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**STAGING BAROQUE MUSIC – AND SHEDDING LIGHT ON TIMELESS GENDER ISSUES**  
An interdisciplinary study of the exploratory artistic work of the Opera Bureau

This paper presents preliminary results from an ongoing exploration of the artistic developmental work of the Opera Bureau – run collaboratively by two musicians Catalina Langborn, violinist, and Christina Larsson Malmberg, soprano, both of them specialized in baroque music (besides working with the Opera Bureau both of them also have individual freelancing carriers). Together, they are the producers and business leaders of the Opera Bureau, and both of them are also principal performing musicians. Both musicians participate in the present research project as researching artists in collaboration with Cecilia K. Hultberg, researcher in music education with a background as a chamber musician, experienced in baroque music. This allows for an exploration of innovative and audience-interactive freelance-based artistic work already well established on a professional area. Of specific interest are the artistic considerations in addressing gender issues, framed by the business focus of the Opera Bureau. Consequently, the results of the project will contribute new knowledge relevant, not only to artistic research per se, but also to the professional field of arts, interdisciplinary research methodology, to higher education in music performance and to increased understanding of the possible tension between artistic work and business focus.

The joint master project (2011) of the two leaders formed the starting point of The Opera Bureau, which produces non-traditional scenic baroque performances addressing a broad variety of audiences in different settings: from children to adults, in concert, theatre, school, as well as event productions. The over-all intention of the producers is to awaken new audiences' interest in baroque music and, to do so by means of scenic (operatic) narrative performances problematizing gender issues that are, on the one hand, closely related to the music in its historical context and, on the other hand, relevant to society of today, as well. The development of each production starts out from a selection of works of music that the two producers wish to present because of its quality. These works, many of them composed by women, constitute a platform for approaching gender issues related to the selected music.

The process of creating a production includes inter-artistic collaboration with scriptwriter, director, stage design and performers: besides further musicians, dancer/choreographer, as well. Equal involvement of all performers on stage is a hallmark implying that the musicians play by heart in order to participate as actors moving on stage as required by the narrative (problematizing) performance in question. Due to this, the music performances are integral parts of the aspect of gender that is being problematized by the staged narrative performance.

Of special interest to the present research project is the leaders' over-all intention to continuously develop the quality of the performances/productions. Thus, they analyse publically presented productions and revise them according to what they find important in collaboration with performers and experts in areas of relevance (i.e. gender pedagogue, director).

During the process of establishing the Opera bureau the two producers have explored multiple value propositions, and business models to multiple target groups. This approach involves iterative strategizing and entrepreneurial learning in close interaction with the artistic creation process. This implies that they are meeting, in a fruitful way, the main challenge for young musicians of today, as described in documents of the European Association of

Conservatoires, namely to establish a solid basis for freelancing musicianship that makes it possible for them to earn their living from it because audiences find their performances meaningful enough to pay for (Kohler, 2004).

#### PURPOSE AND AIMS

With reference to the description presented above, the overall purpose of the main project is to explore, in interdisciplinary collaboration, the interplay between qualities in the artistic work of the Opera Bureau, representing freelancing musicianship, their ways of addressing gender issues and communicating this in public.

#### Specific aims:

- to reveal criteria characterizing the explorative artistic processes on which the Opera Bureau is based and, in relation to this: considerations made in order to
  - develop and present staged narrative performances of baroque music in ways that enhance listeners' experience and awake new audiences' interest,
  - problematize gender issues of timeless relevance by means of staged music performance,
  - interact with different audiences in different settings.

#### *Delimitations*

The exploration aimed at in this project concerns the leading team of the Opera Bureau, which implies that the main focus is directed towards *these two musicians'* actions/interactions and considerations in problematizing gender issues. Consequently, the area of music constitutes the starting point for studying the artistic work of the Opera Bureau. This delimitation is related to the areas of expertise represented by the research team: music performance, artistic research in the domain of music – research in and through the arts as well as practice-based research and music education research.

*This paper presents preliminary results regarding phases of establishment and development of the company. A special focus is directed towards results relevant to performance education.*

#### SURVEY OF THE FIELD

In artistic practice in the domain of music, performances representing interpretation of compositions belong to a crucial area that challenges musicians to keep alive, re-awake and, in specific, to communicate works of music from a broad variety of genres and epochs. This calls for interpreters' re-creativity in order to contribute to a renewal of cultural heritage: to present the music with individual expressivity that corresponds to the composer's intention and, at the same time, addresses and affects audiences of today – a challenge that is taken on by the Opera Bureau in rather specific ways.

In a collaborative study on expert performers' processes in interpretation-finding, Hultberg (2007) found that the musicians expected the process of (re-)interpretation-finding to be rewarding, that is, they expected the music to represent a high quality according to their own assessment. Given this condition, the musicians approached interpretation and re-interpretation as open-end explorative processes, during which they continued to reveal new qualities in the music when (re-)preparing performances of it and/or presenting it in public. Both criteria are consistent with the present project, in which a careful selection of music forms the basis for continuous interpretative exploration. In addition, this approach to the

music also connects to the development of strategies for problematizing gender issues as a means of deepening the open-end explorative process.

The need for problematizing gender issues in music, not only from a historical perspective, but in today's society, as well, has been maintained, for instance in investigation ordered by the Swedish Culture department (SOU 2006:42). Gender may be described as socially defined behaviour that people take on – and expect others to do so as well, often without reflecting on it, because it is implicitly embedded in conventionalized narratives representing culturally established “truths”. This implicit character of understanding gender may explain why many people were taken by surprise by the result of the investigation, implying that a gender-related inequality characterized the professional arena of music in Sweden.

Inequality in the area of music has a long history. As late as in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there could be little difference between female opera singers and prostitutes. In her biography of the Swedish opera singer Jenny Lind, Öhrström (2000) maintains, for instance, that a gentleman listening to an opera performance could “call” for a female singer to accompany him afterwards for dinner and (his) further evening pleasure.

As regards instrumental performance and composition, women were accepted on an amateur level corresponding to expectancies of a well-educated daughter. Representing this kind of “Bildung” she would be well-prepared for future duties as her husband's wife, playing the piano on private social occasions, accompanying amateur performances of her husband and his friends but avoiding coming to the fore as a soloist (Hervig, 1996). Fanny Mendelssohn and Alma Mahler exemplify how talented and skilled women had to “do gender” according to this cultural “truth” as regards composition, which was even more out of question as a female activity on professional level. This socially defined – and expected, behaviour derives from the ideas of identity development through cultural “Bildung” that were established in European noble class during the renaissance (Kössler, 1989), according to which noblemen and their ladies were expected to perform and – noblewomen only, to compose music, and to do so without having to earn their living from it. Consequently, Barbara Strozzi's way of living was a huge provocation to the establishment of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, because she earned her and her children's living as a musician and a composer publishing and selling printed scores of her works (Glixon, 1999).

The general approach of all productions of the Opera Bureau, to start out from a selection of music highly appreciated by the leaders, implies that intra-musical gender representation related to the historical context of the music may reflect gender issues of general social character. This is also consistent with McClary's findings (2002) implying that investigation of semiotics of gender represented in music may tell us about conditions in social history.

The general artistic approach applied in the productions of the Opera Bureau made it close at hand to choose a cultural-psychological perspective (Bruner, 1996) for this project, which implies a special interest in relations between individuals and traditions. According to a cultural-psychological perspective cultural tools (cultural artefacts as well as language and other sign systems, conventionalized behaviour, and beliefs/cultural “truths” represented, for instance, by conventionalized narratives) function as mediators of the real world and, thus strongly influence individuals' thought and actions. This also means that individuals' ways of understanding the local context in question – i.e. their ways of framing it – is of great importance. The latter is especially relevant to the preliminary results focused on in this paper.

## METHOD

The over-all method of the present project represents a combination of research in and through artistic processes (Catalina Langborn and Christina Larsson Malmberg) and scientific, practice-based research (Cecilia K Hultberg). It derives from research on artistic processes in music performance (Hultberg, 2007) and has proven synergistically effective in that it facilitates making use of the expertise of the entire research team: music performance, artistic research in music and research in music education. The participants' shared understanding of crucial but not all parts of the focus area helps revealing and conceptualizing, in collaborative exploration, tacit dimensions and embedded knowledge of the explored processes.

Especially in the exploration of the non-verbalized dimension of artistic processes, which are at stake in this project, a *partly* shared understanding is of utmost importance in combination with a *partly* diverging understanding because it allows researching artists and academic researchers to shed light on a detail from points remaining close to each other. The closeness facilitates deep illumination of the issues subject to exploration (Hultberg, 2011). This approach may be described as a special case of participatory action research as referred to by Kjørup (2011), who underlines that scientific researchers may reveal aspects not recognized by the artists although they are, indeed, closer to the tacit knowledge that is to be revealed. Related to this, it is an advantage that analysis from a cultural-psychological perspective facilitates conceptualizing in easily understandable terms with high relevance to the artistic practice in music (Hultberg, 2012).

Many-sided data are required to explore criteria characterizing the explorative artistic processes on which the Opera Bureau is based and, related to this, the leaders' considerations. Data consisted of

- The leaders' continuous developmental artistic work
- Documentation (notes, programs, critique, reviews, social media)
- Individual thematic reflection in writing
- Individual and team observations of live/documented
  - Rehearsals
  - Performances
  - Revision sessions
- Following-up semi-structured interviews (research team).

For the present presentation questions regarding contextual framing in phases of establishment and development were focused on.

## PRELIMINARY RESULTS

### *Setting and trying out goals*

The initial phase of The Opera Bureau is represented by the creation of the joint master project of Christina and Catalina, "Lovisa Ulrika", which problematizes power behind the throne exerted by a woman instead of the king, as expected. Lovisa Ulrika, a Prussian born queen of Sweden in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, initiated a strong cultural development. She also tried to achieve a central powerful position, which, however, was prevented by the political opposition. This production portrays Lovisa Ulrika in a narrative about power and powerlessness, attempts to exceed roles assigned to gender, divided loyalties in following and

breaking gender-related expectations. Music appreciated in Sweden during this period, partly composed for the royal court, forms the basis of the production.

This initial phase is *framed as a professional take-off* characterized by a shared purpose of the two leaders to

- establish a professional niche allowing them to develop multi-artistic theatrical productions (in the original performance the instrumentalists acted on stage, using the printed score in their performance);
- create something new, to fill a void in classical concert arena;
- problematize timeless gender issues.

The collaborative analyses also revealed individually diverging intentional framings of the collaborative work in the newly established niche, connected to the leaders' expectations regarding their professional development and freelance careers:

Christina (soprano) expected it to support her career as an opera singer;

Catalina (violin) expected it to support her development as a theatrically acting musician.

#### *Establishing professional team-leadership*

After graduating from the master program in music performance Christina and Catalina got the opportunity to work with a non-profit organization, which offers coaching and business consulting/activities to artists. A main purpose is to support the artists to develop their ideas into sustainable business and activities.

This phase is characterized by an *extended framing, which includes leadership and entrepreneurship beside artistic activities*:

- Team-building:
  - Dividing responsibilities (production, administration, funding);
  - Continuous administrative implementation;
- Basic conditions of productions (set of rules):
  - small ensemble,
  - democratic approach:
    - all performers act on stage (instrumentalists play by heart),
    - shared artistic responsibilities,
  - stripped scenography,
  - gender perspective includes the selected music
- Individual expectations need to be put aside.

The expertise in teambuilding was of great importance in order to get enough time for artistic activities in future. However, during this phase the extended framing left only little time for artistic development. This takes a lot of time but provides low income in the short term, which is why the leaders mainly had to rely on their already achieved expertise as musicians during this phase.

However, in terms of a general framing the conditions they set up for their productions were important. These are implemented in “The Courtesan and her Love”, from which a video-clip is shown in the presentation. This production is inspired by the life of Barbara Strozzi, who was renowned for her compositional talent and her poetic lyrics (cf. section Survey of the field). Based on music composed by her and by other women from the same

period conditions of female composers are problematized by means of portraying a fictive Barbara.

#### *Reconsideration and artistic development*

After the successful establishment of The Opera Bureau on the professional arena, Christina and Catalina wished to improve the over-all quality of their company. Thus, they focused on *artistically and pedagogically framed professional development*:

- Revision of the productions “Lovisa Ulrika” and “The Courtesan and her Love”
  - collaboration with a director and a gender pedagogue:
    - development of the dramaturgic curve of the narratives:  
symbolic and narrative simplification,
    - development of interactive “packages” for different audiences,
  - stronger focus on the music performance.
- Reclaiming space for individual professional intentions.

Although both “Lovisa Ulrika” and “The Courtesan and her Love” received very positive public response, the two leaders decided to revise these productions, as well as the ways of addressing different audiences. The revisions resulted in reconsideration of the role of the music related to the specific aspects of gender being addressed when a piece of music is performed, respectively. The stronger focus on music performance left space for taking into account individual professional intentions again. For instance, at present Catalina spends more time on developing her expertise as a theatrically acting violinist.

#### *Re-orientation*

To both Christina and Catalina it was of great importance to pursue their individual professional pathways, respectively, while continuing their collaborative leadership of The Opera Bureau. In addition, the revisions also resulted in an insight of the need for a stronger leadership because the democratic approach had proven partly problematic during the development of “The Courtesan...”. For instance, deadlines were difficult to keep because of other professional engagements of the participating artists, all of them freelancing in parallel, as well. For the development of the next production of The Opera Bureau this implies:

- The leaders’ full responsibility for operating and developing the company;
  - More responsibility but with clear delimitations:  
i.e. initial collaboration with director, script-writer;
  - Consistent artistic/society-debating framing of the productions:  
affecting audiences, making them reflect,
  - Stronger focus on the music performance in the productions,
  - Theatrical framing as before:
    - small ensembles
    - democratic theatrical acting of all performers,
- Balance between development of the company and individual professional agendas:  
a stronger focus on the leaders’ music performance and possible development.

At present, Christina and Catalina are working with the next production and scheduling further performances of the two revised productions, in parallel. Both of them have the

impression that their leadership of The Opera Bureau has supported their individual artistic careers.

The results exemplify the importance of a combination of different competences in order to achieve sustainability of a freelancing performance company. Nevertheless, the results also confirm that expertise in music performance remains the solid ground. On the one hand, it implies a challenge to performance education to provide coaching relevant to a changing professional arena of freelancing musicianship and to combine this with support of artistic development. On the other hand, collaboration with leaders of successful freelancing companies may reveal alternate pathways and give rise to new ones.

We look forward to a discussion on further implications.

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