R E V I E W

by

Prof. Yavor Svetozarov Konov, DSc,

(NBU Department of Music)

on the dissertation of Master

SARAH LOBEGEIGER DE RODRIGUEZ

for the award of the degree of Doctor of Education and Science

Topic of the dissertation

'THE OPERATIC POLYGLOT: ROUTES AND TECHNIQUES

IN WESTERN EUROPEAN CLASSICAL SINGING"

with supervisor Prof. Milena Shushulova-Pavlova, Ph.D. and vocal pedagogue and consultant - Natalia Afeyan, PhD,

Professional field 8.3 Music and Dance Art,

scientific specialty Musicology and Music Art

Department of Music, New Bulgarian University - Sofia 2023

According to the documentation provided to me, the PhD candidate Sarah Jane Lobegeiger de Rodriguez has completed (between 1999 and 2001) the Bachelor of Arts degree at Curtin University of Technology, Western Australia; then (2002-2004) the Bachelor of Music Performance - Voice (Singing) at The Victorian College of the Arts - The University of Melbourne; then (2009-2011) "Master of Speech Pathology" (Speech Pathology) at La Trobe University - Melbourne; then (2011-2014) "Master of Music Performance - Opera" with us at the New Bulgarian University in Sofia, where the current PhD started.

Since 2013 and till now she has been working at the private institution Voice Science (Melbourne, Australia, www.thevoicescience.com) and elsewhere as a teacher (in speech therapy, I would say) for adults: on overcoming foreign language accent in speaking English (Accent Reduction) and other similar trainings (Voice Rehabilitation, incl. for performers; fluency; Speech Fluency, etc.).

Sarah Lobegeiger de Rodríguez has also worked as an English teacher in South Korea (Seoul, 2005-07), Germany (Magdeburg, 2007-08), Bosnia and Herzegovina (in Sarajevo, 2008-09). I add here her extensive, I believe, online practice with representatives of various linguistically diverse cultures, which has created in her ideas and techniques for overcoming difficulties and mastering appropriate English pronunciation in the midst of people with a variety of mental-linguistic

conceptions and habits, including as phonetics. Sarah Lobegeiger de Rodriguez - Navigating Your Voice in Multilingual Pursuits - Skills Workshop, 2020, duration 51 min.

https://youtu.be/XYAZCvuzUmk?si=zgpPKHMASApRLK-d Here's another video of hers: What to do when your English pronunciation needs a little love?, 2022, running almost one and a half hours: https://youtu.be/CjgRFhFprfo?si=EvtnHjqoMXBOTeNf. There are also a number of videos on the web by the PhD candidate on issues of English pronunciation, with details and subtleties of pronunciation according to established practices and norms in the UK, USA, Australia, Latin America, etc., see here: https://www.youtube.com/@Thevoicesciencemelbourne.

In the packet of papers for this PhD there is also a repertoire list of singer Sarah Lobegeiger's roles: a large number of authors and roles (mastered as well as in the process of being mastered). However, there is no list of concerts and/or operas performed by the doctoral student - by place and date. Unfortunately, no video recordings of her singing performances have been provided to me. I searched the internet, (via Google "Sarah Lobegeiger" - "Videos") and found this 40-second excerpt from an aria from Handel's Mass: https://www.facebook.com/reel/590722859333435, as well as this performance of her Bach-Gounod Ave Maria:

https://vimeo.com/805061832/c0488a0f23?fbclid=IwAR3H8nMaHCYkZRYtp9dZ2Hz-jqcBo-rzzG1U3ZlOyGb9VpRmdfWEYE2AuBQ - both from the same concert at the Catholic Cathedral in Sofia, on March 6, 2023. Oh, and here's a carol, a performance from 2021: https://www.facebook.com/cadenzacommunications/videos/387668239800791.

So, the issues of this dissertation have interested and excited this doctoral candidate for many years - the development and creation of this dissertation text crowns many years of research, reflection, approaches, and methods that Sarah Lobegeiger de Rodriguez (both as a speech-language pathologist, as an English teacher, and as a singer) has studied and worked through. By this logic, I accept that the development of this dissertation is the doctoral student's own work.

Clarification regarding my review of this dissertation:

I am not an opera singer - therefore I cannot be a proper, strictly speaking, and proven, specialist in opera singing. But I have studied some opera singing (for my application as a "soldier" in the Construction Troops Ensemble, for in the years 1982-83), and therefore know the basic requirements and sound-making techniques of bel canto singing. As a Master's student after that, I also studied and graduated in Choral Conducting, which is why I sang and worked as a accompanist and assistant conductor in the wonderful Madrigal Choir of the NMA (BDK then) professor Stoyan Kralev ("God bless the memory of him!). There I also "encountered" the necessity of vocal training of singers (most of them - amateurs, the singer Assoc. Prof. Vanilia Kisova), and with the need to master as well as possible the pronunciation of texts in different languages (Italian, French, German, English, Russian...), which was helped by the fact that I know Russian, French, English and German to one degree or another, and in particular the specific bel canto-singing requirements in pronouncing-singing the words in these languages. My work with singers, in terms of pronunciation, has mostly been limited to pragmatic-practical approaches: I show how the relevant words should be heard, we conduct aural-oral exercises on the gradual acquisition of the linguistic-oral skills to pronounce the relevant sounds and consonances - both individually

with each singer (the greater or lesser success in mastering pronunciation depends on the eventual linguistic background of the singer concerned + his intelligence and will) and in groups (in parts, and, finally, with the whole choir). Without philosophizing (let alone - extensively!) and scientific and scholarly monologues, but mostly with concrete explanations and brief practical instructions. I mention the extremely compromising "phonetic" transcriptions in Cyrillic of texts in French, German, English... - if singers, ignorant of the respective foreign language, have only this, they are left with the Bulgarian pronunciation of some "pseudo" foreign language. (I immediately note that in the dissertation of S. de Rodrigues, actual phonetic alphabets are commented on - in the section "Phonetic transcription".) Good results can only be achieved with a person who knows and pronounces the relevant language well, and who reads the singer's text and works out the pronunciation with them (as far as possible and as far as he succeeds). If he also understands singing, he will also tailor things in terms of "vocal staging". If not - she needs to work with a vocal pedagogue to adapt the spoken pronunciation into a possible singing pronunciation. Some aspiring, intelligent and conscientious singers learned to at least read the relevant language in basic terms. Of course, listening to performances of relevant music - solo, ensemble or choral - helps a lot, too, as long as you don't get influenced interpretively if you don't want to.

And since we do not have a habilitated professor of opera singing in the Music Department of NBU, I accepted to write this review. Of course, I know well the requirements for the nature and form of dissertation research. The actual professional reviewer for this dissertation is the "external" reviewer, the wonderful opera singer and decade-proven wonderful opera singing teacher, Prof. Dr. Toni Shekerdjieva-Novak.

Back to the dissertation: it runs to 113 pages (but the length is about 140 pages by BDS). Its text includes: an Introduction, 4 Chapters, a Conclusion, Contributions and a Bibliography. The Bibliography contains 80 descriptions of sources (50 of them online), all in Latin only: 75 in English (including translations) - monographs, studies, articles, including 1 in a non-scientific edition (in the New York Times), and 5 notated editions (2 in French, 2 in German and 1 in Italian). I have not checked which of these 80 sources are cited in the text of the dissertation itself. Most of them are related to medical issues concerning neurology (and neuroplasticity), brain and activities, psychology, speech, pronunciation, singing - hence the PhD student has acquired a good amateur awareness of the issues (amateur, as Ms. Lobegeiger has no medical training, nor one in psychology and/or sociology).

The length of the review does not allow me to include the content of the dissertation (which clarifies it constructively and thematically) - but the abstract is available here on the NBU Department of Music website, anyone can see it.

The dissertation also contains 18 figures (a number of which are authored by the PhD student, such as: fig. 3, a table illustrating the PhD student's "model of the multiprismatic properties of the vocalic syllable"; fig. 4 "The Multi-prismic Properties of the Singer's Syllable", a two-dimensional cake-type diagram; Fig. 5 Segmental Properties of the Singer's Syllable and Phonetic Pitching, a 5-column text table, etc.) illustrating the verbal exposition; etc.

In her dissertation, the doctoral student theorizes a vast number of details in the phonology of singing and pronunciation in the respective language, in teaching, learning, and performance.

"This research aims to assess the viability and sustainability of neurologically informed approaches to voice training in performers, ..." (from p. 6 of the Abstract) - and I am not a neuroscientist, nor do I see one advising the development. So I just read about the idea texts with citations to medical-scientific statements and move on to the dedicated practice ones. 'Singers have body memory...' (Idem, p. 8) - we all have body memory. "The concept of the bodily matrix reconciles the multitude of mental characteristics necessary for professional musical performance by summing up and unifying the gestalt (wholeness, J.C.) of creative cognition" (Ibidem.).

In Chapter 1: "Creative Cognition and the Singer's Body Matrix," we read about the "singer's body matrix" and the "multimodal nature of the singing process."

Chapter 2: Defining the operatic polyglot

The doctoral candidate claims authorship of the term 'operatic polyglot' (also present in the title of the thesis itself), and I quote, 'for the elite singer who has acquired the technical mastery to sing proficiently in languages other than his mother tongue, ...' (Abstract, p. 19).

If you 'simulate' (imitate, mimic) singing a language you do not know - a familiar singing practice - then this does not make you a 'polyglot'. A polyglot knows several languages at a high level (auditory, speech, visual and written) – coes not imitate them. In that sense, I can't disagree more about understanding the term "polyglot" as someone who vocally APPLIES different languages. Therefore, I would use the term "Pseudopolyglot" because, as I pointed out above, a polyglot KNOWS several languages (the PhD candidate knows this no worse than I do, she described the etymology of the word in her dissertation), not imitates them (in this case, in her singing). But I immediately add that the presence of this term ("pseudo-polyglot") would not stand well in the title of the dissertation... The easiest solution would be to put polyglot in quotation marks, thus denoting the figurative sense of the word's use.

Chapter 3 is devoted to vocal-phonetic issues and neuroplasticity, and Chapter 4 to a host of practical aspects.

The doctoral candidate pays particular attention in her dissertation to phonemes and the 3 basic skills necessary to master them in order to phonologically tune the tone, 3 terms are also introduced: 1) Phoneme onset tuning, (2) Sustained (sostenuto) phoneme tuning, 3) Phoneme motion tuning (offset), the ability of the singer to maintain the required pitch.

The PhD candidate also proposes other terms (terminological definitions) of her own, such as "phonetic tone tuning" - in the Bulgarian translation in the abstract (on page 10) it is "phonetic TONAL tuning", which I do not consider to be correct, since it is not about the entire tonality, but about the individual tone(s).

"This doctoral dissertation explores the cognitive and mechanical processes that Western classical singers can deploy in their practical studio within the practical skill of mechanically tuning the

voice to the standard of pronunciation valorized by tradition as phonetically accurate" (Abstract, p. 19). I accept that the definition "mechanical" is used conventionally.

I read, and read... I find it interesting for 1) vocal performers, educators and singing trainees interested in such scientific and para-scientific conceptualizations, explanations, teaching and practical approaches, as well as 2) philologists (with or without singing interests, knowledge and skills) involved theoretically and practically with these issues. In this perspective (2), of particular value will be the opinion of the philology specialist in this scientific jury - Prof. Juliana Stoyanova, Ph.D. from Sofia University [*DSc as well - N .A.*], Professor of modern Bulgarian literary language (morphology and syntax) at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" (with interests in psycholinguistics, contrastive linguistics, linguistic pragmatics and psychoanalytic approach to narrative discourses, see https://naum.slav.uni-sofia.bg/person/юлияна-стоянова).

In addition to reading the abstract in full, I also read the dissertation in full (the abstract presents it in an informative way: it is formatted in 22 pages, but its characters volume is equivalent to 34 pages in BSS). An over-theorized text that interweaves theory of cognition and thinking, and theoretical and practical aspects of singing and its teaching and learning, and linguistics and comparative linguistics, and phonetics incl. (I read a lot of medical terms and sentences in a dissertation by a person with no medical training...) I don't know how much her reading would be of particular practical use in mastering this or that pronunciation, but for those familiar with singing and pronunciation in singing, this dissertation may be of particular interest for its systematic exposition in about 140 pages, in which the doctoral student's own practical conclusions, rationalizations, and terms are added to the arrangement of topics and subtopics and scholarly views on them. Many of the many things described in the dissertation can be said incomparably more laconically by the experienced teacher in practical training, of which I am personally a proponent (to draw a tentative parallel with the idea of a similar approach to pianism and piano teaching). I have learned languages by showing how to pronounce - how to tune the vocal apparatus - for this or that sound and combinations of sounds (words), by systematically mastering phonetic alphabets (these are commented on in the dissertation, e.g. on pp. 47-51), and by listening to audio recordings. These issues are commented on in the dissertation, e.g. in the subchapters Enhancing Visual Processing in the Practice Studio. Mirror Work and Video evaluation of Phonetic Tone Tuning. Visual cues. Visual imitation approaches. The chapter Soundwave analysis and computer assisted pronunciation devices also comments on the use of software to master for the required pronunciation - comparatively, using spectrograms and sound wave images etc., of software to control tone pitches.

Just a reminder that all language changes in place and time - say it is heard in American films from different decades (it is also seen in psychomotorics, in the general behaviour of the artists). How, then, to deal with the "correct pronunciation", for that matter the "correct singing", of an untimely repertoire? By imitating the (actually unknown) way they pronounced and sang then (in all the centuries before sound recording), something that not infrequently unleashes laughter, or by "updating" the old to the present? Open questions.

`   Implicit in my 'digressions', in the 'implicitly dialogic' nature of this not-quite-typical reviewer's submission, are a number of questions, some of which the PhD student could, if she chose, answer in the defence - after all, that's what a 'defence' is for.

Here is the list of publications by Sara Lobegeiger de Rodrigues on the topic of her dissertation:

Lobegeiger de Rodriguez, Sarah. Navigating your voice in Multi-lingual Pursuits: Scills Workshop. Polylot Conference 2020 - Global. Online Conference. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XYAZCvuzUmk

Lobegeiger de Rodriguez, Sarah. How to deliver a presentation woth Charisma, Credibility and Eloquence. Monash University Post-Doctoral Students Workshop, 2022 - Mathematics Department.

Lobegeiger de Rodriguez, Sarah. Creative Cognition for Opera Singers. In: Young scholarly forum on music and dance. NBU, 2023.

Conclusion

The issues presented, theorised and commented upon by PhD candidate Sarah Jane Lobegeiger de Rodriguez in her dissertation *The operatic polyglot*: *routes and techniques in Western European classical singing*, are fundamentally and continually research relevant to the preparation and delivery of singing training and the subsequent singing practice of performers. The doctoral student has consulted a large number of sources of information on the topic of her development, and has cited them correctly in her text. She also offers her own experiences, reflections, illustrative figures (diagrams, tables, schemes). In the videos I found of her singing performances, I heard that she sings well - and you can see and hear that she understands the issues of pronunciation and teaching it. Therefore, despite some of my disagreements outlined above, I vote FOR her to be awarded the degree of Doctor of Education and Science.

Sofia, 10 September 2023   Prof. Yavor Konov, DSc.