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Voice Skill and Vocal Longevity

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Question: *Is a long singing career an indication of a fine vocal technique? Does an early finish to a career mean the singer was technically less solid?*

Comment: There are a number of reasons for early termination of a performance career. Some go beyond a singer's control, and others are the result of choices made by the singer. Physical state of being may be the chief factor in determining the duration of a singing career. The voice of singing is not just the larynx but the total body. Like any other athlete, the singer must stay in the best physical condition of which his or her instrument is capable.

Yet being in good physical shape is not the complete answer to the question of vocal longevity. Laryngeal abuse and misuse can occur regardless of the excellence of physical conditioning. Singers who have been schooled for the concert stage and the opera house usually have sufficient technical skill to manage the literature they are assigned, but they may resort to compensatory devices that are not conducive to vocal health.

In many cases, a talented performer is asked to take on heavy duty professional responsibilities before technical resources have become secure. More than one emerging artist has been thrown to the critical wolves because he or she was given assignments that went beyond current abilities.

In some cases, the technique the singer has been taught leads to pressed phonation (too long a closure phase of the vocal folds during the phonatory cycle) and to a production too heavy for the nature of the instrument, thereby producing either vocal fatigue or nodes. In other instances, despite well-grounded technique, the singing of an extensive series of dramatic roles with high-lying tessitura within a narrow time span can be the contributing cause of an early career termination.

A foremost lyric tenor in his mid-thirties, who was convinced by a major conductor that Radames was now an appropriate role for him, never thereafter recovered the former ease and beauty of his voice. In another instance, it was the casting of a remarkable soprano as Carmen, and her attempts to carry chest voice upward to meet the conductor's conception of the role, that produced a career crisis. In some cases, months of partial voice rest coupled with participation in rehabilitation programs permit an artist to resume a successful career, because the causes of misuse are alleviated.

Nor is it only the "classical" singer who faces problems of longevity; the group of vocal performers known collectively as the "untrained professional" has an exceedingly high incidence of laryngeal abuse, often because of a lack of voice training, and at times because of life-styles associated with the music entertainment field.

Professional singers express concern over the possibility of developing vocal nodules, but nodes are not the chief reason for early demise of a career. The way in which the total body maintains its health and tonicity, through diet, rest, and the avoidance of cigarettes and alcohol excess, is of greater significance.

Another factor concerns the vocal category of the singer. Just as the light vocal instrument is the first Fach to mature, it is often the first to show the ravages of time. The spinto or dramatic soprano voice and the mezzo-soprano often fare better with problems of advancing years than does the lighter female instrument, such as the soubrette or the coloratura. When one cites extended female careers one mostly identifies the dramatic and large lyric voices. In general, there is a greater likelihood that the female singer will be less able to continue a public career into advancing decades than her male colleague. Hormonal changes influence all vocal behavior, and the female experiences them to a greater degree than does the maturing male.

Professional male singing careers often extend well into the sixties. A few top-flight male performers, generally tenors, enjoy limited concert careers beyond their seventieth year. However, in all cases, the sheen of the voice, and the completeness of the scale, formerly characteristic of schooled vocalism, are seldom present. It is safe to affirm that long-lasting careers have belonged to singers who over the years displayed high levels of technical proficiency.

By contrast, one thinks sadly of the early career terminations of both male and female singers who enjoyed star status briefly, with their successes confined to a few seasons or to a single decade. In some instances, health problems beyond personal control were responsible, but more often foolish life-style, greed, and incomplete technique were chief culprits.

The performance life is not just experiencing great music, lovely costumes, exotic travel, interesting social engagements, high salaries, accolades from an adoring public, and sometimes off-the-mark comment (as often positive as negative) from the press. It requires strict self-organization, cautious husbanding of physical and emotional resources, and a nurturing supportive system (sponsors, family, spouses, friends, agents).

More than one performer has become swept up in a social whirl for which the psyche was ill prepared. The element of avarice reaches far into the professional world, sometimes being germinated in the agency office. Fortunately for young singers, there are artist representatives who are fully aware that killing the goose will terminate the supply of golden eggs, and who have a sense of responsibility regarding the welfare of their clients~ Yet all run their businesses for profit; they are not there for the sole purpose of mentoring and assisting artists. Singers must learn to negotiate with agencies and to protect themselves.

Several decades ago a notorious agent in Milan signed the promising young singers just out of conservatories to comfortable monthly stipends for a duration of several years. He then maintained the right to assign roles and appearances for that period of time. One young tenor of great promise was constantly dashing from one end of the Italian peninsula to the other, singing major roles in both major and minor houses in exchange for his monthly stipend, while "Signor Agenzia" was in Milan picking up very good fees to line his own pocket. The career of the tenor grew difficult and terminated early because he was "sung out."

Greed is not restricted to monetary matters. Against all advice, some singers will contract for cross continental engagements and cumulative dates that bring additional PR value. The inability to say "No" to an attractive role that is weightier than vocal endowment, age, or a sane schedule can

match, induces the artist to succumb to professional avarice. Vocal wear and tear become evident, and career durability is shortened.

What about the professional performer who operates on a less visible level? Many singers of excellent vocal talent and training are not faced with decisions regarding recording contracts, coast-to-coast travel, and European festivals. They must contend with the problem of keeping their voices in good condition while working daily in the academic trenches.

There is no doubt that using the voice for teaching is an additional vocal burden that the professional artist performer does not have to face. It should not be surprising that the fully occupied voice teacher often is unable to match the career length her full-time performing colleague is enjoying. Yet careful attention to vocal maintenance will mitigate the effects of such constant vocal usage.

It is not the use of one's own voice during the teaching process that chiefly is detrimental to maintaining a career; it is the neglect of doing one's own daily technical regimen. No teacher of singing should ever begin a day's instruction without first having done his or her own basic technical work.

Is longevity a sign of a healthy vocal technique? The answer is a resounding "Yes!" The healthy singing voice adheres to good physical function that obeys the rules of vocal acoustics; the efficient use of physiology and acoustics equates with good vocalism and a long singing career. But, the reverse of the coin is not true: A shorter performance career does not necessarily mean that bad vocal technique was the reason. Other contributing circumstances may have been compelling. 