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My Little Private Impostor Syndrome

by Martine Bron

When asked to describe my life journey, I inevitably get the same reactions. In short, "Whoa, you're a singer, and a voice teacher, and you've been living in three different countries in the last 15 years... you must be good at what you do." The shortcuts people take...

But what people don't know is that during my exciting travels, I carried a suitcase of "impostor syndrome" – you know, this feeling of inadequacy and doubt we sometimes get. It started very long ago when I sang as a dilettante, and it reached a peak when I began teaching in 2003. Wikipedia explains impostor syndrome as: a psychological phenomenon in which people are unable to internalize their accomplishments. Despite external evidence of their competence, those with the syndrome remain convinced that they are frauds and do not deserve the success they have achieved. Proof of success is dismissed as luck, timing, or as a result of deceiving others into thinking they are more intelligent and competent than they believe themselves to be.

The root of it really was, "How can I trust my voice, let alone allow my students to trust me with their voices, with no proper pedagogical and voice science education?" For there it was, even though I studied at college level in Switzerland, the USA, and Canada between 1999 and 2003, in three quite different jazz programs, each of these schools focused on repertoire only, probably assuming we knew everything there was to know to major in voice. But I knew I didn't, hence the famous syndrom. As a result and with a new bachelor's degree in music, I had only very partial knowledge of how my instrument worked. A very common story indeed.

So where to start? Should I specialize in a method? Would it really solve anything? I'd think not, especially without good solid understanding of the vocal instrument. So I made an appointment with a teacher in Montreal whose reputation was appropriately eulogistic. After a few classes I grasped how I actually could control and coordinate all the elements involved in singing. There was hope. But I was still a simple student.

In the course of a few months, my mentor started to train me to join his teachers' team in his private school. I guess my relentless curiosity and questioning were qualities he was looking for. Still, how is it that he made such a difference compared to the seven teachers I had before? Maybe it was me who was gaining brain cells? Maybe I was starting to connect the dots? But no, as grateful as I am for everything that I learned from each and every singing professor, and even years later after many more studying experiences, he was the only one who showed me where to look, how to keep an opened mind and ear, and how to question. He showed me how to enlarge my knowledge of singing by blending many different fields of research on voice of course, but also to incorporate neuroscience, body mind connection, psychology, awareness through movement, and so much more. Very naturally, I made his model mine.

Is this to say we should not learn, nor teach from a method? Not in a long shot! I've learned tons with a diversity of famous comprehensive approaches. And as a matter of fact, aren't we

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all, as teachers, pledged to convey the matter as we understand it? If one needs a methodology, so be it. Yet by remaining too faithful to one single method or strategy, one could become an apostle in service of a dogma, consequently failing to encompass the unique needs of a student's voice, goals, and learning process, and even letting her think that, when no improvement, she is at fault. How many times do we have to straight-up de-program our students' voices and thought patterns because of what they've learned through one method by themselves on YouTube, or even with a teacher?

For more than ten years now I have been trusted as a teacher and the impostor syndrome has receded almost completely. It comes back at times when I get stuck with a student and feel like I am failing her. But nowadays I welcome my little syndrome for it has become a sort of a guardian, a humble reminder that I do not know it all, that my student is teaching me something I don't know yet, and therefore I need to find a way for her to regain her place and sense her power of participation and action that is so paramount in a learning experience.

And if I have method, here it is: I embrace the role of the Chef, as every singing lesson becomes a cooking lesson. I teach whatever my apprentice needs to learn in order to found and grow her

practical knowledge. I adapt my strategy to her mood and taste of the day, as well as her way of learning or processing, meanwhile exploring new recipes, keeping myself à la page, updated and inspired through different sources -- creating and tasting a unique collaborative experience as the lesson unfolds.

And if you look closer, I think most of us teach this way. At least this is what I found when I invited my fellow Estill workshop classmates to share about their experience as teachers, around a big pot of homemade Thai lentil soup for that matter! We were all teaching chefs from different singing and teaching backgrounds; some more experienced than others, some with a marked taste or ease for a teaching approach. Yet all of us curious and open minded, exchanging, sharing, and expanding our knowledge together. How precious to feel safe enough to open up about a difficulty or ask a feedback or advice. How inspiring to be surrounded by so much diversity and emulation.

The voice is such a mystery to many. We all need to find it, not only as singers, but as human beings who must find a place in the world. In that regard, our role as voice teachers is of magnificent importance, which is not to say we shouldn't play it with a little grain of salt.

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