

5. THE MYTH OF THE “EXCLUSIVIST” VOICE - THE DIVERSITY OF SOUND ASPECTS. CASE STUDY

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Abstract: *There is always talk about the voice intended exclusively for a certain musical genre. There are singing teachers who systematically refuse to encourage young voices to discover other areas of sound from the perspective of vocal practice. For example, Classical Singing teachers approach the phrase "you can't" or, worse, "you're not allowed", when a student studying Academic Singing wants to discover other musical genres such as Folk Singing, Light Music or Jazz. This obtuseness shown by some teachers leads to the premature inhibition of the singer's vocal potential in the full period of accumulation, but, above all, leads to the narrowing of horizons and opportunities on the job market of Classical Singing graduates. Such practices should be challenged and dismantled through concrete examples where one and the same voice can interpret a diversity of musical genres, without in any way affecting the artistic act.*

Key words: *classical singing, jazz, vocal practice*

1. Introduction

The term *exclusivist* might generate some confusion or contradictions in the context of vocalicity, of many perspectives and aspects that define the only *living* instrument among all the world's instruments, the human voice. Throughout the history it has been proven that this instrument is a particularly complex one, and from the perspective of the uniqueness of the individual voice bearer, we could consider that the number of the living instruments on the planet Earth is equal to the number of all those who sing with their voices, which is a number impossible to specify. The uniqueness we are referring to is rightfully argued by the particular features related to the anatomy and physiology of the vocal apparatus, the psychological, emotional, social imprint of the individual, but also by his origin, place of birth, culture from which they come and even genetic “ancestors”.

A voice may be ample but far too internalized, another one may be insignificant as a purely musical language but full of aplomb and charisma, another one may have a large range but a partially active untrained diaphragm muscle. A voice may be high but without potential in the middle register, whereas another one may be deep, lyrical, but without range. A voice may have all the qualities necessary for a vocal singing of fair value, but an anaesthetic timbre (the timbre cannot be educated), whereas another voice may be characterized by a special timbre, a generous range, pronounced lyricism, but with a severe speech pathology... Certainly, this series of *yes* and *no*, *advantages* and *disadvantages* can take on endless dimensions.

2. Discussions

However, we know many singers who have proven or are still proving a good vocal and mental functionality, with a well-defined versatile character of the voice, qualities that have given them a special freedom of artistic expression, in different

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musical genres, with the approach of some repertoires among the most diverse. Are they the chosen *ones*? If we read again the paragraph before the previous one, we can say that each voice is unique precisely by the many particular features that define it: the construction and functioning of the vocal apparatus (with its three compartments – respiratory, resonator, phonatory, as well as all the elements that make them up), emotional availability, education, musical culture (and not only) etc.

How can a young voice discover his/her “vocal profile”? Who determines the potential of a young voice in a period of profound transformation? What are the criteria by which a teacher establishes that a certain voice **must** sing **exclusively** a certain genre of music? Who is responsible for the possible failure of the singers who, after a significant number of study years, realize that their songs do not suit them physically, emotionally, socially, or professionally? The theme called *The myth of the “exclusivist” voice - the diversity of sound aspects. Case study* started more from a somewhat personal revolt, but it comes to destroy a myth, namely that the students who study Classical Canto **damage their voice** if they approach other vocal genres, whereas those who sing academic vocal music **are not allowed** to sing popular music, traditional music, romances, jazz, etc.

Whom does this lack of vision help these days, in a world where the ability to access as many opportunities as possible tends to become a means of survival? What does the (Romanian) school want: graduates of Classical Canto who will not find their place maybe even in the choir of a House of Culture or people with skills in as many musical genres as possible in such a way as to be financially independent, singing on various occasions in formations, ensembles, these being also practicing teachers of Classical Canto, Traditional Singing, Jazz, Popular Music, etc.? The European school has long implemented complementary study programs, integrated into complex music study systems. We are still tense and we impose all kinds of restrictions under the pretext of a so-called elitist exclusivity, although the educational plans allow, encourage and ensure theoretical and practical connections between academic music and other musical genres from the perspective of the diversity of the possible concerns of the student and of the future graduate, leaving him/her to decide for himself/herself, knowingly, based on his/her own accumulated experiences.

Keeping the context of the speech, it should be added that the Bologna system, by creating the European Area of Higher Education, proposed an organization of education focused on the student's needs, as “a market with strong competitive flows, as a way of integrating national systems in an European system where universities have autonomy, are diversified and, above all, are compatible in terms of structures and programs to enable the mobility of staff and students”⁷, obviously with the purpose of increasing the employment potential on the labour market in their country of origin, but also in the other countries where there is a Bologna system. Thus, “from the perspective of the student-centred education, teaching and learning are two interrelated processes, they presuppose each other.

⁷ Sorin Eugen Zaharia; Marinas Laura Elena, 2005, Parteneri pentru excelență în Europa cunoașterii. Universitatea românească în contextul “Bologna” și “Lisabona”, vol. 1. Agenția Națională pentru Parteneriatul Universităților cu Mediul Economico - Social, București, page 15

Teaching is not limited to the simple transfer of knowledge. It combines instruction with training and learning with assessment in accordance with the established goals”⁸. What are the *goals established* for the student in the vocational, artistic field?...

Undoubtedly, there are voices predestined for classical vocal music, in *bel canto* style, just as there are voices predestined exclusively for jazz, rock, folklore, manele, etc. From my experience as a professor of Vocal Art for the past 12 years in the Department of Teaching Staff Training of “George Enescu” National Art University, I have noticed the following main categories of choices/situations:

- students who study Classical Canto out of conviction, but have no potential;
- students who study Classical Canto have potential, but could not sing any other music genre;
- students who study Classical Canto, have no potential for this musical genre, but sing other musical genres very easily;
- students who study Classical Canto, have potential for this musical genre, but sing other musical genres very easily;
- students who study Jazz and Popular Music out of conviction, but have no potential;
- students who study Jazz and Popular Music, have potential but could not sing any other music genre;
- students who study Jazz and Popular Music, have no potential for this musical genre, but sing Classical Canto very easily;
- students who study Jazz and Popular Music, have potential for this music genre, but sing other music genres very easily;
- students who study Musicology, a purely theoretical field, but who have potential in different musical genres, even more in the same voice;
- etc.

Do you see? We are in a situation of compromise, of formal blockage that does not help anyone: neither the professor, nor the student who is often in the position of insisting where there is no data, an exploration on “a sterile territory” of the particular features of a certain voice. What do we do with professors who believe that classical vocal music cannot be joined with any other musical genre that involves the presence of the voice?

3. Results

The current theme *The myth of the “exclusivist” voice - the diversity of sound aspects. Case study* proposes even from the title some examples of voices that practically support the idea of a variety of sound aspects, from the perspective of the myth of the voice that absolutely MUST ... sing only a certain musical genre. We believe that music is not medicine where we need to specialize in a certain segment of the body..., although there is also an increasing tendency to broaden the horizons and concerns of medical specialists: for instance, many specialists in ENT (Otorhinolaryngology) also specialize in Phoniatics (a medical discipline that deals with the study of disorders and conditions of the voice). Certainly, we can

⁸ Liliana-Luminița Todorescu, Învățământul centrat pe student – reper principal al procesului Bologna. Universitatea “Politehnica” Timișoara, Buletinul AGIR nr. 1-2/2009, April- September, page 226

extrapolate into engineering, law, education etc.

Music is an open universe that can be accessed by as many people as possible, each with his/her own resources, because music ennobles the spiritual man, music brings happiness, it is “a higher revelation than all wisdom and philosophy combined”, as it seems Ludwig van Beethoven once stated in one of his approximately 400 conversation notebooks⁹.

Among the “chameleonic” voices that we can take as an example of case studies, we are presenting only a few, with the recommendation of visiting www.youtube.com and the name of each mentioned artist in order to have the proof, the argument of the dissertation in the following lines that wants to essentially say that one and the same voice can sing equally well classical music and jazz or any other genre of music and that the exclusivist voice remains for now... a myth: the soprano Eileen Farrell, the bass-baritone Thomas Quasthoff, the soprano Audra McDonald, the tenor Gavin Creel, the soprano Dawn Upshaw, the soprano Hibla Gerzmava, the lyric-coloratura mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato, the soprano Rhiannon Giddens and others. These are only a few examples of musicians trained in the genre of classical music, with outstanding results on the great lyrical stages of the world, but who managed to integrate perfectly into other musical genres such as pop, stage music, film music, blues or jazz.

We will analyse in more details the personality of the soprano Eileen Farrell¹⁰ who was “one of the finest American sopranos of the 20th century; she had a voice of magnificent proportions which she used with both acumen and artistry in a wide variety of roles, like some unparalleled phenomenon of nature. She is to singers what Niagara is to waterfalls”¹¹. We will present some of the particular features that define the artistic personality of the soprano Eileen Farrell in the area of vocal genres that she approached:

- voice type – soprano with frequent mezzo-soprano poses;
- her parents were vaudeville singers (her mother was a soprano and her father was a baritone) and also music teachers;
- her mother was also an organist at the church;
- she also sang in church;
- she studied canto with Merle Alcock¹² and the soprano Eleanor McLellan¹³, famous lyrical artists of those times;
- she sang in the CBS Radio choir;
- she sang in *Cavalleria Rusticana*, by Pietro Mascagni, as Maria, at Opera San Carlo in Florida;
- she sang in *Alceste*, by Christoph Willibald Gluck, in the eponymous role, at the Metropolitan Opera in New York;

⁹ Luminița Giurgiu, 2022, Beethoven: Cum se aude tăcerea, <https://bel-esprit.ro/beethoven/>, accessed on 03.02.2023

¹⁰ Eileen Farrell (1920 – 2002) – a dramatic American soprano who, for 60 years, sang classical, theatre music, jazz and other genres belonging to the entertainment music

¹¹ Editorial, 2002, Eileen Farrell, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1388741/Eileen-Farrell.html>, “One of the best American sopranos of the 20th century; she had a magnificent voice that she used with perspicacity and talent in a wide variety of roles, a special phenomenon of nature. She is for singers what Niagara is for waterfalls.” (a translation by Mihaela Gârlea), viewed on 03.02.2023.

¹² Merle Alcock (1884 – 1975) – an American contraalto, a professor of Canto and a theoretician

¹³ Eleanor McLellan (?) – an American soprano, a professor of Canto and Opera Music

- she had the roles of Maddalena from *Andrea Chénier*, written by Umberto Giordano, then Gioconda from *La Gioconda*, signed by Amilcare Ponchielli, then Leonora from *La Forza del Destino*, written by Giuseppe Verdi, then Isabella from *Atlántida*, signed by Manuel de Falla and many others;
- she was a philharmonic soloist;
- she started singing jazz with Frank Sinatra in her own show that she coordinated on the radio;
- she sang jazz and blues with numerous musicians on albums such as *The Magnificent Voice of Eileen Farrell*¹⁴, *I've Got A Right To Sing The Blues*¹⁵, *Sings Torch Songs*¹⁶, *Together With Love*¹⁷, but the number of albums she printed music other than academic is much higher;
- she was a canto professor at various American universities.

4. Conclusions

We believe that the student who has chosen to study vocal music has the right to explore different realms of sound, to put his/her own voice in different postures in order to discover what suits him/her best, and thus to follow the path most appropriate to his/her physical and mental capabilities to gain confidence, conviction and chances for a future that will bring him/her professional and financial satisfaction.

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¹⁴ Decca – PFS 4052, Columbia – CL 1465

¹⁵ Columbia – CL 1465

¹⁶ Reference Recordings – RR 34

¹⁷ Columbia – CL 1920