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## Acting for Opera Singers

Jennifer Hamilton

Technological University Dublin, [jennifer.hamilton@tudublin.ie](mailto:jennifer.hamilton@tudublin.ie)

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# 1 Acting for Opera Singers

Jennifer Hamilton

Conservatory of Music and Drama

Contact: [jennifer.hamilton@dit.ie](mailto:jennifer.hamilton@dit.ie)

## Abstract

As the majority of professional classical singers earn a significant part of their living in opera, it is vital that conservatoires and studios are able to provide fit-for-purpose education for these trainee artists. As opera productions today are increasingly influenced by the trends in cinema and live-streamed media, this study sought to identify and clarify the range and detail of acting and performance skills required of opera singers in this evolving professional environment. A significant part of the data collected relates to the participants' perceptions about the relevance of technical stagecraft skills. These techniques mainly relate to how performers negotiate and occupy space when on stage, in terms of angle, direction and distance.

The main component of the investigation has been conducted through a series of online and live interviews with a wide profile of practitioners including stage directors, performers, conductors, designers, teachers and intendants (company managers - usually artistic directors). The questions have been devised in order to evaluate the skills, resources and attributes which singers need to acquire in order to be able to succeed in this competitive industry.

The data revealed the fact that opera singers today are required to possess a high standard of acting skills. The investigation also confirmed that there is an increasing demand for these performers to be instigative and creative in the rehearsal process while working collaboratively. The findings also revealed that all the performers in the study consciously employ technical performance skills.

The conclusions from the investigation proposed that conservatoire programming therefore needs to incorporate technical performance training along with classes which will engender and develop creative and imaginative resources. It is advisable that these skills are contextualised regularly through participation in performance projects.

**Keywords:** *opera, acting, singers, stagecraft, conservatoire, multidisciplinary*

## Introduction

A brief scan of the web-sites of major international conservatoires would reveal that vocal departments strongly promote their opera programmes, indicating that opera appears to be sustaining a position in the market place.

As opera singers also have to be convincing actors, the purpose of this study has been to obtain more detailed information about what those professional expectations are today. The findings were collated from online feedback from a broad profile of professional performers, directors, and teachers working in opera. The data also included feedback from 'live' interviews with a conductor, a drama teacher and a director who also works in theatre and film.

The online questionnaire was devised to elicit feedback on the following:

- Perceptions about influences and/or trends in productions today
- Professional expectations; skills, resources and attributes necessary for singers to engage successfully in the profession
- Perceptions about the utilisation of technical skills; with particular reference to stagecraft
- Recommendations for relevant programme implementation in conservatoires

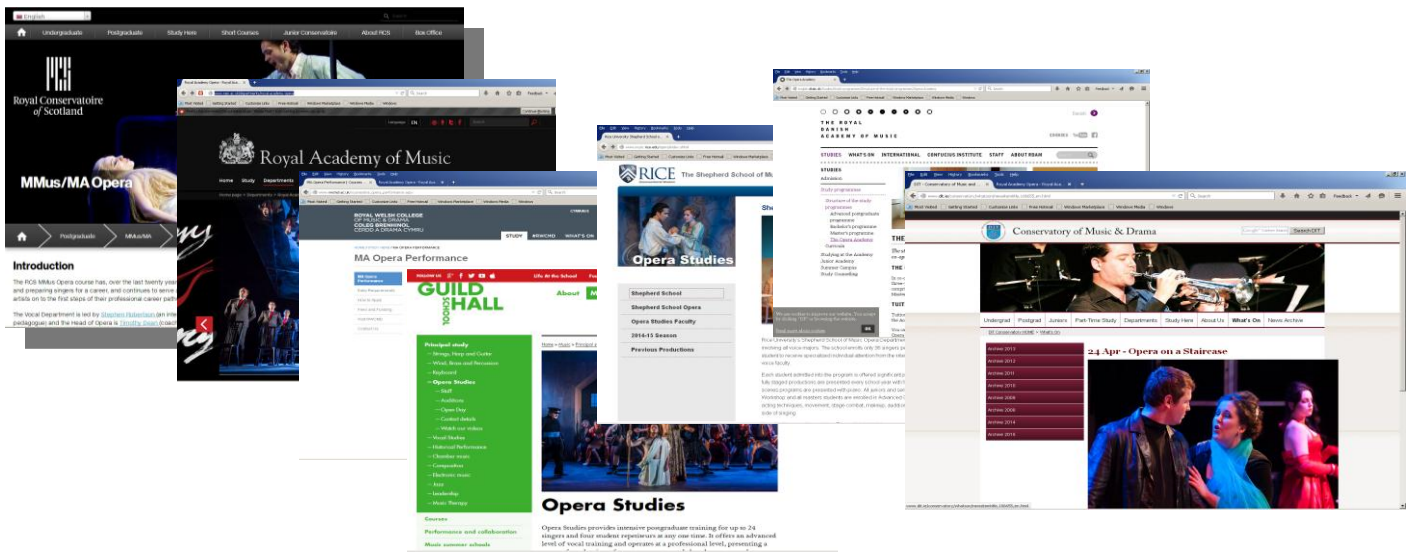


Figure 1.1: Conservatoire opera department web-pages

## Literature Review

*The Cambridge Companion to Opera* (Till 2012) provides informative articles about the evolution in production trends over the last ten years. These have been very useful in helping contextualise this study. In terms of forming recommendations for programme development, it was also useful to obtain an overview of the current attitudes towards multidisciplinary study in conservatoires.

Reformulating the idea of what a musician could be - what he or she has beyond a technical proficiency in one instrument - is highly relevant to the work-place, as musicians now need many strings to their bow. (Gregory 2005: 298)

As many of the findings reflected a current imperative for opera singers to portray realistic and believable characterisations, *Stanislavski on Opera* (Stanislavski and Rumyantsev 1975), a collection of writings about the Russian stage director Constantin Stanislavski's innovative direction of the Bolshoi Opera Studio in the 1920s, still provides an approach to dramatic characterisation which is equally pertinent today. With reference to current publications, David Ostwald's *Acting for Singers: Creating Believable Singing Characters* (Ostwald 2005) provides a commendable methodical approach towards dramatic interpretation.

While there is a reasonable body of such literature which focuses on the psychological approach to acting skills for singers, there appears to be less contemporary material which focuses on matters pertaining to stylistic awareness and technical performance technique (often known as stagecraft).<sup>1</sup> My own teaching experience at undergraduate and postgraduate level has for some time led me to conclude that many vocal students need to assimilate technical principals before they are able to channel their creativity and imagination in rehearsal and performance. It would therefore seem logical that this subject would be adequately reflected in publication. I have been curious to understand what the apparent literature gap might be indicating and how these techniques are currently perceived in the profession.

## Outline of Project Methods

This qualitative investigation was undertaken as a thematic analysis of data retrieved through a series of online questionnaires with a broad profile of 19 practitioners including directors, performers, teachers, conductors, designers and *intendants* (company managers – usually artistic directors) working in Ireland and abroad. These practitioners

<sup>1</sup> Stagecraft is also a term which can refer to scenery building skills.

ranged from major international *intendants* to fledgling performers who are just starting their careers. Live interviews were subsequently held with one director, one conductor and a drama teacher. In agreement with the participants, identities have been withheld in publication.

- Eleven Directors (including two director/*intendants*, one director/designer and two director/teachers)

The profile range of the directors included one practitioner at the beginning of their career, two international *intendants* and an Oscar-winning film director who also directs straight theatre and opera. One of the director/teachers is Head of Opera Department in a major European conservatoire.

- Eight Performers (including one performer/teacher/director)

The profile of the performers ranged from three principal soloists who have been performing for more than fifteen years in major international opera houses to three young singers who have recently graduated from post-graduate study.

- One Conductor (also artistic director of a European opera company)
- One Drama teacher (former course coordinator in a European Conservatoire opera department)

The findings were primarily collated in order to determine any prevalent viewpoints, whilst also comparing and contrasting divergent opinions. The process of analysis was mainly conducted through collating similar vocabulary and phraseology.

- Findings pertinent to a particular topic were drawn from a range of questions.
- The findings were further investigated in order to identify any patterns common to either the performer or non-performer cohorts.
- The collation of anomalous and contradictory opinions formed the final part of the investigation.

## Findings

### Influences and Trends

All the participants confirmed that acting skills are significantly important. There was a strongly held perception among the older performers that there has been an increase over the last ten years in these requirements.

#### Cinematic influence

Eight participants made specific reference to the cinematic/TV influences on opera production:

'The presentation and direction of opera has changed significantly since the 60/70/80s when young and successful stage directors and designers moved into the world of opera bringing the skills of theatre and film production into the genre – Visconti, Zefferelli, Hall, Miller, Brook.'  
(Participant 7, 2014)

The consequence of this influence was generally felt to imply that singers are increasingly expected to produce characterisations which are '*realistic*', '*truthful*', *appropriate to 'intimate close-up work'* or '*naturality*' (Participants 1, 3, 5, 6, 2014).

Several directors stated that they wished that singers would aspire more towards a deeper commitment to acting, instead of being preoccupied with their voices. However, most of the performers spoke of the challenges implicit in the current demand for dramatic realism, particularly with reference to the need to maintain the necessary physical posture, flexibility and strength to be able to sing demanding vocal lines.



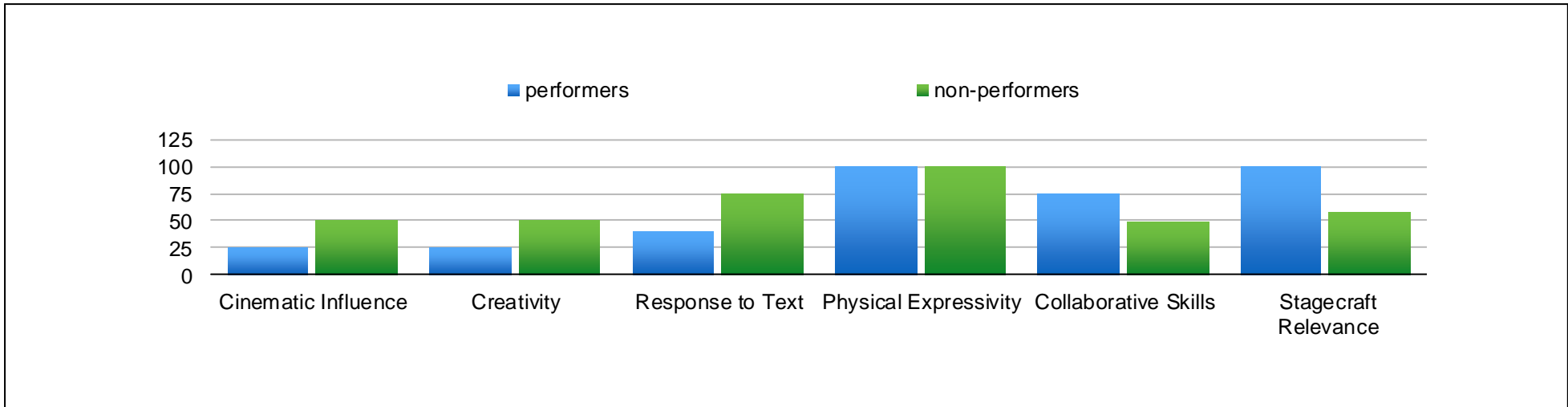


Figure 1.2: Major themes from the findings

## Physical Image

'The singer's body now is required to fit the description of the character, Lulu, Butterfly Mimi.'  
(Participant 7, 2014)

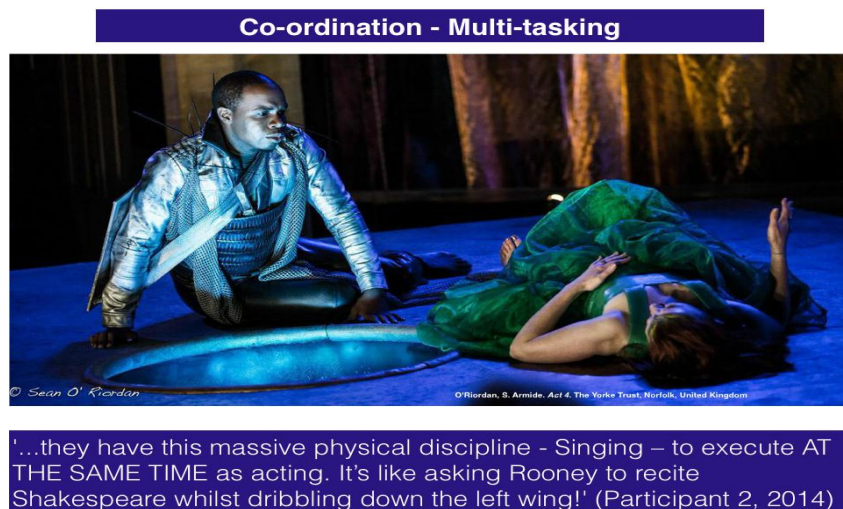
In relation to cinematic influences, three singers and four directors remarked on the current demand for singers to possess role-appropriate physical appearance.

## Professional Expectations: skills, resources, attributes

'Of course she can sing beautifully, of course she can act/dance ... now what else has she got?'  
(Participant 16, 2014)

The feedback from every single participant reflected the fact that opera singers today have to be multi-skilled. The need to be able to work in a team and to work creatively and imaginatively was a very strong priority reflected in the directors' findings. Many of the directors referenced imagination and creativity; equally, five out of eight of the performers' online interviews indicated that they are conscious of an expectation to be able to instigate and improvise in the rehearsal process.

## Physical Co-ordination and Expressivity



*Figure 1.3: Operatic multi-tasking*

All the participants commented that the ability to express emotional information through the body is a prime requirement. All the findings also reflected the fact that there is an expectation for singers to be sufficiently physically coordinated in order to be able to sing demanding vocal lines while acting with naturalness and credibility. This expectation is possibly informed by the HD cinematic influence in the industry. Some directors wished that singers were more adept in this field while some singers felt that certain directors had a lack of understanding of the physical demands required to sing. However the findings were unanimous in stating that a high level of coordination is a very necessary requirement to be involved in a production today. The following performer's account of his responsibilities onstage illustrates this:

'I had to steer a left handed car with my right hand (... with only inches of margin for error, or I would have fallen into the pit or got stuck on the stage) and operate a smoke machine with my left. That was complicated!' (Participant 15, 2014)

## Text

'The ability to act with the voice – and especially the declamation of words. That is the heart of a singing actor.' (Participant 2, 2014)

Eight directors and the conductor expressed an expectation and/or wish for singers to have a strong relationship with text. This was generally revealed as a bigger preoccupation with directors than performers. In live interview, the conductor spoke in detail about the fact that singers who audition with fluent and accurate linguistic delivery make a much more positive impression.

The directors' references to text all related to an imperative for performers to have a deep and detailed understanding of the characters and narrative of the piece in which they are participating. This expectation would link to the other assumption that performers may need be ready to instigate and improvise in rehearsal, and would consequently need to be well prepared in the research and understanding of the role they are portraying.



Figure 1.4: Example of 'cheating'

## Stagecraft

The questions about stagecraft elicited some of the most interesting findings in the study. Stagecraft skills are techniques which relate to how performers negotiate and occupy space when on stage, in terms of angle, direction and distance. One of the most important of these techniques is known as 'cheating'. The prime function of this skill is to facilitate projection out to the audience, and in opera, to maintain a line of visual contact with the conductor. This in turn enables the performers to negotiate the use of space with their fellows and play out when necessary while also maintaining spatial relationships with each other. Other stagecraft include finding light, coordinating footwork, handling props, stylistic use of period costume etc.

While the performers unanimously expressed their belief that stagecraft is a very relevant part of their skill-set, the non-performers were not unanimous in this. One highly experienced practitioner felt that the skills were 'old-fashioned' and another very experienced interviewee stated that he believed that these abilities were 'instinctive'. Of those directors who did vouch for the relevance of these techniques, two of the responses were relatively ambivalent.



## Conclusions

It is advisable to develop multidisciplinary training in opera skills at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. These modules could be greatly enhanced through interdisciplinary collaboration with other schools and it is possible that students in other disciplines could attend these classes as electives in other programmes.

There appeared to be a misalignment of perception between performers and non-performers in several findings. Similar disconnects between voice and drama practitioners were also reflected in the commentary. It would be advisable therefore to embed more congruencies and connections between these disciplines.

## Recommendations to DIT

Although some of the recommendations for conservatoire training are already in place at DIT, the study would indicate that further programmatic provision would be desirable. As this could quickly become unrealistically expensive, the following recommendations are based on ideas which could be incorporated into the existing structure or which could also be of use to other student cohorts. Implementation could additionally be made through forming professional links with existing companies.

### Professional Practice Class

Several participants strongly suggested that conservatories should provide practical professional advice and guidance delivered by members of the industry. This would seem to be a very sound recommendation and could include guidance about professional self-preservation and career sustainability. This could include advice about appropriate role choices, as there seems to be an implicit risk with ref to cinematic influence in productions, for young singers being asked to play image-appropriate roles which may yet be too vocally demanding for them.

The demand for appropriate physical image however is unlikely to disappear, yet the reality of this situation is at odds with increasing conditions in Higher Education for 'correctness' in tutor/student feedback. For example, in certain conservatoires, tutors are requested not to discuss weight issues with students.

Therefore, the implementation of Professional Practice Class may be a very valuable forum, where these professional realities could be discussed and shared in a group setting without the situation becoming over-personalised. These sessions would be in the form of 'from the coal-face' consultations, where visiting professionals would come to discuss relevant issues with the students. Such a class could incorporate discussion and information about such professional factors as agents, role types, time-management strategies, memorising strategies, audition techniques, rehearsal etiquette, personal presentation. Professional practitioners are usually only too willing to share their experience, and this therefore may not be a costly addition to a programme if it is planned to coincide when visiting personnel are working in Dublin.

### Movement classes

As 'physical coordination, flexibility and expressivity' appeared significantly in the findings, it would be advisable to provide *regular dance/movement classes*. These may well appeal to other cohorts of students (drama students for example) and the implementation of these sessions may also go some way to address issues relating to physical fitness and appearance.

Stylistic awareness with reference to movement and body language however could be greatly enhanced if students were able to attend classes in *art history* and *media studies* where they could assimilate a deeper understanding of the aesthetics relating to a particular era. Creativity, imagination and confidence in improvisation may well be enhanced through exposure to a broader spectrum of cultural awareness. Such cross disciplinary study could be facilitated at DIT and would merit further investigation.

## Textual and linguistic support

Text work can be incorporated further into Acting for Singers classes. However, as the recommendations also pertained to linguistic ability, this is another area which requires ongoing implementation. This year at DIT, we incorporated text work from the French and German song classes into projects in the Acting for Singers classes. Students were encouraged to explore the poetry of the songs in greater depth and detail by creating characterised dramatic monologues out of the texts. This is an approach which could be developed and evaluated further. From a linguistic point of view, there may be opportunities to forge further links with relevant schools.

## Stagecraft tuition

As stagecraft skills were strongly commended by all the performers, it would be advisable to continue to include these as part of the Acting for Singers class. The findings lead one to surmise that the reason there isn't more literature in this area is because the techniques are practical, pragmatic, and not considered to be particularly 'artistic'. While all the performers spoke of the practical relevance of the techniques in their professional careers, the non-performers appeared to be more ambivalent. This may suggest that this is a subject which is not particularly discussed in the professional rehearsal process, as it is assumed that all performers have already acquired these techniques by osmosis. Contextualising stagecraft skills would therefore be advisable. These can be explored in devised improvisations, but are perhaps easier to assimilate when taught in tandem with preparation for public performance.

## Proposed Future Work

A publication and DVD about Acting for Singers which address the issues which arose from the study could be a valuable learning tool. I would hope to start work on such a project with DIT colleagues and students in the future.

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