

## **Belcanto in art song- new ways of song interpretation**

The calls for more emotion in art song interpretation are continuously becoming louder.

Poorly attended song recitals, bored listeners and annoyance due to identical ways of interpretation especially in German art song show the urgent need of new ways in song interpretation.

This type of art, which has often been believed to be already dead or which has even been declared being dead, needs a rebirth very urgently.

What has led to this stiffness?

First and foremost it is caused by the overestimation and undue adoration of some interpreters. If nothing is of any value compared to Fischer-Dieskau and if every Baritone is compared to him, then this consequently results in stagnation in song interpretation. And this is not the only consequence as some people even go further and do not acknowledge other voice types of being important in this field. To put it briefly this means that only a German Baritone is able to interpret German art songs in an appropriate way.

But what is the original meaning of interpretation?

The expression is derived from the Latin *interpretatio*, which means translation, explanation. In an encyclopaedia it is explained by "a repetition according to one's own understanding or interpretation". It is this own understanding, the individual feelings and thus the uniqueness while still remaining faithful to the oeuvre, which is missing. However, a true artistic expression can only be developed by the means of uniqueness and authenticity.

If the interpretation lacks this artistic expression, one will soon encounter randomness and uniformity. Moreover, the audience will feel excluded or even bored.

Of course, one cannot put aside the merits of Fischer-Dieskau concerning the acceptance and the spread of the art song. He really did true frontier work in order to free the art song from its minor role and to take it from an amateur-like singing to the stage of professional concerts.

However, it is naive and dangerous for the development of this type of art in our times to conclude from all the facts mentioned above that only this singer's interpretation is the right one.

Another aspect, which has also added to this stiffness in art song interpretation, is the way of singing. Although it is absolutely necessary to consider the technical level as well the way of interpretation at a time, they are separated in this essay for a better analysis and in order to make things clearer. The so-called German voice technique, here only described very briefly, prefers open vowels, placing registers next to each other and the sound is rather stiff, sounding like a horn. Singers<sup>1</sup> who have been taught this method have the following lacks, which will intensify over the years: a limited pitch and depth, a limited capacity of the voice to swell, difficulties with the "passaggio" in height, registers which are completely falling apart (singing in three levels), a coexistence of vowels and consonants, which results in the fact that consonants are "spitted" using a lot of air. These are only the major difficulties.

Especially Baritones tend to compensate the lacking pitch with a terrible use of falsetto, which even worsens the sound. When they are singing forte the pressure they need to produce the tone results in a hard, stiff, inflexible sound

(calling, barking, and shouting far away from the singer's own timbre instead of a real forte). Women's voices on the other hand have to deal with the development of an uncontrollable vibrato over the years, a boyish sound, too much air in the middle register and a rugged breast voice.<sup>2</sup>

Most German (art song) singers have been taught this technique which is the reason for the similarity of the sound. The listener has thus got used to this and some people (especially older people) only want to hear this. Others on the other hand are bored or even consider this inflexible sound disgusting and therefore turn away from this kind of art. (They form a majority.)

The fact that some people mistake these vocal problems for expression is especially regrettable. Even fatigue, roughness, too much pressure and complete abandonment of the singer's own timbre are regarded as being part of individuality as if one was talking about rock or pop songs.

However, if a singer has terrible vocal problems like the ones numbered above, he is not capable of interpretation anymore. All further tries to interpret text or music are doomed to fail and everything remains very much at the surface.

What can be done?

The Old Italian bel canto technique, which results in high individuality, true beauty (real bel canto) and a long life of the voice and which is more and more threatened to die out as only few singers know it or are able to teach it, is not only applicable in opera singing. Its most distinctive features are perfectly mixed registers, an ideal "passaggio", homogeneous vibrato through all registers, a great capacity of the voice, good pitch and depth without using the falsetto. Moreover, the singer has a piano, which is really formed at "forte position", a real balance of vowels, and their position at front, which is never forced and facilitates articulation. Thus, vowel and consonant are mixed perfectly and the singer reaches a most natural articulation.<sup>3</sup>

Old Italian voice technique used in song interpretation leads to surprising, new results in interpretation:

"Honking sound" for example is replaced by a soulful mixture of vowels. Instead of forced, artificial sounds when the singer sings a forte-passage ("honking", "shouting" or "barking") we find a vibrating forte in the singer's own timbre which is due to its free resonance able to produce a similar resonance within the listener.

The artificial way of "spitting" consonants is replaced by a natural articulation, which is free from too much pressed air on single consonants. A voice in free resonance and a complete openness of the whole body allows a singer to give his or her personal interpretation of a song (*personare*= to sound through oneself.) Thus, the often quoted melting of body, soul and mind can be experienced.

Declamatory and cantabile elements are not opposites anymore but they are melted in a natural way. The Old Italian voice technique is also preferable compared to the German one in the field of dynamics and sounds.

As the piano is formed at "forte position", the singer is able to change from one dynamic demand to the other with ease while still remaining faithful to his own timbre. However, that does not mean that he is going to sing in a monochrome way. The opposite is the case: he will play with different phonetics using a wide range of colourful shades within his personal timbre.

Thus, an alienated sound of the voice is replaced by a lot of shades of the sound; a superficial expression has to give way to intensity of expression.

If a singer learns to control his voice in such a way, he will be able to allow his emotions to flow. If he also frees himself from old-fashioned interpretation rules, he gives way to new results in the field of art song.

However, singing and interpreting with intensity and emotions also means not to neglect the aspect of facial expression, gestures and movements. There still has to be done a lot of frontier work. Who of us doesn't know the picture of the stiff singer often clinging to the piano while reciting his verses? Of course, a lot of old customs, which have by now become tradition, are in our way. But it is possible to improve a singer's presence and expression on the difficult stage of a concert (difficult as it is "naked", that means without costumes or stage setting) if a singer is open to this very sensitive and challenging area. It is not a matter of cheap, artificial gestures and false facial expressions, which remain on the surface and which are very common in singing. It is about true, flowing and real emotions coming from the heart of a person and which are than represented by facial expressions and gestures. In order to reach this point, a years-long training is necessary which also demands a great deal of humbleness from the singer. Moreover he has to overcome all kinds of vanity.

If more singers left the worn out paths of interpretation, a voice technique, which causes vocal problems and if they gave up "stale" forms of presentation in the field of art song interpretation - if they instead used the Old Italian bel canto technique and if they blended facial expressions, gestures and movement, this art form could gain new opportunities on the concert stage. That means it would be changed into a non-artificial, intensive stage art and thus into an art of communication that grips and moves the listener.

Verena Rein

<sup>1</sup> *female and male singers*

<sup>2</sup> *The reasons for such lacks and voice problems are so complex, that a further article is needed to describe and analyze them in an appropriate way.*

<sup>3</sup> *About the Old-Italian bel canto technique also read the article: "Tongue technique in classical singing" (online: [www.verena-rein.de](http://www.verena-rein.de))*