

VOCAL DIFFICULTIES FOR MID-CAREER CLASSICAL SINGERS: A PRELIMINARY QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

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ВОКАЛНИ ЗАТРУДНЕНИЯ ПРИ КЛАСИЧЕСКИ ПЕВЦИ В СРЕДАТА НА ТЯХНАТА КАРИЕРА: ПЪРВОНАЧАЛЕН КОЛИЧЕСТВЕН АНАЛИЗ

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Abstract: In the penultimate chapter of her book *Sängerische Begabung*, the soprano and pedagogue Kathrin Graf refers to a classical singer ending his or her solo career as a „taboo topic”, commenting that: „Just as in life, one seldom speaks of death, even though it awaits us all...the topic of how someone ends his singing career is hardly ever spoken about among singers”. So in the interest of full disclosure I would like describe my own vocal „near death experience”. I hope through my research to develop a better understanding of this very difficult period in the professional development of many singers. Why do so many professional singers seem to experience these crises, and what strategies can we use to deal with them? At the very least, this should provide valuable information for performers and teachers alike, even if the attrition rate amongst professional singers remains so high.

Keywords: professional classical singer, solo career, singer crises, strategies.

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Резюме: В предпоследната глава на книгата си *Sängerische Begabung* (в превод от немски „Призванието на певеца“) Катрин Граф, сопрано и педагожка, нарича прекратяването на соловата кариера на класическия певец „тема табу“, като коментира, че: „Така както не е прието да се говори за смърт, въпреки че тя очаква всички нас..., така и сред певците не е прието да се говори за това как някой приключва кариерата си“. Именно затова, в интерес на пълното разкриване на информацията, бих искал да опиша собственото си вокално „близо до смъртта“ преживяване. Надявам се чрез моето изследване да допринеса за по-доброто разбиране на този много труден период в професионалното развитие на редица певци. Защо толкова много професионални певци преживяват тези кризи и какви стратегии можем да използваме, за да се справим с тях? Това би трябвало поне да предостави ценна информация, както за изпълнителите, така и за преподавателите, дори ако процентът на отпадане на професионалните певци остава толкова висок.

Ключови думи: професионален класически певец, солова кариера, кризи на певеца, стратегии.

In the penultimate chapter of her book *Sängerische Begabung*, the soprano and pedagogue Kathrin Graf refers to a classical singer ending his or her solo career as a „taboo topic“, commenting that: „Just as in life, one seldom speaks of death, even though it awaits us all...the topic of how someone ends his singing career is hardly ever spoken about among singers” [Graf, 2013, p. 57].

So in the interest of full disclosure I would like describe my own vocal „near death experience.”

In the early 2010s, I was a soloist at the Oper Halle, engaged to sing lead roles as a „Mozart Fach” tenor. The Oper Halle gave me the chance to try out what I regarded as „my repertoire” in a smaller house, more or less below the radar, before hopefully singing the same roles in more important, international theatres. As one such opportunity arose – singing Don Giovanni with an international cast in Dijon –

my Intendant in Halle said I could accept the contract as long as I also sang my scheduled performances in Halle. This would entail singing performances on 6 consecutive nights, including recording one show for a DVD, using night trains to travel between France and Germany each night. I did not think twice – the opportunity was too important. And if I am honest, the money was important too.

By the last performance, a Sunday matinee of *Die Fledermaus*, I was a wreck, barely making it through. I had not dared to cancel because of what I saw as my agreement with the Intendant. Would that I had, because thereafter followed a pretty profound burnout. I canceled 3 months of performances. Whilst doctors reported healthy vocal chords, I had many other symptoms: muscle spasms in my neck and throat; jaw and tongue-tension; back pain which became cranial pain; reduced vocal stamina; insomnia. I had pushed my body to the limit, trying to do in my mid-30s, what may even have been impossible in my mid-20s.

I was lucky that I had a full-time job and a sympathetic boss who allowed me to take time to recover. The recovery involved seeing my teacher 3 times a week for 20-30 minutes, speech therapy, physiotherapy and Feldenkreis sessions; a process lasting 5-6 months.

I made the decision – an unusual one as I would discover – to talk with colleagues about my difficulties. Many said they admired my courage in admitting my weakness. Others said they had gone through similar crises, and were relieved to be able to talk about it.

In retrospect, the crisis was probably more chronic than acute; that the acute event in March of 2013 had its roots in technical problems that had surfaced a few years before in mid 30s. I had started the work of technical repair, but had not acknowledged that changes in my vocal stamina combined with psychological stress caused by this new sense of my own „vocal mortality” had made me far more vulnerable to the crisis I experienced.

Jump forward 5 years to a new production of *Die Zauberflöte* in Vienna: I was working with a younger colleague who was demonstrating some of the technical deficiencies and signs of burnout that I had experienced at about the same age. Similarly his career was booming, and he probably did not think too much about the vocal decline I could

hear, even when commented upon in reviews.

This decline is a phenomenon I had come to recognise often in younger colleagues and it is this *common but not shared* experience of difficulty or crisis in mid-career – Graf’s „Tabuthema” – that is the subject of my research.

Beyond specific medical issues³ [Seidner & Wedler, 1998, p. 179], very little research has been devoted to the subject of singer’s mid-career difficulties [Simon & Wroblewsky, 2019, p. 9] – to say nothing of the decision to end a solo career. Most published research related to singers focuses on 3 themes:

1. The quality and appropriateness of tertiary training [Bork, 2010];
2. Negotiating the change from student-life to employment [Kastendeich, 2018]; and
3. The realities of the work-life of a singer [Uecker, 2012].

The most recent German studies are aimed at a those starting careers, even if they do address employment prospects of recent graduates⁴, or alternative career paths [Siebenhaar & Müller, 2019, p. 110]. The english-speaking literature is overwhelmingly focussed on instrumentalists [Mills & Smith, 2006, pp. 131-140] and rarely deals with end of career issues.⁵ An Australian study from 1999 investigates the prevalence of vocal disorders in a group of 171 singers working in various genres, but addresses neither the causes of the disorders, nor their effect on the singer’s livelihood. [Phyland, et al. pp. 602-611]

Graf, who devotes 2 pages of her book to end of career considera-

³ eg. Seidner, W. and Wedler, J. (1998) Die Sangerstimme: Phoniatische Grundlagen fur die Gesangsausbildung: Phoniatische Grundlagen des Gesangs. Henschel, p. 179, Phyland, D. *et al.* „Self-Reported Voice Problems Among Three Groups of Professional Singers,” *Journal of Voice*, Vol.13, No.4 pp.602-611, p. 607.

⁴ Kastendeich follows the employment histories for up to 5 years after graduation but does differentiate between instrumentalists and vocalists, nor between performers and teachers.

⁵ One interesting exception ist the 2004 New York Times article by Juilliard clarinetist-turned-journalist Dan Wakin, who interviewed 36 instrumentalists who graduated form Juilliard in 1994. Interestingly he reports that almost one third of of respondents had left a career in music behind completely. Sadly he did not interview any singers.

tions, refers obliquely to the possibility of a crisis when unable to maintain previous high vocal standards [Graf, 2013, pp. 57-59], imagining a naturally occurring transition after a long career, which doesn't speak to the reality that many highly trained singers end their careers much earlier.

What lies behind this relative lack of research?

One reason may be that Culture Ministries and Arts Foundations paying for the research are more interested in the success stories of tertiary institutions, training programs or competitions than in the longterm prospects of individual musicians. These stories tell a more optimistic tale than those dealing with end of career considerations.

Further people who have left the industry are notoriously difficult to contact, and non-responder analyses in previous studies have suggested that those who drop out regard themselves as less successful and therefore less likely to respond to researchers. [Gembris, 2014, p. 3]

But another problem might lie with singers themselves.

Anecdotally, soloists refer to an inability to discuss problems with a peer group: that „my colleague is also my competition.” There are more singers than jobs available, someone is always ready to take your place. In this world, you do not want to show vulnerability or weakness. A less than optimal performance may turn up on YouTube, and will be commented on by people who have no idea of exigent circumstances influencing your performance. Discussion of illness or injury can create reluctance to employ you. And the size of the market means that any such problem can be discussed easily far and wide, leading to a self-reinforcing discussion of a singer's demise.

Compare this to the situation of an injured football player, who has a whole team of doctors and physical therapists to help him back onto the field. Whose injury is just an injury, and is not met with a chorus of criticisms of his technique or work-ethic, or doomsaying that the end of his career is nigh.

In this world, singers' reluctance to discuss their problems is understandable.

Probably the most oft-cited, and incidentally one of the few quantitative studies to consider the career longevity of musicians is the 2005 study by Gembris and Langner [Gembris and Langner, 2005], which

examines the areas in which the respondents (659 pianists, instrumentalists, and vocalists from 7 German Hochschulen) are musically active and how they earn money [Gembris, 2014, p. 1]. Whilst focusing primarily on difficulties at the start of the career and the qualities and deficits of the training at the German Hochschulen, their study incidentally points to a very high rate of attrition amongst classical musicians, particularly singers, with many ceasing to earn their livelihood from performance already in their 30s.

My research explores what factors in singers' experience might lead to this high rate of attrition.

I had originally planned to do a purely qualitative analysis based on long-form interviews using the methodology laid out by Braun and Clark [Braun & Clark, 2013]. I had in mind interviews with 2 groups of singers, all of whom had experienced difficulties in their 30s. The first group had stopped solo singing as a result of the difficulties; the second group had found a way through.

Preliminary interviews to find potential subjects demonstrated that my concept of the difficulties faced was too narrow. That I had chosen a starting point for my research that hewed too closely to my own experience of technical deficiencies and burnout. I therefore risked overlooking a large group of potential subjects, especially given the lack of academic literature to push me in other directions.

For this reason I devised an anonymous online survey to fill in the gaps in my thinking.

The eligibility criteria for the survey are quite simple. Each respondent attests that:

1. they have earned at least half of their income for a period of not less than 5 years as a soloist;⁶ and
2. they had some sort of career or vocal difficulties in their 30s.

The difficulties can be personal (such as vocal or emotional problems) through more industry-related problems (such as lack of performance opportunities or financial insecurity, family pressure).

Having established eligibility, the third question divides the

⁶ I chose a 5 year minimum as it would seem reasonable to assume that if you have already worked 5 years, you might expect to be able to continue, and secondly to exclude respondents who have only briefly worked as soloists.

respondents into those who are still full-time soloists and those who are not. Both groups then take essentially the same survey: questions around training, vocal health or the start of the career are all identical. Most importantly, both groups answer exactly the same questions around career difficulties, their causes and how they responded.

The last section asks those still singing where they are now, and focuses on factors they think are important to maintaining their employment. The ex-singers are asked about the end of their time as a full-time soloist. Was it their decision? Did they know what they would do after singing? Are they still working in a music-related industry?

I chose to publish the survey in both English and German, as these are the primary languages of the biggest opera markets, as well as the most common rehearsal languages.⁷

After its initial creation, the survey itself was refined with the help of 4 English-speaking and 4 german-speaking test-respondents. Over several months questions were refined, categories added and most importantly, the range of answers to many questions was broadened. Additionally the more subjective questions allow respondents to write in an answer, if their response is not listed.

The 10 minute survey was published in the third week of September 2020, initially through a direct mail to professional contacts (singers, coaches, teachers and agents) on social media who are encouraged to forward the survey to their contacts. The second phase places a link to the survey in appropriate online fora.⁸ Finally I am discussions with industry groups to link to the survey in their publications.⁹

At a recent Masterclass I was asked by a student about challenges that I had faced, and I chose to share the story of my burnout. The Professor running the class was very critical, saying that she wanted to „protect her students” from negative information. To let them dream a little longer, I suppose. I would contend that as music educators we also have a

⁷ According to Operabase (<https://www.operabase.com/statistics>)

⁸ eg Opera Talk, Sänger-Kollegen, Teaching Opera (all on Facebook)

⁹ National Association of Teachers of Singing' *Journal of Singing*. (US)
Bundesverband Deutscher Gesangspädagogen's *Vox Humana* (Austria, Germany, Switzerland)

duty to be realistic with younger musicians. Then maybe the crisis, if and when it comes, will not be so potentially devastating.

I hope through my research to develop a better understanding of this very difficult period in the professional development of many singers. Why do so many professional singers seem to experience these crises, and what strategies can we use to deal with them? At the very least, this should provide valuable information for performers and teachers alike, even if the attrition rate amongst professional singers remains so high. Perhaps most of all I would like to start a conversation. In the words of Kathrin Graf,

It would make sense if singers could talk about this shame-laden topic. Only through exchanges about our experiences can we see our problems in a bigger context.” [Graf, 2013, p.59]

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