

Scott McCoy, Associate Editor

Pedagogic Truth in the Age of YouTube

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FOR THE PAST SEVERAL YEARS, students enrolled in my voice science classes at Westminster have had two options for a final project related to their study of anatomy and physiology. Many band together in small groups to produce creative instructional videos about breathing for singing. Others trek to Manhattan to view and report on the preserved, plasticized bodies on exhibit at South Street Seaport (similar exhibitions have toured the country in recent years under a variety of sponsorships and titles).¹ Both exercises are revelatory for assessing my students' assimilation of the information we've dealt with in the classroom. The following comments are quoted verbatim from the most recent batch of reviews of *Bodies: The Exposition*.

From a fourth year undergraduate in voice performance:

"Even though I had been told tons of times about the sizes of a lot of the body parts, I guess I can say I didn't believe it until I saw it. The auditory ossicles were the size of crumbs they were so small. The diaphragm was pretty shocking to see in real life. It really is a huge flat muscle that looks as if it divides the body!"

From a first year master's student in voice pedagogy:

"I noticed, even after studying the diaphragm in class, that it is situated much higher than I had previously thought, and is a much thicker muscle than I had envisioned."

From a second year master's student in voice performance:

"I am sure this happens to everyone when they first see it, but I was astonished at how small it [the larynx] was. I could not wrap my mind around the fact that my vocal folds are that tiny and the sound that comes out of me is so huge."

On one level, such comments come to me as a shock; reading assignments, multimedia materials, lectures, and classroom demonstrations had explicitly addressed each of these issues prior to their visits to the exhibit. They all were aware of pedagogic truth, yet persisted in their disbelief. The reason, I suspect, comes back to a simple, recurring theme: "It doesn't feel that way to me, so I choose not to believe it" (consciously or, more likely, subconsciously).

My students who opt to produce a breathing video complete the project in varying styles from clinical to comedic. Restrictions on the project are few: it must be factual, short enough to meet the posting requirements of YouTube, and sufficiently engaging to hold a viewer's attention. As was evident in the previously described reports, many of these videos perpetuate common misunderstandings of the respiratory process that predate their creators' work in pedagogy class.

The students post their final products on YouTube, and many also visit that site for inspiration as they plan their projects. YouTube, along with Wikipedia, has become a “go to” place for our students. Gone are the days of visiting the library to check out a recording—vinyl or CD—for reference purposes; we can now enter “Caro mio ben” into the YouTube search engine and have instant access to over 1,500 versions! Of course, many, if not most, are poor exemplars of Giordani’s masterpiece. But our students don’t necessarily know that. Neither will they necessarily spot the inaccuracies in the myriad instructional videos related to singing, especially breathing. Many of the supposed singing lessons posted on the Internet are intended only for comedic entertainment; but others purport to provide serious education. One of my personal favorites in this regard is presented by an organization of “experts in the field,” lending an aura of authority to their productions. The protagonist demonstrates the movement of the diaphragm by moving her hands from a starting position at the midpoint of the epigastrium all the way to the top of her pelvis at full inhalation. (One wonders where she put the contents of her abdomen to permit such dramatic diaphragmatic descent—perhaps a hollow leg?)

The age of YouTube is delightful and disturbing. Instant access to audio and video recordings of truly great singers is a tremendous teaching tool. If you are speaking with a young tenor—or your pedagogy class—about registration and the dreaded issue of “cover,” spectacular examples abound at your fingertips. If you need ideas for ornamenting a Handel aria, you likely will find dozens of examples, some wonderful, and some that are egregious violations of musical integrity and taste. As teachers, we have a huge responsibility to help our students filter this material. Our younger charges are at an impressionable age, with musical personas still under development. They are easily influenced, but do not yet have a sufficiently deep foundation reliably to recognize excellence in vocalism, musicality, and language. In spite of what they have learned in the classroom, they often are ill equipped to reconcile conflicting information about singing technique and elements of voice science. Misinformation, stated with authority, often becomes believable. Let’s help our students separate the facts from fiction.

NOTE

1. If you’ve not availed yourself of the opportunity to visit one of these exhibits, please do so at your earliest possible opportunity. You needn’t be afraid of the “gross” factor—there is no odor and the bodies are treated with great respect. I promise that you will be fascinated and enlightened. Regardless of your prior background, you almost certainly will discover some elements of the human body that differ from your current understanding.

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There is a happiness which comes from creative effort. The joy of daydreaming, creating, building, whether in painting a picture, writing an epic, singing a song, composing a symphony, devising new invention, creating a vast industry.

Henry Miller

Thoughts give birth to a creative force that is neither elemental nor sidereal. Thoughts create a new heaven, a new firmament, a new source of energy, from which new arts flow. When a man undertakes to create something, he establishes a new heaven.

Philipus A. Paracelsus

You can’t use up creativity. The more you use, the more you have.

Maya Angelou