

ON BEING AN OPERA / VOCAL COACH....

- ORESTA CYBRIWSKY. MARCH 2007

It is a rare thing for a pianist who loves voice to remain being “just a pianist”. The more a pianist grows artistically and personally, the more his* own working sphere widens and deepens. On the way to earning a living with the piano, some pianists will land as opera coaches. To me, there really is no great difference between an opera coach and an “accompanist”, only in what is expected of each. Both love vocal music, the voice (we hope!), and both support the singer – one is on stage, the other off-stage.

A singer will not and should not refrain from asking his pianist for feedback, suggestions, and guidance. It is expected of an opera coach. Of course the repertoire of each differs considerably, but any first-class musician will be familiar with a wide-range of repertoire, extending beyond opera to Art song, Oratorio and various other genres.

If we are speaking specifically of opera coaching, a pianist has to know the repertoire well enough to guide a singer in the style, the tempi, the general musical execution of the opera and its traditions. Knowing when to give a singer a bit of extra time for a high or even low note, when to manoeuvre or just remain in tempo – many of these things depend not only on the acquaintance with an opera or its stylistic requirements, but also with the orchestral score.

Ideally, an opera coach needs to have good vocal judgement about voice production, including essential listening abilities for intonation, foreign language pronunciation and for diction, as well as a commendable musical instinct. Like the collaborative pianist, an opera coach often acts as the conductor, shaping the musical arc of a piece. The only difference is that one does it “behind the scenes”, his guidance eventually being taken over by the orchestra and its conductor, while the other will continue onto the stage as musical partner to a singer in a recital.

In opera performances with piano accompaniment, the piano substitutes for the orchestra and hence one of the subtleties of the art involves playing orchestrally. The piano is fundamentally a percussive instrument, with mallets hitting the strings. How to invoke a sound resembling an oboe, harp, trumpet or a whole string section requires extraordinary hearing abilities of the pianist and an exceptional technique to transform what he hears into his fingers and ultimately the piano. His ears and his experience must filter out for the singer, what will be audible from the stage and

what not: what will the singer actually hear coming from the orchestra pit. The experience is best gathered from years in an opera house, where an opera coach begins at the beginning with the “plunking out” of vocal parts [from the practice of repeating notes for the chorus, consequently called a “Korrepetitor” in German-speaking opera houses] watching the roles grow and sound eventually with the orchestra. Studying the scores, listening to recordings – these are additional sources of information with which the opera coach can acquaint himself with an opera.

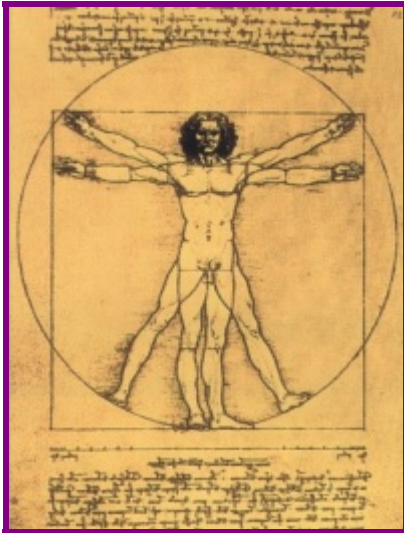
I place tremendous value on an all-round musicianship for a pianist. It was the composer Robert Schumann who urged any pianist striving to become a consummate artist, to work with singers to become more aware of breathing in music, but also to make music with other instrumentalists to experience the art of musical phrasing more intensively.

My musical experience has been that and much more.

Between a voice teacher/vocal coach/opera coach/accompanist– anybody who might have anything to do with voice in a one-on-one relationship– exists quite a fine line of definition and overlapping borders into other domains. As I myself mature and expand on all levels, I incorporate my spontaneous insights and intuitive pictures into the coaching sessions.

What some people call „perfect pitch“ could probably be considered to be a big waste for a pianist to have, since we perform on well-tempered instruments. But this can heighten one’s sensitivity for harmonic color and shifts. Thus, throughout all these years, I have discovered that my sense of harmony, my fine-tuned hearing abilities have raised my awareness for the “Resonating Aura” of a singer. The discerning ears of a vocal coach are highly important, not only for intonation but also for harmonic color and acoustical resonance. It is the voice teachers who train and build voices, but the vocal coach is the one who should be a kind of “voice-accompanist” – not only at the piano, but also with his ears.

I believe that singing takes place in a sort of “cross” form, with a north-south and east-west axis. Much of vocal technique is spent on “connecting the voice from head to toe” in order to get it to optimally resonate. Some voice teachers will concentrate their work on “head to belly-button” so that the inclusion of the full body tends to get neglected. I have discovered an incredible freeing up of sound if I just get a singer to incorporate the east-west axis and even more – à la Leonardo Da Vinci’s pentagonal figure of Man. My extensive experience has taken me even further.



I have seen pictures of the aura's electro-magnetic field around any musician resonating completely with the music he is producing with his body. Through sensitive listening, I have discovered that the music of Mozart and Händel, for example, not only draws on the NS-EW axis, not only on a pentagonal figure, but utilizes the space of a complete 360° of a circle. It is partly what makes this music so alive. And it was also this genius Leonardo DaVinci, who in 1500 discovered that sound travels in waves! One must imagine the singer's body being the center of a complete circle, like a tuning fork, which needs to come into resonance.

The sonic waves expand way beyond the immediate proximity of the body itself; otherwise they couldn't carry very far. So what do we need to do to have a singer open up his/her aura and sing his musical phrases using the whole 360° around him? Breath-work, connecting the body in ways a singer is probably unfamiliar (like cross-bow shooting, ironing, bowing a string instrument, stretching a chest-expander for example), the invocation of inner pictures, awakening energetic intent in shaping a phrase [energize! activate! vibrate!], using Word-Energy, as a colleague so aptly describes, to make a word alive, to paint it, – all these tools and many more, we will discover together in our work. Unifying body, mind and soul is not something for voice technique freaks!

It is said that a human being's aura can optimally span 27-feet in every direction. Yet so few young singers know how to utilize all that space, because their technical work has been basically engaged in finding ways to produce a good sound at the right time in the right place, and unfortunately usually in a relatively small practice room.

So a singer and a pianist, no matter in what kind of musical relationship they find themselves, embark on an exciting journey when they work together. A coach can be a wealth of information for a singer, depending on what his experience, his interests, his talents and gifts are. A pianist's reward for working with singers? Well, that's a subject for many books...

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*Of course, throughout the article I include the female pianists, too