

Literature Review Chapter – Building Brünnhilde

Introduction

The potential for a classical singer to be able to sing the dramatic roles of Wagner either presents when a singer's voice grows while they are enjoying a career in lighter repertoire or is obvious in earlier years when a singer presents at music college with an unusually large and often unwieldy instrument not suited to lighter repertoire. In either scenario 'the effect of using an outdated technique appropriate for lighter repertoire can be career limiting'¹ and can prompt a mid-career transition.

There has been limited scholarly attention to the mid-career transitions of dramatic female voices aside from a small number of dissertations focussed on the training and repertoire appropriate for emerging dramatic female singers.² Any investigation into the mid-career transitions of dramatic female voices will need to draw on academic and pedagogical literature as well as primary sources. The academic literature relevant to this investigation is in the areas of vocal pedagogy, professional practice in opera, including the workings of the European Fach system³ and allied career studies, such as film and tv and social media. Primary sources include interviews with opera singers, their autobiographies and biographies. In this review, I explore the literature relevant to this study through three key themes: late maturation of dramatic voices, trends and traditions in teaching pedagogies and barriers to re-entering the singing profession once mastery of the dramatic voice is attained.

“The Ugly Duckling” – The Late Maturation of Dramatic Voices

The late maturation of the dramatic voice is a cornerstone issue for singers. There are both personal and professional consequences for individuals who experience late maturation, which are not currently well addressed in the existing literature on vocal pedagogy or career development and only mentioned in interviews with dramatic singers after they have successfully re-entered the profession. Pedagogues have historically argued for different methods of teaching voice and since the composition of Wagner's works they have argued for and against different technical approaches to mastering Wagnerian repertoire. The lack of attention to instructional approaches appropriate to late maturation of dramatic voices is a problem experienced by both male and females. Incorrect instruction can exacerbate professional issues of age and visibility, as well as private concerns such as family and (in the case of female singers) fertility.

¹ "The Maturing Dramatic Soprano Voice: Challenges and Solutions," 2003, http://www.voiceteacher.com/dramatic_soprano.html.

² Amber James, "Technique for the Developing Dramatic Soprano" (Doctor of Musical Arts Dissertation, 2018), <https://aquila.usm.edu/dissertations/1576>; Kathleen Beth Sasnett, "Twenty-Five Works for the Dramatic Soprano Voice and Orchestra; A Study Guide" (Doctor of Musical Arts 2006); Bonnie Von Hoff, "Vocal Health and Repertoire for the Dramatic Mezzo-Soprano" (Doctor of Arts Ball State University, 2013); Monica Ariane Williams, "Developing the Young Dramatic Soprano Voice Ages 15-22" (Doctor of Musical Arts University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 2020).

³ P.Y. McGinnis and M.M.G. Willis, *The Opera Singer's Career Guide: Understanding the European Fach System* (Scarecrow Press, 2010), 2. <https://books.google.com.au/books?id=wGYMmAEACAAJ>.

“*Fach*” in German means specialty or category. In the opera world, *Fach* has more than one meaning. First of all, it refers to the system used to cast operas. It also refers to a voice type or vocal category – not just soprano, alto, tenor, and bass, but what “kind of soprano, alto, tenor, and bass

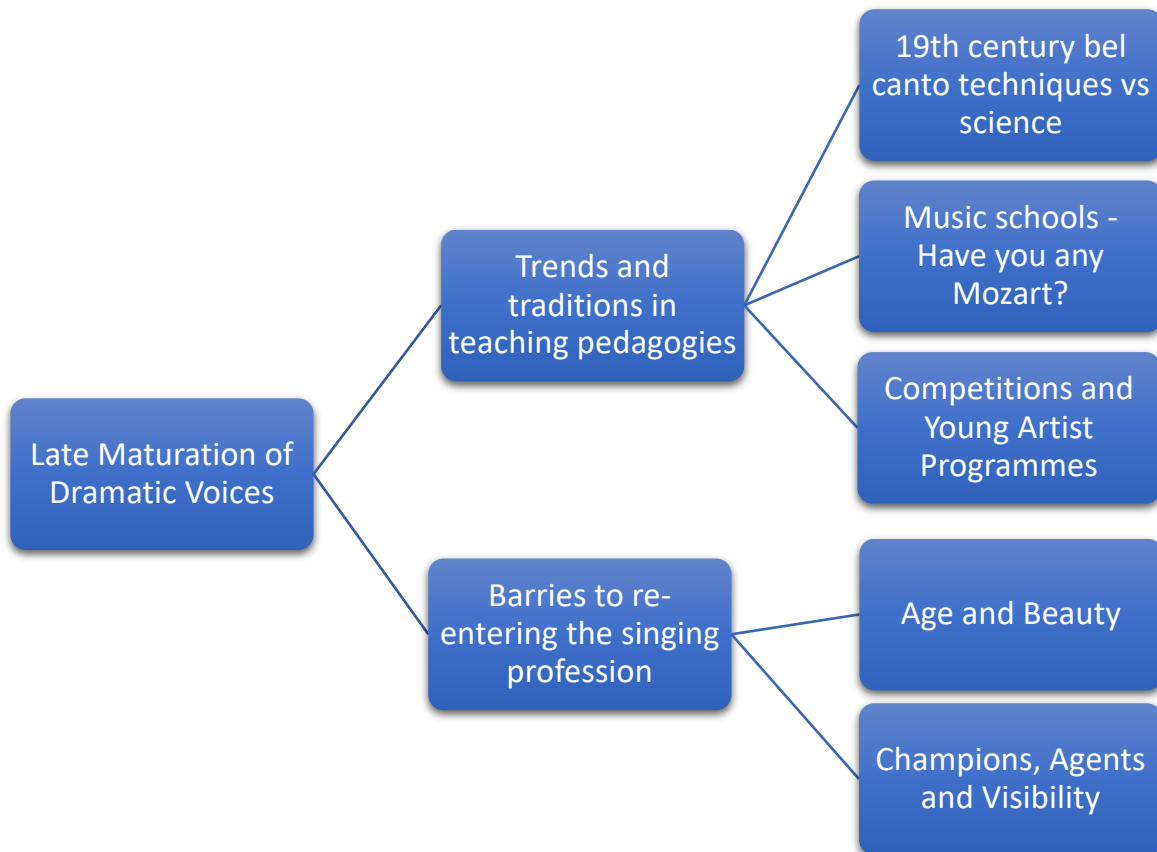


Figure 1 - Issues in the literature regarding dramatic female voices

The dramatic soprano is not a beginner's voice type. The late maturation of the dramatic voice is a well-documented phenomenon and presents challenges for the dramatic singer that are not encountered by lighter voices or other musicians. It is useful, during the discussion of the late maturation of dramatic voices, to keep in mind William Vennard's (1967) description of the dramatic soprano from his technical manual *Singing – The Mechanism and the Technic*:

*The dramatic soprano is either a spinto who is now able to “push” relentlessly, or a mezzo who has learned to carry her full production (or nearly so) clear to the top of the soprano range, say high C6... This kind of singing is only for rare voices, and probably not before the age of thirty-five.*⁴

The age of thirty-five is clearly an approximation by Vennard. Vennard can be forgiven this oversight because his observations are borne out by the experiences of female dramatic singers discussing their transition to dramatic repertoire around their mid-30s. But, as Moravscik (2016) explains, most 'spinto' and dramatic singers only

⁴ W. Vennard, *Singing: The Mechanism and the Technic* (C. Fischer, 1967), 79. <https://books.google.com.au/books?id=nfgmgjqDwuMC>.

mature fully between 30 and 35 years old, with some exceptional cases taking until they are 40, or even older.⁵

Late maturation has personal and professional consequences, especially if the singer is not aware they have the potential for a change of voice later in life. The effects on a singer's personal and professional experiences can sometimes only become clear in retrospect. In interviews, notable dramatic sopranos often refer to their early singing and voices in less than favourable terms. As American dramatic soprano Luana del Vol who matured in her 40s (quoted in Williams, 2020), comments

*I can tell you from personal experience that your voice is not ready for the dramatic repertoire until you are around 35. The voice and the body undergo a change. You can start singing and learning the roles before that, but you should not be out on stage doing it. And who waits to 35? At 30, you are told you are too old – you have aged out.*⁶

Nina Stemme, who Paget (2016) claims is broadly regarded as one of the greatest living dramatic sopranos, perhaps 'the Wagnerian soprano of our time,'⁷ has said in several interviews she thought her early voice was 'ugly'. New Zealand dramatic soprano, Margaret Medlyn, in her 2016 dissertation *Embodying Voice: Singing Verdi, Singing Wagner* describes her voice as a 'difficult, unwieldy instrument, large and wild, dark and powerful with a top extension' She calls us to attend the embodied aspects of voice production when she adds 'My body needed to be very strong to support and protect it and allow it to work efficiently, and this musculature took time to develop'. Similarly, dramatic mezzo and founder of The Institute for Young Dramatic Voices in America, Dolora Zajick, says that at undergraduate level her voice 'was loud (*laughter*). It was loud and unwieldy...It is difficult to coordinate that size of voice. It is kind of like a baby elephant trying to walk down a flight of stairs.'⁸

For dramatic sopranos like Christine Goerke, The Metropolitan Opera's most recent Brünnhilde, who are able to begin a successful career singing Mozart and Handel, the professional consequences of an emerging dramatic instrument can be dire. In 2001, performing *Alcina* for New York City Opera, Goerke experienced a vocal breakdown which was not only terrifying for her, but mercilessly criticised in reviews.⁹ This prompted period of mid-career transition which has variously been quoted as taking 2¹⁰ to 10¹¹ years.

⁵ Andrew Moravcsik, Where Have The Great Big Wagner Voices Gone?, 2016, 11 June, <https://www.princeton.edu/~amoravcs/library/Final%20Chapter%20Moravcsik%20v2%20Comments.pdf>.

⁶ Williams, "Developing the Young Dramatic Soprano Voice Ages 15-22," 53.

⁷ "Nina Stemme: I thought I had an ugly voice," *Limelight*, updated 2 November, 2016, <https://limelightmagazine.com.au/features/nina-stemme-i-thought-i-had-an-ugly-voice/>.

⁸ Williams, "Developing the Young Dramatic Soprano Voice Ages 15-22," 56-57.

⁹ Barry Singer, "Dramatic Destination," *Opera News*, 2012. "New York magazine's Peter G. David gave a blunt assessment of what he heard:

Christine Goerke is one of our brightest young lyric sopranos, and her past work, in Handel particularly, has been brilliantly on the mark. Here, as Alcina, she sounded thin and out of sorts on opening night, unable to project the sorceress's flashing volatility and jealous moods as she gradually loses her magical powers over the one man she true loves. Goerke must have quaffed one of her own potions during intermission, since her energy level rose markedly in Act II, but by then it was too late.

¹⁰ Singer, "Dramatic Destination."

¹¹ Moravcsik, Where Have The Great Big Wagner Voices Gone?

Clearly singing teachers and singers themselves have long understood the problem of late maturation, which makes it curious that voices with dramatic potential, which may be characterised as 'ugly' or 'unweildy'¹², are not an object of more sustained examination. Perhaps this lack of curiosity is part of a broader societal obsession with youth, in particular youthful looking women¹³, and the fact that the dramatic voice is a problem more likely experienced by older women whose voices change is beyond the age limits of most music programmes and voice competitions.

The implicit acceptance of older female voices being more appropriate for certain roles can be seen in a brief historical survey of the age of female singers who sang the role of Brünhilde and other Wagnerian roles at The Metropolitan Opera which demonstrates most began singing Wagner roles in their late 30s and continued to sing them well into their 50s and 60s. Younger female voices are rare enough to be remarkable. There are only two outliers, the Australian dramatic soprano Marjorie Lawrence singing the role of Brünhilde and alternately Sieglinde aged 25 at the Paris Opera and aged 29 at The Metropolitan Opera¹⁴ and Astrid Varnay stepping in at last minute to sing Sieglinde at age 23¹⁵. Helen Traubel, Kirsten Flagstad and Birgit Nilson were all in their late 30s or early 40s before they attempted singing the largest Wagner heroine. Crucially for this discussion none had attempted to sing Wagner before their 30s. Kirsten Flagstad, made her debut at the Metropolitan opera singing Sieglinde 'six months shy of turning 40'¹⁶ and although she had enjoyed a provincial career in Scandinavia she did not attempt her first Wagner role of Elsa till 34. Her advice to young singers: 'Leave Wagner alone'¹⁷. It is significant that all were provincial singers, performing in their local opera houses before they were auditioned by The Metropolitan to sing these roles. Possibly these women had written off their voices as 'ugly' and modified their career ambitions accordingly until the capacity for dramatic voice emerged. Alternatively, they may have had instruments that were suitable for a range of lighter roles, but when their voices and techniques were able to manage the largest Wagnerian roles their rarity meant were suddenly in demand at The Metropolitan

Late maturation – and the career problems that go with it - is an enduring phenomenon. The historical data above correlates with the ages of the most popular living exponents of the role of Brünhilde today. Nina Stemme began singing the role in 2008 at age

¹² Williams, "Developing the Young Dramatic Soprano Voice Ages 15-22," 46. Angela Meade in interview 'Big voices are often unwieldy especially *Hochdramatischer* voices.'

¹³ Lisa Moore, "Invisible lives: where are all the older women in film and TV?," *The Conversation* (2021).

¹⁴ Richard Davis, *Wotan's daughter: the life of Marjorie Lawrence*, ed. Penelope Curtin (South Australia: Wakefield Press, 2012).

¹⁵ "Wagner's Last Golden Age at the Met: 1. The Dramatic Soprano," 2019, accessed 23 November 2021, <http://operapost.blogspot.com/2019/03/wagners-last-golden-age-at-met-i.html>.

¹⁶ "Celebrating Kirsten Flagstad," 2020, accessed 23 November, 2021, <http://www.operanostalgia.be/html/FLAGSTADtribute.html>.

¹⁷ "Kirsten Flagstad: Talk on Singing Wagner," in *The Beecham Collection: Beecham, Flagstad and Wagner* (SOMM Recordings Watner Chappell, 23 November 2021 1950).

45,¹⁸ Christine Goerke began singing the role in 2018/19 at age 49.¹⁹ Lise Lindstrom, whose biography on Wikipedia is deliberately without birth dates,²⁰ began singing the role in 2016 around age 51²¹. All of these singers have stated in interview that they have taken time out of their career to rework their technique to be able to manage the growth of their instrument and meet the demands of singing dramatic repertoire.²² However, while these singers explain the need to take time out, they only give the merest description of what processes they engage in technically and psychologically to transform the 'ugly' voice duckling into a Wagnerian swan. It is, perhaps, no accident that there is a lack of biographical details being reported in the popular opera press. These interviews are PR for singers and the performances they are engaged in, therefore, they are unlikely to go into detail about the technical or psychological difficulties these singers overcame during their mid-career transition. Additionally, it would be a brave singer who would expose their technical faults and fears to an opera going public when they are attempting to portray operatic heroines on stage. It is professionally astute to, instead, display feats of near perfection in classical singing with little explanation. 'Natural talent' is valorised by the public, while singers themselves have lived experience of the amount of work that goes into developing a dramatic voice they are not likely to dispel the public's impression of their talent. Instead, the pitfalls of the pathway to a career as a dramatic female voice are romantically referred to by singers once they have achieved career success, as Lisa Gasteen illustrates when referring to her favourite role, Leonore in Beethoven's *Fidelio*, 'I love her determination, her hope, her progress despite all obstacles. She keeps her goal in mind and will not allow any thoughts of failure to overcome her. It's like building a singing career'.²³

This thesis seeks to address this specific gap: what can we learn from the life history of dramatic voice singers and how might we use this knowledge to intervene in training or guide the career paths of singers with 'ugly' or 'unweildy' early voices.

The late development of dramatic female voices is evidenced by biographical data of both modern-day exponents of Wagnerian heroines and artists from The Metropolitan opera during the 1940's and 1950's. But, as Moravscik (2016) points out, the literature is 'unclear to what extent the late maturation of voice is due to ageing and what is due

¹⁸ Stemme sang the role of Brünnhilde in *Siegfried* for the Vienna State Opera in 2008, in *Die Walküre* for San Francisco Opera in 2010 and in *Götterdämmerung* for San Francisco Opera in 2011.

"Nina Stemme," accessed 7 December, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nina_Stemme#Repertoire.

¹⁹ Goerke sang her first complete Ring Cycle for The Metropolitan Opera in the 2018/19 season. Prior to that she made her debut in the role of Brünnhilde in 2017's [Die Walküre](#), returning for [Siegfried](#) in 2018 and concluding with [Götterdämmerung](#) in 2019 for The Edinburgh Festival.

"Christine Goerke," accessed 7 December, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christine_Goerke#Opera_roles.

²⁰ Biographical details that deliberately exclude birth dates and age is common practice for singers who are conscious of ageism in the profession – see discussion of Age below

²¹ Lindström's debut in the role of Brünnhilde was for Opera Australia's complete Ring Cycle "Lise Lindstrom," accessed 7 December, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lise_Lindstrom..

²² Clive Paget, "Lise Lindstrom: Thawing out Puccini's Ice Princess," *Limelight*, 8 July, 2015, <https://limelightmagazine.com.au/features/lise-lindstrom-thawing-out-puccinis-ice-princess/>.

Paget, "Nina Stemme: I thought I had an ugly voice." Singer, "Dramatic Destination."

²³ "Wagner Calling," *The Age* (Melbourne) 2002, <https://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/wagner-calling-20020310-gdu181.html>.

to the need to develop sounder technique and greater muscle strength over a long period of time.²⁴ The literature on singing pedagogies responses to training dramatic voices amongst professional teachers will now be examined .

Vocal Pedagogy – Traditions and Trends

The sheer number of manuals produced by pedagogues regarding different methods of singing training is *prima facie* evidence that there is no one method for training the classical singer, let alone a standard method for training the dramatic female voice. In this section the major classical texts are reviewed for specific directions regarding training the dramatic female voice. This review shows that although pedagogues realise the dramatic voice has challenges not associated with lighter voices, there is no published literature that specifically deals with the training of this voice type nor the pathway dramatic voices engage in during their mid-career transition. I also highlight arguments between pedagogues regarding whether traditional bel canto teaching methods create better singers in general and dramatic voices specifically, than more modern methods. At the end of this section I will appraise recent dissertations from America which have attempted to fill the gap in the published literature, using interviews with teachers, coaches and dramatic singers themselves to describe their methods.

The lack of published material in this field is summed up by pedagogue David L. Jones on his website – he asks ‘What vocal issues typically arise for the young dramatic soprano? Why is so little written about the healthy training of such a vocal fach?’²⁵ His web article describes a case study of the late maturation of a singer with a dramatic voice who outgrew their technique around age 37. Jones outlines how the singer had been singing lighter roles professionally. Jones details several common vocal issues encountered by maturing dramatic sopranos through this case study, but this approach to understanding the problem is rare in pedagogy generally, perhaps because life histories are not seen as particularly relevant to the problem of the ‘ugly’ young voice or late maturation of a dramatic voice. David L Jones’ own 2017 book *A Modern Guide to Old World Singing: Concepts of the Swedish Italian School* offers descriptions of concepts and exercises used to establish healthy vocal technique, but aside from a case study, he does not specifically address the training of the dramatic soprano voice.²⁶

While there is a lack of attention to life history and career experiences, there is a recognition in the literature of the role of the whole body in dramatic voice singing. Richard Miller, a pedagogue who was instrumental in introducing a generation of singers and teachers to a more anatomical and scientific approach to technique due to his work at Oberlin Conservatory, and well attended masterclasses series in Australia and beyond, makes a colourful reference to the dramatic soprano voice in the opening of his 2000 book *Training Soprano Voices*:

²⁴ Moravscik, Where Have The Great Big Wagner Voices Gone?

²⁵ Jones, "The Maturing Dramatic Soprano Voice: Challenges and Solutions."

²⁶ David L. Jones, *A Modern Guide to Old World Singing: Concepts of the Swedish-Italian and Italian Singing Schools* (New York: Self-published, 2017).

Zerlina and Brünnhilde, according to the designations given them by Mozart and Wagner, are both sopranos. Having Brünnhilde sing "Batti batti" would parallel entering a diesel-powered transport van in the classic Indianapolis 500. Zerlina cannot be put astride Gräne for an Immolation Scene excursion without being headed for vocal incineration. Brunhilde and Zerlina are separated from each other by a wide gulf of laryngeal and vocal-tract construction. From contralto to soubrette, the category (Fach) of each female voice is largely determined by the physiology of the instrument itself, the location of voice-register demarcations, and adherence to specific tonal concepts.²⁷

Despite this description of the physiological and tonal differences of these voices, and aside from a few examples of vocalisations from the performance literature of dramatic sopranos,²⁸ Miller does not specifically address the common issues encountered by training the dramatic soprano voice, nor specific remedies. Miller is not alone in this omission; we see the early problems of dramatic voice also elided in many technical manuals written for singers and teachers. This omission of specific remedies for training the female dramatic voice suggests that pedagogues believe that the basic training of all voices is broadly similar.

Where the problems of the dramatic voice are acknowledged, it's usually in relation to challenges related to certain areas of development. Chapman (2016), when discussing the need for the teacher to encourage good postural alignment in students, is fairly typical of this genre in the way she hints at 'potential' but does not go into specifics:

This discipline is applicable to all types of classical singer, but especially important for those voices which have the potential to sing the bigger heavier roles in opera. In working with these bigger voices, my experience has been that the heavier workload on the larynx itself imposes a postural imperative on the supporting structures of the whole instrument.²⁹

Similarly Frisell (2007) criticises singers who have difficulty with singing softly and 'excuse their vocal limitation by labelling themselves "dramatic sopranos", as if being a "dramatic soprano" allowed them to dispense with the vocal finesse of "soft tones."³⁰ Frisell sees the remedy as being an extension of his techniques of developing the voice more generally. He proposes 'it is hoped that the singer will give proper attention to the development of the falsetto muscular controls, and to overlap all the tones of her chest voice with them.'³¹ Attention to the role of the body is, of course, crucial, but these manuals do not instruct teachers on how to recognise the potential for dramatic

²⁷ Richard Miller, *Training Soprano voices* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 5.

²⁸ Richard Miller, *Training Soprano Voices*, (Oxford University Press, 2000) 49

For the dramatic soprano voice, and for purposes of the drama itself, the recitative "Abscheulicher! wo eilst du hin? was hast vor? was hast du vor in wilderm Grimme?" (Fidelio, Beethoven) supplies for the dramatic soprano voice several onset-breath-management passages similar in technical construction to the examples cited thus far.

²⁹ J.L. Chapman, *Singing and Teaching Singing: A Holistic Approach to Classical Voice, Third Edition* (Plural Publishing, Incorporated, 2016), 34. <https://books.google.com.au/books?id=AMRPDwAAQBAJ>.

³⁰ A. Frisell, *The Soprano Voice: A Personal Guide to Acquiring a Superior Singing Technique* (Branden, 2007), 32. <https://books.google.com.au/books?id=QBaTYx2jnHcC>.

³¹ Frisell, *The Soprano Voice: A Personal Guide to Acquiring a Superior Singing Technique*, 32.

voice and instruct their students on how to develop it – let alone the more difficult career path they might face.

The omission could also be due to most pedagogues admitting in their foreword's that the unique nature of each singer's physiology means singing cannot be adequately taught from a book. It is industry standard practice to state that a singer must engage in a face-to-face process with a knowledgeable teacher. While there is no doubt that individual singers benefit from working directly with knowledgeable teachers, these teachers also need to be aware of the specific problems and remedies of the dramatic vocal type. This thesis by investigating the life histories of singers who have traversed these difficulties, will seek to contribute to the training of the emerging dramatic voice by offering strategies for recognising potential dramatic voices and strategies for development as well as contributing to the training of the maturing dramatic singer and the remedies for using an outdated technique on the developing dramatic voice.

Bel Canto Traditions vs Modern Methods

There is a tension between traditional approaches to singing training and more recent scientific approaches. Vocal pedagogue Janice Chapman (2016) argues 'bel canto' traditions, described as the word of mouth traditions and writings of the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries of the 'bel canto' school of the Italians that culminated in the work of Manuel Garcia, demand respect.³² However, she argues that these methods were predicated on myths and imagery and the success of these methods relied on singers only singing in lessons every day with an expert teacher who consistently managed how the singer produced sound for several years. Our modern music conservatory system no longer sustains this type of intense training as 'social and economic factors have long since precluded this teaching model'³³. Additionally, Chapman argues that the teaching of singing has changed significantly in the past 25 years 'as information from science, medicine, therapy, and other disciplines enables us to develop another methodology that can successfully teach what the old masters taught over many years to "the few."³⁴

Garcia, in developing the laryngoscope between 1841-1855³⁵, is also credited as being the father of modern voice science. The laryngoscope provided a way for singers and teachers to actually see the vocal chords in action. Mathilde Marchesi, a student of and renowned successor of Garcia's method, published several theoretical and practical publications on singing which focus on exercises and vocalises for each particular difficulty of the voice and are still used today, particularly by female voices. Often cited as a teacher of the 'bel canto' tradition, Marchesi, herself, rejected this notion stating that she did not subscribe to Italian, French, or German schools of singing, but that there were 'only two Vocal Schools in the whole world: the *good*... and the *bad*'.³⁶

³² Chapman, *Singing and Teaching Singing: A Holistic Approach to Classical Voice, Third Edition*.

³³ Chapman, *Singing and Teaching Singing: A Holistic Approach to Classical Voice, Third Edition*, xv.

³⁴ Chapman, *Singing and Teaching Singing: A Holistic Approach to Classical Voice, Third Edition*, xvi.

³⁵ L. Lehmann, *How to Sing* (Dover Publications, 1993), Foreward.

<https://books.google.com.au/books?id=cc50lkKmpb4C>.

³⁶ Mathilde Marchesi, *Bel Canto: A Theoretical & Practical Vocal Method* (United States: Dover Publications Inc., 1970), xviii.

Marchesi alludes to an argument that was brewing in vocal pedagogy from the mid-1800s in reference to the music of Wagner and his contemporaries:

I must again call the attention of pupils to a serious error, disseminated in these days by empiricism. It is argued, that because modern vocal music consists of long and declaimed phrases, without florid passages or embellishments, it is unnecessary...for the singer to cultivate the mechanism of the voice, as it tires the vocal organs and causes loss of time for the pupil.³⁷

Clearly Marchesi believed that application of her method would result in a voice that could traverse the demands of both tradition bel canto repertoire and modern repertoire. There are certainly pedagogues and singers who still agree with this statement today despite advances in voice science.

Despite advances in voice science and emerging methods based on these advances, many pedagogues and singers agree with Marchesi's sentiment and suggest that the "bel canto" traditions and teaching of the 19th Century produced better singers than modern methods. Greco in his 2020 PhD thesis on the expressive sound world of Nineteenth-Century singers, analyses a studio recording of dramatic soprano Lillian Nordica made in 1905 of Isolde's famous *Liebestod* from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* and a fragment of a live performance of the love duet recorded on wax cylinder from 'The God's' of *The Metropolitan Opera* on 2 September 1903. Despite admitting that the archaic recording methods used 'can at best represent an approximation of what took place that evening'³⁸, Greco wonders 'if a dramatic-soprano today might maintain the stamina and repertoire half as diverse and flexible as Nordica's if they were to use these un-notated expressive practices to their advantage'.³⁹

It is, however, a mistake to believe that all singers produced in the era of the "bel canto" style could cope with the demands of the music Wagner and his contemporaries were writing. Writing in 1926, pedagogue Kate Emil-Behnke highlights that Italian singers 'held that it was not only impossible to sing Wagner vocally, but that it would mean ruination of the voice.'⁴⁰ Emil-Behnke's method of 'scientific vocal training', used the invention of the laryngoscope and the discovery of Röntgen rays (X-rays) to observe and understand the action of the vocal chords and the muscles of respiration. This scientific method was held by Emil-Behnke to be instrumental in solving 'the ever increasing complexities of modern music sung in English and German.'⁴¹

Similarly Lilli Lehman, who coached by Wagner himself took part in the first complete *Ring* cycle at Bayreuth in 1876, and sang in the first performances of *Tristan and Isolde* and the complete *Ring* cycle in America,⁴² describes in 1902 that singer's needed different skills to those developed by the 'bel canto' method. In particular she

³⁷ Marchesi, *Bel Canto: A Theoretical & Practical Vocal Method*, xviii.

³⁸ David Greco, "Waking the Dead Dive: Recovering the Expressive Sound World of Forgotten Nineteenth-Century Singers" (Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Music Performance University of Melbourne, 2020), 84.

³⁹ Greco, "Waking the Dead Dive: Recovering the Expressive Sound World of Forgotten Nineteenth-Century Singers," 86.

⁴⁰ Kate Emil-Behnke, *Singer's Difficulties - How to Overcome Them* (London: Chappell and Co Ltd, 1926), 4.

⁴¹ Emil-Behnke, *Singer's Difficulties - How to Overcome Them*, 6.

⁴² Lehmann, *How to Sing*, cover notes.

describes that sopranos may need to use more chest tones in the vocal mix 'because more expression is required (since the influence of Wagner has become paramount in interpreting the meaning of a composition, especially of the words) than in the brilliant fireworks of former times.'⁴³ She also makes comment that certain singers were struggling with the demands of Wagner's music. When comparing German tenors to Italian tenors she exhorts German tenors to 'learn to sing *well*, even if they do interpret Wagner? Will they not learn, for the sake of this very master, that it is their duty not to use their voices recklessly.'⁴⁴

Generalisations that 'bel canto' methods used by singers in the earliest productions of Wagner's operas produced better singing disregards that at any time in history there has been singing of variable quality. As Miller (2018) notes 'There never was a time when connoisseurs of singing did not lament the passing of a "golden age", a period when vocalists really knew how to sing'⁴⁵ This discussion highlights that there is no recognised standard for the singing of Wagner or technical or practical manual to support this. Lacking from this discussion are life histories of singers who perform these roles and have had to develop a technique that works for their voice and repertoire, in spite of disagreements between pedagogues, coaches and conductors,. This thesis in investigating, through life history interviews, the experiences of developing a technique during a mid-career voice transition addresses this specific gap.

Conservatoire model – Have you any Mozart?

The modern music conservatory's undergraduate and post graduate training in opera schools and young artist programmes provided by opera companies have replaced traditional methods of singing teaching as described above. No longer do singers work with their teacher daily, spending a number of years on exercises and vocalises before attempting art song or operatic repertoire. Operatic roles are no longer taught to the singer phrase by phrase by a coach who, expert in both the language and style, made sure the role was taught both efficiently and correctly. The social and economic factors that have forced this change in the delivery of vocal studies are beyond the scope of this dissertation. It is, however, relevant to discuss whether singers with later maturing dramatic voices are well served by the current music conservatory and post-graduate development programmes.

Recent dissertations from America describe in detail the current modes of delivery of vocal training for the modern classical singer. These dissertations explore the repertoire and technical requirements for variously the dramatic soprano, the dramatic mezzo and the young (between the ages of 15-22) dramatic soprano voice.⁴⁶ Aside from Sasnett's dissertation which is purely a study guide of 25 works for dramatic

⁴³ Lehmann, *How to Sing*, 42-43.

⁴⁴ Lehmann, *How to Sing*, 63.

⁴⁵ Marchesi, *Bel Canto: A Theoretical & Practical Vocal Method*, Miller, Phillip L. Introduction to the Dover edition.

⁴⁶ James, "Technique for the Developing Dramatic Soprano."; Sasnett, "Twenty-Five Works for the Dramatic Soprano Voice and Orchestra; A Study Guide."; Von Hoff, "Vocal Health and Repertoire for the Dramatic Mezzo-Soprano."; Von Hoff, "Vocal Health and Repertoire for the Dramatic Mezzo-Soprano."

soprano and orchestra, the other dissertations detail how dramatic voices are let down by the current music conservatory system and post-graduate training.

Young singers with sizeable instruments are often overlooked in tertiary opera schools. The comparative rarity of dramatic voices and prevalence of lighter voices in undergraduate and post-graduate music programmes have led music conservatories to perform lighter works of Handel, Mozart and in Australia and the United Kingdom, Benjamin Britten. Singers who are able to manipulate their instruments by holding back and lightening the voice, or perhaps over-darkening the voice to sing mezzo roles, can be cast in inappropriate repertoire choices to fill a cast, 'if you're musical you will unconsciously manipulate what you need to do to make it sound like what your mind's eye says the piece demands.'⁴⁷ While this repertoire can be beneficial to the training of lighter voices, the specific timbral and stylistic requirements of the repertoire and consequent manipulation by larger voices can be detrimental to the growth and development of the dramatic soprano.

Choice of repertoire is related to the debates in vocal pedagogy. While teachers and coaches have strong and often opposing views about whether developing dramatic voices should commence singing lighter repertoire such as Mozart and Handel, others argue that young dramatic voices should develop the voice through more expansive repertoire such as large art song and lieder, Italian verismo and some lighter Wagner roles. The most interesting findings from James, Williams and Von Hoff's dissertations come from the interviews with dramatic female singers themselves where, without exception, singers themselves express that there is a large variety of repertoire that proved to be a good fit for these singers at different stages of their development. For some dramatic voices, perhaps those whose voices grew later, the repertoire of Mozart was easily surmounted while for others Mozart never felt comfortable and they were better served by singing repertoire where they could let their "ugly" or "unwieldy" voice expand thus developing the requisite body engagement.⁴⁸

Similar to the debates that rage in discussions of pedagogy, singers recognise that there is no standard approach that fits each individual voice. It is a shame, therefore, that the modern music conservatory, especially those aligned with universities and tertiary institutions, promote approaches that benefit the greatest number of students, but perhaps do not serve those with more rare, dramatic voice types. It is clear from the singers that do find a pathway to performing dramatic roles that there are many dedicated singers and teachers who create a course of study focussed on the individual dramatic voice, but these methods are not well discussed in the literature and have not influenced the development of the modern music conservatory. By using life history interviews to inform the creative works in this thesis an alternative approach for developing performance skills will be developed that can enhance current offerings at tertiary institutions.

⁴⁷ James, "Technique for the Developing Dramatic Soprano," 147.

⁴⁸ James, "Technique for the Developing Dramatic Soprano."; Von Hoff, "Vocal Health and Repertoire for the Dramatic Mezzo-Soprano."; Williams, "Developing the Young Dramatic Soprano Voice Ages 15-22."

Competitions and YAPs

After graduation from the music conservatory, many lighter voiced singers find career opportunities in young artist programmes and vocal competitions. English dramatic soprano, Jane Eaglen, stresses that because of the inherent qualities of dramatic voices 'there aren't a lot of opportunities in a young artist program. They want singers who can blend in on the mainstage. It's hard to do that with a larger voice.'⁴⁹ While not giving specific remedies to this problem, Eaglen suggests that 'you need a larger level of patience as a bigger voice.'⁵⁰

The late maturation of the dramatic voice can preclude success in vocal competitions as the majority have age limits of under 30 or 32. The Elizabeth Connell Prize, first awarded in 2014, was designed by the late, great South African dramatic soprano Elizabeth Connell to 'promote female opera singers who show the potential to sing the more dramatic repertoire'⁵¹. The age limit for this competition, specifically targeted at dramatic female voices, is 25-34, which precludes many dramatic voices who have found their dramatic instrument post 35 as described above. The design of this competition is all the more strange when looking at Elizabeth Connell's own career and voice transitions. Born in 1946, Connell commenced her career as a mezzo soprano, but in her mid-thirties she 'became a soprano...cancelling all her engagements as a mezzo, not speaking as well as not singing, then gradually easing herself into the soprano repertory.'⁵² At 37 she debuted as a soprano performing larger Mozart roles of Fiordiligi and Vitellia from age 41 she moved into dramatic soprano repertoire performing the role of Senta in Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman*. Connell continued to have success as a dramatic soprano performing until her death from cancer at age 65.⁵³

The emphasis on opportunities for younger singers with potential or lighter voiced singers who are useful in mainstage opera companies means that there are no clear or established pathway towards career success for the emerging dramatic female voice. In engaging in life history interviews with female singers who have dramatic instruments, this thesis seeks to address this specific gap and find out what qualities, in addition to Eaglen's aforementioned "greater level of patience", and strategies singers employ in order to maintain their motivation during their vocal transition. The creative component of the thesis will also address this gap by providing an alternative method for singers to learn their craft through performance.

⁴⁹ James, "Technique for the Developing Dramatic Soprano," 91.

⁵⁰ James, "Technique for the Developing Dramatic Soprano," 91.

⁵¹ <https://cdn.shopify.com/s/files/1/0401/9545/7177/files/2021-Elizabeth-Connell-Prize-Rules-and-Regulations.pdf?v=1617758088>

⁵² Elizabeth Forbes, "Elizabeth Connell: Mezzo and soprano acclaimed for her Verdi and Wagner interpretations," *Independent* (London), 27 February 2012, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/elizabeth-connell-mezzo-and-soprano-acclaimed-for-her-verdi-and-wagner-interpretations-7441081.html>.

⁵³ Forbes, "Elizabeth Connell: Mezzo and soprano acclaimed for her Verdi and Wagner interpretations."

Duckling to Swan – re-branding and re-entering the singing profession

Age and Beauty

If a singer is able to successfully negotiate their vocal transition to dramatic repertoire they then need to rebrand themselves and re-enter the profession. There are a number of barriers described in the literature that centre around the age and looks of the more mature female singer. McGinnis (2010), in her career guide for opera singers, states that ‘with the exception being the dramatic categories. The implication is that “something is wrong” with singers who waited until their late thirties to audition in Europe’.⁵⁴ While this may be true, even dramatic female voices are subjected to current professional standard where ‘[T]oday’s public wants the soprano who portrays a heroine of physical beauty to approach an ideal image...the category of dramatic soprano must be included in this discussion regarding physical appearance.’⁵⁵

This argument has been born out numerous times in the profession, most famously in The Royal Opera House’s sacking of American dramatic soprano, Deborah Voigt, for being too large to fit into the “little black dress” that was part of the concept of the production directed by Christof Loy.⁵⁶ This trend mirrors concerns in the film industry and documented in academic journals that ‘when older women are shown, TV and film casting often favours women who have bodies that are the shapes and sizes of younger women.’⁵⁷ The sad postscript to this story was that the replacement singer, Anne Schwanewilms, although praised in the critical press for her thin figure was criticised for not being ‘feistier in voice and presence.’⁵⁸ While Voigt has been vocal about this experience in the press and her autobiography⁵⁹ details her subsequent gastric band surgery and the psychological effects of this public sacking, Schwanewilms did not make public statements about this event or the effects it had on her personally or on her career.

It seems that female dramatic singers cannot win when critics want an expansive voice and presence, yet directors, influenced by the prevalence of HD recordings of operas and their own visual aesthetic, preference looks over the singing voice. The lack of life history accounts from singers regarding criticism of their bodies when performing or as a barrier to being cast and the efforts they undertake to maintain their bodies, will be addressed in this thesis and will contribute to an understanding of the

⁵⁴ McGinnis and Willis, *The Opera Singer's Career Guide: Understanding the European Fach System*, 112.

⁵⁵ Miller, *Training Soprano voices*, 163.

⁵⁶ Matthew Westphal, "Covent Garden's Music Director Calls Deborah Voigt's Notorious Little-Black-Dress Tale 'Rubbish' (But Evidence Suggests Otherwise)," *Playbill* (4 April 2007). <https://www.playbill.com/article/covent-gardens-music-director-calls-deborah-voigts-notorious-little-black-dress-tale-rubbish-but-evidence-suggests-otherwise>.

Voigt's UK manager, Michael Benchetrit, told the Telegraph, "This was a very simple matter of the Royal Opera House wanting to keep a little black dress in the production that did not fit Deborah. The producer said that the black dress had to stay and that the woman had to go. In this day and age it seems that the producers matter more than the singers.

⁵⁷ Moore, "Invisible lives: where are all the older women in film and TV?."

⁵⁸ Robert Barr, "Thin opera star earns light praise," *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles), 25 June 2004, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2004-jun-25-et-barr25-story.html>.

⁵⁹ D. Voigt, *Call Me Debbie: True Confessions of a Down-to-Earth Diva* (HarperCollins, 2015). <https://books.google.com.au/books?id=8fnGAgAAQBAJ>.

psychological resilience and physical attributes, aside from voice, that are required by singers embarking on this career.

Champions, Casting and Visibility

Goerke describes being terrified at the prospect of auditioning again and proving 'that I had fixed myself.'⁶⁰ She credits the conductor Seiji Ozawa as giving her a chance to prove herself in her new repertoire. Her psychological relief and gratitude is palpable when she comments 'If I had another kid and it was a boy, I'd name him Seiji.'⁶¹ Similarly Lise Lindstrom credits the General Director of Mobile Opera, Jerome Shannon, offer of the role of Turandot after a four year singing hiatus as fortuitous, for Lindstrom 'everything I am experiencing now has been built on that decision. I found a really good teacher, I found an excellent coach and I had Jerry – people who have been really crucial and who still help me choose what's right for me.'⁶²

For both these singers the idea of a 'champion' who is prepared to give the re-branded singer a chance is key. Historically, 'champions' who assist singers' careers are generally casting directors or conductors, directors and agents who have influence over the decisions made by casting directors. Successful singers, in maintaining a public image of 'valourised' natural talent in the press, often suggest that these offers were 'lucky breaks' rather than strategic manoeuvres, singing for the 'right people' who can influence casting decisions.

However, the professional landscape in opera is changing alongside other allied industries of film and tv, due to the influence of social media 'the impacts of internet celebrity culture are often taking root deeply, slowly but surely, and in quiet confidence, in all aspects of society'.⁶³ Opera singers, as public figures and traditional celebrities, now use social media to connect with their audience. Christine Goerke's Instagram handle '@heldenmommy'⁶⁴ and Lise Lindstrom's Instagram hashtags '#whataluckydiva' and '#heldensopran'⁶⁵ show modern dramatic sopranos are using the power of social media to build their brands as 'helden' or dramatic sopranos, divas and in Goerke's case – mothers. This visual medium exacerbates the issues of aesthetics discussed above, but it also gives singers' agency over how they communicate with their audience and portray themselves. In building a following through social media, singers are now able to rebrand themselves and network from their phones increasing their visibility when not performing onstage. Actors note 'the trend for casting performers based on their social media following means talent can be overlooked'⁶⁶ which like the 'little black dress' example above, may lead to photogenic singers being cast rather than mature dramatic voices who have honed

⁶⁰ Singer, "Dramatic Destination."

⁶¹ Cathy Aggett, "Reflective journaling: A singers path to performance" (ISME International Society for Music Education World Conference 2008).

⁶² Paget, "Lise Lindstrom: Thawing out Puccini's Ice Princess."

⁶³ C. Abidin, *Internet Celebrity: Understanding Fame Online* (Emerald Publishing Limited, 2018).
<https://books.google.com.au/books?id=IORiDwAAQBAJ>.

⁶⁴ <https://www.instagram.com/heldenmommy/>

⁶⁵ <https://www.instagram.com/liselindstrom1/>

⁶⁶ Matthew Hemley, "Castings based on number of Instagram followers a'disheartening'trend, actors warn," *The Stage*, 2019, <https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/castings-based-on-number-of-instagram-followers-a-disheartening-trend-actors-warn>.

their talents over a number of years. However, while Lindstrom's followers number only a little over 2k, Goerke with 13.4k followers could be using social media to advantage her casting opportunities.

The career-building strategies and psychological processes singers with dramatic voices engage with to re-brand themselves and re-enter the profession are under researched. The thesis seeks to understand what might be learnt from life history interviews with dramatic voice singers about the strategies they engage in to re-enter the singing profession and the psychological resilience required to surmount these obstacles and asks how we might use this knowledge to guide the career paths of singers who have developed their technique to enable them to sing dramatic roles and want to re-enter the singing profession.

Conclusion

The impacts on female singers with dramatic voices of late maturation of dramatic voices, confusion and disagreements within teaching pedagogies when dealing with the dramatic voice and efforts of rebranding and re-entering the singing profession are under researched in the literature.

This thesis seeks to address this specific gap: what can we learn from the life history of dramatic voice singers and how might we use this knowledge to intervene in training or guide the career paths of singers. I will employ a life history interview technique with dramatic female voice singers to understand in detail what technical and psychological processes they have engaged in while taking time out of their career to master their dramatic instrument. Additionally, these interviews will investigate the career-building and additional psychological process these singers undertook to rebrand themselves in a new voice type and re-enter their singing career. This life history analysis will be accompanied by a creative piece and accompanying exegesis that will explore the themes that arise from the life history interviews using an "academic recital" format to embody the singers' pathways and pitfalls through the singing voice. The musical components of this creative work is important in communicating the non-verbal aspects of the singers' experiences and will also provide an alternative model for emerging dramatic voices to develop the performance skills required for success as a dramatic female singer in the 21st century.

References

- Abidin, C. *Internet Celebrity: Understanding Fame Online*. Emerald Publishing Limited, 2018. <https://books.google.com.au/books?id=IORiDwAAQBAJ>.
- "Wagner's Last Golden Age at the Met: 1. The Dramatic Soprano." 2019, accessed 23 November 2021, <http://operapost.blogspot.com/2019/03/wagners-last-golden-age-at-met-i.html>.
- Aggett, Cathy. "Reflective Journaling: A Singers Path to Performance." ISME International Society for Music Education World Conference 2008.
- Barr, Robert. "Thin Opera Star Earns Light Praise." *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles), 25 June 2004. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2004-jun-25-et-barr25-story.html>.
- Chapman, J.L. *Singing and Teaching Singing: A Holistic Approach to Classical Voice, Third Edition*. Plural Publishing, Incorporated, 2016. <https://books.google.com.au/books?id=AMRPDwAAQBAJ>.
- "Christine Goerke." accessed 7 December, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christine_Goerke#Opera_roles.
- Davis, Richard. *Wotan's Daughter: The Life of Marjorie Lawrence*. Edited by Penelope Curtin. South Australia: Wakefield Press, 2012.
- Emil-Behnke, Kate. *Singer's Difficulties - How to Overcome Them*. London: Chappell and Co Ltd, 1926.
- Forbes, Elizabeth. "Elizabeth Connell: Mezzo and Soprano Acclaimed for Her Verdi and Wagner Interpretations." *Independent* (London), 27 February 2012. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/elizabeth-connell-mezzo-and-soprano-acclaimed-for-her-verdi-and-wagner-interpretations-7441081.html>.
- Frisell, A. *The Soprano Voice: A Personal Guide to Acquiring a Superior Singing Technique*. Branden, 2007. <https://books.google.com.au/books?id=QBaTYx2jnHcC>.
- Greco, David. "Waking the Dead Dive: Recovering the Expressive Sound World of Forgotten Nineteenth-Century Singers." Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Music Performance, University of Melbourne, 2020.
- Hemley, Matthew. "Castings Based on Number of Instagram Followers A'disheartening'trend, Actors Warn." *The Stage*, 2019. <https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/castings-based-on-number-of-instagram-followers-a-disheartening-trend-actors-warn>.
- James, Amber. "Technique for the Developing Dramatic Soprano." Doctor of Musical Arts Dissertation, 2018. <https://aquila.usm.edu/dissertations/1576>.
- "The Maturing Dramatic Soprano Voice: Challenges and Solutions." 2003, http://www.voiceteacher.com/dramatic_soprano.html.
- Jones, David L. *A Modern Guide to Old World Singing: Concepts of the Swedish-Italian and Italian Singing Schools*. New York: Self-published, 2017. Self-published.
- "Kirsten Flagstad: Talk on Singing Wagner." In *The Beecham Collection: Beecham, Flagstad and Wagner*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S6Stoi8DAqUSOMM> Recordings Watner Chappell, 23 November 2021 1950.
- Lehmann, L. *How to Sing*. Dover Publications, 1993. <https://books.google.com.au/books?id=cc50lkKmpb4C>.
- "Lise Lindstrom." accessed 7 December, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lise_Lindstrom.

- Marchesi, Mathilde. *Bel Canto: A Theoretical & Practical Vocal Method*. United States: Dover Publications Inc., 1970.
- McGinnis, P.Y., and M.M.G. Willis. *The Opera Singer's Career Guide: Understanding the European Fach System*. Scarecrow Press, 2010.
<https://books.google.com.au/books?id=wGYMmAEACAAJ>.
- Miller, Richard. *Training Soprano Voices*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Moore, Lisa. "Invisible Lives: Where Are All the Older Women in Film and Tv?". *The Conversation* (2021).
- Moravcsik, Andrew. Where Have the Great Big Wagner Voices Gone? 2016. 11 June,
<https://www.princeton.edu/~amoravcs/library/Final%20Chapter%20Moravcsik%20v2%20Comments.pdf>.
- "Nina Stemme." accessed 7 December, 2021,
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nina_Stemme#Repertoire.
- Paget, Clive. "Lise Lindstrom: Thawing out Puccini's Ice Princess." *Limelight*, 8 July, 2015.
<https://limelightmagazine.com.au/features/lise-lindstrom-thawing-out-puccinis-ice-princess/>.
- "Nina Stemme: I Thought I Had an Ugly Voice." *Limelight*, Updated 2 November, 2016,
<https://limelightmagazine.com.au/features/nina-stemme-i-thought-i-had-an-ugly-voice/>.
- Sasnett, Kathleen Beth. "Twenty-Five Works for the Dramatic Soprano Voice and Orchestra; a Study Guide." Doctor of Musical Arts, 2006.
- Singer, Barry. "Dramatic Destination." *Opera News*, 2012.
- "Celebrating Kirsten Flagstad." 2020, accessed 23 November, 2021,
<http://www.operanostalgia.be/html/FLAGSTADtribute.html>.
- Vennard, W. *Singing: The Mechanism and the Technic*. C. Fischer, 1967.
<https://books.google.com.au/books?id=nfgmgjqDwuMC>.
- Voigt, D. *Call Me Debbie: True Confessions of a Down-to-Earth Diva*. HarperCollins, 2015.
<https://books.google.com.au/books?id=8fnGAgAAQBAJ>.
- Von Hoff, Bonnie. "Vocal Health and Repertoire for the Dramatic Mezzo-Soprano." Doctor of Arts, Ball State University, 2013.
- "Wagner Calling." *The Age* (Melbourne), 2002.
<https://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/wagner-calling-20020310-gdu181.html>.
- Westphal, Matthew. "Covent Garden's Music Director Calls Deborah Voigt's Notorious Little-Black-Dress Tale 'Rubbish' (but Evidence Suggests Otherwise)." *Playbill*. (4 April 2007). Accessed 13 December 2021. <https://www.playbill.com/article/covent-gardens-music-director-calls-deborah-voigts-notorious-little-black-dress-tale-rubbish-but-evidence-suggests-otherwise>.
- Williams, Monica Ariane. "Developing the Young Dramatic Soprano Voice Ages 15-22." Doctor of Musical Arts, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 2020.