The female voice of the Garcia School – Research on opera vocal techniques from a gender perspective

Abstract

The purpose of this project is to analyse gender aspects in opera vocal techniques by examining the important Garcia school. Despite aiming to improve the male operatic voice, Manuel Garcia the younger (1805–1906) and his successors had their greatest success with female singers. The Garcia school is highly topical today, since some aspects are still used in opera training, while others have died out. By examining Garcia's vocal techniques, this project seeks to find out:

1. How are female opera voices affected by an opera vocal technique that originates in the male voice?
2. How do Garcia's techniques *coup de la glotte*, *lateral breathing technique* and *voix blanche* affect female voice development? Are these techniques perhaps the key to why Garcia was successful with female students?
3. What underlying gender codes are included in opera vocal technique?

Gender-Aspekte von Operngesangstechnik stehen im Zentrum des Projektes, das von der berühmten Garcia-Schule ausgeht. Obwohl Manuel Garcia jun. (1805–1906) sein Lehrwerk auf die männliche Opernstimme zugeschnitten hatte, feierten er und seine Nachfolger ihre grössten Unterrichtserfolge mit Sängerinnen. Manche Aspekte der mittlerweile legendären Schule werden bis heute in der Ausbildung vermittelt, während andere vergessen sind. Durch die Analyse von Garcias Technik sollen folgende Fragen untersucht werden:

1. Welche Auswirkungen hat eine auf Sänger zugeschnittene Technik auf weibliche Stimmen?
2. Wie wirken sich zentrale Techniken Garcias wie Glottisschlag, Flankenatmung und *voix blanche* auf die weibliche Stimmentwicklung aus? Sind diese Punkte der Schlüssel zu Garcias Unterrichtserfolgen bei Frauen?
3. Welche unterschwelligen Gendercodes beinhaltet Operngesangstechnik?

Introduction

This is a three-year postdoc research project on gender aspects in opera vocal techniques, funded by the Swedish Science Council. Its starting point is Manuel Garcia's treatise on singing, published in 1840/47. Despite its orientation on the male voice, the most successful pupils of Garcia's school were female singers, among them the Swedish soprano Jenny Lind. The Garcia school remains topical today. Some aspects of it are still used in opera training, while others have died out. I here consider three of the «vanished» techniques: *coup de la glotte*, the *lateral breathing technique* and the *voix blanche*, which may all be significant factors why the Garcia school was extraordinarily successful with female singers, especially high sopranos.

This project has a gender-theoretical approach. Empirical data will be collected and analysed on the basis of current gender-critical discussions of opera and voice, primarily by Susan McClary. She laid the foundation for musicological gender research in opera by exposing musical gender codes. McClary shows how men and women throughout the centuries have been represented by musical stereotypes that have generated their own musical gender system.

Methods

According to the gender-theoretical framework outlined above, I will treat the empirical data by regarding female opera singing as having been adapted from conditions defined for the male voice, both in matters of technique and in the music scores themselves. In my thesis «Jenny Lind – the impact of her voice on media identity» (2013) I developed a method of analysing voices from contemporary reviews combined with my own vocal experiments. I will use this method in the present project.

The empirical data will be collected in three stages. First I will examine vocal techniques of female singers from the first generation of the early 19th century such as Maria Malibran, Pauline Viardot-Garcia, Henriette Nissen and Jenny Lind. Then I will compare these results with the techniques of singers from the second generation that can be heard in early recordings, such as Nellie Melba and Ellen Beach Yaw. Finally I will conduct vocal experiments on my own voice. My glottis will be filmed while I sing using Garcia's techniques. This part of my research demands practical vocal knowledge and will be treated as a self-experiment.

Results

This project aims to determine both whether Garcia's «extinct» techniques may be regarded as the main reason why he succeeded with his female students, and how female opera voices might be affected by vocal techniques originating in the male voice.



Garcia checking the glottis with his laryngoscope. (Garcia: Hints on Singing, 1894, p. VII)



One of the most famous pupils of Manuel Garcia, the Swedish soprano Jenny Lind (1820–1887), here shown in a production of Bellini's *La Sonnambula* (Image: painter unknown).



The female voice in the Garcia family: His sisters Maria Malibran and Pauline Viardot (the latter shown in a picture by Carl Timoleon von Neff, 1842) were famous singers as well.

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