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## The actor's voice and character in an operatic performance

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### Abstract

Becoming aware of oneself and the consciousness of how to get a good speaking voice is a task every actor must fulfil. An actor with a good voice has better opportunities to clinch a role during and audition because the voice has the capacity to attract listenership. People don't enjoy listening to someone with a very loud, bad articulation, speaks too fast, speaks too slow or has a lisp. This paper helps actors to get the right kind of exercises and basic rules of having a good voice with Cicely Berry as the main source of information. Findings have shown that performing in an opera is somewhat a difficult task especially in Nigeria because most actors are yet to come to terms with the fact that voice training is as important as characterization. It is very important that actors give proper attention to voice training as just as they train their acting chops.

**Keywords:** Actor, Voice, Character. Operatic Performance

### Introduction

Dramatic opera means acting while singing in an opera. It means more than that because singing in an opera implies a wholeness of functioning that transforms acting into something different from acting in a spoken drama. The element of music and the physical act of singing demand so much emotional involvement and physical discipline that acting in opera becomes its own art, related to singing and related to acting, yet distinct.

In developing a character in a dramatic opera, the actor must first create an emotional and psychic involvement, projecting feelings with energy and not worrying about how accurate they are to the character, but loosening the disbelief in the ability to draw from the mythic depths of experience that lies within. The primary objective in a dramatic opera is to convince the audience that you are someone you are not, and to do so while you participate in the operatic convention of singing words that in real life (or spoken drama) would normally be spoken. One needs to act so convincingly that the audience becomes unaware of this convention and engages only in the drama and the beauty of the music.

### Character in Voice

A Character's voice is not just the words that emerge from the character's mouth. It is the point of view from which the character views the world. If you have the most gripping plot imaginable happening to characters no one cares about, the audience will not be able to fully appreciate the play. Character development is crucial to a play's success, and character voice is one important aspect of character development.

In an operatic performance, the voice enables the singer to be heard while singing, and projects the singer's singing ability. It is advised that the opera soloist need to be able to sing loudly for the audience to hear and understand the message he or she is passing across which is possible only with the help of a trained voice. According to Helen Sewell, loud does not mean shouting but projection. As she puts it.

Projecting the voice is not just shouting louder – that can strain and ultimately damage the vocal cords – but a way of speaking that uses the diaphragm, an umbrella shaped muscle which lurks at the bottom of the stomach above your belly button. The strength of the speaking voice is marked by the amount of air

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that can be steered by the diaphragm through the lungs to the vocal cords, Projecting the voice does not involve just shouting louder – that Can strain and ultimately damage the vocal cords.

Projecting is a way of speaking that uses your belly muscles to push the sound up and out of you [1]. Sewell goes ahead to advise that the first step for any opera singer in mastering the art of voice projection in any situation is good posture. Bad posture, slumping or hunching, can tense up the muscles used for both breathing and the voice – she says the singer should stand up and straight, with hips over legs and ears over shoulders, with the weight evenly balanced and muscles relaxed, that by doing this the singer already have a sound basis for projecting the voice. Also the singer should stand upright, the head resting comfortably above the spine. Roll the shoulders back gently and the hips slightly forward while tucking the tailbone in at the base of the spine for support and Standing with the feet comfortably apart.

She maintains that it is important to remember that a strong voice doesn't come from the vocal cords in the throat: they shape the breath from the lungs as it passes out of the body. Vocal strength depends on the power of that breath. The inhaled air is taken down to the diaphragm and released up and outwards over the vocal cords, into the mouth to be shaped into words before being released. She also says that the use of voice in singing is examined in terms of breath use, control of pitch, and loudness, and shaping of resonance for change of timbre. In a similar vein, Stanley Kahan insists that proper method of delivery which is an important factor that contributes to the success of a great speech depends on the ability to properly manage the voice to be able to deliver the various rhythms that suit various moods and subjects. According to him,

Vocal techniques must also be learned and used properly in order to achieve maximum effectiveness on stage. When moving on stage, the actor does not move, stand, or sit the way he or she does in everyday life. So too, when using the voice, certain modifications are necessary, due to the heightened sense of the vocal cord which is necessary in the theatre before an audience. (108)

Operas are full of complex characters. The musical choices a composer makes and the casting of different voice types gives the audience a clue about these characters and helps them to gain a deeper understanding of their emotions, actions and motivations. A character's voice is a distinctive and important part of both character development and overall development of the play. Each character voice in a play and perhaps even some of the minor ones should have a distinctive voice that sets that character apart from others. A Character's voice can make or mar an operatic performance. Cicely Berry, an acclaimed voice expert also provides methods of voice production and its application to the speaking of the text. She tries to achieve this by introducing exercises aimed at making sure the actor is aware of all the possibilities of the text and the release one's strength and subconscious responses which are nearly richer than one thinks.

She however warns that these exercises take time to work, that one must feel the exercise before he or she can notice what is happening. Berry also points out that these exercises are guides to finding the movement of the character's age, physical prowess, mental agility and wit. She advised that

before you go into any exercise you must first of all remind yourself of the element of speech, which she termed *Substance of the Text*, and this has to do with Attitude, Rehearsal, Vocal expression, Nonverbal expression. In the first exercise, Berry advises the actors to go through the following.

**a. Vowels and Consonants**

The following two exercises focus on the actors becoming even more sensitized to the actual sound qualities of vowels and consonants in words. The actors meet in a circle and speak the same passage which they know well. At this stage, they should only verbalize the vowel sounds in words and feel the lengths and differences between long and short ones. She reminds one to maintain good breath support and to bear the meaning of the words in mind, but not to let this dominate the experience. The actors should actively feel the fullness of each vowel sound and how certain patterns may emerge throughout a phrase and a feeling of the rhythm of a line may become clearer. They then return to speaking the text normally and observe how this might feed into their sound exploration.

The group then speaks through a shorter section of the same passage but focuses on the consonant sounds. The aim is to “gauge how forceful the language is, its muscular strength...and whether devoiced or voiced” This she feels draws attention to the precision of the thought as spoken by a character/speaker and the mood, depending on the heaviness or lightness in the qualities of the consonants. The sound and substance of the language are pointed out through these exercises. This, Berry feels is always a positive process as it is “slightly absurd—...not logical, they release us from the need to make sense, and our imaginations can then be released through sound. (143)

For group and solo work, Berry advises the actor to go through the entire lip vowel, putting a light ‘h’ in front of each:

*OO oo OH AW o OW OI*

According to her, these lip vowels are mixed monothongs, and diphthongs, so it is good to notice the lip movement on the diphthong, and also the different length of each sound. She also advised on the need to feel the voice continuants, making them vibrate and make the head buzz.

E.g. *Vvv Zzz TH ----* (voiced). She suggests that we should feel the difference between the voice and unvoiced plosive e.g.

<b>Voiced</b>	<b>Voiceless</b>
<i>te te</i>	<i>de de</i>
<i>pe pe pe</i>	<i>be be be</i>

Actors are also advised to use them with the vowel, so as to feel the impelling sound.

TOO DOO  
TAH DAH  
POO BOO

- Repeat the sequence with the consonant at the end.
- Feel the final voice continuants, use them any combination of vowel you like so that you do not keep it at isolated sound, this enable you to notice variable length (144)

The exercise given for the group work has to do with hearing the substance of the text by going through this sequence:

*Mememe mememe mememe MOO*  
*Mememe mememe mememe MOH*  
*Mememe mememe mememe MAY*  
*Ememe mememe mememe MEE*

According to her, when the actors are used to this sequence, they should sing, this way (145), while singing the consonant sequence, she also advises that actors should standstill for the vowel and open their arm out for it, so that a shape can be formed with the arm, the shape that vowel suggests to them.

To properly work on the piece of text, Berry advises that the group should work on the text by reading it through together at least once to get the feeling of it together then read and sing the last work in each line, that they'll hear the vowel open out. They should speak it through but spread our arms on the last and make the shape that the vowel suggests. She opines,

I particularly like the exercises which make arm movements and shapes for the vowels. The shape on specific can vary enormously; go with your impulse, it makes the vowel spread physically through your body and makes you give them full value, and allow meaning to be expressed through them.(147).

According to Berry, physical arm gestures serve to enhance the expression and meaning of vowel sounds.

#### **b. Hearing the Language**

This has to do with hearing what is happening in the language both in terms of rhythm and in terms of quantity. Apart from the grammatical sense it is important to hear and know the meaning of the text or connection will not be made. As such, the actor has to be totally behind what he is saying. In understanding, Berry again suggested exercises that will help the actor achieve this.

She suggests that the actors get in circle, speaking the passage round, one person at a time from one punctuation mark to another punctuation mark; each person must receive what he has been given from the last person and allow his own phrase to open out and hand it to another person. By so doing, there is an individual communication which is part of the whole. The actors should repeat this sequence, but instead of speaking, they should sing the word round and respond to what they are hearing and try as much as possible not to make it sound like hymns and chant.

Berry opines that the actor gets in a good position and prop the text in front of him and prepare himself so that his breath is rooted, she also says that it is useful to go through a few lines from the text with the arm moving, that the arm movement stops one from being tensed and enables the actor to hold his breath.

#### **c. Language Fabric**

This section complements the previous one on hearing the substance in the language of the text. Now the focus shifts to an awareness and recognition of the underlying choices made in connecting thoughts in a passage. One should spend time on words to feel their full possibilities and to not take any of the words for granted. Words create certain images and sounds that are connected to each other and the actor

Needs constant reminding to find these connections. She says there is not a specific exercise for this but rather the fostering of an attitude to text that needs to be done "for everything contributes to the texture of the thought and is part of the whole fabric, through which we find the patterns and ladders in the writing (157).

For group exercise, Berry focuses on the issue of listening, observing and commenting. To achieve this, she makes actors to speak the passage together while one person steps outside the circle to listen and observe. The listener questions and comments on all words and lines that is not clear in intention or their sound. Each member of the group takes a turn to step out and continue this process. The actors can speak one word each at a time or a phrase and make sure that they convey this clearly and with full intention. It requires sharp concentration to speak and pass on the lines or thoughts without losing the energy and clarity. Finally full thoughts can be spoken by each actor and a sense of connection is maintained in the group on the text as a whole. (158).

She goes on to talk about solo work where she insists that the actor must speak the phrase aloud so that the thought is put in the mind and then mime it, the actor should take his time and be imaginative as he can and also take note of some of the exercises done in the group and go through the sequence alone through the following processes.

- **Attending to the word**

This means resisting the urge to think in terms of groups (clumps of sense) but rather filling each word entirely before taking the next word. Isolating each word from each other in your thoughts and moving sequentially from one word to the next whilst keeping the whole passage clearly in your mind.

- **Awareness of choices**

The purpose of this particular exercise is to increase our awareness of the language choices in the subtext which are always tied up with the objectives of the character. Berry says it will be quite essential to work on this part for it helps you to get inside specific vocabulary and also to be more accurate to the thought and this also has to do with antithesis, ladders or imagery. Just allow the words to contain all that is in your imagination.

- **Miming the Image**

Berry's attention is still on the words and finding physical ways of releasing the words to point out underlying structures, textures, connections and contrasts between them. This exercise is extremely useful in the sense that it makes you think accurately through the image.

- Take a speech you want to mime as if it's to someone who is deaf or who does not understand the language.
- Take care not to be too literal i.e. Do not make it into a language for the deaf and dumb but to try to capture the essence of the images.

- **Substituting Words**

Berry opines that it is good to do an exercise which substitutes words; it creates an awareness of the original choices and helps to find spontaneity of the image. She advises that the exercises should be set up like this:

Taking a prologue from a play, speak it round a line at a time and substitute one word in each line i.e. A verb for a

verb or a noun for a noun. The reason why she wants us to feel from the exercise is this, to become familiar with the language in ways that are not to do with thinking harder, but with receiving it in more instinctive ways. (176)

Berry goes further to examine the issue of energy in what she terms *Energy through Text*. This exercise is one that entails walking in the space and changing direction on each punctuation mark in the text. The aim is now to actively note the change in energy from “line to line...thought to thought...sense structure to sense structure” (179). According to her, the actor kicks an object e.g. an empty tin can on the last word of each line. This creates a sense of movement in the whole space. She emphasizes the need for the actor to kick “on the word, and not just after it. Notice just how active those last words are”. She suggests using a sonnet to experience this sense of lifting the last word of a line and how the strong movement releases energy and points the meaning of end words. One can extend this further by only kicking on “the last word of the whole thought structure” (198).

### **Taming the Voice**

This part reveals the practical ways the actor can prepare his voice directly before performance either in a theatre group or on a personal endeavour. It reveals different work space in which the actor can thrive using the voice. The voice has been defined by Berry as an intricate mixture of what we hear, how we hear it, and how we choose to use it according to our personality, experience and physical make-up. As a result, good acting requires the effectiveness use of the vocal mechanism to express the intellectual and emotional content of the dialogue. When the actor has succeeded in doing this, it can be said that he is using the voice properly. The world out there is set on a different pedestal. Rooted in the very fabric are distinct acoustics. Everywhere you step into has a different sound. It wouldn't be out place to consider that the world is in sound form, seeing as everything makes a sound, whether pleasant or derogatory. In this quest of preparing our voices, it is expedient that we make ours adjustments objectively, which is in fact required because it not only keeps us vocally sound but it presents a new challenge which should be grabbed. She goes further to advice that it is good to work as a team in getting feedback and more importantly, relying on your good judgement as well. She maintains that it is paramount to a successful play that actors do a voice run-up as opposed to the usual rehearsal process.

Originally, actors perform less due to not being synchronized with the ‘space’ and this causes a ‘disconnect’ with the actors while performing. Berry further reveals some pointers that will help us to achieve the type of space needed for performance and how to adjust them subsequently beginning with size.

According to her, whatever size of space we are working on, it is essential to investigate all the areas for clarity for each space has its own idiosyncrasies. She goes further to talk about large spaces that not all large spaces are difficult to use, they can be bright and easy to use. We should however watch out for dead spot which is also called blind spot (an area in which signals are weak and their reception poor). She says that in a conventional theatre space, we will often find an area at the back of the stalls. The fact that it is under the circle deadens the sound and because it is not easy to see, people often feel they cannot hear.

She also points out that some spaces are deceptive, thus making us feel that the voice we are carrying is better than it is, while some spaces are unkind. In that the actor does not get feedback from their voice, they lose the sound as they speak and this is most likely to happen when the auditorium is wide and the stage is open and the actor starts to shout because he cannot hear what is happening thus causing damage to the voice, she advise the actor to resist temptation to be louder, rather sit back on the voice, and find as much resonance as you can and let it sing. This kind of large space needs resonance more than volume.

She insists that if a space is bright acoustically and the sound very resonant then the actor should cut down on the volume and make the consonants firm. She however talked about the medium and small spaces as well, that they are often tricky and need care that they may not need the volume, but they are deceptive and make us comfortable and too intimate.

Using thrust stage as an example, they feel very good and open but it is difficult in hearing round sides. However, the actor has the ability of adjusting his voice no matter the type of stage he finds himself. According to her, “all these have to do with common sense but it is perhaps quite useful to know that it's what you have to depend on. There is no one way of doing it right; you have to feel out each space and make your own judgement.” (262)

What is so important is not to allow yourself to be pushed or rushed and not to realize that volume alone is not the answer. People may hear but will not necessarily understand. We just have to become very sensitive to the time and flow that each space needs to make that happen. As usual, Berry suggests exercises that may be useful in blending the voice to the type of space we find ourselves.

As it concerns group work, Berry suggests warm up exercise, then setting a hum sound, each person feeling the vibration in the chest, back head and face. When this feels satisfactory, then everyone goes into the auditorium, spreading round as much as possible, and set hum again. The hum should continue until we feel it strong. The group should also pitch this hum sound from one level to another. She says that setting the hum sound is important and mustn't be in unison because everyone needs to find their own comfortably. She advises that it is good to go through this exercise before performance because it keeps the actor in tune with the play and the actor's sound energy going.

For solo exercise, Berry insists that the exercise is important for the actor because it enables the actor find his own level and confidence, that the actor should simply work on the piece of text on stage and get someone to go and in a different part of the theatre and get their reaction. The actor should experiment with the volume first and find what is comfortable to listen to, then experiment with the pitch. She recommends that the experiment also should be done on different position of the stage and that the person listening should tell you what they hear and did not hear.

Berry goes further to explain Cadence and Note. She defines Cadence as the musical flow of line in which stress happens incidentally. She makes us understand that Cadence is not just simply infliction, but that cadence happens because of the musical flow of the language. She says there is a need to tune into the musical possibilities in the language knowing that flow of thought can be helped by changing the note and that the listeners attention are always drawn when they hear a new note.

Further exercises introduced by Berry which she says can also help an actor's confidence in improving their voice is breath exercise. She advises actors to practice Edmund Jacobian's theory of relaxation. It is believed that maximum contraction produces maximum relaxation to relax all muscles in the body; the class practices the sun relaxation before practicing vocal exercises. This is to relieve any tension that the student could have during day so that the vocal exercise will not be affected.

The use of Hatha Yoga breathing is also recommended. Actors learn the maximum stretch that can produce the maximum breath. She also introduced other exercises like the floor exercise, breathing: ribs, breathing: stomach and others that can aid the actor's voice.

As it concerns metre and rhythm, Berry concurs with Shakespeare's idea of speaking the text loud and feeling the movement of the language before the actor realizes the meaning. The actor can find his way into the text by inhibiting and understanding the character and doing it through a precise attention to the word, the image, rhythm and a wonderfully shaped expression. Metre is the basic rhythmic structure of a verse or lines in verse. Many traditional verse forms prescribe a specific verse metre, or a certain set of metres alternating in a particular order. The study and the actual use of metres and forms of versification are both known as *prosody*.

Berry further states that it is important to know the function of the metre and that it is however, important to go back to this structure and start from a common point that once that is fixed, the actor will discover the possibilities of the movement within the line, great freedom and make themselves ready to hear it. According to her, pentameter consists of two syllables. The first unstressed and the second is stressed i.e. Short – Long which we mark e.g. the word "alike" or the two word "our scene". She says that the combination of stress with which the length of syllable varies the movement of line that the meter stress don't always lie with the sense stress. She adds that the awareness of metre subtly enhances the meaning of the text. As she puts it,

Now it seems to me that so often, directors and actors limit their choice by taking one of two definitive lines of approach. One way is to go with the metre as much as possible, and within the basic sense, accentuate its regularity. This accentuates a heightened emotional state that is rhetorical in essence, and is also very powerful. It is authoritarian and leaves no room for questions and so people like: it is how they think verse should sound. (52)

Berry then concludes that the metre is the most complex to explain because it involves feeling it with the body as well as the mind, but all other points hang on it. According to her, "I think from the actor's point of view, the variations on this basic form are of two kinds.

1. Those to do with the number of syllables or beats in a line. These variations alter the movement of a line, and therefore its emotional colour: there is always a reason for them. However, for our purposes, their effects is more often subliminal in that they are part of the motive and texture of the whole thought and do not substantially alter the style of speaking but of course, there are exceptions.
2. Those which are used more consciously and purposefully to dramatic effect, such as the broken or split lines, rhyme and rhyming couplets. The last two

are not in sense variations, rather an increased stylization in the writing – the form at its most exceptions" (71).

For Rhyme, Berry insists there is nothing difficult about it, that we simply have to be alert and use it, in order to allow its artificiality and we should never underestimate any nursery rhyme, rather actors should take any nursery rhyme and speak it aloud then stop at the last line that we feel just how much that last line is needed to fulfil both the sense and the pattern set up, that this is what the actors need to be careful and conscious of when using rhyme in Shakespeare which is a sense of delivering the rhyme to satisfy the ear of the listener. She opines,

It is interesting to notice the religious purity of the metaphor in the sonnet, but that as soon as the kiss is taken, the word play immediately has more licence. So we have to be alert to rhyme and enjoy using it for we must remember that pleasure in rhyme is a very basic instinct, which has nothing to do with class or education, simply with a delight in the turning of a word, as in children's rhymes, music hall songs etc. One remembers the delight one has as a child at verses which led you to expect a particular rhyme usually a rude word, only to find a different word was supplied. (73)

On final rhyme couplet, Berry says they are not the same as rhyme within a scene rather they are used purposefully to finish off a scene or part of a scene or a soliloquy, that the function of the final rhyme couplet is to carry the audience into the next piece of actor, she says that it has to do with style because they provide formal ending to what may have been a free and naturalistic piece of writing and they are a gesture in verbal term. She maintains that the rhyme and rhythm of the couplet have to be honoured completely because they occur in every play.

As a measure of control and uniformity, Bruce Schoonmaker maintains that an actor needs to act so convincingly that the audience becomes unaware of this convention and engages only in the drama and the beauty of the music. As a result, he introduces what he refers to as 'some brief rules.' As he puts it,

1. The dramatic reason for singing: You must have a good reason for singing. You must convince the audience (and yourself) that you can only express what you are trying to get across by singing. Otherwise you would simply have spoken the words.
2. Quiet doesn't mean small.
3. Don't blend. Don't apply choral concepts to singing opera.
4. Don't breathe passively. Don't breathe chorally. Don't sing chorally. Try to make the breathing a natural part of the characterization. Perhaps this character breathes deeply. Perhaps what she says at a particular moment extends her breathing in the same way that the singer playing her extends her breathing.
5. Take the momentum from one another as you gain the dramatic focus. Acting on stage is like playing basketball: one player handles the ball, then passes it to another. In the same way, one person dominates the drama (controls the dramatic focus), then passes that focus to another.
6. Feel the meter in half the time that the conductor is directing. If he conducts in 4, feel the beat in 2.

7. When you are the primary musical material, sing as if you are the primary musical material.
8. Always match or exceed the momentum of the conductor.
9. Mozart: Sing grace notes on the beat. Young singers make the mistake of singing grace notes too fast and unsupported.
10. In ensembles, do not match the phrasing of other voices. Make the dramatic sense of your melody into your own distinct phrasing.

### **Conclusion**

An actor's job is to fully embody a character that can convince and engage the audience. This is done through verbal or non-verbal means. The voice has been identified as the actor's means of expressing his fears, joys, intentions, experiences such that the words do not call attention to themselves based on pronunciations and tonality. They are just means to express ourselves in very clear terms. If diction must perform this fundamental role, the actor must be very attentive in the way he listens and apply care when learning in order to learn the right words, how they are used and what they stand for.

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