

AMERICAN ACADEMY OF TEACHERS OF SINGING

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THE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT AND THE SINGING OF GRAND OPERA

Singing in the High Schools of our country exerts a compelling influence on the voices of the students who participate. It is in this early, formative period that habits of voice use are formed. In particular, the music that is sung should be well within their capacities both as to range and tessitura as well as general difficulty.

Because of the many instances that have been brought to its attention of the performances of Grand Opera by students in the High Schools, and the use of similar unsuitable repertoire, the American Academy of Teachers of Singing believes that a statement on this subject as set forth in Part I will prove serviceable. Certain observations on the care and treatment of young voices have been presented in Part II.

I

A wise selection of repertoire is an important factor in the progressive growth of the solo voice and is a safeguard in the development of young choral groups. Appropriate selections can develop enthusiasm, and at the same time, assist good tonal production. They can conserve and beautify the quality of each individual voice in a choral group, inspiring a love for singing that will last through a life-time. An unwise selection can destroy interest, impair good voices and thwart the desire for enjoyment of singing.

Interest in Grand Opera has been stimulated by radio and television performances as well as by the extensive sale of phonograph recordings of famous singers. There are many elements of benefit and inspiration for young singers in such programs in all these media. However, both the range and tessitura of Grand Opera are usually beyond the normal capacities even of adult amateurs, and can be catastrophic for inadequately equipped adolescents. Such works, for example, as "Aida", "Il Trovatore", "Carmen", "Don Giovanni", "The Barber of Seville" or any other operas by major operatic composers should never be attempted by High School singers. The same is true of such masterpieces of oratorio as those by Bach, Handel, Brahms ("Requiem"), Rossini ("Stabat Mater") and other eminent composers in this field. Obviously, most of the great works by famous masters, composed as they were for trained, adult voices, are generally unsuitable for High School voices. The only possible exceptions would be when the compositions have been edited by experienced musicians who are familiar with the limitations and capacities of adolescent voices, or where there is available individual voice training to develop the young voices to a point where they can safely cope with such music. **It is a fallacy of long standing to believe that music too difficult to be sung by individual voices can be successfully rendered without strain when sung in chorus.** Many choral directors today are rendering outstanding service because of their knowledge and experience in the safe and sane employment of young voices. There are, however, too many other directors, expertly educated in the teaching and conducting of orchestras and bands with far too little or no knowledge of the human voice or the repertoire suitable to its best development. Their work often strains rather than trains voices of young singers.

A school should be first and last an educational institution and all school music rated first for its educational value. Entertainment is important, both for those who participate and for public relations, but always of secondary importance. Suitable music that can satisfy both requirements is available if an earnest and intelligent search is made for it. **THERE SHOULD NEVER BE A SUGGESTION THAT GRAND OPERA IS SUITABLE FOR YOUNG, INEXPERIENCED SINGERS.**

II

The American Academy of Teachers of Singing believes that there should be a well-planned course of voice building as a part of the routine training of every choral group in the High Schools. This instruction should lead to such a development of the voices that an adequate pitch range and variety of dynamics can be produced safely.

The adolescent singing voice can be developed to a degree not commonly found in this country if properly trained from the beginning. It is during these early years that training in the correct use of the voice is most helpful. Certainly, the Junior High School group is ready, both mentally and physically, to be taught good posture, the correct principles of breath support, the avoidance of interfering tensions in the throat area and throughout the body, ear training, and the correct use of those parts employed in the formation of pure vowels and clearly sounded consonants. While in Junior High School some of the boys' voices are unchanged, this period of change varies with the individual and should be dealt with as it arises.

It is obvious that care must be exercised in the demands made on the voices of Junior Grade pupils. On the other hand, there is sometimes a tendency to treat the voices too gently. Many directors warn children always to sing softly, to use only descending scales, either to open the mouth as widely as possible or, at the other extreme, to use the closed vowel "oo" as the principal tone-model. Anyone of these practices, used alone, tends to retard rather than advance the normal development of young voices. The prevalent practice of establishing a predetermined tone quality by the continued use of covered vowels results too often in a lifeless, immature tone which is inadequate in timbre and also results in unintelligible diction. The vocal limitations thus established in the Junior grades carry over into the Senior grades and become liabilities rather than assets, as the music to be sung there demands greater volume and range. Because of this lack of proper training in the Junior grades, many choral directors in the Senior grades work with great energy and earnestness for results which cannot be realized by boys and girls who have no knowledge or understanding of how to use their voices.

Directors also often err by offering the recordings of famous singers as models of tone quality and singing ability. Learning to sing by imitating other voices is, at best, a faulty procedure. High School students in particular should avoid attempting to imitate the voice quality of mature, experienced singers who record the operatic repertoire. Heroic voices of Caruso, Tebaldi, del Monaco, et al, naturally are the preferred models of youthful aspirants. Many young voices have been permanently injured by trying to produce the sonorous quality and power of these phenomenal voices. To protect students from such injurious practices, it is the duty of directors and teachers to exercise great care in the use of such recordings for the purpose of imitation.

Of equal danger to the mind of the young student is the misuse and abuse of the human voice as heard day after day on radio, television and phonograph records, which constitute the major portion of the musical fare in millions of American homes, because young people tend to imitate what they hear. Folk-music, also, when distorted by night-club singers, crooners, and so-called Hillbilly singers is a degrading influence upon public taste and is a harmful influence on young singers.

Vocal teachers, choral directors and others who are responsible for the conduct of young voices, should at all times be conscious of the immutable law that the singing voice is a human instrument — more sensitive than any man-made **mechanical** instrument. When and if the voice of a High School boy or girl is subject to physical abuse through the performance of Grand Opera and other unsuitable repertoire, permanent damage may be the result. In conjunction with the foregoing principles, it is the firm conviction of the American Academy that singing, when adequately and normally practiced in its early stages, establishes the dominant fundamentals on which consistent future development can be based, either professionally or avocationally. It also affords the opportunity for splendid mental discipline, and the assurance of a lasting cultural attribute.

AMERICAN ACADEMY OF TEACHERS OF SINGING

The American Academy of Teachers of Singing was founded in 1922 by a small group of representative and nationally known teachers of singing, with the purely altruistic purpose of doing what lay in their power to further the ethical and cultural interests of the profession. They laid no claim to any special qualifications which might not be equally the possession of other teachers, except perhaps their long years of successful personal effort; but they believed that a small body of earnest men, inspired by a common motive, could accomplish much for the profession which was not possible to them as individuals. The successors of the original group have striven to remain aware of the tradition of service established by the founders and to measure up to its responsibilities.

The activities of the American Academy have been pointed always along the lines of comprehensive, discriminative and tolerant consideration and discussion of the many complex and debatable subjects abounding within the sphere of the teaching of singing, vocal repertory and other closely associated features. The services of Academy members as adjudicators of vocal auditions and competitions, and as advisers to teachers and singers alike in the voice field are constantly sought after. From its membership, also have come leaders in other major organizations of vocal teachers in the United States.

The Academy's publications are the result of intensive and extensive work by committees whose reports are given critical consideration by the entire membership. On approval by a majority, these reports, in the form of pronouncements and song lists, are published. The expense of preparation and distribution is, in the main, met by the membership.

Copies of this and other publications may be had on application to Harold C. Buchanan, Sec'y, 100 West 11th St., New York 11, N. Y.