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## In search of oscillating relations

### Power, gender, remix in operatic performance

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# **Intersection and interplay**

**Contributions to the cultural study of music  
in performance, education, and society**

**Petter Dyndahl (Ed.)**

## Intersection and interplay

Contributions to the cultural study of music in performance, education, and society

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## CHAPTER 7

### In search of oscillating relations – power, gender, remix in operatic performance

SARA WILÉN

#### STOP THE OPERATIC PERFORMANCE

The pianist's right hand fingers wander upwards, take a quick dance turn, and land on a melancholic chord. Don José stands very straight and tense, almost stiff, and stares darkly at an imaginary piece of paper, while trying to write down some letters. Carmen sits on a white wooden bench and looks at Don José, smiling teasingly. Someone laughs in the salon. The pianist's fingers elegantly leap along the same melody line, one octave lower. The two hands join in a repetitive dance rhythm, which tunes into different colours. Carmen rocks more intensely to the rhythm. Don José stares more intensively at the imaginative paper. Several laughs are heard in the salon. What is so funny about this situation?

The circumstances have been described to the audience. The cigarette worker Carmen has been arrested after having stabbed one of her colleagues in a fight in her working place and is kept in custody, guarded by Don José, a soldier with a violent past. Don José and Carmen are alone together in a cell. She needs to get out and he needs to keep her there, so he does not get in trouble. Carmen takes a smiling breath and is just about to start to sing, when a voice from the salon suddenly calls: "Olé!" The music stops. The singers stop. Everyone looks in the direction of the calling voice. "Carmen forgot the hips!" the voice from the audience calls. Laughter and giggles echo through the space as the tall male singer performing Carmen smiles and gives thanks for the remark. He leaves the stage. A shorter bearded man runs on, to take his place, while the female Don José stiffens up again. It is a performance, a Carmen play. The expectations of a world-famous romantic opera are turned head over heels in an

intertextual, parodic play. As soon as a spectator decides to shout “Olé!” to stop the music – and the operatic performance – the power relations of the roles of the audience and the performers in classical music are challenged.

This version of the Seguidilla scene from George Bizet’s opera derives from my experience of how a scene in the project *Opera Nova – power, love, remix (ON)* was performed. ON emanated from an idea about changing roles in opera that I had had for some time. The project started on my initiative and was carried out with the support from the Swedish Arts Council, the City of Stockholm and the Helge Ax:son Johnson foundation in different phases, in the ensemble Operaimprovisatörerna, where I am a member. Opera improvisation is a genre where actions, music, and text are created through live interaction of classically trained singers and musicians, inspired by idiomatic traits in Western classical music in dialogue with the audience (Wilén, in press). In ON, the purpose was to investigate and problematize concepts of power and gender in opera performance and in society from different perspectives, and what actions different roles, or subject positions, may allow. Opera improvisation techniques were combined with critically interpreted scenes from opera repertoire, using cross-gender acting, or cross-casting. A further aim was to investigate performative tools for classical singers. ON was a possibility for me to work with one of the research questions of my doctoral project: How can opera improvisation be used as a way of challenging performative and musical aspects of opera? ON premiered in Stockholm in March 2012, and was played on tour at Vadstena-Akademien in July, and at Bastionen in Malmö in October.

The project ON also sought to explore different medias and platforms for dialogue and exchange of experiences and knowledge, for example on-stage conversations on the theme gender and power in opera and theatre. The first stage conversation was arranged at Moment:teater in Gubbängen one week before the premiere. Two members of the panel started a dialogue that later continued in other public and social media. This was one of the starting points for a debate on opera sexism in Sweden during the spring of 2012, which illustrates how repertoire opera is perceived and performed in Sweden today (Brodrej, 2012; Dellefors, 2012; Ernman, 2012; Gademan, 2012; Hammar, 2012; Lindén, 2012; Lindkvist, 2012; Löfvendahl, 2012; Maticic, 2012; Operaimprovisatörerna, 2012; Söderberg, 2012; Witt-Brattström, 2012).

In this text I intend to contextualize and discuss the project ON in the framework of theory from different fields, such as cultural studies, musicology, music education and performance studies, and reflected in the Swedish cultural climate. I combine different sources, such as research literature, my own experiences as a singer in different contexts, and newspaper articles connected to the debate. During the project, insights and experiences from my ongoing literary studies have influenced my artistic work. My choices of methods show similarities with both “practice-based” artistic research (Rubidge, n.d, p. 5), where the artistic

work emanates from and is inspired by theoretical issues and concepts and “practice-led research”, that can derive from an “artistic hunch” aiming to locate theoretical frameworks that may be implicated in the practice (Rubidge, n.d., p. 6). My intention is to create and expand dialogues on different levels about the conditions for singing and performing in classical music and opera.

#### THE VOICE AND THE REPERTOIRE IN CLASSICAL SINGING

According to Hemsley (2007) a singer’s voice has certain “natural limitations” (p. 64) and individual characteristics that result in a specific vocal range and vocal quality, such as light or heavy. These features determine which repertoire is suitable for the singer. He points out that the singer’s main concern is to express the contents of the score, referring to opera repertoire, written by composers like Mozart, Puccini, Verdi and Wagner. As a classical singer, I have shaped my instrument during many years’ training and through the practicing and performing of the classical repertoire. During my education and as a freelancer I have chosen (and been assigned) repertoire in collaboration with teachers, conductors, directors and coaches, connected to what I have perceived as my voice type. As a female singer with a high voice, although with a darker colour, I have performed opera roles of both lyric character, as Pamina in *The Magic Flute* (Mozart, 1791/2006), and more dramatic character such as Violetta in *La Traviata* (Verdi, 1853/2008), roles impersonating young women. Being fairly short with a size 36, I have also impersonated children, mostly in contemporary operas. My repertoire correlates with how Cotton (2007) describes the work of singers who launch professional careers.

Hemsley (2007) states that the opera world is increasingly dominated by a casting system where singers are encouraged to choose and profile a certain colour and character of the voice, in order to make a career, which in turn delimits the singer’s ability to develop vocal flexibility and “possibility of discovering their full expressive range and imaginative powers” (p. 66). The classical opera repertoire, including music from Mozart to Strauss, mainly contains roles written for voice types, or voice characters, where a certain colour and range, or tessitura, of the voice is connected to different characters in music.

My work with opera repertoire has led me to perceive my vocal identity as based on these kinds of roles, and on the music connected to them. It has motivated me to develop and enhance the musical and dramatic functions of this voice type, in terms of phrasing, colours of the voice, and acting. My ways of thinking about this relate to Cotton (2007), who draws an image of a singing field where voices are categorized through two systems: voice classification due to physiological facts, delineating “the capabilities and limitations of an instrument” (p. 3) and a *Fach* system of role types, depending partly on trends of the market. She describes classification as an important part of the vocal education, preparing for the “marketplace” (p. 11). The collective expectations and casting trends on vocal timbre change

and vary over time, concerning for instance characteristics such as chasteness, femininity, masculinity and promiscuity, but also the body type of the singer (Cotton, 2007). The arias that are chosen for an “audition package” (p. 1) depend both on the singer’s vocal qualities and expectations and trends in the casting market.

As a repertoire singer I aimed, most importantly, to interpret and perform only the given repertoire in public, in order to present myself as a classical singer. Improvisation was not relevant to me. Hultberg (2000) contrasts two different methods of instrumental training in European tonal classical music. In the 1850s a view of music as works of art developed where the composer’s intentions became more important, “while less space was provided for interpreters’ musical licence” (Hultberg, 2000, p. 29). “Instead of improvising [...] students played printed technical exercises in order to improve their instrumental skills” (p. 30). This is referred to as the “instrumental-technical method“ (p. 30) that Hultberg holds to be taken for granted by many in the Western music tradition. My work with repertoire during my education and in professional life shows influences from the instrumental-technical method. I strived to interpret, although without altering, the contents of musical scores, even in music composed before 1850. I have been aware of my responsibility to preserve and respect the traditions in classical music.

The “practical-empirical method” (Hultberg, 2000, p. 25) was prevailing in Western music until the 1850s. The music was approached as a language, from an aural perspective. Pupils on all levels expressed themselves by understanding, playing, and creating music according to the idiomatic features by varying and creating music from existing musical patterns (Hultberg, 2000). This can be seen as relating to “discourse in music” (Folkestad, 2012, p. 201). The practical-empirical method resembles my practice as an opera improviser, where I make up my own actions, music, and words inspired by different idioms in classical music (Wilén, in press). I notice how I often in opera improvisation choose other ways of using my voice than what is common in my work with repertoire, often singing in a lower register, as well as choosing other, more active dramatic actions on stage than I have done in the repertoire roles.

This has led me to consider whether the vocal and dramatic qualities and choices that I have mainly worked with in my repertoire work can be considered to be the only ones that are possible for me, due to the natural limitations as claimed by Hemsley (2007). This also concerns the acting on stage. Am I as a person performing everything I can do in striving to enhance young, light, happy, smart, longing or suffering passive women, children or animals in my vocal and scenic qualities? Frith (1996) sees a merger of bodily practice and imaginative fantasy as an integration of ethics and aesthetics. “Music constructs our sense of identity through the direct experiences it offers the body, time and sociability, experiences which enable us to place ourselves in imaginative cultural narratives” (p. 124). Could it be that some of the vocal qualities or sounds that are connected to certain roles, are results of



certain discourses in the operas, rather than natural qualities that are innate in my voice and body, and that direct me towards certain sets of dramatic actions in music? How are these discourses constructed and how can I investigate these through practice?

During the last few years, I have noted that theatre institutions as well as free groups and theatre academies have chosen to perform classical repertoire plays with gender-blind casting where the parts can be performed by women as well as men. In 2006, the committee for gender equality presented the report *Taking the stage* (Kulturdepartementet, 2006, my translation). According to Lund (2009), the report pointed at certain insufficiencies in the gender equality work within Swedish performing arts. Two years after, the report *Performing gender* (Att gestalta kön, Edemo & Engvoll, 2009, my translation) was presented as a result of an artistic and educational development work performed by the four Swedish theatre academies. Hagström-Ståhl (2009) describes how the gender perspective of the project generated many new possibilities for making artistic choices.

Reading about *Performing gender* in 2010, I became very interested in trying the same strategies in opera repertoire. During the project I have studied literature connected to cultural studies. This led me into further investigations of the concepts performativity, deconstruction, and intertextuality. Could they open new perspectives on investigating the relations between gender and performance, as well as between work and performance in opera?

#### PERFORMATIVITY IN THEORY

Before we move on to examples from the project, I would like to contextualize my arguments in a theoretical framework rooted in feminist poststructuralist thinking. Foucault (2009) claims that discourse is the site where power and knowledge are joined together, in discontinuous, unstable segments that can be played in different strategies. Weedon (2009) describes discourse as the structuring principle of society in modes of thinking, individual subjectivity, and social institutions. Analyses of the social and institutional contexts of discourse are a means to examine and question relations of power in feminist poststructuralism.

According to Butler (1997), the performative is a domain where power acts as discourse. The term performativity derives from Austin (2004), who in his lecture series “How to do things with words” describes a performative utterance as an utterance where the saying of certain words or phrases is actually doing something, as in a marriage ceremony. Judith Butler (2004) developed this concept into the performativity theory, claiming that “gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed, rather it is an identity [...] instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (p. 154). In this way, gender exists mainly through its representations, as a type of performance (Rosenberg, 2000). In Operaimprovisatörerna, we work in a similar way. Both men and women wear the same

costumes with jackets and skirts, to open up possibilities for the singers to choose gender as a result of the situation in the improvised scenes.

Butler (2007) claims that gender is not an essence, but a social construction, a frail identity that has been created in outer spaces over time, as an effect of a stylization of the body, due to survival strategies in a coercive system. The incessant use of body gestures, movements, and styles creates an illusion of a stable, gender defined, and natural self, which rather can be considered as reflecting a norm. If the repetition fails, as for instance in a deformed or parodic repetition, the impression of a stable identity is revealed as a political, weak construction. “In this sense, gender is not a performance that a prior subject elects to do, but gender is performative in the sense that it constitutes as an effect the very subject it appears to express” (Butler, 2009, p. 232). Butler asks in which performance, and on which scene, the performativity in gender could be revealed in a way that destabilizes the naturalized categories of identity and desire (2007).

According to Bell (2007), Butler’s work has turned the concept of performativity into an analytical tool for studying differentiated subject positions within structures that delineate certain lines and effects of power. Weedon (2009) sees the range of subject positions offered by language as situated in specific historical and social discourses. To me this relates to how I perceive that the singer in opera improvisation uses altering subject positions as she decentres herself, or is decentered by others, in the emergent improvised fictive and rhetorical situations (Wilén, in press).

Although dominated by music, opera is by no means neutral in terms of gender. According to McClary (2002), opera became an incentive display of gender construction in composing music.

Beginning with the rise of opera in the seventeenth century, composers worked painstakingly to develop a musical semiotics of gender: a set of conventions for constructing “masculinity” and “femininity” in music. The codes marking gender difference in music are informed by the prevalent attitudes of their time. But they also themselves participate in social formation, inasmuch as individuals learn how to be gendered beings through their interactions with cultural discourses such as music. (pp. 7-8)

Consequently, singers who perform a certain repertoire over time are shaped by the vocal discourses they work with. McClary declares some codes as “strikingly resilient” (2002, p. 8), and compares the portrayal of feminine seductiveness and masculine bravura in 20th century films about Indiana Jones to music in 17th century operas. McClary claims that this is a sign that some social attitudes on gender have proven stable over time. She therefore argues that studies of music from the vantage point of musical semiotics of gender “can also provide insights into social history itself” (ibid). Löfvendahl (2012) claims that although opera today is considered a serious art form, it has always been coloured by commercial interests. He

notes that Puccini's famed operas build on popular stage plays dominated by sentimental and exciting traits, including sadism, as in today's thriller films.

#### RELATIONS BETWEEN WORK, PERFORMANCE, AND TEXT

In order to look into how the role of the musical work affects the performance circumstances in opera, I now choose to investigate and discuss some concepts connected to work and text.

According to Goehr (2007), in classical music the score is synonymous with the work, and, hence, has a regulative function. The performance of a classical piece is conducted through interpreting and showing respect to a score. The concepts of work and text in classical music are practically synonymous. Following Goehr (2007), a musical work is "a complex structure of sounds related in some important way to a composer, a score, and a given class of performances" (p. 20). She describes the concept of *Werktreue* that emerged in Europe in the 19th century. The performer should "comply as perfectly as possible with the scores composers provided" (p. 231). This is relevant in opera performance even today. Dellefors (2012) commented on the debate on opera sexism by pointing out that the role of both the director and the conductor are to realize the intentions of the composer as they are delivered in the score. They are not supposed to enhance themselves.

In performing opera repertoire, I have often come across the conception of the music as the most important part. To sing a part in repertoire opera of for instance Verdi or Mozart is indeed a very inspiring, exciting, and technically demanding job, where the musical performance to a high degree must be in focus. But is it enough just to rely on the music when (re)performing power relations deriving from social structures from the passed centuries on stage, in front of an audience of today? According to McClary (2002), "musical institutions like to claim that music for the most part is not concerned with mundane issues such as gender or sexuality" (p. 9). As I see it, this statement is confirmed in an interview on Swedish radio with the director of the Royal Opera, Birgitta Svendén. She stated that she wanted to avoid delimiting herself by reflecting on gender issues in her artistic choices, since she did not see it as important to consider this in her work (Lindkvist, 2012).

To rely on quality is perhaps not enough. Lindén (2012) has studied the performances of some of the Swedish theatre and opera scenes between 2004 and 2011, analysing body language as well as interpretations. She concludes that it is very rare to see a performance of female sexuality where the woman has an active subject position, and sees a pattern of unequal power conditions in the performances studied, which cannot be regarded merely as the results of the free choices of artists. The opera singer Maticic (2012) argues that opera is a brutal art, where directors work inspired by a "modern" (writer's quotes) ideal created in the 1940s. The singers portray artificial images of individuals, and, for example, the unwillingly aroused woman is a sign for stopgap solutions. Löfvendahl (2012) claims that although in Swedish opera women hold the leading positions in the institutions, a sexually oriented male

gaze still dominates. Brodrej (2012) follows this line of argument and concludes that many antiquated stories of opera need directors that are conscious, skilled, and interested in creating stories that apply to audiences of today.

To further investigate the relation between work and performance in opera, I would like to address how mimesis and realistic acting can connect to opera performance on stage. Mimesis is a concept that has dominated Western arts through history. Aristotle described mimesis as a way of choosing the actions that, correctly portrayed, show the way to the knowledge of universal values (as cited in Diamond, 1997). Diamond argues that mimesis is instead a political practice that recurs through history, coloured by different attitudes. “But the mimesis of this ‘nature’, in its production and reception, will be fully marked by the political, literary, and gender ideologies [...] and the social context” (viii).

Stage realism is the mimesis of positivism, a mode for production that satisfied the need for knowledge and the production of truth (Diamond, 1997). According to Fischer-Lichte (2008), realistic acting derives from late 18th century German literary theatre, where the aim was to elevate the status of the poet’s text and to decrease the influence of the actors. To express the true meaning of the text, the actor’s body was meant to transform from sensual into semiotic, “into a ‘text’ consisting of signs for the emotions and mental states that build a character” (p. 78). There are some similarities to vocal interpretation and how the role of the musical work in opera and classical music affects the acting on the opera stage. From my experience, and following Hemsley (2007), the initial work during opera projects has a main focus on musical interaction and interpretations of the score, led by a conductor or vocal coach. As a singer, I strive to embody the expressive vocal qualities of the score with my voice in terms of interpreting in expression, sound, dynamics, articulation, and phrasing. After a few weeks, the director takes over the rehearsals, and the ensemble starts working on the staging. Situated acting influenced by realism is often used as a vantage point. The conductor or the vocal coach is present, and the aim for me as a singer is to give priority to the prepared musical interpretation of the composer’s work while acting in the dramatic situation.

Theoretical concepts from literary theory have influenced the perception of work and text in other fields, such as cultural studies. In literature the roles of the work and the author have changed during the last decades, due to interdisciplinary findings. The work in literature was earlier conceived as a fragment of substance, a general sign, or an object to be consumed, while read and interpreted through an inner, passive mimesis (Barthes, 1977). In “From work to text” (1977), Barthes describes an epistemological slide in the conception of the work. The authority of the author as a father and owner of the text to whom we should pay respect diminishes. Thus, the work is decanted by the text “from its consumption and gathers it up as play, activity, production, practice“ (p. 162). The text is a signifier, a methodological field, or a social space, that should be seen as the deferred action of meaning. It “is structured but off-

centered, without closure” (p. 159) and filled with traces of other anonymous texts, “woven entirely with citations, references, echoes, cultural languages [...]” (p. 160).

Kristeva (1992) explains her concept intertextuality as the transposition from one sign system to another. Every signifying practice is polysemic and creates a field for transpositions of different sign systems, an “inter-textuality” (p. 308). At first intertextuality was used by poststructuralists in their aim to subvert implied concepts of objective and stable meaning (Allen, 2011). Literary as well as non-literary texts were claimed to lack independent meaning, as they were constructed on existing systems with traditions and codes from earlier literature. Middleton (2000) states that an intertextual relation where a text refers to other texts, “pushes against the tendential self-sufficiency of works” (p. 61). This relates to how I perceive the role of the opera improvisation as related to opera. Opera improvisation as a practice can be seen as an intertextual and interperformative play (Wilén, in press), where new words, actions and music are created in live improvisation following – and challenging – certain (idiomatic) discourses of different classical music styles that we have learnt from repertoire performance.

#### FROM WORK TO PERFORMANCE, TO DECONSTRUCTION IN PRACTICE

If we were to turn the roles over in opera repertoire, would we then see the voice *Fächer* and power relations between men and women that we may consider as natural, as constructed relations or discourses instead? And what would happen with our relations to operas as musical works? In his “de-construction of the transcendental signified” Derrida criticizes the idea of logocentrism and metaphysics of presence (Derrida, 1997, p. 49). It is therefore perhaps not surprising that he names the theatre as undermined and corrupted by the evil of representation (Derrida, 1997). Derrida mentions two kinds of public persons: the actor and the orator (or the preacher). He compares the actor to an alphabetical letter that does not signify anything in itself or take any ethical responsibility for what is said on stage. “He hardly lives, he lends his voice” born as he is “out of the rift between the representer and the represented” (p. 305). The orator, on the other hand, represents himself, and the representer and the represented are the same. According to Dyndahl (2008), deconstruction is an approach to perceiving the complexity and contingency of the world through exposing things that can have been left out or ignored in what occurs as complete and rational. Deconstruction in music education deals with aesthetic dimensions and insights, and therefore can be used to question “the metaphysical, transcendental notion of a work of art” (Dyndahl, 2008, p. 141). Culler (2007) mentions Butler’s concept of performativity, relating to Derrida and Foucault, as the most important feminist method of deconstruction.

In ON, we chose a number of dramatic situations from the opera repertoire, in order to go through and analyse the material from a performative perspective. We decided on choosing mainly duet scenes from operas with the aim of investigating the interplay between two

characters. Preparations started with individual studies of the repertoire, where the singers learnt all the parts in the scenes, in combination with literary studies from a list that I had prepared for the ensemble. For the project we employed an opera director, Elisabet Ljungar, who is also a classically trained violinist. This was important, since the project aimed to investigate opera material from a performative perspective in musical as well as dramatic performance techniques. In the history of opera, cross-dressing is to some extent an established practice, both as written into the scores and in the operatic practice. Breeches roles, where male parts are written for women, occur in operas from different eras. Opera seria roles composed for male castrato singers in the 18<sup>th</sup> century today are often performed by women. However, from my experience it is not common to cross-cast, or change parts between male and female voices in opera other than in cases related to the ones mentioned above.

During the rehearsals, we combined techniques of improvisation with interpretation working with questions such as: how are gender and power performed in our voices and bodies? What do the characters want to achieve in the situations? What actions do they take? How do we as different singers act in the same part? Changing roles, we did not only face the challenge of having to know how to perform a scene from the different perspectives of the characters. Changing parts also confronted us with the crossing of borders in opera interpretation in a way that went beyond almost everything we have learnt as classical singers. This was an issue that not only concerned the gender question, but also the vocal identity, or *Fach* identity when changing from, for instance, soprano to mezzo-soprano, or from baritone to tenor. Making this choice was a statement in itself, where we challenged the opera as a musical work to be interpreted according to certain, naturalized rules. An opera improviser in an improvisation oscillates between different perspectives as she interacts in parallel or clashing discourses on different levels, such as rhetorical situation, fictive situation on stage, and as a singer in musical action (Wilén, in press). To me, this insight was a very helpful tool in the new ways of interpreting as well as improvising within and relating to repertoire scenes from different subject positions.

In theatre performances (as art events), the performer's actions as well as the materiality of her body can focus and challenge the limits between actor and spectator, or active and passive (Fischer-Lichte, 2008). Fischer-Lichte delineates different performance strategies to achieve this, for example cross-casting and reversing the relationship between the role and the performer. Subject and object are changed into oscillating relations. This in turn makes performance a process rather than an object, thereby questioning the division of the creation of art into production, work, and reception (Fischer-Lichte, 2008). Following this, I see the meeting and creating of opera improvisations in dialogue with the audience as questioning the traditions and structures of operatic performance and musical works. Below I will illustrate how we in this project mixed interpretation and improvisation, with the aim of deconstructing operatic performance. A theoretical discussion will be included in the descriptions.

### REMIXING POWER AND REALISM: TOSCA AND SCARPIA

To investigate power relations and positions in operatic performance, we chose a scene between Tosca and Scarpia in Puccini's opera *Tosca* (1900/2008). It takes place in Rome in 1800. The second act is situated in Scarpia's office, Palazzo Farnese. The famous singer Tosca (spinto, or lyric dramatic soprano) implores the head of the police, Scarpia (baritone) to release her lover, Mario (lyrical tenor), who is held in arrest and tortured. Scarpia offers to release Mario if she agrees on being intimate with Scarpia, which she refuses. In our reading, the main strategy of both characters is to negotiate, as they both struggle to execute different kinds of power over the other. Tosca's vocal part has a broad spectrum: she begs in a lyrical voice and later dramatically refuses Scarpia. From the ensemble's experience Scarpia is almost always portrayed as a man of stable power. The part is often sung with full a baritone voice, with a constant high status, which makes him seemingly static and impossible to influence. We decided to try to destabilize Scarpia, thereby opening up the scene for a play of power between him and Tosca. All singers studied and repeated the scene in both roles.

In Vadstena, we decided to invite the audience into creating the scenic space. One singer introduced the dramatic circumstances and asked the audience for details for the scene, in terms of time of day, colours and furniture of the room, and what food Scarpia was eating. The situation was then enacted between two singers, in a realistic style, with a fourth wall to the audience. A big difference from realistic acting, though, was that any one of the singers could enter the scene to "tag out" one of the performing singers, and take over the role. The scene was about eight minutes long, and during this time different kinds of cross-casting and "cross-voicing" occurred in a fluent way, due to the improvisational tagging-out technique. In Vadstena, every singer was free to choose, that is, improvise, her or his own intentions, goals and actions in the moment, as long as s/he followed the written music and text. Near the end of the scene, we stopped the scene and invited the audience to decide how it would end, preferably not as in the original opera. Given this new information from the audience, we continued improvising within the Puccini score for some more minutes, and then slid over to improvisation.

According to Foucault (2009) power is a dense web, a "multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization" (p. 313). Rather than a structure or an institution, it is a result of an unstable strategic situation, filled with complexity, due to the society at hand, and "produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another" (ibid). He describes exercise of power as "a set of actions on possible actions" (Foucault, 2001, p. 341) that is executed by some upon others, using consent and threat of violence as instruments. A relationship of power must be articulated in two elements. First, the person over whom power is executed is acknowledged as a subject who acts, and second, s/he who is faced with a power relationship may open up a field of reactions, responses and other strategies. Foucault

stresses that power relations can change at all times, as the result of both conscious and unconscious actions (Nilsson, 2008).

The singers' individual freedom to choose strategies and goals when entering the scene may have been hard to notice for the audience. To us as singers this improvisational technique combined with the written parts gave us a freedom to play, act, and react upon each other's actions, in order to achieve and execute power. Since the end was open, and who would "win" was uncertain, our actions during the written parts were important to give the audience a hint of an idea for the ending. When we were given the ending, we had to perform it, but we had to make our way there, while still defending the choices and goals of our characters. This gave the improvisation a slower tempo than usual, which I perceive as positive. The music in the end was improvised, but inspired by Puccini's music, and the dramatic situation related to the previous scene. This can be seen as an intertextual relation between a written and an improvised scene.

Dyndahl (2005) describes traditional remix as an alternative panning, or changes in relations between background and foreground on a track, through the processing or changing of sounds in a sound image. There are a variety of methods, from reconfigured relations between tracks in a recording, to more thorough changes, exclusions or additions of tracks or other elements (Dyndahl). According to Middleton (2000) the remix culture can be seen as "the final nail in the coffin of work-thinking" (p. 62).

In our performance, Scarpia could be a fairly short soprano at one moment and a very tall baritone in the next, while Tosca was a tenor or a mezzo-soprano of average height. If we choose to perceive the performing bodies, sounds, and actions of the singers as different tracks, the result was a constantly shifting flow of readings on different levels, where the subject positions of the two characters changed, or were remixed. This may also be related to Derrida's view of representation in the theatre (see above, p. 113). One signifier (here: Scarpia) could denote several signifieds (here: singers) and have many meanings, the connection is thus destabilized (Dyndahl, 2008). Derrida (2001) describes language as an infinite play with signs and significations within discourses, a structure, or a centreless field (due to that there is no central signified of absolute, transcendent meaning). The differing voices and bodies of Tosca and Scarpia can also be seen as a play, a way of investigating discourses of power. The different singers with different voices, bodies, and sexes perform power through different strategies. The same relation was embodied in different shapes, as a deconstruction of mimetic realistic acting and discourses of power connected to the voice colour and vocal range in opera performance.

#### CROSS-CASTING AND PARODY IN THE CARMEN PLAY

*Carmen* (2003), written in 1875, is one of the most famous Western operas. It is performed in different settings several times a year in Sweden alone. According to McClary (2002), Don



José is the central character, represented by a musical discourse that impersonates the transcendental universality of Western classical music. Carmen is portrayed as the exotic Other, teasing Don José, as an anima more than a realistically portrayed person, in a music based on dances, characterized by chromatic excesses, and teasing and taunting melodies: “before she even begins to sing, her instrumental vamp sets a pattern that engages the lower body, demanding hip swings in response” (p. 57).

The Seguidilla scene in the first act is a dramatic point that is vital to the story, as the characters meet each other in private for the first time. During the rehearsals, we started in realistic performing and took turns in singing the roles. The switches between singing and watching gave us opportunities to compare how different singers expressed actions and feelings in the voices and bodies, and what strategies we used. During the work we asked ourselves: What is the most interesting to see? Should we do drag, where a woman acts as a male character in Don José? Or should she act as a female officer, “Donna Josita”? To sing parts that are written for another voice *Fach* was a challenge, which to me became almost more important than the cross-casting. Carmen is a mezzo-soprano role where much of the part lies in the fourth octave. In spite of being a high soprano I would gladly sing these notes, but the timbre of my voice is lighter, which gives another impression. The Spanish dance character of the music, with a playful, elegant touch, and the passionate, seductive character that is so connected to this role is also very rare for me as a soprano to perform. Don José is a dramatic tenor part, which has about the same tessitura as a lower soprano, although with a more dense and dramatic texture of the vocal lines. This was harder to sing, mostly due to the fact that his lines are shorter, and in the form of very dramatic outbursts.

We worked on different ways of merging improvisational techniques into the scene. During the rehearsals we used “improvisational bubbles” that were included at any point where one of the singers had become aware of her/his unaware slipping in status. In the bubble the singer worked his/her way back again. One notion is that every new aspect or technique, such as the change of subject position or *Fach*, to us seemed rich with possibilities in the beginning. After having worked on it for sometime, it got too familiar, and we were somehow set back again. After having investigated how to enact the scene with a realistic perspective in a number of ways, we were puzzled. As I see it, we were searching for the feeling of something unknown and open to widen our perception that I realize is a vital part of opera improvisation.

In theatre and opera, the issues of action and character are central. In some realistic (theatre) acting, the action is used as a vantage point, whereas the character emerges as the result of the actions. The actor then does not strive to play or impersonate character traits, but decides on actions and goals, that s/he persecutes. In opera, character acting more than action acting is common (although it can affect the dramatic qualities of the performance negative-

ly). This can be due to a number of factors, for instance sometimes a slower tempo in opera as drama, as well as the emotions expressed in the music.

We finally decided to go another way: to choose parody, to exaggerate and play with all the notions of “bad acting” in opera that we could come up with. This was probably a way of mirroring our own images of and expectations concerning these two characters, that are among the most played and famous in opera literature. One of the singers hosted the game, and introduced the dramatic situation with an ironic touch, exaggerating the exotic traits of Spain, Carmen’s passionate bodily behaviour and the troubled manhood of Don José, a silent man with a violent past. The audience was asked to suggest two character traits for each role that stressed these stereotypes. If one of the singers should break the agreement made with the audience, by not featuring the traits given ahead clearly enough in the scene, anyone in the room could stop the play by calling out “Olé!” The singer gave thanks for the criticism with a smile, and was exchanged by another singer, who hopefully could do it better.

According to Hall (1996) identity is articulated inside discourse, in the suture between inner and outer perspectives. As I see it, the goal with Carmen was to create a play with the audience about the singer’s impossible mission in performing a coherent identity of a character while embodying several clashing discourses. The singer had to be fully present in the serious fictive situation, while performing the music according to the score with a free vocal technique, as well as embodying stereotypical physical traits, in order not to be caught by the audience and replaced. The wild goose chase became hilarious to both singers and audience.

Hutcheon (2000) holds that parody can include all kinds of repetition with critical distance. It can be used in problematizing values of the representational process. In music parody can occur as a means of commenting on itself from within. Humour is often, although not always, included. Referring to Butler, Malmio (2007) describes parody as an efficient performative weapon, since it can imitate the language of power, writing itself into the discourses of power as a virus programme, while showing the unnatural ways that power masks itself as “true” and “real” (p. 74, my translation).

In the Carmen play we worked on satirizing the stereotype images of women and men in opera. This goes for the change between different sexes as well as voice *Fächer*. Hutcheon (2000) points to the pragmatic dimension of parody. She holds that the pragmatic function of irony can be seen as signalling valuation. The writer sees parody as mixing similarity and difference, which makes it possible to express contrasting values, such as respect and doubt, at the same time in commenting a work. “This ... mixture of doubling and differentiation, means that parody functions intertextually as irony does intratextually: both echo in order to mark difference rather than similarity.” (p. 64). Using irony as a rhetorical strategy and pending between extramural (from society) and intramural (within a certain genre) strategies can be

seen as ways of using satire and parody as deconstructive strategies (Hutcheon, 2000). Hagström-Ståhl (2009) mentions performativity as an artistic strategy that creates a certain effect of distance that can be connected to Brecht's concept of *Verfremdung* (Brecht, 1975, p. 87). Brecht highly valued the concept of entertainment in his theatrical work as he conceived of laughter as an important strategy in connecting to the audience and making them reflect on the performance and their own reactions (Järleby, 2009).

The opera improviser's oscillation between different perspectives, such as action perspective within a fictive situation, and rhetorical perspective as an improviser addressing the audience, was to me a very helpful tool in this work. Referring to Derrida (1997), the switching between an entertaining rhetorical situation as in the communicative moment with the audience and the fictive dramatic situation in the Carmen play, can be seen as a way of parodying and deconstructing the relations between the representer in a fictive situation of a play (or opera) and the represented, an orator (or a singer) who performs as herself, as in a rhetorical situation. The traditional role of the audience was also challenged, by making them co-creators. Breaking the frames of realistic acting, the actors and the audience are made aware of the fact that performing a work is a way of performing certain discourses, not expressing authentic values.

#### IN SEARCH OF OSCILLATING RELATIONS

In this project, we aimed to problematize both our singing performance techniques of gender and power in opera, and the performance traditions of opera repertoire. Methods such as cross-casting, cross-voicing, musical and scenic improvisation and opening up for dialogical moments in the fictive situations were used. To create a meeting place between artists and audience in ON also meant creating pathways where the audience would be willing and able to follow us, thereby agreeing on being more or less included in a dialogue. In some scenes, as in the Carmen play, they were free to participate and affect the staging, whereas they were left as spectators behind the imaginative and invisible fourth wall in most parts of the Tosca scene. The role of the audience shifted, from passive spectators to active participants (Fischer-Lichte, 2008), who offered suggestions and affected the actions on stage. This may also affect how they perceive the singers, who oscillate between performing as actors and orators (Derrida, 1997).

ON has given me new experiences on how I can perform with my voice and body on stage, which I hope will influence my artistic choices in the future. Taking on the role as Scarpia or Don José, I interpreted the opera scenes from the male subject position. Enacting these roles means defending their intentions and goals. As soprano I executed actions and power with my voice and body in ways that I earlier have connected to male opera singers and the *Fächer* of baritone and tenor. Performing as Carmen, I became more aware of how tempting it is for me as a singer to embody a stereotypical image in performing a role, in

order to focus on enhancing the vocal performance. This can be seen as deconstructing different discourses of operatic performative practices in terms of roles and subject positions for artists and audience, as well as the voice *Fächer* in opera. To me the oscillation between different perspectives was a helpful tool from opera improvisation that gave way to new perspectives in the repertoire scenes.

I find Barthes' (1977) and Löfvendahl's (2012) notions of consumption connecting to (literary) works and opera respectively very interesting. If operas are perceived as works, or art objects of music, hierarchic structural relations of classical music on different levels may limit the singers' agency in making choices. Stage settings of classical operas where the staging is moved to a contemporary context while the social situations and discourses from the time of the opera remain unchanged and unproblematized could actually reproduce and emphasize hierarchies more than a historical setting would do (*Operaimprovisatörerna*, 2012).

Consequently, also the musical components of opera, such as the scores and performance practises, need to be approached from different perspectives (*Operaimprovisatörerna*, 2012). If we choose, inspired by Barthes (1977), to see opera as musical texts, a variety of perspectives open up to other readings and modes of performance. In this way the performers may gain access to more tools to communicate what and how they want to express themselves, rather than mainly focusing on deliverance of the music as works.

This is also important when it comes to vocal education. The performance of music as work is indeed a very rewarding, demanding, and inspiring task that takes a great deal of work. However, when we as singers practise and perform classical singing repertoire as works, during many hours a day for many years, often using tools of the instrumental-technical method, we enter, integrate, and develop historicized discourses into our bodies, often without being aware of it. I believe that a vantage point of classical music as text could give singers greater possibilities in developing as performing artists in music, making their own choices from artistic, societal, and not least musical perspectives to a greater extent, by developing practical-empirical methods.

Opera Nova – power, love, remix, or rather power, gender, remix, is an investigation and a play with different musical and performative processes and traditions in operatic performance. Remixing on the interface between the singing body and sound as materiality can be seen as problematizing the work concept of classical music through practice, or deconstruction from within. A search for oscillating relations between different perspectives on music and performativity in operatic performance can be seen as turning to a diversity of operatic performative aesthetics.

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