

Let's Build a Straw Man! (The Technique versus Artistry Debate)

The increasing interest in functional aspects of the singing voice may be expected to cause a degree of apprehension among teachers who have not yet had an opportunity to acquaint themselves with the developing body of literature on use of the professional voice. This uneasiness comes largely because of concern that cherished opinions may need to be altered, or that long-held assumptions may be called into question. (Those reasons, of course, are never acknowledged.) Such anxiety has led, in some quarters, to the setting up of a pedagogical "straw man," a caricature that can easily be toppled.

This straw-man construction consists of the absurd notion that vocal technique based solely upon physiology and acoustics must be presented and perfected before one turns to musical and artistic factors. When this flimsy and ridiculous figure is erected on a hypothetical pedagogical pole, he is easily assailed and deposed. One is then freed from the troublesome matter of acquiring factual information and from submitting to the discipline of learning what has been going on in the profession over the past few decades in the area of research into professional voice usage.

Of course, no musician in any field could support the assumption that mechanical technique first must be totally mastered before attention is directed to music making. It is, therefore, foolish to pose the question, "Should vocal technique be taught independently of artistry?" Such a question interjects an artificial dichotomy into vocal performance pedagogy. If there exists in the vocal pedagogical world anyone who



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would answer such a question affirmatively, he or she remains to be identified!

Mainly as a result of the developing cooperation among persons who work with vocal professionals, today's teacher of singing has a number of ways of verifying or modifying opposing concepts that often divided vocal pedagogy in the past. The creators of the straw man prefer to forget that most persons involved in voice research, both past and current, have themselves been serious artists and performers. However, the straw-man vocal pedagogue is made to resemble the mad scientist of the arcane laboratory who searches for alchemistic solutions to vocal problems. He or she is generally charged with searching for a "new way" to sing.

There is no logical reason for suggesting that walls should be erected between a performance art and the elements of skill that go together to make up that art. The "either technique or art" syndrome raises just such barriers, and is detrimental to the furtherance of vocal pedagogy.

To maintain the position that one should deal only with artistry, while ignoring the voice as an instrument upon which technique is of necessity built, would be equally untenable. Yet, one often hears it said that through imaginative treatment of word and musical line, all physical problems in singing will disappear. That, of course, is patently nonsensical.

Furthermore, as soon as *any* aspect of vocal sound is discussed with a student, the teacher is dealing in physiologic and acoustic instruction, often of an inventive nature. It is not the case that functional aspects of singing are not being considered in such instruction, but that the functions described do not correspond with reality. When any teacher of singing considers vocal timbre, phrase direction, posture, dynamic levels, "resonance," breath, vowels, agility, or sostenuto technique, that teacher is dealing in physical and acoustical materials. The creators of the straw man prefer to ignore what is factually known about the voice as an instrument and to offer assumptions that seldom stand the scrutiny of fact.

Surely no one, in good faith, can believe that in today's highly

competitive performance world there exist numbers of voice teachers who train professional singers by means of physical function devoid of artistic expression. What is increasingly clear is that teachers of singing who avail themselves of information in all areas, including psychology of performance, musical style, linguistic accuracy, and vocal function, are the teachers who are producing young professionals ready to enter the real performance world. (Many of these are Americans, it should be noted.) Today's wise teachers, as did the major teachers of the past, avail themselves of *all* these tools. One should entertain skepticism as to the actual intent of the person who actively campaigns against the dissemination of factual information and who hides behind the "I only want what is musical" mantle. Musicality, based upon coordinated function, is precisely what vocal technique examined in the light of vocal function can facilitate.

It is time to forego the foolish partisanship that comes from trying to divide vocal pedagogy into opposing camps labeled "science" and "art." It is simply not the case that current vocal pedagogy is becoming "scientific" to the detriment of artistic expression. It is clear that the only reason for any form of technical vocal study, which must be based upon the physical instrument, is to be able to sing in an artistic and communicative manner. *Function and art cannot be separated at any phase of development.* It is equally clear that for any teacher to invent "facts" is not a tenable route.

The next time you meet a teacher of singing who expends great energy in setting up the straw man of the technique/artistry pedagogical dichotomy, and who at every turn expresses disdain for those who labor to further the accomplishment of artistry through examination of the voice as an instrument, ask yourself why.

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