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Creative Practicing

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Given the nature of today's popular culture, how does a young person become "turned on" to so-called classical vocal study? The choir director at school or church, an avuncular opera buff in the family, the thrilling discovery of an operatic recording, or a colorful video reproduction of an appealing opera may generate initial enthusiasm. Soon the realization of the physical joy of vocal performance and the satisfaction of artistic expression propel the young singer to performance as a possible vocation.

Early performance successes are heady experiences; one's peers show new respect. Persons who are considered experts begin to talk of "promising potential." "Talented," "gifted," "unusual," "artistic" are expressions that fall pleasantly upon the ear. With the good help of a local teacher, acceptance into a performance program at a major school of music becomes possible.

It is probably at the point of entrance into a degree program that there dawns the realization that what was great fun for the talented high school amateur now requires new kinds of responsibility in pre-professional circumstances. Whereas there was never any doubt about being the uniquely qualified singer in high school, at church, or in the city, now there are numerous other singers with similar performance histories. It is something of a shock to discover that the new teacher is accustomed to dealing

with unusual vocal talent. No longer is one unique.

Further, the new teacher seems to hear many more things that are in need of correction. Those areas of the voice that were never at the level of the best parts of the instrument have taken on new importance. Technically detailed practicing, as opposed to singing because it is fun, is suddenly required. Even those favorite songs and arias that had previously met with great approval at home now appear to be in question. Perhaps the Metropolitan Opera contract is not as close at hand as the folks back home had been assuming! Pre-professional reality strikes.

The transition is problematic not only for the young singer but also for the studio teacher. The new teacher must face the considerable task of maintaining an essential, good self-image for the student and of nurturing the initial curiosity that drew the student to the field of performance, while at the same time directing attention to skills and to the need for greater discipline.

How can the teacher redirect youthful energy and enthusiasm without diminishing valuable assets? This is a major pedagogical problem.

There is, fortunately, an answer: *creative practicing*.

Problem solving is itself a creative act shared by teacher and student. There must be an over-all plan that outlines goals, with

explicit instructions as to what should be taking place in the practice room when the student works alone. Identification of a technical fault during the lesson without an accompanying solution is disheartening to the learner. "Try to work that problem out by yourself" is not serviceable advice. Non-creative teaching consists of running through the gambit of current pedagogical ideas without determining which ones are based upon efficient action and which ones are purely subjective. Clearly, pedagogical trial and error do not substitute for specific information grounded upon an understanding of the voice as a physical instrument.

During the lesson there must be assessment of problems, prescriptions for their correction, and an estimate as to the probable time span required for the recognition of results. Very often it is unclear to the student that some problems are long range, dependent upon a gradually developing coordination. The student may incorrectly assume that if the solution has not proved successful this week, it may never work.

Creative practicing can take place only if based upon specifics, with clear understanding as to what is to be accomplished. Problems take on the character of an intriguing puzzle, and each solution opens up the possibility for additional progress. Every practice session should build upon the creative excitement of solutions previously offered in the studio.

Vocalises can be useful in "warming up" the voice, but their chief purpose should be to build the total technique of the singer. Only vocalises that have proved to produce specific coordination in singing are acceptable. They should be noncomplex and they should be able to induce desirable physiologic and acoustic function. But won't the student become bored with vocal exercises, and can't songs and arias produce the same results? The answer in both cases is "No."

It is often overlooked that vocal timbre itself is emotive, and that every vocalise should be treated as a musical expression,

an emission of sound that in itself is communicative. It is naive to assume that technical work is non-creative and that creativity enters only when literary ideas are expressed. Were that the case, approximately half the standard vocal literature from previous centuries would fail to qualify as performance-worthy, because of its emphasis upon pure vocalization.

Singing a rapid arpeggio over the span of a twelfth on a series of changing syllables can be as exhilarating as the passages of a *cabaletta*. The vocalise is useful technically because it limits the area of skill to be acquired. It concentrates more narrowly upon specifics. It is entirely possible, of course, to execute that arpeggio in a non-emotive, mentally-detached fashion, in which case its purpose is lost. Consistency of resonance throughout a sequence of changing vowels can be a joyous, creative experience. Recognizing vowel modification so as to avoid openness or excessive "cover" in a mounting scale pattern can become an exciting adventure in timbre matching. Such work is creative.

There is seldom value in practicing any vocalise that does not have musical merit. Vocal techniques that incorporate grunting, groaning, yawning, sighing, barking, or primitive yelling – the list could be extended – are largely useless technically and aesthetically; one cannot be creative while making ugly sounds. Every phrase, brief or long, fast or slow, loud or soft, must present a musical experience. True, not all attempts at beautiful sound will be equally successful. It is not possible to produce only aesthetically pleasing sound while attempting to master technical skills, yet the ideal of tonal beauty should always prevail.

The practice room should never serve as a laboratory remote from performance-ready sound. The ultimate goal of technical study remains communication. In the practice room the student should sing series of vocalises as though performing before an audi-

ence. The physical joy of singing must be present, and the instrumental sound of the voice should be emotive. An imaginary audience accompanies creative practicing.

Thus far in this consideration, emphasis has been placed upon vocalises, because it is the vocalise that remains the chief vehicle for technical development. However, vocal literature itself can be treated just as analytically without losing the creative spark. A single phrase may be treated technically, just as can the vocalise, without loss of creativity. Musical and textual expression are also subject to analysis.

Student and teacher can share creatively in analyzing and determining what is still lacking. Creative practicing is an extension of creative studio teaching.

The practice room can become a friendly and exciting place where vocal technique and artistry are united. It need not be just the room where one “warms up” the voice prior to tackling the literature. It is the environment where daily routining permits the singer to stabilize technique and communication skills learned in the studio. Creative practicing produces the creative singer. 📖