



Coaching the Classical Singer

Why a vocal coach?

Non-singers, even professional musicians who are not singers, are often perplexed by the existence of both a voice teacher and a vocal coach in a singer's development, and are confused as to the exact function of each. Instrumental teachers act as both technician and musical advisor. Why should a singer have a coach as well as a teacher?

When the training of a singer is more closely examined, both the need for a vocal coach and the delineation of the coach's duties and responsibilities will become more apparent. While technical vocal skills may be the most significant aspect of a singer's art, there are three additional factors that must be considered:

1. Classical singers, for practical purposes, almost never sing unaccompanied.

Singers are accompanied in a song recital by a piano or a chamber group and in an opera or an orchestra concert by orchestra musicians (all of whom have the music before them). For this reason the singer needs to be familiarized with the sound of the musical accompaniment as well as the ensemble problems posed by the interplay between the singer and the accompanying instruments. This procedure will also aid necessary memorization.

2. Singers must always sing from memory, frequently in a language not their own.

Time spent in voice lessons is rarely sufficient for routinizing obligatory memorization or to accomplish the linguistic requirements of the foreign language in which the piece may be written. In addition, singers need to

be supported in the memorization process. Few voice teachers possess the pianistic skills to play as well as a professional pianist, nor are they usually capable of providing cues while playing the score. Rarely can a voice teacher be simultaneously a great teacher and a great accompanist.

3. The presence of words in most vocal music makes dramatic and interpretive skills an intrinsic part of the art.

Adding to the problems caused by the very joining of language to music (linguistic burdens and diction issues present technical difficulties beyond the usual vocal technical skills), music with words tends to demand dramatic abilities. This means that unsuitable facial grimaces and visible body tensions that would dilute the dramatic image of the composition are contraindicated. The nature of the art demands that the singer's efforts look easy, that the singer appear to be spontaneously in the emotional state dictated by the words and music. Thus, the singer must possess a physical control of the body that permits only the dramatic elements to be seen, none of the natural vicissitudes of making the music (with the possible exception of breath support)—no beating tempos with the body, no elbows rising and falling, no head wagging or foot tapping. Nothing requires so many rehearsals as the work that culminates in the appearance of ease and spontaneity. These rehearsals are done with the coach. While voice teachers should be knowledgeable in the essential singing languages and should indeed impart the basics during the voice teaching process itself, far more time is needed, perhaps specific expertise as well, for mastering the fine nuances that foreign language singing requires. Memorization demands even more time.

To do all this, singers must study and practice in a different way from that of other musicians. Mastering these layers of responsibility—musical fidelity and accuracy, technical vocal skills, linguistic skills, dramatic skills, which are

achieved one at a time, many of which are dependent upon muscle memory—takes place primarily in a pianist’s or coach’s studio and is attained by means of extensive repetition.

Speaking financially, the voice teacher is probably the most expensive member of the vocal team during the developmental years of a singer’s study. Dividing the work to be accomplished between the voice teacher and the vocal coach lessens the prohibitive costs that a singer must bear during these early years.

The issue is further complicated by the fact that a singer is connected not to one but to three different pianists with three different responsibilities:

1. The rehearsal accompanist

This pianist often has some skills as a coach, but his/her main task is to help singers by allowing them to learn and memorize the entire composition and repeat it as often as necessary.

2. The recital accompanist

This pianist is in some cases also the rehearsal pianist and prepares a final performance with the singer. Because of the equal and collaborative nature of making music together, the recital accompanist often does not play the “teaching role” of the coach.

3. The coach¹

This pianist works on style, language, musical phrasing (musicality), musicianship (assuring that the singer is accurately interpreting the score), and performing. This pianist is a teacher with specific areas of expertise, who helps the singer grow as a sophisticated musician. This pianist must be a linguist, a musicologist (understanding performance practice in a variety

¹ For the remainder of this paper, the word “coach” will refer to the third classification.

of styles, genres, and musical eras), an exceptional musician, and must possess a wide knowledge of vocal repertoire. He/she is often a resource for repertoire appropriate to the singer. Since the coach is usually a fine pianist, singers may sometimes come to him/her together with their rehearsal accompanists.

In summary, the singer can rely upon the coach for the following types of aid:

1. Surmounting musical difficulties and complications

A large percentage of young singers discover their voices only after puberty. Consequently many have missed the opportunity to learn an instrument or acquire reliable musicianship in their earlier years. In these cases, the coach, who is knowledgeable about various ways to analyze and learn music, can liberate singers' musicality and help them to blossom artistically at the same time that they become musically accurate. The fact that some singers who started musical studies late in life may not be expert musicians does not indicate that they are unmusical. Such a singer should make it clear to the coach that improving musicianship in general and improving musical creativity in particular are qualities that he/she very much wants to attain.

2. Recognizing vocal, orchestral, and piano cues

Clearly, much of a singer's level of preparation is based upon the coach's musical skills and musicological background. A fine coach will have both the talent and facility to help the singer recognize musical entrances and exits, the instruments cueing these elements (in an orchestral accompaniment), and linguistic cues (especially in the case of recitative).

3. Accomplishing linguistic accuracy and authority

Singers depend upon their coaches to oversee the day-to-day memorization of the words with the correct pronunciation, the authority with which they are uttered, and the validity of the accent. Seeking a coach with a particular expertise in a certain language is of prime importance here. Once the brain has memorized a bad linguistic habit, it is very difficult to eradicate it. The constant vigilance and kindly nitpicking of the coach are invaluable.

4. Routinizing the solution to vocal problems in context

The necessity for repetition in vocal training is clear. The solution for a vocal problem is found during the voice lesson, but the whole lesson cannot be spent repeating the solution until it is automatic. It is during the coaching hours that repetition can either solidify this solution or prove that it is insufficient, in which case a return to the voice teacher is mandated, either for clarification, reinforcement of the original, or another solution. Repeating the vocal solution as many times as the singer needs in order to acquire confidence may, understandably, be tedious for the coach, but repetition is essential. What destroys artistry is a reliance on last-minute inspiration rather than the confidence and competence that comes through lengthy repetition during rehearsals with the coach.

5. Acquiring physical control of the dramatic elements

Although a singer, possibly with the help of a drama teacher or stage director, has thought out the composition's dramatic scheme, eventually it must be coordinated with the music. Here again, the coach is of primary importance. Music exists in time. If a dramatic change of heart, therefore a change of facial expression or physical position, takes place between two phrases or musical sections, then this visible change must be timed with the existing music, which is the dramatic subtext. Unlike an actor, a singer cannot experience dramatic elements in natural time. They must happen at specific moments in the music and text. This requires that the detailed work be done while hearing and singing the composition. Again we see the need for repetition, which will eventually afford the singer a control that is sufficient to give an impression of ease and spontaneity on stage. True ease and seeming spontaneity may not come until many repetitions have taken place.

6. Making memorization reliable

Although much of the wearisome work of memorizing must be done alone, the coach can offer the singer many helpful hints about this process, such as: rather than relying on counting beats to find an entrance accurately, learning instead which salient features of the accompaniment indicate that entrance; or memorizing by means of mnemonic devices when faced with four verses of the same melody with similar text (as in Schubert's songs).

7. Mastering the suitable requirements of style and performance practice

It is rare that any individual voice teacher or singer can be sufficiently knowledgeable with regard to the specifics of *all* styles and performance practices. Here a coach who is expert in a particular style will give the singer indispensable advice. The singer must feel free to seek out and work with a specialist and to use more than one coach when the languages and styles vary.

8. Letting go of obsessive concern with technical accuracy so as to improve performance

It is truly unfortunate that many singers, typically having started their technical training approximately ten years after most instrumentalists begin theirs, develop a mistaken but unshakeable belief that technical musical and vocal skills are the most important factors in vocal performance. When this belief mutates into an obsession with technical expertise, it becomes an obstacle to elite performance. Yet conductors, stage directors, and administrators who hire singers from an audition *expect* to hear competent singing and good musicianship. Therefore, they give the job to the singer who also has charisma and is a compelling performer.

As a consequence, the singer must factor into his/her preparation the need for a type of practice that ensures freedom in performance. Letting go of compulsive analytical and critical monitoring cannot be done by wishing it so. The pre-performance practice and rehearsal must include practice at surmounting vocal worries. Again, this can only be done after much technical rehearsal with the coach, followed by performance mode practice. Again, the coach is irreplaceable.

The coach's place on the vocal team

In the triumvirate of singer, voice teacher, and coach, the coach is properly an extension of the teacher's "ear," ensuring that those tones which are being encouraged and nurtured in the lessons are brought over into the repertoire. Both singer and voice teacher depend upon the coach's conclusions concerning the present level of the singer's vocalism, his/her musical decisions, linguistic command, and dramatic impact. To be a supportive but vigilant watchdog is

possibly the coach's most important function. (Has that vowel that was once too far back and wooly now transmuted into a vowel that is too far front and shrill? Has that dramatic personality that was once too shy become too brash, or perhaps perfectly balanced? Has that body that was once frenetic and lacking in serenity now transformed itself into a somnolent being that exudes boredom? Have those low notes that were once nonexistent now become raucous chest voice in unsuitable places? Or have they now become quite beautiful?) No doubt the coach has noticed. Once he/she reports back to the teacher, either compliments or corrections can be offered.

Nevertheless, the coach is not a voice teacher. It is quite understandable that coaches, wanting to be of help when hearing problems that are not being solved as quickly as one might wish, cannot resist trying a few remedies of their own. Yet, while they might hear what is wrong, their ideas of how to fix the problem will probably be, at best, based solely upon their intuition, gathered from all the singing they have heard, not based on technical truths within their experience. (It is interesting to note that pianists who accompany instrumentalists virtually never offer technical advice to them.) The voice teacher surely needs to be in constant touch with the coach, to hear everything that the coach has to say, to report on efforts that he/she has initiated in the voice lessons and discuss ways in which the coach can help sustain this work. It is in the singer's best interest, however, that the coach, when finding a technical problem that is not yet resolved, not try to correct it. His attempt to *teach* the singer will only cause confusion and set progress back. The singer should be advised to ask his/her teacher about these technical issues.

The voice teacher's place in the team

The voice teacher has certain responsibilities with regard to the team. Young singers—especially those who have had no experience with coaches—should be counseled about what to expect in their coachings, how best to take advantage of the coach's skills, how to prepare for these sessions, etc. When this is done, coaches will be able to fulfill their duties more efficiently. The voice teacher should keep in close touch with the coach, making sure that he/she is aware of the plan for the singer's development and informed of any vocal restrictions upon the work. The

coach cannot be expected to intuit the direction expected by the teacher. The team will function to the singer's advantage when all three members have the same goals.

The best coach

The best coach is:

- one whom the singer trusts and whose judgment the singer wishes to use as a performance criterion;
- one with high pianistic, musical, performance practice, stylistic, and linguistic knowledge, who patiently but firmly imbues the singer with his standards;
- one who will not make the singer “audition” or prove him/herself in each new hour that they study together;
- one who is willing to repeat patiently as many times as the singer deems necessary in order to achieve excellence;
- one who will have an attitude that says: we are collaborating to find the best solution for this piece;
- one who will remain totally objective while giving constant positive feedback about the continuing work;
- one who will not attempt to teach technical voice skills, but will cede that right to the voice teacher, cooperating with the teacher's procedures;
- one who, recognizing that vocal study is a process and cannot be hurried, will be willing to take the responsibility for helping at whatever stage of development the singer is found.

Singers spend much of their professional lives being criticized, a practice which often produces a fragile and insecure state that impinges negatively upon the vocal instrument and its

performance. The broad scope of singers' duties, especially for opera singers, is staggering. In this balancing act, the coach's expertise is not all. His kindly, musically generous, constructively critical attitude can mold a better singer and a better musician. An impatient, unfeeling, disdainful, or unremittingly critical manner can literally destroy a career. Patience and good will on the part of the coach are essential.