

Richard Dale Sjoerdsma

Honesty In Teaching



Richard Dale Sjoerdsma

. . . no legacy is so rich as honesty.

— Wm. Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act 3, Sc. 5

INTERERRUPTED BY A REPORT on the ICVT9 in Stockholm, the “honesty trilogy,” begun in the May/June 2017 *Journal of Singing* continues with this edition of “Editor’s Commentary.”¹ In many respects, honesty in teaching has proved the most difficult to write about. What is honest voice pedagogy, and how does honesty relate to truth?

My earlier essays on the topic assumed personal honesty, integrity, and virtue, and the same applies here.

But a person of integrity does more than tell people what is on his mind. He learns the art of telling the truth well. To tell it with love—helpfully, *healingly* [italics mine], even though painfully—this is the skill that turns honesty into art.²

The *quality* of honesty finds its origin in the kindness, love, and integrity of the offerer. The *act* of honesty finds its fulfillment in the recipient.

Let us briefly examine pedagogic honesty in three venues in which the voice teacher typically functions.

STUDIO

When I was a graduate assistant in voice and opera and simultaneously pursuing my PhD at The Ohio State University, young Steve entered my studio seeking voice instruction. Actually, it would be more accurate to say that he sought affirmation for his conviction that he was a Bayreuth bound *Heldentenor*, and he would entertain no argument to the contrary. His was not a bad instrument, but it was painful to listen and watch as he reddened, sweating profusely, straining to maintain Wagnerian tessitura. He would reluctantly accept what I determined to be more appropriate repertoire only if he were allowed to bring in his arias. I’m not certain of my quality of pedagogic honesty at the tender age of 26 or so, but no amount of dissuading on my part or that of my colleagues seemed to be effective. I don’t know what became of Steve, but he certainly was not one of my success stories.

How does one deal with faulty perceptions of vocal reality? Or how does one talk to the student whose heart is set on the Met or on Broadway? Of course, not all students are problematic, but each offers vocal and relational challenges to the instructor. A principal criterion in all cases, it seems to me, is a realization that “brutally frank” is not synonymous with honesty; the latter, as seen in the Smedes citation above, is couched in kindness, while

the former is inconsiderate bluntness. It is essential to sublimate self and to look out for the best interests of the student. Additionally, the teacher must be assiduous in preparation and honest in expectations, explanations, and assessment.³ Honest pedagogy is empathetic, but also informed, evidence-based pedagogy.⁴ (For additional perspective, the reader is referred to Scott McCoy's "Voice Pedagogy" column in this issue, especially p. 303.) Tailor pedagogy to the individual, provide venues for success and satisfaction, instill standards, and broaden horizons.

MASTER CLASS

The master class, in my view, continues to be a somewhat controversial issue among voice practitioners. Conventional wisdom seems to suggest that—given careful organization, scrupulous selection of master teacher, clear criteria for performer and instructor—they can have value.⁵ In my opinion, however, the lack of same, along with constraints of time and pressure to deliver, suggests that the master class is perhaps not an ideal venue for honest pedagogy.

Please consider two examples that may illustrate both sides of the proverbial coin. A number of years ago, an internationally famous operatic baritone came to Milwaukee as a guest of our state NATS chapter to deliver a master class. His name was a huge draw, of course, but he demonstrated a lamentable lack of preparation and pedagogy. A tray filled with glasses of water occupied a table near the piano, and each student's problems were addressed by offering water. Supplementing an impoverished "bag of tricks," his approach consisted basically of "hydropedagogy." This would be an extreme example of a master class as distinctly counterintuitive.

In a recent column, Associate Editor Scott McCoy acknowledged limitations inherent in a master class situation, but at the same time noted "many occasions where the suggestions of a master teacher have elicited real change."⁶ I have another vivid memory of a master class at a NATS national conference led by a tenor (whose name I have forgotten) who was associated with the Lyric Opera of Chicago. As he worked with a struggling young male singer, the teacher rather forthrightly—perhaps even brusquely—identified the student as a "short tenor." It was instructive to observe

as he kindly and with obvious concern for the individual brought the student to acceptance and a willingness to explore more appropriate and satisfying repertoire. I found the master teacher not to be "brutally frank," but rather exercising in this case a necessary "tough love" in an honest pedagogy.

COMPETITIONS

Many voice pedagogues are invited to adjudicate singers in various levels of competitions, which are also opportunities for instruction, while at the same time compromised by format, time, and grading.

In terms of format, honest pedagogy is challenged in situations where one is required to adjudicate large numbers of singers, and perhaps mixed voice types and performance categories as well. Relatedly, one cannot be expected to offer quality criticism in only a few minutes of adjudication time. Finally, grading and commentary must be complementary (not necessarily complimentary). Often I have seen, for example, "Tone" described as wonderful, but with a mediocre grade assigned. As is also true for the master class, time constraints can result in language that is terse, vague, or misleading, and may cause misunderstanding, damaged sensitivities, or worse, vocal harm.

CONCLUSION

The truth is not always beautiful,
nor beautiful words the truth.

— Lao Tzu

Words matter, as we currently are increasingly and often painfully made aware. Self-respect and respect for others demand that we choose words carefully, while clothing what we say with kindness and consideration. One can save mental effort by using vague, even disingenuous language, but that is a disservice to both self and student. In response to my soliciting journal contributor comments on the topic, Leslie De'Ath writes, "So 'honesty in teaching' requires wisdom and intuition—lest we praise too indiscriminately on the one hand, or draw conclusions too prematurely on the other. And the onus lies totally on the pedagogue . . . the student cannot possibly know."⁷

The honesty trilogy, part three, like its predecessors, exposes only the extreme tip of the iceberg. I hope that contemplation and conversation follow.

Honesty is the first chapter in the book of wisdom.

— Thomas Jefferson

NOTES

1. Richard Dale Sjoerdsma, "Honesty in Singing," *Journal of Singing* 73, no. 5 (May/June 2017): 477–479; Richard Dale Sjoerdsma, "Honesty in Writing," *Journal of Singing* 74, no. 1 (September/October 2017): 5–7.
2. Lewis B. Smedes, *A Pretty Good Person: What It Means to Live with Courage, Gratitude, and Integrity* (New York: Harper/Collins, 1990), 88.
3. The difficult matter of grading is effectively addressed in, Seth Keeton, "Effective and Meaningful Grading in Applied Collegiate Voice: Assessing Effort and Progress, a Grading Toolbox, and a Recommendation," *Journal of Singing* 72, no. 5 (May/June 2016): 563–572.
4. Cf. Lynn Holding, "Cognitive Dissonance: Facts versus Alternative Facts," *Journal of Singing* 74, no. 1 (September/October 2017): 89–93;
5. American Academy of Teachers of Singing (AATS), "The Vocal Master Class," *Journal of Singing* 61, no. 3 (January/February 2005): 231–233.
6. Scott McCoy, "In Praise of Gifted Teachers Students," *Journal of Singing* 73, no. 5 (May/June 2017): 519.
7. Leslie De'Ath, email to author (September 29, 2017).

 Berklee  BOSTON CONSERVATORY
at Berklee

Boston Conservatory Opera Intensive at Valencia

Hone your technical and performance skills,
increase your understanding of what it takes to
build and maintain a career in opera, and work
with distinguished faculty and guests.

- Studio recording sessions
- Private voice lessons
- Renowned guest clinicians

 Hosted at Berklee College of Music's
campus in Valencia, Spain

 June 3 through
June 23, 2017

 valencia.berklee.edu/opera
 summervalencia@berklee.edu