
Das *APCS* Bulletin

Avis officiel de l'Association des Professeurs de Chant de Suisse

September 1996

Nr. 32

Wrapping Up the Performance Package

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Nachdruck aus "The NATS Journal" Januar 1993 mit Erlaubnis des Autors.

What a beautiful natural voice you have! You should become a professional singer!" Following a few years of exploratory study, the singer enrolls in a professional training program at a reputable conservatory or school of music. Friends and family say, "John is becoming a professional singer," or more probably, "John is learning to be an opera singer." That is what John himself most certainly believes. What are his chances?

The consistently beautiful sound John may eventually learn to emit from his larynx and his vocal tract is not the crucial factor. Nor is his desire to sing, although both are necessary to the realization of a professional singing career. John must assemble the total package.

Voice teachers sometimes marvel at what might unkindly be termed "cosmic jokes" in the world of vocal endowment. John or Jane possesses an instrument of exceptional beauty but does not have the innate ability to master basic skills essential to the art of singing. He or she may lack an exact rhythmic sense, an understanding of phrase movement, an awareness of the subtle shades of vocal timbre, the ability to repeat a concept of tone consistently or to distinguish among the niceties of linguistic exactitude, facility for quickly learning music and for memorizing it readily, a sense of drama, a genuine feeling for communication.

Coordinating the elements of artistic singing may forever remain unattainable, no matter how intense or how long the training period; despite favorable attributes of larynx and physique, the other essentials to a professional singing career are inherently lacking. Chances for a professional career are minimal.

Can it be assumed that if the singer has natural vocal endowment, a musicianly ear, musical skills, and an artistic imagination, a career will follow? Even then, chances are small. Why should this be? Because nature is profligate in her gifts, and the world is full of beautiful vocal instruments housed in persons of musical sensibilities. Something more than the basic components is needed.

What makes the difference in career success among persons of similar endowment? Conventional wisdom speaks of "the breaks" and of "contacts," both of which are important along the road to a professional career, but neither of which makes the compelling difference. Singers themselves often attribute lack of success to poor technical instruction, and too many times they have reason to lament what they have been taught. But that, again, is seldom the cause for a lack of success. A clever singer will eventually find the necessary help in solving remaining technical problems.

The "package" itself must be in place, and the difference between having it and lacking

it lies in the extent of the singer's *self-organization*. (This used to be termed *self-discipline*, but such language is now out of style.) A singing career has to be built with the same concentration of energy that is directed toward any successful enterprise. This is particularly difficult for the young singer in a world full of distractions. It comes down to a matter of immediate priorities. A person who, after acquiring the essential musical skills, hopes to have a singing career, must devote large amounts of time to acquiring technical skills systematically, to listening to successful artists, to gaining familiarity with the literature of his or her Fach, to the long process of role coaching and memorization, to an orderly lifestyle that contributes to vocal health. Excellent studio training does not obviate the need for these factors.

One is often astounded when talking with gifted young singers to realize how limited is their knowledge of the professional field and its requirements. Many hopefuls are frequently unfamiliar with the voices and artistry of past and current singing artists, and are unaware of the competitive nature of the profession. They have little information on the practical aspects of career building, harboring an assumption that they will be "discovered." The need to work aggressively at finding performance outlets, and the essential role of agents and representatives, are unknown to them.

Many of today's performance majors complete their musical education with little knowledge of the standard art song and operatic repertory. They are in command of only the literature learned for the required public recital appearances associated with their degree programs. Even within these limited repertory expectations, it is not uncommon for the student singer to assume that if the material is memorized a week or two in advance of the dress rehearsal, adequate preparation has been made. They are

like unsuspecting persons who begin the ascent of a mountain without knowing how high it is, and without appropriate mountain-climbing gear.

Many of these problems stem from the social milieu within which today's young singer moves. It is not possible to spend long hours watching television, "playing house," or accepting the duties of the "normal" life style of young adults around one, while building a career base. Peer pressures to do so are strong. But unless there is a single-mindedness about career building, there will be no career.

This means the current foregoing of many pleasurable activities, accustoming oneself to long work days, to a tightly organized schedule, to "woodshedding" and "slogging away" at career preparation while one's companions appear to be having a great time partying. It comes down to the basic recognition that "if you do this, you can't do that," no matter how interesting or even commendable "doing this" might be. The limited nature and value of time available for attending to the many aspects of career building must be realized. Daily adherence to a work schedule that embraces all facets of that training is essential. During the preparatory years, immediate gratification cannot be a high priority.

The advertising world attempts to persuade that "you owe it to yourself" to have a good time, obscuring the fact that there is far greater pleasure to be found in the satisfaction of permanent accomplishment than in momentary entertainment. The counterargument here being made may well smack of a call to an out-of-date "work ethic," of "holding one's nose to the grindstone." It is clear that a call to self-organization does not readily fit into current social attitudes. However, the professional "classical" singing voice requires the same amount of preparation in time and commitment as it did in previous epochs.

This is not to say that there is no room for socializing or for recreation in the life of an aspiring young singer. As in all occupations, some respite from work is essential to the healthy maintenance of equilibrium. But because of the nature of the singing instrument and the need to approach the art of singing creatively and imaginatively (and because of the gregariousness of most singing personalities!), it is easy to assume unwittingly that things will happen of their own accord as a kind of natural phenomenon, and thereby to expend one's energies in undirected fashion in nonprofessional channels.

No doubt self-indulgence has always been as much a characteristic of established performing artists as of the rest of the populace, but the successful artist early learns to *channel that self-indulgence into professional preparation*. A true artist is consumed with his or her art, and perceives such complete commitment as self-indulgence, not as sacrifice. However, much of the exacting process of professional preparation is *not* fun. It goes contrary to the current assumption that to expend such amounts of time and energy is to place oneself in thrall to the "Bitch-goddess Success." Although she may not be best described by such a pejorative appellation, the Goddess of Art is a demanding mistress.

It may well be that a professional career is not worth all the effort. So be it. Then the singer should face that fact and not invite the later frustration of non-accomplishment that dogs so many would-be performers. A gifted young singer must decide if a professional singing career is more important than anything else in the world. An understanding of human needs and emotions is essential to artistic expression, but it is not necessary to experience all that life has to offer if it means dissipating one's time and energies in life's numerous distractions. In fact, that may be the best way to insure failure.

Wrapping up the professional package consists of a conscious attempt to husband one's time and energies, and to direct them to specific career goals. Otherwise, one should forget about it and turn to some other field of endeavor.

