

# Learning an operatic role effectively

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- a case study of learning an operatic role in a time-saving way both vocally and on stage

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Arbetet motsvarar 15 högskolepoäng

Operagestaltning – Rollen och det musikdramatiska uttrycket

VT 2020

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OF THE ARTS | HÖGSKOLA

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Learning, preparing and practicing a role for a performance is considered to be a major part of the profession of an opera singer. These skills are put to a test when it is required to be as efficient as possible, especially when it is needed to learn a new piece of music in a short period of time.

In this study I will focus on the process of learning an operatic role in the most effective ways. There are several situations where an opera singer is required to internalize great amount of knowledge in a limited amount of time. The learning process can require different amounts of time depending on the length and the complexity of the role. It is also dependable on the time which can be used on learning the role. It is not unusual for opera singers to face a challenge as they are asked to perform a part in a short time, e.g. one day, such as when an opera singer is called to cover a role e.g. in a case of a sickness. In this study this was not the case, but I hope this study can give also some answers for such cases. This study is aiming to go through some of the techniques how to make this learning process less time consuming.

The reason I started researching this subject was because I was cast as the cover for Donna Elvira in Don Giovanni by W. A. Mozart in the Finnish National Opera (later: FNO). The ten performances were supposed to take place in March and April 2020. Two of them were performed before the COVID-19 epidemic was burst.

I needed to organize my learning process in the most effective way I possibly could. I had some advantages as my basis as I started to learn the role. I was rather familiar with the opera Don Giovanni, and I already had sung parts of the role of Donna Elvira. Donna Elvira has been my favourite character in Don Giovanni. In addition, for my advantage, I had had some experience on learning a role and performing it in a short notice, as I was called on stage to perform the part of Sieglinde from Die Walküre, as the first act was performed in a concert version in Rantasalmi, Finland in July 2018. I had eight hours to learn the role. Then I had the possibility to sing it from the sheet notes. This time I was supposed to learn the role by heart.

Firstly, I had a limited time to learn the role musically before the stage rehearsal period. Secondly, as covers, we did not have as many possibilities to rehearse the opera on stage as the real cast. This set requirements for the effectiveness when working not only on stage but also off the stage as well.

This study is written in the light of two points of view: firstly from my own observations about the learning process, and secondly from the point of the tips and knowledge from my colleagues, coaches, teachers and literature, which I had during the rehearsing period.

### 1.1 Implementation of the study

The implementation of the study began approximately from the 15th of December 2019. The study period lasted until the first performance on the 6th of March 2020. Naturally the complete learning process had been a longer process, but the focus is on this period as I consider it as the most intense period of time concerning the studying of the role.

During this period I had rehearsals with répétiteurs from University Opera College of Stockholm University of the arts, Sibelius Academy in Helsinki and FNO. The stage rehearsal period lasted from the 27th of January 2020 to the 4th of February 2020 as the dress rehearsal for the cast took place. The general rehearsal for the covers was on the 3rd of March 2020.

The methods of this study are various. I interviewed the director of Don Giovanni Jussi Nikkilä and the assistant director Anna Kelo and asked their views on building the character. I was keeping a diary of the learning process and wrote down some of the tips I was given along the rehearsing period. The literature for this study focuses on the theories of learning and memorizing effectively.

## 2 DEFINITIONS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In this study I will focus on the effective ways in order to enhance the learning process. By learning a role I mean studying an operatic role from the scratch both vocally and on stage. “Efficiency” refers to doing something in an organized and quick way, and “effective” means something successful or achieving the wanted results<sup>1</sup>. Mainly I consider that it is essential to elaborate what “learning” means, although the term is complex to define<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Cambridge Advanced Learner’s dictionary, 4th edition, Cambridge University Press, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Schunk, Dale H.: Learning theories: an educational perspective. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill, 2009.

## 2.1 What is learning?

One possible definition of learning is that it is an active process, where a learner internalizes new skills and/or knowledge by learning, practicing and/or rehearsing. It is an interactive process where a learner changes his/her experiences in the way that permanent changes happen in his/her abilities, knowledge or attitudes.<sup>345</sup>

There are several conceptions of learning, but usually they are divided in three categories: behaviorism, cognitivism and constructivism<sup>67</sup>. Behaviorism sees learning as a chain of stimulus and reaction, and this chain can be reinforced by repetition. In cognitivism the focus is on the learner's thinking, problem solving skills and ability to understand, and on how the learner is organizing the new information to the already existing schema. According to constructivism the new information is constructed around the learner's past experience and knowledge. The learner is an active part of the learning process.<sup>8</sup>

According to my experiences all of these theories of learning are used when learning a new piece of music. By simplifying: a learner needs repetition in order to make engrams to his/her muscles and body, and this kind of repetition-based learning is typical to behaviorism. When the learner gets corrective feedback she/he uses cognitive theory. When the learner applies new information to his/her own concepts of the situation and therefore constructs his/her own meaning from the knowledge being acquired, as working on stage and making own "motives" for the director's instructions based on his/her own experiences, I would see this as constructivism.

In the next chapter I will focus on what kind of learning it requires when it comes to learning a role effectively.

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<sup>3</sup> University of Eastern Finland: Oppimisteoriat ja –strategiat. Web document.  
<<https://www.uef.fi/fi/web/aducate/oppiminen1>> Read 28.2.2020.

<sup>4</sup> Kielitoimiston sanakirja. Kotimaisten kielten keskus. Web document.  
<<https://www.kielitoimistonsanakirja.fi/#/oppia>> Read 26.3.2020.

<sup>5</sup> Rauste-von Wright, Maijaliisa & von Wright, Johan: Oppiminen ja koulutus. Helsinki: WSOY,2003.

<sup>6</sup> University of Eastern Finland: Oppimisteoriat ja –strategiat. Web document.  
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<sup>7</sup> University of Arts, Finland: Oppimiskäsityksiä. Web document.  
<<http://web.uniarts.fi/muhipedi/index7fc2.html?id=26&la=fi>> Read 26.3.2020.

<sup>8</sup> University of Eastern Finland: Oppimisteoriat ja –strategiat. Web document.  
<<https://www.uef.fi/fi/web/aducate/oppiminen1>> Read 28.2.2020.

## 2.2 What does learning mean in a musical context?

In musical sense learning can also mean many things, e.g. from being able to master his/her instrument to be able to deepen one's musical understanding via e.g. semiotics. In this study I will focus mostly on memorizing music and stage work by heart. I will summarize Jane Ginsborg's (2004)<sup>9</sup> essay about memorizing music in the next chapters, as I see it as a relevant theory basis.

First of all Ginsborg makes definitions about "memory". Ginsborg divides memory in the classical division to three categories, based on Baddeley's (1990) and Eysenck & Keane's representation: 1) Sensory store, 2) short-term memory store, and 3) long-term memory store. Sensory store is memory for visual, auditory and tactile information. By focusing attention to certain sense the information restores in the short-term memory store, also known as "working memory". By rehearsal and elaboration the information stores in the long-term memory store and it's stored as procedural, semantic and episodic information. In memorizing it is crucial to be able to retrieve information from the long-term memory.

Ginsborg summarizes four points which are useful for a musician to bear in mind when storing information to long-term memory for easy retrieval. These are: 1) improving memory in general, 2) remediating memory deterioration related to age (e.g. by healthy lifestyle), 3) enhancing study skills (e.g. mind-mapping), and 4) using mnemonics by associating information with the material to be remembered.

Ginsborg presents a study where a group of singers were searched for the most effective ways of learning a new piece of music. The groups of singers were given 20 minutes of time to learn a new piece of music. It appeared that generally the group of singers, who memorized the text and the music simultaneously, gave more accurate and confident performances from the memory. The other groups were either memorizing the text first, then the melody and then both together; or learning the melody first, then the text and then both together. Surprisingly the experience of the singer was not related to the success of memorizing the song.

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<sup>9</sup> Jane Ginsborg in Williamon, Aaron: Musical Excellence: strategies and techniques to enhance performance. Oxford University Press, 2004.

Ginsborg states some heuristics of memorizing a new piece of music. These are:

- “little and often” is a better strategy to memorize than one large session: chop the piece of music into smaller pieces, and when you have become familiar with the material increase the size of the chunks.
- When the date of the performance comes closer it may be useful to frame the situations to resemble the actual performance, by e.g. creating the same kind of frame of mind as when you are practicing as you would be on stage, or by practicing in the same location where the performance is going to take place.
- Use all of your senses when learning the new piece of music: use rote, kinaesthetic memory in addition to either visual or aural memory.<sup>10</sup>

The research problems are:

1. What are the most effective ways to learn a role vocally?
2. What are the most effective ways to learn a role on stage?

### 3 LEARNING A ROLE VOCALLY

The fach of Donna Elvira has been defined as jugendlich-dramatischer soprano<sup>11</sup> or spinto soprano<sup>12</sup>. The role has been sung also by mezzo sopranos such as Joyce DiDonato and Isabel Leonard. Yet the role requires agility. The range of the role is h-b2.

While learning Donna Elvira I was also preparing Waltraute in FNO’s production of Die Walküre. The performances of Die Walküre were supposed to take place in May-June 2020. The Wagnerian roles suit me well, and Mozart is rather different from Wagner. Besides that, I had changed my fach from mezzo soprano to soprano in summer 2017, and I still do not consider myself as a high soprano.

The learning process began with me translating the libretto. The translating process was challenging, but luckily I had some help from the FNO with the translations. As I was interviewing the director Jussi Nikkilä, he said he had faced some situations as an actor where he was needed to learn a role quickly to cover a colleague who had fallen sick. Jussi Nikkilä thought that there are

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<sup>10</sup> Jane Ginsborg in Williamon, Aaron: Musical Excellence: strategies and techniques to enhance performance. Oxford University Press, 2004.

<sup>11</sup> Kloiber, Rudolf & Konold, Wulf & Maschka, Robert: Handbuch der Oper. Neuauflage. 11., durchgesehene Auflage. Bärenreiter/dtv, Kassel u. a./München, 1951. (p. 764)

<sup>12</sup> Aria database: web document. <<http://aria-database.com/>> Read 26.3.2020.

some methods when going through a new role. When reading the libretto, you should find what is said about the character and his/her motives. What is she/he searching or aiming for? Where is she/he going? Why? When? What is said about the character's outer appearance? All of this helps you to build a character. Of this kind of process of building a character I will give an example in the chapter 5.

### 3.1 Special traits in singing Mozart with a young dramatic voice

Singing Mozart is quite different from singing Wagner. Yet, for dramatic voices, it is essential to be able to sing both "lighter" repertoire as well as dramatic repertoire.

For me the challenges were singing coloraturas (e.g. Act 1, scene 11, quartet, measures 44-49 "*che mi dice di quel traditore cento cose che intender non sa*"; act 1, scene 10, aria "*Ah fuggi il traditor*"; act 1, scene 19, terzetto, measures 257-265 "*Vendici giusto cielo*"). There are many places where it is required also to sing coloratura or coloratura-like music in pianissimo. In my opinion winning these challenges were the moments where I learned the most vocally. Singing coloratura in pianissimo helped me also focus my voice in the more "Wagnerian" parts.

The other new challenge I was facing was singing the recitatives. According to my experience to be able to perform recitatives well requires a bit different kind of mindset compared to singing arias or ensemble singing. Recitatives must be performed as they would be spoken yet singing without diminishing the energy of your body. As I was learning the recitatives there were many kinds of aids which were helpful, which I have summarized in the chapter 5.

## 4 LEARNING A ROLE ON STAGE

The stage rehearsals lasted six weeks. During the period the cover cast had a few opportunities work on stage with the director. It was a great opportunity, as it is not something taken for granted that a director is willing to work with a cover cast, as Anna Kelo stated.

## 4.1 Watching

I followed some of the rehearsals of the main casts as I found it fruitful. It was useful for me to know in advance what kind of requirements it was set me while working on stage. In that way I was able to prepare myself for the upcoming tasks: for example it was good for me to practice singing while kneeling before needing to do so on stage.

Although watching was a good starting point for me to learn a role, as I interviewed the assistant director Anna Kelo, she considered that a singer does not learn only by watching and reading. On Kelo's opinion it is crucial for a singer to have a kinaesthetic experience of performing the role in order to successfully internalize the director's instructions. According to Kelo you learn by doing, and I can relate to this. Watching is, after all, one of the ways of learning according to the modality based instruction method.<sup>13</sup>

## 4.2 Writing

I wrote down most of the directions in the score. I reread my notes before my own turn. Of course the directions changed and became more precise along the rehearsing process, and as soon the adjustments appeared I wrote them down too. As I was writing the directions down it was almost necessary to "motivate" (i.e. find a reason or an intention) the movements to myself. Otherwise the certain movements had not made sense and the learning process would have been slower.

It is crucial to find the intentions of the director's instructions. As I interviewed the director Jussi Nikkilä, he emphasized that a person with an intention is an interesting person, and that is what makes the drama. Thus it is important to find the reasons for the action, because a role cannot exist without any directions. Otherwise the character would be "hollow". Sometimes I found the motives from the text or imagined the context: what had happened to the character while I was not on stage. Sometimes I asked the director about his thoughts why a certain choice was made.

## 4.3 Full commitment

One of the challenges as being a stage cover is that you need to learn the role on stage with only a few rehearsals. It is understandable that a singer wants to try the director's orders by singing with a full voice right away, as there might not be many opportunities to sing on stage before the performance. This is why marking was not an option for me. It is challenging, because all the bodily

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<sup>13</sup> Anttila, Eeva: Ihmis- ja oppimiskäsityksiä taideopetuksessa. Teatterikorkeakoulun julkaisusarja 58. Web document <<https://disco.teak.fi/anttila/>>, read 18.3.2020.

movements, dancing, feelings and contacts to others need full attention in the rehearsals. This requires deep internalization of the text and the music and great vocal ability.

Although one would have learned the piece of music well, it may always require a new bodily position when singing. This was the case for me e.g. when I was supposed to sing “Ah chi mi dice mai” in act 1 while being on my knees. I had never sung on my knees before, let alone coloratura-like phrases such as in measures 92-99. I needed to practice that in advance in order to get the full advantage out of the rehearsals on stage.

## 5 ”QUICK TIPS” AND CONCLUSION

In this chapter I will summarize some of the tips which I gathered during the time I was learning the role.

### 5.1 Recitatives and text

- to memorize the recitatives it helped if I remembered the syllable in which the melody changes
  - o e.g. in act 1, scene 5, measures 11-12: “*In casa mia entri furtivamente*”
- repetition, repetition, repetition
  - o referring to the rote memory in the chapter 2.2
- I spoke the text aloud, thinking of the stresses, which sound the most natural. This took time!
- I covered the stave and looked at only the text. Do I really understand every word that I am saying? Only by understanding the text it sounds natural also when sung.
- I was told to forget about the meters of the notes or the rests and sing the recitatives as the lines were spoken.

### 5.2 Coloraturas

- I practiced the coloraturas as gruppettos
- Practicing gruppettos was easier when I was dividing them in to parts and finding “hidden notes”<sup>14</sup>
  - o *I thought coloraturas as embellishments (e.g. aria: “Ah, fuggi il traditor” in act ,1 scene 10, measures 34-41)*
- I practiced coloraturas it in legato

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<sup>14</sup> Simeonov, Jenna: 4 tips when there are too many notes. Web document. <<https://www.schmopera.com/4-tips-for-when-there-are-too-many-notes/>> Created 3.6.2015, read 10.3.2020.

- I was told that singing “h” in between of the notes is not an option

### 5.3 In general

- when getting to know the character, I looked at the libretto or the text. What does it say about the character? What do the other characters say about the character? What is being said about the historical context?

*E.g. It is said that Donna Elvira is from Burgos (act 1, scene 5, measures 19-21). What could that imply to?*

- it is good to image how the character would be like, but I must be flexible to change it, as the director’s proposals may differ from my thoughts

*E.g. Donna Elvira can be sung by many kinds of spinto sopranos - as in Leporello’s aria “Madamina, il catalogo è questo” he lists many kinds of women, who Don Giovanni has seduced. As Anna Kelo stated, it is useful to have a flexible mind although you would have done the certain role several times before.*

- when in piano it does not mean to sing more silently – I can think of singing more “beautifully”

*There is always a reason for dynamics. If I think of piano as a dynamic it won’t sound good. Do I make the dynamics or do I live and breathe the dynamics? E.g. terzetto in act 2, in measures 78-84: what does the pianissimo refer to? What is the thought behind the dynamics? I was thinking of the feeling, not the dynamics. If I was thinking only about the dynamics it did not work.*

- I looked at the orchestral score (or the piano reduction) and listened to the complete music, not only my own line. What does it tell about the character which is not written explicitly in words in the libretto?

*E.g. In act 2, scene 7, no 19, sextet, measure 2 “Sola, sola in buio loco” there is b2 played by the violins repetitively. It gives a bit not-so-serious, even a bit playful character to the music, compared to if the violins would play a long b2.*

### 5.4 On stage

- I wrote down the director’s instructions to the score – and remembered to make the changes
- I read, even briefly, the score just before the rehearsals
- I imagined the situations, went through the scenes in my head after the rehearsals

- When rehearsing singing by myself I practiced also the choreographies at the same time
- It is always ok to ask and listen to others' questions as well
- "Relax and breathe!" as Jussi Nikkilä stated

## 5.5 Conclusion

The expertise of an opera singer is comprised of many different skills and a large knowledge basis. These skills are put to a test when there is not much time to practice a part for a performance and practice must be effective. This study has gone through my experiences of learning the role of Donna Elvira in W. A. Mozart's Don Giovanni in the light of efficacy.

In addition to all the topics written above I consider that what makes me effective is mainly the effort of focusing my energy in right places. The quality of the rehearsing is much more important than quantity. Maintaining the focus means also reducing the stress by taking one challenge at a time. The practice period put my focusing skills to a test both when practicing the music by myself and on stage. I found that maintaining the focus has much to do with the overall well-being of oneself: getting enough sleep, having a balanced diet and exercising makes focusing easier – not to mention relaxing and breathing, as Jussi Nikkilä stated. The overall well-being includes also the positive atmosphere of the whole crew and cast. In this production the whole personnel was very supportive and everybody was enthusiastic about the production, which I think was a crucial element of creating a safe environment and a creative mindset.

The occasions where an opera singer must adapt lots of information in a short period of time will probably occur in the life of most opera singers. I wish this case study will help other students as well to relate to my experiences and find some useful information to be taken in to use.

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