

## THE OPERA COACH – A KEY FIGURE IN THE SUCCESS OF A STAGE PERFORMANCE

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### Abstract

*Despite being extremely important, the career of a repetiteur is often overshadowed by the headline performers, given that their contribution is not sufficiently recognized by the discerning music audience. This study aims to highlight the complexity and implicit value of the role of the repetiteur, analysing the characteristics, attributes, necessary competencies and challenges of this profession. This study draws upon bibliographic sources as well as direct observations of some renowned accompanists from the world of opera, and aims to offer a detailed perspective on an essential figure in the success of a lyrical production.*

### Keywords

*corepetitor, répétiteur, korrepetitor, opera-coach, maestro collaboratore, pianist, accompanist*

„It's one thing to know the piano and to know how to play it, even to be a concert pianist, but it's quite another to be a repetiteur. It is here that the first accents or pauses, the first nuances of the difficult musical endeavor are set.”<sup>39</sup>

*Corepetitor, répétiteur, korrepetitor, opera-coach, maestro collaboratore*, all these terms, which come from different musical, linguistic and cultural traditions, refer to professionals who work mainly with classical and opera singers. In this study we will use the term repetiteur and opera

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<sup>39</sup> Carmen Guțuleanu (repetiteur at the State Theater of Constanta-opera section) Interview on the occasion of the event "The incredible memory of Constanta's theatre" organized by the daily newspaper "Ziua de Constanta" on March 28, 2020

coach interchangeably. The role of the repetiteur is of major importance in rehearsals, as he is the one who (co)rehearses with the singers, is attentive to the pronunciation of the text and has a thorough knowledge of harmony, improvisation and conducting. He is a support to the singers, a link between the singers, conductor and director, and shows tact and empathy throughout the whole process.

The pianist's broad sonic capabilities make him the only musician who can stand in for an orchestra. This is due not only to the instrument's ability to play polyphonically, but also to its wide extension of sound, which allows it to cover all registers and 'imitate' both low (double bass, trombone, bassoon) and high (violin, flute) instruments. This is why the repetiteur works mainly in opera and ballet theatres, but also in symphonic theatres when vocal-symphonic titles appear in the program and his presence is necessary in the preparation of the choir and soloists.

There is a common misconception that those who choose this profession are "second-rate" pianists, those who have failed to make it to the next level of pianism. After all, if you can play a Beethoven concerto, how hard can it be to accompany a Verdi arias, writes Margherita Colombo, the well-known *maestra collaboratrice* and author of the blog *Pianisti all'opera*. she continues: „And, indeed, a host of excellent pianists fail miserably at the first rehearsal or piano performance under the baton of the conductor.”<sup>40</sup>

Indeed, it takes much more than a vigorous technique to be a good repetiteur; distributive attention, knowledge of conducting gesture, the ability to boil down the orchestral score to the essentials, linguistic knowledge, improvisational talent and a love of opera are the traits that distinguish the repetiteur's portrait. For this reason, more and more higher education institutions are offering Bachelor and/or Master's degrees in which piano accompaniment technique is the core subject. The advantage here is that young repetiteurs are thoroughly trained in basso-continuo technique, conducting, harmony and piano technique, participating directly in opera class productions and thus having their first experiences with the conductor and director.

Heinrich Creuzburg (1907-1991) was an opera repetiteur in Leipzig and studied conducting, composition and viola; he also directed the Opernschule (Opera School) of the Detmold Conservatory (Germany). He published numerous compositions, mainly for violin and viola, as well as a four-volume collection of exercises for young repetiteurs, *Partiturspiel*, which became a standard work used in German conservatories.

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<sup>40</sup> „E infatti, pletore di eccellenti pianisti crollano miseramente alla prima prova di accompagnamento o di esecuzione al pianoforte sotto direzione” (personal translation and adaptation)

In his work *Das Operntheater aus der Sicht der musikalischen Einstudierung*, Creuzburg says that it is necessary for the piano repetiteur to play the piano masterfully, but warns that perfect *pianism* also conceals dangers. Brilliantly playing everything written in the score can be detrimental to his work during the first rehearsal stage. When working in the booth, only what the player needs to hear in order to learn the part should be played. He suggests that at this first stage, the pianist should work directly from the orchestral score and not from the piano reduction, extracting the essential elements from the orchestral parts, the characteristic motives, the harmonic progressions, in short, everything that can be simplified down to the melodic and rhythmic substance. Sometimes it is sufficient to play one-handed, concentrating more on listening and, if necessary, correcting the diction and pronunciation of the text, conducting or giving free-hand entrances and singing the lines of the other singers when they are not present.

As an anecdote, it seems that Fritz Busch, a famous Dresden opera director in 1933, had the piano pedals unscrewed in all the repetiteur's rooms to prevent unnecessary "noise". In this way, he claimed, the repetiteur could hear the soloist better and detect phrasing errors or inaccuracies in rhythm and intonation.

Kurt Adler<sup>41</sup>, repetiteur and conductor of the Metropolitan Opera in New York, agrees. His book *The Art of Accompanying and Coaching* is a comprehensive work on the art of opera coaching and on page 187 he writes: „First of all, the coach must be a good sightreader [...] you must be able to scan [the musical material] very quickly and to play it.”<sup>42</sup>

Heinrich Creuzburg, in the above-mentioned book, gives the example of the opera *Tannhäuser* (Wagner) act 3, scene 3 *Tannhäuser/Wolfram*, piano reduction (Peters):

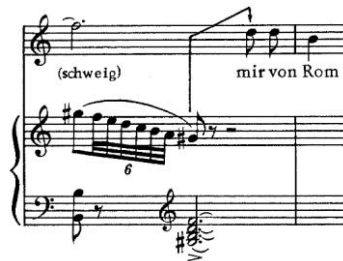


Example no.1 - Wagner, *Tannhäuser*, act 3, scene 3  
*Tannhäuser/Wolfram*, piano reduction (Peters)

<sup>41</sup> Kurt Adler (1 march 1907 – 21 september 1977) conductor, choirmaster, accompanist and writer. He studied conducting in Vienna with Erich Kleiber.

<sup>42</sup> Kurt Adler. *The Art of Accompanying and Coaching*, Da Capo Press Inc. New York, 1971, p 187

Creuzburg suggests that the tremolo in the second measure be picked up by the left hand



Example no.2 - Wagner, *Tannhäuser*, act 3, scene 3  
Tannhäuser/Wolfram, piano reduction

and replaced with a seventh chord. He proposes this for two reasons: first, this choice allows the pianist to stay on the harmony and give the soloist free-hand input. The player's concern here is not to count but to wait for the impulse on the second beat (the unit of measure is the half note) and immediately enter the second half of beat two, naturally. Secondly, consulting the orchestral score, we see that the fortissimo is attributed to the strings, which have a low sonority compared to brass instruments, for example. Moreover, the high tempo ( $\text{♩} = 80$ ) makes this moment very short, followed by a rapid decrescendo until the pianissimo in the next bar, and that tremolo would unnecessarily clutter the sound at a moment when it is not necessary at all; note, moreover, that the decrescendo sign is completely missing in the orchestral reduction.

Example no.3 - Wagner, *Tannhäuser*, act 3, scene 3  
Tannhäuser/Wolfram, orchestral score

That is why it is essential when working from the piano reduction to always compare the original score and to always have the sound of the orchestra "in your ear". A good pianist knows that the *Struktur-Klarheit* (clarity of structure) is more important than the display of pianistic technique, and knows that perfect imitation of other instruments is utopia.

Another important ingredient is the ability to transpose, writes Kurt Adler, recalling another task of the repetiteur: the ability to transpose. The repetiteur will need this ability when (as we shall see later) he becomes an accompanist and takes to the stage with the singers in lieder recitals.

Another important aspect is improvisation, which is particularly important when the pianist becomes a harpsichordist and takes on the role of an orchestral instrumentalist in the performance to assist the singers in recitative. A knowledge of harmony, basso-continuo technique and the need to improvise here and there, assisting the director, will help the repetiteur to accompany the secco recitative with refinement and discretion. Opera is first and foremost theatre. There is a story here, the theatrical gesture, scenic movement, drama, scenography and the music supports this 'whole', to the delight and wonder of the audience. In fact, the recitative is not a secondary part of the opera, but on the contrary, it is its driving force and the whole action unfolds in recitatives. That is why it is necessary that the pianist who will accompany the recitatives later in the performance should be present at all the rehearsals. His art must perfectly follow both the text and the direction, and the manner must be in keeping with the meaning of the text. In opera buffa, where the lines are rapid, chords will be short, the harmony changes quickly, and little improvisation is necessary. In recitatives of a melancholy or dramatic character, they will be slower and arpeggiated, and short measures of improvisation may be required often throughout. When chords accompany the text, they should generally be played on the hard beat of the measure or, within a word, on the stressed syllable of the word, so that the text will acquire fluidity, coherence and a natural cadence of declamation. The duration of the long bass notes, as presented in the score, is only indicative. The priority is that they are subordinate to the demands of the text and the dissonant chords can be played arpeggiated and extended over two octaves precisely because they are more interesting and draw attention to some more interesting/changing word or mood.

Building upon the discussion of the subject of text, we come to another mandatory requirement mentioned in all job advertisements addressed to repetiteurs: knowledge of foreign languages. Italian, French and German are compulsory (including knowledge of specific phonetics and diction) and Russian and English can be a serious advantage in a job interview. International opera house casts therefore require repetiteurs to

specialize (also) linguistically, all the more so as their work begins before the first ensemble rehearsals. Here, in the one-on-one rehearsals with each soloist, paying attention to the pronunciation of each individual vowel and revealing step by step the subtle refinement of the text while accompanying it, the repetiteur becomes a real personal trainer, coach and mentor.

For example, the *Bayerische Staatsoper* employs six repetiteurs. One of them is Sophie Raynaud, whose specialty is French repertoire, and whose main task - the correct pronunciation of vowels in sung French.<sup>43</sup>

To help pianists and singers who want to brush up their pronunciation skills, we can speak of Marie-Paul Hallard. Born in Algeria of French origin, she grew up in Lille (northern France) and studied German pedagogy, Romance languages, acting and singing (Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique in Paris). She is currently a member of the German and French singing teachers' associations and teaches at the Staatliche Hochschule für Musik und Darstellende Kunst Mannheim where she also founded a French course for singers.

Appreciating the importance of correct pronunciation in singing and knowing the differences between spoken and sung French, Marie-Paul Hallard is the author of *Le français chanté, phonétique et aspects de la langue en chant classique*. From the book's presentation we quote:

But will future generations still be able to distinguish an open "o" from a closed "o", will they still know what a "liaison" is, will they still have the tools to understand and bring to life the poetry of a Paul Verlaine, a Gabriel Fauré or a Claude Debussy? For all those who love the French language and music, the rigor and finesse of its structures, the clarity and richness of its vocabulary, its nuances and marvelous power of evocation, this book will be the unrivaled tool for tackling specific problems of language, phonetics or articulation technique in French vocal music.<sup>44</sup>

German is also present on the big opera stages. It is not only the recitals of lieder (so beloved especially by German and Austrian audiences), but also

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<sup>43</sup> BR-Klassik, article with the title *Der Korrepetitor* from the series "Opernberufe" published on 06.04.2016.

<sup>44</sup> „Mais les générations à venir seront-elles encore en mesure de distinguer un o ouvert d'un o fermé, sauront-elles encore ce qu'est une liaison, auront-elles les outils nécessaires pour comprendre et faire vivre la poésie d'un Paul Verlaine à travers un Gabriel Fauré ou un Claude Debussy? Pour tous ceux qui aiment la langue et la musique françaises, la rigueur et la finesse des structures, la clarté, la richesse du vocabulaire, les nuances et le merveilleux pouvoir d'évocation, ce livre sera l'outil incomparable pour aborder les problèmes spécifiques de langue, de phonétique ou de technique d'articulation de la musique vocale française." (personal translation and adaptation)

titles such as "Elektra", "Der Rosenkavalier", "Parsifal", "Fidelio" and so on, that are always performed to sold-out houses.

Even those that are less famous, such as *Doktor und Apotheker* by Carl Ditters von Dittersdorf or *Haensel und Gretel* by Engelbert Humperdinck are very popular with the public. This is why knowledge of German is a must for a pianist repeteur in Germany (and beyond!). The level required is relative, depending on the hiring company, ranging from "gute Kenntnisse" (good knowledge of the language) to Beherrschung der deutschen Sprache (mastery of the German language). The audition repertoire includes important excerpts from the repertoire, such as the Finale of Act 2 of Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* and, depending on how well the pianist manages to play in Italian, the committee might turn a blind eye to the lower level of German (provided that after the engagement the German language ability improves within a few months. Richard Strauss's *Elektra* is also almost obligatory on the audition list of repeteurs, especially "Mägdeszene" (from the beginning to the entrance of Elektra) together with Salomè from number 188 to number 204. Both in the hiring audition and in the actual work in the theater, the pianist has to sing with the voice while accompanying on the piano. For someone who does not know German at all, this is impossible.

There are several resources that can be of equal help to pianists and singers alike in honing their sung German. One of these is Anke Kramer's book *Handbuch der deutschen Phonetik für Sängerinnen und Sänger*. Here we find the rules of German pronunciation in general and for each sound in particular. It is worth noting that he manages to explain clearly, easily and understandably and at the end of the book we find a collection of very useful exercises which have helped many singers to sing correctly and fluently in German. It is worth mentioning, however, that a basic knowledge is required to read the book, as it is written entirely in German.

Returning to Kurt Adler and his book *The Art of Accompanying and Coaching*, on page 92, chapter 8 (German Phonetics and Diction), he writes:

There is a widely held misconception that German is the language of harsh consonants. The old Wagnerian school and some singers of the past, who stressed consonants in a heavy Teutonic fashion have done great harm to the singing of German. As in many other musical fields, our taste has changed here, too. Today we prefer German to be sung according to the principles of the classical Italian school of singing, giving full rights to the onomatopoetical power of consonants, but with the diction based primarily on pure articulation of vowels.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Kurt Adler, *op. cit.* p. 92

And yet.... „Opera in music is a purely Italian invention”<sup>46</sup> writes Alessandra Korner in her doctoral thesis defended in Milan in 2014 with the title *L'insegnamento dell'italiano ai cantanti d'opera internazionali*.

Korner translates from French the words of Francois Ragueneau (1660-1722), the French historian and musicologist who strove to spread Italian opera in France:

Italian has a great advantage for singing compared to French, because all its vowels can be heard very well, whereas half of the vowels in French are mute, almost soundless vowels. It follows, firstly, that no cadence or agreeable passage could be constructed on the syllables in which these vowels are; and secondly, the words are only half perceived, so that you have to guess half of what the French sing, while you understand very distinctly everything that the Italians pronounce.<sup>47</sup>

## Conclusion

As we have seen, the repetiteur's job involves many skills, but perhaps the most important one is his great love for opera and for working with singers. There are many moments when he becomes an accompanist, when he forgets to be a conductor, coach or mentor and exposes himself alongside the singer in the spotlight. All theatres, without exception, organize lieder evenings or arias recitals; now the accompanist breathes, lives and his emotion merges with that of the singer. Here the pianist is needed with masterly technique, a velvet touch and with the experience gained in previous work with the soloist, the accompanist knows the soloist's every breath and discreetly but firmly assists and supports him until the final applause.

To summarize, among the most important traits of the repetiteur-accompanist are: excellent pianist with a good prima vista; mastery of basso continuo technique, harmony and improvisation; able to play after the conductor's gesture; thorough language skills; empathic, fine psychologist and above all - loves singers.

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<sup>46</sup> „L'opera in musica è un'invenzione del tutto italiana” (personal translation)

<sup>47</sup> „La lingua italiana ha un grande vantaggio per il canto sulla lingua francese, in quanto tutte le sue vocali suonano molto bene, mentre invece la metà delle vocali della lingua francese sono vocali mute, quasi prive di suono. Da ciò deriva in primo luogo che non si potrebbe costruire alcuna cadenza né alcun passaggio gradevole sulle sillabe in cui si trovano queste vocali; e in secondo luogo, che le parole si percepiscono solo a metà, così che si deve indovinare la metà di ciò che cantano i francesi, e al contrario si capisce molto distintamente tutto quello che dicono gli italiani.” (personal translation and adaptation) on Korner, Alessandra. *L'insegnamento dell'italiano ai cantanti d'opera internazionali*. Tesi di Dottorato. Università Cattolica del Santo Cuore, Scuola di Dottorato in Scienze linguistiche e letterarie, Milano, 2014, p. 59



With creativity and enthusiasm, he thus becomes master and servant at the same time. He will selflessly serve the composer and master the stage with his art.

The repetiteur is not a mere performer, a neutral reader of the score, for whom only the technical data of the score are sufficient. If he lacks sensitivity, if he lacks the ineffable lyrical thrill and is unable to suffer with Desdemona or Cio-Cio-San, to rejoice with Figaro or Vincent, the repetiteur will remain a poor clerk with the hands of a bureaucrat. And the artist next to him will be just as poor, even if his technique is impeccable.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>Carmen Guțuleanu, interview.

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