

## **Singing Your Emotional Life**

Susan Gregory

Dear Editor

As a young baritone currently in the first year of my master's studies, I cannot express how helpful, enlightening, and encouraging this magazine is! It's the confirmation of knowing there are a million people who support what you do and who are wanting to help you. I appreciate the articles dealing with how to get a career started. (Fortunately, I'm still postponing the dreaded walk into the "real world.") I would, however, like to see sonic articles that deal a lot more with the psychological aspects of being a singer.

Not to generalize... [but] we all seem to have a unique gene within us. As a young singer living in die new millennium [and] within the world of popular culture, it can be extremely difficult to close your eyes and take yourself back into a different period of time when the classical style of music was more cherished than it is now. I think this is a huge task for a young singer of my generation to take on. Unfortunately, not all of us are growing up with Mozart, Schubert, Wolf, Debussy, and Mahler.

It would be interesting to see an article or...some research about this, and [about] how young singers can find a balance to stay within their current time, yet remain focused, not in debt, and maintain a healthy social life. Once again, thanks for such a wonderful publication!

Sincerely,  
Justin M. Randolph  
Bowling Green, Ohio

Justin M. Randolph is a baritone and is currently pursuing a M.M. in vocal performance from Bowling Green State University. As a young baritone Mr. Randolph has over 10 roles in his repertoire including The Count from *Le nozze di Figaro*, Bob from *The Old Maid and the Thief*, The Count from *Il matrimonio segreto*, and Falke from *Die Fledermaus* among others. He has studied voice with Andreas Poulimenos, Jane Schoonmaker-Rodgers, and he's currently studying with David Okerlind. Mr. Randolph has been coached by Eastman School of Music's Russell Miller, former Toledo Opera coach Kevin Bylsma, world renowned composer Richard Hundley, and San Francisco Opera's Adelle Eslinger. He was the 2000 recipient of the Arion Foundation Award for Excellence in Musical Achievement, and a finalist of the 2003 Great Lakes NATS competition. In Spring 2005 he will be singing in a Thomas Pasatieri one act titled *La Divina*.

[www.juslinranddph.com](http://www.juslinranddph.com)

Response:

Universal emotions of love, hate, fear and anger can serve as guides for contemporary young singers trying to grasp the heart of any song or operatic scene from yesteryear. We can look past historical styles of music and language to the essence of the emotional message. We can identify which of the four basic human emotions—think of them as primary colors—the character or the poet is expressing.

In identifying the primary emotion of the song or scene, we can recall experiences from our own lives when we have felt the same emotion. Remembering that, we can translate the feeling of our emotional experience into our singing experience now. The remembered situation need not be the same as the story we are singing about—only the emotional tone need correspond.

Sometimes we cannot recall or identify emotions we have felt in the past. This may take some self-exploration, or some professional assistance. As expressive artists, we need to be able to access our emotions, name them, and allow them to flow through the music we sing, without our being overwhelmed by them. Becoming emotionally intelligent in this way requires a learning process, which includes brightening self-awareness and loosening strictures that may be preventing us from accessing our emotions.

In working on operatic roles or art songs, we don't need to let historical style become a smoke screen. The four basic human emotions—love, hate, fear, and anger—have been the same throughout human history, and are at the artistic heart of the matter. Singers are always expressing one or another of these four basic emotions in a song. All the many other emotions we can name are tonal variations on these four; they are subheadings, if you will. I encourage you to oversimplify, to recall emotion in experiences from your own life and to use memory of it in the songs you sing. This brings the song alive, no matter how unfamiliar its historical aesthetic.

“As expressive artists, we need to be able to access our emotions, name them, and allow them to flow through the music we sing, without our being overwhelmed by them.”

The ability to do this does not come automatically. It takes mental-emotional practice, just as learning to sing takes practice. It's a kind of training in mental focus and emotional access, which includes focus on recall and imagining. Singing artists need rich mental-emotional lives, which they can work to develop during their years of training. Imagining, remembering, and feeling are precognitive brain functions that get stronger with stimulation and practice. Developing these skills is part of what we undertake to become excellent professional singers.

“Opera is about people relating to people. It involves emotions that remain true throughout time: love, anger, jealousy, sympathy, etc.”

Becoming professionals is what people go to graduate school to achieve. It is a kind of immersion into a new world, a world with requirements for personal growth and skills development that take effort and guts. The work is intense and includes a commitment to excellence, which professionals in every field of endeavor undertake.

A graduate education requires that we depart from our familiar ways of living and stretch ourselves to develop competencies that join us to the tradition of accomplishment in our field. In classical singing, this includes the commitment to explore the uncharted waters of our mental-emotional lives, so that we can fulfill our professional role in society—which, in my view, is that of helping audiences know and feel the elemental truths of human existence.

Becoming a singing professional—and here I refer to attaining a panoply of skills on a highly developed level—causes us to embark upon a journey that other members of our family may not have taken. This is called "individuating." When we individuate from our families, the process often is painful for everyone involved—and sometimes, to reduce the pain, we may do less than we need to do to complete our transition to professionalism.

There's no getting around it, successfully taking advantage of the opportunity a graduate education affords requires a vast amount of effort—effort to conquer the unfamiliar, to build a ground of knowledge on which to stand, to deepen an array of skills, and to seek mental-emotional expansion so as to fulfill the expressive requirements of the art. This process is not always comfortable. You may suffer growing pains. Yet your time in graduate school provides a precious opportunity for self-defining and developing your potential. Carpe diem!

Respectfully,  
Susan Gregory