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Opera singers in danger Vocal artists as working matter and director's instruments only?

Voice specialists of Collegium Medicorum Theatri (CoMeT) warn against health risks of today's cultural industry

In March of this year, the Austrian mezzo-soprano Elisabeth Kulman caused quite a stir when she publicly denounced the often tenuous position of opera singers today. Her initiative "art but fair" was widely reported as "The Artists' Revolution" and found a multitude of prominent supporters. Amongst other things Kulman criticised the often too tight schedules of rehearsals and performances as well as the basic requirements of today's cultural industry, which demands a great deal from young artists. Since then, Kulman is lobbying for better working conditions in the opera and music world via her non-profit association "art but fair" (www.artbutfair.org).

But the increasingly difficult situation of vocal artists has not only financial aspects, but also another, not less alarming, side to it: the singer's health.

"The resilience of the human voice is not unlimited"

The world association of voice and theatre doctors and voice scientists, the Collegium Medicorum Theatri (CoMeT), a worldwide network of doctors and therapists, who's aim it is to provide vocal artists with medical attendance and support, is alarmed by the increasing deterioration of vocal artist's working conditions.

“The schedules of rehearsals and performances are very tight nowadays. As a consequence, artists very often lack sufficient recovery time. At the same time, they are forced to commit to ever shorter engagements at various venues: As a result they have no time for proper health care anymore”, says voice specialist, festival doctor and board member of CoMeT, Josef Schlömmicher-Thier.

“The resilience of the human voice is not unlimited. Therefore, long periods of rehearsals and performances and ever more engagements will inevitably lead to health problems of the vocal artists, which are often associated with the above-mentioned lack of adequate rest periods.”

Additional stress factors are for example the increase in pyrotechnical effects on stage, which put a strain on the singer through thick smoke and loud blasts, as well as the exposition to brighter lights, modified for television live broadcasts, which result in a much stronger light strain than a normal performance.

“Enormous time pressure in case sudden illness”

The voice and theatre doctors Dr. Josef Schlömmicher-Thier (Salzburg Festival) and Dr. Matthias Weikert (Stadttheater Regensburg), both board members of CoMeT, see professional singers today faced with enormous time pressure in case sudden illness: “The first night is an immovable deadline. While a singing student still has the opportunity to apply simple vocal rest for an adequate period of time as a useful medication, professional opera soloists, who are involved in ongoing productions, are confronted with a variety of individual factors when illness strikes: their responsibility towards the other members of the cast, the nervousness of the management as well as the influence of the conductor and the director – all this makes a replacement difficult. At the same time, possible record contracts beckon and – last but not least – the audience wants to see the shining star on stage.”

"Over-exposure to vibration is an occupational hazard"

Ingo Titze, Director of the National Center for Voice and Speech in Salt Lake City, Utah, USA, has for many years researched the physical effects and the potential damage caused by excessive stress on the vocal cords caused through vibration: "Vocalization can be considered as an occupational hazard due to over-exposure to vibration in human tissue. Much like over-exposure to hand vibration from power-tool use, or vibration of the eardrum from excessive noise, too much vibration of the vocal cords can produce tissue damage. Research has been done to quantify vibration dose for heavy voice users and on recovery times needed to maintain vocal health."

CoMeT – goals and demands

The aim of CoMeT is to work constantly for the compliance of the cultural industry with the following basic conditions:

1. Vocal health for vocal artists
2. Preventive medicine for artists
3. Worldwide quality of care of vocal and theatrical doctors
4. Good working conditions for vocal artists on stage (adherence to periods of recreation and rest)
5. A vocal-friendly work climate on stage (in terms of harmful substances, dust, dryness. etc.)
6. Fair and respectful manners

End of release

For further questions:

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