

Vocal Identities: The Social Construction of Professional Singers

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I am a singer and a voice teacher. My research interest is to understand more deeply how a singer's identity is constituted. Why does a young person decide to become a singer? Who is a classical singer? Who is a pop singer? How does the singer make her choices and how do external factors, such as artistic status, public opinion, and peer pressure, influence her choice of career?

In order to learn more about song and identity, I selected three young Norwegian singers, from classical song, pop, and jazz traditions, respectively. I chose informants who are professional performers, recently educated at higher music institutions, who classify themselves as belonging to a certain genre. I conducted in-depth interviews with them over the course of a year, exploring the singers' narratives and reflections about professional identity.

What I will present here is an extract of my results concerning one particular dimension, namely the influence of classical song ideals in the formation of all three singers. Classical song seems to represent a professional authority that they all use to measure and develop their own competence and identity.

Theoretical Approach

My theoretical approach is discourse analysis. I use the tools of discourse theory, primarily Michel Foucault's (1972) work with power-relationships. From this perspective, all human social activities are seen as constructions of meaning, as processes of understanding (Burr, 2001). Identity formation is, therefore, a continuous, cultural process embedded in patterns of meaning. A discourse can be defined as an unambiguous understanding of what it is possible to do, say, be, think, or express within a certain framework of people and material objects. Discourses are tacitly constituted by the hidden agreements we make when we categorize, when we accept something as normal and subordinate ourselves to wider systems, such as school, healthcare, or kinship. Discourses control and organize actions and thoughts. Discourses rule our minds as social individuals and make us take decisions on who we want to be, how we want to appear for others. In vocal cultures, discourses are enacted by singers when they accept and propagate norms and conventions within their genre as acceptable and worthy. The meaning patterns people live by, the sanctions we try to

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avoid, the gratifications that motivate us, can remain more or less unknown to all agents. These identity-shaping patterns are precisely what the researcher seeks to unveil and understand.

The discourse perspective is particularly helpful in highlighting the interactions between the individual level and the societal levels of existence. We cannot study identity formation of any kind without situating it within culture (Hall, 1996; Geertz, 1973). Studying Western singers without trying to understand voice expression and song from a cultural point of view would be unhistorical and misleading. An individual is always already embedded in a culture where experience is structured by its perceived meaning, conveyed by powerful stereotypes of thought and action that individuals experience as reality and as the truth. The meaning of social phenomena is never finite or totally graspable, new meaning is always being created in social practices. Meaning can therefore never be fixed in existing concepts or practices; the construction of identity and society emerges in evolving processes of interaction, interpretation, and creativity (Jørgensen & Phillips, 1999).

A metaphor for the concept of discourse is space. A discourse will be compounded by individuals who speak and act in ways that are familiar to all inside the same space. The knowledge that circulates within this space constitutes patterns that make some thoughts and actions possible and others impossible. Space encloses identity (Krüger, 1998). An identity will be distinct when we can say what it is not. My research is an exploration of how the discursive space of society and educational institutions force singers to internalize norms and discipline themselves as individuals.

Examples

Trond, 33-years old, is a highly appreciated classical singer educated in Norway and Germany. For him, the classical style and traditions serve as a measure of quality. Trond has changed a lot since he was a teenager, both personally and with regard to his professional competence and musical worldview. As a youth he played guitar in a pop band, sang pop songs, and had pop idols. He had hardly heard any classical music in his childhood before he became a student at a music high school where he understood that classical music was highly appreciated and regarded as more elevated than pop. After three years he applied for admission to the music conservatory:

Applying to the conservatory was not an ordinary thing for me. It was extraordinary, but I felt positive about it. I do think that it was

based on the fact that everybody said that to be admitted at the conservatory was like passing through the eye of a needle. And I had, I have thought of it afterwards, I had low expectations that I would be able to get in (K1-40Tr, personal communication, 2005).

Today Trond fulfils the old classical ideals of voice quality. Whether he is singing Baroque or modern music, his professional identity is that of a mediator between the composer, the music, and the audience.

Gry, 24-years old, is a pop singer educated in the US. She also sees herself as a serious, professional singer who does not compromise on quality. She does not see pop music as an easy way to success. She wants to sing pop because the genre involves the most interesting possibilities of using her voice and expressing her art in ways that she chooses. She is very concerned that nobody accuses her of being superficial or flimsy, even if she is a pop star. She wants her audience to see the entire performance as a totality where voice expression, interpretation, and scene appeal express her as a person. She wants to be respected as a serious professional. She has high ambitions and hopes to reflect her technical skills in ways that are different from amateur pop singers and with higher musical quality than that of the average pop hit:

...that I can express things that are demanding and challenging. These are long-term goals, but I wish to express things that technically can be looked up to, admired. But most of all I wish to make my own expression, in a way, and I want to go a bit towards jazz, funk, R & B and so on, and be respected for that (P3-80G, personal communication, 2005).

Gry uses words like demanding and challenging. Explicitly she expresses quality criteria that match those from the classical genre where advanced technique is a must for any singer wanting to interpret the music in accordance with the norms.

My third informant Liv, 30-years old, is educated as a jazz singer and voice teacher from Norway and England. She is very concerned that her vocal expression should not be seen as an imitation of someone else. She wants strongly to be her own trademark, express genuine feelings, and give the audience a special experience. Her style is distinctive. Her voice is well-trained and homogenous, and her improvisations are minimalistic, advanced, and focused. She has self-confidence and talks of her performances with pride, "I, in a way, identify myself perhaps more with people who

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work with...I mean people who are educated and work with music, than people who are not (J3-44L, personal communication, 2005)." She adds, (...) I believe that from my point of view, and with my musical background, my quality criteria are so high that I can go quite far in my musical expression, and master it (J4-32L, personal communication, 2005).

But underlying her pride is an uncertainty, a feeling that voice teachers continuously are comparing her with classical singers when it comes to technique and style, "(...) Sometimes I feel that jazz song is downgraded as not being a serious way of expressing song. That it is just something you do for fun... (J1-178L, personal communication, 2005).

When asked what sets the standard, she answers "classical song."

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Let us have a closer look at how my informants relate to and are constituted by different discourses, how they have been moulded by diverse cultural practices. Each of them has, of course, a large number of social identities; as woman or man, as Norwegian, as belonging to the profession of singers, as being young and promising singers, as being professionals, not amateurs, and so on (Jenkins, 2002).

The classical singer has adopted all the normative ideals from the classical traditions, but not without internal negotiations. The prominent discourse in Trond's early life was that of pop music. He had experienced the pop style as a social and meaningful way of expressing music. The emphasis of the style was on the totality of voice sound and guitar sound together. Then he meets the distinguished classical discourse with its specific demands on vocal technique and the authority of a discourse that obviously is ranked on the top of the educational hierarchy: "It seems like I have to be oriented towards classical music now, when I am in this institution (K1-2Tr, personal communication)," he says to himself when he studies at the music high school. It was not easy for him, though, because at first he quite frankly did not like the music. Nevertheless, he chose classical song. Today his identity is clear because the different discourses of his musical life have disciplined themselves in a hierarchical manner. His present identity is the outcome of internal negotiations among the different competing discourses that he is offered in the space he inhabits. He is very confident as a classical singer. Pop is something he sings when he has moments of leisure, never as a professional.

The pop singer did not want to fit into the classical format, but she had learned the ideals through classical song and piano lessons. She wanted to express *herself* through the music, not primarily the music itself with her as a medium, which she felt suffocating. "I knew that classical song was seen as the real song (P2-119G, personal communication)," she said. "My voice teacher convinced me that it was very important to have the basis of the classical vocal technique (P1-12G, personal communication)." The pop discourse offered her possibilities to be more visible and more extroverted than she thought she could be within the classical style. She chose the pop genre, but as I read her narratives, her constant negotiations will lead her to other arenas than the pop scene in the future. Her quality norms are not in accordance with those in the pop genre, which appears to her as too much governed by media.

The jazz singer was also trained with classical song and piano lessons as a teenager. For her, the classical song ideals have remained a key to how the voice can stay healthy, how she can train voice and body to do the challenging passages in jazz style partly using classical technique. When it feels right and meaningful to express song the way she does, it means that she accepts the dominant discourse and its hegemony. Her effort is to sing jazz as well as classical singers sing classical, but with her own characteristic style.

Why do all these three singers take for granted that classical song ideals are best? Classical song functions as a template for quality, and thereby also for identity formation. Identity is intimately related to a person's experience of fitting in with others who value her ways of being and performing (Schei, 2003). My singers appear to perceive these important others to be those who hold classical song to be the ideal, the bedrock of singing quality. It seems that our current song educations, regardless of genre, promote a hidden curriculum where classical song is still dominating the vocal field through its prestige. None of the singers seem to really rebel against the classical norms. One could say that the pop and the jazz singer do, but as long as they measure their competence by the same quality criteria as the classical, they have a fundamental belief that the classical ideals are the key to vocal professionalism.

My findings raise a number of questions concerning music education, vocal traditions, power, and quality. Musical institutions that educate singers have a responsibility not only for technical proficiency, but also, as I hope to have shown, for the identity formation and worldview of their students. The institutional power reveals itself in admission requirements, obligatory reading and singing, and in the public presentation of different genres. There is a change in our time as music institutions offer more and more education in both pop and jazz. But transformation processes tend to go

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slowly. We can expect that it will take many years before singers of pop and jazz experience their vocal identity to be as respectable and attractive as classical. The supremacy of the classical genre is not reflected in the number of singers in that style, it inheres in tacit and largely unreflected agreements concerning the quality of singers, across genres.

To the extent that it can be generalized, this finding raises a number of interesting questions. Do singers in rhythmic vocal cultures who regard classical song as normative profit from it, technically and artistically? Or, conversely, does the hegemonic position of classical song in our educational systems curtail the development of artistic musical expressions, because of rigid norms that are largely unacknowledged, and therefore not challenged? I will not attempt to answer these questions. That is the task of future research. But I will point out that it may be quite useful to question more deeply the ways we judge, criticize, and admire vocal expressions, and how such evaluations influence the development and self-understanding of singers.

Conclusions

A singer's identity is revealed through regularities in her ways of speaking, acting, and expressing herself with voice, mind, and body. These regularities are results of her internal and unconscious negotiations of who she wants to be and how she wants to sing. When these are concurrent with a certain vocal genre, the singer will find it appropriate to define herself as a classical, pop, or jazz singer because it just feels right.

What human identity means is not obvious. An identity is not fixed. It is continuously changing because it is compounded by many struggling discourses. Through the ways we think and act, we become who we are. And the ways we think and act depend largely on the discursive space we inhabit. Does this mean we are all determined by social forces? To a certain extent, yes, but a critical distance can be obtained through knowledge production and reflection. This means that research and theory development can have a constructive impact on reality.

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