

## **“So, how should I sing it?”**

### **Notes on writing an aria by Julie Nugent (first-time librettist)**

An **aria** – musical term, originally any expressive melody, usually, but not always, performed by a singer. The term is now used almost exclusively to describe a self-contained piece for one voice usually with orchestral accompaniment.

A **libretto** - the text or words of an opera or similar extended musical composition.

In December 2010, I was invited to take part in a project that the Welsh National Opera and Music Theatre Wales were running in conjunction with Birmingham City University and the Birmingham Conservatoire. The exercise was to ‘*Make an Aria*’, where writers and composers were brought together, to do exactly that.

Through a twisted form of speed-dating, writers were matched to musicians; and all of us recast as librettists and composers. We sat together awkwardly, a little shy and apprehensive as we waited for our brief. The material was passed around: a handful of sentences with which to stake out ideas. As discussions began, the energy crackled; the partnerships took shape.

An aria is like a soliloquy – a protagonist addressing the audience whilst time is suspended. It is focused and precise, like a beautiful paragraph or a well-crafted scene. If you get it right, then everything you wanted to say about plot and character and image and theme crystallises in a word, a line, a set of musical notes.

Such exactness is not won easily. To be clear about the aria, I had to be clear about everything else: to know the secrets of my hero, what he wanted, what he was scared of, what he needed to succeed. The aria had to be located firmly in a plot, with a clear sense of where the story started and where it would end. And, as a piece of opera, I felt it had to live up to the scale – tell the macro through the micro; a hero’s quest, a search for meaning....

When my draft was ready, I handed it over to the composer: Kirsty Devaney, a first year student from the Birmingham Conservatoire. I was more nervous than I’d expected. I am used to writing alone, with endless revisions, until I’m happy with the sound. This felt unfinished, somehow careless; an abdication of responsibility, perhaps a ceding of control. Kirsty was frank and imaginative, with a clear sense of genre and what she wanted to achieve. She carved out the score and the words that didn’t fit.

We listened together.

‘I’m not sure about the squiggly bit.’

‘That line is too repetitive.’

‘Can we have some more lullaby?’

Though neither of us spoke the other's jargon we both knew what we wanted and were happy to work through our differences.

Historically, librettists have been the subordinate partner, although the dynamics of the relationship have changed over time. There is a primacy to the music, and the knowledge it will be performed. The melody lifts the words as it speaks them, a dual capacity of message and medium. Kirsty took the writing, and made it into music.

We had lots more ideas which we discussed even further. Thoughts about the set and the lighting and the special effects. We wanted to be precise about directions – like the staging of a play. Is our hero moving now or standing? Does he look at the audience as he addresses them? Is there anyone else on stage?

From a writer's perspective, this is all fantastic training. It moves the writing into a deeper physicality, demands a clarity of location, and movement, and character interaction.

We thought we had nailed it, until we came to the rehearsal in October this year. Kirsty and I were introduced to our pianist, Nicola Rose, and our tenor, James Oxley.

'What am I trying to achieve here? How should I sing it?' Our hero challenged his creators, like a monster learned to speak.

For a moment, we faltered, unused to such rebellion. But there was backstory and plotting and characterisation to draw from. A psychological coherence we had hoped to convey.

The tenor nodded, deciding his motivation. He sang the aria; breathed new life in our creation. Our hero moved away from us, enhanced and somehow freer, from authorial intent.

At this point, the creative process became multi-dimensional – with writer and composer and performer all complicit. And then the conductor joined in too.

'Line 54.' He admonished the tenor. 'More schizophrenic, less Sondheim!'

Another voice, another interpretation, another point of bifurcation as the meaning shifted further. A timely reminder of how the words can escape you. Others take them and interpret them, in new ways and better ways and ways you'd never dreamt of. There is energy in collaboration, as well as conflict and reflection. It helps you engage as a writer and a reader and a listener too.

And even now, as I'm writing, I hear my characters muttering.....