

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation:                   TRANSCENDING *FACH*: A SEARCH FOR  
IDENTITY INSIDE AND OUT OF  
MEZZO-SOPRANO REPERTOIRE

Seung-Hee Han, Doctor of Musical Arts, 2006

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The German *Fach* system is a tool to classify voices in classical singing. This dissertation comprises three different programs that reflect my search for identity as a mezzo-soprano and my desire to transcend the limitations of *Fach*. The three programs, all presented at The Clarice Performing Arts Center, contain repertoire written for male and female voices thus allowing me to explore areas outside of the mezzo-soprano *Fach*, gain a better understanding of the *Fach* system and guide me as I strive to become a more mature performer.

In my first program, I sang the role of Sesto, a role that was composed originally for a castrato, in the opera *La Clemenza di Tito* by W.A. Mozart. The Maryland Opera Studio production took place April 30, May 2, 4&6, 2003. Performing this gender-bending role provided an experience of physical behavior from the male view point along with the demands of coloratura singing.

Program two (November 30, 2004) contained the song cycle *Dichterliebe* by Robert Schumann and songs by Ludwig van Beethoven, Franz Schubert and Felix Mendelssohn, which are usually sung by male voices. This program experimented with extended range, tessitura and a gender-bending performance in the art song arena.

In program three (April 21&23, 2005), I sang the contralto role of Cornelia from *Giulio Cesare in Egitto* by George Frederic Handel. The role of Cornelia is psychologically complex, expressing emotions such as love, melancholy, rage, malice, joy and fear. To convey these emotions a voice needs warmth and darkness of quality. Although the range is close to that of the mezzo-soprano, Handel wrote Cornelia for contralto voice because he wanted a dark timbre and this role allowed me to develop my lower register and manage suitable ornamentations.

The programs are documented in a digital format available on compact disc and are accompanied by the oral presentation at the defense of this dissertation.

TRANSCENDING THE FACH: A SEARCH FOR IDENTITY  
INSIDE AND OUT OF MEZZO-SOPRANO REPERTORIE.

By

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## Table of Contents

### Chapter 1

- 1.1 *La Clemenza di Tito* Part I CD 1  
1.2 *La Clemenza di Tito* Part II CD 2

### Chapter 2

Works by Schumann, Beethoven, Schubert, Mendelssohn CD3

- Track 1: An die Geliebte Ludwig van Beethoven  
Track 2: Ariette (Der Kuß)  
Track 3: Adelaide  
Track 4: An die Entfernte Franz Schubert  
Track 5: Der Doppelgänger  
Track 6: Ganymed  
Track 7: Minnelied Felix Mendelssohn  
Track 8: Nachtlid  
Track 9: Neue Liebe  
Track 10-25: *Dichterliebe* Robert Schumann

### Chapter 3

- 3.1 *Giulio Cesare in Egitto* Part I CD 4  
3.2 *Giulio Cesare in Egitto* Part II CD 5  
3.3 *Giulio Cesare in Egitto* Part III CD 6

### Chapter 4

Written Document of Oral Presentation at the Defense of this Dissertation

## Transcending the *Fach*: A Search for Identity Inside and Out of Mezzo-Soprano Repertoire

The German *Fach* system has been a very convenient tool in classifying voices for classical singers. Because each voice has different stages of maturity, it is not easy to categorize it especially at an early age. These three dissertation projects gave me an opportunity to experiment with my own *Fach* and gave me a better understanding of the *Fach* system. Through this short presentation, I will share my experience with the *Fach* system and other matters which are involved in creating a satisfying performance.

In classifying voices, the *Fach* system considers range, weight, color and tessitura as well as physical appearance. The system is primarily used in Europe, especially in German speaking countries, where it helps the many repertory opera houses in casting roles and planning for future seasons.

In general, the voice types of classical singers are classified in three groups for both female and male voices. Soprano, mezzo-soprano and alto for female voices. Tenor, baritone and bass for male voices. Each classification has subcategories such as lyric, coloratura and dramatic. The types of mezzo-soprano voices are also subdivided to a lyric, coloratura and dramatic. Lyric mezzo-sopranos have warmth and richness in their voices and a well developed top register. The color of the voices are rather bright; some lyric mezzos sound almost like a soprano. The voices of Frederica von Stade and Anne Sofie von Otter are good examples of this voice type. Coloratura mezzos have almost the same quality as lyric mezzos but they have more flexibility in their voices. Cecilia Bartoli is very well known for this voice type. Dramatic mezzos have a darker color than lyric or coloratura mezzos. They have some kind of metallic sound in their voices which helps to express a dramatic intensity. Dolora Zajick and Christa Ludwig are good examples of this voice type.

A mezzo-soprano, meaning “half soprano” in Italian is a female singer with a range usually extending from A below middle C to two octaves above A (A3-A5, Middle C=C4) with an extension to high C in many roles. Mezzo-sopranos generally have a darker and richer vocal tone than sopranos and their voice type sits between the soprano and the contralto.

Mezzo-Sopranos sing major roles and secondary roles in operas. A common expression for mezzo-soprano roles is “Witches, Bitches and Boys.” which summarizes their function in opera. Singers and roles are often classified according to vocal range but a limited range within a category could be a disadvantage to a performer. Some female singers have a range that encompasses both soprano and mezzo repertory. Can an extensive range be a determinant to categorize a voice?

In my opinion, range is not a primary element to categorize a voice, because the voice changes gradually, rarely reaching vocal maturity until the third decade and sometimes later. Also, vocal range can be extended by appropriate vocal training. Young singers who are still developing their skills can be having problems with a temporarily short top or a lack of energy and breath control. All of these problems can limit range and can mislead one in placing a voice in a certain *Fach*. Therefore, to determine *Fach* by range only can be unreliable.

How about quality and tessitura of the voice? In my opinion, quality is a more significant element in categorizing a voice. Richard Miller, a very well known voice teacher states an incident in his book *The Structure of Singing*: “Caruso sang Colline’s aria from the opera *La Bohème* during an onstage performance. The incident is remarkable not because Caruso had such a strong low voice that he could sing bass arias, but because his unique timbre provided him to do so with such good result that some members of the audience assumed his bass colleague was actually singing.”

Singing repertory which is out of my *Fach*, as Caruso did, was my second project. This recital was filled with songs normally sung by male singers. Among the songs, Robert Schumann's famous song cycle *Dichterliebe* was the biggest challenge for me. The poems in this song cycle are by German poet Heinrich Heine (1797-1856). Schumann selected 16 of the 66 poems from "*Lyriches Intermezzo*" in "*Buch der Lieder*". Heine's poems often deal with unhappy and unrequited love. *Dichterliebe* was not an exception. Some literary critics and biographers have tried to prove that his early poems were a reaction against a relation with his cousin Amalie, but this theory has not been proved. Some other scholars assert that Heine's poems reflected his relation to the world and the society. But these theories are all assumptions. In my opinion, however, Heine's expressions in his poetry indeed came from his sad love affair and the world which at once repulsed and attracted him.

*Dichterliebe* contains a variety of emotions, complex and conflicting. Once, the poet was joyfully in love and he portrayed his lover as a girl who has a beautiful body as well as a soul. When the girl left him and married another man, the beloved's choice of another man becomes a main source of the poet's mood. Because the story is told in first person (the poet's), it has been naturally sung by a male singer. Actually, according to the article by Christopher Howell from the online resource [www.divine-art.com](http://www.divine-art.com) there is an allegation that *Dichterliebe* was composed for a dramatic soprano but it seems disregarded because of insufficient historical evidence.

The tessitura in *Dichterliebe* sits in the middle octave for most of the time, apart from the optional A in "Ich grolle nicht" and goes no higher than G. I presume that Schumann tried to give the singer a "comfortable tessitura" so the text could be better communicated to the audience. As a mezzo-soprano, to perform this song cycle, the range was not the biggest challenge but rather the tessitura.

I was afraid of breaking its originality, by transposing down some of the



songs so I sang it in all the original keys. As a result, it required an enormous amount of energy and breathe management. It was hard for me to sustain that much energy through the entire cycle. Although the range did not stop me in experiencing this new repertory, the tessitura of this song cycle lead me to think that it is a more significant element in determining *Fach*.

I already made a statement previously that the quality of a voice is a very important element in classifying voices. Vocal quality includes the color and the timbre. Many adjectives, such as dark, warm, dramatic, heavy, light, bright etc, are used to express the color of a voice. Timbre is a little more complicated to explain. It is the combination of qualities of sound that distinguish it from other sounds. Because of this distinguishable quality (timbre) of each voice, even though a voice has an amazing top register, we can not rashly categorize that voice as a soprano or a tenor. Therefore, the color and timbre of a voice is an influential element in classifying a voice type. In performing *Dichterliebe*, it is hard to discuss whether the color and timbre of my voice was appropriate or not. As I mentioned before, this cycle is usually sung by a male. To make a judgment on the appropriate quality of voice between different genders is an obscure matter to discuss. But we can certainly talk about performance quality.

In today's world, the population of female singers performing major song cycles which deal with men's feelings and lives is gradually increasing. Barbara Bonny, the American soprano, recently recorded a new album called "While I Dream". This album contains *Dichterliebe*. She has also performed this song cycle in Carnegie Hall. In his article in the New York Chronicle, Jay Nordlinger states "*Dichterliebe* requires everything a singer has, including great mental discipline and imagination. Bonny has clearly thought deeply about these songs, yet she presents them naturally." Christa Ludwig and Brigitte Fassbaender have recorded "*Winterreise*" to great

acclaim by critics and music lovers alike. Jill Sharff wrote her thought on this subject in the *New York Times* (November 18, 1990). She said “Brigitte Fassbaender’s and Christa Ludwig’s renditions are on a far higher interpretive level than any of the non-native-German-speaking males I have ever heard. There are so few good *lieder* singers around today that we should rejoice when superior exponents of the art of the *lied* have the good sense to help save it from extinction by venturing into repertory that convention decided was not for them.” But there is an opposite opinion. Some critics and audiences are concerned that these kind of cross over performance causes a loss of authenticity. Matthew Gurewitsch (senior editor of *Connoisseur Magazine*) wrote an article in the *New York Times* (October 28, 1990) about this cross over performance specifically on *Winterreise*, “The presence of woman in place of a man is patent artifice—an artifice the conventions of the concert stage generally do not oppose. But in these songs, not a phrase may be placed in quotes. They must be real.” Despite these negative views on cross over repertory performances, it is still happening in the art song arena. It seems that female singers are more actively exploring male repertory than vice versa.

In my opinion, the most important thing which has to be considered in cross over repertory performances, is disguising oneself as the person who the poet uses as narrator. To use “**Impersonation**” for expressing different emotions and moods is more important than whether the piece is for a male or female singer. Poets use impersonation in their poems very frequently. For example, Chamisso wrote the poems for the song cycle *Frauenlieben und Leben*, which is a very well known song cycle for female singers. This male poet wrote poems which express a woman’s life and love. That indicates that the poet impersonated a woman and created these beautiful poems. Then, why can’t female singers perform male repertoire? However, this new experiment of cross over repertory in the art song arena seems to be

welcomed by many audiences and will probably continue.

The history of gender-bending performances in opera is a longer one than in art song. Until the late eighteenth, early nineteenth century, only men were allowed to perform in public. This and the love of the powerful male soprano voice caused the birth of the castrato in Italy. The castrato started as a church singer taking the place of the higher voice part as women were forbidden to sing in the church from the twelfth century onward. Although the church did not condone the practice, it certainly benefited by it. If the Church was the main sponsor of castrati never admitting to it, opera was the main provider for their glittering career.

It was pure coincidence that castrati became a feature of the religious world at the very time that opera was coming into existence. In the Papal States, where women were not allowed to appear on stage at all, castrati were a necessity to produce operas. They were loved as prima donnas and prima uomos in *opera seria*. The peak of castrati, as well as *opera seria*, was the first half of the eighteenth century. The second half of the century was less glorious because of the appearance of *opera comique*. From about 1730, *opera seria* had to compete with *opera buffa*. The popularity of comic opera was rapidly increasing. Audiences felt that it was more realistic, less artificial and less demanding. This increasing popularity of comic opera caused the decline in popularity of castrati because castrati were well known for portraying noble and heroic characters and were not used in comic opera. As a result, lower female voices began to take over the castrati parts in opera. Finally, in 1902, Pope Leo XIII proclaimed a decree which prohibited the use of castrati in church music forever. Since then, real castrati have disappeared from the music performance world, the last one died in 1922.

Lower female voices were chosen for the youth or boy roles to replace castrati as they could better express the youth of the characters. Most of the roles that

castrati sang in operas were either young boys or heroic young men. Therefore, female voices were preferred in these roles to mature male voices. Also, physically it was often more believable when female singers disguised themselves as young boys. Sesto from *La Clemenza di Tito* by W.A.Mozart is a good example of a role which was originally composed for a castrato and later taken over by a mezzo-soprano. The opera *La Clemenza di Tito* was composed for the coronation of Emperor Leopold II as King of Bohemia. It was first performed in Prague on September 6, 1791 just few months before Mozart's death.

*La Clemenza di Tito* contains only one trouser role, Annio. Annio was first performed by the soprano Carolina Perini and the role of Sesto was first performed by the castrato Domenico Bedini. In early nineteenth century in Germany, Austria and Bohemia the role of Sesto was beginning to be performed by female singers. At that time, some critics and audiences objected to Sesto being sung by a female, because the heroic noble young man sung by a woman looked so unrealistic and unnatural. Also, musically, the mezzo voice as opposed to the castrato voice caused an unbalance in the ensemble pieces. I strongly believe that lower female voices have the closest similarities of range and quality to castrati voices. That is why lower female voices have been chosen to take over castrati parts over the years and audiences have become accustomed to this practice. To sing this gender-bending role of Sesto, it required an appropriate physical behavior as well as mental preparation. To stay in character, I had to keep reminding myself that I was a role, so I could avoid behaving like a woman. Musically, the range and tessitura was very comfortable, but to find suitable phrasing took a lot of practice. Singing clear coloratura passage was a big challenge because of the weight of my voice. However, this opera gave me a variety of experiences both musically and dramatically.

Having various experiments in the *Fach* system through my dissertation

project, the role of Cornelia from *Giulio Cesare* was another valuable study to explore the range, tessitura and quality of my voice. The role of Cornelia was composed for a contralto which was my only true female role and ironically the lowest among the programs on my dissertation project.

The opera *Giulio Cesare* was composed in 1724. Handel composed this opera for the Royal Academy of Music. Italian opera started to make an impact on the public in London around 1705 and Handel first began to compose Italian opera in 1707. This opera is known as one of Handel's very best operas. The libretto for this opera was adapted from rendition of a story from the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries by Nicola Francesco Haym.

The plot of the opera is very straightforward. Simply, Cleopatra and other characters, including Cornelia, are saved from Cleopatra's evil brother Ptolemy by Caesar. In spite of this simple plot, I found the role of Cornelia to be psychologically complex. The emotions that this role employs are love, melancholy, rage, malice, joy and fear. In my opinion, the reason Handel chose a contralto to sing Cornelia is that the darker and warmer color of this voice type can easily convey these emotions. Rather than using elaborate tunes, Handel used various rhythms to express Cornelia's emotions. The range sits in the lower portion of the staff most of the time and it put me under the pressure of producing sufficient volume to penetrate the orchestra. Developing the lower register of my voice was equally as hard as developing the upper register. Choosing suitable ornamentation for my voice for the *da capo* section freed me from staying in the lower part of my register exclusively but it was a long term procedure. If Handel really wanted to have the true quality of the contralto voice for Cornelia, I believe that I was not the one to sing the part. But it was a valuable study to examine the capabilities of my lower voice.

As a result of experimenting with three different repertoires, I reckon that my voice showed the best quality when I sang middle and upper registers but staying in the upper register a lot of times was not comfortable. Also singing the lower register exclusively gave me the pressure of producing the right amount of volume as well as good breath control. In addition to that, singing a clear coloratura passage was a challenge because of the weight of my voice. All of these reasons lead me to the conclusion that I am not a soprano or a contralto but that I have the potential to be a lyric, full lyric or dramatic mezzo and gave me an idea that tessitura and other qualities of my voice such as timbre and weight can be more significant elements to determine my *Fach*.

In this modern world, *Fach* might just become a matter of semantics but it cannot be totally ignored. There are many elements such as timbre, tessitura, range and color etc. which determine *Fach*. It is hard to say what the most effective elements are to categorize a voice. Each element should be examined before classifying a voice and one cannot totally lean on only one element. It could be a disadvantage to young singers to pigeonhole their voices too soon but I think that it is important to know the potential of each voice. Through this adventurous journey I have experienced the diversity of dramatic personalities that each role requires. Also this journey has provided me an exciting musical exploration of my range, tessitura and quality. The journey to find an answer for *Fach* may have no end but it has indeed filled me with new ideas about the *Fach* system and new concepts on how to approach various repertoires.

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