

# Soprano Andrea Conangla from Portugal in an interview with her teacher the mezzo-soprano and vocal coach Marion van den Akker from the Netherlands

**AC:** The Fach vocal system is used mainly in Opera Houses to help organizing the opera seasons BUT is also used as a guide to students during the training. Is the Fach vocal system a good tool of categorization?

**MA:** Well, I think it can be very helpful. I agree with the Fach system in a certain way. It was invented in Germany, actually, and being used by them. It's a very special system. It can help you to, perhaps, not overuse your instrument and finding a good way to coach your voice and not going into extremes in certain roles that you can damage yourself, especially when you are still very young. So I think it is not a bad system, it is useful.

**AC:** Is it a valid way of categorization?

**MA:** Yes, I think it is. It's very valid because you can build up a good repertoire without overusing your voice. Only if you stay more or less in the same category of course.

**AC:** How is it used? Or how should it be used?

**MA:** I don't know nowadays how it is used, because in my time, they used it in Germany in quite a proper way. They produced one or two seasons in advanced and they looked for voices to fill in the roles. But in "the old days" it was the other way around. The producers and intendants of the opera houses were more interested in the singer, they searched operas to fit the singer's voice. If they really stick to the Fach system you could sing good roles, as I did as a *lyrical mezzo*, like *Cherubino*, *Dorabella*, *Carmen*, it was not too heavy, and it was good to build repertoire. But sometimes, some houses asked me for *Cherubino* as a light mezzopart but they also ask me to sing *Venus* a *dramatic soprano*, that was impossible for me at that time ! It's totally different. *Venus* can be sang as a *Zwischen-fach*<sup>1</sup> role. *Venus* can be sang by a *dramatic soprano*, but it can also be sang by a high full *lyrical mezzo*. It's in the middle of two Fächer, like *Fidelio a bit*.

**AC:** What are the dangers or opportunities involved?

**MA:** I think there's not a real danger when you stay within your Fach, on the other hand it can be a bit boring when you want to develop your voice. Some German singers stay for years in the same theater and singing the same parts over and over again (at least in my days) But You can also develop your voice in different ways. Let's say you are a *soubrette* and you like to develop more in a *lyrical coloratura soprano*. Because that's very near to each other, then you don't get the chance to do that in some houses. There are other houses, perhaps bigger houses where you get the chance to do so, but you need to be really careful with yourself and

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<sup>1</sup> Voice that fits between two categories.

take everything in consideration; can I do that? Is my voice strong enough, is my body strong enough, do I have the stamina on the long run? Can I sing all this different parts? So it depends a lot on yourself, and your knowledge of the music, on your own voice, on the right support of your teacher. Otherwise those houses will exploit you.

**AC:** Is there a way to minimize the mistakes which have been made in the past with the classification system?

**MA:** Yes when they invite/contract some more soloists in the fixed group , but that will cost THEM more money. Nowadays they don't produce so many operas anymore in one season, there's not enough money anymore , opera is the most expensive way of making theater. They produce more instrumental concerts in between, ballets, commercial programming so in this way the problem solves itself a bit concerning singing too much and too many roles in one season for one singer. But in the old days you had *Ariadne auf Naxos*, *Zauberflöte* and *Tosca* running in the same month ,you could be busy with 3 opera roles at the same time.

**AC:** But with different singers?

**MA:** Well, they should use more singers for the same Fach. Then you could minimize that problem of ruin the voice . But if you use the same voice singing *Tosca*, *Ariadne* and *Pamina* it's too stretching for the voice and too different in style at the same time, that's hard. You start rehearsing *Tosca* and in one month you have the *premier*. Right after the *premier*, you start rehearsing the other opera. Then for example at night you sing *Tosca*, in the daytime rehearsing *Ariadne* and there were two or three old performances still to go from *Die Zauberflöte* for instance. That's killing! Too much work with different roles , no rest, that is too much for the voice. Too hard! If they want to minimize these problems, they should contract more soloists for the same Fach in the fixed group of singers in that particular house..

**AC:** What do you think about the key words of the classification? (brightness, agility, weight, dark color,...)

**MA:** I think that's not really classification, because brightness, agility, dark, light color, can be all in one voice. You can have a lower darker voice but still have brightness (ringing voice). If we take Renata Tebaldi, she has a lyrical spinto voice that could sound very dramatic, full and sometimes dark but she has this brightness, this ring, she sang great stunning coloraturas! She could also sing the real big spinto parts. So, that's a matter of time to develop. Nowadays your study is really short and everything must be done or completed very quickly, there is no time to develop these qualities anymore. You could if you had/take more time. If the student, the teacher and the school had more time..... Time is money nowadays. Birgit Nilsson for example took the boot to Bayreuth for a week, prepared her part already a year before, worked for six weeks in Bayreuth and after the performances there was a boot trip bag so you could cool down yourself and your voice. This is not possible anymore. Well it is possible but not excepts anymore, very hard for today singers

**AC:** Do you think there is a way of being more objective?

**MA:** What is the use of that? Concerning voices we always need interpretation. So subjectivity instead I should say.

**AC:** What do you think is the role of personal taste and personal interpretation when using the Fach system?

**MA:** Personal taste is always very important Fach system or not, but age and development can also change your personal taste very much. For instance three years can make a big difference. Many things can happen also in your personal life, but I'll answer that question later more expanded

**AC:** Oh, ok. So, when did you know for sure your Fach?

**MA:** I didn't! Ahahah! I came to the conservatory to do my audition and I sang *Queen of the Night* like an idiot. I couldn't sing it at all, but I could hit the high notes, and I sang *Orfeo*, the very low aria. Then I ask the commission: can you help me to find my voice? Because I have no idea! I was eighteen years old. There was a *mezzo* and a *soprano in the jury*, and the *soprano* said: I can make you a *soprano*. Do you want that? Of course I wanted that, I loved it! I thought there would be exiting more work as a *soprano* then as a *mezzo*. I loved the high range, and I could sing it!

**AC:** When was your transition to the *mezzo* Fach?

**MA:** After my study, I had my degree *cum laude* as a *soprano*. I was the "queen of the high C" at the conservatory in Amsterdam in 1981. But I sang very light soprano parts. I sang *Ach, ich liebte* from *Entführung*, Mozart's *Exultate Jubilate*, I sang the C minor messe of Mozart, a lot of Händel. But I also sang *Louise* from *Charpantier*, *Pamina*, Berio's *Sequenza*,... and that changed after the conservatory when I sang 24 times *Pamina*. I didn't like it in the end. I couldn't do it anymore. The reason why I could do it anymore was my new love I think. I met my husband by then. I was singing as a soprano, and I met him. He was a very deep and serious person. He asked me: "Marion, you sing like an innocent angel, you sing all these beautiful notes, but what does this mean to you? What is the music about?" I never realized this. I was so involved in hitting and reaching these high notes, instead of making music. Then I started to make music and things changed completely an got more difficult. Singing as a *soprano* got worse and worse until I stopped. I thought I would never sing again. Then I met this teacher that changed my life and voice. A baritone. I was singing Mozart's Requiem as a soprano and I told him: this will be my last concert. He said: why should you? Maybe there's something else to discover in your voice, because when I hear your speaking voice it's low but very beautiful and strong. I went to his house, we sat at the piano and we started to try things. We started with *Rosina una voce poco fa*, Rossini, and I could sing that very easily. He asked: Have you ever developed that? No, never. But I spoke in that to me lower register all the time, I wasn't allowed to use this voice during my study. There was a whole new world for me to discover!

**AC:** Can you consider this first classification as a *soprano* was a wrong classification of your voice?

**MA:** Difficult question! I don't think so. It's so hard. I think this teacher did the best she could for me, she was a very light high soprano herself. Maybe it was wrong, but I did so well in that Fach and period. I could sing all these high notes, because I had no idea of...maybe I was

copying her all the time? She had a technique herself but she couldn't explain clearly how to sing. I was copying her all the time, and it was easy. I wasn't in trouble, so you cannot say I was in a wrong classification. It just happened, I can't blame her.

**AC:** Did this affect your vocal health?

**MA:** Well, I stopped in time. I didn't allow myself to sing this *Pamina* in a wrong way. When I was asked to sing some other *soprano* parts, I refused. I decided to study again and change my voice.

**AC:** So, the main reason of your change could have been love?

**MA:** Yes, because I met Rian and he was the great love of my life. I was so busy with all this high notes, the outside, everything, that I didn't allow love in my life. This man was so serious, so intimate, when I really got into the text, the music itself, not just showing off, the love for music, the understanding of the composition, the composers, poets,...that was the love. That brought me to another world and character. Deeper and more intimate and that changed my character and voice.

**AC:** And do you think it can have to do with any physical change? Maybe not aging, but having a child,...

**MA:** Perhaps, yes. But I was already a *mezzo* when I got my first child, which was also my last. I also had a double hernia surgery on my lower back when I was 26. That was a real tuff time! After that my voice also changed because I couldn't find the right support. It took me some time to recover. But I think giving birth to a child can change a voice because your whole hormone system is confused. It did however in my voice. I really started as a soprano, then as a *lyrical mezzo*, then after Nina's birth I think the voice became even more a bit richer and darker, with more character. Life experience can change your voice as well.

**AC:** How do you see the match between your own character/personality and your Fach category?

**MA:** That took me some time, because it was such a big change. The *soprano* was always the leading lady, the melody singer, the wonderful dresses (well, as a *mezzo* you can also wear beautiful dresses..) but the *soprano* is the leading lady. That's a different character, and the *mezzo* is more harmonic with the rest. Also with the singing. Being a mediator between the tenor and the soprano. You have wonderful parts as a *mezzo*. I think that the mezzo suits me better than a soprano, in character. As a *soprano* I was always nervous, very nervous! As a mezzo I had more contact with the earth. Also with the other *mezzo's*, I had better contact. More philosophical discussions... *sopranos* gargonade a lot about their roles they had to sing and how high they could sing. The *soprano* world! I remember I did a masterclass with Renata Scotto! There was one corner with sopranos they were so loud! They laughed in all sorts of scales and showing off everything like dresses, jewelery, high notes,... and the mezzos were together, sitting apart from the soprano group, it was more quiet and intense. It was another world for me. I liked the mezzo group very much. Also in my youth I always sang the middle parts, never the high or the low, I remember I composed some songs for three voices when I

was youngster, I always sang the middle part so when I became a mezzo “again” I felt very at home.

**AC:** Did this change made you look to technique in a different perspective?

**MA:** That’s a difficult question. I learned singing in different ways, I learned to open my throat and I never did that as a soprano. I had a very light voice and I was not allowed to use my chest voice or feel any connection. If you use chest in a proper way, without pushing but in combination with head resonance , it’s very valuable for the rest of your voice. By becoming a mezzo my technique changed, but I could use it as a soprano if I had known how to do it. It has a lot to do with the repertoire you sing. Here in the Netherlands, they often think it is too much what you do. They like thin, slender, light, bright voices because we do a lot of baroque music here. We have over a thousand choirs in this little country. If they produce big operas they fligh in foreign singers, because we don’t have dramatic voices here , and if once in a decade a dramatic voice rises in the Netherlands, they go abroad of course.

**AC:** Did this change make you rebuild your repertoire?

**MA:** Yes totally.

**AC:** Is there any role that was maintained?

**MA:** None.

**AC:** Cleaning!

**MA:** Yes! Well, maybe *Cherubino* stayed as a soprano and as a mezzo, but only for some years

**AC:** How did this change affect your professional career (job opportunities, roles, teachers you approached,...)?

**MA:** A lot indeed! It had a great effect on my career. When I was singing so much as a soprano in the early 80 until 90, I sang a lot, and then I stopped. I needed 3 years to build my mezzo voice, because I developed another imagination of the sound. I had to change that. It took me quite some time and I was still asked as a soprano, I had to say no. That wasn’t good for the career of course. When I started as a mezzo they didn’t except it ! So I had to go abroad. I went to Germany and to England to work as a mezzo in smaller opera houses and concerts . There I sang to agents and important people, they confirmed I was a mezzo, no doubt! Here in the Netherlands they only thought I was a soprano without high notes and they didn’t offer me any jobs. As soon as I was invited in Germany they started to invite me here as well again . Even at DNO, finally I sang the role of Carmen at the Royal Concertgebouw and I was accepted! But it took some years. They really liked me as a soprano, they couldn’t understand why I had to change my voice, they hardly accepted it. But I had to change and proof myself. This influenced my career tremendously, I had to build a second career which was not so popular anymore. But I was happy. I still am.

**AC:** How about teachers?

**MA:** I approached several teachers and also approached conductors for musical advise. I worked in Firenze for some time in small opera companies to develop my voice in the Italian belcanto style, the language and this conductor Mario Ruffini discovered actually my mezzo voice for the very first time. I was upset by hearing that, I knew deep down from the very past as a youngster I was a mezzo, but he was the first one saying this. This Italian conductor. Then I came home and I worked with this baritone. I worked with him for three years, 3 times a week. Later I searched for a good mezzo to work with, I wanted to get used to the mezzo sound, it was hard work. It was like changing from a violin to a cello. I needed a new idea of my own sound. I worked with many singers and the best one was Josephine Veasey she taught at ENO. We worked for 2,5 years. She was very good with a clear Italian technique.

**AC:** Do you still have a teacher?

**MA:** 'Smiling': Not anymore. I am nearly sixty and I like to coach and train young singers myself now.