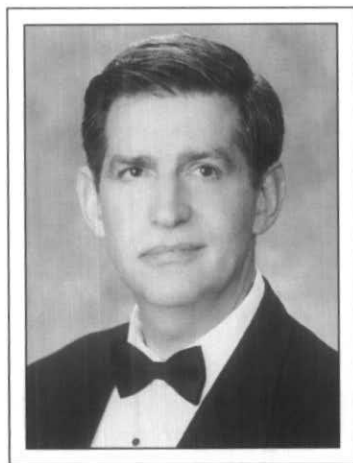


# The Dumbing-Down of Classical Singing



Robert Edwin

ITEM #1—According to *The Philadelphia Inquirer* newspaper, of the top ten classical albums in the region during the first week of July 2001, two belonged to Andrea Bocelli, and two belonged to Sarah Brightman. A fifth album by various artists took its title, *Time To Say Goodbye*, from a song popularized by Mr. Bocelli and Ms. Brightman.

ITEM #2—Quoting from the cover letter announcing a local NATS chapter's annual student auditions: "**A MAJOR CHANGE** has been made in repertoire requirements. Any student, *except* one singing in the **ADVANCED** categories (11,12), **MAY** choose to sing one music theater selection. This piece may be used to fulfill any requirement. Substitution is at the discretion of the teacher."

We are living in musically ambiguous times as lines between vocal styles continue to blur. This teacher, for one, is troubled by the blurring, and feels quality classical singing may be victimized in the process. De-

finitions, standards, and expectations need to be especially clear for teachers of singing and their career-minded classical student singers, if those student singers are to be competitive in their chosen field.

My concern with the first item is simple: Mr. Bocelli and Ms. Brightman are not particularly good classical singers. The listening public may perceive them to be at the top of the opera food chain because they are entertaining, popular, and successful; however, they can not compete with the Marcello Giordanis and Renée Flemings of the world who labor under much more demanding critical standards. Andrea Bocelli and Sarah Brightman are fine entertainers worthy of praise and adulation, but they are to opera what McDonalds is to gourmet cuisine.

Perhaps classical music critic Peter Dobrin put it best when he wrote about Bocelli in the March 27, 2001 *Philadelphia Inquirer*: "It's not that he's a bad opera singer; he's just a really good wedding singer. If you think of him in those terms, the appeal is obvious. He has that Acme do-it-yourself tenor sound—like an overzealous voice in a church choir. Add to that the mop of hair, his scruffy beard, and there's an Everyman quality, an untrained quaintness to the voice. And if millions of people are enjoying it, what's wrong with that?"

What is potentially wrong with "that" is the danger that opera may come to be defined by the broad and often clumsy vocal strokes of singers like Bocelli and Brightman, while

the highly refined skills and subtleties of the top operatic artists may be overlooked.

It is clear that much of the general public and the media have embraced the dumbing-down of classical singing. Public Service Broadcasting (PBS), once the bastion of excellence and education, encourages and supports the dumbing-down process with faux classical programming featuring singers such as the Flemish tenor and former Elvis impersonator, Helmut Lotti; "little Helmut," Michael; and the ubiquitous Mr. B and Ms. B.

PBS's motivation is clear. Ratings and income drive most television corporations. PBS puts on Bocelli, the money flows in. PBS puts on the Met opera broadcasts, less money flows in. Bocelli or the Met? When given a choice, some local stations have pulled the plug on the Met. They defend such a move by claiming that the extra revenues they will raise will allow them to do more quality programming. It has an empty ring to it, given the direction in which they have been heading in recent years. Another PBS rationale for "classical-lite" programming is that Bocelli et al. will eventually lead audiences to "real" opera. Such reasoning is as suspect as the belief that "pops" orchestras serve as a bridge that will lead people to "real" symphonies. It usually and sadly does not happen.

While the redefining of classical music concerns me, I am even more concerned by the consequences of

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the second item. In an effort to be more inclusive, this NATS local chapter, like PBS, risks long-term negative consequences from short-term policy changes. Their action is not the same as creating a separate music theater category at the student auditions, a subject I addressed in my May 1996 column, "Nonclassical Pedagogy? Yes! Nonclassical Student Auditions? No!" Their latest decision is an across-the-board (save for the advanced categories) invitation to mix classical and music theater vocal styles within the majority of categories, high school to adult.

Perhaps my colleagues did not consider that the time and effort devoted to vocal technique and repertoire to produce authentic and artistic classical singing, especially on the collegiate level, might not translate into authentic and artistic music theater singing. Conversely, those with excellent music theater skills may not do justice to the classical literature. Franz Schubert demands entirely different singing skills and sounds than Jerry Herman. This studio and others that deal with a variety of singing styles have case histories on nonclassical singers who put much time and effort into developing competitive classical technique and repertoire. Similar are the case histories on classical singers who have had to spend comparable time and energy developing different vocal techniques and repertoire in order to compete successfully in music theater venues.

Simply put, being a good music theater singer may make one, by default, a poor classical singer. Vibrato from the onset of tone, vertical vowels, and formal language are but a

few of the vocal techniques that challenge music theater singers who attempt classical literature. Those are just "legit" singer issues. Belters trying to sing classically face a very different challenge.

Mixing classical and music theater repertoire in student auditions invites confusion on the part of both singer and teacher of singing, while even further blurring the aforementioned lines. Let us keep our heroes and role models separate and distinct. Andrea Bocelli, Marcello Giordani, and Michael Bolton are three tenors who sing classical vocal literature. We in NATS need to define and affirm who does what well. We can enjoy the "classical-lite" singers, and even the rock singers' attempts at Puccini, but when it comes to classical vocal technique and performance, we should enable and encourage our students to emulate the critically acclaimed singers who have distinguished themselves as outstanding classical artists.

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