

PROFESSIONAL ADAPTATION OF BEGINNING OPERA SINGERS AFTER GRADUATION: CASE-STUDY

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Abstract

The paper presents the results of analysis of problems experienced by beginning specialists in their workplaces. There are certain features of professional adaptation characteristic of the sphere of arts. The paper presents the results of the study conducted using both formalised and non-formalised methods of statistical analysis (survey and in-depth interviews, respectively) of the problems that beginning opera singers face when they join a theatre troupe after graduation. Opera singers of different age groups from Russia and Germany were included in the study. Having analysed the practices of adaptation of beginners in different theatres, the authors point out “The St. Petersburg Chamber Opera” (St. Petersburg, Russia). It has a proprietary methodology for training young singers, and, in our opinion, other theatres could benefit from adopting it. Based on the findings, the authors concluded that inexperienced opera singers who start their career in theatres after graduation require an individual approach. The authors suggest a training programme aimed at shaping a graduate into a high-level professional vocalist.

Key words: Professional adaptation; young opera singers; theatre management; mentoring system, human resources.

JEL Code: A23, J44, O15

Introduction

Integration into a stable work-flow is a complicated task for graduates. A large number of papers has been written about the problems young specialists experience at the start of their career, however, one can still claim that the problem has not been studied in full. There are various approaches to solving it. A number of authors suppose that adaptation of a young specialist must be seen as a three-constituent issue: macroenvironment – organization – a young specialist (Lugovaya, 2018).

When teenagers finish school, they choose their future career based on its prestige. This results in the following surplus of certain specialists in the labour market. In this case, the macroenvironment is unfavourable for adaptation of a young professional to the job (Kravets, 2016). It is up to the state to act as an integrator between graduates, the educational institutions and employers.

Professional adaptation is often a complicated and ‘painful’ process. At this stage, a trainee has to form part of a new collective to work with (Gribanova, 2018). Also, graduates are not always ready to face the difficulties found therein, and academic knowledge has little to do with it (Vilmantè, 2019). Either a success or a failure to adapt primarily depends on supervisors of trainees. “One gets adapted only if one's personal supervisor is interested enough to engage in it” (Ivanov, 2016) is the author's personal judgement, and it is hard to disprove.

A survey conducted both with the graduates and employers showed that most respondents find mentoring the best way of professional adaptation (McDonald, 2014). One cannot but agree with the authors that adaptation gives a beginner an opportunity to gain professional competence in quite a short period of time and to integrate into the organisation, both professionally and socially.

However, over one third of the surveyed employers do not think it necessary to undertake any activities that would facilitate adaptation for trainees.

It should be noted that professional adaptation of graduates in the sphere of arts has certain distinctive features (Agid, 2010). As a rule, graduates of art colleges are gifted in pictorial art, dance or singing, which makes them “confident in their capabilities of realising their talent in full” (Maskevich, 2018). When they join a group of art professionals, trainees are confronted with many problems, in particular, with a lack of experience. The first failures in their professional activity are inevitable and inspire doubts about the talents and ruins self-assurance. The same feelings can be provoked by heads of art-related organisations who are unwilling to rely on inexperienced newcomers and tend to keep them occupied with secondary roles, without development and adaptation. Besides, groups of art professionals are characterised by complex relationships within. Any success of a beginner causes jealousy and negatively affects professional adaptation.

Thus, the difficulties associated with the professional adaptation of graduates depend on both their individual capabilities and the features of the troupe into which they are going to integrate.

The aim of the study is to analyse the problems young opera singers face at the start of their career. In addition, we considered various approaches to successful adaptation of young vocalists in opera theatre troupes.

1 Data and Methods

To identify problems related to post-college adaptation of opera singers, both formalised and non-formalised methodologies were used. As part of this research, the following empiric studies were conducted:

1. In-depth interviews with Russian and European vocalists who have successfully mastered the profession. The aim was to identify the problems and difficulties experienced by beginning opera

signers when they join a theatre troupe, and factors that allow them to be taken on into theatre's repertoire performances sooner.

2. Research with a group of young opera singers. A survey was developed containing 12 questions. The answers thereto helped systematise the problems that singers have at the take-off of their career, both in Russia and Europe.

2 Results

In the course of the study, data from employees of four theatres were collected: "Ural Opera Ballet" (Ekaterinburg, Russia), "Sverdlovsk State Academic Musical Theatre" (Ekaterinburg, Russia), "The St. Petersburg Chamber Opera" (St. Petersburg, Russia), Staatstheater Braunschweig (Braunschweig, Germany). The participants were surveyed and interviewed.

We obtained the following results through our research.

1. Analysis of in-depth interviews allowed to identify the main problems hindering adaptation of beginning singers in the opera theatre troupes:

- the duration of adaptation depends of the psychological type of the personality (the attitude can be either "it doesn't matter if the role is well-rehearsed, I'll just come out and sing" or "I have to be 100% sure that the technical aspects of the role have been figured out, so I can demonstrate my talent");

- different voice timbres require different periods of time to develop the key characteristics for successful work in the specific field of "Fach" (classified using the *German Fach system*, which is a method of classifying singers, primarily opera singers, according to the range, weight, and colour of their voices) (Neubert, 2011).

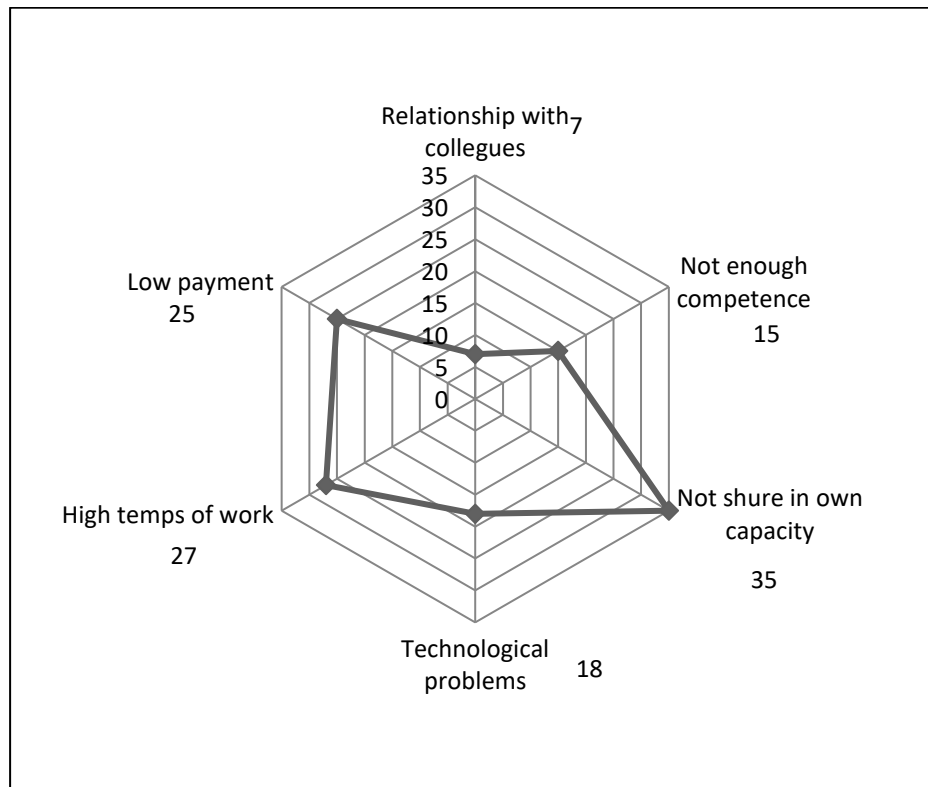
Here is an excerpt of an interview: "All specialists claim unanimously that bass timbre continues developing till the age of 35, and its climax is after the age of 40. But, you know, I've got family to provide for now, today. How am I supposed to keep going and still believe in myself?" The survey results confirm it (Fig. 1).

2. In-depth interviews allowed to conclude that a mentoring system is indispensable for beginning singers in theatres. After analysing the approaches for professional adaptation implemented in the above-mentioned theatres, we have seen that "The St. Petersburg Chamber Opera" stands out. This theatre has its own methodology for adaptation of graduates which allows to master the profession in short terms.

3. The survey of Russian and European vocalists demonstrated that:

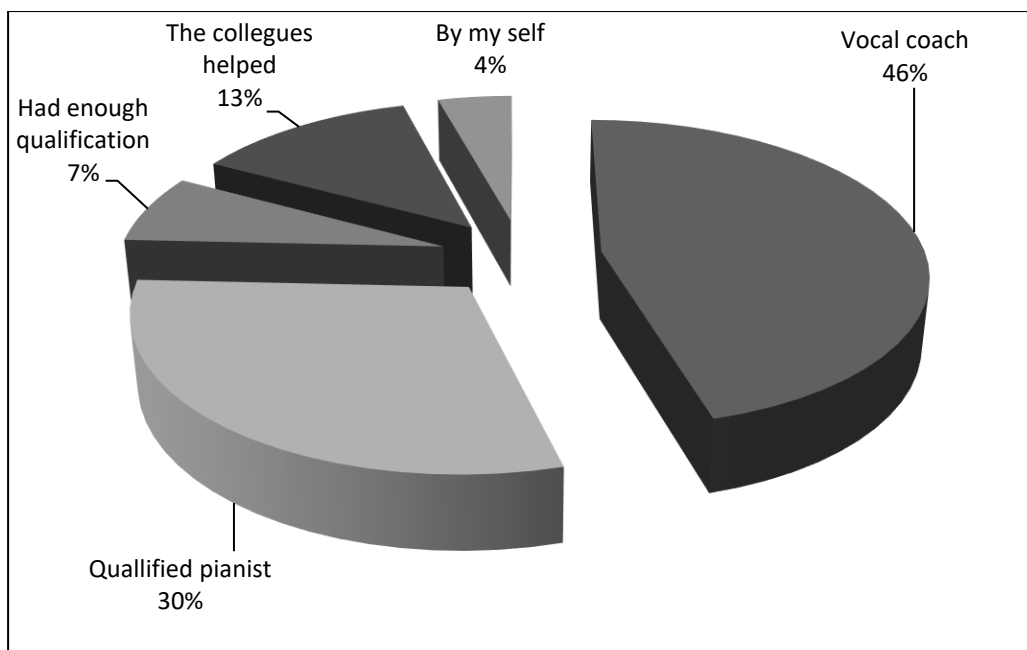
- in order for graduates to retain the skills obtained in musical colleges, a vocal coach should be employed as part of the theatre staff, 46% of the respondents believe so (Fig. 2);

Fig. 1: The main problems that musical college graduates have when joining a theatre troupe



Source: data of the survey

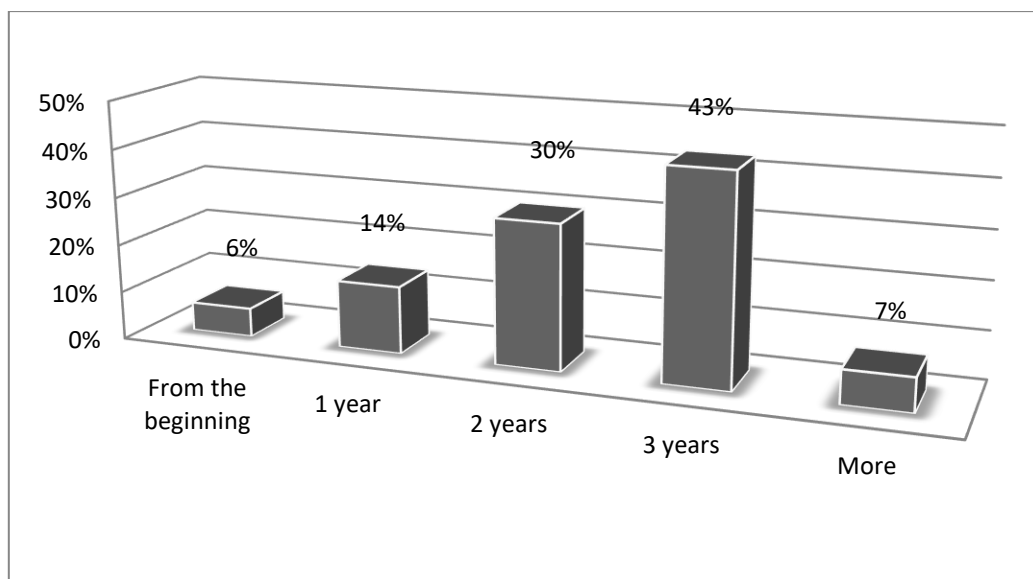
Fig. 2: Favourable factors for professional adaptation of beginning vocalists (according to the survey results)



Source: data of the survey

- it takes 2–3 years for a beginner to start feeling secure and confident in their artistic competence, 73% of the respondents have chosen this option (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3: Answers to the question ‘How long does professional adaptation take?’



Source: data of the survey

3 Discussion

1. Analysis of the in-depth interviews with beginners and accomplished vocalists allows to conclude that individual training is the best choice at the start. In our opinion, attainable goals should be set for graduates, and the tasks should get more complicated further on. It is necessary to take into account individual features of each singer who joins the troupe. It is hardly sensible to label somebody as incompetent or under-qualified if they fail to succeed at the first attempt.

2. All specialists state that different voice timbres tend to reach the optimal sound at a different age. High-timbre lyric voices (lyric sopranos, tenors) peak at 25 to 45 years, while low-timbre dramatic voices (mezzo-soprano, bass, dramatic baritones) keep tuning until the age of 35–40 years (Holloway, 2017). This difference is physiological, and it shall be taken into account when devising a repertoire policy for a singer. A vocalist shall have a development programme, as well as a short- and long-term perspective of their professional growth. This way, young singers can keep confidence in their capabilities and stay motivated to improve.

3. Accomplished opera singers argue that a mentoring system should be in place in theatres to guide beginners. A pianist tutor, in-house vocal coach, or conductor can be mentors who train a vocalist at role studying, give advice on how to bring out the natural gift of a singer. Theatre administration should be constantly monitoring the performance and progress of a trainee and gradually (it is of importance) complicate the tasks and offer to learn more complicated roles.

Currently, there are in-house vocal coaches in some theatres (e.g., Sverdlovsk State Academic Musical Theatre). This practice is certainly associated with positive outcomes. The tutor may listen to the role from the audience hall and later point out relevant aspects that need improvement and analyse them with trainees. Thus, a vocalist never loses interest in progressing. They keep perfecting and grow more confident, and, as a result, reach higher levels of staging performance.

Survey results also prove our ideas right. A total of 75 vocalists aged 23 to 35 from Russia and Germany were surveyed. Most of them (46%) think it necessary for their career growth to have classes with a vocal coach (Fig. 2). Here, it is also appropriate to mention the Sverdlovsk State Academic Musical Theatre again. The authors believe that other theatres could benefit from adopting its practice.

4. According to the survey, the majority of respondents are convinced that a beginning vocalist needs 2–3 years to integrate into a theatre troupe (Fig. 3). Therefore, the authors believe that the optimal term of a contract with a musical college graduate is 2 years. It is enough to adapt to the job and feel secure.

5. Comparing the practices in Russia and Germany, it can be noted that in Russian theatre troupes are generally more stable. Singers tend to work for the same theatre for many years, and both experienced and beginning vocalists are employed, which it allows the younger ones to learn from the accomplished performers. Meanwhile, in Germany, 1- or 2-year contracts (Brunet, 2013) are more common, and there is significant rotation within troupes (Boerner, 2004, Boerner, 2005). At the moment, in the Staatstheater Braunschweig there is a fairly young, promising troupe, with the mean age of 33 years. However, it has one major disadvantage: a graduate who joins it lacks an opportunity to learn from more experienced colleagues, there is no continuity between the generations of singers. Consequently, it impedes adaptation of beginners.

Conclusion

The studies conducted using both formalised and non-formalised methods of statistical analysis allowed to make the following conclusions.

First, the success or failure of a trainee to adapt greatly depends on how interested the company director is in helping them grow into an accomplished specialist. Another important factor is labour market oversaturation with graduates of certain specialities.

Second, a mentoring system is required for successful adaptation of graduate singers. It shall help to shorten the period of graduate adaptation in a theatre and train them into a top-level vocalist, thus enabling the theatre management to cut expenses on endorsement of invited lead singers.

Third, the personality type and voice timbre specifics should be taken into account when developing the training programme.

Fourth, having analysed the existing approaches to graduate training, the authors find the practices in The St. Petersburg Chamber Opera especially effective; a proprietary methodology for music college graduates is in place. We consider it expedient for other troupes to adopt this methodology.

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