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## Pedagogical Clothing for the Emperor (Empress)

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Someone should call a halt to the proliferation of so-called "master classes" presented by performing artists who normally do not teach. Material from such events could make up a volume of fascinating reading. A few examples follow.

Said the artist-turned-momentary-master teacher when the student performer finished singing, "What color were you thinking? I heard green." Replied the young soprano, "I was worrying about making it through the long phrases!" Pedagogical advice from the artist: "This time think the color blue." Subsequently the colors yellow and purple were suggested, with no change in the quality of the performance. Calling this kind of instruction appropriate to a "master class" is hardly logical.

Another classic example comes from a much publicized "master class" given by a world-famous opera star who advised his singers that they should "pinch the uvula with the tonsils." On another occasion, an equally well-known star explained to the singers assembled before him that the vowel [i] is good for vocalization because it is small enough to fit into the channel of narrow sinuses that

he has found to exist above each eyebrow; further, all other vowels must be made to conform to the same [i] size and shape so that tone can be "placed" there.

At a highly advertised session at a famous conservatory, a leading figure in the world of music suggested to the singers before him that they must always hold the epiglottis down when singing. In similar fashion, during another series of master classes, a young soprano was given the physiologically questionable advice to raise her eyebrows because that action would "widen the pharynx" and "place the tone in the forehead." At a comparable level of physiological invention was the comment from yet another noted performer momentarily turned master teacher that the diaphragm (indicated as lodging at the navel) plunges downward for low notes (pelvis indicated), and surges upward (sternum indicated) for high notes.

There is the risk of being perceived as less than generous in describing such incidents, but one grows increasingly weary of the questionable subjective advice proffered young students from successful artists who know how to assemble into one psychological gesture their

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own personal experiences but not how to communicate them to others. Advice such as “believe in yourself,” “listen to your own emotions,” “follow your instincts,” “just think about the text,” “be carried by the drama” has little value when the talented singer is wishing he or she could better manage an evenly modulated scale, or that the remaining tongue, jaw, and neck tensions could be resolved. A gentlemen’s agreement to respect professional boundaries should be negotiated between those who professionally teach others the art of singing and those who successfully perform but do not teach. There are major differences between the two disciplines; they are not interchangeable.

One appreciates the good intentions of the campus administrator who thinks it would be exciting to have the well-known performer who is to appear on the artist recital series give a “master class.” Those of us who teach in the vocal trenches often silently shudder while assenting to what appears logical to those who do not teach. This is because most of us are, or have been, performers, and we have learned that disciplining for the art of teaching requires as much specific preparation and experience as does disciplining for the art of performance. One does not go blithely into teaching just because one is capable of beautiful singing. Master teaching results from the acquisition of pedagogical information and skill, not from performance success. Without doubt the number of premier singers in any generation who have been great voice teachers could be counted on the fingers of a hand or two.

It is worth noting that in the eighteenth century many of the most respected

singing teachers were themselves opera composers. (It is also true that many composers of early opera were themselves singers of sorts.) Yet major singing teachers were not often known for performance excellence. Typical is Manuel Garcia the younger, acknowledged as a major teacher of the transition period in vocal styles from the first to the second half of the nineteenth century. He was not a successful performer, although that was his original goal and that of his family.

It is more complex to assemble the requisite body of knowledge for solving a wide variety of vocal problems than it is to acquire individual performance skills. For this reason, there are many more fine professional singers than there are highly qualified vocal pedagogues. This situation can be remedied if those performers who wish to teach are willing to take time to acquire information that goes beyond one’s own personal performance acumen.

Part of the current problem of vocal instruction in European conservatories is that the great singer at the end of her or his career, never having taught, is then appointed by the Ministry of Culture as Professor of Singing at a major conservatory. The American pedagogical system is more practical, inasmuch as many teachers appointed to music school faculties have had courses in vocal pedagogy and vocal literature, and they have had teaching experience during their own graduate study programs. They then begin their academic careers as instructors or assistant professors at institutions where mentoring and evaluating young teachers is the rule. In addition, most American voice teachers from the

beginning of their professional lives combine teaching and performing; they therefore know much more than what comes from their own performance experiences.

The charismatic presence of an accomplished artist on the master class stage often provides an exciting performance in itself. However, to speak of such a performance as masterful pedagogy is to exclaim over the beauty of the naked emperor's clothing. Were the performing emperor or empress to take time to dress pedagogically, there might be general pleasure over the splendor of his or her garments.

Artists should not be placed in the embarrassing position of presenting amateur pedagogy. There are two distinct disciplines: performing and teaching. Both require time to acquire; neither discipline ensures success in the other.

To apply the term "master class" to the experimental pedagogical musings of an inexperienced teacher who, although an accomplished singing artist, is as lacking in pedagogical skills as the student appearing before him or her is lacking in artistic ones, is to praise the naked emperor's (empress') dress. 📖