

Wisdom of Marchesi

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Mathilde Marchesi*

prov·e·nance (prŏv'ə-nəns) *n.* Place of origin, source. [LAT. *Provenire*, to originate.]

[Editor's Note: I am greatly indebted to Dr. Kimberly Broadwater, Associate Professor of Music at Mississippi Valley State University, for providing a transcription of the article that appears here. Dr. Broadwater is engaged in a research project that includes every article on vocal music written in *Etude* magazine between 1893 and 1922 and examines them in historical context. This piece by Marchesi appeared in the October 1913 issue. The legendary mezzo is eloquently introduced by the magazine's editor at the time, James Francis Cooke.]

TRUTHS FOR SINGING TEACHERS AND STUDENTS BY THE MOST RENOWNED TEACHERS OF SINGING OF THE PAST CENTURY MME. MATHILDE MARCHESI PREPARED IN CO-OPERATION WITH HER DAUGHTER MME. BLANCHE MARCHESI

[The name of Marchesi is so well known in the musical world that it seems somewhat idle to essay an introduction to the following article. Mme. Marchesi was born Mathilde Graumann, in Frankfort-am-Main, March 26, 1826. She was the daughter of a wealthy merchant who lost his fortune. Thereupon she took up the study of music and determined to become a professional musician. In Vienna she studied with Nicolai and in Paris with Garcia. Sixty-five years ago she appeared in concert in London with great success. She taught at the Vienna Conservatory from 1854 to 1861 in which year she moved to Paris. Her next position was at Cologne (1865) where she remained for three years. Then she returned to Vienna (1868) remaining at the conservatory for ten years. This was followed by three years of private teaching after which she returned to Paris at the height of her fame and soon was surrounded by a coterie of remarkable students many of whom became historically renowned in the world of song. This list includes such names as Gerster, Eames, Calvé, Melba, de Marska and others. In 1852 she married Marchesi de Castrone (Salvatore de Castrone, Marchesi della Rajata). This distinguished musician and teacher was a pupil of Lamperti, Garcia and others. He sang in New York as early as 1848. Later he met with wide success on the European continent. He composed many songs and vocalises. Mme.

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*Mathilde Marchesi, head-and-shoulders portrait, facing slightly left / Barz. , 1900. Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2002706926/>.

Marchesi's daughter Blanche (Baronne Caccamisi) made her operatic debut in Prague in 1900. In 1899 she gave successful recitals in the United States. She now resides with her mother in London.—Editor of *The Etude*.]

My work is done. I owe to the world one thing—to say the truth. There are many things I say to-day which I have hesitated to write down for years; but to-day, when I am reaching the highest age that man can reach, I have no more time to disguise my thoughts or to display useless modesty.

As *THE ETUDE* has kindly invited me to speak to students, especially to the aspiring singer, through its medium, I will try (although at my age it is a difficult task and may make me more enemies than I already have the honor to possess) to say some things which will be of the highest importance to each one of them and which may guide them through the great difficulties that students encounter when they start searching for a teacher. I shall have to restrain myself to say all I would like to say regarding the really atrocious state of things in the world of singing teaching. I do not speak without due deliberation and I have no animosity toward any person. I would not say anything so iconoclastic that it might take away the daily bread from those teachers who in their teaching might not agree with the opinions I have evolved from a lifetime of experience. But I can not hesitate between the teacher who teaches what he does not know and the innocent student who wishes to learn what he does not know, because the student may be guided through wrong paths by which he never will reach the goal.

I have given my life to students. My last word shall be a word of help to them. The questions I will treat are of vital interest and for many a girl may prove her salvation.

Voice Little Understood.

There are few things in the world which have been so much ignored by the crowd and misunderstood, or not comprehended by the professionals as the human voice. About thirty years ago every town possessed a few singing teachers certainly not more than ten, and they all had been more or less before the public, knew something about music style, and the works of the composers, and although ignoring completely the secrets of voice culture, they did their best to impart what they knew, and to form singers after their own image.

It takes many years for great simple truths to penetrate the human mind—and truths are always simple.

For over thirty years Garcia and myself worked at the service of that truth, and worked hard indeed to make it known, and yet we were not able to spread it all over the world. Garcia lived a very retired life, and shunned publicity and anything that looked like advertising. My life was filled with such hard work that I have really never taken the time to write about these matters; I only taught, and my teaching speaks for itself. To-day I must admit that through the work of Garcia, that embraced a period of seventy years, and through my own teaching, lasting sixty-five years, after all, something has penetrated—something has taken root, and to-day one hears people speaking of the larynx, the vocal cords, the breathing, the blending of registers, voice production, etc., etc.—a thing that was unheard of years ago. I do not say that people understand the meaning of all these words they use, but nevertheless it is certainly admitted and known to-day, that voices must be trained, and it also is admitted that they can be ruined.

Here, we have already great indications of progress. In olden times one thought that one was either born a singer or without the gift of song. When a voice, loved by the public, began to decay, this was attributed to various reasons. To-day, the idea that a voice can be trained, spoiled, or saved, has spread very extensively.

The reason why Garcia's glorious discovery, that I carried to a positive mathematical art, was not better known in the world, is that there are only a very few persons born in a century who unite all the necessary inborn, genial qualities, to form a singing teacher.

Garcia trained me, and I think he was proud of his pupil, but he did not find many people born with the special genius of teaching. It was hard work—but it was beautiful too, because what can there be more sublime than to feel in one's self the power of giving the human being a voice, at least to train it so to give it to him forever, to win it back if it had been lost, and to make hundreds, yes, thousands of existences happy and sometimes glorious and always bread-winning? To train apostles, who spread all over the earth the art you have imparted to them? But that this art should be more understood there should be more knowing teachers.

There are only a few people who find time and money to study their own singing thoroughly, but there are none

intelligent enough to grasp the tremendous importance of learning to teach, to be a thorough, and to become a complete, and knowing, singing teacher. I would like to say more; there ought to be all over the world an understanding like there is in medicine and surgery, that only one method should be allowed to be taught—the one that makes, saves, and preserves the voice.

The Teacher's Fitness.

Certainly it is not only the length of time of studies that will make the teacher. It is always the inborn quality which will decide about a person's fitness to work in this profession. One must have some voice to be able to teach. I exclude anyone else, because there are things that you must absolutely be able to feel or try on yourself. I will say more; everyone born with the gift to teach singing, and having learned the right method, can improve the method. The fundamental rules are as unchangeable as the construction of the human being itself. But nothing ever stands still. I know I improved on what Garcia taught me.

A teacher must, as I said at first, be born with a general musical talent; with a special disposition, and genius for singing; genius for grasping composition (without which style cannot be taught); with a strong pathological sense, with psychical insight, with patience "*a outrance*," (the principal teaching virtue); with love of imparting, imagination, complete literary historical, and musical historical education, and complete mastery of at least four of the principal living languages, as you cannot teach masterpieces if you do not know the spirit in which they were created. Important, also, is the special gift that lies in the ear—of discerning the real nature of the voice—all its possibilities, and its future line in Art.

Inspiring the Pupil.

Last but not least, the gift to guide pupils, characters and natures; to help to change them in necessary cases, and to show them a high ideal. If one could, one would try also to wake in them the love of God. This will make certain people smile, but in Art whether it be painting, sculpture, or music, love of God is perceptible in the work exhibited and elevates it to the highest realms.

The crowd sees, hears, and feels, and it is only those that carry high ideals, who become loved by the crowd. The public that understands great moral qualities in

painting and sculpture is a small one, but the people who listen to music form vast crowds who feel, know, and judge perfectly well the artist who stands before them.

The first thing a person does who wishes to sing is to consult her friends whom to take as a teacher.

Here already we must stop, and speak out frankly. Don't go to the inefficient; go to the able teacher. When I go to a doctor I go to the one most celebrated for effecting real cures. Don't ask advice of inconsequential people. Go to some prominent person and try to awake his interest. It will spare you many years of useless waiting, money-spending, and heart-rending deception. Try first to learn if you have a voice worth while cultivating.

Who Shall Judge My Voice.

You who read these lines are in America. We will say you are in a very small town. Do not go to the singing teacher of your town first to know if you have a voice. Go to one or two prominent musicians, or the principal organist of the town. Go to people who are not in the singing profession. Often simply excellent musicians, with their own well-trained ears, having no interest at all to push you in or out of the singing profession, will give you a candid opinion. They cannot tell you what you will become; but they can tell you if they like the sound of your voice. The sound of your voice—that is what we generally call the quality. Certainly art can and must improve it to a high degree, but the quality that makes success and money is a gift given by God. However beautiful the altogether uncultivated voice may be it can not from the very nature of things possess the training which make the possessor an artistic singer. An art-lover might possess the finest pigments, the best brushes, excellent canvas and a magnificent frame, but he cannot put the picture that will win the favor of the art critics and the dollars of purchasers upon that canvas until he has patiently trained his hand and mind in the art of painting. He may have the greatest talent on earth, but unless he develops it in the right manner it will only be a pathetic monument to his lost possibilities. It is much the same with the voice student. The student might have a voice which combined all the virtues of Malibran, Patti, Melba, or Jenny Lind, but without the right development it would be next to worthless. There are, however, many voices which possess it nevertheless. Only the most experienced specialists can detect this quality. Even when developed

it does not compare with the inborn natural quality and the singer must compensate for natural hindrances by superb artistic attainments.

The Advice of Tourist Artist.

Sometimes the touring artist may be induced to give the promising young singer an audience. However, many successful singers are beset by applications of this kind and in order to avoid an unpleasant situation will sometimes give a favorable opinion where it would have been real kindness to have told the disappointing truth. I must now touch upon a rather delicate point. If you feel that you are the possessor of a phenomenal voice of rare quality and beauty you may do well not to ask advice of a singer of your own sex possessing a voice similar to your own. I regret that it is necessary to observe that singers who have already achieved success rarely welcome other voices of the same type entering the same field. I have even known some who would be glad if they could be secure that none other like them could ever be born. I once trained a singer, who came to great fame and position, long years ago. She is herself to-day an old lady. After having made a most successful stage debut, which kept her in the operatic field for thirty years or more, she conceived the curious idea of trying to induce me never to train another light soprano in a similar manner. In other words, she not only wanted her own field for her own lifetime but wanted to lease it for all time to come. It never seemed to occur to her that no other singer would ever be born with a voice, mind and ambition exactly the same. She was certainly candid, but her fears were needless. It simply goes to show the peculiar mental attitude with which some singers seem to be afflicted. Consequently, if you have a contralto voice you will do better by asking the confidential advice of a soprano and if you are a soprano ask a contralto to judge your possibilities.

I do not want to credit great artists with a lack of sincerity, but the little human touch which makes them jealous of similar voices seems as natural as it is common. Men as a rule are fairer and kinder, but rarely possess valuable judgment in the matter of the female voice.

When you have been able to form an opinion from the advice gathered from different gifted musical people who have all declared your voice beautiful, or at least promising, then at once seek the best teacher in your town. Who is the best teacher in your town? Not the

one who makes the loudest pretensions, but the one who has actually turned out and presented to the public the greatest number of successful singers. The painter can only be judged by his pictures. He can write volumes on painting, how great painters paint, what constitutes a fine picture, or indeed any phase of art as for instance did John Ruskin, but he may in turn fail as completely as did Ruskin in becoming a great artist. It is the picture on the wall that speaks and it is by that picture that the artist must be judged. It is the same with the voice teacher. Garcia was great as a voice teacher not solely because he wrote upon the voice, made vocal discoveries, and sang himself, but because he produced great pupils. Only the pupil tells the story. In this I do not refer to famous teachers who teach a pupil for only a few months and claim all the glory, whereas some other lesser known teacher may have spent years in developing the voice,—I refer only to the master-teacher capable of teaching the voice from the beginning to the highest artistic accomplishment.

Teachers Must Produce Pupils.

There are people at this day who talk eloquently about breathing, training and singing to such an extent, that one can not take the time to listen to all their dissertations. I would like to tell them all to remain perfectly quiet until they have produced one pupil to prove their own knowledge. I would not demand that their pupils be very celebrated. Stars are rare. Like the planets, millions of miles apart, even the most successful teacher may hope to see but a very few during the course of a lifetime. It is only fair that the teacher should be judged by the best voices she turns out, the successes,—for unless the pupil comprehends the instructions and carries them out the teaching of the very best master may come to naught. Consequently, find out who are the representative pupils of the teacher you contemplate studying with and make an effort to hear those singers yourself. It is a serious matter and one you can not give too much consideration to it in order to form a definite opinion. One should hear a great many of the best pupils because I have known the case of teachers who have had the good fortune to secure one star pupil, but who have been unsuccessful with most all others. One or two successful pupils mean nothing. It may be the case that these star pupils have marvelous natural gifts for self-development, or they may have studied with some

worthier master early in life and concealed the fact. You should hear at least ten pupils and if they all have the one method, that is if they all sing uniformly well and are devoid of the common-vocal faults,—if they have the one way of doing what they do, if they have the one voice production, the same beautiful even legato, the total absence from every indication of physical effort—then and only then can you judge the master.

When you have selected a teacher place the utmost confidence in that teacher, but do not be misguided in the matter. Regard all things sensibly and if in your best judgment things are not moving as they should be moving give the matter careful thought and if necessary make a change. The matter of the right teacher is a very serious matter and may affect your whole career. It is right for you to be selfish,—that is to think wholly of your own interests. Suppose, for instance, you have heard pupils whom you considered well trained and you have entered the master's school. Immediately there arises the very important question,—“Will he understand my particular case?” Your case seeming easy to a lay ear, may really be an especially complicated one. Your teacher may not have had enough experience for this new case. How are you to determine whether the teacher is doing right or wrong? How can you tell whether he is doing you good or harm? Naturally quick and intelligent persons will find out through their own intelligence whether they are being treated properly. They will not believe blindly what they are told. They will look for continuous improvement and if this does not occur they may well be justified in rebelling and discontinuing.

Musical Guardians.

There are of course many young and easily influenced pupils who do not seem to know much about anything and who certainly are unable to navigate their own affairs successfully. They have a blind faith in humanity and especially the authority that goes with high position and great reputation. They must be helped to help themselves. Fortunate indeed are they who have some mature musical guardian who has only the interest of the pupil at heart and who will do the thinking and judging that the pupil is unable to do for herself.

Changing teachers frequently is of course a fearfully bad practice. My daughter once had a comparatively young pupil who had changed at least fourteen times.

While it is a huge mistake to go on for months and years with the voice growing steadily worse and worse, imploring the ignorant teacher to tell one what to do, not daring to leave him, always hoping, believing and waiting patiently for the best, the student must not get in a panic, or become so mistrusting, that the teacher can not do good work. I would not write anything that would upset the pupil. Think deeply and seriously before you make a change, but once you have made your decision let nothing stop you. Remember, that the teacher is quite as anxious as you are to make you a successful singer and that unless he is an absolute fraud he is leaving nothing undone to bring about success.

The golden-rod is yellow;
The corn is turning brown;
The trees in apple orchards
With fruit are bending down.

The gentian's bluest fringes
Are curling in the sun;
In dusty pods the milkweed
Its hidden silk has spun.

The sedges flaunt their harvest,
In every meadow nook;
And asters by the brook-side
Make asters in the brook,

From dewy lanes at morning
The grapes' sweet odors rise;
At noon the roads all flutter
With yellow butterflies.

By all these lovely tokens
September days are here,
With summer's best of weather,
And autumn's best of cheer

But none of all this beauty
Which floods the earth and air
Is unto me the secret
Which makes September fair.

'Tis a thing which I remember;
To name it thrills me yet:
One day of one September
I never can forget.

Helen Hunt Jackson, "September"