Acting for Singers

CREATING BELIEVABLE SINGING CHARACTERS

DAVID F. OSTWALD

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"[My gestures] must always be the authentic product of the moment. Nevertheless, essential though this logical spontaneity is, the most important prerequisite of an actor (opera singers *are* actors) is to identify with the character, as created by the composer and the librettist. . . .

"The art of music is so enormous that it can envelope you and keep you in a state of almost perpetual anxiety and torture. But it is not all in vain. It is an honor and great happiness to serve music with humility and love."

Maria Callas

Quoted in *Maria Callas: Sacred Monster* by Stelios Galatopoulos

"The actor must first of all believe in everything that takes place on the stage, and most of all he must believe in what he himself is doing. And one can believe only in the truth. Therefore it is necessary to feel the truth at all times, to know how to find it, and for this it is inescapable to develop one's artistic sensitivity to the truth."

Constantin Stanislavski

My Life in Art

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PREFACE

Acting for Singers was sparked by an innocent question from a colleague, Philip Bayles, some years ago. He pointed out that while directing I often gave the singers nuggets of advice about acting, each of which I handed on as "one of The First Ten Rules of Acting, All of Which Are First." When he asked whether I could give him a list of all ten, I knew immediately that I couldn't. I was neither sure how many rules there really were nor what they all might be.

Philip's question stuck with me as I continued to teach acting to singers, first at the Juilliard School and later as head of the Opera Program at the State University of New York at Purchase, and as I directed operas and plays both in regional companies and in academia. Gradually, it became clear to me that the heart of effective acting-singing is believability, and that what I now call Ten Maxims of Believable Acting all contribute to that end. These maxims, which are listed in the introduction and in appendix 1, became the launching pad of this book.

I would like to acknowledge the many people who helped bring this book into being. First of all I want to thank all the students and performers with whom it has been my pleasure to work and who taught me with their questions. I want to thank Stan Washburn for the drawings which accompany the exercises in chapter 14, the master yoga teacher Alan Bateman, who gave me permission to use them, and Rhoda Levine for her provocative thoughts and for exercise 4 in chapter 3, and to Birgitte Moyer-Vinding for her tireless proofreading. My thanks also to all my professional colleagues, especially Sylvia Anderson, Wesley Balk, Philip Bayles, Rachmael ben Avram, Ruth Bierhoff, Janet Bookspan, Anne Kish, Doris Kasloff, Matthias Kuntzsch, and Richard Woitach, who generously shared their knowledge with me. And to all those friends and colleagues—including Skye Alexander, Robert Caldwell, Angene Feeves, Judy Hubbell, Ora Lerman, Perry-Lynn Moffitt, Anne Mendelson, Ian Strasfogel, and Stan and Andrea Washburn—who gave helpful advice and support through the many years during which this book was written, may I say, "Without you this book could not have come to fruition."

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Introduction

Are you a singer who would like to be a better performer? Would you like to integrate your singing with believable acting? Are you a teacher who coaches singers how to interpret roles or to become more stageworthy? *Acting for Singers* can help.

This book is the outgrowth of my several decades of hands-on experience in music-theater, both as a teacher of acting for singers and opera history and as a director of plays, musicals, and operas. It is based on the premise that good acting singing is believable acting singing, and it recognizes that singing even without acting is enormously complex. It acknowledges that the music expresses each character's feelings and controls the rate at which those feelings unfold.

At the same time, in the four-hundred-year-old controversy about whether opera is primarily a musical or a dramatic form, *Acting for Singers* sides with the dramatic. It assumes, with the Renaissance masters who developed opera as a re-creation of Greek tragedy, that opera is about telling a story by combining singing and acting. Like Monteverdi, Gluck, Mozart, Wagner, Verdi, Puccini, Britten, and Menotti, it envisions opera as a theater form in which singing, orchestral music, acting, text, and spectacle are inextricably interwoven.

The foundation of the book is the principles I call "Ten Maxims of Believable Singing Acting." These ten nuggets distill years of experience that have convinced me that the way to guarantee the members of your audience the fulfilling experience they desire—which I believe is the goal of an actor-singer—is both to gratify their aesthetic sensibilities and to touch their feelings. The first requires that—supported by the conductor, director, choreographer, designers, and fellow singers—you interpret each work beautifully to illuminate its full potential. The second requires that you arouse the audience members' empathy, which is done most effectively by creating characters who seem believable. The

ten maxims also help you to meld the personality and motivations of your character with your vocal interpretations and enable you to behave *as if* you are in your character's situation.

Ten Maxims of Believable Singing Acting

• Your characters believe they're real people.

They don't think of themselves as "characters." Most often they don't know that they are singing and, even if they do, they always have their own internal dialogues running constantly in their heads.

• Your music is your characters' feelings (and vice-versa).

The composer has interpreted the characters' feelings in the music. Let the music guide you to the feelings that motivate your characters' actions and to the nuances of their responses. Look to it as the primary source of your characters' internal dialogue.

• All humans have a common reservoir of feelings.

Different people may react to the same situation differently, but each of us has the same spectrum of feelings—from hatred to love, despair to ecstasy. Therefore, you have in you the potential to portray all the feelings you need for any role. By the same token, each member of your audience has the potential to empathize with all of your characters' feelings.

• You are always you.

Each of us has our own body, voice, and personal history. Don't try to deny who you are; rather, transform yourself by selecting which traits to emphasize and which to downplay.

• If you don't let it show, the audience can't know.

Audiences read actions, not minds; so you must *allow* your characters' thoughts and feelings to be manifested physically. Remember, however, that the audience will assume that every action you make is an expression of your *characters'* thoughts and feelings.

• You are making art.

Since art is created by humans to communicate feelings and ideas, you can count on the fact that every character is created for a reason. You can figure out that reason and use your understanding to interpret your roles. In addition, since you are engaged in bringing to life the artistic creations of others, everything you do in a performance at least on some level of consciousness is an interpretation. Acknowledging that you are an interpretive artist leads you away from the destructive judgments of "right" and "wrong" that bedevil most performers and toward the constructive question "Am I being clear?"

• Believable characters engage your audiences.

When audience members believe you as your character, they identify with you. Once they identify, they extend their empathy; then they are available for you to arouse their feelings and to move them. This is equally true whether your character is a person in an opera or musical or the "I" of a song or lied.

• You make your characters believable by endowing them with convincing, apparently spontaneous, re-creations of real human behavior.

The audience knows that you have rehearsed, but they don't want to feel that your characters have.

• Play the minutiae of what is really happening.

You will seem spontaneous if you respond as your character to even the smallest things your colleagues sing or do as their characters.

• Never try to repeat results.

When you focus on the details of a past success, your mind cannot be engaged in the present; you lose the sense of spontaneity, and your performances take on a mechanical unconvincing quality. Focus instead on revivifying the sources of your characters' actions and feelings as developed in the rehearsal process; respond in the present, and you will achieve a new—and subtly different—success.

* * *

Acting for Singers equips you to solve the acting-singing problem from three different perspectives. First, it gives you a map of the realm of live performance in which acting singing takes place. This realm is a province of the world of art. It is populated by artists like yourself and the people who are your audience. Audiences enter the performance realm prepared to suspend disbelief. They are prepared to accept the stage world as an authentic one, singing as normal behavior, and characters and their circumstances as real. As suggested in the Maxims, with a little help from you in the form of a believable characterization, they will see everything you do, every thought you manifest, as an expression of your character; they will tacitly assume that by accepting each separate action as meaningful, they will ultimately be able to assemble all those bits of information into a coherent picture.

Second, this book guides you to believable interpretations and characterizations. The path can be described in nine words: "Behave *as if* you are in your character's situation." Each chapter of this book addresses some step of the process, presenting a sequence of instructions that focus on how to analyze your characters and their situations, how to step into those situations using nothing more than imagination, and how to allow your body to move intuitively "in character."

Third, this book helps you past many of the technical traps that are intrinsic to acting and singing at the same time. For instance, it shows you how to cre-

ate an internal dialogue onto which you can fuse both the vocal and emotional demands of your character, so that you don't feel torn between them. It instructs you how to scale your performance believably to the appropriate size, so that you do not have to choose between being believable and filling the performing space. It also helps you skirt the borders of those personal performing quagmires that so very often form around fears and self-doubts. And, for those unhappy occasions when you find yourself trapped in one, it offers a variety of rescue techniques, including ways of improving your ability to trust yourself and your colleagues.

Using This Book

Use the book in chapter-by-chapter sequence or jump around, focusing on those chapters dealing with problems that you find vexing. Use it in a class, in a group, or by yourself. However, since listening to and interacting with your colleagues are so crucial to believable acting singing, you will benefit from at least occasionally having a working partner. Each chapter contains information from all three perspectives discussed in the previous section. Each chapter ends with exercises—some of which you can do by yourself and some you can do with a partner or group.

Part I maps out why believable characters are so crucial to the whole music-theater endeavor, and gives you the basic tools with which to create them. It addresses how most usefully to think through the circumstances in which the librettist and composer have placed your character, and how to enter those circumstances using your own imagination and improvisation.

Part II focuses on the nitty-gritty of creating a character. It helps you dissect a score to reveal the kinds of information that you need to motivate your characters. It explains how to examine the basic skeleton of music-theater pieces and investigates large structures like the dramatic theme. Then, guiding you through an examination of smaller details, it helps you develop a central line for your character, motivations for each scene, and, ultimately, motivations for each individual phrase and action.

Part III supports you in the process of bringing together all your performing skills— in auditions, rehearsals, and in performances. It focuses on the vexing questions of how to remain believable in all venues and styles.

* * *

The acting terms used in this book are in common usage in the United States, but some are not universal. The term "super-objective" (also known as a "through-line of action") describes the compelling need that drives each char-

acter through a piece. What a character really means or feels about what he says or sings is quite commonly referred to as "subtext"; I have extended the idea of subtext to those moments when a character is not singing or talking either because he has musical interludes between his singing or because he is listening, suggesting that he (like the rest of us) has a continuous internal voice that I call an "internal dialogue." To help clarify my discussion I have used "subtext" for that part of the internal dialogue that has text and "internal thoughts" for that part that does not.

No established term seems to cover not only operas, operettas, musicals (known as musical theater), and vocal recitals, but also other forms that involve singing and acting together, such as the newer forms of performance art. "Music-theater" is in increasing use, and, lacking anything better, I have adopted the term.

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PART I

BELIEVABILITY: THE TERRITORY AND THE TOOLS

Part I lays out the tools you use to be believable. It shows you how to define your character's situation most usefully, how to use the "Magical *if*" to enter it, and how to improve your concentration. It explores how improvising can help you to use yourself naturally and believably in imaginary situations and how to make your singing expressive of your character.

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CHAPTER 1

The Divine Marriage: Combining Believable Acting with Expressive Singing

Being Believable as Your Character

When you perform, you want to move your audiences by communicating all the nuances of the music, ideas, and feelings of each piece. You will succeed if you are believable as your character, because believability is the magic key with which you unlock the audience's empathy. When audience members empathize with your character, they open the floodgates of their feelings; they are moved.

You are believable when you appear to be in your character's situation—when you seem to be inventing the music and words as spontaneous responses to what the character is experiencing. This requires that you understand every word that you sing and that is sung to you and that you make the connections between your thoughts, your feelings, your breathing, and your body that we do in real life.

As an actor-singer you will create this complete believability most successfully if you think of your voice as an evocative acting tool. Think of beautiful singing as an outpouring of your character's feelings.

Believability is the key to empathy, and empathy is the key to success.

Acting Actions

Audiences don't read minds, they read the physical clues that you give them—visible and audible actions. They enter your character's world by interpreting what you *do* with your voice, face, and body.

Imagine, for instance, that you are playing Alfredo in *La Traviata.* You are at the moment when you read Violetta's devastating note telling you that she has left you. Let's say you do nothing. You stand still, not moving a muscle, not uttering a sound, without a thought in your mind. Since whatever audiences can see or hear—the flicker of an eye, a barely audible sigh—they interpret as meaningful, they may take your non-action to mean you are stunned by your loss, but they are only guessing.

Now allow yourself to feel Alfredo's love for Violetta, and the wrenching loss that he experiences. Unconsciously, you will change your facial expression, shift the way you stand, and perhaps you will gesture. With these physical actions, you give the audience concrete information they will use to enter into your character's thoughts and feelings.

Go a step further. Imagine that you are so deeply involved that your feelings cause you to utter sounds. This action gives the audience still more specific clues to Alfredo's feelings. Verdi's choice of an outburst on a high A-flat accompanied by a fortissimo tremolo in the strings helps evoke both your shock and your heart-wrenching pain.

When you immerse yourself in your character's circumstances so that what he must sing and do seems not just logical but inevitable, you can let your outward bodily movements spring from your own internal impulses and feelings. Working this way, you will choose evocative and believable actions unconsciously, by intuition. You are rescued from the awkward situation of *trying* to act—placing your hands in a certain position, making a specific gesture, "putting on" a particular emotion. Instead, you have rich, complex, appropriate feelings leading to integrated gestures that create a believable character.

The more deeply you immerse yourself into your character's situation, the more expressive your choices will be—assuming that you allow your expressive impulses to be manifested, that you *allow* yourself to be transparent. Until you were about two, like all small children you allowed your thoughts and feelings to parade across your face without censorship; you were perfectly transparent. Then, like all of us, you learned to hide your feelings; you protected yourself. When you perform, ideally you temporarily drop your protective armor and reconnect with your natural expressiveness.

If you don't let it show, the audience can't know.

As the example from *La Traviata* suggests, characters' actions, like our own, very often are motivated by their feelings. This is particularly true of singing

characters because music's special strength is the evocation of feelings. (This idea is explored further in chapter 6.) Even Figaro in *The Barber of Seville,* who seems like an unflappable, happy-go-lucky person and therefore might be a possible counterexample, sings almost exclusively about his feelings. In his famous entrance aria, "Largo al factotum," he sings about the pleasures of his profession. When Rosina outwits him, he sings about his astonishment. In the finale, when the Count and Rosina dally, he sings about his impatience, fear, and anger. His unruffled demeanor is merely a manifestation of his self-confidence.

Similarly, if you examine the "cool" gang members in *West Side Story,* you will discover they are brimming with feelings—including pride, hatred, fear, and even compassion. Indeed, their very need to seem "cool" is driven by the heat of very strong feelings.

In the theater, it's "cool" to be hot.

Acting Feelings

Ironically, although feelings are the main channel of communication between you and your audience, you cannot act them directly, because feelings are not actions. You cannot "do" love, hate, jealousy, or joy. You can, however, do the actions of a person who has a particular feeling. To portray love, you can play with, look at, or caress someone; you can tease, smile, laugh, cuddle, touch, or kiss. Similarly, if you want to portray happiness you can smile, laugh, tease, play, run, jump, skip, twirl, or sing.

Any single action can be ambiguous. (Notice how the list of loving actions overlaps with that of happy ones.) But if you do several actions, the audience can usually deduce what you are feeling. Since words are less ambiguous than body language, if you add the actions of speaking or singing, you help the audience understand your feelings with greater certainty.

Acting Technically; Acting Intuitively

There are essentially two different approaches to generating the actions with which you portray your character's thoughts and feelings. One is to use your imagination and empathy to enter your character's situation and allow your body to react intuitively (as just discussed in "Acting Actions"). The other is to figure out what a person with your character's mindset might appropriately do

in analogous real-life situations and then intentionally re-create those actions without necessarily involving your own feelings. This is often called "technical" acting, or mimicry.

Both approaches present challenges. For the first, you have to analyze your character's situation very clearly and allow yourself to enter it. For the second, you need to develop exquisite control of your face and body and extremely good concentration. You also have to become an astute observer of human behavior to create characters who are unique individuals rather than generalized stereotypes. In spite of these difficulties, mimicry is extremely useful for those moments when you absolutely have to focus on your singing technique. With practice you can make appropriate mimicked behavior for such passages believable.

You can also blend the two approaches. You can generate your character's behavior by immersing yourself in her situation, and then use what you discover for mimicry that you produce more technically. As long as you appear to be in your character's situation and your responses appear to be spontaneously motivated from within, use whichever technique works best for you. In reality, many good American actor-singers use a shifting mix of brief moments of mimicry interspersed between longer passages of intuitive acting.

Grounding Your Acting in Hardwired Human Behavior

To be believable, you need to make your characters function the way real people do on the physical, emotional, and psychological levels. Our basic human mechanism includes six hardwired behaviors that are particularly essential to incorporate. When you successfully immerse yourself in your characters' situations, they automatically will be part of what you do without conscious effort. If, however, you are still struggling to get into a character or if you prefer to use technical acting, be sure to incorporate these behaviors:

- Your mind is always in gear.
- Every action begins with an impulse.
- Change attracts your attention.
- Consciously, you do only one thing at a time.
- You never repeat yourself exactly.
- You improvise your way through life.

• • •

Your mind is always in gear.