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The Key with No Lock

by Brad Jenks



Over the last few years, a handful of singing-related questions have bothered my already too-frenzied brain. I have found myself wondering about such things as . . .

Why do most young singers emerge from their undergraduate studies so technically immature and unready for professional engagement—effectively needing time in grad school—while a handful here and there do seem to be young-professional ready and win competitions?

Is this just a prodigy effect, or is there a correlation to the fact that the overall age of professional debuts has risen in a similar fashion over the last century?

Why are many singers with a master’s degree so often unaware of some of the basics of singing physiology and mechanics? How is that being a master at their field?

What does all this say about the priorities of these singers and their teachers?

After much reading and deliberating, I have arrived at the conclusion that our instruction model is outdated. I don’t mean by this that it hasn’t kept up with the times regarding things like scientific discovery. Many contemporary voice studios have all sorts of audio-visual aid to supplement their ears and their good, old-fashioned know-how. Additionally, many studios make a determined point of addressing contemporary styles and accoutrements. Specifically, what I mean to say is that we no longer learn by apprenticeship.

Anytime before maybe 70 years ago, the average voice student would see their teacher multiple times a week at least, sometimes doing nearly daily lessons or even living with their teacher. This is how most people learned most things for most of human history since the division of labor began in early human settlements many thousands of years ago. Young people would learn their parent’s profession by living it daily, or parents would take their child to a master of a different skill, drop them off, and the ensuing years would be spent becoming that thing on a daily basis.

Learning a skill meant immersion. In this paradigm, it was perfectly fine for the master to be the brains of the operation, because understanding would happen by the pupil’s reflection on a working model—but from the inside. Abject obeisance and hard work was all that was required, and the rest would come in time. But because there was no distracting television and limited or no interruption from compulsory state education, young people acquired skills much earlier.

We no longer practice this social construct of apprenticeship and have, for better or worse, swung fully over to the academic model we presently have, often tacitly branding it as the only legitimate means of learning. There are scores of conversations to be had on this topic, but I will restrict myself to the point. The standard voice lesson still retains the structure that it had under the apprenticeship model: the student comes to a lesson, the teacher remains the brains.

Explicitly or implicitly, the student is expected to shut up (figuratively speaking) and follow the directives of the teacher, hope for some insight during the activity or from the sparse explanations peppering the vocalises, and leave aspiring to retain any sensory information gleaned—or at least feeling they have been given a good workout by a wise mentor. But, then, over the remaining six days of the week they are left to their own devices, entirely able to screw up any progress made in their scant hour with the teacher. And this doesn’t even account for holiday breaks!

Many texts from the early years of the 20th century relate that teachers preferred that most practice by beginner and intermediate students be done only under supervision. Well, that might work if lessons were a nearly daily activity. Not so today.

So we are continuing to teach these young people in a fashion best supported by a structure that no longer exists. What are we to do? What do we owe them? What ought we to do in order to accommodate this change and fulfill our pedagogical obligation to our students (who are usually indebting themselves to the tune of many thousands of dollars, only to finish half as prepared as people younger than themselves only 100 years ago). This style of lesson used to be the key to learning. But with the loss of apprenticeships proper, the lock which that key fit has disappeared.

To my mind the answer is not the return of apprenticeship—it’s likely too late for that. So it must instead be the revamping of the lesson itself. It’s all well and good for a student to seek out an expert in hopes that they might, over time, sing better. Now they must find an expert . . . and then become an expert themselves in turn.

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This fascinating dynamic is demonstrated in a kind of inverse fashion by the anecdote of Norwegian Wagnerian soprano Kirsten Flagstad (whose career spanned the first half of the 19th century) and her teacher Gillis Bratt. When Flagstad began studying with Bratt, he asked her if she ever intended to teach. Assuring him that she had no intention of ever doing so, he told her that "instruction would go faster if he didn't have to explain everything that he did . . ." Bear in mind that she was already an accomplished pianist, had studied voice for years, and even then received at least two lessons weekly. And he was strict, including working for months only on speech, articulation, and phonation before ever allowing her to sing a note!

Potters teach students to become potters, plumbers teach students to become plumbers. But voice teachers usually teach students to become singers only, but rarely teachers in their turn. And how much more important is it that they do, now that students are left upwards of 85 percent of their time of study to be the sole supervisors of their practice?

This says little of the unfortunate tendency toward a cult of personality around teachers that can result from failing to purposefully walk students through facts and practicalities. As pupils attend their teacher, hoping against hope that the next lesson will hold the key the teacher harbors that will help to gel everything in their singing, all but the most determined and ambitious young singers will ultimately leave all authority in the hands of the teacher and await their molding into the star they are destined to become.

But for their money, this is not a terribly practical approach. We need to not simply run them through minimally explained vocal calisthenics, reassuring them of the progress that only we recognize. We must draw their attention in the same direction. We need to encourage questions and, above all else, we must persistently and with great scrutiny focus lessons on addressing what the student is doing outside of the lesson.

We need to ask questions like "How do you practice?" "What does that look like?" "Why do you choose that exercise, or that order?" "How effective and efficient has that been for you?" And then advise, advise, advise, while filling in knowledge gaps.

This can very easily receive some pushback. So much in society, especially as regards music and singing, is centered around emotional response far before practicalities are ever addressed. In the present model, we are faced with an extra capitalist element. Yes, teachers should be respected as experts, but students ought to be respected as patrons, since our authority comes at the price of their money.

The tricky bit is that this carries with it the buyer's expectations—reasonable or otherwise. It is a strange sort of hostage holding that happens when a teacher is faced with a student who balks at being told physiological information, intimating that they "don't really learn best that way." We must be willing to respond, "Then you don't really learn." We do no great benefit to them or to our own reputation as teachers to allow for the option that ignorance is as good an education as actual learning. Learning styles may vary, it's true. But if the "style" results in no acquired information, it shouldn't rightly be called learning. It's a pervasive absurdity that ought to dissipate.

Now, again, I understand that improvements in the sung portions of lessons may indeed best be done by a variety of methods. So if it helps a student to make a better sound by telling them to pretend they are a balloon or that they should think of the pitch A-flat as "distinctly purple-ish in color," then by all means, do that. But when we additionally insist that they learn something of the mechanism in tandem, we aren't explicitly doing it for the present singing, we are doing it for their future.

When we leave out this perfectly relevant information, we are abandoning them to any troubles they may encounter in the future. When the balloon deflates or "purple" stops being so "purple-y," they will find we have left them ill equipped to address these issues. It is for these moments that understanding the physiological whys and hows of singing becomes indispensable.

For many this is little more than the persistent debate between the traditional and the scientific approaches to instruction. But to debate this assumes the mutual exclusivity of each, and we frankly can't afford this anymore—neither can our students. They still need our ears and our advice, but outside of an apprenticeship, they now simultaneously need our knowledge. They can't make reasonable progress without it. And if we fail to provide this, we do them a pedagogical and financial disservice. Lilli Lehmann, in her book *Meine Gesangskunst* described it well when she wrote, "The singer is usually worried by the word 'physiology' . . . The singer need, will, and must know a little of it. We learn so much that is useless in this life, why not learn that which is of the utmost service to us?"

So the model must be reversed. It's not enough to do first and understand later. Students must understand concurrently, or even prior. They must learn what they are looking for. They must know what they are working with. And they must know what they are working toward.

To teach them their art, we must teach them their instrument.

With over 25 years of experience in the field of vocal music, Brad Jenks' teaching has taken him from Miami to Chicago and as far as Los Angeles. Focused on teaching and pedagogy for the last 13 years, he currently maintains a private studio in Chicago, another in Champaign, Illinois, and is faculty at both the British School of the Performing Arts in Chicago and Metropolis School of the Performing Arts in Arlington Heights, Illinois. In addition to his teaching, he is an avid writer on the subject of singing, study, and pedagogy, including his blog "A Journey in Song". He has worked on administrative staff at the Festival Lyrique de Belle-Ile-en-Mer in France, Glimmerglass Opera, and Florida Grand Opera, and studied privately under the late William Miller, professor emeritus of voice at the University of Illinois.
E-mail the author at: bradleyjenks@gmail.com

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