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Zwischenfach: Paradox or Paradigm?

Elisabeth Harris

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ABSTRACT

Singers within the operatic world are expected to conform to the strict limits and dictates of the *Fachsystem.* Casting directors and opera companies prefer to be informed of which particular '*Fach*-box' you tick when auditioning and it is becoming increasingly important for career advancement and name recognition to remain within that box. Yet what happens when your voice does not operate strictly within the predetermined requirements of a particular box? Or if the vocal category you supposedly assume is already ambiguous and contentious? Jennifer Allen's DMA thesis, *An Analysis and Discussion of Zwischenfach Voices,* provides invaluable critical insight surrounding this enigmatic concept of voice categorisation. Allen argues that despite advances within vocal pedagogy, there remains a 'gray area' within the discussion. This elusiveness, to which Allen refers, pertains directly to the *Zwischenfach* voice type. Translated literally from German, the word *Zwischen* means 'between' and '*Fach'* refers specifically to vocal specialisation as a way of categorising singers according to the weight, range and colour of their voices. Thus, in its most basic form, a *Zwischenfach* voice denotes a voice that lies between the vocal categories of soprano and mezzo-soprano. However, whilst Dr Rudolf Kloiber's *Handbuch der Oper* (a staple for the operatic world) provides a definitive guide to vocal categorisation and continues to influence casting throughout Germany and Europe, the corresponding American *Boldrey Guide* acknowledges *Zwischenfach* as a voice that cannot be classified precisely in one particular *Fach* or another. This lack of uniform approach highlights not only the potential flexibility of this voice, but also the paradoxical nature of attempting to define a voice that defies standard classification. Indeed, as a young singer currently singing high mezzo-soprano repertoire, I have found the *Zwischenfach* labelling to be a paradox, for the upper extension of my voice also enables me

potentially to sing some soprano roles. Therefore, is it conceivable to postulate that this term is a misnomer and merely highlights the issues associated with being constrained within the *Fachsystem?*

In order to come to terms with these issues, then, my analysis of *Zwischenfach* labelling requires a separation of voice categorisation and the *Fachsystem* and an ongoing critique of these systems throughout my exegesis. In an attempt to determine its practicalities, the limits that it can impose, and how its boundaries have not always functioned so neatly, my critique focuses on elements such as convenience, marketability and professional development and life. An exploration of the relevance of aspects such as range, tessitura, *passaggi*, timbre, agility, physical characteristics, pitch of the speaking voice, and scientific tests is also necessary. Once a definition of *Zwischenfach* is established, I consider the "in between" nature of this vocal category as I investigate roles that develop out of this into the realm of the heavier, more dramatic voice. Finally, I explore the implications of switching between *Fächer* and divulge how I incorporate the contradictions within this category with the successful management of the label. The piecing together of existing scholarship surrounding this field of research and the practical application to my own expanding repertoire is invaluable in facilitating the expansion of my knowledge in regard to my own progression through *Zwischenfach* repertoire and roles.

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