

Scott McCoy, Associate Editor

# Teaching “It”



Scott McCoy

**T**HOSE OF YOU who regularly acquaint yourselves with my writings have no doubt discovered my ongoing discussions of the fundamental skills required for a successful career in singing. And while my personal focus always has been on classical opera and concert repertoire, I’m confident the same skillset is required of singers who specialize in other genres. Some of the most important of these abilities are listed below, albeit in no particular order.

- The ability to sing in tune. I’ve often heard from people on the production side of professional music events say that correct intonation is a non-negotiable skill. To put it more bluntly, the Seattle Symphony is highly unlikely to hire anyone who randomly—if not chronically—mistunes by more than a few cents (100ths of a semitone). Of course, every singer has a bad night from time to time when things simply don’t work correctly. But it probably is wise to do everything possible to ensure avoiding two bad performances in a row.
- The ability to learn and memorize music accurately and efficiently. As a tenor, I’ve been subjected to countless jokes about my brethren opening the score for the *first time ever* when they arrive at the first rehearsal, which is a prejudice I’ve worked diligently to dispel. But like many stereotypes, there well could be a grain of truth in this characterization. Unfortunately, we still encounter the occasional student who holds Pavarotti’s (possibly apocryphal) reputation as being musically illiterate to justify their own musical deficiencies. And extensive examples are found in studio and live recordings of respected artists who sing a handful of incorrect pitches and/or rhythms. But these are an exception to the rule. I firmly believe that it is more effective for singers not to count on being that person who is so special that normal rules don’t apply (the same would apply to a lyric baritone who has his heart set on singing Fasolt or Fafner in *Das Rheingold*.)
- The ability to sing with expressive musicality. Many conductors currently engaged by significant performing organizations seek to control everything down to the subtlest musical nuance. When casting for a solo role, these folks might be looking for a truly “blank slate” who will scrupulously follow their musical directives, ignoring the singer’s personal interpretation. But that doesn’t mean they are looking for a dispassionate, expressionless singer to become their vocal Pygmalion. No, they are looking for someone whose intrinsic musicality most closely matches their personal vision. And with a nearly limitless supply of singers, they are likely to find somebody to fit the bill—eventually. I’ve always admired conductors who asked me to sing a passage a different way *during the audition*; most seemed to believe that

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the way I sang a selection was the only option I had. Nonetheless, I'm quite certain that most casting directors prefer to see and hear some unique, expressive musicality. They might seek to make radical changes to that musicality, but at least they know the singer is capable of saying *something*.

- The ability to sing in multiple languages with passable diction. Fifteen to twenty years ago, I had the pleasure to work with a marvelous singer who already was in his seventh decade. This guy was a true “Verdi baritone,” gloriously singing everything from “Eri tu” to “Di Provenza.” He possessed a world class voice, but only when singing in English. All other languages were better described as merely *Italian-ish* or *German-like*. It's really a shame, because if he had come with the gene that allows us to hear and pronounce languages accurately, he could have had a major international career.

Ideally, a singer's goal should be actual fluency in one or more of the standard classical singing languages, not mere proficiency with diction. Every time I view one of the Met's high definition broadcasts, I'm struck by the fact that almost every artist can be interviewed in multiple languages. Time for another joke: What do you call someone who only speaks one language? An American. In the not too distant past, many students entered my studio having completed years of German, French, Italian, or Latin. Today, I'm lucky to find a handful who studied Spanish; most have had no conversational study beyond English. I don't have a handy solution to deal with this issue, other than the fact that young singers who truly desire to be successful on the international stage *absolutely must* become competent speakers of more than one language.

When I was a young singer coming up through the ranks, I often heard it said that American singers were the most sought after in the world, because of our strong technical training and our *ability to sing well in multiple languages*. Few native speakers of any language will fault subtle mispronunciations from someone who earnestly is trying to communicate. But at a minimum, we must be certain that nothing is so badly mispronounced that word meaning is changed (as in the perennial favorite example from Despina: the difference between *una donna quindici anni* means something very different from *quindici ani*—if you don't know, look it up right now!).

- The ability to portray a convincing character. Singers are faced with many more challenges than are faced by instrumentalists. When a cellist plays a transcription of Massenet's *Élégie*, s/he must use appropriate late nineteenth century French musical style—but the piece isn't actually played *in French*. S/he also doesn't need to communicate the meaning of the French text. So, it becomes a great deal more complicated for those of us who conceal our instruments within our bodies. Sticking with French, we must master at least sixteen different vowel sounds, not to mention decoding the arcane set of rules and exceptions that sometime make it seem like some French diction rules apply only on alternate Thursdays. And we must do this in a way that is dramatically expressive, musically accurate, in tune, and with passable diction; only then can we really focus on making the performance come to life through characterization.
- The ability to sing with technique that enables difficult vocal tasks to be sung routinely. A baseball player who strikes out two out of every three times at bat might never progress beyond amateur pickup games. But if a homerun is hit during every third time at bat, that same player will land a multimillion dollar contract in the pros. Oh, the unfairness of it all. Imagine what kind of career Natalie Dessay would have had if she cracked on two of every three pitches sung above G<sub>5</sub>. I'm betting that nobody would ever have heard of her. Face it: we expect near perfection of notes, rhythms, text, intonation, and drama. Close isn't good enough.
- The ability to see past setbacks. As we know, it can be difficult for singers to find appropriate feedback and career guidance. One of the best things about our NATS auditions at all levels is the feedback that comes from experienced singers, teachers, and voice consumers. If only such feedback were routine from professional auditions. In general, I received two kinds of feedback from the auditions I sang: 1) I was offered the gig, or—and more likely—2) to use the current parlance, I was ghosted. So, it came as a surprise when I actually received comments from a noted conductor for whom I sang: he found my singing to be mediocre. I was shattered. My mother had taught me that people had two ears so that when bad things were said, they could go in one ear and directly out of the other. But I've also learned that no matter how we

(or our teachers) might disagree with the assessment, there almost certainly is at least a grain of truth to be found. Ultimately, we must face that fact that the vast majority of singers receive more bad news than good. A thick skin and the ability to depersonalize negative comments must be developed.

- The ability to fulfill contracts that are far in future. You might think you can contradict this statement with the example of Jonas Kaufmann, who has bowed out of numerous engagements in recent years. But when you have vocal and acting skills that are possessed by virtually nobody else, companies are more likely to cut you some slack. Even for singers whose talent is merely mortal, one cancellation might be forgiven; two might be pushing it. Because of this, singers strongly benefit from routine good health. Accidents—biologic and physical—can still occur, but if allergies or menses routinely impair your ability to perform, you must find a workable solution, which might include taking prescription medications.
- The physical, emotional, and intellectual stamina to thrive through repeated, lengthy performances. Face it: high definition broadcasts have led to an increased emphasis on physical appearance. We are unlikely to return to the days of Radames and Aida being so corpulent that an embrace is comical. This really is a major aesthetic shift. I fondly remember gloriously sung productions of operas that were cast with a virtual smorgasbord of singers, representing a wide range of nationalities, ethnicities, and physical characteristics. We used to be told that works for the stage were wonderful because they required us to suspend our disbelief. If that actually is true, why is our profession currently so hung up on believability? In my universe, if two singers have equivalent vocalism and one is physically more attractive than the other *from my personal perspective*, I likely would factor in appearance when making a casting decision. But if the “more beautiful” person doesn’t sing as well as the other, s/he would become a cover or understudy.

The non-negotiables I’ve spoken about form a strong foundation for a successful singer’s skillset. But there is one more thing that might be the most important of all, and which probably is the most difficult to teach: the “It” factor, which might be called *musical charisma*.

Anyone who has taught more than a handful of singing lessons no doubt has encountered the “It” phenomenon. A new singer comes to work with you who seems to know instinctively how to produce an expressive envelope on a sustained pitch that keeps musical direction moving forward. These students also show an affinity for musical sequences, routinely changing dynamics and articulation to highlight the musical structure. Musical pacing ebbs and flows in a dramatically expressive fashion. Cadential embellishments—whether a thrilling cadenza or the simplest *ritardando*—are convincingly expressive. With any luck, this singer also possesses solid musicianship, excellent intonation, and strong languages. S/he also is able to alter fundamental vocal timbre to suit varying emotional situations. The presence of these innate skills makes our teaching easier and more fulfilling.

All of us also have taught singers who have everything except “It”—great languages, a dramatic persona, accurate pitches and rhythms, or perhaps a photographic memory that permits instant memorization. With consistent, high quality coaching, some of the singers in this group gradually will develop a personal ability to sing expressively. But others always will need a teacher, conductor, or coach to mold them into a finished product—essentially, someone who will pour musical expression into them.

How might we help these “It”-less singers? One answer might be to funnel them exclusively into situations that do not depend on individual musical creativity. Many choral conductors with whom I’ve worked (perhaps even including me when I’m waving a baton) would find these folks to be ideal choristers; they sing accurately and in tune, but otherwise do little to assert their interpretive independence. They can be played like an instrument. Many of our charges are enthusiastic about singing in ensembles, while others have their hearts set exclusively in pursuit of solo singing—which can be nearly impossible for the “It”-less crowd. All of this discussion begs the question: *Can “It” be taught?*

Believe it or not, it actually is possible to devise algorithms that teach a computer to independently perform music in a manner that is musically creative. Our friend Johan Sundberg demonstrated this ability at a Voice Foundation International Symposium a number of years ago. Truth be told, it was fairly obvious—at least

to my ears—that the attempt at musical expression was not fully human, but it was far less sterile than usual for digital musical renditions. Some of the rules that were used in this attempt to humanize a machine can be taught to most music students. Indeed, I believe that much of the difference in the expressive maturity of singers and instrumentalists can be traced to the age at which study begins and the repetition of interpretive suggestions over a period of years. By the time most pianists are admitted to college, they have studied for ten or more years, constantly receiving feedback about phrasing, articulation, dynamics, and musical direction. But the majority of singers enter college with a much more limited background. Most of the folks who audition for a baccalaureate degree in voice at my school have studied singing for less than two years; and in every audition cycle, the people who have never had a singing lesson outnumber those who have had five or more years of training. (Time out for a little rant. Have you noticed that there often is an inverse relationship between the years an undergraduate applicant has studied and his or her ability?)

Our goal is that through repeated guidance in locating expressive moments and how to approach them, singers will start to *generalize* interpretive rules. In this context, “generalize” indicates the ability to see parallel elements in songs and arias, applying previously learned interpretive or technical skills to a new situation. It shouldn’t be that big a stretch to see the commonalities in cadential structure that prompt a *ritardando*, the patterns in a sequence that demand a varied approach to each repetition, or the manner in which many ascending phrases are enhanced by a *crescendo*. These are expressive aspects that we might reasonably assume are able to become automatic. And yet, they remain opaque to so many singers, who blissfully sing every note precisely the same, regardless of musical context.

Of course, the simplest step on the journey toward expressive musical independence is to observe all interpretive directions provided by the composer. I’m less sanguine about following the suggestions provided by an editor, which often are best considered to be *suggestions* about how you might shape a phrase or employ dynamic changes. I suspect that I am far from being the only singing teacher in NATS with students who seem willful in their disregard for interpretive instructions

published in the score. Perhaps this occurs out of an ego that assumes expressive superiority to that of the composer, a factor that also leads to frequent episodes of re-composition—times when a singer arbitrarily changes pitches, rhythms, and even text according to personal preference. But I’ve yet to have a student who was more musically adept than Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, or Verdi, composers who had a distinctive voice and have no need to be *fixed* by contemporary artists. Singing precisely what appears in the score goes a long way in ensuring an expressive performance.

There also are those pesky unwritten rules that fall under the heading of *performance practice*. Experienced musicians of all stripes need to know that a tied or dotted note generally decays in music from the Renaissance and Baroque, but that by the time we reach the classical and more recent eras, the standard practice to maintain, if not actually increase, intensity to the last possible millisecond. We also learn rules for portamenti (okay within limits in Italian rep, occasionally okay in French music, and a mixed bag in German, English, and Russian), how to deal with written and unwritten appoggiaturas, and when to highlight syncopations, sequences, and other compositional techniques. None of us came to the party already knowing these unwritten rules, but without them, emotionally and musically authentic performances are nearly impossible.

Let’s now speak of some concrete steps to help singers evolve to become expressive musical instruments.

1. Insist that our student singers follow all instructions provided by the composer.
2. Insist that our student singers listen to a wide range of performances by established, professional singers when preparing new repertoire. They need to be exposed to a range of interpretive possibilities—listening to a single recording provides too much incentive to simply mimic that performance.
3. Insist that our student singers complete training in *stage acting*. I’m not talking here about special classes that focus on teaching techniques for *opera acting*, which also have value. But studying acting skills that depend solely on physicality and interpretation of the text goes a long way toward enhancing a singer’s overall stage presence.
4. Provide frequent opportunities for students to sing as a soloist in studio classes, seminars, master classes,

and recitals. We learn to sing by doing it, not by reading or talking about it. One of the most important enhancements to applied teaching at my current school is scheduling two studio classes each week. I usually teach only about a dozen students, which means that almost everyone is able to sing before an audience at least twice every week. The resulting rapid growth is delightful to witness.

5. Do not be satisfied by singing that merely is proficient. Just because pitches, rhythms, and text are accurate

doesn't mean the singing is expressive. We always must strive to help our charges become independent, expressive musicians, capable of achieving a high level of performance without intervention from a teacher, coach, or conductor.

So, promise me you will do your best to eschew mediocrity and doggedly pursue the "It" factor: it often—if not usually—can be enhanced. You might not help someone become the next Maria Callas, infamous for her dramatic intensity, but everyone should be able to improve.



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