Towards an Understanding of Outreach and Identity: Professional Opera Singers' Perspectives of Definitions, Value, and Status of Outreach

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ABSTRACT: The growth of outreach work in classical music organisations over the last few decades has cemented its place as a fundamental part of such organisations' output. In doing so, it has also created a different mode of professional work for artists. However, tensions exist within the terminology that is used to describe outreach work, and in the terminology used to differentiate outreach from what is seen as the main artistic output (often performance). Academic discussion on outreach programmes has often been framed in terms of numbers, demographics, and experiences in relation to the audience. By contrast, comparatively little research exists into the experiences of, and impact for, the artists who engage in outreach work as part of their professional careers, and even less in relation to the singer. This small-scale qualitative study explored the lived experience of professional singers engaged in opera outreach work in relation to language (terminology) and perceptions of identity and status. Its aims are to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of professional opera singers within this specific professional world and offer insight around the tensions in terminology in relation to their identity (professional or subjective) and status. Findings suggest there is a lack of clarity around the definition of what outreach work is, both by those inside and outside the industry. Furthermore, this lack of clarity impacts the identity and status of those singers working in opera outreach.

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1950s, cultural, educational, and political trends in the United Kingdom have inspired the growth of outreach work in classical music organisations (Winterson, 1996) which, in turn, has shaped the type and availability of work for performers in the UK (Morrison, 1992). All the major national opera companies and many smaller opera organisations in the UK have departments dedicated to outreach. The resulting work is recognised nationally and internationally (e.g., English National Opera's 'ENO Breathe' programme was awarded the Royal Philharmonic Society Impact Award in 2021 and Birmingham Opera Company won the Education and Outreach category at the 2020/21 International Opera Awards). In recent years, the drive to reach new audiences beyond the traditional theatre setting has taken on new impetus, not least as a means of maintaining live performance in the midst the COVID-19 pandemic era. Moreover, outreach work has been used to evidence the relevance of opera within an evolving cultural, educational, and financial status quo (e.g. see Clutton, 2018; Higgins, 2012; Nice, 2021; Sandow, 2011).

Given this context, it is notable that there is currently no concrete nor universal definition for 'opera outreach'. Likewise, it is striking that singers working in this area do not have a clear understanding of the place and status of their occupational practice. This article explores these points through the experiences and perceptions of professional opera singers working in outreach contexts in the UK. It argues that a combination of systematic structures and the terminology used in opera (namely definitions and labels) contribute to a sense of tension for the identity and status of the professional opera singer.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Whilst the research literature offers little (as yet) regarding the experiences of outreach in relation to the singer, there are nevertheless interesting and relevant areas of exploration that have provided a grounding for this current study. These include the definition of (or lack of) opera outreach, and theorisations of identity, 'otherness', and 'status' pertaining to artists and artistic practices.

Definition of "outreach"

The *Oxford Dictionary* defines outreach as "the extent or length of reaching out; an organisation's involvement with or influence in the community

especially in the context of religion or social welfare" (Oxford Dictionary of English, 2021). While there is no specific definition for outreach in relation to opera, the definition above suggests that it is perhaps characterised by taking the expertise out of the usual venue (theatre) and into a community setting. Within the literature relating to this type of work, the term outreach is seemingly interchangeable with terms such as 'learning', 'engagement', 'participation', 'education', 'youth programmes', and 'community music'. Swingler (1993), Veblen (2008), and Higgins (2012) suggest that the definition of such work is purposefully generalised because its broad remit and context-specific nature precludes a universal, one-size-fits-all description. These authors lean towards a collective term of 'community music' to describe outreach activities. This suggests that either this is the preferred scholarly term for such practice, *or* that 'outreach' is indeed something distinct from 'community music' (and related terms).

What is evident from the literature is that there is an intentional resistance to an overt definition of the term 'outreach'. Instead, there appears to be an emphasis upon clarifying the aims of such work, whereby the notion of 'access for all' is cited a key principle (see Cole, 2011; Veblen, 2008). In this regard, there exists a striking irony in relation to the foundational tenets of outreach versus the inaccessibility of defining exactly what it is. While the rationale for the open-ended definition might be understandable, it nevertheless invites an important exploration into the impact of this ambiguity upon the understanding, experiences, and identities of artists who work in this area, and the recipients of the work.

Identity

Given the ambiguity over the definition of opera outreach, it is worth considering the implications for the identity of the professional opera singer working in this context.

According to Oakland (2014, p. 222), identity can be understood "as a process of self-knowledge, developed in part through interactions between the self and the society we live in." Using the framework of 'professional identity' and 'subjective identity' (see Mills, 2004)—relating respectively to occupational status, and an individual's sense of self, irrespective of employment activity—Oakland (2014) explores the impact of redundancy on professional opera chorus members. Her findings indicate: first, that the identity of professional opera singers falls under the notion of a professional identity as it is

characterised by "paid work and the social and cultural status given to the job title" (p. 221); and second, that the identity of opera singers is predominantly defined by external validation of occupational status, something which Oakland cautions against given the fragility of such an underpinning. These findings invite consideration of the ways in which the identity and status of a given occupation (in this case opera outreach practice) might impact the singer's sense of professional and/or subjective self.

Individuals can develop and enact multiple identities based on their given environment, relationships, and activities (O'Neil, 2017). Thus, although the notion of a professional identity may relate to an opera singer in broader terms, there is plausible scope for other identities to come to the fore depending on the different contexts in which they work, for example, performance in a main stage production versus outreach work in the community. McAdams (2011) explores the notion of narrative identity, whereby a person's internalised and fluid self-account is constructed to rationalise and make meaning out of one's life experiences. While narrative identity is factually based, O'Neill (2017) argues that it is ultimately curated and made sense of by the individual in response to social influences. In other words, identity is as much shaped by extrinsic factors as it is by the individual's own intrinsic motivations and their desire to align their external activities with their sense of self.

It could be argued, therefore, that where there is an incongruence between the external and internal self, or between the professional and subjective self, there is scope for a conflict in identity. For instance, Bennett (2007) contends the label of 'musician' is problematic because the term 'musician' is generally taken to mean 'performer', even though most musicians manage a portfolio of musical and non-musical activities as part of their profession. Specifically in the realm of the opera singer, Oakland (2014) found that the label of 'opera singer'—'what and who an opera singer is'—is open to a broad range of (potentially opposing) interpretations. The lay person might readily interpret the term 'opera singer' as 'general classical singer', whereas the opera singer might use this label to denote a high level of, or more specialised, expertise. Likewise, such a label might be used as a means of distinguishing one's professional skills and identity from that of another singer (such as a chorister or pop singer), but it could also be used as an umbrella term for a wider profile of work as a singer (akin to a broader definition of a musician as described by Bennett,

2007; MacDonald et al., 2017). In relation to outreach work in the arts, Higgins (2012) contends the job title of 'animateur'—a term often used to define the outreach or community music practitioner and borne out of a push to professionalise the field—is also problematic, having often been misconstrued as meaning either 'amateur' or 'animator'. Again, this would support the idea that, in the absence of universally understood definitions for 'opera singer' and 'opera outreach', there is potential for tension around the singer's sense of status and identity in relation to their occupational role.

Group identity, status, and otherness

It is lastly worth considering the concepts of group identity and otherness in relation to the opera outreach singer. Tajfel's Social Identity Theory, or SIT (1978) suggests that group membership affords a person a sense of social identity. Through this 'in-group' identification, individuals assess and compare their group's status with other groups (outgroups) by way of maintaining "positive social identity and self-esteem through in-group favouritism, outgroup derogation, and positive distinction from the outgroup" (Shepherd & Sigg, 2015, p. 507). Additionally, Abbey et al. (2011) suggest that divisions between two factions ('them' versus 'us') are more easily perpetuated when there is in an imbalance of power in favour of the dominant party. If the definition of opera is generally rooted in the notion of performance and 'mainstage' production (Oxford Dictionary of English, 2021) and, by contrast, outreach practice is ill-defined and less readily acknowledged, then it is possible to infer that one faction of operatic practice, and by default the singers working within this faction, is attributed higher status, and thereby dominance, over the other. This idea is arguably exemplified by terms commonly used within the industry-mainstage and outreach—and further underlines the notion that group identity and 'otherness' are heavily intertwined with the concepts of status and language (definitions and labelling). Finally, Staszak (2009) argues that, although 'other' can sometimes be seen as exotic, it is often cultivated in a "stereotypical, reassuring fashion, that serves to comfort the Self in its feeling of superiority" (p. 1). In other words, to be in the 'outgroup', or to be 'other', is always to be something 'lesser'.

In summary, the literature suggests an interesting dynamic exists between definitions of terminology, identity, and status: a formal title might suggest an elevation of one's professional status but, equally, the absence of a universally understood definition, or a mismatch between internal and external perspectives, potentially undermines that status and indeed one's sense of (professional and/or group) identity. Likewise, if language is a key mechanism by which we define and express our sense of self (Oakland, 2014) then labels, and the inherent meaning within these labels, are significant factors for our sense of internal and external self.

METHODS

This small-scale qualitative study explored the lived experience of professional singers engaged in opera outreach work in relation to language (terminology) and perceptions of identity and status.

Participants

Convenience and purposive sampling were used to recruit professional opera singers for this study. This approach allowed for a variety of voice types and professional experience to be represented within the sample set. A total of 12 singers were approached and nine consented to being part of the study. The types and numbers of voices represented in the study included four sopranos, one mezzo, two tenors, one counter tenor and one baritone. All the selected participants had experience of working in outreach projects as part of their professional careers, but the level and type of experience varied. The types of projects described by the participants encompassed workshop facilitation, small-scale and/or community-based performances, work in hospices and care homes, and teaching. Some participants stated they primarily worked in these contexts, whilst other participants stated they had only been involved in one or two outreach projects at the time of being interviewed.

Materials and Procedure

Participants were invited to take part in interviews, either one-to-one or group, which were conducted in 2020 and early 2021. A total of four one-to-one interviews were conducted with each lasting around one hour. One group interview lasting two hours with five participants was also conducted. This study took place during the global COVID-19 pandemic and, in compliance with current guidance at the time, all interviews took place via an online platform (Zoom) as opposed to 'in-person'.

A semi-structured interview approach was used, and the notions of terminology (in particular definitions), status and identity were explored through the following topics of interest:

i.   Definitions of the term 'outreach' in relation to opera
ii.   Experience of outreach projects as a professional opera singer
iii. Comparisons between experience in outreach and experience in more formal concert and mainstage productions
iv. Differences in approach between mainstage and outreach
v.   Perceptions of success in each context (mainstage and outreach)

As a research approach that examines how people make sense of their experiences, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009), was selected as the method of analysis for the data. In line with IPA, the process of analysis included detailed examination of the linguistic and conceptual tools employed by the participants (considering *what* was said, *how* was it said, what was *not* said, etc.) by way of arriving at a deeper understanding about the lived experiences of singers within this specific professional world.

Any organisations mentioned have been anonymised and the participants have been allocated pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. Ethical approval was gained by the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland's Ethics Committee prior to seeking participant consent for this study.

Researcher positionality

Both authors have professional experience in opera outreach work across the UK, and one is also a professional opera singer. As such, the authors have status as both insiders and outsiders to the data and the participants: an ongoing awareness of reflexivity has, therefore, been considered throughout. From an insider status, we bring embedded knowledge and experience in the research area under investigation. All the participants were known to one of the authors, either directly or indirectly, prior to this study. The outsider status as an observer of outreach work has been formalised through the role of researcher where existing knowledge informs interactions with participants and interpretations of their data. This has allowed for the balance advocated by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) for IPA between the ability to "stand in the shoes" (p. 36) of the participant but likewise be able to interrogate the data (both at the point of interview and during the

analysis) at a distance. To avoid 'token representation' (as described by Ritchie et al, 2014), the final sample set for this study achieved comprehensive representation while necessarily acknowledging limitations pertaining to balance, sample size, and the researchers' unavoidable position as known insiders.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study identified four main themes for discussion which will be discussed individually before a general conclusion is drawn. The four themes developed by the analysis include:

1. Definitions of outreach
2. Definitions in practice: relationships between outreach, performance, and education
3. Otherness underlined by terminology
4. Otherness underlined in practice.

While the concepts of identity and status have not been identified as individual themes, they provide a common thread across the findings.

1. Definition of outreach

Much like the current discourse within the research literature, none of the participants offered a well-defined answer to the question: "What does the term 'outreach' mean to you?". This is somewhat striking given that all nine participants self-identify as either 'singers who work in outreach' or as 'singers with experience of working on outreach projects':

> I would interpret it as, um, a bit like a fishing net. In a way to, sort of, bring people into the fold and, and give them some sort of experience, be it musically or, or whatever, that they either don't have access to, or due to some social constructs that is, uh, that we're in, constructs that we're in, don't feel they have, um, a right to be part of. So, to try and, sort of, open things up for, yeah, for, for the fishing net… Bringing people into the fold so that they feel like there's something they're part of and they get access to something. [Georgia]

Georgia's interview represents a tendency seen across all the participants to focus on the ideological underpinnings of outreach, rather than provide a literal or practical description. This offers a direct reflection of the approach taken by Cole (2011) and Veblen (2008) to define community music by its aims rather than pinning it down with a direct definition. The tentative way in which Georgia answers the above question suggests uncertainty around the specifics of outreach work

versus other types of work. As a prime example, Georgia's answer to this question is neither a full nor coherent statement. Rather, the prosody here is irregular and often interrupted, and Georgia frequently repeats or corrects herself. Alongside this, it is also worth considering the importance of speech fillers here (the 'ums' and 'uhs'). Whether Georgia considers this topic difficult to broach or understand, or whether she is simply filling for time while she considers her answer, the presence of 'ums' and 'uhs' suggest a degree of uncertainty. Given Georgia's wealth of experience working in outreach settings (of all the participants in the study, Georgia is one of the most experienced in opera outreach work), it is interesting that she should falter at this question. It could be argued that her above response comes at the start of the interview and, as such, a degree of 'warming up' time may be considered. Nevertheless, that this ostensibly straight-forward enquiry should pose an issue suggests that the definition of outreach is problematic, even for the singer working in this context.

Georgia is not the only participant to struggle with this question; indeed, a similar degree of haziness is evident across all the participant responses. On one level, the ambiguity in this area supports the assertion that outreach practice is intentionally and constructively nebulous (Veblen, 2008; Higgins, 2012). Nonetheless, if a cohesive group identity (as outlined by Tajfel, 1978) depends upon a clear perception and understanding of a profession's distinctive features (Erhard, 2008, cited in Heled & Davidovitch, 2021), then the absence of a clear definition surely has implications for the identity of the singers working in outreach. Furthermore, when considered alongside Oakland's (2014) findings that a professional opera singer's identity will often fall under the notion of 'professional identity', this lack of cohesive identity in outreach (whether as an individual or in a group) has the potential to be all the more impactful.

2. Definition in practice: The relationship between outreach, performance, and education

One of the salient issues raised by the participants is the question of whether outreach is a profession in its own right, or whether it is more fitting to view it as a branch of either performance or education. At various points, the participants attempt to sub-categorise or align certain projects to one domain or the other (performance vs education). However, reflecting earlier (largely unsuccessful) attempts to define outreach succinctly, there is no clear

consensus as to a correct path; moreover, in certain cases, the participants appear to contradict their own previously asserted criteria. This would suggest that their experience of outreach work is perhaps influenced by context and personal perceptions of what that context is or what it means in relation to their identity and the role they play. To a certain extent, this might be explained by O'Neil's (2017) assertion that identity is fluid and, if there is a recognised and natural flow relating to changing identities, the seemingly uncomfortable flitting between performer, educator, artist working in outreach, could be seen as entirely normal.

2.1 Definition in practice: The relationship between outreach and education

Leading the discussion around education, Hayley talks extensively about her role as singing teacher for a national youth choir organisation. Indeed, throughout the course of the focus group discussion, Hayley almost always pairs the word education with outreach, referring to her work as 'education outreach'. In doing so, Hayley asserts that these two terms belong comfortably side-by-side, if not being fully synonymous.

At the outset, Georgia appears to agree with Hayley; she states that her teaching and education work constitutes a form of outreach—*"teaching's outreach. Any kind of education's outreach."* Georgia initially offers a relatively clear distinction between 'education-based outreach' and 'performance-based outreach', whereby her work is either 'education' or it's 'performance':

> everything that I've done, has either been an educational outreach or, you know, concerts for people who can't have it. So, in views of the singer, I'd say … if I'm not thinking education, and I'm thinking purely performance, it's, again, to open up an experience that they haven't had before. [Georgia]

Here, Georgia makes the distinction between projects that are education-based and those—for example, concerts—that are 'purely performance'-based. In doing so, she implies there is a branch of outreach that creates access solely through offering new musical experiences as part of creative programming, and which is separate from projects in which the audience might also 'learn' as part of the process. Having set up some clear parameters, however, Georgia then begins to blur her own lines by suggesting that this type of 'access' in performance programming is itself educational because it actively and intentionally introduces the audience to something new:

So, quite often, that would be, either repertoire choice or if I'm thinking about my tours of the Highlands and stuff, a lot of those people hadn't heard opera… So, that's… what I see my job is, as a singer. If it's not education based, I'm using my singing to give them something familiar to open up a door to something that's unfamiliar. [Georgia]

Georgia is invited to expand upon her proffered distinction between performance- and education-based outreach:

education's sometimes a useful tool…I'm not saying that adults can't be educated, because sometimes they do come in an educational fold… education outreach can sound patronizing. Like, you need to educate someone. And that makes them feel like they have to like what you've given them. Whereas, I don't see it as that … sometimes when I think about a performance outreach, it's access to something that they wouldn't otherwise have and it's not about educating them, it's about giving them an experience and a choice to choose whether they like that experience or not. But, if you have no access to it, you don't really have a choice whether you like it or not … And that's how I see that performance-based outreach, whereas education is something very specific. [Georgia]

It appears that Georgia's experience of having projects for adults labelled as 'educational' does not feel comfortable. Rather, she prefers to view these events as 'performances' because doing so reduces the risk of seeming condescending. The above extract provides an important insight into Georgia's relationship with the audience, because it demonstrates that she is highly conscious of a status interplay between herself (as the singer) and the given audience. It is interesting to consider that Georgia has less of an issue in terming projects 'educational' if working with children. One reason for this might be that western society generally places children on a lower status rung than adults, and that this hierarchical relationship is amplified within the classroom setting. Given Georgia's experience in education—she explains elsewhere in the interview that she has been influenced by the educational careers of her parents and older siblings—, it therefore makes sense that Georgia might feel most at ease in this setting. Conversely, it is worth considering whether the tension Georgia feels around the use of 'education' in adult audience settings stems from a genuine threat to her authority/agency, or whether it is a projection of her own values upon the audience at hand (i.e. does the audience really feel patronised at the notion of being 'educated' or is Georgia allowing this perception to shape her approach?). If it is the former, there is an argument to suggest that she leans more towards extrinsic motivation (similar to

the findings of Oakland, 2014); in other words, the 'reward' or 'acceptance' from the audience, to affirm her identity in this context. In any case, the above indicates that, in so far as the semantic definition of outreach is problematic and ill-defined, so too is its relationship with education. In terms of the singer's definition, the extent to which outreach and education are linked appears to depend upon the individual's own perceptions of status and identity relative to education.

2.2 Definition in practice: The relationship between outreach and performance

In considering the relationship between outreach and performance, Ruth outlines her career early into her interview, stating that she undertook performance work *alongside* her work in outreach.

And I suppose, most of my professional career for the last sort of eight or nine years, while I continued to perform to some extent, a lot of it, would be probably what you would call (laughs) outreach. [Ruth]

By framing her career in this way, Ruth sets up a distinction, whereby performance in the context of outreach work is different from performance in a traditional sense. She does this again at various points in the interview: for example, she frames her work as an oratorio soloist as 'purely performance', and elsewhere, she asserts a difference between 'total performance' events (in which the interplay between the singer and the audience is somewhat one-directional), and 'outreach performance' (which she says is more participatory). At other points in the conversation (as will be shown in due course), Ruth argues the converse: that performance is an integral part of outreach, and that to separate the two ideas would be "meaningless." In doing so, she demonstrates a degree of internal conflict over the practical demarcation of the term 'outreach'. Taking this into the realm of professional identity, Ruth's experience seems to be one of having to switch between multiple identities (O'Neil, 2017) depending on the context but, crucially, that these identities blur in similar ways to the terminology used to describe them.

It is worth noting the importance of phrases such as 'total performance' or 'pure performance'. Again, these imply that outreach is something that is 'different' from performance in the conventional sense of the word. Of course, 'different' in and of itself isn't necessarily a negative connotation. Nonetheless, when Ruth places 'total' or 'pure' performance in opposition with outreach

performance, the implication is that outreach performance is something that is 'lesser'. Moreover, if the opposite of pure is 'impure', then there is likewise an inference that the integration or mix of various modes of practice in outreach somehow 'taints' the product or experience. All of the above underlines a tension around the demarcation of outreach in relation to performance. Although Ruth could plausibly have replaced the words 'total' or 'pure' with 'exclusively'—simply meaning a performance that doesn't integrate other practice elements—all of these words have layered meanings/connotations. In the context of a discussion about the identity of the work—is it performance? Is it education? Is it outreach or something in between?—the use of words such as 'pure' and 'total' arguably affirm the status of performance as being higher than other factions, and conversely, diminish the status and identity of outreach because it is not clearly defined. As such, this underwrites that notion that language plays an important role in either affirming or challenge notions of identity and status.

3. Otherness underlined by terminology

In the group interview, Thomas is the first to voice his concern over the appropriateness of the term 'outreach':

> I've actually been struggling with the terminology over the course of this conversation… because outreach, I feel we've generally been talking about education rather than outreach, which is more therapeutic is more, uh, yeah, non-conventional audiences where I think, I feel like school kids tend to be a more conventional audience. [Thomas]

The first point to consider is Thomas' use of the word 'therapeutic', which according to the Oxford Dictionary, relates to "healing" or "having a good effect on the body; contributing to well-being" (Oxford Dictionary of English, 2021). The implication here is that outreach work aims to *cure*, *ameliorate*, or *fix* something on the part of the audience; this implies agency on the part of the singer at the expense of the audience. It is also interesting that Thomas uses the terms 'non-conventional' and 'conventional' to describe various audience groups. This demonstrates the interesting interplay between perceptions of group identity (Tajfel, 1978) for the opera singer, and group identity for the audience. On one hand, these terms could respectively be taken to mean 'groups who do not traditionally engage with opera' and 'groups who *do* traditionally engage with opera'. In this regard, it might be surmised that children would fall into the first category. However, Thomas very

clearly places school children into the 'conventional' bracket, which invites the question: what, in Thomas' mind, constitutes 'conventional' or 'non-conventional'?

Thomas doesn't have the opportunity to elaborate this point any further, largely because his statement invites further discussion from the other group interview participants about the terminology of outreach, and the conversation subsequently evolves in this direction. Notably, however, the *Oxford Dictionary of English* defines 'conventional' as "tending to follow what is done or considered acceptable by society in general; normal and ordinary, and perhaps not very interesting" (Oxford Dictionary of English, 2021). One interpretation, therefore, is that, for Thomas, 'conventional' and 'school kids' sit comfortably in the societal mainstream, or what is deemed 'normal and ordinary', whereas 'non-conventional' refers to groups outside these parameters. If this is the case, then the inference is that outreach deals with something 'other', and this idea has clear implications for the singer-audience relationship. Moreover, there are implications for the singer's sense of identity in outreach, whereby, by virtue of the audience context, the outreach role (and the singer) either sits within that which is deemed 'acceptable' or 'mainstream', or conversely, outside of these parameters and 'separate' (Shepherd & Sigg, 2015).

The notion of 'otherness' arises at other points during the group interview discussion, namely as part of a conversation about 'wokeness'—"the quality of being alert to injustice and discrimination in society" (Oxford Dictionary of English, 2021). During this conversation, the group proffers that the necessary move by conservatoire institutions towards being more inclusive, will eventually result in a more integrated approach to outreach as part of training curricula, career narratives, and real-life practice. Again, the inference is that these singers do not currently perceive outreach to be part of the mainstream conversation, nor part of the assumed mainstream professional career route (despite the prevalence of outreach and education departments and projects). This may well be a reality that adds to the perceived division between performance and outreach within education and industry affirming Abbey et al.'s (2011) suggestion of a 'them' and 'us' approach being perpetuated through an imbalance of power, in this case, in favour of performance. The above discussion suggests that the lack of clarity around the term outreach goes beyond semantic issues to impact the singers' experiences in real-life practice: challenging their sense of place within perceived

hierarchal structures and their sense of professional identity.

4. Otherness underlined in practice

It is lastly worth considering how the notion of 'otherness' plays out in the real-life experiences of these participants. Marcus talks about the potential professional implications relating to the 'label' of outreach:

> The outreach department is completely separate, uh, to the operatic department, or whatever you want to call it. Very, very different people. Very, very different ethics and attitude… Is there a link between the education, and the main company? Is there a feeling that if you work for the outreach and you do their education work, that you may be considered, or at least be thrown into the hat for, for something on the mainstage?... Or, are you, um, will you be, uh, pigeonholed into, uh, that particular type of work? [Marcus]

Marcus' rhetoric suggests he might feel conflicted over the status of outreach, and thereby uncertain as to his own position as a singer. His assertion that the departments relating to 'outreach' and 'mainstage' are clearly separated—*"Very, very different people. Very, very different ethics and attitude"*—is supported but the other group interview participants; in particular, Hayley jumps in to say *"Totally separate. Every company."* The distinction between departments appears to be a source of tension for Marcus since he questions the likelihood of being offered mainstage work if engaged for outreach projects within the same company. It is therefore possible that Marcus is conscious of a hierarchical structure, whereby mainstage work is attributed higher prestige than outreach work, and the singers who work in outreach are (at least from Marcus' vantage point) either not on the radar, knowingly overlooked, or deemed not a good fit for mainstage casting. If this is the case, then one inference is that the 'label' of outreach carries with it associations of lower status and/or 'otherness' for the singer involved in such work. This reinforces the notion of in-group favouritism as outlined by Shepherd & Sigg (2015) and the divisions between the two separate parts of the same company (Abbey et al., 2011).

It is interesting to note the parallels between Marcus' professional experiences and his own rhetoric. For example, the real-world structural divisions Marcus describes are also underlined through the linguistic distinction between outreach/education and '*main*stage'/'*main* company'/'operatic company'. Likewise, the uncertainty he expresses about his place, status, and potential to progress as a singer is emphasised by the interchangeability of the terms 'outreach' and 'education' and the apparent lack of clarity over the correct terminology for each department; he eventually says *"whatever you want to call it"* when describing the branch of company in charge of mainstage productions. If this reinforces the notion that ambiguity around the definition of outreach (and the wider scope of operatic work) has implications for the singer's own sense of status and identity, then it is also possible that the term 'outreach' is a source of conflict for Marcus because of its potential to influence his professional and subjective sense of identity and status (as described by Mills, 2004). Certainly, it is worth considering the impact of terms such as 'main' and 'operatic' for the singer's sense of value and status, particularly if the work being undertaken does not fall under that classification. Does 'main' imply that anything different from this is 'other' or of lesser status? That Marcus questions whether he will be "pigeonholed" in outreach work suggests not only that he perceives there to be a distinction between this type of work and that of the "main" company, but that undertaking work in one department does not necessarily equate to being considered for work in the other. Are there obstacles in both directions (from mainstage to outreach and vice versa)? Considering the semantic and hierarchical implications of terms such as 'main' and 'operatic', and Marcus' self-professed nervousness around being 'pigeonholed', the inference is that undertaking outreach work will narrow, rather than expand, the singer's options for career progression and employment.

Dawn Bennett (2007) asserts that most musicians are categorised according to their instrumental specialism (i.e. a violinist, a baritone, and pianist). Likewise, multiple authors have discussed the notion of hierarchical statuses within the performing arts (see Kogan, 2002; Weller, 2004; Bain, 2005; Bennett, 2007, 2009); in musical circles it is assumed that the full-time performer achieves greater prestige over the protean musician or full-time educator. However, if the status and identity of one's work impacts one's own sense of self (Frederickson and Rooney, 1988), then it is possible to conclude that the singer working in outreach is labelled differently to the singer who performs exclusively in full-staged operatic productions. Bennett (2007) suggests that performing artists tend to circumscribe success relative to their sense of the personal and professional achievement and that "traditional artistic hierarchies measure success according to performance activity and status. This hierarchy

contributes to the angst experienced by practitioners who have non-performance focus and whose activities attract less prestige within the social context: such prestige being one of the ways in which individuals gain self-meaning in their work" (p. 312). In this respect, the label of outreach could potentially be a source of tension for the singer by virtue of *not* being traditionally associated with the terms 'operatic' and/or 'main'.

There is also a suggestion that the label of outreach is associated with underachievement and/or failure. For example, elsewhere in the focus group discussion, Marcus talks about perceived biases around outreach:

> I think the preconceptions about, um, outreach work and education work, or basically extracurricular work that's not singing on stage in a main role [Marcus]

Marcus' description of outreach/education work being "extracurricular" again underlines the notion that a singer's main line of work is expected to be performance-based and largely in the context of full-staged productions. That he frames this as a "preconception" of operatic work likewise reinforces that idea that outreach work does not conform to the conventional narrative of 'who and what an operatic singer is and does'.

Later, Matthew and Marcus return to the topic:

> [Matthew]: Do you think that's to do with what we talked about at the beginning? Like, this sort of feeling of somebody looking at your career and thinking "Oh, education," or "Outreach," or whatever.
>
> [Marcus]: Yeah, quite possibly.
>
> [Matthew]: Yeah.
>
> [Marcus]: The stigma with it.

Again, there is a strong sense that outreach work both falls outside of the mainstream narrative and is seen as something 'lesser'. This is emphasised, firstly, by Matthew's close alignment of education and outreach work, suggesting again that the mixed association of outreach diminishes, or at least blurs, the status and identity of outreach practice and the singer affiliated to this work. More compellingly, Marcus' suggestion that there is a stigma attached to outreach strongly implies that this type of work sits outside of the 'normal' paradigms of operatic practice; by default, the singer who works in outreach is negatively stereotyped, discriminated against, and marginalised from mainstream opportunities (Abbey et al., 2011). In other words, if stigma suggests "a mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality, or person" (Oxford Dictionary of English, 2021), then the label of outreach is potentially a mark of shame and 'otherness' for the singer who works in this realm.

The distinction between mainstage and outreach operatic work is underlined at a structural level through the separate terminology used to define the two—*main*stage versus *out*reach. This labelling instantly suggests a division of sorts, whereby one faction is afforded higher 'ingroup' status than the other. For a professional opera singer who works across the two contexts, there is potential for conflicting identities and a sense of 'otherness'.

Moreover, whether the singer working in outreach self-defines as an 'opera singer' an 'outreach singer/practitioner', an 'animateur', or something else, it can be inferred from all the above that there is potential for a conflict in identity and/or a feeling of 'otherness'.

CONCLUSIONS

The distinction between mainstage and outreach opera work is underlined by the hierarchical structures and categorisations within the UK operatic industry and through the terminology used to define the two—mainstage versus outreach. This labelling instantly suggests a division of sorts, whereby one faction is afforded higher 'ingroup' status than the other. For a professional opera singer who works across the two contexts, there is potential for conflicting identities and a sense of 'otherness'. Moreover, whether the singer working in outreach self-defines as an 'opera singer' an 'outreach singer/practitioner', an 'animateur', or something else, it can be inferred from all the above that there is potential for a conflict in identity and/or a feeling of 'otherness'.

Given the central role of the singer in operatic performance and the apparent significance of outreach—as expounded in industry narratives and in the pervasiveness of outreach practice in the UK—it is striking that singers who work in this field should experience this sense of 'otherness'. While there seems to be a societal understanding of what a singer does in relation to 'performance' and, therefore, a reference for the 'status' of such a role, there is a lack of understanding as to what a singer does in relation to outreach due to a somewhat nebulous set of defining characteristics. Furthermore, this lack of understanding is not just limited to those outside the artform of opera, but inclusive of those inside it, and, most strikingly,

those for whom it is part of their professional practice.

If the notion of 'the singer who works in outreach' sits outside the mainstream narratives around opera and the opera singer, then parallels exist between real-life practice in opera and the scholarly discourse. While the findings in this study concur with much of the published literature around status and identity in relation to the professional musician/opera singer, importantly, this study provides a new lens through which to explore these ideas in a way that does not currently appear in the scholarly discourse.

While the small sample size in this study precludes any generalisation, the findings here nonetheless invite further investigation into the singer's experiences in opera outreach practice versus mainstage performance and could be pertinent to a variety of discourses: namely those around the formal training of singers and the notion of status and identity in the wider performing arts industries. To what extent are these notions of status and identity introduced at the higher education training level, and to what extent does this impact both the student-teacher relationship and the construction of the young singer's professional and musical identity at this formative stage? Which is the more critical factor—the terminology or the systems in place within the professional landscape? (For example, if the terms 'outreach' and 'mainstage' were substituted with alternative labels, how would this this impact the singer's sense of status and identity?) In a post-pandemic era in which opera (in the UK at least) is striving to maintain its own societal/cultural status and identity, a better understanding of the singer's perspective in outreach contexts is important to inform real-life practice in this field.

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