

Title: Teaching Singing

Author(s): Barbara M. Doscher

Source: Doscher, B. M. (1992, Summer). Teaching Singing. *The Quarterly*, 3(2), pp. 61-66. (Reprinted with permission in *Visions of Research in Music Education*, 16(3), Autumn, 2010). Retrieved from <http://www-usr.rider.edu/~vrme/>

It is with pleasure that we inaugurate the reprint of the entire seven volumes of The Quarterly Journal of Music Teaching and Learning. The journal began in 1990 as The Quarterly. In 1992, with volume 3, the name changed to The Quarterly Journal of Music Teaching and Learning and continued until 1997. The journal contained articles on issues that were timely when they appeared and are now important for their historical relevance. For many authors, it was their first major publication. Visions of Research in Music Education will publish facsimiles of each issue as it originally appeared. Each article will be a separate pdf file. Jason D. Vodicka has accepted my invitation to serve as guest editor for the reprint project and will compose a new editorial to introduce each volume. Chad Keilman is the production manager. I express deepest thanks to Richard Colwell for granting VRME permission to re-publish The Quarterly in online format. He has graciously prepared an introduction to the reprint series.

Teaching Singing

By Barbara M. Doscher

University of Colorado

Just as the study of music theory, historical periods and styles, and the keyboard provide a body of knowledge which defines the well-trained musician, the study of the physiology and acoustics of the singing voice forms the bedrock on which individual teaching methodology must be based. A vague understanding of the singing instrument, even when coupled with a desire to transmit the "artistic" value of singing, will seldom produce a reliable, consistent technique, and without a controllable sound, this athletic endeavor, like any other, is fitful at best. Almost a century ago, a legendary soprano who sang until the age of 70 said that "a lasting art is impossible without technique" (Lehmann, 1902, p. 230). For example, the architect who knows nothing about the stress properties of the materials he uses may envision beautiful forms, but his buildings collapse because of his lack of "technical" knowledge. On the other hand, an architect with no imagination probably envisions one little box after another.

Form (technique) and expression (imagination) are an inseparable unit, and one without the other is an exercise in futility. Expressiveness is almost impossible, however, unless the artist has control of the basic sensuous material of the art form. The emotional and expressive aspects of singing can only be realized when certain muscular and articulatory activities produce a fluid, free sound. It is sometimes proposed that if one just *thinks* a

beautiful sound, it will emerge from the mouth. If that were true, any of us could have the diving form of Greg Louganis or could play tennis like Monica Seles.

An effective teacher of voice must know how the instrument we teach functions. The "natural" singer who does everything correctly is extremely rare, and the variety of vocal problems encountered is legion. In many cases, these problems are not the ones

we experienced in our own training. Understanding of the physiology of breathing, how the vocal folds function, and the part played by fixed vowel formants allows one to devise training methods based on knowledge, not on "voo-doo." The use of imagery is certainly a valid kind of methodology, but only if there is an anatomic, physiologic, biomechanic, or acoustic basis for that imagery. Granted, there

are still some areas of vocal function that are "not well understood," the voice scientists' way of saying they don't yet know what is happening. These areas are steadily being explored by increased research projects in the major voice-science laboratories such as the Denver Center for the Performing Arts in Colorado. Greater cooperation between singing teachers, speech therapists, laryngologists, and voice scientists generates new information available to those teachers who read the *Journal of Voice*, *Folia Phoniatrica*, *Journal of Research in Singing*, and other research journals.

Teaching Proper Vocal Development Through Choral Singing

In an ensemble context, there is a difference in the literature performed, and perhaps a

"There is enough self-criticism going on already. Your task is to teach these neurotic singers how to make a better sound"

Barbara M. Doscher is Professor of Music and Chairwoman of the voice faculty at the University of Colorado-Boulder, where she teaches studio voice and vocal pedagogy.

“[T]he choral musician has as great an obligation to be well-versed in the physiology and acoustics of the singing voice as does the studio teacher. Both are dealing with an irreplaceable instrument.”

greater interest in voices that can blend with each other. The latter criterion means that unusually individualistic voices probably are not appropriate for group singing. Other than these minor differences, however, both the studio teacher and the choral musician work with the same instrument. Moreover, in most universities the choral professors rehearse their groups four or five hours per week compared with the one-hour lesson in the studio. It is obvious, then, that the choral musician has as great an obligation to be well-versed in the physiology and acoustics of the singing voice as does the studio teacher. Both are dealing with an irreplaceable instrument. Thus, there is an ethical obligation to create as strong a background as possible.

Caring for the Singing Voice

Although it is not appropriate for me to tell my students how to live, and I am not naive enough to think that admonitions about abusive physical habits will be heeded, it is definitely a teacher's obligation to inform young singers of the most common dangers.

The pathologies most frequently suffered by singers are centered in the larynx and generally in the vocal folds themselves. Vocal nodules are hard calluses which form bilaterally near the middle of the membranous portion of the folds. The major cause of this problem is abuse, most often too much medial compression and/or singing at too high a tessitura for too long. On the other hand, a contact ulcer or granuloma of the vocal process of the arytenoid cartilage, also a bilateral phenomenon, is most frequently the result of a hard glottal attack and/or an unusually low speaking voice plus a driven, perfectionistic personality. A student who undertakes the serious study of singing needs frank, straightforward information from the teacher about possible injurious habits:

- (1) Don't yell or scream.
- (2) Don't continually talk over noise.
- (3) Don't continually clear your throat.
- (4) Decrease normal periods of talking when

you have an upper respiratory infection or a cold.

- (5) Avoid irritants and drying agents such as smoking and drinking alcohol. Antihistamines are also exceptionally drying to the throat.

On the pedagogical side, many problems can be avoided if the student uses enough air flow and hydrates frequently. Vocal-fold vibration generates extra heat and friction, both of which can best be alleviated by the use of sufficient air and by frequent sips of water. For all voices, whether developing or fully mature, singing at the wrong tessitura for the laryngeal configuration is courting eventual dysfunction. It is especially dangerous for junior high and high school voices to habitually sing alto.

There are many excellent books on vocal hygiene, but I think that the best teacher is a videotape of damaged vocal folds trying to phonate normally. A lecture by a voice therapist who understands the singing voice and has worked extensively with singers is also effective, particularly if time is set aside for questions from the students.

As a teacher, you must repeatedly tell your students that enough sleep is an absolute necessity. All successful athletes know that plenty of rest is of foremost importance for an effective performance. Because young people have almost limitless energy, they think they can “get by” with little sleep. The thoughtful, dedicated student will learn, either through painful experience or by following your advice, that “getting by” is not enough.

Learning Theory: Criticism or Support?

There seem to be two major opposing points of view about how to motivate a student to improve. Such statements as “see if he can cut the mustard” or “if she can't stand the heat, she should get out of the kitchen” are typical of the belief that continual criticism and comparison of one performer with another are powerful, appropriate motivating

“Words with aggressive connotations (like ‘push’ or ‘attack’) do not really help any athlete, except perhaps the football lineman, and fortunately the sounds of a singer and the grunts of linemen have no resemblance to each other.”

forces. This orientation assumes that those aspiring to be performers must be able to tolerate such adverse working conditions because the field is competitive. The opposing view, and the one to which I subscribe, is that learning takes place faster and the student retains new concepts more easily if the environment is encouraging and supportive. Human nature being what it is, even professional singers do better under such conditions. Because the singing instrument is inside the body, it is affected more than any other instrument by the emotional and physical state of that body.

I do not mean to imply that a teacher should say that a sound is good when it is not. Never lie to a student or try to cover up vocal difficulties. However, “Let’s try that again” is a much better comment than “What a poor sound.” The famous late nineteenth-century vocal pedagogue, G. B. Lamperti, said:

Never say to a pupil, “You sing badly.” It is comparable to introducing someone and at the same time saying, “Take care, he is a thief.” People hearing this will lock up their possessions (Brown, 1931, p. 135).

There is enough self-criticism going on already. Your task is to teach these neurotic singers how to make a better sound. Progress should be recognized with “That’s better” or “You’re getting there.” Thus demands and expectations go hand in hand with praise and encouragement. Never forget how much power you have over another person’s emotions and self-confidence; be careful not to abuse that power.

Do not be too quick to judge either a voice or a personality. The instrument is so immature at the usual college undergraduate age that it obviously will change considerably over the four-year period. As for the personality, initial outward impressions can be deceiving. Defense mechanisms come in many forms—arrogance, sullenness, even flippancy. A person’s body language is much

more reflective of his or her inner state than verbal language. I do not mean that you should try to be an amateur therapist. Leave that to the mental-health professionals. I do mean that each person’s ego is laid bare, so to speak, and the successful voice teacher must be sensitive to that naked psyche.

Practical Tips

Set a slow initial pace with a new student. In general, getting to know each other is more important than immediate progress. At first, the student cannot possibly practice with much efficiency or muscle memory, but will only repeat improper physical habits. At this early stage, ask for only ten minutes per day devoted to practicing technique. Be precise concerning the order in which the student should sing the vocalises, and confine yourself initially to only two or three. Follow through on whatever concept or remedial technique you are pursuing. Do not emphasize air flow one week and then ignore it for the next month. Find out the student’s areas of special interest. It will give you a clue to his or her personality, and if it is a physical pursuit such as dance, weight-lifting, or playing the flute, it often has a crucial effect on singing habits.

In line with my comments about learning theory, it is best to work with what the student can do, not what the student can’t do yet. A very good way of breaking bad habits is to establish good habits in their place. If you work from strengths and “sneak up” on weaknesses, you avoid the mental and emotional fear of failure. The voice teacher who continually warns the student about a tight, retracted tongue will soon be teaching someone whose tongue feels five times as big as it really is. If, on the other hand, the teacher uses vocalises in which key vowels are preceded by the unvoiced /th/, the result is more air flow plus self-extension of the tongue. When one is trying to cultivate

physical habits from which a reliable, stable method of vocal technique will arise, it is better to “speak” to the muscles, not the brain. Any physiological explanation that seems necessary can be made at the end of the warm-up session. Words with aggressive connotations (like “push” or “attack”) do not really help any athlete, except perhaps the football lineman, and fortunately the sounds of a singer and the grunts of linemen have no resemblance to each other.

Ask questions of your students. Encourage them to become aware of what is happening physically when they sing. A teacher provides technical guidance, aural feedback, and moral support, but ultimately each student must do the singing and make decisions about the singing. It is informative, sometimes even astounding, to hear students’ concepts of their own sounds, their vibratos, and what happens to the soft palate as they sing higher. As it is in families, there will come a day when the fledglings leave you. If they are used to taking responsibility for their own progress, their flight will be frightening, but also exhilarating because they have a solid basis for reaching into the unknown.

The question of vocal stamina occurs frequently among those who direct and/or conduct operas or musicals, or lead choral groups. It is well to remember the old adage, better a month too late than a day too soon. Too high, too loud, too long seems to be the warning cry of many voice therapists. Although the high-school aged singer is especially vulnerable under these circumstances, college-aged and even pre-30 graduate students are also at risk if the show is not double-cast or if the director does not understand that periodic rest is needed. Garcia (1894) maintains that a regimen of three half-hours per day, even for the mature voice, is the maximum practice time and will give flexibility without risk of fatigue. Sherrill Milnes (1977) confirms Garcia’s limit. Lamperti advises a half-hour consisting of three periods of ten minutes each for a beginning singer (Brown, 1931). In comparing singers and baseball pitchers in *Sports Illustrated*, Kellogg (1979) says:

To those who don’t know the effort that goes into singing, it may seem strange that an op-

era singer who sings only half an hour to an hour in an entire opera requires two or three days to recover.

It is not only unfortunate and counterproductive, but also potentially destructive to the singing voice if rehearsals of over an hour and a half of continual singing are required by orchestral or choral conductors. I like Bunch’s (1982) blunt statement to her colleagues in these disciplines:

It is regrettable that some conductors with little working knowledge of vocal production will require singers to rehearse for long tiring hours. This is difficult for seasoned professional singers and an almost impossible situation for the novice. Even worse are the choral conductors whose all-day workshops or long rehearsals constitute the most flagrant violations of proper usage of the voice (p. 121).

I would go even further and say that it is a disgrace to our profession that future studio voice teachers and choral conductors continue to receive advanced degrees when they have no knowledge of the physiology and acoustics of the singing voice. Training in repertoire, style, foreign language diction, keyboard analysis, and where to order risers are all very well, but these cannot replace information about the singing voice itself, the core of this kind of music making.

A word about repertory. It is perfectly true that the Italian language is the easiest on the throat of all the major singing languages, primarily because the consonants are articulated so softly. Consequently, many voice teachers prefer to start with Italian songs. I disagree. For me, it is more important that a young singer understand the poetry and the emotions the song is trying to express. The emotional roots, the reason why a young person decides to learn how to sing, should come from a fervent desire to communicate his or her view of life to other people. There are many ways in which people try to communicate. Singers do it with music and words. If the words are not deeply felt by the singer, half of the equation is missing. Singers can certainly learn to pronounce their own language as well as or even better than the various foreign languages required for a performance degree.

A teacher can make or break a student

“Finally, let those of us who choose a life of teaching over more materialistic and remunerative professions rejoice at the wonder of that splendid profession. In this violent, fragmented world, we help other humans give expression to their deepest emotions. Can there be any greater joy?”

with the kind of literature assigned. Take your time and always keep in mind the vocal color, the tessitura, current technical problems, musical strengths, and (with beginning students) the personality of the student. Of course, there generally is a reason why certain songs are most commonly used. Just because you have heard Schubert's *Lachen und Weinen* countless times does not mean that your student has. Do not show off your esoteric taste or assign a song you have always wanted to teach, even though you secretly know that it is too advanced technically for a very musical, but young student. Even with an advanced singer, assign literature below the technical level of frustration for performance or audition and save more challenging work for studio training.

The basis of good diction is the ability to sing focused, fluid vowels. Still, there are certain English consonants that must be altered, especially in the high register. The following consonants should be sung dentally, with the tongue against the upper front teeth instead of the gum ridge: /d/, /n/, /t/, and /l/. The resonance of sur-rounding vowels is weakened if the more plosive articulation is used. The /l/ is especially insidious because not only does it touch the gum ridge, but the sides of the tongue cleave to the upper molars. Of course, the worst villain of all English consonants is the retroflexed /r/. When spoken by Americans, there is a constriction at the tip of the tongue and another at the base. The vowels preceding or following it generally sound unusually guttural. In classical singing, this consonant should be flipped, but in American folk songs or popular music, if the singing is intimate and the room generally is not large, the detrimental vibrational reaction in the throat is minimal. The flipped or rolled /r/ definitely is not appropriate for Gershwin or Ellington.

Teacher-Student Relationships

Do not be afraid to be excited or enthusiastic or to show your feelings. You can even cry if you are that moved by a song. Be tolerant of high spirits; an inhibited, introverted person seldom becomes a singer. Above all, let your own body language tell students that they can learn.

Be open to questions and valid suggestions (as opposed to babbling) from students. No two minds approach any experience from precisely the same perspective, just as no two voices are ever exactly alike. Occasional verbal give-and-take is a good way to find out more about how that student approaches a problem. Above all, if an exercise is not succeeding, do not pretend that it is. Admit that your idea did not work, and start over. If you do not know the answer to a question, say so and try to find the answer if there is one. Accomplishments need to be greeted with joy, especially the first tentative awakening of the creative impulse. For the most part, respect is based upon how well you know your field and how skilled you are at teaching others how to be successful in that field.

There is one other important “do-don’t.” Do not be rigid in matters of interpretation. It is true that Schubert should not be sung *à la* Streisand, and Gershwin should not sound like Mozart. Matters of style and good taste must be dealt with. But just as students have their own sounds, they also have their individual ideas about the emotional climate of a piece. Challenge them to convince you expressively rather than insisting, with metronome ticking, upon your own ideas.


If you have a weekly class at which students perform, encourage clapping and insist that if comments are solicited, the good points in the performance be mentioned first. Train your students to be supportive of each other, even when specific suggestions for improvement are given. It can be

done, and it has an effect on their outlook on music and its place in the scheme of things. Music is not intrinsically a competitive endeavor, despite the increase in competitions fostered by the business part of the professional singing world. If during their training, singers are encouraged to be individualistic and their voices are described as unique, singing will enrich their lives, regardless of whether they make a living that way or not. We must allow each person, within his or her own present capabilities and emotional disposition, to have a personal and individual vision.

Harry Plunket Greene wrote a marvelous book called *Interpretation in Song* (1912, 1956). He talks extensively about that most essential of ingredients, imagination. He believes that imagination encompasses what is remembered, what has never been entirely experienced (such as Ravel writing about Spain when he had never been there), and what cannot yet be seen. The latter idea is especially intriguing because the human spirit has always tried to overcome the absoluteness of the present. Cognitively or rationally, music is an inexplicable mystery, but emotionally it is a vital force. Even a young person with limited life experience must be allowed to unleash that force, to give free play to the imagination, and to make expressive "mistakes." After all, the "mistakes" of today are often the bases for the "insights" of tomorrow.

Finally, let those of us who choose a life of teaching over more materialistic and remunerative professions rejoice at the wonder of that splendid profession. In this violent, fragmented world, we help other humans give expression to their deepest emotions. Can there be any greater joy?

References

- Basmajian, John V. (1982) *Primary anatomy*. (8th ed.) Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins.
- Brown, W. E. (1968, reprint from 1931) *Vocal wisdom: Maxims of G. B. Lamperti*. New York: Arno Press.
- Bunch, Meribeth. (1982) *Dynamics of the singing voice*. New York: Springer-Verlag.
- Emmons, Shirlee. (1988) Breathing for singing. *Journal of Voice*, 2 (1), pp. 30-35.
- Garcia, Manuel. (1894) *Hints on singing*. Translated by Beata Garcia. London: Ascherberg, Hopwood, and Crew.
- Greene, Harry Plunket. (1956, reprint from 1912) *Interpretation in song*. New York: Macmillan.
- Howie, John and Pierre Delattre. (1962) An experimental study of the effect of pitch on the intelligibility of vowels. *The NATS Bulletin*, 18 (4), pp. 6-9.
- Kellogg, Sean. (1979) As I see it. *Sports Illustrated*. May 14.
- Lehmann, Lilli. (1952, reprint from 1902) *How to sing*. New York: Macmillan
- Milnes, Sherrill. (November, 1977) Lecture at the University of Colorado, Boulder.
- Perry, Paul. (August 31-September 1, 1991) Tee time with Lee Trevino. *USA Weekend*. 

Music Researcher E-Mail Directory

Join over 60 researchers around the world who are listed in the directory!

An e-mail directory for music researchers is available on-line. The directory is sent out monthly and appears in the pages of *Psychomusicology*.

To participate, e-mail your full name, institutional affiliation, and internet or bitnet address to

musepa@cc.utah.edu or **musepa@utahcca.bitnet**

Most university campuses provide access to international e-mail systems free of charge. The techniques are simple and the power is phenomenal.

This service is provided as a courtesy to the music research community by the Department of Music at the University of Utah.