

THE EMOTIONAL LABOR OF AN OPERA SINGER

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1. Introduction

Put on your costume and make-up. The people pay, and they want to laugh.
And if Harlequin steals your Colombina, laugh, Pagliaccio, and everyone will applaud!
Turn your spasms and tears into jokes, the tears and pain into grimaces!
Laugh, Pagliaccio, at your broken love, laugh at the pain that poisons your heart!

Canio's aria *Ridi, Pagliaccio!* from Ruggiero Leoncavallo's opera *Pagliacci*, "Clowns," is an intriguing description of *emotional labor* on stage: the actor must hide his own emotions and display those of the character, laugh through his own tears. Here, Canio has discovered the infidelity of his wife but still must put on a clown costume. He must laugh on stage with a broken heart, to transfer his personal distress and tears into merry clownery.

In her seminal 1983 book *Managed Heart*, sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild recognized that actors as well as many other types of professionals are required, either explicitly or implicitly, to display emotions that suit their work: as examples, consider a grocery store where the "smile is included in the price" or a nurse who cannot show her true feelings to the patients but must maintain a calm, kind, and hopeful expression, even if faced by difficult situations or difficult patients in the workplace. The term emotional labor used above—admittedly outside its original meaning—was coined by Hochschild, who defined it as "management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display, when such management is done in exchange of a wage" (Hochschild 1983, p. 7).

Hochschild, when discussing emotional labor, borrowed terminology from Konstantin Stanislavski's (2011) theory of acting, but she did not consider professional acting to be emotional labor. Instead, she believed professional acting to be a distinct occupation, immune to the negative effects of emotional labor (Hochschild 1983: 48). According to Hochschild, on stage, the illusion [of emotions] leaves as it came, with the curtain, and the illusion takes on meaning only in relation to a professional role (ibid, 47). In an ideal world, that would be true.

Also, an operatic singer does not make "the finding and expressing of feeling his main professional task (Hochschild 1983, p.54)" like a stage actor does. Rather, her main professional task is classical singing—and her singing is by no means immune to emotions, whether spontaneous or acted (Lättilä 2016).

2. Emotional labor: key concepts

Originally a concept of sociology, the term emotional labor is now used widely in different fields of study. I will next introduce a few key concepts:

Emotional dissonance refers to the discomfort or stress caused by the difference between a person's true (or own) emotions, and the emotions they express because of the requirements of their employment. (Middleton 1989)

The stress caused by this dissonance is partly explained by *emotional contagion*. Emotional contagion is a phenomenon where observing the facial expressions, vocalizations, and movements associated with an emotion by others leads an individual to subconsciously mimic these expressions, vocalizations, and movements, which in turn triggers that same emotion in the observer. (See, for example, Hatfield et al. 1993). It is important to note now, that according to this explanation, mimicking the expression of an emotion leads a person to experience the emotion.

Hochschild (1983) recognizes two different strategies of emotional labor: *surface acting* and *deep acting*. The terms were originally concepts of Stanislavski's (2011) acting theory.

Surface acting refers to the strategy a salesclerk may adopt: he arranges his face in a smile but does not try to rationalize it or even to accept that he should feel happy. He makes the smiling expression but beneath it might feel frustration or even anger and fear. Surface acting maintains the distinction between a person's own emotions and those required by the job. Deep acting is the opposite strategy: in deep acting, the individual rationalizes the emotion and adopts it as a part of their work. A nurse might consider the emotions she is expected to express as part of being a nurse, so she internalizes these emotions. She may try to evoke emotions in herself, knowing that a friendly and empathetic expression really is part of the treatment of patients. Thereby, her emotional labor becomes a part of her professional ethos. She may really feel the desired emotions of her profession, even though she knows that they are not her own, or real, emotions 100 percent of the time.

The research literature connects emotional labor to stress and burn-out (see, for example, Zapf 2002 p. 255–258), and on the other hand, to work satisfaction (ibid. 259). It seems emotional labor amplifies the satisfaction or dissatisfaction a person genuinely feels at work.

Obviously, an opera singer must display emotions as a part of her work. There are, however, some differences between singing opera and other occupations of emotional labor.

3. What makes singing opera a special kind of emotional labor occupation?

A typical salesperson, stewardess, or nurse is expected to express positive emotions in a rather subdued manner. In contrast with these much-researched service-sector professionals, an opera singer may have to express extremely negative emotions, such as hatred, terror, jealousy, rage, or self-destructiveness—in a very grandiloquent manner, too. The expression of emotions needs to carry from the stage to the last row of seats in the auditorium.

The varying emotions an opera singer expresses are not part of her professional identity: the character is a task, not the essence of her profession. While a nurse expresses the same kind of emotions throughout her career, a singer may be the passionate and impulsive Tosca in one production and the power-hungry and murderous Lady Macbeth only a few weeks later. Therefore, the acting of a singer cannot be considered *deep acting* or internalization of emotions in the way Hochschild (1983) uses the terms, but it is not mere surface acting, either: the opera singer still utilizes her own, genuine emotions when creating the character through the artistic process.

And finally, opera is a team effort, and the singer is not usually performing alone. The performer works in the rehearsal room or on stage with her co-actors, who express their own emotions and the emotions of their characters: a singer is exposed to the emotions she is acting herself as well as to the emotions of other characters of the opera, which exposes her to emotional contagion.

So, a singer expresses extreme emotions and is subject to emotional contagion. This is not without effect: Classical singing is akin to top sport in the extreme physical control it requires. Even minuscule lapses in that control have an effect on the voice. As we know from the research literature (see, for example, Ekman 1999 and 2016), the physical response to basic emotions involves autonomous neuro-physiological reactions. For example, experiencing disgust causes a person to wrinkle their nose and push their tongue forward, while the epiglottis moves in gag reflex and breathing becomes shallow. If a singer experienced real disgust on stage, singing would become quite impossible for them.

Classical singing is all about precise control of breathing and the larynx and palatum, which is implemented through control of the facial muscles—a person cannot experience real disgust and continue to produce a high-quality operatic voice at the same time. All of the basic emotions

(Ekman 1999) are associated with autonomous neurophysiological reactions that are incompatible with classical singing—the best expression for classical singing would actually be calm, happy, and contented, and that state of mind is rarely portrayed in the great operatic arias.

Emotional contagion on stage means that a singer experiences, at least to some extent, the emotion she is acting and the emotions her co-actors are expressing through their acting. It is not possible to actually feel and express the anger or disgust the role requires and simultaneously to sing beautifully about it: either the expression or the singing will decidedly suffer. Yet opera is about expressing emotions with singing. How is this done?

4. Coping with emotional labor on stage

As a framework for explaining my artistic process, I use the Stanislavskian *method acting* (see Stanislavski 2009). Konstantin Stanislavski (1863–1938), a Russian actor and stage director, was the first to develop a systematic method of acting. His method acting comprised three phases: analysis of a role, rehearsing it, and finally performing it. Stanislavski called for psychological realism, which means acting as if the events on stage were real, as if the stage was not open towards the audience, as if there were just a fourth wall between the stage and the audience.

This is achieved through thorough analysis of the character, where an actor uses his emotional memory as a starting point and utilizes the *magical if*, that is, a technique of asking “what if” as a means of putting them into the character’s position. Stanislavski (2011) also realized that the audience does not see the emotions the actor is feeling but only the physical expression of those emotions. Therefore, an actor rehearses the role so that she is able to perform on stage those actions that express the emotions of the character.

In my research, this Stanislavskian division of an actor’s work into analysis, rehearsal, and performance is central. Analysis is the phase where a singer empathetically experiences the emotions the character lives and finds her own physical expression for those emotions using various means. During rehearsal, the singer repeats the physical expression until the emotions are distanced from their expression. At the same time, the character becomes increasingly real: the actor spends considerable time thinking of the character, her motivations, her experiences, and her emotions. The fictional character naturally is not a real other, but the character is still physically present through the physical acting.

In the end, performing an operatic role is actually fun: the singer simultaneously experiences the joy of a job done well, the nervousness of being on stage, and extreme concentration on the task at hand.

Still, an opera singer on the stage cannot fully experience the emotions of the character they are playing. At that moment, it is just a well-rehearsed act.

5. Emotion management outside the stage and other stress-building factors

In addition to displaying emotions other than her own, a freelance singer—unless a world-class opera star—must also often conceal her true emotions when talking to an agent, a casting manager, and artistic director, or a conductor. Even in the face of injustice, criticism, the loss of a role, being replaced, or losing an audition, she cannot show her disappointment, distress, sorrow, anger, frustration, or contempt: she must maintain an eager, happy, cooperative and friendly façade at all times. These people are not “clients” in the sense Zapf (2002: 238) defines the term, but still, these interactions fall into the category of "effort, planning and control needed to express organizationally desired emotions during interpersonal transactions" (Morris & Feldman 1996).

Singing opera is a job, and like other jobs it is not without stress. Like many other freelancers, a freelance opera singer is a worker in a foreign city, in short-term employment, without the security of a permanent work community. The few opportunities available are highly competitive, and the competition is tough, as in any other profession. There are still two factors that set an opera singer apart:

First, an opera singer’s profession is a public one: the feedback an opera singer gets is partly published in the media and via social media.

Second, given the significance the character has for an opera singer, it is worth noting that when a singer’s contract ends, they part not only from their colleagues, but also from the character. This is not entirely unlike experiencing the death of a friend or a divorce. So, when a singer whose contract has just ended is experiencing the normal reaction that any person leaving his job might experience, she is also parting with a person with whom she has been sharing her emotions and experiences.

In summary, I’m proposing that emotional labor explains part of the strain the singer experiences due to their work. While there certainly are other stress factors, it is beneficial for singers’

occupational well-being to understand how acting emotions affects a human's psychology and how a person's own artistic process creates and manages the acted emotions.

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