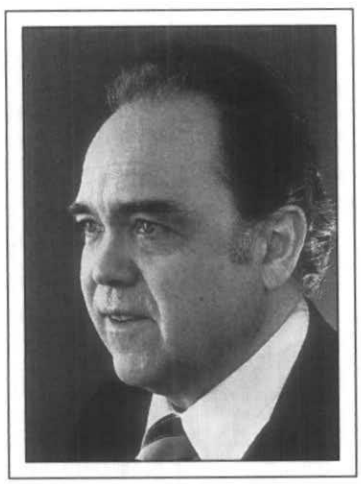
(1) A Performer Meets the Three Graces
and
(2) Balancing Technique and Literature



Richard Miller

Written questions that teachers and performers have submitted for discussion at sessions devoted to systematic voice technique are wide ranging, often penetrating the very heart of voice pedagogy; sotto voce *continues to consider some of them.*

A PERFORMER MEETS THE THREE GRACES

Question:

I am a voice major at [noted school of music]. We have recitals, almost weekly, where every major has to perform in front of everybody else. It is always a terrifying experience. You look out at all those singers sitting there in the hall like a bunch of vultures waiting for a corpse to drop. I start to fall apart, and so does almost everybody else. We feel we are up against a firing squad. Do you think that kind of performance experience is of any value?

Comment:

These sessions are not worthwhile if they continue to create the atmosphere you so vividly describe. However, it is not the public performance format itself that is the problem, it is the psychological disposition developing among its participants. What you describe is a perfect example of wrong values elevated to a position of preeminence. You have become part of the most negative web any group of performers could weave around itself.

Artistic expression must culminate in communication. A performer who is caught up in personal or group entanglements can not be a communicator. The performer overpowered by concern for personal approval is unable to convey either skill or creativity. It would appear that the individual members of your performance group, with which by the chance of time and location all of you are temporarily associated, have not yet met The Three Graces of Performance.

When we think of The Three Graces, we conjure up the Botticelli universally-admired painting, with its airy, idealized female forms. We can retain them as appropriate symbols for the three graces that play an integral role in the psychology of performance. Grace is definable as freely available, undeserved benevolence. The three graces to be considered are perennial to human experience and need not be subject to any specific theology or philosophy (although inherent in most).

The first, divine grace (or a force to be equated with it), is extended to all, regardless of personal merit. It may be accepted or rejected. The second is human grace to humankind ("Man's grace to man"). Individual acceptance or rejection of this proffered grace makes the difference between flourishing social relations and those that fail. We have a choice of extending human grace to each other or denying it. In withholding or rejecting grace, we sow the seeds of bitterness, we shatter relationships, we quarrel, we divorce, we withdraw from each other, we murder, we make war. The third, and often unrecognized grace, is animal grace. It is an innate physical grace extended to the lowest and highest forms of all living creatures. We can accept or reject any one of these forms of grace.

Let us for a moment exclude divine grace, over which we have no generative power, turning instead to mankind's grace to mankind. This concept is an ancient one, perhaps best illustrated by the biblical tale of bread being cast upon the waters (Ecclesiastes 11:1, as it appears in the King James translation). All are in need of nourishment, and all are in need of sharing. A portion of one's

daily bread—that is, essential sustenance—was to be deposited in a basket and placed on the stream so that it might benefit some needy downriver finder. One might oneself at some time be the provider of the act of generosity, and at another time its recipient. Casting bread upon the waters is a free offering of grace to another human being, without thought of quid pro quo.

What does casting bread upon the waters have to do with performance? Actually, just about everything. When you as a listener look only for the vulnerability of a fellow performer, rather than to offer support, you have withdrawn sustenance from that person and have become an enemy. Then, when you stand before an audience, you have every reason to expect that you too are facing hostility. Poison, not bread, has been cast on those waters, and it is poison that will return. If, on the other hand, you develop the habit of sympathetic, though objective, critical listening, you will find at your end of the performance river the same full basket of bread that you have extended to others. Learn to find pleasure in another's successes, and that attitude will return to strengthen you. You may ask, "But how will that change the attitude of others?"

Performance generosity is contagious. Your good will toward others will prove seductive. It will gradually act as a permeating agent. Young singers with professional goals have already entered a competitive field where they are in need of a support group, not an assemblage of adversaries. Anytime more than one singer is on a stage there develops a kind of rivalry. Yet, as with any social activity, the more supportive performers are of each other, the more sympathetically they are viewed by colleagues and audience members. By giving Rodolfo her fullest support and encouragement as he sings his exposed aria, Mimi endears herself to him and to her audience and, in so doing, prepares a sympathetic ambiance—on and off stage—for her own forthcoming aria. She casts her bread upon the waters and it comes back to sustain her.

Professional courtesy is part of professional wisdom. That reality ought to be learned and brought to fruition just as completely in the studio-class recital setting as on the stage of the Metropolitan Opera house. A conscious extending of human grace must be resolutely sought after and firmly established. The envious, hypercritical performer is an ill-at-ease performer.

Animal grace results from the congenital physical coordination all sentient beings have accumulated millennium upon millennium. The puppy chasing his tail, the flying bird, the little boy skipping stones across the stream, the dancer, the Olympic figure skater, Donna Anna and Cio-Cio-San, all find anchorage in animal grace. The puppy does not worry as to whether his tail-chasing is pleasing to others, the stone-skipper skips stones for the love of it, the dancer and the figure skater place their trust in what the body can do, Donna Anna and Cio-Cio-San rely upon the body's inherent knowledge. Animal grace is the ability to get in tune with the wisdom of the body, and to shut out other distractions.

Learning to accept any of the forms of grace is in itself an art. It reduces the multifarious distractions open to a performer. Divine and animal graces are already ours if we wish. We can, by choice, add to that mix the vitalizing force of human grace, which will return to us like bread cast upon the water. In accepting all three forms of available grace, performance itself develops into a gracious and benevolent act.

BALANCING TECHNIQUE AND LITERATURE

Question:

What represents a good daily balance between technical work and that directed to the performance literature?

Comment:

In the early stages of concentrating on concepts of good voice function, it is sometimes necessary to give the preponderance of lesson time to technical work. Yet, no voice session should be devoted solely to vocal technique separated from music making.

It is false to assume a dichotomy between technique and communication. Although during the early phases of voice instruction, basic techniques such as onset, agility, vowel definition, resonance balancing, and register unification must be dealt with systematically and become firmly established, unless they are quickly joined to actual music they remain largely extraneous pedagogic gestures. If not transferable to the performance tasks presented by the literature to be sung, technical exercises are pointless.

Suppose a young student who has been assigned Purcell's wonderfully instructive "I Attempt from Love's Sickness to Fly," still concerned with breath management, has difficulty maintaining the long cu-

mulative melismatic phrases. The song should then be broken down, phrase by phrase. First, each phrase is introduced through brief single-note staccato pilot-onset patterns that establish the flexible *appoggio*; second, short agility patterns that demand noble posture and quiet breath renewal are substituted for the onset patterns. These two simple introductory exercises almost always help the singer to manage the forthcoming phrase lengths.

Suppose vowel definition itself is the immediate problem. The phrase is then broken down phonetically, only the inherent vowels of the text being sung, omitting the intervening consonants present in the text. Then the singer returns to the original text, keeping the definition of vowels intact. When early consonantal intrusion into the vowel has been the problem, replacement of the text by nonsense syllables (as in "ra-da-da-da, rada-da-da" for the opening phrases) may be additionally helpful.

Yet another technical device that can be undertaken as a step toward improved vocalization and strong communication is to alternately substitute a single front vowel with a single back vowel for selected phrases. Then the singer returns to the text, keeping the same vowel definition principles established without the consonants. Legato, resonance balancing, and phrase shaping are greatly enhanced, thereby heightening textual communication.

Another device for improving pure vowel definition and resonance balancing involves even greater detail by detaching syllables, treating each one as an individual onset exercise produced with the phonetic exactitude of the syllable. Subsequently, the phrase is reassembled; additional phrases are treated in like fashion, then are reunited. By such precise means, technique and literature are pragmatically joined.

These specific technical devices are related directly to the tasks at hand. They help the singer to more freely accomplish the emotive intent of the text. Much more will be accomplished toward the realization of the interpretative values of the song through technical maneuvers such as these than through constant repetitions of the whole song.

The pedagogic principle behind such work is clear: the artistic imagination can not achieve its goal if the ear remains unalerted to problematic components that hinder ease of production. Detailed technical work relates directly to improved communication; repetition of the unidentified problems does not.

With an advanced student, the teacher's aim during each lesson should be to allot equal time to technique and to artistry. Of course, when public recital and stage appearances approach, the moment arrives for putting technical considerations in the background and concentrating on communication of the drama and the music. But interpretative freedom can happen only when the technical work that undergirds all performance has been successfully pursued.

In tailoring technique to interpretation, every vocal exercise must become a vehicle for accomplishing beauty of timbre, phrase shaping, dynamic nuance, and meaningful text inflection. Passages from the literature itself ought to be excerpted as vocalization material. When problematic, they should be treated by technical means similar to those just cited.

It is of utmost importance that technical routining not be removed from performance ambience. Technical vocalises should be sung with as much emotional involvement as any text. No vocalise should be sung without envisioning public performance.

It is clear that much of the vocal music by Haydn, Mozart, Donizetti, Bellini, and Rossini is built on pyrotechnical exhibition meant to display both skill and emotive communication. In fact, part of the emotional content of advanced vocalization has to do with exhibiting a high degree of control over technically demanding material: skill becomes united with communication.

Although with the approach of public performance, emphasis is directed to musical and interpretative factors, the earlier technical work should never be removed from performance communication. Technical study should not aim at assembling a singing machine, but at developing a communicative artist.

Among Richard Miller's many activities and honors are: Internationally acclaimed masterclasses; recurrent engagements in Austria, Australia, Canada, England, France, Germany, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland, and thirty-eight U.S. states. Voice research in Belgium, the Czech Republic, England, Finland, France, Italy, Hungary, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland. Distinguished international opera, oratorio, and recital career. Tenor soloist with Knappertsbusch, Ackermann, Ludwig, Sebastian, Slatkin, Lane, Szell, Boulez, etc. Pedagogy/performance texts: English, French, German and Italian Techniques of Singing *(Scarecrow, 1977, revised 1997),* The Structure of Singing *(Schirmer Books, 1986) [French Ministry of Culture* La Structure du Chant *(1990)],*

Training Tenor Voices *(Schirmer Books, 1993)*, On the Art of Singing *(Oxford University Press, 1996)*, Singing Schumann: An Interpretive Guide for Performers *(Oxford University Press, 1999)*, Training Soprano Voices *(Oxford University Press, 2000)*. *Editor,* Liszt: 25 French and Italian Songs, Liszt: 22 German Songs, *High/Low (International Music, 1998); 120 professional journal articles. Chevalier/Officier, L'ordre des arts et des lettres (French Ministry of Culture honorary); Doctor of Humane Letters; Otolaryngology Adjunct Staff, Cleveland Clinic; Collegium Medicorum Theatri; American Academy; Professor/Director, Vocal Arts Center; Wheeler Professor of Performance, Oberlin Conservatory. International adjudicator at primary competitions. Students contracted at major opera houses in Europe, Asia, South America, the United States, and in major young-artist programs.*