Artistic development in opera singers: 
A longitudinal approach 

MARIA SANDGREN 
Department of Psychology, Stockholm University, Sweden 
Department of Theatre Studies, Stockholm University, Sweden
Opera singers are considered to be artists from various aspects; one is that they are re-creators of music. They are performers and messengers of products of ancient and contemporary composers. They are also solo artists who have to master a very specific artistic expertise – complex elements of music, singing and acting - in order to meet the high demands from the music and the opera world.

The singers use their body, specially the voice, as a means and instrument by which they transfer their vision of a musical piece to the audience. Both psyche and soma are involved as the singers expose themselves. During the years of education, up to around 10 years before entering the professional scene, the singers need above all to develop necessary technical singing skills which will hopefully match the high working demands: musically, physically and not at least psychologically. The voice turns into a sophisticated instrument through which the singers fulfil their artistic aims throughout a career which may last until the age of 50-55 years, sometimes even longer.

In an explanatory qualitative and quantitative study of professional opera singers, very few singers talked about their artistic pursuit in terms of aesthetic strivings (Sandgren, in press). Instead, most singers talked about worry about negative evaluation and worry about indisposition, i.e. an inability to sing satisfactorily due to somatic problems. The performance was more regarded as an achievement than an artistic endeavour. The results from the present study raised many questions: How can artistic development be conceptualised from the view of opera singers? Which factors (person-environment) characterize this process? How do these factors change over time?

Creativity and artistry

Research on creativity has focused on the creative person, process or product (Hennessy & Amabile, 1988). To be creative on stage and in their artistic development, opera singers are in constant interaction. The audience views the product and evaluates it. The level of singing skills, musical interpretation, acting skills or the impression of the whole performance trigger an emotional and intellectual response with the observer. The most important aspects of the product are originality and adaptiveness (Simonton, 1999).

Creativity is also seen as an individual characteristic or behaviour. For instance, the creative artist is characterized by an intense involvement in their work (Hennessy & Amabile, 1988), to seek out novelty, to be ambitious, intelligent (Simonton, 1999). The assumption that creativity has its locus inside the person can be questioned. To define creativity, neither as an end, nor as a state, opens up to view it from a developmental perspective. In the present text, it is emphasized to regard artistic development and talent as a potential. Therefore, it is meaningful to follow the development of this potential across time.
Developmental perspectives on artistry

A modern holistic view “emphasizes an approach to the individual and the person-environment system as organized wholes, functioning as integrated totalities. At each level, the totality derives its characteristic features and properties from the interaction of the elements involved, not from the effect of each isolated part on the totality” (Magnusson, 1999). This approach is particularly interesting to adapt on artistic progress which has a temporal dimension, not being equivalent to time, but to change within a process. At each state of development or progress, organized structures of “elements are the results of previous processes and forms, at the same time, the basis for current processes.”

The central questions of what constitutes artistic development, which factors are involved and how they change or promote stability over time – in case of education and later progress are especially suited to longitudinal research. The hypothesis is that personality, necessary skills, motivational factors, environmental factors and the socio-historical context are the key aspects shaping the pathways of development. Semi-structured interviews have been conducted with a class of students at an opera college and with prominent opera singers. The aim is to create a model that can be useful for identifying and working with the gifted singers in order to be able to identify and nurture artistic development appropriately.

Personality

How and why persons think, feel, act and react as they do can serve as a general idea of what constitutes the personality (Pervin & John, 1999). In a study using the Big Five inventory (Kemp, 1996) the personality of singers was characterized by the primary factors of extraversion such as outgoingness, surgency, adventurousness and group dependency (the latter negatively loaded). This result was expected as the singers perform as soloists and need to enjoy showing off on stage. Second-order factors of independence (suspicion and dominance) and pathemia (sensitivity) loaded as well highly positively. The high level of sensitivity suggests that the singers operate on an emotional and less cognitively sharp level: a trait that also characterizes musicians, but is more marked among the singers, probably because of the use of more expressive modalities (using the body on stage). The singers differ from instrumentalists also in that sense that they have more difficulty to separate themselves psychologically and physically from the instrument. The singers develop a particular kind of “body sensitivity” as they learn to connect certain sensations with certain desirable sounds.

Yet to be studied is the perception of music: especially the sensitivity to the emotional message of music which might be a better indicator of musical giftedness than sensitivity to notational aspects (Winner & Martino, 2000).

Links between motivation and factors essential for the artistic strivings
Personality traits such as extraversion answers the question about the satisfaction of performing (despite constant performance anxiety), but is not enough for our understanding of the singers’ choice of profession and endurance. Motivation is of major importance, and certain forms of motivation are probably indispensable for the artistic development.

Does it exist something like musical motivation? More particularly, a satisfaction of expressing oneself through the means of singing? The choice of instrument is a personal matter and not random. The preferences of sound (horn or piano), of physical contact (base or flute) (Ostwald, 1992), of playing in a group or solo in front of an audience (choir or opera singer) offer examples of various appealing interactions between person, instrument and environment. Background factors such as parental support, relation to the first teacher do also play a role (Sloboda and Howe, 1991). Motivational factors have their roots long back in time – for better or for worse.

Furthermore, the concept of motivation can be described in many ways: achievement-orientation (Atkinson, 1964; Bandura, 1997), intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Amabile, 1983), need for autonomy, competence, relatedness, popularity (Ryan and Deci, 2000), self-actualization and self-esteem needs (Maslow, 1954). Motivation is affects the amount of deliberate practice (Ericsson et al, 1993) and involvement in an artistic task (Hennessy and Amabile, 1988). For example, achievement motivation might be one reason why certain students with apparent less singing and acting skills may surpass more gifted students in their development. Another explanation is that the less gifted singer stands out in his or her tendency and ability to find challenging problems and be motivated by them. Hard work or deliberate practice is necessary for the development of any artistic expertise, but hard work does not seem to be sufficient.

Overview of artistic development during the college years

*Developing an appropriate singing technique.* The singing technique consists of many skills. The mastering of the higher respectively lower register is essential. The extension of the higher and lower register is decisive concerning which kind of opera repertoire the singers will be able to do. Other singing skills to master is to sing piano and pianissimo beautifully and still be heard from an opera stage. Vocal stamina and egalization are other major skills to develop.

*Development of other means of expressiveness.* As the mastering of the singing technique passes through different stages and is improving, students who have reached at least a reasonable level of singing technique also begin to be more aware of other possible means of expressiveness in text and music as well as body on stage. Too much trouble with singing technique interferes with developing other means of acting skills and musical interpretation.

*Interpersonal skills related to the artistic work.* It is vital to learn certain interpersonal skills specific for the opera world: how to collaborate with colleagues and how to communicate with directors and conductors about artistic and practical matters. Such skills
facilitate the artistic work. The students also appreciated to work and socialize with professional opera singers and observe their work methods and preparations. Moreover, in order to be able to work more independently as a professional opera singer, students need to find their very own method to interpret the music, text and role.

Summarizing, the students described their artistic development mainly in terms of self-actualization and gaining higher competence but rarely in explicit terms of aesthetic evaluation. This phase of artistic development can be described as forming an artistic identity including establishment of voice type, selection of suitable repertoire, developing autonomy, but also psychological awareness of commitment and motivational factors. The singer will then feel competitive and authentic in his or her artistic endeavour.

These findings show that the artistic development involves various phases that each has its own problems and demands on external stimulation. Each phase has a critical period and is characterized by a sensitivity for a certain type of learning of various skills, knowledge, attitudes and habits which are essential for the development of the artistic identity and later the professional career (Manturzewska, 1995; Pruett, 1991; Sosniak, 1985). Gifted and already well established opera singers need continually to be developing their gained artistic expertise that rendered them success, or they become identified as gifted “have-beens.”
Address for correspondence:
MARIA SANDGREN
Stockholm University
Tulegatan 21
113 53 Stockholm
Sweden

E-mail: mariasandgren40@hotmail.com
References


