

McPedagogy

This is an age of hurry. Fast results are expected in every field. A theologian viewing the popularization of religious concepts worries over the proliferation of McReligion. The political scene, with its avoidance of in-depth discussion of issues in favor of twenty-second sound bites, has become disastrously mired in McPolitics. Education, when it favors social adjustment and participation to the detriment of information, qualifies as McEducation.

Much of what passes today for popular music, lacking form and substance, can best be termed McMusic. (This includes not only the omnipresent music bill-of-goods sold to the young through adult marketing indoctrination, but what you have to listen to in your dentist's office.)

The art of singing is not immune to non-substantive instruction. Vocal McPedagogy lives. It consists of quick solutions based on tricks and myths as to how the vocal instrument works. *Pedagogy with Ease*, pulled out of a bag of idiosyncratic invention, is an alluring will-o'-the-wisp, enticing many teachers and singers.

McPedagogy, the quick-fix for the problems of the singing voice, fails to take into account the two basic principles of



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technical instruction: (1) diagnosis, and (2) prescription. To instruct, there must be a body of specific information that permits analysis leading to improvement.

It is insufficient to recognize that a vocal sound may be less than ideal; the correction of any defect requires the ability to diagnose what interferes with good function. Only then can technical prescriptions be made.

Acquiring such information is within the grasp of any voice teacher of average musical training and intelligence. Information regarding the basic physiology and acoustics of the singing voice is accessible. It can be found in general textbooks and in manuals specifically designed for the singer.

The vocal performer and teacher do not need backgrounds in medicine or the physical sciences in order to comprehend these relatively simple principles. A few months, or perhaps a year, of concentrated reading and study of the literature can produce specificity of language that allows a teacher to convey more accurately what the musician's ear hears and desires. It is not necessary to "take time out to enroll for course work," as is often assumed. Simply, there must be a willingness to take the time to acquire the tools of one's trade. To continue to complain that it is impossible to do so is to admit that the professional goals of the discipline are too demanding, and to play a somewhat dishonest game with oneself and one's profession.

Voice teachers must not allow themselves to be intimidated by the new technology, nor by persons who fail to make the newer feedback devices understandable. They must resist the obscurantists who make voice "science" difficult. With an honest effort, what at first may seem

foreign will quickly become friendly.

No serious teacher of singing would attempt to give instruction if unable to read music. Anyone who can learn to read music can learn to read a spectrogram, and in far less time. The excuse that it is all beyond one may indicate a more serious defect regarding one's vocal pedagogy: refusal to give up cherished opinions and to risk examination of private pedagogical territory. (To hide behind the old saw that adding to one's knowledge will diminish artistry is embarrassing.)

More charitably, some teachers who have themselves come entirely through the imagery and personal sensation route, make the false assumption that everyone must have the same set of empirical experiences, described through imaginative language. This sentiment is refuted by teachers who have bothered to supplement their good ears and experience with a body of precise information. They universally express great joy in their new capabilities and increased freedom of expression.

Vocal pedagogy is only as useful as the specific information it conveys. Regrettably, the value of one's teaching cannot be measured solely by the excellence of one's musicianly ears and the ability to recognize a good sound.

There is no doubt that the musical ear is, above all, the key to vocal instruction. A clear concept of desirable vocal timbre and an awareness of how to make expressive use of it, is essential. But the ability to communicate concepts to a student in understandable language is the essence of first-rate teaching. Not just what one knows, but how one conveys that knowledge, leads to successful teaching.

When dealing with a student who is struggling with technical problems, it is not enough to play the combined role of artist model, counselor, psychiatrist, musical coach, and close friend. Even the established artist pupil may develop problems that a teacher should be expected to solve, not through personal charisma, but through diagnosis and prescription.

McPedagogy, based on magic-wandery, is on the way out, not only in American but in European vocal circles as well. The "artist-teacher" who requests the student to think purple or chartreuse, or who requests floating tones to emerge from chimneys on tops of heads, is no longer taken seriously. Today's student wants information, not McPedagogy. The successful modern teacher takes time to acquire the means for diagnosis and prescription. Not to do so is to be satisfied with less than what one has the capability of becoming.

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