Unique research on aging voices

Can the singing-voice last for life? For some people, the voice quality deteriorates as early as in their fifties, while others sound great well into old age. Nobody really knows why it is so and there is no scientific evidence to back it up. A unique research project will now be initiated by Symf (The Swedish Union of Professional Musicians) and the Göteborg Opera in collaboration with Malmö Opera and the Royal Swedish Opera with researchers at Lund University leading the project. Which factors have negative impact on professional opera singers' voices and how can damage be prevented so that voices can remain healthy in the later stages of a singers' career? These are some of the questions the researchers are looking to answer.

In 2014, the Swedish Government decided to postpone retirement age for singers from 52 to 65 years. Having lost the option of early retirement places new demands on work environment and on the knowledge of aging voices which has become a challenge for employers, employees and unions.

"It is important to create conditions for sustainable professional life. A lack of knowledge and research on how to prevent and rehabilitate age-related voice changes and how we can create conditions for sustainable professional life has meant that singers today have been forced to leave the industry", says Anna-Karin Simlund, deputy chair of Symf.

The Work Environment Act sets requirements for the prevention of ill health and, in addition, the Discrimination Act sets requirements for active measures within the work environment to counteract age discrimination.

"For us as employers it is tremendously pleasing that meaningful research on sustainable vocal health and voice quality will be carried out. Together with our singers we want to create optimal working conditions in order to enable our employees to perform at the highest level, and this research project will hopefully give us the tools needed for a long and sustainable professional life", says Lena Vedin Almung, administrative manager for opera/drama at the Göteborg Opera.

The research project is led by Lund University with the support of the Sound Environment Centre also at Lund University. The research leader is Pontus Wiegert.

"The research project is expected to directly benefit opera singers and their employers. From a broader perspective, we hope the project can contribute to important knowledge, even for other voice-dependent professions such as actors, musical artists and also teachers. A third of the total workforce in Sweden have a profession where the voice is the most important tool and a good vocal work environment can be crucial for ongoing professional activity up until the point of retirement", says Pontus Wiegert, resident physician of phoniatrics and doctoral student at the Department of Clinical Sciences at Lund University.

Our hope is that this research will contribute groundbreaking knowledge to the entire dramatic arts industry and lead to improved opportunities for a positive extended professional life for anyone who uses their voice as a professional tool.

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Lund University was founded in 1666 and is ranked as one of the top 100 universities in the world. With high-quality education and research at eight faculties, we are one of the most comprehensive universities in Scandinavia. The University has 47000 students and 7000 staff based in Lund, Helsingborg and Malmö. Lund is often considered to be Sweden's most attractive study destination and huge investments are currently being made in the new research facilities MAX IV and ESS in the city