Texting from the Stage: Singers as Communicators

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New York City is no stranger to ubiquitous advertisements. Even a short trip on a bus or subway brings repetitious billboards to commuters. And so, it was hard to escape The Metropolitan Opera's pervasive 2016-17 ad campaign *The Voice Must Be Heard*. Each poster featured a famous singer in a black and white photo seductively posed next to the catchphrase. The text seemed to be a poignant reminder that, above all else, opera is about singing. While theatrical aspects of opera also are important, one must bear in mind that without the voice, the art form ceases to exist. If the advertisements' words reminded people that the voice is paramount; it stands to reason that an *aide-mémoire* had become necessary because the ideal had fallen by the wayside. Had the voice become subservient to grandiose productions or far-reaching demands of the singers? The ad campaign's text is a good catalyst for those dedicated to the training of singers. It implores us to ask what now is demanded from singers and why people need to be reminded that the voice is most important. Singers are expected to be highly-trained actors, have the ability to move easily onstage, and possess superb language skills. As of late, they are also expected to sing Mozart and Rossini as easily as Rodgers and Porter, often in the same season. Understanding these expectations opens a dialogue for how we can best train singers in today's profession. What works and what needs to be reevaluated? Has training evolved to meet the demands of today's profession? How can singers work to build successful careers, and how can their team of teachers and coaches support this work? This essay does not claim to offer a simple and miraculous answer but, like all those in this book, it intends to begin a discussion.

Today's voice students should have training of the highest order, with the understanding that the breadth of skills required to become comprehensive musicians can be taught in a variety of repertories. Before we address the demands of today's young musicians, let us revisit some old observations about singing. Walter Ford wrote about this topic nearly one hundred years ago. He observed that "quantity has been substituted for quality, beauty plays only a subordinate part."[262] Ford described a dichotomy for all musicians: the struggle between technique and musicality. For the purposes of this essay, the terms technical security and vulnerable musicality will be used throughout, so we are reminded that a solid technique produces a stable foundation with which one can make and express music. These are two sides of the same coin and often are where we turn to solve problems in our music-making. If something needs more *legato,* is that a technical issue or must one merely dare to be more expressive?

[262] Walter Ford, "Some Thoughts on Singing," *Music & Letters* 1, no. 3 (Jul. 1920): 201-207, accessed June 28, 2017, http://www.jstor.org/stable/725905.

If a passage needs to be faster and clearer, should we work on it in the practice room solely with a metronome or is it better to try to find a more inner and urgent dramatic impetus? Every musician has undoubtedly encountered his or her own similar dilemma. Whichever way we decided to address the problem, Ford's article reminds us that technique serves the music, not the reverse: "It is true that art in its full sense involves more than an excellent technique: it is not true that it can exist without it. We are still suffering from a reaction, as inevitable…against the soul-destroying supremacy of virtuosity; but it has gone too far."[263] I have noticed that many similar observations are made by singers, coaches, and voice teachers today. Many people echo Ford's sentiment that singers are fixated on technical perfection often at the expense of musical expression. This does not mean to imply that singers should be concerned only with either facility or musicality. Rather, quality artistry is a well-balanced combination of both technique and musicality.

But how do we arrive at this very balance? How should we be training today's singers? If many of the same concerns remain present from a hundred years ago, it would imply a never-ending cycle that lacks progress. One answer may be to adjust the training itself. In an article curiously entitled "The Problem with Beautiful Singing," Matthew Shaftel and Christopher Swanson write, "In this essay, the authors propose a possible pedagogical approach in which issues of vocal technique, musical analysis, and poetical analysis may each be discussed in a way that reinforces the others."[264] Shaftel and Swanson also write that "unfortunately, the demands of the typical four-year college music degree are not easily reconciled with the older pedagogies, and students do not have the luxury of slowly building their voices before embarking upon techniques of expression and interpretation."[265] In short, working to achieve technical security and vulnerable musicality can and should happen simultaneously, not necessarily sequentially. Although Shaftel and Swanson write from a perspective solely based on classical singing, it is this author's belief that singers can be trained healthfully in a combination of "vocal technique, musical analysis, and poetical analysis" in which *both* classical singing and contemporary commercial music inform one another. For the purposes of this essay, my discussion of contemporary commercial music will focus on the American musical theater repertoire.

A personal anecdote might best illustrate an example of how training in classical singing and contemporary commercial music can work together. While still a student at The Juilliard School, a group of fourth-year undergraduate vocal arts majors asked me to serve as music director and performance pianist for their student-initiated cabaret. At that time, the curriculum for vocal arts students was not

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[263] Ibid., 204.

[264] Matthew Shaftel and Christopher Swanson, "The Problem with Beautiful Singing," *College Music Symposium* 47 (2007): 53—71, accessed June 28, 2017, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40374504.

[265] Ibid., 54.

dissimilar from many classical singing programs in the country, in that most of the studied repertoire was from the classical singing canon: opera, oratorio, concert works, and art song. For our cabaret, however, a variety of musical theater and jazz standards were woven together to create a thematic ensemble piece of continuous music that lasted approximately 50 minutes. A faculty member directed the production, which saw highly successful performances in a small black box theater at the school. Over some years, the cabaret gained more administrative and financial support. The musical numbers were selected with specific singers in mind, but the cast changed annually. Because each cabaret was a true ensemble piece, no two productions were alike. Our cabaret's musical preparation began with one-on-one coachings, and students often asked questions that appeared to indicate a steadfast concern with technique: should that have vibrato? Is it loud enough? Is my diction clear? I often found the answer to assuaging these concerns was in the non-technical components of the music. I was also aware that a fine and definite line exists between voice teacher and coach. And so, we addressed the technical concerns by discussing the particular characters in a song's text and by asking many questions, usually without settling on a single answer. Why was he or she singing this song? What does the text communicate to a listener? How could the singer find and draw upon personal connections as it related to the song? The song improved almost instantly, and usually the technical concerns that beleaguered the student suddenly were gone. And, the performance was more beautiful and aware.

Asking these questions of a student is not unique to the contemporary commercial repertoire, but students were able to answer these questions with well-informed opinions. Surely, one could apply the same process to their classical music. It became clear to me why American singers often are drawn to American musical theater and why technical concerns could usually be solved through non-technical discussions. The text is in their native tongue (assuming it is English) and many students were part of a community or high school musical production long before they came into contact with an aria or song in a foreign language. The cabaret provided students with the opportunity to sing a performance entirely in English. This made it very natural to react to the text. Our team determined that it was the ability to connect with the text that made the students' performances so rich. The cabaret became an annual favorite with both students and faculty. When faculty attended the cabaret year after year, one of the recurring pieces of feedback given to the artistic team was how profoundly moving the performances were and how well everyone sang. This is not to imply that when these students sang an aria or song in a foreign language, it lacked the same depth. As my colleagues and I fondly remembered the first cabaret we created together, we also remembered the bit of trepidation we felt as the ensemble proceeded to craft that first show. The lore was quietly handed down that, not too many years earlier, students had attempted to create an ensemble piece in a similar cabaret format. But some faculty members were highly unsupportive of the attempt and labeled it "the Devil's music." Our casts never heard these words uttered during the production, but everyone still proceeded with hesitation. There was a

seemingly ever-present "us versus them" attitude about classical singing and contemporary commercial music. In fact, it is very common that many students in music schools—conservatories or universities alike—have experiences that seem to indicate these two repertoires are at opposite poles.

Shaftel and Swanson may have said it best when they noted, "If song represents a composer's musical engagement with a poetic text, then perhaps the beautiful interpretation of a song requires a commitment to the integrated whole."[266] As we worked on the cabaret, it seemed that the integrated whole often came naturally to students in American musical theater music because it is so entrenched in American culture. This idea of an integrated whole means that any performance is greater than the sum of its parts. Why, therefore, can't both classical singing and contemporary commercial music be part of a student's education? Can we use contemporary commercial music as a point of departure to illustrate parallels to classical song and operatic repertoires?

When it comes to learning and preparing, all musicians should have a process by which they learn, honor the score, execute it in a healthy way, and replicate the finished product repeatedly in performances. Vocal music provides an added layer of study to this process. The presence of text is an additional advantage for understanding how and why a composer created the setting in a certain way. Perhaps a composer's musical setting complements the text—or is the music's *ying* to the poetry's *yang*. This information is an advantage as one studies a piece of music, and it also means singers must possess a deep knowledge and intimate understanding of every word set before them. Text often conveys a story or series of events, and communicating these actions and emotions is at once the responsibility and goal of the singer. Albeit a contrary notion to what young singers might believe today, the process does not end when a song or operatic role feels technically secure and is memorized. In truth, it is only at that point that the real, deep, and abstract work begins. Usually a further level of questions now arises: what subtleties of language can we explore that we haven't yet investigated? Why did this composer set the text this way, but another composer seemed to react so differently to it, and are both successful?[267] Are there multiple ways in which to interpret the text, and could I try doing it differently?

The belief is widely held that understanding (i.e., translating, if necessary) the text is a singer's first step in the learning process. A performer's relation to the text is what produces high-level and unique performances, and so, understanding the text is obligatory. What, then, *is* connection to text? Like a fingerprint, everyone's definition of it is individual. I believe it involves a figurative chewing on the poet's or librettist's every word, and a consideration of a story from each character's point of view and how their actions cause reactions. It involves constantly asking questions of oneself and

[266] Ibid., 70.

[267] As an example, one considers the very different settings of Goethe's "Erlkönig" by Schubert and Loewe, or of Verlaine's "C'est l'extase" by Debussy and Fauré.

scouring the source material time and time again with new ideas or inquiries. Often, one realizes that there is a wealth of information already present and we need not invent or concoct our own reactions or judgments about a piece until we have understood it deeply. Connecting to the text, which stems from deeply understanding it, is something that happens slowly over time and after consistently reckoning with the material. Perhaps it is easily done when one returns to a piece of music at different stages in one's life. The description may seem abstract precisely because this work often is.

In some cases, a deep connection to the text can even forgive technical shortcomings. Shaftel and Swanson remind readers to "consider the famous collaborations between Pears and Britten on the Schubert song cycles. Few would say that Pears achieves the finest tone quality, but the character of the performance makes them instantly recognizable as unique."[268] If Pears was able to create a performance that was personal and artistic, despite a less-than-perfect tone, then knowing how to connect to the text is imperative for students. They should not be limited to learning this skill solely through classical voice repertoire. I contend that this skill is what ensures that a voice will be heard, and is what sets the great apart from the good. Intuiting the subtleties of Debussy's Mallarmé settings is nearly impossible for native French speakers, let alone a student who is embarking on his or her first French *mélodie*—despite (as is usually the case) never having really studied the language. If singers find it difficult to complete the aforementioned work required to connect to their texts in foreign languages, perhaps we should adjust *how* we teach the skill and acknowledge that we can do it through contemporary commercial music. If connecting to a text, as a skill and tool, is taught in music slightly more familiar to students, we can make a small yet positive alteration in a student's training.

A student may find it easier to first do this critical work with a piece of Sondheim or Gershwin. Recalling the story about the cabaret, the works of this repertory are in English and the student may already be familiar with all the nuances of a musical's plot and a character's feelings. A teacher or coach can help students draw parallels and comparisons to their *Lied* or aria repertoire, and show how an equally deep understanding of text is necessary and possible in both genres. For example, look no further than Sondheim and Furth's 1970 musical *Company*. Many students have loved singing "I'm not getting married today," a song that appears toward the end of the first act. The song features three characters, though many students have arranged it so that a single performer can sing it in recital. In the musical, Amy is panicked about her impending marriage, and Sondheim has done a masterful job at fusing the text and music. Amy's inner thoughts are sung, but the other characters cannot hear them. She is panic-stricken about getting married, and Sondheim has set these words as a very fast patter, keenly creating a stream-of-consciousness worry about the wedding. At once, there is poetic awareness

[268] Shaftel and Swanson, "The Problem with Beautiful Singing," 54-55.

of why these words convey the emotion, and there is musical understanding of why the song is structured in this way. A student likely wouldn't need to have been at the altar to offer a convincing performance of the song because the musical drama is so relatable. To make the song technically secure, a student should work slowly with the words and exact rhythms, with the knowledge that the eventual tempo is very fast. Inviting these levels of understanding weaves together technique, poetic awareness, and musical understanding to create a successful performance. This holistic work also makes for an easier performance of the song.

Once a student has learned how the process works and that these levels of understanding should happen all together, the work that began with a strong and deeply-rooted understanding of text can be applied to a piece such as the opening trio from *Cenerentola*. Coaches and teachers often offer little solace to the frustrated singer who worries about never being able to sing the Italian text fast enough. This technical concern becomes an *ideé fixe* for the singer. In reality, the process to achieve a successful performance in *Cenerentola* is not much different from doing so in *Company.* After translating the piece, the student works slowly with the text in exact rhythm and infuses her process with knowledge of the story in an effort to understand why this music is so fast (and causing her much grief!). Cenerentola feels completely helpless and is annoyed that her stepsisters treat her awfully. It is the same brimming-with-emotions that Amy feels in *Company*. That is why the tempo in *Cenerentola* is so fast. It is exemplifying the palpitations and despair that Cenerentola feels at being in an unfair and difficult situation. At its core, the emotion is relatable to almost anyone. It is understanding these feelings that, coupled with studying the text, sets singers up for success as they realize why the music has been set a certain way.

I contend it is better for the student to first see the similarities in these kinds of music, rather than the differences. Most teachers and coaches concur that different skills of vocal production are required to perform classical and contemporary commercial music. By first making them aware of how each genre is similar in the learning process, students can then delve deeper. The student will be ready to learn about how techniques of vocal production are distinctly different when it comes to classical singing and contemporary commercial music. Andrew R. White may have said it best when he wrote, "I assert that classical technique may best be taught by teaching what it is *not*."[269] Sondheim and Rossini are not polar opposites or musical enemies, though how one sings them requires some different skills. White's brief but excellent article states, "Feathered registration and the capacity for cross-register *messa di voce* are the hallmarks of contemporary style. Facility with ornamentation and vibrato control are also imperative. These are hard-won skills. *No* one comes by this naturally. The sound may

[269] Andrew R. White, "BELTING As An Academic Discipline," *American Music Teacher* 60, no. 6 (June/July 2011): 22—24, accessed June 28, 2017, http://www.jstor.org/stable/43539818.