

The Meaning of Redundancy for Opera Choristers: an Investigation of Musical Identity in the Context of Job Loss

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ABSTRACT

This study looks at the impact of job loss for seven professional opera choristers. The individual aspects of such change are not always addressed by traditional methodologies. Motivated by these concerns, this study takes an idiographic approach using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA is concerned with the subjective meanings that people ascribe to experiences, but also recognises the active role of the researcher in gaining access to that window of experience. Three main themes emerged from the data analysis but, for the purpose of this presentation, only one theme will be discussed which is 'Issues of Identity'. This theme looks at the differing levels of importance assigned by the participants to the singing and performing aspects of their work. It also investigates the effect that these varying priorities have on an identity construction when adapting to job loss. Analysis showed that some singers experienced redundancy as a positive change and a chance to develop aspects of the 'self' that were not possible in a professional community. Others found difficulty in dealing with the lack of continuity in their identity that was enforced by loss of work.

BACKGROUND

A. Work and Identity

The relationship between sense of self and chosen profession is complex. Identity theory in social psychology predicts that the work roles we perform affect the perception we have of ourselves as well as of our relationship to others within a social context. The amount of commitment to those roles impacts identity salience and subsequent role performance (Stryker, 1981, 1987). Given the amount of personal investment and commitment involved in becoming an elite performer, (Ericsson et al. 1993 estimated that expert violinists achieved around 10,000 hours deliberate practice time before the age of 20) the salience of work-role identity is likely to be high and have a powerful influence on behaviour and identity perception.

Within the performing arts, the understanding of 'who we are' and 'what we do' appears less straightforward than in many professions. Performance becomes more than a means of earning a living, it becomes a way of living. Work is an important way of validating a musical self-concept and verifying the status of a professional musician. MacDonald et al. (2005) found that within the jazz community it was generally accepted that '*being a busy musician equates with being a good musician*'. There is no reason to suggest that this would not apply to other areas of the performing arts.

The work of opera

Opera is one of the most complex forms of art to produce because it combines music, staging and technology. It places enormous demands on the artists who work in the profession yet as Sandgren (2005) notes, very little is known about how opera singers '*live, learn and work in this contemporary*

pursuit'. Her study concentrates on the health and vocal issues related to the work of opera singers, as does most other research in the field (see Sundberg et al. 1998, Thomasson and Sundberg, 1999, Vurma and Ross, 2000, Kenny et. al 2004). For the purpose of this study, the term opera singer should be understood to mean singers who make their living from singing and performing opera as opposed to using it as a descriptive term to classify a style of singing.

Sandgren (2005) states that it is vocal ability that defines the skill level of an opera singer, yet contemporary opera production requires a singer to do far more than sing. Currently, emphasis is shifting from productions where 'it's not over until the fat lady sings' to a more sophisticated visual approach which requires performers to have the skills and looks of professional actors and dancers. This point is emphasised by Davidson and Coimbra (2001) in a study of performance assessment of college students. They found that the single most striking performance personality theme to emerge from the data was the emphasis on physical appearance. However, opera singers are required to dress up in costume and play a fictional role within a fictional social context. A sense of personal identity, performing identity and musical expression is then wrapped up within the confines of the fictional character portrayed. As Davidson (2002) notes, the demands of acting can affect singers' perceptions of themselves and their performing identity, but there is little research that investigates this issue. There is also little music psychology research that looks at what happens to the components of musical identity if they cannot be utilized or validated by means of work. In contrast, it is recognised that athletes and dancers, also considered to be elite performers, will inevitably be faced with 'retirement', either as a result of injury or aging. This is reflected in the available research and specialist help available (see Smith and Sparkes, 2002, Wainwright and Turner, 2004, Jeffrie and Throsbie, 2006).

METHODOLOGY

IPA is a qualitative methodology examining the 'lived in world' of an individual, using the researcher as an active tool to gain entrance to this world. It focuses on the meaning that experience has for an individual as opposed to mere observation of the experience (for an in depth discussion see Smith et al. 1999, 2003). IPA is idiographic in nature and concerned with a detailed understanding of meaning of particular cases rather than making general observations.

A. Participants

The main requirements for participants of an IPA study are that they should be considered experts in the field under

investigation and be able to understand the principles of their involvement (Reid et al. 2005). Purposive sampling is used to select a closely defined group of participants for whom the research questions are significant (Smith et al 2003). The singers for this study have all experienced enforced career change as a result of redundancy. All participants had been full-time professional opera choristers with major opera companies in Great Britain. At the time of the interview none of the participants had full-time work within the operatic profession.

Figure 1. Participant Information

Participant	Age	Career History	Current Employment
Margaret	41	10 years full-time with one company. 2 years freelance work.	Hoping to combine her own business with freelance singing work.
Helen	49	20 years full-time with one company.	Working full-time outside music. Does not sing any more.
Moira	49	11 years full-time with one company.	Initially worked full-time outside music, now combines freelance opera work with other non-musical work.
Hugh	47	20 years full-time with one company.	Freelance opera work.
Fiona	50	28 years full-time with two companies.	Teaches singing and does some concert work.
Andy	50	10 years full-time with one company. 10 years as a freelance singer.	Freelance teacher and choir trainer.
Beth	50	23 years full-time with two companies.	Runs an art gallery and paints. Does not sing anymore.

Although age was not a criterion for participation in the research, all the singers were at an age where it would be difficult to be re-employed in a full-time capacity. In order to protect anonymity, all names and places mentioned are fictitious.

B. Procedure

The semi-structured interview is considered exemplary for IPA research (Smith, 2004). The interviewer has more

flexibility to establish a rapport with the participant, the order of questions is not important and it can produce richer data (Smith, 2003). I initially made written contact with each participant in order to explain the nature of the research. After consent was given I made further contact by email or telephone in order to ensure that each individual was clear about his or her undertaking. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with each participant in a place of their choosing, usually their own home. I began with one general question: *'what does singing mean to you?'* I then followed the participant through their narrative, which allowed me to explore areas of interest that I had not previously considered. The interviews lasted between ninety minutes and two hours. They were transcribed verbatim and analysed in accordance with IPA guidelines.

Analysis

IPA analysis consists of a set of stages that reduce the data to a small number of super-ordinate themes with relevant sub-themes. Initial analysis began during the transcribing stage at which point I was able to re-live the interview and make notes of any non-verbal language, or changes in voice timbre. This provided the first step to gaining an intimate knowledge of the script. Subsequent readings increased this personal engagement. The left hand margin was used to comment on points of interest. I used colour coding to identify exploratory themes, initial interpretative or interrogative comments and the way language was used by the participants.

The next stage involved developing the notes in the left hand margin to a deeper interpretative level in order to produce a set of more psychologically oriented themes that reflected my initial impressions. This stage can be particularly time consuming because care must be taken to ensure that the researcher's interpretation remains connected to the words of the participant (Smith, 2003). I reduced these initial emergent themes into sub-ordinate themes by means of making connections and clustering. These sub-ordinate themes were then grouped together with a descriptive label and title. This process resulted in three main themes known as super-ordinate themes. Finally, I produced a table listing these three themes with their related sub-ordinate themes and beside them a text example for each theme. This procedure was carried out for each participant before making cross-case comparisons.

RESULTS

The super-ordinate theme 'All about me' encapsulates the issues that appear to have most impact on the effects of change on the professional and personal identities that had been established by the participants. Within this super-ordinate theme, three sub-ordinate themes will be discussed. 'Me, Singing and Self' explores the understanding the participants have of themselves through their voice. 'Me and the Stage' looks at the influence that stage performance has on identity formation and 'Me and the Job' considers the role played by full-time employment in identity formation. These themes will now be explored in depth to understand the implications that a changing work environment has on the way that the singers come to terms with a changing sense of self and altered social standing.

A. 'Me, Singing and Self'

This theme will explore issues of vocal embodiment and identity by looking at the way the participants interact with their voice as a biologically embedded instrument. Responses to the opening question 'What does singing mean to you?' included comments such as 'it's a way of expressing myself', 'it's a comfort zone', 'something natural', 'energy', 'it's been a way of earning a living', 'something I was good at', but also comments such as 'it doesn't come into my life anymore'. These responses illustrate a wide range of functions that singing is able to fulfill; physical energy, emotional well-being, self esteem, practicality, but also detachment from singing. Two main differences emerged: Some participants viewed themselves and their singing as an inseparable unit while others were able to take a more objective view of their voice. This following comment by Moira shows a feeling of total unity with her voice:

'You can't separate your voice from who you are. I don't believe you can talk about your singing as a separate thing, it's not like a violin or a pianist, it's you, it's human'. (Moira)

Moira personalises her voice in a way that makes it seem like a living entity unable to be separated from Moira the person. She senses a special status that sets her apart from other instrumentalists. One of the reasons for this feeling of being in a different category could be the close awareness singers have of their bodies as a generator of sound. Margaret talks about how this physical production of sound affects her sense of personal fulfilment:

'There's something quite satisfying about having that sound so low down in the body. There's something about having a really solid middle to the voice that makes you solid on stage. I don't know, there's something about it, for me personally that's very satisfying. I like the way it feels within my body'. (Margaret)

Opera singers, like dancers and athletes, work closely with their bodies and consequently are very attuned to the way they experience themselves physically. Margaret is relating the way that her voice feels inside her body to her state of general well being. The middle part of a voice is an important register for all singers because it forms a point of balance between upper and lower registers. References to solid and low suggest that Margaret feels grounded and physically stable and this is reflected in the way she sees herself as mentally stable and complete. Margaret uses identical words to describe vocal production and her own state of being, which shows how the voice can be used as a regulator of self. It is also possible to perceive from these comments that any evaluation of the voice is likely to be a direct evaluation of the person, a point reinforced by Moira:

'If you're talking to another soprano you can't really say what you think about their voice 'cos it's almost like you're criticizing them, I know as a performer that if someone was criticizing my voice it's an attack on your own self'. (Moira)

Professional opera singers live and work in an environment where they are constantly evaluated on the basis of their vocal abilities. The close physical and psychological union with the voice can also be vulnerable if exposed to adverse change. Singing played a large part in the life of Helen until she was made redundant. In this extract she talks of what singing meant to her and how those feelings were affected by the loss of her job.

'It's (singing) a part that I've had since a child so it's been with me for my whole life though at the moment singing doesn't really come into my life anymore. I haven't sung for two years, so singing (speaks very slowly) is still in me, it's within my being but I'm not physically expressing it. Singing at one time in my life was a way of earning a living. It was a huge part of my life, and now it's not'. (Helen)

Helen sees singing as an integral part of who she has always been. She feels it is still within her but no longer has an external outlet. Redundancy has led Helen to distance herself from the physical act of singing. Her comment about not singing for two years refers not just to professional singing but the fact that she has not been able to bring herself to sing in any capacity at all since being made redundant. Earlier discussion pointed to the way that singers were aware of the correlation between vocal ability and the evaluation of self and others. It is possible that redundancy has undermined her sense of personal value to the company and consequently undermined a part of Helen that has been with her since childhood, namely her singing. Work provided Helen with a physical outlet for singing that is now denied to her and as such has taken away a large part of who she thought she was. The physical sensations of singing seem to be an essential experience in order to maintain a sense of self. 'Energy' and 'Buzz' were words used by all the participants to denote the feelings that they experienced through singing. Moira and Beth describe the act of singing like an addiction:

'I need an avenue that I can give energy into, it's part of who I am, it's like a fix, there's nothing like it, it's like sex'. (Moira)

'When singing works well there's nothing like it, the magical feeling you get, the shiver, it's almost like a drug'. (Beth)

It seems that a professional singer develops a dependency on singing to provide a sense of physical and emotional well-being. Maybe this is due in part to the huge personal investment they devote to their profession. Comparisons can be made to athletes who become addicted to the 'buzz' achieved through participation in top-level sport. Distress can be experienced when enforced change denies the opportunity to achieve this 'high' that gives continuity to a sense of self and well-being. However Fiona experienced these feelings in reverse:

'Singing means energy and expression now, not identity now. It was identity for years, it isn't now. (Fiona)

This is an interesting comment because Fiona is no longer using singing as a way of defining herself. When she was

working it was as if singing was a passive entity that served to define her job description. The internal embodied elements of singing became lost as the requirements of the job shaped her identity. Redundancy enabled her to re-evaluate the meaning of singing. Since leaving the profession she has become more aware of the fundamentals of singing as a source of energy and expression.

Thus far, discussion has centered on singing as a subjective experience but Andy and Hugh viewed singing in a different way. Both came to singing from other disciplines, which might explain this more objective approach:

'Singing isn't the be all and end all for me, it's never been like that for me. I've always been a general musician, it was a way of making a living, satisfying my musical desires, so it wasn't that I was mad keen on opera, I was mad keen on music'. (Andy)

'I suppose it's never been the be all and end all but it's been an important part of my life. I've always had other interests as well. I didn't start off as a singer you know. I did a history degree and all the rest of it so I came to it from another discipline. It hasn't been a total obsession but it's basically been a way of earning a living'. (Hugh)

Andy began his musical life as a trumpet player but took up singing because he felt it was 'more natural' than playing the trumpet. However, as can be seen in the extract above, singing does not appear to be a major factor in the way he defines himself. Despite saying that singing was more natural, he admits later in the interview to having difficulty in expressing himself through singing:

'You've got to be fully in touch with your emotions but I think the singing, when it's got to be sad, you've got to think a bit more about the emotions and that can be a bit more er, er, tricky if you're not comfortable with your emotions, 'cos you've got text to deal with'. (Andy)

This extract highlights the difficulties of an embodied voice, where it is not enough to be able to make sound physically. Personal emotions must also be drawn upon. Andy experiences difficulty with this and subsequently experiences a less intimate relationship with his voice than do some other participants. It is the love of music rather than the act of singing that Andy and Hugh prioritize in their professional lives. There could be several reasons for this apparent lack of internal involvement with singing. Firstly, singing was not significant for either of them in their formative years and therefore may not be embedded so deeply in their identity as it is with the other participants. Secondly, this could be a subconscious strategy to minimize the impact that redundancy had on their lives. They may be trying to convince themselves that singing played a smaller role in their identity formation than was actually the case. Finally, singing can be a highly emotionally charged vehicle for self-expression. Andy, in particular, appears to have difficulty expressing deep emotions externally. Using music as a more internal facilitator of emotional release perhaps reduces the need for Andy and Hugh to display their emotions overtly.

The data has shown differing degrees of unity between self and the vocal instrument. Subsequently, the function of singing for the participants was also varied. Some used singing as an external tool with which to access music or earn a living. Others experienced their voice as an inseparable part of who they were which meant that professional singing was more than just a job. It became an intensely personal manner of self-expression and self-evaluation. Maybe these differences could be contributing factors to the reaction of the participants to redundancy.

Me and the Stage

This theme will look at how identity formation can be influenced by working within a specialized theatrical community where performance on and off stage is subject to constant scrutiny.

'The show must go on, my show must go on'. (Beth)

Research has shown that it is possible to develop a stage persona and that a necessary part of a good performance is the ability to 'show off' to an audience (Davidson, 2002). However, as the above quotation from Beth shows, it is not always easy to separate this stage persona from real-life. Despite being made redundant ten years ago Beth has not lost her performing instincts. She later stated that she had to 'learn to be an ex-opera singer' as if learning a new role. Davidson also states that to have a performance personality is to be able to show off in a number of different ways apart from on the stage. In a full time opera company, performance becomes part of daily life, whether it be on stage to an audience or off stage with colleagues. Data from Andy, Moira, Helen and Beth demonstrates the complexities involved when living and working in a theatrical environment. Andy sums up his experiences of the theatrical world in the following extract:

'Some people have that stage persona, they have the stage with them when they go off stage, that they're completely wrapped up in the whole theatre thing and you get other people that do a good job, come off stage and you they're just normal blokes at the end of the day. I mean we're all different'. (Andy)

In this extract, Andy is differentiating between colleagues who use a performing persona only for their work and those who carry it with them constantly. In other words he sees performance as something that can be controlled rather than as an integral part of the self. He also refers to singers who are not in performance mode as 'normal blokes'. A possible explanation for this is that he feels performance, in the stage sense, is an abnormality for males. Dressing up and putting on make-up is usually something associated with femininity. Likewise, outward expression of emotions is not always considered to be a masculine trait. It is not clear in this extract how he classifies himself but in his following statement he appears to be uncomfortable with a performing role:

'You don't have to perform to be a musician, some people don't have that disposition'. (Andy)

In the previous theme it was seen that Andy experienced difficulty in dealing with his emotions in a singing capacity. He also identified himself as a musician rather than a singer. Because of this I assumed the above quotation to be a personal statement rather than a generalization. It is a surprising comment because although not everybody is a 'natural performer', in the area of the musical world in which he was involved, it is generally accepted that performance is an essential part of being a musician. Andy remarked earlier on the ability of some performers to 'switch off' away from the stage.

This implies that performance is a role that can be acted and is not necessarily a personal trait. Nevertheless, he seems unable to engage with a performing persona on any level. Classifying himself as a musician could be a means to avoid the association with extrovert, perhaps sometimes superficial, emotions often associated with singing and the stage.

Moira also equates being a singer with being a performer but, in contrast to Andy, says she feels most comfortable when she is in a performing situation:

I'm a showy person and I like to be, that's my nature. I'm a performer, I'm a singer, that's what I do. I'm not a shy little wallflower when I'm away from the stage. Someone once said to me that they thought I was all show like my opera. I found that quite a hurtful thing to say, also quite ignorant to say, I was really offended when she said that 'cos that's me she's talking about. (Moira)

Moira sees herself as a performer on and off stage and does not differentiate between the two selves. Opera is commonly perceived by the uninitiated as portraying fantasy and unreality, with the performers being judged accordingly. Consequently, she is hurt when she is criticised for being superficial despite having just admitted that she is a 'showy person'. Perhaps the conflict lies in the meaning that Moira assigns to 'show'. Being a 'showy' person could be interpreted as being 'on show' in order to gain attention and be different, rather than being emotionally superficial. This can be seen in the following extract:

'Being a singer is attention seeking. I don't want to sit back and let someone else take center stage, I enjoy being centre stage, I like sitting here chatting to you having centre stage as it would if it were reversed and you were chatting and I were listening, that's what performing is all about'. (Moira)

The need for attention is considered by Moira to be a normal part of being a singer, on and off stage. She assumes that I, as an opera singer, would also enjoy audience attention if our situations were reversed. Perhaps the interview itself could be construed as one singer performing for another. However, at the end of the interview, despite saying she is not an emotional person, Moira talks emotionally about a friend who was also made redundant from the same company:

'You know I'm not this emotional person. You know, maybe it's a singer thing, well no, a performing thing, everyone goes round, big hugs, how are you darling, lovely to see you, I'm

just not like that. I don't do it and A (name of friend) she's such a dear friend and sometimes I just want to hug her so tight when I see her but I don't and when she's gone I cry 'cos I just can't'. (Moira)

Moira is again distancing herself from the superficiality often associated with the theatrical environment. This could be because it prevents her from showing genuine friendship and she is concerned that any expression of emotion will be perceived as a performance 'like her opera'. She appears to be confused about her emotional side. It is possible that she has spent so many years expressing emotions through the fictitious medium of performance that she is not even sure how to access her genuine, emotional side.

Andy and Moira both appear to have difficulty with understanding and expressing personal emotions. A life of performing has made it difficult for Moira to display her true, deep emotional feelings and Andy feels that because he has difficulty in dealing with his personal emotions he is unable to project himself in a stage situation.

For Helen the stage was a way of experimenting with different selves:

You can be someone else not just the person you are, you're hundreds of different characters. When you work on a stage you go through life being so many different people and it's challenging to be your own character and work out your own personality'. (Helen)

By portraying many different characters on stage Helen seems to be adding an extra dimension to her real-life self. This could be indicative of uncertainty about the boundaries between the stage and real life. It is possible that Helen sees the stage and theatrical environment as a place where she can live out fantasies that might be frowned upon in her own life. Opera choristers, particularly if they are full-time, work closely with their colleagues in ways that other musicians don't, because of the theatrical environment. Off stage, they share dressing rooms, hotel rooms and sometimes partners. On stage they are often required to engage in close physical contact with colleagues in circumstances that might not always be acceptable in the real world. When she ceased to be part of this world she experienced a self with which she was unfamiliar as she comments:

'I don't feel comfortable with this person who doesn't do what I do'.

She talks about herself in the third person as if she is observing a physical body which is functioning in daily life, but one with which she is unable to engage psychologically. Helen created characters in her working life, but perhaps the amount of physical time spent on the stage as a full time chorister left few resources with which to develop a self outside the theatre. By comparison, Fiona felt ill at ease with herself when she was in a working situation. In the following extract Fiona describes a normal working day of rehearsals and performances:

'I never ever got comfortable with myself or what I would wear, gosh I don't know where this is coming from, I never dressed as Fiona, the only version there was, was me in my jeans and scruffy (rehearsal clothes), I'd throw on leggings and a tee-shirt for rehearsals and a costume at night. I never developed any kind of identity of my own, even through clothes'. (Fiona)

Again, the use of the third person suggests a separation of the physical and mental self. Although these comments are retrospective and not necessarily how she felt during the time she was working, they do show how redundancy presented an opportunity to evaluate her work and its effect on 'Fiona the person'. Fiona and Helen both talk about not being comfortable with themselves but in different circumstances. Helen needed the stage to feel herself and Fiona lost her sense of self through the stage.

Data from these four participants is representative of the differing ways that all the singers were influenced by the stage and performance. The stage can provide a world for creativity and character formation that can be an escape from the restraints of real-life but can also encroach on real-life. Moira felt she could not be seen as sincere away from the stage; Helen became unsure of herself away from the stage just as Fiona was eventually unsure of who she was as a result of working on the stage. Andy by contrast avoided the confrontation completely by removing himself from any associations of performance. Redundancy has forced all the singers to consider the consequences that working in a theatrical environment has had on their personal identity.

Me and the Job

The final theme will look at the role played by work and the importance that is attached to popular assumptions about 'being an opera singer'. The following four extracts give examples of the status the participants attached to the title of the job:

'When somebody asks me what I do for a living and I say I'm an opera singer, it's immense and I don't want to let that go. I don't want to say I used to be an opera singer'. (Moira)

'It was such a part of my identity, you know, I was Beth the opera singer, how I was from say the age of seventeen, eighteen. That's how I saw myself and all my working life I was Beth the opera singer'. (Beth)

'I definitely rode on the fact that I was an opera singer, nothing to do with singing but the name of the job and the level of the job'. (Fiona)

'A job like a singer, my feeling for that is you're a very gifted, very special person to be allowed to do a job like that, there are so few of us around when you think how many accountants and lawyers there are'. (Helen)

These quotations all demonstrate how special the participants felt to be able to call themselves opera singers. All the quotations point to the role of work in affording this title.

Singing in itself can be a very subjective experience and not necessarily a direct contributor to self-esteem. Paid employment endorses the level of ability and subsequently boosts self-esteem. Furthermore, these four participants all enjoyed the attention that 'being an opera singer' attracted in social contexts. This also perpetuated their expectations that, in the eyes of the public, they deserved a special status. Enjoying the attention could also be seen as another way of bringing the stage into real-life but also implies that it is the job title and status that receives the attention rather than the individual. In fact being an individual is not easy within the collective identity of a group as can be seen in the following extract:

'It was kind of feeling for the company rather than myself. You know one had been a part of a national company for many years and one felt kind of proud of hopefully some of the artistic standards you'd contributed to the company. The one body that I think had been responsible for a lot of good things in the company was the one they were dispensing with on a full time basis and I just felt it was the wrong thing to do'. (Hugh)

Hugh speaks objectively about a company and a chorus to which he belonged. It is as if being part of a company took precedence over any personal identity he had as a singer. In other words he is using corporate status, rather like Fiona, to validate his abilities and social status. He could also be using the company to displace any personal feelings he may have had when faced with redundancy.

'Being an opera singer' featured heavily in most of the lives of the participants. However, Andy presents a striking contrast to these views by disassociating himself from the work:

'I kind of always classed myself as a classical musician never as an opera singer. I suppose at some time I must have said I'm a singer but I don't think I ever said I was an opera singer 'cos I've been a musician longer than just a singer'. (Andy)

Andy is making clear differences between the titles of singer, opera singer and musician. Whereas the other participants enjoyed being evaluated by other people's perception of the job this was not the social status sought by Andy. Perhaps the problematic associations he had with the stage and performance discussed earlier made it possible for him to acknowledge his identity as a singer but not of an opera singer. Additionally, this could be a way for Andy to avoid the stigma of 'being an ex opera singer'

Loss of full-time work does not necessarily mean loss of career. Theoretically it was possible for all the participants to look for alternative employment as singers with other companies. Hugh, Moira and Margaret all took on freelance work after redundancy but a quotation by Helen points out the need to take a different approach to this sort of work:

'Towards the end when I made the decision to go early I was officially part time and it was awful, it felt like you were nothing on the stage. You were automatically looked on differently even by colleagues. I was then classed as a part time chorister and er, that was the start of the loss of status if you like, it was the beginning of realising that I wasn't going to be

the same person. (pause) It's difficult (becomes emotional)'. (Helen)

Within an opera company, personal experience has shown that there are clear dividing lines between full-time and part-time workers. Helen opted for early redundancy, which meant that she spent her final year working the same hours as her colleagues but without full time status. The extract above shows the fragility of artistic identity and its dependence on external validation, not only from an audience but also from colleagues. Because of her change in work status Helen now felt in a different class from colleagues with whom she had worked as an equal for more than twenty years. Freelance working automatically placed her on a lower level than her colleagues and put her abilities and self-esteem in doubt. She felt she didn't belong to the company anymore. Helen, more than any of the other participants, placed enormous value on *'singing with people who were dedicated to one company'*. Her corporate loyalty was possibly to the detriment of her own identity as a singer and seems to have left her few personal resources to adapt to life outside opera.

For the singers who moved away completely from singing, being an opera singer created several problems in a wider community that had little or no understanding of what it meant. This can best be demonstrated by the way Fiona felt about herself after she moved to a small village:

'When I first came here I didn't want anyone to know I was an opera singer because I thought people would think it was a bit strange, because it feels like the school gates thing (mothers dropping their children off at school) is so far removed from my job that I didn't want to be thought of as (pause) unusual, I wanted to fit in and make friends. Now the other side of that is I, well you know, you're at a party and someone says what do you do? Oh I'm an opera singer, and that's it, that's all the conversation from then on and I think well actually I'm more than just an opera singer'. (Fiona)

Fiona has not yet let go of being an opera singer. Even though she is not working she talks about 'my job' in the present tense. However, she is reluctant to present herself as such within her new community for fear of not fitting in. The operatic community is a very specialized world, which Fiona earlier referred to as 'a bubble'. It's a world that as a working singer you have to fit into but it can be quite removed from other areas of life. The conflicts that Fiona is experiencing are similar to those experienced when working in a chorus. It is necessary to find a place and function within a group of perhaps sixty choristers but at the same time each chorister is looking for individual recognition. It seems that the opera singer label has restricted Fiona throughout her working life. She feels that she is more than just an opera singer but despite this, she is still unsure about how to fit into a non-operatic community.

It is generally accepted that work is a way of self-definition and self-presentation. There is evidence here to suggest that the participants evaluate themselves largely by the perceived view that others, outside the operatic community, have of their work. This leads them either to identify strongly with the job title as a way of being special and different or, as with Andy, to present

himself as a musician in order to avoid being type-casted as just a performer.

DISCUSSION

This study has explored the effects of redundancy on identity formation for seven opera singers. In order to understand more about the career transition that redundancy initiated, it is first necessary to understand something of the pre-established world of the participants and the way they created their professional identities (Schlossberg, 1981). In order to do this, data was organized around three interdependent components that were found to contribute to this identity formation, namely singing, stage performance and job status. Analysis has shown there to be considerable variations in the meaning and priority that the participants assigned to the various aspects of their work.

Involvement in music, particularly for professional musicians begins at an early age. O'Neill (2002) states that once children and adolescents negotiate a sense of identity in relationship to music these conceptions appear to be resistant to change and disconfirmation. However, opera singers often come to the profession later in life either from other careers or from instrumental backgrounds. Some opera singers even enter the profession with no formal musical education. Sandgren (2005) found, in a study of opera students, that they reported having singing, choral or instrumental experience from their mid to late teens but that these experiences were insufficient to lead directly to pursuing an operatic career. None of the singers in this study had specialist operatic training. They gained experience and skills by actually working in the profession. Whereas a professional violinist might identify himself as such from a very early age, self-identification as an opera singer starts much later. Andy and Hugh became opera singers only through the medium of work. This suggests that identity formation for opera singers could be thought of as something that evolves as a sequence of events through a working life, rather than something that is possessed.

Baumeister (1986) views identity as an experience. He defines experience as an event or collection of events with a unity of meaning. That experience is not necessarily a momentary event but events that are spread over a period of time and linked together with unity of meaning. Thus, being an opera singer is the result of a process that can span many years.

Sandgren (2005) found that this process involved changes in competence and self concept which implied a transformation of social skills. When students entered operatic training they viewed themselves as *'talented opera students'* and when they left could ascribe to the role of *'promising professional opera singer'*. Presumably change in self-concept would continue with professional experience as singers find themselves either in the role of a chorister or a soloist.

Baumeister (1986) further concludes that if an experience is spread over time and the self is derived from these experiences, then the self also begins to have unity across time thereby establishing continuity of identity. He states that this continuity is most under threat when involvement with established experiences change abruptly.

'Self', for the participants, has been established through many years of work in the public eye and it seems that self-formation relies to a large extent on the perception and

evaluation of others, both within the profession and the general public. The relationship between self and voice can be a means to regulate the self internally, away from the public domain. Research into adolescent singers by Monks (2003) showed that vocal identity revealed a close relationship with their sense of self and that the singers were more concerned with vocal development than public acknowledgement. Given the amount of physical and emotional upheaval in this stage of life, these findings highlight the amount of influence that the human vocal instrument can have on self knowledge. However, unlike the singers in the study by Monks (2003) the participants of this present study were all very concerned with public acknowledgement for themselves and their voices. For professional singers, vocal abilities become a means of self-assessment and assessment by others. Sandgren (2005) points out how the opera singers in her study felt exposed to negative judgments from an audience. In a similar way Moira views any vocal criticism to be a criticism of the self and when Helen was made redundant the impact on her 'sense of self' was so great that she effectively lost her vocal identity. Kenny, Davies and Oats (2004) studied performance anxiety for a group of opera choristers and concluded that they needed to develop a greater reservoir of personal resources because they live in an environment of constant social evaluation. It would appear that the relationship between self and voice becomes more vulnerable as the need for constant evaluation through professional work increases. Redundancy is likely to heighten this vulnerability.

Also discussed was the influence of acting and stage performance on self-identity. Pitts (2000) studied a group of amateur singers who performed Gilbert and Sullivan operas. She reported that performing gave the singers a chance to be something they were not. It provided them with attention and admiration and they felt that through performing they were valued differently within society than they were as ordinary people. Apart from Andy, this was also true for the participants of this study, but although most enjoyed the attention that they received and expected from the general public, conflicts were created if they felt this attention was given for the wrong reasons. For example, Moira was shocked when she was accused of being shallow, Fiona was afraid she might be considered unusual in a non-operatic community and Andy wanted recognition for his musical abilities rather than his stage performance.

There appears to be a certain amount of identity confusion between how the singers would like to be thought of and how they perceive themselves to be thought of. It is possible that these complexities were not apparent to the participants in the environment of full-time work. Fouad and Bynner (2008) state that work is able to provide a continuity of life-style and an assurance that when a particular identity is established it can remain in the same form for as long as the individual chooses. Redundancy came as an unexpected, un-prepared for life change, which inevitably led the participants to question their established sense of self.

There is very little available research that has investigated career disruption for musicians. For this reason it is useful to examine literature pertaining to sport psychology where identity has been researched extensively with regard to career transition. Athletes like singers are elite performers and both

professions require dedication and personal investment to attain elite status. Warriner and Lavalley (2008) point to the relevance of identity in discussing career transition. They state that the impact of transition is moderated by its effect on the individual's assumption about the self. Thus for Andy, redundancy was possibly a release from the need to perform but loss of work impacted on his involvement in music as well as his ability to support a family.

The degree to which an athlete identifies with the athletic role is also seen to be a moderating factor in transition. Sinclair and Orlick (1993) and (Taylor 2005) found athletic identity to be positively correlated to the amount of distress and social adjustment involved in change. In other words, the amount of salience to a role-identity determines the amount of adjustment needed during change. Beth identified strongly with the role of opera singer to the extent that she still thinks as an opera singer ten years after being made redundant. Similarly Helen is experiencing difficulties adjusting to a new identity without singing, possibly due to a high investment in her singer's identity and strong corporate loyalty. While transition can cause considerable stress (Werthner and Orlick, 1996, Blinde and Stratta 1992), it can also be a positive process, which allows athletes to develop areas of the self previously neglected (Sinclair and Orlick 1993). For example, Fiona is now able to consider herself as being 'more than just an opera singer'. Margaret is planning to start her own business in addition to freelance singing.

However, while it is useful to make certain comparisons between sport and singing there are also major differences. Career transition in professional sport, is usually caused by an inability to work as a result of injury or age whereas for the participants in this study, it was possible to look for professional singing work elsewhere. However, only three singers did this. It is possible that the other singers felt unable to adapt to the diminished status that freelance workers have in a professional opera company. Furthermore, when athletes retire they usually have time and professional help to consider their options. Perna, Ahlgren and Zaichowsky (1999) found that retirement from sport need not always be stressful, particularly if the athletes already had a new occupational goal. Redundancy gave little time for the participants of this study to give full consideration to alternative possibilities particularly as they were occupied with fighting the redundancies.

This study has shown that 'being an opera singer' is a highly individual process with each singer prioritising different aspects of the work. This is reflected in the differing reactions to the changes brought about by redundancy and the changes in assumptions about themselves. Schlossberg (1981) states:

'Ease of adaptation to a transition depends on one's perceived and/or actual balance of resources to deficits in terms of the transition itself, the pre-post environment and the individual's sense of competency, well-being and health.'

Although Schlossberg acknowledges that transition can have a general pattern, the above quotation goes some way to explain the individual differences that are apparent in transition. The idiographic approach taken in this study has 'given a voice' to these individual differences. The small sample size has permitted a more in depth account of individual

experiences rather than making general assumptions. In addition, it has been possible to acknowledge the influence that self-definition has on identity formation and identity salience (Callero 1985).

However, a number of limitations to this study should also be addressed. Firstly the participants were at different stages of the redundancy process. Future research could benefit from a longitudinal study to follow singers through the transition process. Secondly some gender issues were raised in the analysis and a more equally balanced male/ female ratio might have provided further data. Finally, although I felt that in my own capacity as working opera singer and researcher I was able to obtain rich data, interpretation of that data is inevitably based upon my personal experience and knowledge. This said, analysis has also been scrutinised by the co-authors of this paper. Nevertheless, analysis of the data should only be thought of as one possible interpretation.

CONCLUSION

This study has highlighted the complexities and vulnerability of identity formation for singers who constantly live in a world of professional and social evaluation. It has also highlighted the individual nature of adaptation to change of social and professional status. However, identity formation is only one aspect of the complex process of change. Further work will look at issues of control, loss and bereavement in order to provide a wider context for the study of singers and enforced vocational change.

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