Expanding the Expressive Palette:

Performing the Voice Music of Viardot on the Clarinet

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Introduction

Can the clarinet play with a singing quality by studying vocal repertoire and technique?

This was the central research question addressed in our ORSP-sponsored, UWEC Student-Faculty Research Project that we considered through the study of repertoire and historical context of *Bel Canto* music written by French composer Pauline Viardot. Through the study of vocal techniques and three vocal works by Viardot, I experienced new avenues for thinking about the music to enhance expressive performance.

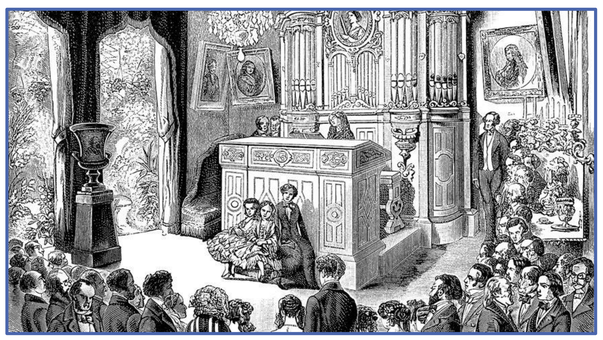
Background Research

- Pauline Viardot was an accomplished teacher, composer, and performer in her lifetime. She was selected for this project because she is an undervalued and under-studied female composer who greatly furthered the development of *bel canto* music.
- *Bel canto ('beautiful singing')* style: highlights virtuosic singing, connection of ranges, blended tone, text-driven phrasing, all of which can be helpful to understand when developing expressive playing.

Pauline Viardot (1821-1910)

Materials

- Instrumental set-up (clarinet, piano, reeds, ligature, etc.)
- Flat online music notation software
- Professional sound recorder



A drawing of Viardot's salon in France – this is where many composers and musicians gathered to perform new works in the 19th century.

Methods

1) **Selected Pieces:** *L'innamorata, Povera Me,* and *Fleur Desséchée* were the three Viardot pieces selected for the research. Each had different characters and vocal challenges to learn from.
2) **Learned Trial Piece:** I practiced singing and playing 'Amazing Grace' to get an idea of what the research process would be like. After this, I identified challenges and observations I had about the singing-to-playing process. Notably, using the text to phrase was tricky and enlightening.
3) **Transposed Pieces:** I transposed the songs we selected for clarinet by hand onto staff paper and then with notation software.
4) **Learned Vocal Diction and Vocal Considerations for Each Piece:** I met with Dr. Ken Pereira, a member of the UWEC voice faculty, to learn French and Italian diction for the songs. This was the basis for playing technique, articulation, and expressive approach to the songs.
5) **Applied Vocal Considerations of the Pieces:** I learned the pieces on the clarinet with newly-learned voice considerations in mind. Through this process, I spoke and learned to feel the text with the music, learned the tune on a neutral syllable, and then added depth, phrase nuance, and expression.
6) **Applied Advanced Score Study:** I listened to representative recordings of the pieces and noted similarities and differences between them to inspire my performance.
7) **Summarized research into program notes and recital program.** (See below)
8) **Rehearsed with Pianist:** Worked with local pianist Shawn Muench to rehearse the pieces to complete interpretations and prepare for recital performance.
9) **Recital Performance:** Performed the three pieces in a formal recital .
10) **Reviewed the Performance and added observations to the created performance guide:** The performance guide includes scores of the pieces with the added transposed clarinet part, translations of text for the pieces, interpretation suggestions for translation to clarinet from voice, and program notes.

Conclusions

- **How a singer pronounces a word directly affects how they treat the note it correlates to.** The same thing can be applied on the clarinet. When performing these pieces, I considered the diction of any given word and what kind of articulation would match. Thinking this way and mimicking a singer revealed an array of new articulation styles on the clarinet.
- **Matching color and nuance to that of a singer requires special attention to be given to the phrasing singers use.** Phrases are sometimes shaped by dramatic breaths and lead more to notes in the high register because of the greater amount of air support needed to produce those notes. To play with a singing quality on the clarinet, it's important to implement both of these ideas into one's playing.
- **Embodying a character while performing was paramount to the interpretation and performance of the pieces.** The point of performing music is to convey something to your audience--a feeling, a story--this is so effective when portraying a character with a defined set of emotions and traits. Singers have text to work with, so they have an assigned character already, but for a clarinetist, it's important to imagine what your music could be portraying. This plays a huge part in playing expressively.

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Micaela Huesemann and Alyssa Powell on performance day.

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