTunes mp3s. A lot of people today do not understand the importance of the moment where music is created. That is often understood when people do not turn off their mobile phones during a performance. **"The moment is eternity"**.

The musician first should show how precious the moment is and pull the audience to his/her core. As my teacher Dinah Bryant says a performance does not have to be perfect, **it just has to be wonderful!**. Perfection is something that one must always work towards to but something unreachable. True perfection can only please the demanding mind but not a yearning heart.

## *Episode 6: Arrive, Appear and be Free*

### Arrive

After preparation of the music material and test-drive in rehearsals, one must stop “arriving”, one must arrive once and for good. Sometimes we are never ready for a piece. Musical aspects are fine but it lacks a strong interpretation. I believe that at that moment we must give it a try in a small concert -a sort of recognition battle. Maybe only then can we identify what feels wrong. Even if the singer is unsure, one must start somewhere. So I say arrive at last not to stay, but to take the time to see where you came from, where you are and which direction should you go from then on.

*“Interpretation is the individual understanding and reproduction”*  
- Lotte Lehman

### Appear

Touching ground, arriving in our destination, the performance. Interpretation is the narration of the trip within the gardens of composers and poets. Interpretation changes along the way and as we grow. Every time we revisit pieces, it is very likely that each time we will discover hidden treasures. They were there before, but we were young and impatient and wanted to master the high or low notes and missed the true essence of it all: the story. So now is the time to tell the story. Invite the audience to our journey, enchant them.

### Be Free

Go on. What is freedom? The Greek word for freedom is “Ελευθερία” coming from the future tense of the verb “έρχομαι” which means to arrive. The actual meaning of the word freedom in Greek is not an established situation, but the way *to* a situation. In other words, the word for freedom in Greek means the “agon”, the way towards, the strive and hope for something that will come. This is how I perceive singing. Freedom is not a state but a way, a movement. If one thinks that has found balance and stops trying for it, he/she will soon collapse. It is a constant harmonization with the surroundings and the internal life, those two parallel worlds. If a singer arrives to believe that has learnt everything and can never be mistaken again, he/she will only lose quality in the art of singing and interpreting. The deeper we study and observe the more it becomes clear that we do not and possibly cannot know anything. The more I research, the more I see how many things I do not know. One of the things I deeply appreciate and admire about my teacher Dinah Bryant is that she is humble enough to say “I honestly do not know, let’s search!” when she is not sure about something. Studying with her I received the most precious gift as a singer: she taught me how to be **free**, how to **enjoy** what I do and finally how to search for **my own way**.

*As for me, all I know is that I know nothing*  
-Socrates

## *Episode 7: My suitcase Part II*

This episode is a sequel of episode 3 (Act I) and here I show you the rest half of my suitcase. The portraits I made for every character I wanted to sing in my second graduation recital, were created after a role study I made for each of them. Some do not have a concrete personage –mostly Rachmaninov’s and Debussy’s songs, so I created a portrait that sparked a feeling, a circumstance that the text and music evoked in me. The idea and image of every piece came to me spontaneously through singing the pieces -before setting the photoshoot, and the role study came to confirm that I was on the same frequency with each one of them. Each piece except Francesca’s aria. That one I did not see coming: All the other pieces sing of what they are. Francesca does so, too, but she has a purpose. She seems so sweet in this cantilena but that is only her camouflage to intrigue affection from others. I only got to know that after studying the libretto of this Opera. So I was tricked by Francesca the same way she tricks everyone attracted to her (!). That made me take a closer look to all of the other pieces again, just to secure that every thing is as they say. Finally, I concluded that studying **new repertoire is like meeting new people**. Everything matters: the first impression, the relationship, the everyday conflict, the agreement and co-existence. One must be honest if wanting to create bonds and deep understanding with another person, so it is with new repertoire as well.



## LAETITIA

“What a curse for a woman is a timid man? – Steal me sweet thief”, Opera and libretto “The Old Maid and The Thief” by G.C.Menotti. Originally a radio-opera for NBC, with first theatrical production (after adaptation by the composer) given in Philadelphia in 1941. Menotti was inspired to write the story of the opera after visiting the family of his partner, Samuel Barber: he found that what seemed to be a quaint, cute town actually covered up a plethora of secrets about people and places. Scene VI-Laetitia’s solo: She is ironing Bob’s clothes. Bob, the beggar that she and her Old Maid, Miss Todd gathered from the street but only to learn after that he is a thief. She is complaining that in spite of her Maid’s help – who secretly leaves him money here and there to steal, he makes no advances. This phrase is accompanied by a chord progress in the accompaniment (leitmotiv, see picture). Bob’s progress is exactly what Laetitia longs for, but not in terms of stopping to steal, but to steal even her as well! She is afraid that she will end up like her Maid: old and alone. She prays that he would steal her breath and she does actually lose her breath even in the thought of it, as the aria proceeds and the rhythm of the vocal line becomes denser. Moreover, as if Menotti did it on purpose, he uses alterations of “f” and “th”, consonants that require a lot of air in order to be projected. So this aria is **Laetitia’s dream: That Bob would touch her like she touches his clothes**. I chose to put Laetitia into long black gloves because women from the working class would always wear gloves when dressing for a special occasion: they wanted to hide their chapped hands. I find that vocally, this piece starts with a Mozartian recitativ and continues with a Puccinian aria. I remember having trouble with supporting this aria’s long phrases until I tried it once while I was ironing(!) and immediately understood the kind of movement my support muscles should make.





## MOTHER OF A SERPENT

“Blute nure du liebes Herz” aria for Soprano from Matthäus-Passion, with music by Johann Sebastian Bach and libretto by Picander, a pseudonym for Christian Friedrich Henrici. The date of first performance is in dispute, occurring at Thomaskirche, Leipzig, on either April 11, 1727 or April 15, 1729. From Part I (no.12), a lament for the mother of Judas Iscariot, following the announcement of his intent to betray Jesus. This beautiful lament starts with persistent double appoggiaturas in the accompaniment, creating such harmonic tensions that one might think that these are the cracking sounds of a breaking heart: A mother comes to understand that the child she brought up with all her love, that nursed at her breast, grew up to become the serpent who threatens to murder Jesus –the snake-like melody.



A mother who has loved her child once, will love it forever, and that is exactly why her heart is “bleeding”: because **now she has to hate what she has loved the most**. The pain is so deep that cuts the sentence in an unexpected place, after a comma and the causative “denn”:



What is challenging in Bach’s works, is the purely instrumental vocal line with words that are repeated over and over again. As for the posture of the model I was much influenced by Pina Bausch’s choreography of Dido’s lament (Henry Purcell) for *Café Müller* in 1978.



## COMING OF AGE

“Ach, ich fühl’s”, from the Singspiel Opera “The Magic Flute”, music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and libretto by Emanuel Schikaneder. Premiered on 30 September 1791 at the Freihaus-Theater auf der Wieden, Vienna. Out of all Mozart’s Andantes (andante maestoso/un poco adagio etc) this is the most bare of all: This Opera is written for standard string sections, 16 woodwind player, brass and percussion. For this aria, 13 woodwind players set down their instruments, leaving only a single flute, oboe and bassoon (the latter joins first in bar 4 with a dissonance on the word “hin”: behind). Let us keep in mind that German language reveals the meaning of a sentence little by little. There is a way of making the major mode seem even more desolate and pathetic than the minor mode, the way he removes the three high woodwinds for ten bars of the forty-one-bar aria to accentuate the depths of Pamina's thoughts of death. Until the instrumental coda of the last four bars of the aria, the string players offer essentially a single rhythm: There is an extraordinary tension between the rigorously unchanging accompanimental rhythm and the prodigious variety of rhythms in the vocal line. Pamina is expressing certain emotions for the very first time: **First love, first hurt, first loneliness have all come at once.** Pamina reaches maturity: grows into a woman who will sing no fewer than 26 notes on "herzen" (heart). The rhythm of the strings is like the bars of a prison cell, but those of the vocal line show the way she is tentatively trying to grope a path to enlightenment. We read in the Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung that Mozart wanted to hear a Pamina *passionate, excited, restless, reflecting the feeling of being offended by Tamino's silence.* But she *must* express herself in this detailed, sophisticated way for an additional reason: she must be paired with Tamino, the prince. The most persuasive interpretations come only when the underlying harmony is taken into consideration. The piece is written in the last year of Mozart's life, is one of the most forward-looking pieces he ever wrote. He avoids making a cadence in the home key of the piece. He manages to delay a complete cadence until Pamina's last line, a brilliant touch on its own but a devastating one when the resolution is immediately swept away by the chromaticism of the instrumental coda.

*There is nothing  
more desirable  
In the world  
than the dream.  
It has magic stillness.  
It has on its lips  
No sadness, no laughter  
And bottomless eyes,  
and many hidden  
pleasures.*



*It has two immense wings,  
as light as  
the shadow of midnight.  
It's unfathomable  
how it carries them,  
and where and on what;  
It will not beat its wings,  
And it will not move its  
shoulder.*

## MORPHEUS

"Сон", op. 38 no. 5 (1916) by Sergei Vasil'yevich Rachmaninov and poem by Fyodor Kuzmich Teternikov (pseudonym Sologub). Once in the West, he had to concentrate on piano playing to make a living. Aside from the 3 Russian Songs for Chorus of 1926, these beautiful and romantic songs are *the last of his total of 85*. Opus 38 shows that when this unfortunate cessation happened, Rachmaninov was at the top of his form as a vocal composer. The songs achieve a unique synthesis of his powerful style of keyboard writing and sensitive, informed composition technique for voice. Moreover, Rachmaninov's taste in poetry was changing thanks to the intervention of Marietta Shaginian, age 25 and a poetess, who started writing to the composer in 1912, signing her letters simply "Re." Their correspondence became open and intense. Soon, Shaginian felt able to criticize Rachmaninov's selection of poems to set as songs, telling the composer he relied too much on works of deceased poets and even then often used weaker ones. She introduced him to the works of the living poets of the Symbolist school of poetry. Rachmaninov responded by making his use of harmonies and tonality more subtle and colorful, adding a layer of chord-based symbolism. There is an improvisatory quality in Son with a soft-textured, lulling and rippling accompaniment. Its title is probably best translated as "Sleep," although sometimes "Dream" is seen –and that is where the portrait takes its name from: **Morpheus**, the ancient greek god of **sleep** and **dreams**. He has the ability to mimic any human form and to appear in dreams. His true semblance is that of a winged daemon. Rachmaninov was composing Op.38 at the same time with Études-Tableaux, Op.39. These works are polar opposites emotionally. Op. 38 is actually the result of a chance meeting at a sanatorium in Crimea in summer 1916. Rachmaninov went there seeking treatment for wrist pains after a particularly stressful concert season, with extra concerts added to benefit Scriabin's family. On arrival, he found soprano Nina Koshetz in residence. They were already acquainted, having just performed some of his songs previously that year. At the sanatorium, they formed a plan to appear together again in the coming year -provided that Rachmaninoff could quickly produce some new songs. The new songs appeared as Op. 38 dedicated to Koshetz, and the pair premièred them before the end of 1916.



### FRANCESCA THE VAMP

“Vous avez deviné – Comme une fleur de serre” from the opera “La Route d’Emeraude” by Auguste De Boeck and libretto by Max Hautier (after the novelle by Eugène De Molder) which premiered January of 1921 in Théâtre Royal in Gent. This is the composer’s final opera written during World War I.

Kobus wants to be a painter and leaves for Amsterdam in order to become student of Frans Krul. When he arrives there, even though warned by his friend Dirk, he falls immediately under the spell of the beautiful Spanish model, Francesca. Rembrant visits the atelier and compliments Kobus on one of his sketches. Seeing that he is not in his most prosperous period, he gives him the prophetic words:

*“A person is only truly capable of greatness after his heart has bled, after he has loved, cries in bitter anguish; since the heart sings best when it dies from grief”.*

Francesca seems to passionately respond to Kobus’ love but only to abandon him soon after. In third act, we see Kobus and Dirk in an inn, while Dirk is explaining to Kobus that **Francesca gives her favours to anyone who offers her something in return, be it money, be it favours**. Kobus leaves the inn disillusioned and then the pirate Barbéra enters followed by Francesca. She tells Dirk that she still has feelings for Kobus but he tells her that Kobus has already forgotten of her. She then throws herself on the pirate, whom she seduces with her cantilena. Barbéra is a landsman from Spain, and she agrees to follow him home. At the Quay she encounters Kobus, but she once again mocks his feelings.

Alike as they may seem, the figure of Francesca is not Carmen. **Francesca does not really love or hate any man**. She only wants to survive and make her way up in society. She feeds on men’s naivety, that is her nature. In her cantilena she appears as helpless (like Mignon), evoking thus an urge of protectiveness from the pirate.



## APPARITION

Apparition, from *Quatre chansons de jeunesse*, Claude Debussy, 1884 (8 February) in Ville d'Avray, dedicated to Madame Vasnier. Like many of Mallarmé's poems, "Apparition" deals with loss, specifically the absence of a loved one and her presence through the faculty of memory. The poem is cast in two sections which are by turns opposed and conflated, centered on the multifaceted images of a feminine symbol. In the first section, lines 1–9, the poet recalls the blessed day of the beloved's first kiss, set in a Baudelarian garden full of seraphic musicians and vivid flowers. But everything is wrong: the moon was sad, the seraphim weeping, the viols sobbing. It is as if they knew beforehand that the joy of this day was not to last, that the act itself (whether a true kiss or a kiss-as-metaphor) could never equal the poet's anticipation of it. This section is balanced, and somehow redeemed, by the memory of the fairy, who blessed the dreams of a spoiled poet-child's slumbers in years long past. The figures of the beloved and the fairy are conflated in the apparition that assails the poet as he wanders the streets. Searching for his own unique musical voice, Claude Debussy discovered the works of the Symbolist writers Maurice Maeterlinck, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Paul Verlaine, and thus found a reflection in words of all he sought in his own music. Maeterlinck provided him the means of escaping Wagner's operatic influence and the libretto to his one and only complete opera *Pelléas et Mélisande*; Mallarmé offered the inspiration for his revolutionary orchestral tone poem *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*; Verlaine, the text for nearly one-third of Debussy's total output of song. Though Debussy's vocal music often is resigned to live in the shadows of his magnificent piano and orchestral works, his songs are no less stunning and original.

Stéphane Mallarmé's poem *Apparition* was the basis of Claude Debussy's 1884 setting. Debussy's music, however, was left unpublished and did not appear in print until 1926. Beginning in E major with brilliant figurations in the high register of the piano, Debussy effectively captures the ethereal setting of Mallarmé's text. Throughout the song, the listener follows with great awareness the passions of the poem's narrator as he recollects the "sacred day" of his and his beloved's first kiss and her appearance before him in the cobblestone streets. The piano accompaniment is active, painting an intricate picture in tones of Mallarmé's scene. At the conclusion of the opening E major section (though by then that key had long been abandoned), a new section juxtaposing compound and duple rhythms emerges in G-flat major. Despite this initial intricacy, the music of this section begins to slow as it approaches what might be termed the central episode. Shifting to C major, the voice adopts a much more lyrical tune and the piano provides a steady and quiet accompaniment of reiterated chords. A reprise of the G-flat major section closes out the song, which concludes with soft chords, over resonant open fifths, ascending into the high register of the piano and the voice. *I intentionally chose to finish my performance as a Master in Voice student with "Apparition: it expresses my desire to unveil my personality as a performer and appear in front of you.*

## Epilogue

I am gladly writing the end of this essay -yet only the beginning of a research, only the first “Check-In” on the list of numerous destinations. Act I dwells upon Musicianship and Act II upon Musicality. One should never think that one is more important than the other. Only in combination can they shape an exceptional artist. After preparation a singer has to take the trip. No matter how well we are prepared, if we don’t actually take the trip, all effort is meaningless. Arriving on the actual destination has a different sensation from the touristic agency’s leaflet - same with musical preparation. Being a student is so much more different from being a professional: everything you knew is put under different perspective, now – after having mastered vocal technique, one is concerned about making art more than about being correct. A singer grows and finds his/her place in the wonder world of music (Episode 4).

If we were to play Act II in fast forward this is what we would hear more or less -Highlights (Episode 5):

Conquering land: **Role down the role and start the exploration voyage.**

Inspiration: **Make room for the “crazy” flower.**

Fear: **Stubbornly expose yourself until it is settled.**

Emotion and La Vie Intérieure: **“You cannot take us to a place you’ve never been.”**

Frustration: **Don’t water flowers of range.**

Conviction: **Be natural. Nature is not concerned about convincing.**

Maintenance: **We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit (Aristotle).**

Actors: **The singer serves more like a vessel for the drama than a participant in it.**

Vibrancy and Buoyancy: **All living creatures have a vibe. Vibrate and stay alive!**

Control is an illusion: **One must still have chaos in oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star (F.Nietzsche).**

Coming home, the singer, now changed, grown, experienced and moved by his/her journey invites us to his world: the performer becomes the host of the dream (Episode 6).

Concluding, I bring you the images I carried along the way, along my preparation and which are an organic part of my performance and interpretation (Episode 7).

May this essay be seen under the prism of a suggestion. Each one of us is unique and unique is the balance of elements in him/her. One must find what works best for him/her and what helps them to serve the music the best.

*Listen, real poetry doesn't say anything; it just ticks off the possibilities. Opens all doors.*

*You can walk through any one that suits you.*

*-Jim Morrison*

Finally, I would like to express how grateful I am for having to go through this research: it offered me knowledge, new viewpoints, and kept me sane under the stressful yet exciting circumstance of preparing a diverse and challenging singing program. The more I discover the more I become a student of myself and of the world, which leads me to the paradox: The more I learn, the more I realise how much I do not know. Yet.

As singing goes, so goes life.  
To my family.

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