*The text of the paper given by Alan Williams and Philip Tipton at the Grim Up North: Northern Identities Network Conference September 2017*

**Operatic Voices from the North: culture, identity and linguistics at the crossroads.**

This paper describes the context to, and methods adopted by composer Alan Edward Williams and sociolinguist Phillip Tipton in the development of an operatic technique in which a Northern English accent is audible. The work, which took place between 2013 and 2017, resulted in a two act opera, The Arsonists, which was premiered as part of the BBC Philharmonic’s Red Brick Sessions in November 2017 in Salford, and received widespread media coverage, because the singers are directed to be sung “in a south Yorkshire accent”.

People often think of opera as being mainly sung in Italian, hence the cod-Italian of the “opera singer Gio Compario” on the “Go Compare” adverts. Although this caricature of an opera singer sings in English, he (that is, the operatic tenor Wynne Evans) adopts an accent mimicking an Italian singing in Italian-accented English: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4_W9rIPAkdY>

But most new operas premiered in the UK and the US are in English, and there is also a long tradition of singing operas in English translation. Critic, musicologist and translator Edward J. Dent in 1934 dismissed the common belief that English “is an unmusical language”, by stating “it is perfectly possible to sing English with the correct pronunciation”. In 1934 the worlds of theatre, broadcasting and opera were united in the belief that ‘correct’ meant Received Pronunciation, but whereas within a few years , non-RP regional accents would become commonplace in theatre and broadcasting, opera in English in the UK has continued to use RP almost exclusively up to the present day.

When Alan Williams began to discuss with Ian McMillan the idea of an opera, there was no intention to court controversy. Nevertheless the issue of sung accent immediately became salient, as Ian’s own performance of his verse is indivisible from his voice – beloved of BBC Radio 3 listeners – and his Barnsley accent. The characters he intended to present on the operatic stage were those who, for the most part, would speak with his own accent, and to represent them on stage speaking the operatic version of RP would have seemed like a parody, the opposite of what was intended. Opera, with its strong associations of class and privilege, is often described as an ‘elitist’ artform, a prejudice which opera companies continually strive to overcome. Our contention was that the uncritical adoption of an accent in performance which - in the UK, at least - is associated with power and privilege is one of the contributing factors to that prejudice.

Thus the questions the creative team were attempting to solve were partly practical ones: what techniques should an opera singer adopt to project an audibly ‘Northern’ accent through the operatic voice, when their training has favoured a normative RP accent? But we were also interested in asking if through the process, the accent could become invisible or unmarked, in the way a television drama set in the North is unmarked to speakers of northern English, and becomes unmarked rapidly to a non-Northern audience once the characters are established.

 Although it is obviously by no means the case that northern English is spoken only by people identified as working class, the strong association between certain varieties of northern English (in our case, South Yorkshire) and working class identity means that the project may be viewed as something of a comic juxtaposition of opera’s high-art, elitist image, and working class post-industrial Northern image. The hope of the creative team is, nonetheless, that audiences might come to mock and stay to pray – in other words, that the initial shock which might generate a comic response would quickly fade as the characters began to emerge and the story to unfold.

The voice in musical performance is, of course, central to the communication of artistic intent in sung media. In this it has much in common with other forms of creative practice, not least the theatre, in which the authenticity of the voice is central to the performative intent of the actor. Facility in the production of various, geographically-disparate accents is seen as a skill which enhances the employability of actors, yet the same cannot be said of opera singers whose facility in authentic pronunciation is valued as just one part of their engagement with the rich pedagogy of singing. In his review of ‘historical landmarks’ of singing voice pedagogy, Hoch (2018: 3) talks of the ubiquity of *bel canto* approaches to singing pedagogy. Its ubiquity, however, belies a great deal of variation in its use and, more broadly, how it is understood within pedagogical traditions and classical singing generally. The extent to which a departure from the pedagogical norms of singing was required to effect an authentic representation of the voice of the author only became apparent to the project’s linguist during the initial workshopping stages of what became *The Arsonists*.

Although accent variability arises from the whole spectrum of the phonological system, it has often been in vocalic variation in which the majority of distinguishing accent features have been found (ref.). Honorof (2003) provides a comprehensive review of approaches to the issues arising from his practice in dialect coaching, specifically the role of speech gestures and *lexcial* *sets* (Wells 1982) in facilitating the acquisition of an accent unfamiliar to the actor. Critically, he cites the latter half of the approach (2003: 106) as a form of ‘analytical preparation’ which is sold to the actor as a way of preparing the ground for when she is required to speak extemporaneously; in essence an appeal to the actor in order to convince her that the linguistic work will lead to a greater ability to focus on the nuance of performance, rather than an excessive concern with accent authenticity as the expense of the wider demands of the role. Applying a linguistic-analytical approach to classical singing was always going to be a challenge. In the following sections, we outline our application of Honorof’s approach to the novel situation that arose out of the need for the libretto of *The Arsonists* to not only *be* northern English (specifically, south Yorkshire) in linguistic terms but *be perceived* to be so by the audience. As will be outlined below, this necessitated recourse to the insights of both Labovian variationist sociolinguistics (1966; 1972; 2001; 2010) and sociophonetics (Foulkes & Docherty: 2006).

**REGIONAL ACCENTS AND DIALECTS IN SINGING**

The near-exclusive use of “prestige dialects” in opera can be seen as a direct consequence of its aristocratic origins. Opera originated in the aristocratic courts of Northern Italy, and was a lavish demonstration of economic, as well as cultural power (Bianconi 1984). As the nobility in Italy gradually adopted the literary dialect of Tuscany (the idiom of Dante and Petrarch) from 1500, it was a logical consequence that opera would too. There were exceptions: Castelli’s libretto to Cecchini’s 1635 *Primavera urbana* had scenes in Fiorentina dialect (Murata 1995), but generally it is not until the development of 18th century Neapolitan *opera buffa* that regional dialect is commonly heard on the opera stage. Naddeo describes a complex relationship between social class, regionalism and comedy in opera buffa: “[opera and] literature in the local language of the city of Naples was intended not only for the intellectual elite, but also for the ruling patrician class, which apparently delighted in the language and exploits of its plebeian subjects.” Thereafter, where it occurs, the projection of a regional accent is usually done for comic effect, or to emphasise class differences, or both – so that, for example, the comic character Baron Ochs in Strauss’ *Der Rosencavalier* is represented with a lower-Austrian accent as a ’provincial’ figure, and in English translation was played by Lancastrian John Tomlinson with “Northern vowel sounds” in ENO’s 2012 production. Similarly, in Opera North’s 1992 production of Chabrier’s *L’Etoile*, Pamela Helen Stephen interjected “volleys of insults in a sawtoothed Glaswegian accent…” in order to “point up the class distinction between the two lovers” (Nichols, 1992).

Where one might expect regional or non-standard dialect to occur – in Italian 19th century *verismo* in opera – it barely features, notwithstanding Arman Schwartz’s note that Puccini was concerned with the authenticity of Roman accent in Tosca (Schwartz 2008). It seems one is safe to conclude that in opera, where characters are meant to be taken seriously – as in the majority of *verismo* operas – a regional dialect or working class accent would not do.

English language opera’s normative assumption of RP as “standard” is enshrined in opera singers’ training, leading to prescriptive statements that seem anachronistic – such as Amanda Johnston’s 2016 “in lyric diction, one strives to sing in the “high form” of each language”, uncritically listing English RP, Parisian French and Hochdeutsch as examples of this dubious concept. Richard Miller (1996) in *The Art of Singing*says that “Good singers [will] have already learned to eliminate regional speech habits from their singing.” The RP-centric view that dominates classical music singing can be seen in comments such as Lefranc Holford-Stephens (2003) “in Thomas Arne’s day ‘command’ rhymed with ‘land’” , he says– whereas of course for most of the UK, it still does. On the other hand, a few writers do recognize the hegemony of RP in singing and its association with social status: John Potter says, with reference to Elizabethan madrigals “if modern RP-speaking singers use their natural accent they perpetuate class coding in a way that has nothing to do with the song as it was originally conceived” (Potter, 120). The justification of the prescriptive use of RP, or “American standard” in the Unites States, is usually ascribed to the intelligibility of the “neutral” accent, so Kathryn Labouff (2007), describes RP as “the most easily accessible to the listening public”. She makes an effort not to grant RP special value: “This is not to imply that neutral pronunciation [i.e. RP] has any greater merit than any of the regional dialects. It is also a dialect, but one without any regionalisms.” Subsequently, Labouff gives an account of vowel alterations required to sing in specific regional accents (albeit relegated to an appendix), describing the activity as “a wonderful and worthwhile challenge”, but cautioning singers that “the basic shape for tone production should not change as you move from dialect to dialect – only the colour of the “gel” [i.e. by analogy with theatre lighting] changes.” She provides details of these changes to vowel sound and length, described using the International Phonetic Alphabet for accents which are, or may be required by the operatic and lyric repertoire. Significantly, no Northern English accent gets a mention.

Most of what is written about classical singing and varieties of diction falls in the pedagogic category – Labouff’s book is one of many which is full of exercises for the vocal student – and it is understandable that singers might be cautious about altering the vowel sounds of their singing. Vocal strain is a constant risk for singers who project unamplified over often large ensembles; techniques such as harnessing the resonance of upper partials (known in Italian as *squillo*, or “ring”) allow singers to be heard over the orchestra, and could be destabilised, leading to enforced rest, or even permanent damage through strain.

Pedagogic literature has been further confused by the use of terms such as “pure vowels” in a context discussing Italian vowels: see for example the *The Diction Police* podcast in which the authors give reasons “why we should sing pure Italianate vowels in every language”, (*The Diction Police,* Podcast 62, Sep 2012 <http://www.thedictionpolice.com/e/episode-62/>) The term “pure” has been used by some linguists to mean monophthongal, but this apparent valorization of the Italian language has led some singing pedagogues to conflate this “purity” with some imagined originary quality to Italian compared with other languages. Thus we have Richard Miller stating:

“It is possible to sing the many sounds of all Western languages with the same phonetic principles by which the Italian language can be managed.”

This statement could easily be taken to mean that the “7 vowels” of Italian are capable of being used exclusively in the pronunciation of all “Western” languages. This, combined with Miller’s remark quoted earlier about the elimination of regional speech habits, makes for an – at best - confusing attitude to the idea of ‘non-standard’ accents or dialects in classical singing.

By comparison, in the United States, the presence of non-standard regional accents in opera is much more developed. Scott McLeod’s 2012 DMA thesis “Creating the Southern Voice” refers to the “wealth of Southern opera repertoire” now in existence. While it is beyond the scope of this article to compare the socio-economic conditions of the North of England with the American South, for our purposes it is the accent’s non-standard status and its substantial presence in opera which is relevant. McLeod analyses mainly the way composers have represented “Southern-ness” through a variety of means, including speech rhythm and stylistic reference. The role of the singer in developing a southern accent is described using IPA transcription, and it is clear that this is partly a responsibility of the composer, and partly of the singer. For example, McLeod describes the performance of a line from Lee Hoiby’s *Summer and Smoke –* “but where is the ice cream man?”, set by the composer in the following way:



In this example, quoted from McLeod’s thesis, Hoiby leaves it to the discretion of the singers what to do with the accent, but there is room for the lengthened vowels of the Southern American accent, and the performer made use of the diphthong (/mɛːjən/) giving the last note in effect two syllables. As we will see, the team making *The Arsonists* came to see that the responsibility for the specific musical rhythm created by such regional variants lay as much with the composer as it did with the performer.

**ACCENT VARIATION IN POPULAR MUSIC**

As already discussed, as far as classical singing is concerned, it is within the pedagogic literature where we find the majority of the discussion surrounding the use of non-standard sounds in singing. Popular music of course, while subject to what might be said to be standardizing forces of its own (Simpson 1999), has reflected a much wider acceptance of both lyrical non-standardness (Squires *forthcoming*) from the perspective of standard language ideology (Milroy 2001) and, increasingly, accent variation (Beal 2009). In her discussion of the band *Arctic Monkeys*, Beal (2009: 223) uses the interviews given by members of the band to point to their explicit awareness of their use of local dialect features at the expense of what she terms ‘the mid-Atlantic of mainstream British pop music’ (*ibid.*: 223).

What, if anything, is being rejected in the *Arctic Monkeys’* rejection of mainstream diction practices in popular music performance? Adopting the language-ideological framework of, *inter alia*, Silverstein (1976), Beal (2009: 224) employs the notion of linguistic indexicality, whereby linguistic features and behaviour attain systematic symbolic impact, to posit the use of non-standard features as a manifestation of a rejection of the mainstream, in favour of a process of foregrounding authenticity of voice, place and identity. This approach has become increasingly common in variationist sociolinguistics in the Labovian tradition (1972; 2001; 2010), in which indexical relationships between linguistic variables and social categories are discovered in the systematic study of stratified speech communities and their language use.

Eckert (2012) provides a systematic review of the development of sociolinguistic variation studies in which she points to three distinct ‘waves’ of variationism, each of which foregrounds different elements of sociolinguistic endeavour. Two key themes which emerge from Eckert’s review of the discipline are i) the shift in understanding of the linguistic-indexical relationship of linguistic variables and ii) a paradigm shift in the role of the researcher/fieldwork in sociolinguistic work. These two issues lie at the crossroads of sociolinguistic theory and methodology. From the outset, sociolinguistic theory has developed in tandem with methodological possibilities. The ability of linguists to record high-quality samples of speech on portable, freely-available hardware has brought with it a huge increase in the ways in which fieldworkers are able to interact with their informants. As Eckert points out (2012: 90), early sociolinguists’ contact with their informants was often fleeting; informants were classified along well-established categorical strata, such as socio-economic class, gender, ethnicity and age and their linguistic behaviour correlated with these social attributes to provide a survey-like understanding of the relationship between linguistic variation and social fact. Much of this early work remains important in its description of hitherto unstudied vernacular varieties of English. Most work was carried out on urban linguistic varieties, thus providing a picture of the city and its environs as a site of linguistic contact, variation and identity negotiation. For the purposes of the current project, Labovian variationism provides us with a challenge; how to represent ‘northernness’ to an audience whose perception of its linguistic-indexical properties might themselves vary to a great extent.

 Am important trend in the discipline of socioliguistics which must be acknowledged is the shifting status of social meaning of linguistic variables, moving from peripheral importance in early Labovian studies to its current status as a central concern of so-called third wave studies. It is within the underlying theoretical assumptions of third wave studies that we find perhaps the most useful theoretical tool to understand potential audience responses to opera ‘in a northern accent’. Eckert (2012: 94) points out that Silverstein’s theory of indexical order (2003) is crucial to understanding what she terms the ‘mutability of indexical signs’. We can, therefore, start to think of ‘singing in a northern accent’ as a meta-pragmatic response to the indexical sign of northernness in which the rehearsal of performance and the input of the dialect consultant acknowledges the north as facet of the (British) popular cultural imagination. Producing an opera in northern dialect is in itself an indexical act which uses conventionalized icons of northernness to further embed the concept in the mind of the audience.

**Methods**

For the first phase of the project, we adopted an open-ended workshop based approach where the singers’ physiological experience of singing in an accent they had not been trained in would be at the centre of the approach. A series of five workshops were arranged with professional opera singers, the librettist Ian McMillan, sociolinguist Philip Tipton and composer Alan Williams. Prior to the workshops, Williams and McMillan had composed a song for baritone, written in standard English orthography with a few colloquialisms, and the first session was devoted to discussing the ways we might seek to develop a more Barnsley sounding voice in that song alone. Subsequent involvement came from Conrad Nelson, Artistic Director of Northern Broadsides Theatre Company, and Omar Ibrahim, a Doncaster-born classsical singer, who had sung the role of the Northern shepherd in the 1986 premiere of Harrison Birtwistle’s *Yan Tan Tethera*, the only known purpose-written ‘northern’ role in the operatic repertoire.

The first phase culminated in June 2015 with the presentation of work which had been developed collaboratively by Alan Williams and Ian McMillan in consultation with the singers (Zoe Milton Brown, soprano, Sarah Helsby Hughes, Soprano, Nick Sales (Tenor), Richard Strivens (baritone), Tom Eaglen (baritone) and Omar Ibrahim (baritone), with sociolinguist Philip Tipton, director Conrad Nelson (Williams 2018). In preparing for this ‘show of work’ Philip Tipton developed a role similar to that of accent coach in theatre.

Following on from the observations in regard which ‘northern-ness’ would be presented by the operatic voices, we quickly realized that singers required much greater specificity in the accent to be represented than could be expressed by the idea of a ‘northern’ accent. This self-evidently problematic concept was rejected in the first session in favour of making the poet’s own performing voice the model for the goal-accent, even when there were variants in the poet’s own pronunciation of certain words in certain contexts. The sociolinguist’s sensitivity to the markedness of particular vowel sounds suggested the use of the International Phonetic Alphabet as a reference point as IPA is used (with caution) by both singers and linguists. The texts sung by the singers in Ian McMillan’s ‘own’ Barnsley accent were recorded by the poet, and then transcribed by Philip Tipton into IPA. The reference point for the accent aimed at by the singers thus became these vocal recordings and their IPA transcriptions.

These methods, developed during the first phase, are now (in September 2017) being used in the rehearsal process for the second phase, the performance of a full length opera, *The Arsonists.*

**Techniques developed**

The techniques we developed can be summarised as follows. Examples are given in timecodes, and refer to the introductory video to the Northern Voices Opera Project.

Performing techniques:

* *Diphthongs*- whereas in conventional training the second part of the diphthong comes very late in the sung vowel, the singer Nick Sales brought it forward (2:39). In this text “That’s why”, conventionally, the first of the vowel pair in “Why” would be lengthened, and fairly dark, as in R.P. the second of the vowel pair would be tucked in just before the end of the note. In order to project a Yorkshire accent a brighter vowel is used on the first of the pair, and it is much shorter than in conventional diction.
* *Voiced Consonants*- unlike conventional training we lengthened the voiced consonant to allow for a short vowel on a long note. In the text “I would stand” the “a” in “stand” needs to be short, but this is set to a long note because of the sustained the nature of the music. The singer, Zoe Milton Brown, lengthens the voiced consonant “n” in order to allow the vowel to heard as short, but still to sing through the long note (1:26)
* Vowel Modification – this technique facilitates control in high notes, particularly in soprano voices. It obscures the specific quality of vowels in Yorkshire accented English, so we abandoned it, even where this resulted in an ‘ugly’ tone. In this example, tenor Nick Sales revels in a harsh, bright, unmodified vowel sound to reflect the Yorkshire accent of the librettist (1:40)

Composing techniques:

* The rhythm of the spoken voice, in particular short and long vowels, were reflected precisely in text setting, based on an audio recording of the poet’s speaking voice, as in Hungarian and Finnish settings:



* Setting material lower in range for the key vowels which identify the accent gave the singer more control over their accuracy.

 

**Summary of Findings**

* It is possible to project the operatic voice over a large ensemble in a Yorkshire accent
* Yorkshire is easier to sing than RP
* Accents in English are so distinct that they need to be localised to the speaking voice of the librettist
* The use of International Phonetic Alphabet transcription, combined with recordings of the poets’ own voice, and accent coaching enabled accents to be heard
* Relative length of vowel is as important as particular vowel quality
* It is the composer’s task as much as the performer’s to create the vocal impression of a particular accent in spoken and sung English.

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