

They only get noticed when they make a mistake, but are absolutely crucial to the operatic creative process. **Jane C Oakland** investigates the shadowy figure of the répétiteur

Good companions

Everybody who has ever worked in an opera house, from chorister to soloist or stage technician, will have come across the opera répétiteur, the orchestral substitute in production rehearsals. Although thought of primarily as rehearsal pianists, in practice their role is considerably more varied and challenging. Depending on the production, they may need to conduct, sing, coach soloists, or check for sound problems in orchestral rehearsals.

They often act as a liaison between soloist, conductor, occasionally producer and sometimes management, in order to aid the smooth running of a production. In the words of one répétiteur, 'If a conductor isn't at the rehearsal, the rep can take charge. If the producer isn't there, music can be rehearsed; if some of the singers aren't there the rep can sing in the cues. But if the rep isn't there, the rehearsal can't really begin.'

However, most of their work is 'behind the scenes' and often done without thanks or acknowledgement. Another répétiteur remarks: 'We're often only noticed if we make a mistake.'

So what is it that motivates highly talented musicians to enter this often thankless profession? Many are aspiring conductors, hoping to progress quickly to greater recognition, but it seems that there are also growing numbers of musicians who are what might be called 'career reps', musicians who do not consider the work as an interim step or a second choice career.

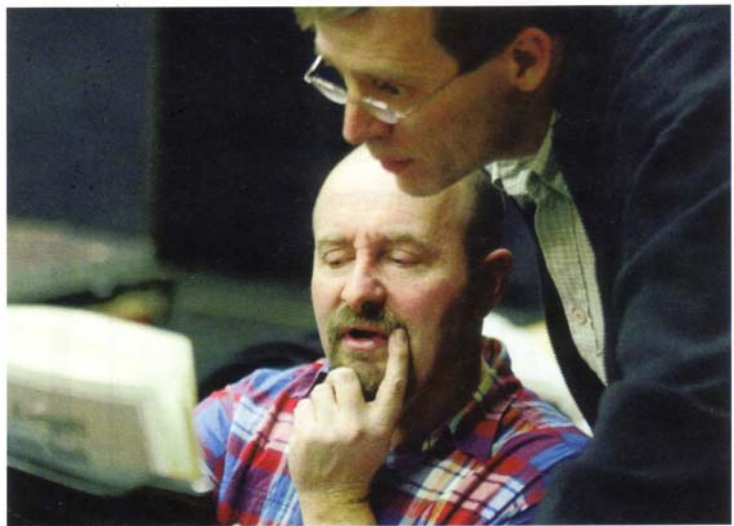
To find out more about the type of musician attracted to this work, I spoke in depth to several répétiteurs working in international houses in Britain and the continent who have enjoyed long-term success in the profession and who regard what they do as being an essential part of opera production. I wanted to learn more about the motivating factors that contributed to their perception of success.

As I discovered, there is no stereotype for a good répétiteur. All had different priorities when it came to job satisfaction but four factors came out as being common motivators for everyone I spoke to.

Financial security

'I've spent a lot of my life moving around but I think somehow in the adventure there was always a sense of having financial security.'

This was something instilled in the participants from an early age by their parents, most of whom would have preferred their children not to have a musical career. But this may have had something to do with the age of the parents rather than any dislike of the music profession. The musicians I interviewed were all post-war children growing up in an age where job security of any kind was highly sought after. Nevertheless, this could have left the children with a conflict of loyalties, wanting to be true to the wishes of their parents but also needing to satisfy their own musical ambitions.



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Interestingly, the work of the répétiteur seems to balance these factors. It is still one of the few 'performing' jobs where it is possible to have a firm income, and if a répétiteur is good there is generally no shortage of work. However, one of the advantages of being on contract with a large house is that it is relatively easy to come off contract temporarily in order to take on challenging freelance work without losing income stability. All the répétiteurs I spoke to made use of this, either to work on productions with other houses, or take on conducting or high-profile accompanying work. This helped them to avoid the feeling of being 'part of the furniture' and at the same time contributed to their own personal growth and recognition.

Performance

'You are very much one of the performers, even although nobody knows you're there.'

On the surface it might be difficult to think of répétiteurs as performers in the traditional sense, possibly due to the fact that their work is rarely on public display. Nevertheless they do consider rehearsals as performing opportunities but perhaps not in the way that a soloist might use the opportunities to display technical prowess. For a répétiteur a good performance consists of successfully adapting a musical score in order to give singers clear cues and support, providing orchestral colour for the conductor and generally being able to use the piano to create a suitable ambience for a rehearsal.

Given that keyboard skills are the main tool that répétiteurs have at their disposal for communication it is surprising that not all of the musicians I spoke to actually liked the piano as children. One found it a very lonely instrument, another stopped playing for ten years and only one admitted to spending hours a day on technical practice. They generally preferred more informal practice such as sight-reading and improvisation. They very quickly found ways of using the piano as a medium for working and performing with other musicians and were therefore unconsciously developing some of the skills they would need in their future careers.

In *The Musical Temperament: Psychology and Personality of*

Musicians (OUP), Anthony Kemp specialises in studying the personalities of several different types of musician. He notes that pianists in higher education seem to display greater extroversion and group dependency than other musicians and questions whether life in a university music department or conservatoire keeps the pianist in the forefront of musical life. Often this is the only option open for many pianists but, if successful, the work of a repetiteur can address the imbalance by providing high-level performance opportunities. The difference is they are performing for colleagues or employers rather than an audience, so perhaps their extroversion does not extend so far that they want to be the centre of attention like the singers.

Individuality

The ability to work within a team is an important factor in the work of repetiteurs and their perception of identity or individuality within that team appears to have considerable relevance for job satisfaction. One repetiteur, asked whether he ever resented being a member of a team, replied: 'Never. A good team is a collection of individuals: people who have their own things to contribute'.

However, they seem to have mixed feelings about individuality. As a soloist it is perhaps easier to find an individual style or sound that is uniquely personal but repetiteurs do not have that possibility, at least not in a playing capacity. Their job is to carry out the wishes of others, often using the piano purely as a tool to give maximum assistance to soloists and conductor, which can at times be very frustrating.

'I'm not always successful but I try to leave my individuality outside, I try to play well in rehearsals but as an individual manner of expression – no, that's something else'

Repetiteurs then need to find other ways of establishing individuality in their work. This can sometimes require adapting the perception of the roles they play within an opera team. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Doubleday Anchor) the psychologist Erving Goffman refers to identity as a 'front' or a role to be performed, which can change, dependant on the circumstances. In considering group dynamics, he suggests that when an individual assumes a 'front' that can



Nederlandse Opera repetiteurs at work (clockwise from far page): Rupert Dussman (seated) with assistant conductor Boudewijn Jansen, Brenda Hurley with conductor Riccardo Chailly, and with fellow repetiteur Peter Lockwood

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The ability of a repetiteur to recognise and act on these differing circumstances can greatly affect the smooth running of an opera production yet, despite not being able to openly display signs of individuality or 'specialness', all have been able to find a niche where they feel recognised. For one it was her playing abilities, for another it was his empathy with the singers, one even felt he was employed purely for his sense of humour – all of which contribute to important feelings of self-worth.

Validation

Self-worth is generally the result of positive validation from others. As a soloist a lot of validation comes from audience reaction or critical acclaim. For the repetiteurs this sort of appreciation did not seem important, recognition by their peers was more highly valued.

'There's nothing nicer than getting a compliment from a singer or a conductor because they know what they're talking about.'

A reason for this could be that several of the repetiteurs came from non-musical families who were unable to make knowledgeable judgments and it could be that even if praise was given it was not valued. However what was highly valued was their personal inclusion, professionally and socially, within the upper levels of music performance.

'An orchestra doesn't get as close to a conductor as we do, and we really know them and you feel they are friends. If you talk to other musicians, they would love to know a conductor as well as I do.'

The work of Henri Tajfel, notably in *Differentiation between Social Groups: Studies in the Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, (Academic Press) has done much to show that being a member of certain social groups can greatly influence one's self perception of identity and self-esteem. As can be seen from the above quotations, working and socialising with top singers and conductors seemed to be a way in which the repetiteurs were able not only to validate their professional work but also increase their feelings of self-worth and of course ultimate job satisfaction.

These observations have been made from just a very small sample of top repetiteurs and it is not the intention to assume that they are true for everyone who works in this field. Nevertheless, the general truth seems to be that despite relative anonymity, they do in fact play a vital role within the team of an opera production. Each musician I spoke to had been able to find his or her own ways of making what is essentially a 'helping profession' contribute to personal fulfilment. For the 'career repetiteur', perhaps the ultimate reward is the knowledge of having made a difference to somebody else's performance while at the same time satisfying personal needs.

As one repetiteur concluded, 'We don't get paid as much as a conductor, but we're just as important.'



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enhance the performance of the whole group, it is more than likely a project will be successful.

Repetiteurs are very aware that each opera production can require them to assume different roles: sometimes they may need to give soloists more support, sometimes they need to be a peace-maker, other times they are required to do no more than just play the piano.

'Every production has a different dynamic and you have to fit in, you're needed in different ways: sometimes the singers need you a lot, sometimes they don't. Likewise the conductors. You have to be flexible without losing your own sense of what is good or bad.'