

ARE WE *ZWISCH*-ING YET? AN EXAMINATION OF THE *ZWISCHENFACH* VOICE  
CATEGORY AND SELECTED TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY AMERICAN ARIAS

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The German word *Zwischenfach* often refers to opera roles and singers whose voices lie between the categories of mezzo-soprano and soprano. While the term is not universally accepted as a voice category, *Zwischenfach* voices and roles are being discussed more openly and with more specificity in collegiate and professional circles. This document includes a discussion on the challenges of categorizing dramatic voices, mezzo-soprano voices, and those who could be considered *Zwischenfach*, taking into consideration the inherent ambiguity and flexibility within these voice categories. The elements that have led to developmental changes in opera voices and their categories over the centuries provide insight and context on how *Zwischenfach* has become a term that describes the ambiguity and challenge of classifying opera voices in the twenty-first century. A main focus of this document is a discussion of eleven pieces from twenty-first century American operas which a *Zwischenfach* singer could consider for auditions and performances. Operas included are: *Dead Man Walking* by Jake Heggie, *The Grapes of Wrath* by Ricky Ian Gordon, *After Life* and *Glory Denied* by Tom Cipullo, *Lysistrata* by Mark Adamo, *Dinner at Eight* by William Bolcom, and *Fantastic Mr. Fox* by Tobias Picker. My hope is that this document will give *Zwischenfach* voices a resource when choosing twenty-first century repertoire and promote further discussion and acceptance of the *Zwischenfach* voice category.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

“Nobody puts baby in a corner” is the famous line from the movie *Dirty Dancing* meant to incite independence and maturity, and empower a woman to stand up and advocate for herself. In the performing arts, this can be challenging, especially for young aspiring singers, while staying within the industry guidelines and expectations in the pursuit of a career. The guidelines help teach and steer us in the right direction, but they should not define the ability of an artist. While industry guidelines can be useful, they need to be flexible in order to meet the needs and individuality of the singers it serves.

One such guideline in the performing arts is the *Fach-System*, documented by the German conductor and pianist Rudolf Kloiber. His *Handbuch der Oper*, published in 1951, categorized opera singers’ voice types and suggested opera roles best suited to their voices.<sup>1</sup> The German word *Fach* is translated by the dictionary *Pons* as “pocket, shelf, pigeonhole, or drawer.” *Fach* also indicates a subject, or specialization in an area of study.<sup>2</sup> The *Fach-System* Kloiber documented in 1951 has served as a guide for opera houses and singers, and reflects casting trends at the time of documentation.<sup>3</sup> In fact, many singers say that staying within a given *Fach* helps them avoid roles that are inappropriate for their voice, thereby protecting the longevity and health of their instrument.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rudolf Kloiber, *Handbuch der Oper*, (Kassel, Germany: Bärenreiter, 1978).

<sup>2</sup> *Pons Dictionary*, s.v. “Fach,” accessed July 12, 2023, <https://en.pons.com/translate/german-english/Fach>.

<sup>3</sup> Sandra Cotton, “Voice Classification and Fach: Recent, Historical and Conflicting Systems of Voice Categorization,” (DMA diss., The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2007), 59.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Boldrey, *Guide to Operatic Roles and Arias* (Caldwell Publishing Company, 1994), 6.

Throughout the development of vocal music, voices categories reflected the demands and qualities of repertoire and styles being composed. At first, very few vocal categories were needed, but eventually an extensive list of subcategories were created that further differentiated vocal strengths and characteristics: soubrette, lyric, spinto, dramatic, and coloratura soprano, among others. In Chapter 2, I examine and posit how voice categories evolved from the early seventeenth century to the twenty-first century and reasons why the concept of *Zwischenfach*—or “between” *Fach*—developed.

But what about voices that possess vocal qualities that are less conventional, and challenge well-established rules and guidelines? Jessye Norman, a world-renowned soprano who sang a broad range of roles, stated “Pigeon-holes are only comfortable for pigeons.”<sup>5</sup>

Voices that lie between or outside traditional voice categories are sometimes referred to as *Zwischenfach*, or voices “between categories.”<sup>6</sup> The term *Zwischenfach* can describe a voice and/or a role that lies between categories, but the usage of the term has also changed over time often referring to dramatic voices or more lyric roles sung by mezzo-sopranos and sopranos.<sup>7</sup> Chapter 3 provides further discussion on what seems to be an ambiguity surrounding the *Zwischenfach* label. If *Zwischenfach* is taken at its literal meaning, it can also describe male voices who have the facility to successfully sing between and across categories. Michael Spyres, who sang the title role of Idomeno in the 2023 production at the Metropolitan Opera, refers to his voice

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<sup>5</sup> “Jessye Norman: Legendary Opera Soprano,” Academy of Achievement, accessed July 14, 2023, <https://achievement.org/achiever/jessye-norman>.

<sup>6</sup> Boldrey, *Guide to Operatic Roles and Arias*, 25.

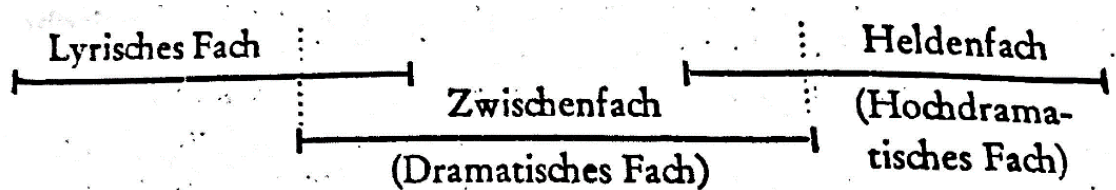
<sup>7</sup> Jennifer Allen, “An Analysis and Discussion of *Zwischenfach* Voices” (DMA diss., Arizona State University, 2012), 16-17; Boldrey, 10.



category as bari-tenor. His first solo album, *Baritenor*, was released in September 2022 and included both standard baritone and tenor selections.<sup>8</sup>

In Kloiber’s 1957 publication *Taschenbuch der Oper* (or *Opera Pocketbook*), the term *Zwischenfach* was used to describe voices that were in the “serious” vocal category, versus the “character” vocal category. *Zwischenfach* sits between and overlaps with *Lyrisches Fach* (lyric category) and *Heldenfach* (hero category) in the “serious” category, as represented in Figure 1. He also suggests that the *Zwischenfach* category refers to the *Dramatisches Fach* or dramatic *Fach*. Kloiber states that the second category, or *Zwischenfach*, “is understood to mean the vocal material lying between the lyrical and the heavy” and the “highly dramatic subjects were first developed by Richard Wagner.”<sup>9</sup>

Figure 1: Kloiber’s *Zwischenfach* Categorization<sup>10</sup>



In the United States, *Zwischenfach* is generally used to describe upper voices that are capable of singing both mezzo-soprano and soprano repertoire or roles that are sung by more than one voice category. I focus my discussion on soprano and mezzo-soprano voices, acknowledging that *Zwischenfach*, in its literal meaning, is not exclusive to these voice types. Among industry professionals and in university programs, it is

<sup>8</sup>“Michael Spyres on Baritenor,” interview by Katherine Cooper, Presto Music, November 2, 2021, <https://www.prestomusic.com/classical/articles/4285--interview-michael-spyres-on-baritenor>.

<sup>9</sup> Rudolf Kloiber, *Taschenbuch der Opera* (Regensburg, Germany: Bosse, 1957), 844.

<sup>10</sup> Kloiber, *Taschenbuch der Opera*, 844.

becoming more common to discuss *Zwischenfach* singers and the roles that are unique to their vocal qualities.

To give some background and context to my interest in *Zwischenfach*, it came about from my own pedagogical journey while pursuing the Master and Doctor of Musical Arts degrees in vocal performance at the University of North Texas. In my undergraduate degree work I trained in the coloratura soprano repertoire; during my master's degree I started singing full-lyric soprano repertoire. By the end of my master's degree, my voice had developed qualities more akin to that of a mezzo-soprano, with an extended upper range. My range was similar to many soprano and mezzo-soprano voices—G3 to C6—but finding roles with the correct *tessitura*, or comfortable singing range, lead me to repertoire that is often classified as *Zwischenfach* sung by both sopranos and mezzo-sopranos, such as Rosina/*Il barbiere di Siviglia*, Stephano/*Romeo et Juliette*, Dorabella/*Così fan tutte*, and Komponist/*Ariadne auf Naxos*.

In addition to a pedagogical comfort zone that *Zwischenfach* provided, I found the flexibility of singing both mezzo-soprano and age-appropriate soprano repertoire suited my personality and temperament which encouraged my artistic individuality, aspects that are essential when determining a *Fach* or voice category. To be sure, there were challenges along the way. A *Zwischenfach* voice does not always fully evolve until the singer reaches a certain level of maturity, usually in their late twenties or early thirties. Thankfully I had mentors early on who supported and encouraged my pedagogical path of transitioning from light coloratura soprano to qualities more in line with *Zwischenfach*. Their patience and open-mindedness throughout my training helped me have the courage to explore possibilities beyond the traditional voice categories—

important for singers of all *Fächer* (plural of *Fach*). The discoveries that led me to explore *Zwischenfach* have helped me utilize more creative approaches as a teaching fellow at the University of North Texas, as an adjunct instructor of voice at Texas Woman's University, and will, without a doubt, inform my teaching as a newly-appointed Assistant Professor of Voice at Wichita State University. The takeaways based on these experiences have shown me the importance of developing positive teaching approaches as well as pedagogical strategies for young aspiring singers whose voices have not yet settled into a clear and obvious category.

Characteristics of vocal categories change and shift as musical style, composition techniques, and performance practice traditions develop over time. This can be confusing for singers when trying to apply the same vocal categorizing system to twenty-first century repertoire. There is a certain ambiguity with the *Zwischenfach*—or “in between” vocal category. One recurring question singers often ask is what roles exist for these “in-between” singers in the contemporary American operas of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Through my collegiate study and professional engagements, I’ve noticed that a significant percentage of new works are written for high soprano (*Euridyce/Euridyce*, *Pip/Moby Dick*), and mezzo-soprano (*Kitty/Doctor Atomic*, *Laurene/The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs*, *Marnie/Marnie*). However, the mezzo-soprano roles are often written for a mezzo-soprano with an extended range (*Myrrhine/Lysistrata*, *Gertrude Stein/After Life*), while other mezzo-soprano roles are written with a low tessitura for a mezzo-soprano and are closer to a contralto tessitura (*Mother/Thumbprint*, *Ma Joad/Grapes of Wrath*). This scope of compositional possibilities is due in part to the expert training American singers receive. Composers

are often writing for singers who excel in all parts of their range. These twenty-first century high mezzo-soprano roles—and some soprano roles—are appropriate for a *Zwischenfach* singer.

My interest in twenty-first century opera repertoire began during performances of the role of Gertrude Stein in Tom Cipullo's opera *After Life* with UNT Opera in 2018. It was at a time when I began questioning my own notions of *Fach* identity. Singing newly-composed repertoire with its challenging range and demanding vocal line revealed vocal qualities and strengths characteristic of *Zwischenfach*. The experience piqued my interest in other twenty-first century American operas, particularly those with roles that could be considered *Zwischenfach*, a path that not only benefited me, but might do the same for other young singers.

The purpose of this document is two-fold: firstly, I discuss some of the ways the voice classification system came about given the changes in opera over the time, creating voice classifications that are considered somewhat ambiguous. Secondly, I examine what is meant by the concept of *Zwischenfach* as it pertains to opera singers, specifically, mezzo-soprano and soprano voices. In my discussion of *Zwischenfach*, I include a performance guide to eight arias and three excerpts from twenty-first century American operas which could be successfully sung by a *Zwischenfach* voice, and would provide opportunities to solidify pedagogical training and further their development as twenty-first century artists.

## CHAPTER 2

### VOICE TYPE AND *FACH*: CONSIDERATIONS AND CHALLENGES FOR MEZZO-SOPRANOS, DRAMATIC VOICES, AND THOSE WITH EXTENDED RANGES

Singers at all levels are asked to categorize their voice type: soprano, mezzo-soprano, tenor, baritone, and bass, and sometimes the many subcategories in those voice divisions such as dramatic, lyric, coloratura, soubrette, or some combination thereof. In her dissertation *Voice Type vs. Fach*, Sandra Cotton argues that *Fach* is separate from voice type because *Fach* depends heavily on current casting trends for roles and the desired characteristics for certain roles. This and other factors often make it difficult to distinguish a singer's *Fach*.<sup>11</sup> The more specific categories of *Fach* reflect opera casting trends that can shift with performance practice.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, what has come to be known today as the *Fach-System* was chronicled by the German conductor and musicologist Rudolf Kloiber in his 1951 publication *Handbuch der Oper*.<sup>12</sup> Although he documented these voice categories, categorizing singers was happening well in advance of Kloiber's publication, though perhaps not as clearly or specifically. Today, singers, voice teachers, coaches, conductors, and casting directors have used *Fach-System* to classify voices. His book provides a directory of operas and the most common voice category for each opera role from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries. The book's latest edition (11th) was published in 2006 with additional operas and commentary on roles. While *Fach* voice categories are a useful guide, they can also create strict and inflexible boundaries for

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<sup>11</sup> Cotton, "Voice Classification and Fach," 1.

<sup>12</sup> Kloiber, *Handbuch der Oper*.

singers. Casting based on the *Fach-System* is still utilized in Europe, and has been a guide for American opera companies when hiring singers for mainstage productions and young artist programs.

In 1994, an American equivalent to Kloiber's book was published by pianist, vocal coach, conductor, and author Richard Boldrey.<sup>13</sup> In his book, *Guide to Operatic Roles and Arias*, Boldrey says categorizing voices, in its simplest terms, is "to make it easy to match voices with repertoire."<sup>14</sup> The book provides a comprehensive list of over 3500 arias and over 1000 operas, and categorizes voices by the following characteristics: range, tessitura, timbre, weight, and agility as a guide for singers to understand appropriate roles and arias. In Boldrey's guide, there is a comparison of *Fächer* from different countries and those with overlapping characteristics, showing how category labels intersect across languages. He also displays the possibility of many more subcategories than Kloiber's guide, including some fourteen different categories for treble voices (soubrette, light lyric coloratura soprano, light lyric soprano, full lyric coloratura soprano, and among others). It is expected in Boldrey's categories that roles would fit within many categories—some up to four or five of these subcategories—and voices could overlap two or more of these categories.<sup>15</sup> For example, the role of Carmen is categorized as full-lyric mezzo-soprano, spinto soprano, dramatic mezzo-soprano, and contralto to suggest that voices, within all these categories, could sing the role. Boldrey's guide is a contemporary reflection of the 'gray area' that has developed

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<sup>13</sup> Boldrey, *Guide to Operatic Roles and Arias*; Richard Boldrey, *Guide to Operatic Duets*, (Caldwell Publishing Company, 1994).

<sup>14</sup> Boldrey, *Guide to Operatic Roles and Arias*, 6.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, introduction.

between vocal categories, and the ambiguity of categorizing voices with these specific subcategories.

There are other guides, such as Boris Goldovsky's 1968 publication *Bringing Soprano Arias to Life*<sup>16</sup> and Mark Ross Clark's 2007 publication *Guide to the Aria Repertoire*,<sup>17</sup> that give background and interpretive advice for certain arias. Goldovsky's guide does not address *Fach*, and Clark's guide, while updated to include some late twentieth century and twenty-first century repertoire, also has less commentary on vocal categories than Boldrey's guide. Clark includes three fewer subcategories than Boldrey in his analysis of repertoire.<sup>18</sup> In his introduction, Clark says "Although the arias in this resource book are categorized by *Fach* and voice type, singers should not feel restricted to only one area of classification."<sup>19</sup> Voice categories continue to be discussed in an ambiguous way.

From its origin in 1600, opera did not have eleven or fourteen voice categories, as Clark and Boldrey suggest of our contemporary industry. Roles were often written for specific singers, especially during the reign of the Castrati singers and the *prima donnas* in the bel canto era. Showing off the performer's ability to sing florid passages was the top priority. Over the centuries, an increasing number of voice categories have been added as opera roles have become more demanding. The categories and classifications have become more specialized since the time of Monteverdi, perhaps, in

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<sup>16</sup> Boris Goldovsky, *Bringing Opera to Life: Operatic Acting and Stage Direction*, (New York, NY: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1968).

<sup>17</sup> Mark Ross Clark, *Guide to the Aria Repertoire* (Bloomington, Indiana: University Press, 2007).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, introduction.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

part, because of the increasing demands on singers regarding range/tessitura, vocal weight/heft, and heightened dramatic intensity in the vocal line.

The *range* is the highest and lowest notes a performer sings in public<sup>20</sup> and can also reflect all the notes required in a role or aria. It is different from *tessitura*, which is the most comfortable range for a singer or the most common range of notes within a particular role.<sup>21</sup> *Tessitura* has relevance for singers when discussing voice categories. When determining the appropriateness of a particular role, singers must consider the range throughout the entire opera, and—equally important—the *tessitura*. Both range and *tessitura* are important to ensure the singer will have the stamina to withstand a rigorous rehearsal and performance schedule. Looking only at the arias when undertaking a role does not always give the singer a complete picture of its inherent challenges. The singing range of opera roles has steadily expanded in both directions—in the lower and upper registers—since the beginning of opera in the early seventeenth century.

With the decline of bel canto in the mid-nineteenth century, the popularity of Donizetti, Bellini, and Rossini operas gave way in favor of those by Richard Wagner (1813–1883) and Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1901). They composed operas which demanded more of the singers, both dramatically and vocally. Verdi was important for the eventual transition to *verismo* style that depicted more dramatically heightened, realistic situations, often with violent and tragic endings. Orchestra size and volume continued to increase in size with the addition of more instruments, particularly brass

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<sup>20</sup> Boldrey, *Guide to Operatic Roles and Arias*, 7.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-9.



and winds. Performance spaces also increased in size, allowing for larger orchestras, as well as adjusting the orchestra pit and proscenium archway designed to aid in the acoustical challenges of the large space.<sup>22</sup> These changes meant that singers needed to project their voices over larger orchestras in bigger spaces. This required more vocal heft and volume from singers and contributed to the constant evolution of more specific voice categories and subcategories in opera, e.g. dramatic mezzo-sopranos, spinto sopranos, and Verdi baritone in addition to the more lyric voice categories already present in the opera repertoire.

The specialization in choosing a voice category does not exclude the possibility of crossing *Fach* boundaries. For example, the great German mezzo-soprano Christa Ludwig sang both Octavian and Marschallin in *Der Rosenkavalier* as well as Lady Macbeth in Verdi's *Macbeth*, usually sung by a spinto or dramatic soprano. The most recent production of *Macbeth* at Chicago Lyric Opera featured Sondra Radvanovsky, also known for her work in the soprano bel canto repertoire. I have not found any indication that *Zwischenfach* was a term used in these opera circles at that time, but it is a probability that it had its roots in the evolution of larger voices for the reasons mentioned above.

The term *Zwischenfach* is particularly applicable for mezzo-sopranos who have an extended range in the upper register and spinto/dramatic sopranos because ranges and *tessitura* tend to overlap when defining these voice categories. Voices with a darker

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<sup>22</sup> Ronald Lewcock, Rijn Pirn, Jürgen Meyer, Carleen M. Hutchins, J. Woodhouse, John C. Schelleng, Bernard Richardson, Daniel W. Martin, Arthur H. Benade, Murray Campbell, Thomas D. Rossing, and Johan Sundberg, *Oxford Music Online*, "Acoustics," 2001, <https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.libproxy.library.unt.edu/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000000134>.

timbre and greater vocal heft might be perceived either as a dramatic soprano or a mezzo-soprano, capable of straddling both categories.

Dramatic sopranos who eventually specialize in Verdi, Wagner, or the heroic bel canto roles often started their careers as a mezzo-soprano. The reverse is also true: a singer could start their career singing soprano repertoire and become a mezzo-soprano or *Zwischenfach*. Such a case is internationally acclaimed mezzo-soprano Marilyn Horne. Her breakthrough performance in the United States was the soprano role, Marie, in Berg's opera *Wozzeck* performed in 1960 at San Francisco Opera.<sup>23</sup>

As a voice matures and vocal technique is solidified, a singer's chosen *Fach* may well change. For example, my voice teacher, Dr. Carol Wilson, referred to an American singer who had a four-decades long career in Germany. Over her career, she sang all three principal roles in Strauss' *Der Rosenkavalier*, first the light lyric soprano role of Sophie, later she moved to the mezzo-soprano role of Octavian and towards the end of her career, the role of Die Marschallin.<sup>24</sup>

Students embarking on an undergraduate degree in voice often have preconceived ideas about their voice category. It is not at all unusual that the voice category they choose early on is not the one with which they continue as their voice matures—e.g. tenors could eventually become baritones, and vice versa. A student's mentor and voice teacher have the responsibility to carefully consider a singer's vocal category or *Fach* and encourage changes to repertoire and vocal assignments when

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<sup>23</sup> "About Marilyn Horne," Marilyn Horne, accessed July 12, 2023, <https://www.marilynhorne.org/marilynhorne.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Carol Wilson, discussion with author, 2023.

necessary. An open mind and the flexibility to consider voice type on behalf of their students is essential, while fulfilling the needs of their degree program.

Voice teachers are sometimes presented with a dilemma regarding their student's voice category, particularly for their younger singers whose voices have not yet reached maturity, which typically happens anywhere from the mid-twenties to mid-thirties. When singers present themselves for auditions and evaluation at every stage of their training and career, choosing a voice category is a necessity. This is particularly important when singers audition for young artist programs and develop marketing and social media strategies for their career.

Meredith Wallace, Head Artistic Administrator at Atlanta Opera discussed *Fach* with me in a recent conversation. She acknowledged the need for young professionals to present an aria package that offered a complete snapshot of their capabilities, and that it is beneficial to remain within the traditional *Fach* categories. She suggested when a singer becomes more established, *Fach* is less important, and vocal timbre and acting ability should be a significant consideration when casting opera roles, especially for new works.

Soprano Emily Pulley, who was a principal singer at the New York City Opera and a UNT alumna, stated that she has sometimes changed her voice category—soprano to mezzo-soprano—in a program depending on the role. Most recently she performed the role of Ruth in *The Pirates of Penzance*, which is typically cast as a mezzo-soprano or even contralto.

This is reflective of the subjectivity in casting preferences. Casting directors, conductors, and heads of companies have freedom and flexibility when casting in all

genres. *Fach* continues to be an ambiguous and ever-changing concept, and performers should be valued for their unique qualities rather than only adhering to traditional voice categories. The overlapping and interchangeable nature of voice categories that has evolved since the beginning of opera to today has provided singers with choices on the spectrum of lyric to dramatic and works from the baroque to the present when crafting a unique and individualized career path.

## CHAPTER 3

### *ZWISCHENFACH*: SINGING OUTSIDE THE BOX

Defining a singer's *Fach* can be confusing when choosing repertoire and arias for an audition package, especially with a *Zwischenfach* voice, an issue I can speak to as a mezzo-soprano with an extended upper range. In my recent experiences on the audition circuit, some panelists have questioned this choice because of my ability to sing in the upper register with soprano-like ease. Although the ease of my upper register suggests a certain level of comfort, some soprano roles require sustaining passages in the upper register over an entire evening. This fact alone can be a distinguishing factor in the mezzo-soprano/soprano *Fach* debate.<sup>25</sup> Rather, I gravitate to and feel most comfortable singing roles that are often sung by both sopranos and mezzo-sopranos and do not pose unrelenting *tessitura* challenges. Examples of those roles are: *Komponist/Ariadne auf Naxos*, *Dorabella/Così fan tutte*, *Giovanna/Anna Bolena*, and two roles I have performed over the past few years, the title roles in Blitzstein's *Regina* and Bizet's *Carmen*. Looking ahead to the future, it remains to be seen whether my voice will transition to a dramatic soprano or *Jugendlich-dramatischer Sopran*, both requiring a considerable vocal heft throughout the entire voice range, typically from G3–C5. These experiences with *Fach* issues—whether I am truly a mezzo-soprano or soprano—have provided me with a unique point of view for a discussion about *Zwischenfach* and the characteristics commonly associated with those roles and voices.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, the term *Zwischenfach* is defined as roles and voices that lie between vocal categories. In other words, singers who identify as mezzo-

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<sup>25</sup> Richard Miller, *Training Soprano Voices*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000), 23-26.

soprano might also sing soprano roles, and singers who identify as soprano might also sing mezzo-soprano roles. Well-known examples of singers who have had successful careers performing roles in both voice categories are Jessye Norman and Shirley Verrett. Because of their international status and success, they could take unconventional approaches to the roles they accepted and performed. To my knowledge, neither classified themselves as *Zwischenfach*, which was not then and still is not always a universally recognized *Fach*. However, one could argue that since both were open to and welcomed roles in the mezzo-soprano and soprano voice categories, they represent the idea of *Zwischenfach*.

As previously stated, qualities that go into considering a role or voice as *Zwischenfach* include range, tessitura, stamina, timbre, character, and heft or weight of the voice. Evaluating these qualities is often subjective and open to interpretation, adding to the ambiguity when considering whether a voice is *Zwischenfach*. The typical range of a mezzo-soprano or soprano is G3–C6. When a singer has vocal heft or weight in the lower register *and* can perform full, vibrant sounds in the upper register with relative ease, it would suggest they exhibit qualities of *Zwischenfach*.

Young singers aspiring for a performance career begin auditioning and performing while in their twenties, often before their voices have fully matured. Typically, larger, more dramatic voices mature during their thirties. It is an accepted fact that a singer's voice naturally changes with age, and often physical changes during those pivotal years, which might include childbirth, can add heft or weight to their voice and become fuller and warmer in timbre.

Such changes over time can affect a singer's chosen voice category or

subcategory, which sometimes results in the straddling of mezzo-soprano and soprano roles. During a singer's early development, they can benefit from crossing traditional voice categories, incorporating *Zwischenfach* qualities to experience vocal freedom and solidify pedagogical development.

*Zwischenfach* singers often have an extensive vocal range and the ability to sing across the low, middle, and upper registers with vocal strength, projection and color, which can provide an emotional intensity required by certain roles. Stephanie Weiss, mezzo-soprano and Associate Professor of Voice at Arizona State University, wrote her doctoral dissertation "Zwischenfach—A Distinct Voice Type: A Study of Fach through Specific Roles in the Works of Richard Wagner and Richard Strauss" that examined the unique characteristics of *Zwischenfach*. In her paper, she advocated for establishing *Zwischenfach* as a distinct voice category: "since the majority of the *Zwischenfach* roles are found in the German repertoire [...] one could argue that the *Zwischenfach* should be classified as a German dramatic mezzo-soprano."<sup>26</sup> The roles she cited to demonstrate *Zwischenfach* characteristics are *Adriano/Rienzi*, *Venus/Tannhäuser*, *Kundry/Parsifal*, *Octavian/Der Rosenkavalier*, and *Komponist/Ariadne auf Naxos*. Weiss states that "both sopranos and mezzo-sopranos have the range to sing the *Zwischenfach* repertoire [but] the determining factors of the *Zwischenfach* are the registration, the metallic timbre, where the power of the voice lies, and dramatic integrity, both vocally and related to character."<sup>27</sup>

In addition to suggesting several principal roles in Strauss and Wagner operas

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<sup>26</sup> Stephanie Weiss, "*Zwischenfach* - A Distinct Voice Type: A Study of *Fach* through Specific Roles in the Works of Richard Wagner and Richard Strauss," (DMA diss., University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 2015), 5.

<sup>27</sup> Weiss, 17-18.

that require a certain metallic timbre and vocal size to project over large orchestras, she also posits that their voices must possess a dramatic intensity that can sustain phrases in the upper *passaggio* (E5–G5) with ease.<sup>28</sup> There should also be consideration for trouser roles in French operas, Mozart roles originally classified as soprano but traditionally sung by lyric mezzo-sopranos, and other bel canto repertoire that both sopranos and mezzo-sopranos sing, including: Stefano/*Romeo et Juliette*, Rosina/*Il barbiere di Siviglia*, Adalgisa/*Norma*, Dorabella/*Così fan tutte*, and Cherubino/*Le nozze di Figaro*.

In their dissertations, Elizabeth Harris (“*Zwischenfach*: Paradox or Paradigm?”)<sup>29</sup> and Jennifer Allen (“An Analysis and Discussion and Discussion of *Zwischenfach* Voices”)<sup>30</sup> suggest that lyric voices can also be considered *Zwischenfach* as well as those with more dramatic qualities.<sup>31</sup> Harris states that lyric mezzo-sopranos are usually cast in the trouser roles that can also be sung by a soprano. These include roles such as Cherubino/*Le nozze di Figaro*, Siébel/*Faust*, and Stephano/*Roméo et Juliette*, among others. Both Harris and Allen go on to suggest that while lyric mezzo-sopranos might have difficulty handling the more dramatic vocal demands of Strauss’ trouser roles (Komponist/*Ariadne auf Naxos* and Octavian/*Der Rosenkavalier*) they can nevertheless consider themselves *Zwischenfach*.<sup>32</sup>

A more lyric mezzo-soprano or soprano can effectively straddle the fine line

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>29</sup> Elisabeth Harris, “*Zwischenfach*: Paradox or Paradigm?” (MM thesis, Massey University and Victoria University of Wellington, 2014).

<sup>30</sup> Allen, 27-33.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 27-33; Harris, 36-42.

<sup>32</sup> Allen, 32-34; Harris, 48-49.



between the two voice categories. Mozart indicated most of the female roles in his operas as soprano. Contemporary casting for these roles is often with a mezzo-soprano or a soprano. Examples are Cherubino/*Le nozze di Figaro*, Dorabella/*Così fan tutte*, Zerlina/*Don Giovanni*, Despina/*Così fan tutte* and Annio/*La clemenza di Tito*. The rationale of casting directors, when choosing a particular voice type for a role, might be because they prefer the warmer voice quality of a mezzo-soprano over a soprano to reflect a more mature characterization, or a voice with more vocal heft and volume to project in a larger hall.

One must also consider historical changes in performance practices and preferences that affect voice classification, including changes in the standardized musical pitch. Performing at baroque pitch (A = 417) vs. modern pitch (A = 440) means the difference of a half step. This seemingly small change affects the tessitura of a role and could significantly reduce or enhance the ease of an aria. This can be an important factor in the singer's decision to accept a role.

Based on these considerations, *Zwischenfach* voices can include those who have a lyric or dramatic vocal heft. Although the more dramatic roles of Wagner and Strauss often require a metallic vocal quality, the *Zwischenfach* category is not exclusive to their operas. Ultimately the arbiter of whether a singer possesses *Zwischenfach* qualities and guides them to those types of roles is subjective and informed by the musical styles in which the role was composed. A hybrid approach to role classification—blurring the lines between mezzo-soprano and soprano *Fächer* or *Zwischenfach*—offers singers a variety of repertoire choices at any stage of their career. Considering a lyric voice to be *Zwischenfach* alongside a voice with more dramatic

weight might assist in the training of young voices and those not yet ready to be classified in a particular *Fach*.

The ambiguity when attempting to classify voices—particularly for mezzo-sopranos and dramatic sopranos—is due in part because the development of these categories span centuries of different time periods and musical styles. I have had discussions with singers, voice teachers, coaches, casting directors and conductors regarding the idea of *Zwischenfach*, not as a conventional voice category, but as a useful conceptual alternative posed by these historical changes over the centuries. This is an idea that will continue to be examined and discussed in the years to come as the opera world becomes more sensitive and receptive to the unique qualities and needs of today's singers. Although *Zwischenfach* voices and roles are discussed more openly by professionals in the opera industry, its use as a legitimate vocal category is not yet universally accepted. The consensus among singers, voice teachers, coaches, and conductors is that it is important for young professionals to state their voice category and present an aria package that gives audition panelists a consistent idea of a singer's vocal abilities. If an aria package represents more than one *Fach*, the singer can be perceived as unprofessional, and not taken seriously by an audition panel.<sup>33</sup>

A benefit of labeling *Zwischenfach* as its own voice category is that it gives a snapshot of the capabilities of a voice that has the musical and artistic range to portray these roles. The challenge of that argument is that *Zwischenfach* voices often present an aria package and sing roles *within* traditional voice categories, and those singers should not be discouraged from singing *Zwischenfach* repertoire if their voice and

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<sup>33</sup> Cotton, 1-2.

character are appropriate.

The benefit of ambiguity of a *Zwischenfach* voice is that it allows the listener, whether an audition panel or audience, to hear a variety of colors, nuances and character possibilities within the voice. The fact that my voice could challenge traditional classification and can go *outside the Fach box*, makes for interesting career options and a variety of prospects. Some of my recent and upcoming performances over two seasons (Summer 2022–Fall 2023) highlight that advantage: a contralto role Indiana Elliot/*Mother of Us All*, Carmen, which ranges in classification from lyric or dramatic mezzo-soprano to dramatic soprano, Taller Daughter/*Proving Up* by Missy Mazzoli, a role I would categorize as lyric mezzo-soprano, and Mrs. Gross/*Turn of the Screw*, a role that is usually sung by a soprano. My range as an actress, and ability to show a variety of vocal colors have made it possible for me to navigate a broad range of roles and their vocal demands. Quoting Jennifer Alan discussing ambiguity of *Zwischenfach*:

One unique way in which the *Zwischenfach* voice performs is in its freedom to remain undefined. Though this vague definition comes with its own drawbacks, it also offers the chance for the artist to showcase her ability as a singer—not constrained by the bounds of a defined voice-type, but rather, only by her own capabilities and limitations.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Allen, 22.

## CHAPTER 4

### PREVALENCE OF AMERICAN OPERA AND INCORPORATING *ZWISCHENFACH*

Opera companies are expanding and enriching their seasons by programming and commissioning contemporary American operas. It is increasingly the case that audition panels for Young Artist Programs require arias from this repertoire for auditions. The relatability and familiarity of the libretti, often portray socially impactful narratives, and the immediacy of the English language can have universal appeal and attract new audiences.

Here are some examples of recent commissions and performances of American opera taking place at three major leading companies in the United States: the Metropolitan Opera, the Dallas Opera, and Santa Fe Opera. The Metropolitan Opera's 2023–2024 season will include new productions of Jake Heggie's *Dead Man Walking*—first premiered at San Francisco Opera in 2000—as well as Anthony Davis' *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X*. Their upcoming season will feature the return of Kevin Puts' *The Hours* after a highly acclaimed premiere in 2022.

The Dallas Opera has commissioned several new works in recent years including two operas by Heggie—*Great Scott* (2015), and *Moby-Dick* (2010)<sup>35</sup>—and Jody Talbot's *Everest* (2015) in collaboration with celebrated lyricist and librettist Gene Scheer.<sup>36</sup> The 2023–2024 season will include a new premiere, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, another collaboration between Talbot and Sheer. The premiere will feature Grammy

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<sup>35</sup>James Chute, "Brining a new opera to life takes talent, teamwork, trust and lots of money," *The San Diego Union Tribune*, classical music review, February 13, 2012, <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/entertainment/classical-music/sdut-san-diego-opera-moby-dick-2012feb13-htmlstory.html>

<sup>36</sup>The Dallas Opera, "The Dallas Opera is Proud to Announce A Major New Commission," Accessed July 13, 2023, <https://dallasopera.org/the-dallas-opera-is-proud-to-announce-a-major-new-commission/>.

award winners Lucas Meachem, baritone, and Sasha Cooke, mezzo-soprano—both superstars in the industry who regularly sing in premieres of new operas.<sup>37</sup>

The Santa Fe Opera is commissioning new works including *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs* with music by Mason Bates and libretto by Mark Campbell (2017)<sup>38</sup> and *The Righteous*, a commission for the 2024 season, with music by Gregory Spears and libretto by Tracy K. Smith. The premiere will feature UNT alumus, baritone Michael Mayes.<sup>39</sup> New operas such as these provide ample aria choices for mezzo-soprano, sopranos, and those that identify as *Zwischenfach*.

Two sources contributed to an expanded awareness of recent commissions of new works, many of which provide possible arias for the examination in this document. The New York-based organization, Opera America's database, the North American Works Directory, provides an up-to-date and comprehensive list of contemporary opera commissions and performances. It is a reliable resource that tracks upcoming productions of new works and cites the frequency with which new works are performed on national and international stages. For example, they cite the fact that *Dead Man Walking* is the most-performed contemporary opera in English composed in the time frame 1991 to present.<sup>40</sup> This opera alone is the source of four arias for a *Zwischenfach*

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<sup>37</sup> The Dallas Opera, "World Premiere: A True Story of Strength, Determination, and the Desire for Connection," Accessed July 13, 2023, <https://dallasopera.org/performance/diving-bell-and-the-butterfly/>.

<sup>38</sup>Mason Bates, "The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs," Accessed July 13, 2023, [https://www.masonbates.com/the-revolution-of-steve-jobs-2/#:~:text=The%20\(R\)evolution%20of%20Steve%20Jobs%20is%20an%20opera%20in,with%20support%20from%20Cal%20Performances.](https://www.masonbates.com/the-revolution-of-steve-jobs-2/#:~:text=The%20(R)evolution%20of%20Steve%20Jobs%20is%20an%20opera%20in,with%20support%20from%20Cal%20Performances.)

<sup>39</sup>Santa Fe Opera, "*The Righteous*: World Premiere," Accessed July 13, 2023, <https://www.santafeopera.org/whats-on/the-righteous-2024/>.

<sup>40</sup>Opera America, "North American Works Directory," Accessed July 13, 2023, <https://apps.operaamerica.org/Applications/NAWD/index.aspx>.

singer. Another invaluable resource has been Wolf Trap Opera’s “Aria Frequency Lists,” a yearly publication of the arias performed during their fall audition tour. The lists from 2012 to present from the “Aria Frequency Lists” for both sopranos and mezzo-sopranos were most useful for this investigation.<sup>41</sup>

Young singers can benefit from today’s composers often orchestrating their operas for chamber-sized ensembles, making performances more accessible and practical for boutique companies and university programs. By reducing the orchestra size, young singers have more freedom to utilize different vocal colors, in part because they do not have the need to project their voices over a large orchestra. These smaller chamber orchestras also give companies the possibility to innovate by utilizing interesting spaces—often smaller, more intimate venues or outdoor spaces. The New York company On Site Opera, founded in 2012, frequently performs in non-conventional opera venues. *The New York Times* music critic Anthony Tommasini commended the company’s shift towards non-traditional performances spaces, writing: “On Site Opera presents the ultimate in intimate productions by performing works in spaces that fit the setting of the story.”<sup>42</sup>

Composers are known to create new works with certain vocal colors in mind, to advance their dramatic intentions, whether their choices are conscious or subconscious. When they receive a commission for a new opera, it is often the case that they have a premiere cast in mind. Their primary concern may not always be about composing for a

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<sup>41</sup>Wolf Trap Opera “Audition Resources: Aria Frequency Lists,” Accessed July 13, 2023, <https://opera.wolftrap.org/audition-resources/>.

<sup>42</sup> Anthony Tommasini, “A Snappy, Intimate Take on 'Figaro,' Room to Room in a Townhouse,” *New York Times*, music review, June 16, 2016.

specific voice category or subcategory in the strict and traditional sense; rather, they can be more focused on the vocal colors and acting abilities a performer can bring to their character portrayal.

Nico Muhly is the composer of *Marnie*, an operatic psychological thriller that premiered in 2017 at the English National Opera and at the Metropolitan Opera in 2018 featuring mezzo-soprano Isabel Leonard in the title role.<sup>43</sup> In an interview given on a *Met Live in HD* broadcast during the intermission of *La Fanciulla del West*, Muhly says he wrote the role of Marnie with Leonard in mind: “what isn’t [inspiring about Leonard]! The power of her voice but also the enigmatic acting felt really perfect for this. It’s not a kind of obvious thing, what to do...” Leonard nodded in agreement and added “It’s not an obvious character to play.”<sup>44</sup>

Leonard’s upcoming 2023–2024 season reflects the variety of demands in a twenty-first century career, ranging from opera to musical theater, and demonstrates a ‘lyric’ example of a *Zwischenfach* singer. Leonard’s upcoming season includes the soprano role of Donna Elvira/*Don Giovanni* at Los Angeles Opera (Mozart classified this role as a soprano); Rosina/*Il barbiere di Siviglia* at Los Angeles Opera (sung by both sopranos and mezzo-sopranos); Songbird/*Songbird*, and adaption of Offenbach’s *La Périchole* at Washington National Opera (a role often sung by mezzo-sopranos, but premiered by a soprano); Maria/*The Sound of Music* at Houston Grand Opera; and

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<sup>43</sup> English National Opera, “ENO Presents the World Premiere of Nico Muhly’s *Marnie*, Conducted by ENO Music Director Martyn Brabbins,” last modified September 20, 2017, <https://www.eno.org/news/eno-presents-world-premiere-nico-muhlys-marnie-conducted-eno-music-director-martyn-brabbins/>; David Salazar, “Metropolitan Opera 2018-19 review: *Marnie*,” OperaWire, October 20, 2018, <https://operawire.com/metropolitan-opera-2018-19-review-marnie/>.

<sup>44</sup> “Nico Muhly and Isabel Leonard on *Marnie*,” interview by Susanna Phillips, Metropolitan Opera, October 30, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xGJlbuCTkw>.

Angelina/*La Cenerentola* at Bayerische Staatsoper in Munich.<sup>45</sup> Leonard began her career in the trouser roles of Cherubino and Stefano, also sang Rosina, and eventually Carmen. She is often reviewed for her stellar acting ability, wide and evenly produced range, and her skill in expressing through a variety of vocal colors.<sup>46</sup>

Recalling my recent conversation with Meredith Wallace, Director of Artistic Administration at Atlanta Opera, she emphasized that she and her colleagues often look to the premiere cast from productions in other opera houses when casting contemporary operas. Instead of only considering the voice category or the role's designated *Fach*, they are guided by the vocal quality and character portrayed by the singers in the original cast, which could lead them to consider voices outside traditional vocal categories.<sup>47</sup>

Casting trends and preferences for certain vocal timbres for a particular character have fluctuated over time. Perceptions and artistic tastes have changed when considering the most appropriate voice to sing a role. American opera in the twenty-first century is being created and recreated at companies and universities across the United States, and in a variety of non-traditional spaces, which can create innovation and inspire companies to consider non-traditional casting. UNT alumna and soprano Emily Pulley, creator of the title role (soprano) in Mark Adamo's *Lysistrata*, says "the lack of performance practice within this body of work is of benefit for continuing to promote and perform these contemporary operas and gives freedom to a *Zwischenfach* singer to sing

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<sup>45</sup> "Calendar," Isabel Leonard, accessed July 12, 2023, <https://isabelleonard.com/category/calendar/>.

<sup>46</sup> Jason Victor Serinus, "The Essential Isabel Leonard," San Francisco Classical Voice, April 5, 2021, <https://www.sfcv.org/articles/feature/essential-isabel-leonard>.

<sup>47</sup> Meredith Wallace, conversation with author, June 2023.



what they like!”<sup>48</sup> An example of this flexibility is demonstrated by the American composer Tom Cipullo. When asked in a 2017 UNT opera masterclass about his voice preference for the role of Older Alyce in his opera *Glory Denied*, Cipullo replied “I believe anyone who can sing the role should sing it, no matter the voice type!”<sup>49</sup> I examine one of the arias from this opera in Chapter 5. With this outside-the-box thinking regarding casting, singers will have more options in their careers as casting directors expand their choices beyond *Fach* considerations.

To expand further on the contribution *Zwischenfach* can have in American opera, a number of frequently performed and lesser-known twenty-first century American operas have pedagogical value for voices in the “between” or *Zwischen* category. With that, I have chosen to discuss eleven pieces that I believe could be sung by either mezzo-sopranos, sopranos, or *Zwischenfach* voices. The discussion includes four arias from Jake Heggie’s *Dead Man Walking*, two arias from Ricky Ian Gordon’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, one excerpt from Tom Cipullo’s *After Life*, one aria from Cipullo’s *Glory Denied*, one aria from Mark Adamo’s *Lysistrata*, one aria from William Bolcom’s *Dinner at Eight*, and one aria from Tobias Picker’s *Fantastic Mr. Fox*. These excerpts and arias embody some or all of the characteristics I associate with a *Zwischenfach* singer. These characteristics can include: an extended range—a mezzo-soprano who is able to comfortably and effectively sing notes and passages in the upper register; or a soprano who is capable of singing in the middle and lower registers without forcing or manufacturing a darker timbre; the ability to support the dramatic intention with a variety

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<sup>48</sup> Emily Pulley, conversation with author, June 2023.

<sup>49</sup> Tom Cipullo, UNT Vocal Masterclass, 2017.

of vocal colors; the ability to sing across a broad spectrum of dynamics when indicated in the score—especially the skill to nuance softer dynamics in the upper register, or, in singer-speak, “float” high notes; an ease and power to sing in the D5–F5 *passaggio*. While one could argue that this list is somewhat daunting, I know a number of singers for whom these characteristics set them in their comfort zone, and often make categorizing their voice confusing. Some singers who can check most of the boxes on the list above do not usually refer to their voice as *Zwischenfach*, preferring to use the conventional category of mezzo-soprano or soprano, for reasons discussed in previous chapters.

CHAPTER 5  
TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY AMERICAN ARIAS AND EXCERPTS  
FOR THE *ZWISCHENFACH* SINGER

The arias and excerpts discussed in this chapter can be helpful for singers when choosing repertoire for auditions or competitions, and provide excellent options for contemporary arias in English for voices who consider themselves *Zwischenfach*. The capability and vocal quality of the singer and the contrast within an aria package or recital should be considered when choosing from this repertoire, keeping in mind that not all arias or roles fit every voice.

For each aria or excerpt, I provide the name of the character, the context, general feeling or mood, range, tessitura, the singer who first premiered the role, and suggested vocal qualities needed to execute the piece successfully. I have included the publisher, any additional publications in which they appear, and available recordings. The goal is to provide singers with a variety of options in *Zwischenfach* repertoire. This list is but a few possibilities—a comprehensive list of all possible roles and arias in the American contemporary opera genre is a seemingly impossible task, particularly since new works continue to be commissioned and produced. The exciting world of contemporary opera is constantly changing and growing—we are living it!—and I hope this commentary will encourage listeners and singers to embrace the ambiguity of *Zwischenfach*.

*Dead Man Walking*

Music composed by Jake Heggie (b. 1961)

Libretto by Terrence McNally (1938–2020)

Commissioned and premiered in 2000 by San Francisco Opera

The story of *Dead Man Walking* is based on the true account of Sister Helen Prejean's correspondence and interactions with inmates on death row at the Louisiana State Penitentiary.<sup>50</sup> The two principal female characters, Sister Helen and Mrs. Patrick De Rocher, are both mezzo-soprano roles, and were premiered by Susan Graham and Frederica von Stade respectively. In a conversation at the McCammon Vocal Competition with Patrick Summers, Artistic Director at Houston Grand Opera and conductor of the premiere of *Dead Man Walking*, he explained that world-renowned mezzo-soprano Frederica von Stade was originally cast to premiere the role of Sister Helen. Instead, she requested to sing the role of Joseph's Mother and mezzo-soprano Susan Graham was then engaged to sing Sister Helen. Jake Heggie accommodated the cast change by rewriting much of the role in a higher *tessitura* to better suit Graham's voice.<sup>51</sup> The range for the role of Sister Helen is B3–B-flat5 and the *tessitura* lies around E-flat5.

The range of the mezzo-soprano role Mrs. Patrick De Rocher is D4–A5 and the *tessitura* also lies around E-flat5.<sup>52</sup> Although the range and *tessitura* for both roles are similar, each represent women of significantly different ages. Roles that depict older women, like Mrs. Patrick De Rocher, are often set in a lower *tessitura*—not necessarily a lower range. Both roles require a singer to express a broad range of emotional/dramatic colors, and navigate an entire evening in and around the second *passaggio* (C5–E5).

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<sup>50</sup> "Biography," Sister Helen Prejean, accessed December 13, 2022, <https://www.sisterhelen.org/biography/>.

<sup>51</sup> Patrick Summers, conversation with author, March 18, 2023.

<sup>52</sup> Sean C. Teets, "A Stylistic Analysis of Jake Heggie's Opera: *Dead Man Walking*," (DMA diss., University of Northern Colorado, 2007), 33.

## Publications

- Piano/Vocal Score and Aria Collection: Jake Heggie; Bent Pen Music, Inc.<sup>53</sup>
- Opera Arias for Mezzo-Soprano published; Bent Pen Music, Inc.<sup>54</sup>
- Other single print and digital editions available online

## Available Recordings

- *The Art of Susan Graham* Album, Warner Classics 2010 (Spotify)
- *Dead Man Walking*, Houston Grand Opera, Erato 2012 (Spotify)
- *Arias & Songs*–Album by Deborah Domanski, CD Baby 2011 (Spotify)
- *Heggie: Dead Man Walking* recording of 2000 world premiere production, San Francisco Opera, Alliance
- Numerous YouTube Recordings of the aria “This Journey”

## “This Journey”

- Act I, Scene 2: The Drive to Angola, (mm. 620–732)<sup>55</sup>  
*On her way to Angola Prison, Sister Helen contemplates her relationship with God, death, and the death row inmate, Joseph De Rocher.*
- Character: Sister Helen, a young nun
- Mood: optimistic, yet hesitant
- Range of Aria: C4–A-flat5
- *Tessitura*: G4–E-flat5
- Suggested *Fach*: lyric or dramatic mezzo-soprano, *Zwischenfach*, soprano, or mezzo-soprano
- Premiered by: Susan Graham, mezzo-soprano

The *tessitura*, range, length, and legato of the melody make this aria a good

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<sup>53</sup> Jake Heggie, *Dead Man Walking*, lib. Terrence McNally, Piano Vocal Score (Los Angeles, CA: Bent Pen Music Inc., 2007).

<sup>54</sup> Jake Heggie, *Opera Arias for Mezzo-Soprano*, lib. Terrence McNally and Gene Scheer, Piano Vocal Score (Los Angeles, CA: Bent Pen Music, Inc., 2021).

<sup>55</sup> Heggie, *Dead Man Walking*, Piano Vocal Score, 56-62.

choice for pedagogical reasons, and for an audition package that offers *Zwischenfach* repertoire. In the aria, Sister Helen sings about her calling and in particular, her fears regarding death as she prepares to meet Joseph De Rocher for the first time—the prisoner on death row with whom she has been corresponding. The melody soars with sweeping lines through the entire piece. At the climactic moment of the piece, Heggie sets the highest note at A-flat5 in m. 690, approached by an upward ascending line, then immediately descends to the upper middle range.<sup>56</sup> The aria sits primarily in the middle range, within the treble staff and has the potential to build confidence, stamina and strength in young voices. While Heggie composed the role for a mezzo-soprano, the tessitura is such that a soprano with ample color in the middle range could also successfully portray the character by summoning appropriate vocal heft. The length of the aria is just under three minutes.

“Be careful, people have always told me”

- Act 1, Scene 2: The Drive to Angola, (mm. 313–526)<sup>57</sup>  
*Sister Helen begins the drive to Angola Prison to meet Joseph De Rocher, an inmate on death row. The two have been corresponding through letters but have yet to meet.*
- Character: Sister Helen, a young nun
- Mood: playful, then anxious
- Range of Arioso: D4–G5
- *Tessitura*: G4–E-flat5
- Suggested Fach: lyric or dramatic mezzo-soprano, *Zwischenfach*, soprano, or mezzo-soprano
- Premiered by: Susan Graham, mezzo-soprano

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>57</sup> Heggie, *Dead Man Walking*, Piano Vocal Score, 34-48.

This excerpt is at the beginning of the second scene in Act 1, before the aria “This Journey.” This is Sister Helen’s introductory monologue, giving a glimpse into the character and vocal demands of the entire role. On her drive to the Angola Prison, where she will meet Joseph De Rocher, Sister Helen first shares the decision to become a nun with her words “be careful, people have always told me. When have I ever been careful?”<sup>58</sup> With growing anxiety, she worries about meeting Joseph for the first time, face to face with the words “pictures and letters don’t tell you how a man could do a thing like that.”<sup>59</sup> The aria, lasting four minutes and forty seconds, takes the listener through three sections that describe struggles and internal conflicts with accepting the calling she has chosen. The arioso-like writing is conversational and text driven; the declamatory voice line between E4–F5 brings out the dramatic intent that is needed for the emotions that arise out of the highly-charged political issue of the death penalty. In the final section of the aria, Heggie creates a frenetic accelerando in m. 478 accompanied by a hushed dynamic level in the orchestration, suggesting an undercurrent of anxiety for Sister Helen.<sup>60</sup> The vocal line becomes angular with declamatory accents as she searches for strength to fulfill her mission. This excerpt only appears in the piano/vocal score, and is not included in the Heggie Aria collection.

“What you all say my Joe did is so terrible”

- Act 1, Scene 7: The Courtroom, (mm.1676–1750)<sup>61</sup>

*In a courtroom, Mrs. Patrick De Rocher appeals to the pardon board for her son to be removed from death row.*

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>59</sup> Heggie, *Dead Man Walking*, Piano Vocal Score, 42.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 138-144.

- Character: Mrs. Patrick De Rocher, Joseph's Mother
- Mood: hopeless, pleading
- Range of Arioso: D4–A5
- Tessitura: F4–F5
- Suggested Fach: lyric or dramatic mezzo-soprano; dramatic soprano;  
*Zwischenfach*
- Premiered by: Frederica von Stade, mezzo-soprano

Joseph is on death row for murdering two teenagers. In this excerpt, Joseph's mother, Mrs. Patrick De Rocher, appeals for her son's life to the pardon board, asking for his removal from death row. The excerpt is raw with emotions of grief and anger as she sings "haven't we all suffered enough" in mm. 1689–1694, and repeating the phrase "haven't we" in mm. 1694–1698.<sup>62</sup> The long melodic lines are more syllabic and, at times, declamatory. The shifting emotions make this a heart-wrenching scene that requires a convincing singer-actress with the ability to summon a variety of vocal colors. The desperate words the character sings suggests the aria is best-suited for a singer possessing the ability to draw on many vocal colors to portray the range of emotions in the excerpt.

For the most part, the role and this excerpt sit in the singer's middle range, but there are a few moments where the voice line is written in the upper register and the singer must project vocal brilliance, power, and the ability to sing sustained *sotto voce* phrases and perform a *messa di voce* on G5. I would recommend this aria to a singer who has ample vocal color and power in the middle voice and possesses commanding acting abilities. The length of this excerpt of approximately 4 minutes makes it an ideal choice for a recital or audition aria.

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<sup>62</sup> Heggie, *Dead Man Walking*, Piano Vocal Score, 139.



“Don’t say another word”

- Act II, Scene 4: The Visiting Room, (mm. 923–956)<sup>63</sup>  
*Mrs. De Rocher pays a final visit to her son Joseph before he is executed.*
- Character: Mrs. Patrick De Rocher, Joseph’s Mother
- Mood: affectionate, melancholy
- Range of Aria: E-flat4–G-flat5
- Tessitura: E-flat4–D5
- Suggested Fach: lyric or dramatic mezzo-soprano; dramatic soprano;  
*Zwischenfach*
- Premiered by: Frederica von Stade, mezzo-soprano

This short aria is in dramatic contrast to Mrs. De Rocher’s previous aria, allowing for tender, sweet singing and acting. Mrs. De Rocher sings: “Let me look at you. See, I’m smiling” in mm. 925–927, as she recalls Joseph’s happy childhood.<sup>64</sup> The aria is set in a syllabic style, with phrases driven by a speech-like rhythmic quality in the middle voice. The melody line remains within the staff (E-flat4–E-flat5) with the exception of two phrases that require the singer to observe dynamic nuances on F5 and G-flat5.

### *The Grapes of Wrath*

Music composed by Ricky Ian Gordon (b. 1956)

Libretto by Michael Korie (b. 1955)

Based on John Steinbeck’s 1939 novel by the same name

Co-commissioned and premiered by Minnesota Opera and Utah Opera in 2007

Publications

- Piano/Vocal Score; Carl Fischer<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Heggie, *Dead Man Walking*, Piano Vocal Score, 309-313.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 309.

<sup>65</sup> Ricky Ian Gordon, *The Grapes of Wrath: An Opera in Three Acts*, lib. Michael Korie, Piano Vocal Score (New York, NY: Carl Fischer, 2009).

- The Grapes of Wrath Solo Aria Collection<sup>66</sup>

## Recordings

- The Grapes of Wrath World Premiere Recording can be streamed on Spotify, Amazon Music, and YouTube; also available for purchase.
- Various YouTube recordings of “One Star” duet available

## “One Star”

- Act I, No. 11: The Zephyr/One Star<sup>67</sup>  
*Rosasharn and her husband travel with their extended family in search of a new life in California to escape the Dust Bowl in Oklahoma. They dream about the life they will provide for their baby.*
- Character: Rosasharn, pregnant daughter of the Joad family, age nineteen
- Mood: hopeful, poignant
- Range: B4–A5
- Tessitura: E4–E5
- Suggested Fach: lyric mezzo-soprano; light/lyric soprano
- Premiered by: Kelly Kaduce, soprano

This aria can be successfully sung by any *Zwischenfach* voice, but I would recommend a more lyrical voice when considering for an audition aria. There is a version for voice and piano in Gordon’s published collection of arias from the opera, *The Grapes of Wrath Solo Aria Collection*.<sup>68</sup> The aria can be sung as a duet with a lyric baritone, taking the excerpt directly from the piano/vocal score. This aria’s beautiful melody is both angular and lyrical. Each phrase builds to the upper register before gently returning to the middle register. The aria ends on a C5 in the original score, but

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<sup>66</sup> Ricky Ian Gordon, *The Grapes of Wrath Solo Aria Collection*, lib. Michael Korie, Piano Vocal Score (New York, NY: Carl Fischer, 2010).

<sup>67</sup> Gordon, *The Grapes of Wrath*, Piano Vocal Score, 128-133.

<sup>68</sup> Gordon, *The Grapes of Wrath Solo Aria Collection*.

provides *ossia* on G5, which creates a more climatic alternative ending and works well for recital or auditions.

### “Truck Drivers”

- Act II, No. 1: Truck Drivers<sup>69</sup>

*Mae is a waitress at a diner on Route 66. She takes orders from the truckers at the counter. In the aria, she sings about her experiences as a waitress and encounters with customers passing through the diner.*

- Character: Mae, a waitress (singing-actress, twenties-thirties)
- Mood: flirtatious; jazz-like
- Aria Range: C4–G5
- Tessitura: F4–F5
- Suggested Fach: lyric mezzo-soprano; soprano; *Zwischenfach*
- Premiered by: Anna Jablonski, mezzo-soprano

At the opening of Act 2, Mae’s aria provides relief from the intense drama surrounding the Joad family’s escape from the dust bowl. The voice category/*Fach* for Mae is not specified in the piano/vocal score or in the Aria collection. The upbeat rhythms in a jazz-like, pop style make this an exciting addition to a concert or recital, allowing an opportunity to showcase the singer’s chest or belt/mix voice. The melody, with its dotted eighth- and sixteenth-note rhythms throughout, suggest elements of swing/jazz. In most phrases, the vocal line begins in the lower register on an E-flat4 or F4, then ascends to the top of the staff to showcase a singer’s brilliant upper register. Excellent diction will enhance this strophic story-telling aria, to make it shine.

### *After Life*

Music composed by Tom Cipullo (b. 1956)

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 37-45.

Libretto by David Mason (b. 1955)

Commissioned by Music of Remembrance and premiered at Benaroya Hall, Seattle, WA in 2015

#### Publications

- Piano/Vocal Score published by E. C. Schirmer<sup>70</sup>

#### Recordings

- Recordings of the full opera are available on Naxos, YouTube, and Spotify from American Opera Classics

#### “Baby Precious? Is it you?”

- Act I, Opening<sup>71</sup>  
*Gertrude Stein wakes up in the afterlife, and wonders who called her. She relives the fame of being on the cover of Time Magazine.*
- Character: Gertrude Stein, American poet and novelist
- Mood: Self-indulgent, narcissistic
- Aria Range: B3–B5
- Tessitura: G4–F4
- Suggested Fach: dramatic mezzo-soprano or soprano; *Zwischenfach*
- Premiered by: Catherine Cook, mezzo-soprano

I suggest this three-minute excerpt begin with a brief piano introduction starting at m. 15, with the voice entering at m. 18 to the text “Baby Precious?” and ending at m. 52. The pianist can end at m. 53 on a 6/4 chord, and the singer can continue sustaining the A-flat to give more finality to the aria. If the singer prefers a longer version, they could begin at m. 1 and end at m. 77.<sup>72</sup> An interesting aspect of this excerpt is the

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<sup>70</sup> Tom Cipullo, *After Life: Chamber Opera in One Act*, lib. David Mason, Piano Vocal Score (Saint Louis, MO: E.C. Schirmer, 2017).

<sup>71</sup> Cipullo, *After Life*, Piano Vocal Score, 4-13.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-10.

juxtaposition of the melodic elements that are both lyrical and angular, with wide intervals across vocal registers. The excerpt requires a voice that can sing with strength throughout the lower, middle, and upper registers, and the singer must also be capable of “floating” pitches at a *piano* dynamic above the staff at G-sharp5.

### *Glory Denied*

Music and libretto by Tom Cipullo (b. 1956)

Based on the true story of Colonel Floyd James Thompson, the longest-held American Prisoner of War, depicted in the book of the same name by Tom Philpott (2001)  
Premiered at Brooklyn College Opera Theater in 2007

Recorded live at Fort Worth Opera in 2013

#### Publications

- Piano/Vocal Score available from E. C. Schirmer<sup>73</sup>
- Two Soprano Arias available for purchase separately from E. C. Schirmer<sup>74</sup>

#### Recordings

- Fort Worth Opera recording available on Spotify
- Various recordings of the arias available on YouTube

#### “After you hear me out”

- Act 1, Scene 1, (mm. 174–208)<sup>75</sup>  
*Jim returns home after being held as a POW in Vietnam for almost nine years. His wife (Older) Alyce suffered greatly from his absence and declared him legally dead in order to move on. In the aria, they are reunited, and she wants to explain herself before he passes judgment.*

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<sup>73</sup> Tom Cipullo, *Glory Denied: Opera in Two Acts*, Piano Vocal Score (Saint Louis, MO: E. C. Schirmer, 2007).

<sup>74</sup> Tom Cipullo, *Two arias for soprano from Glory Denied*, Piano Vocal Score (Fayetteville, AR: Classical Vocal Reprints, 2010).

<sup>75</sup> Cipullo, *Glory Denied*, Piano Vocal Score, 20-24.

- Character: Older Alyce, wife of Colonel Jim Thompson, independent, thirties
- Mood: quiet, moving
- Aria Range: B3–B5
- Tessitura: E4–E5
- Suggested Fach: lyric mezzo-soprano or lyric soprano; *Zwischenfach*
- Premiered by: Gretchen Munding, mezzo-soprano<sup>76</sup>

This is a remarkable, challenging soprano aria, but, hear me out! For the most part, the tessitura sits in the lower and middle register, starting on F-sharp4, then descending to D-sharp4 before soaring upward. A few phrases require the singer to achieve a nuanced *piano* dynamic at F5, G5, and B5. The dilemma and challenge of this aria, and, for that matter, the entire role, is that it incorporates characteristics of both the mezzo-soprano and soprano. This role is quite dramatic, providing the singer with the freedom to create a variety of vocal colors in the extended vocal ranges. The aria is listed on the Wolf Trap Opera *Aria Frequency Lists* for both soprano and mezzo-soprano within the last ten years.

### *Lysistrata*

Music and libretto by Mark Adamo (b. 1962)

Based on the play of the same name by comic Athenian playwright Aristophanes (fifth-century B.C.E.)

Premiered at Houston Grand Opera in 2005

#### Publications

- Piano/Vocal Score available through G. Schirmer, Inc.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Anne Midgette, "A Former P.O.W., Now Sentenced to Loneliness," music review, *The New York Times*, May 7, 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/07/arts/music/07glor.html>.

<sup>77</sup> Mark Adamo, *Lysistrata or, The Nude Goddess: A Tragicomedy for Singers and Orchestra*, Piano Vocal Score (New York, NY: G. Schirmer, Inc., 2005).

- Six arias separately available for purchase from E. C. Schirmer

## Recordings

- A few recordings on YouTube of the Lysia and Myrrhine arias

## “Peace: Yes! of Course...”

- Act I, Scene 2: No. 34<sup>78</sup>

*Lysia is hoping to convince the Athenians and Spartan women to join her in withholding sex from their men until the war is ended. Given such a drastic and extreme plan of action, Myrrhine pleads with Lysia to consider those who are in love.*

- Character: Myrrhine, a romantic realist, in her twenties–thirties
- Mood: earnest
- Aria Range: B3–A5
- Tessitura: B4–F5
- Suggested Fach: lyric or dramatic mezzo-soprano; dramatic soprano;
- *Zwischenfach*
- Premiered by: Laquita Mitchell, soprano<sup>79</sup>

There is ample middle-voice singing in this aria, and the last section requires the singer to sustain long *fortissimo* phrases in the upper *passaggio* and upper range (E5–A5). Although the role is listed as mezzo-soprano, it was premiered by the soprano Laquita Mitchell, who at the time was a Houston Grand Opera Studio Artist. On the two occasions I performed in this opera, (scenes program as Dika with UNT Opera, and as Sappho with Pittsburgh Festival Opera’s film project) a spinto/dramatic soprano sang the role of Myrrhine. The last seventeen bars of the aria sit in the upper *passaggio* E-

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<sup>78</sup> Adamo, *Lysistrata*, Piano Vocal Score, 151-156.

<sup>79</sup> Houston Grand Opera, “‘Lysistrata, or The Nude Goddess,’ by Mark Adamo,” NPR, March 14, 2008, <https://www.npr.org/2008/03/14/88201659/lysistrata-or-the-nude-goddess-by-mark-adamo>.

flat5–A5. Sustaining this tessitura is challenging for a mezzo-soprano, and for all voices navigating the English vowels in the *passaggio* will take some practice. The need to navigate long, sustained phrases with rhythmic accuracy suggests the aria is for a more advanced singer.

### *Dinner at Eight*

Music by William Bolcom (b. 1938)

Libretto by Mark Campbell (b. 1953)

Based on a play of the same name by American playwright and director George S. Kaufman (1889–1961)

Premiered by the Minnesota Opera in 2017

#### Publication

- Piano/Vocal Score available from Edward B. Marks Music Company<sup>80</sup>

#### Recordings

- A few recordings of the arias on YouTube

#### “Lobster in Aspic”

- Act I, Scene 1: No. 1-1: The drawing room of the Jordan home, 9:00 AM, Friday, (mm. 216–429)<sup>81</sup>

*Millicent organizes her household for the impending visit of Lord and Lady Ferncliffe. She dreams of the main course: Lobster in Aspic.*

- Character: Millicent Jordan, a New York socialite, in her 20s to 30s
- Mood: punchy, comic
- Aria Range: C-sharp4–B-flat5
- Tessitura: E4–F4

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<sup>80</sup> William Bolcom, *Dinner at Eight: An Opera in Two Acts*, lib. Mark Campbell, Piano Vocal Score (New York, NY: Edward B. Marks Music Company, 2017).

<sup>81</sup> Bolcom, *Dinner at Eight*, 24-39.



- Recommended Fach: lyric mezzo-soprano; soprano; *Zwischenfach*
- Premiered by: Mary Dunleavy, soprano

This aria is just over five minutes long and requires a singing-actress with comedic skills. The singer should note the challenging diminished and augmented intervals, as well as singing across vocal registers. The wide intervals, low tessitura in a number of phrases, and often surprising notes in the upper register, must be sustained through the whole aria. Phrases alternate between sung and *Sprechstimme*, mimicking a recitative-like style often found in musical theater. This entertaining aria makes a unique and dynamic addition to an audition package, and could be especially effective and appreciated in recital programming.

### *Fantastic Mr. Fox*

Music by Tobias Picker (b. 1954)

Libretto by Donald Sturrock (b. 1961)

Based on the children's book of the same name by British writer Roald Dahl (1916-1990)

Commissioned by the Roald Dahl Foundation

Premiered by Los Angeles Opera in 1998; Reduced Orchestration and Chamber Version premiered in 2010

#### Publication

- Piano/Vocal Score available from Schott Publications<sup>82</sup>
- Various arias available for individual purchase from Schott Music Corporation
- Aria Collections available for Soprano, Mezzo-soprano,<sup>83</sup> Tenor, and Baritone/Bass from Schott Music Corporation

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<sup>82</sup> Tobias Picker, *Fantastic Mr. Fox: An Opera*, lib. Donald Sturrock, Piano Vocal Score, (New York, NY: Schott Helicon Music Corporation, 1998).

<sup>83</sup> Tobias Picker, *Arias for Mezzo-Soprano and Piano*, (New York, NY: Schott Helicon Music Corporation, 2014).

## Recordings

- Video of full opera on YouTube and composer's website performed by Opera San Antonio in 2014
- Recording by the Boston Modern Orchestra Project and Odyssey Opera from BMOP Sound, 2020 Grammy Winner for Best Opera Performance

## "I Want to Say"

- Act I, Scene 2<sup>84</sup>  
*Mrs. Fox expresses her concern for the dangers of the outside world and warns Mr. Fox to be careful when leaving the house.*
- Character: Mrs. Fox, married to Mr. Fox, and resident of the forest
- Character Mood: comforting, apprehensive
- Aria Range: E4–G5
- Tessitura: G4–G5
- Recommended Fach: lyric mezzo-soprano; soprano; *Zwischenfach*
- Premiered by: Susanna Guzmán, mezzo-soprano

Both sopranos and mezzo-sopranos can command the vocal range of this aria.

Many phrases begin on G5 and descend in an arpeggiated fashion to A4. Starting a phrase on G5 might prove difficult for some singers, as notes in the upper register are usually approached through an ascending line. This aria is just over two minutes and could provide an opportunity to improve this particular skill. The accompaniment is driven by dotted eighth-note and sixteenth-note rhythms in the piano, which effortlessly progresses the aria and encourages the use of legato singing through large interval phrases.

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<sup>84</sup> Picker, *Arias for Mezzo-Soprano and Piano*, 27-29.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

The purpose of this document has been one of examining the idea of *Zwischenfach* as it pertains to soprano and mezzo-soprano voices in opera. Ambiguity is an inherent part of voice classification, particularly when classifying voices that share qualities of more than one category or are capable of singing opera roles across *Fach* lines. The evolution of opera continues to serve current social and artistic interests of patrons and audiences, giving composers an opportunity to reflect on recent historical and current events. Twenty-first century American opera gives *Zwischenfach* voices an opportunity to showcase their unique characteristics, and be a part of creating a performance tradition in these new works.

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