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## Exchanging Information

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**Q**uestion: Where I teach, there is never any exchange of technical information among colleagues. In fact, talking about what we teach is purposely shunned. People in other disciplines talk freely with each other. What is it that makes it so hard for teachers of singing to exchange technical information among colleagues in the same department or town? Any comment?

**C**omment: This question zeros in on what is perhaps the most unfortunate aspect of the voice-teaching profession, and points to a fundamental flaw that plagues our educational philosophy: teaching voice tends to be a go-it-alone enterprise, much to the detriment of students and teachers alike.

The teacher who considers himself or herself unique labors in an intellectual and artistic vacuum. Many teachers welcome brief participation in off-campus or nonlocal symposia and conferences (most of which deal superficially, if at all, with vocal pedagogy); at the same time, however, dialoging with one's immediate peers about actual studio practices is considered off-limits. The questioner rightly wonders why it should be so.

Some voice teachers believe that what each studio teacher does, including themselves, is singular, and they want to keep it that way. They feel that either they, or their former teacher, have put together a work-

able system, and that there is no need to know how anyone else has arrived at his or her approach.

Classic is the case of a well-known voice pedagogue who proudly and frequently announced that the technique she presented was strictly her own, and therefore she had never felt the need to read a book on singing technique nor one on sex, yet had been successful in both areas. This kind of self-evaluation assumes that pedagogy consists of passing to the student personal images, sensations, and experiences. Therein lies a grave error: subjective, nonspecific information can be only minimally handed down to someone else.

The secretive teacher is reluctant to share pedagogic practices, refusing under all circumstances to have visitors, because to do so might reveal studio secrets. An example is in order.

An accomplished young soprano from the American Midwest, on becoming a Metropolitan Opera finalist, moved to New York. Her mid-western college teacher, with whom she had finished four years of highly productive voice work prior to her win, suggested she continue her study with a well-known teacher. She followed this advice. Learning that her recent teacher and mentor was visiting the city, the young woman invited him to a lesson with the new teacher. When the soprano and her recent teacher arrived at the new teacher's studio

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door, they were informed that he could not sit in on the lesson. No matter what the relationship between him and his former student might be, nor how respected the collegial association between the two teachers, visitors simply were never permitted. (This closed-door policy also may be found in academic settings in all parts of the western world, as well as in private studios.)

Yet another young singer, having become accustomed to recording her lessons with several past teachers, assumed that the taping of lessons was a normal procedure. Following her move to a metropolitan location, she arranged to take an initial lesson with a well-known teacher. She placed her small cassette recorder on a table near the studio piano. Mid-lesson, the new teacher suddenly became aware of the recorder, leaped to her feet, removed the tape, and said, in great agitation, "No one is permitted to record my teaching!," whereupon she placed the prohibited tape in her wastebasket. The lesson continued under considerable stress for both of them. The singer, wisely, never returned.

Is it possible that the teachers in both instances were hesitant to have their technical solutions on record, aware, perhaps, that the information being delivered could not stand objective, close scrutiny?

Sometimes a beginning teacher may assume that what was taught to her or him is all there is to know about the technical aspects of singing; the same information is then to be passed on to every student. Such questionable pedagogic philosophy is based on the principle of cloning: "This is how my teacher did it, how I do it, and you must do the same."

Success rates are seldom high, because the cloning approach belies the individuality of each singer. Although there is a large degree of commonality of function among all who sing, it is naive to assume that two individuals – here, teacher and student – will have

identical physical structures, voice types, psyches, sensations, or tonal concepts.

To refuse examination of what others know is to practice intellectual insularism, and represents a devastatingly parochial attitude. It asks, "If I already know what I'm doing, why should I consult with a colleague about the art of singing? What more do I need than what I now have?" An appropriate answer is, "One never knows what remains to be learned if one never explores the world around oneself."

The best place to start exploratory growth is with the colleague in the studio next door. Perhaps I suspect I already know some of that teacher's principles and am convinced that I am not in agreement with them. This should not exclude contact on how someone else plies his or her craft. Why not inquire about a specific technical point, recommended by my neighbor, that differs from mine? Why does he or she consider it advantageous? In general, where does his or her pedagogy fit into historical pedagogy? Why not explain why each of us holds his or her viewpoints? In discussing alternative methods, both teachers would be pursuing healthy comparative voice pedagogy. An interchange of this sort might strengthen the current practice of each teacher, or it could prompt both teachers to consider alternatives.

Justification for anything a teacher tells his or her student ought to be based on whether or not it is in accordance with the laws of acoustics and physiology. Why not openly discuss aspects of singing that depend on these two vital areas of information, and measure what each of us is doing against those principles? Why not sit in on each other's lessons, and discuss them afterward?

It is not chiefly because of busy schedules that exchanges are rare, but rather from fear or, more discouraging, from arrogance or pride. Perhaps I will need to give up some cherished opinion, some technical point that

I got from my own teacher; perhaps I will have to tell my students that I have changed my opinion on some point or points. Or my hesitancy may be that I am afraid my next-door colleague will feel threatened by me, or I by him or her.

The topic raised by the questioner is of such burning concern that it should occupy a main-event session at every regional and national conference devoted to the teaching of singing (in preference to sessions that politely skim the surface and evade real substance).

Voice teachers are accustomed to participating in meetings devoted to repertory, style and interpretation, performance anxiety, and career development, but almost never to technique. Most so-called master-classes are given over entirely to coaching and do not deal with the basics of voice production. Frank discussion at national professional meetings regarding the crucial areas of voice pedagogy might encourage the exchange of ideas on the local level, where it seems so difficult to initiate. Will it happen? The record thus far is not encouraging. 📖