

The

# TEACHER'S CORNER

A place for teachers to essay on technique, pedagogy, philosophy, and more.

## Demythologizing Vocal Technique

BY BRAD JENKS

*Teacher Brad Jenks opines on the dangers of kneeling before the altar of technique and how teachers can best nurture their students in and out of the studio by keeping it simple.*

Quite a few years ago I had a simple but formative moment with my teacher. It remains a vivid memory from my years of study with him. He was elderly and had been teaching singing for longer than my young mind could comprehend. I was playing for him two recordings of a couple of singers I had been enjoying recently. Both singers were relatively new on the scene and unfamiliar to him. The first of them he immediately acknowledged as a very fine singer within only moments of hearing him. I played him the second singer. After listening for a little longer than the first, he simply said, "He has a handsome voice . . . not very disciplined . . ."

Despite my enthusiasm for the singer, my teacher had apparently found something lacking, and yet he did not immediately classify him as a "bad singer." This was startling for me. For myself and many of the younger singers and vocal students I knew, it had become habit to point out "faulty technique" and we had become very quick to label someone a terrible singer. Our eagerness to do so no doubt stemmed from a desire to seem "in the know."

My teacher had no such need. He did not suggest the second singer had "bad

technique" while the other had "good technique." Whatever technical elements might have been at play in either singer's vocalism, my teacher spoke in terms of "discipline."

Moreover, nothing was said in a disparaging way. His tone of voice almost sounded hopeful, even encouraging. This was foreign to me at the time. And thank goodness it happened.

In this era of easy-access mass media, where fame can be gained with minimal training or experience and where talent and hard work are sometimes considered mutually exclusive, classical vocal music remains one of the arenas where it is understood that hard work is still required of practitioners. In any field that acknowledges a need for such concerted effort, technique will never fail to be a subject on peoples' lips. One need only look at the commentary beneath the YouTube clip of any working singer to see the way in which their "technique" is analyzed.

Singers are scrutinized bit-by-bit, taken to pieces by opera fans and, more often, amateur singers who are obsessed by this idea of "technique." Technique becomes fetishized. It becomes a thing unto itself, a Holy Grail to be sought and rarely attained. From the way one reads or hears it discussed in some forums, it might appear that Good Technique is a thing obtained only by now legendary singers who are no longer active or alive—and

with whom no contemporary singer can compete.

Even the notion of a "trained singer" has taken on certain connotations. Rather than meaning that a young singer has received tutelage to improve their strength, stamina, diction, and legato to further discipline their body and voice for health and consistency of performance, it has come to mean that a person has decided they want a "classical" sound and they have sought a teacher who will teach them this nebulous "classical" technique. Armed with this technique, they will be a "classically trained" singer. This technique they are learning is almost considered a "thing" unto itself. "My technique" and "his technique" are spoken of in such terms that it begins to sound like an object apart, handed down teacher to student—a thing you either have or have not, with no apparent in-between.

Technique becomes depersonalized—and so, shortly thereafter, do other things. Young singers jokingly speak about "*la voce*," but it is surprising to watch how young singers can grow increasingly detached from their own voices. As young singers address technical issues, it is not uncommon to see them beginning to consider their voice almost as a separate entity, especially distant on days where it appears not to cooperate. But does this thinking benefit young singers? And what, as teachers, is our role in

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helping young singers to understand their voices and technique? How, as teachers, do we consider vocalism—and, more importantly, how do we encourage our students to consider it?

Effective instruction strategies vary widely from teacher to teacher, usually along a spectrum that ranges from the intricately physiological to the profoundly metaphorical. While these approaches are employed to help students to make good

and healthy sounds, are we always certain that these moments of correction and improvement are taking root in the fertile soil of a healthy, overarching concept of singing? It is one thing to get a student to make a lovely sound, but as important as the sounds they make in your studio are the impressions that stay with them when they leave.

For many years after his death, and still to this day, I find myself understanding

things that my own teacher said to me that I was not prepared to incorporate fully at the time. Countless elements, both significant and subtle, have come to my attention further down the road and have been fathomable to me only because of the basic concept he tried to impart. And following that tradition, I consider it a very significant part of my job to not just teach my students for the present moment or for the musical task at hand. I must also give them something they can take away—a clear idea they can carry with them when they go.

The way a person thinks about singing is the path that they will follow. Consequently, part of the job of teaching must be to attempt to demythologize vocal technique for our students—distilling it, as it were. It is important that students inherit from their teachers a simple, practical, and honest approach by which they can gauge their singing.



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This is of course in addition to any physiological knowledge and metaphor that is used in instruction. Music is an emotionally charged field. It is especially so when the individual is both musician and instrument. It would be easy to entrance our students, encouraging a mythology of glamor, adding layers to an already bloated concept, and feeding on their youthful eagerness to seem advanced or mature.

"I think the problem with singing is that most people complicate it enormously. Imagine the kind of terror that comes over a singer if he's trying to adjust every single note that he sings," said American baritone Cornell MacNeil. In my observation, many young singers approach their vocal study with an attitude almost of "I'm an adult now, and I am ready for a grown-up [read: complicated] vocal technique." No doubt they can find a teacher who will give that to them. But when difficulty strikes, how

much more complicated is the solution?

Perhaps part of this eagerness for a complicated approach stems from a desire to hide or have an excuse when things don't go as we hope. If technique is simple, after all, then why would a young singer have problems along the path to good vocalism? A complicated technique, however, offers the singer myriad explanations for flaws in their singing. And all of us, faced with difficulty, have a nasty habit of excuse-making.

But this is to mistake *simple* for *easy*—and singing, of course, is not easy. All singers will face challenges at some point, both great and small. "The voice collects and translates your bad physical health, your emotional worries, your personal troubles," Plácido Domingo once said.

There will be ups and downs, questions and concerns throughout the life of a singer. There can also be great moments of clarity and understanding. All the

more reason that, as teachers, we make it a priority to provide our students with a mental "home" to return to about singing. A place where they can reset and take refuge when they have questions. A place where moments of clarity and understanding are found to be doors to rooms in a house they already know. And in my experience, the great foundation of this home is simplicity.

*Brad Jenks studied voice privately under master teacher William Miller, professor emeritus from University of Illinois. He has worked on staff at the Lyrique-en-mer Festival de Belle Ile in France, Glimmerglass Opera, and Florida Grand Opera. He currently lives in Champaign, Illinois, and spends his time teaching between Champaign and Chicago where, in addition to private instruction, he teaches for the British School of the Performing Arts. ©*



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