



The Arts Past and Present: Diva

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The students who are studying the diva are doing so as the second last chapter of the first book of this course and the book's theme is that of reputation and, as we know, performers, particularly opera singers, often have a reputation of being what we refer to as the diva, which means they have certain personality characteristics, some negative and some positive. So by the time the students reach this part of the course they've already studied historical figures who have particular reputations like the ancient Egyptian Queen Cleopatra, and also the Russian leader Stalin, and looking at the diva as to their knowledge of how one gains a reputation, and how a reputation can be manipulated, not only by the personality themselves, but also by the media. As part of the study of music in this chapter, our students will already have listened to some recordings by Maria Callas, one of the great opera singers of the twentieth century, and we felt within the team writing this course that students might find it useful to learn how one becomes an opera singer, and what it's like to be a student of opera, and that's why we chose this girl, Catherine Rogers, who may become famous within her own time, so we can understand how a voice like Maria Callas can be developed, and how you learn to acquire stage presence and everything that goes with being an opera singer. So Catherine is almost like the students who are studying this course, she's right at the beginning of learning her profession and will go on, we hope, to be a very great professional opera singer.

The idea of the diva does have some very negative connotations that go with it. We think of people storming out of rehearsals, storming out of performances, we know about pop musicians who make demands of things that must be in their dressing rooms, otherwise they will leave the festival. This is what makes someone with that reputation very difficult to work with and we often describe them as being a diva because of the demands they make. When we interviewed Catherine at the opera school, and were speaking with the head of opera, he was making it very clear that we now have to help students work with other people, and this type of negative attitude of making unreasonable demands is not going to help necessarily in sustaining a career and might make people very difficult to engage, so we're now looking more at the idea of the diva in terms of performing ability and great talent, and hope we can focus on the positive aspects of being a diva, rather than the more negative ones that often come immediately to mind.

The students who are studying this film are looking at Catherine learning musical skills, the skills she requires to be a musical performer. But they're also watching her acquiring other skills as well: her acting skills, her language skills, movement skills across the stage; and in this way it's very similar to the journey that the students are making on AA100. They are learning lots of other skills as well that, at the end of the day, they may decide to just focus on one academic discipline, but they have acquired lots of skills in the process, and training to be an opera singer is the same. You're training to be a great singer who can convey the emotion and passion of the music, but at the same time you have to have acquired lots of other skills to help you get there.

Our AA100 students are learning lots of different skills and lots of things, especially at the beginning of the course: how to read an academic text and understand what's happening; how to read a historical document, and this historical document can be a written document, it may be a document that is now translated into English and we're unable to read it in the original language; they're learning how to look at artefacts - this may be paintings by Cezanne, or the Egyptian temples; and for music of course our artefacts are the recorded sound, and they'll have listened to some opera singing, also some modern pop singing too, and Catherine, not only in her rehearsal process towards performance, but we've listened to a

bit of her performance as well. So many different skills that students are learning while reading and in addition to this, of course, we assess them and what they have read, so they're learning how to bring lots of materials together to answer an assignment question, and learning the related essay-writing skills that go with that. And very much like a performer when students have submitted an assignment they get feedback on that assignment that helps them work better in the next assignment, helps them to write a better assignment, and those of us who are performing musicians know only too well that every time you perform there is feedback that comes with that, sometimes it's very positive and you can go away on a high after it, and sometimes it's a bit negative, but you can always take that on board, and it helps you perform better next time around. When we watch Catherine in, for example, the staging rehearsal of *The Marriage of Figaro* we see her working not only with fellow students as part of a singing ensemble, but also working with the director, and we could think of the director as being the equivalent of the tutor for an AA100 student. The director is there to help the singers achieve the goal, and he's also there to say when things are not going quite right so, for example, we see Catherine walking across the stage, and she admits herself that her movement is not very good and not very elegant, and she has said this, and we see the director telling her this as well and showing her how she could move more elegantly. And that's very positive criticism, and something that will help her as she progresses as a performer. And for students, if you think of your director being your tutor, and your tutor does the same thing, then we look at assignments, or if there's a piece of the course material that you haven't quite understood, or you say to the tutor I think it means this, and the tutor says no, that's the wrong end, it really means this, and then that helps you see a new way through the material. So I think we can find many parallels in learning to be a performer and in learning to be a successful AA100 student.