



La voix humaine

and mental health

Poulenc's monodrama has seen a plethora of pandemic productions, but as **Sara Schabas** asks, at what cost to artists currently living out its themes of isolation and hopelessness?



← Clockwise from top L: France Bellemare in Opéra de Montréal's *La voix humaine*, 2020; Isaiah Bell in City Opera Vancouver's *The Human Voice*, 2021; Rachel Krehm in Toronto City Opera's *La voix humaine*, 2020

Over the past year, many of life's pleasures have faded into memory. Visits with family and friends, embraces, unmasked smiles from strangers, travel to new places, restaurant visits, and cultural and sporting entertainment have been replaced by Zoom calls and live streamed events. Opera audiences accustomed to delighting in the unamplified voice have been forced to consume the grandiose art form on a screen. New productions have had to adhere to strict protocols by hiring small casts, using little or no orchestra or chorus, and in some cases, implementing onstage physical distancing. During these times of isolation, one may have expected companies to comfort pandemic-weary audiences with familiar works like *La Bohème*, *The Magic Flute*, or *The Barber of Seville*. Yet in 2020, Francis Poulenc and Jean Cocteau's relatively obscure and emotionally fraught monodrama for solo soprano, *La voix humaine*, emerged as one of the world's most performed operas. In Canada alone, it was produced by Opéra de Montréal, City Opera Vancouver, Toronto City Opera, Opera in Concert and Vancouver Opera, while companies in the United States, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Holland, Russia, Spain, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom staged over thirty-three independent productions of the opera.



La voix humaine centres around a woman identified only as “Elle,” the French pronoun for “she,” as she speaks on the phone with her estranged lover, a last effort to connect with the man she loves. She tells of her near suicide the night before and becomes increasingly dejected, eventually tangling the telephone cord around her neck. The opera closes with the cord still around her neck as Elle reassures her lover: “Be tranquil. One does not commit suicide twice.”

Producing *La voix humaine* makes a lot of sense during a pandemic. With a single cast member, maintaining physical distancing is of no concern. Forty minutes long, the opera is roughly the length of a Netflix episode, and works well for the small screen. The domestic setting has particular relevance for any viewer sheltering at home. And for companies unable to bring an orchestra together, Poulenc’s score translates beautifully to piano.

Yet for all of the ways *La voix humaine* is suited to our times, presenting Poulenc and Cocteau’s meditation on heartbreak and suicide during the Covid-19 pandemic also raises questions regarding the effects of subject matter on both artists and audiences. Over the past year, alarming numbers of Canadians have reported erosions in their mental health as well as suicidal ideation, a “twin pandemic” also affecting the viability of many performing artists and arts workers. In times such as these, is presenting a work like *La voix humaine* the right choice for a community in crisis? What responsibilities do companies have when presenting repertoire that mirrors many peoples’ lived experiences?

For opera singers, exploring the full range of human emotions is part of the artistic process. We relish performing roles from the tragic to the comic, drawing on personal experiences to lend authenticity to our interpretations. The subject matter of a piece like *La voix humaine*, however, can prove triggering and exhausting, especially when a singer’s external circumstances reflect

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those being enacted onstage. Performers may need support in order to psychologically manage the burden of playing such roles.

Dr. Chase McMurren, psychotherapist and medical director at University Health Network’s Al & Malka Green Artists’ Health Centre in Toronto, reflected on these challenges, particularly for performers less accustomed to the psychological demands of the operatic profession. “It feels like a lot to ask, especially of more novice performers, to step into these roles and know how to navigate all of that complexity if they haven’t been given opportunities to cultivate their inner resources,” he shares. McMurren suggests that training programs consider integrating self-discovery work to help prepare artists for the demands of the profession. “Performing is often anxiety-provoking,” he claims, “even if people love doing it.”

Anxiety amongst performers and arts workers is well-documented, with many artists and audience members even believing the harmful myth that suffering is required in order to produce great art. Before the pandemic hit, the Canadian Actors’ Equity Association (CAEA) reported high rates of anxiety amongst its members. An Australian study conducted in 2015 showed that performers are ten times more likely to suffer from anxiety and five times more likely to suffer from depression than the general population. Thankfully, CAEA provides multiple resources for its members while they are under contract, including intimacy and fight coordinators, reimbursements for therapy and counselling, and Respectful Workplace policies.

↑
Miriam Khalil
in VOICEBOX:
Opera in Concert’s
La voix humaine,
2021

→
Barbara Hannigan
in Opéra national
de Paris’s *La voix
humaine*, 2015



VIEWPOINT

But ensuring workplace safety from an emotional standpoint can still prove difficult for opera companies. Marion Newman, a First Nations mezzo-soprano who has performed many works containing traumatic subject matter, believes CAEA could do more to support artists. "It would be great to have specific training workshops for stage management and company leadership," she notes. "You don't declare a space safe, you make it safe continuously throughout the whole process." Psychiatrist David Matthews of the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) in Toronto also reflected on this issue after watching *La voix humaine*. "Companies need to be prepared to support artists, especially if they are drawing on personal experiences," he writes. "This includes creating space for difficult conversations in the rehearsal room and allowing people to opt out of conversations that feel too heavy for them."

Canadian sopranos who performed *La voix humaine* this pandemic year described the challenges of singing Elle at a time when its subject so closely reflected the zeitgeist. Miriam Khalil admitted how difficult the isolated

conditions of the pandemic had been for her, and that she experienced immense fatigue following her Voicebox: Opera in Concert recording of the piece. Conversely, Rachel Krehm said that singing the role for Toronto City Opera helped her to process her own feelings and emotions. But while Krehm experienced something positive, McMurren cautions against universalizing a process that can only be truly healing if performers have safe containers in which to explore difficult issues.

Opera culture has changed dramatically over the past few years, as companies have finally begun to deal with systemic issues of harassment, racism, and sexism. But supporting mental health will require new ways of approaching the rehearsal process. When an opera's subject matter includes traumatic material, Newman believes a good place to start is for directors to ensure safe rehearsal environments. She also suggests incorporating daily check-ins for teams, noting, "Then when you get down to the work, you have a whole cast of people that are listening and connecting to each other." Mezzo-soprano Mireille Lebel, who sang in Vancouver Opera's

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Mireille Lebel in
Vancouver Opera's *La
voix humaine*, 2020



La voix humaine, echoes this point: "If someone doesn't have a deep kindness or empathy, you likely won't feel comfortable going to the vulnerable place necessary for these kinds of roles," she remarks. "We have to go so deep."

In non-pandemic times, an opera singer's life is often full of travelling, score learning, and logistical planning, all ideally balanced with a rich personal life. A singer's preparation time is largely spent ensuring vocal and musical excellence, rather than investigating how a piece will affect them psychologically. For works involving trauma, both McMurren and Newman recommend preparing artists emotionally before the production even begins, either when casting singers individually or through group Zoom calls. McMurren suggests asking singers in advance how they intend to move through experiences emotionally, so that companies can give them support. "If they don't have a sense of how they'll navigate something overwhelming, then that's a concern," he says.

When it comes to the issue of supporting audiences, opera companies' responsibilities get a bit murkier. Prefacing operas with trigger warnings can feel excessive and even offensive to audience members. Furthermore, people of diverse experiences encounter art in different ways, and companies can't predict or control audience reactions. Newman recalls forgetting to warn her father, a residential school survivor, that she would be wearing a nun's habit in *Suor Angelica*. She also describes the complicated feelings that can arise for people of different cultural backgrounds while watching productions of *Madama Butterfly* or Handel's *Messiah*. In an attempt to address such questions, both McMurren and CAMH's Matthews recommend companies provide resources for those impacted by subject matter, rather than trigger warnings. "With a challenging, uncomfortable issue like suicide or racism or whatever it may be," says McMurren, "there is some responsibility to acknowledge it. It doesn't need to be fear-based, though I think it's reasonable to comment about it and to provide helplines, because they may save lives, and at least hint that support is available and may be useful."

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the arts have provided us with opportunities to share our experiences virtually, to escape quotidian realities, and to collectively reflect on our present moment. Stories like *La voix humaine* remind us of the fragility of the human condition, as well as of our shared responsibility to care for one another. In the opera world, this act of caring begins in the rehearsal hall and requires communication, openness, deep listening, training, and access to professional resources. Great art need not always come from great pain. **OC**

Toronto-born soprano **SARA SCHABAS** currently lives, and sings, in Geneva, Switzerland

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THE CENTRE FOR ADDICTION AND MENTAL HEALTH (CAMH)

THE NETWORK FOR ABORIGINAL MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCE

Dr. McMurren noted that many community agencies offer free walk-in, single-session support with professional therapists