

A Pronouncement of the American Academy of Teachers of Singing

Through printing error in the September/October 1994 The NATS Journal, the last two lines of text were omitted, therefore, the entire pronouncement is reprinted here.

HEALTHY VOCAL TECHNIQUE AND THE PERFORMANCE OF EARLY MUSIC

It is a cause for serious concern to the voice teaching profession when conductors, either choral or instrumental, require qualities of vocal tone that may contradict the principles of healthy voice production. Although singers must bear the ultimate responsibility for maintaining the health of their own voices, conductors and collegium directors can and do have enormous influence—in the professional world as a source of income and opportunity, and in the academic world because of ensemble performance requirements.

Today, the Early Music Movement is “big business,” not only on campus but also in commerce. The literature recorded by “authentic” organizations grew to astonishing proportions in the eighties and early nineties. More and more untrained singers and singers-in-training are drawn or compelled to the movement as it burgeons in schools and colleges. What was once identified as “music before 1750” has expanded to incorporate Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, and beyond. Understandably, the question is often asked: how early is Early Music?

The so-called Early Music Movement is not as recent a phenomenon as some might believe. For more than a century musicologists have been engaged in editing and publishing the works of

outstanding composers from all historical periods. Others have been identifying and characterizing performance conditions and practices, thereby enabling conductors to know the stylistic requirements needed in recreating music from the past. Today’s scholars continue to debate the notion of “authentic” performance and challenge the fine points raised by opponents and proponents of the very concept of authenticity. Meanwhile, singers (whether amateurs in school and church choirs, or career-bound vocal majors in collegia, chamber choirs, and the like) are increasingly caught up in the controversy and challenged to meet what could be unreasonable vocal demands—demands often made by conductors without a working knowledge of untrained or developing voices, who seek to impose their understanding of appropriate musical style or simply their own idiosyncratic musical tastes. In this pronouncement, The American Academy of Teachers of Singing turns to what are considered by some to be the special vocal demands of Early Music.

Members of the Academy are troubled by the increasing complaints of colleagues. Their students are being asked to apply purportedly historical vocal techniques in the performance of Renaissance and Baroque music before they are able to perform the much simpler vocal tasks relevant to the basic development of their voices. The problem is compounded when the aesthetic choices of vocally ill-informed or unaware directors extend to

questions of vocal vibrato and timbre. Certainly, the uses of wide vibrato, rapid-fire flutter, or wavering tremolo have no place in any singing repertory. The *natural* vibrato that every healthy voice develops is something else entirely. Vocal authorities of today and in years past are generally in agreement that demands for so-called “straight tone” singing for extended periods, or the deliberate alteration of a natural characteristic and healthy vibrato (one that does not call attention to itself as too fast or too slow) can be injurious to the vocal health and natural progress of young voice students.

The timbral characteristic which accompanies the demand for “straight tone,” is the so-called “white” voice (Italian, *la voce bianca*, or French, *la voix blanche*). This and other timbral choices, some of which can easily degenerate into pressed phonation, or its opposite, breathy production, pose advanced technical and interpretive problems, and are not to be undertaken too early in the developing singer’s experience. Certainly, the conductor of an Early Music group or the choral director who espouses authentic performance practice, whatever that might currently be (and it is constantly changing), has the right to choose the voices for his or her ensemble. There are enough vibratoless, “white” voices in the world at large to make up groups of such singers to satisfy the conductor whose taste runs in that direction. Asking aspiring young singers to produce sound qualities that are potentially damaging, however, is tantamount to vocal abuse.

Professional singers and singers with advanced technical training may have at their command a greater palette of vocal colors suitable to meeting the demands of those Early Music conductors who are enamored of a particular sound quality. However, even here individual voices vary greatly and the professional singer must monitor his vocal health closely. The voice teacher should be the primary resource for the development of specific timbral vocal techniques. If these techniques cannot be developed in a healthy fashion, the professional singer should reconsider any prolonged participation in Early Music (especially when such participation brings with it arbitrary vocalization) just as he would reconsider an inappropriate operatic role or musical theater assignment. As it happens, much can be found in the early music repertory that is ideally suited to the aspiring young singer, and, if it is permitted to be sung with healthy, natural tone production, it should be a near perfect learning vehicle. One would be hard pressed, for example, to find better English language repertory than the combination of poetry and music found in the Elizabethan lute song and madrigal for the integrated development of the voice, interpretive resources, taste, and general musicianship of the vocal student whose native language is English.

Part of our responsibility as teachers—a large part from the ethical point of view—is the protection of gifted individuals who show great promise and, if properly nurtured, may contribute to the promulgation of the vocal art of the future. Surely it is time to bring to bear our interdisciplinary influence—pedagogical, therapeutic, scientific, and medical—upon those instances of Early Music study and

performance that are observed to contain unacceptable levels of risk or manifestations of vocal abuse. The individual private voice teacher may have only one avenue of approach—advice to the pupil. Teachers on school faculties may have enough access to conductors to be helpful. Those teachers who have access to the pages of publications for conductors might also serve a useful purpose by discussing dispassionately the pros and cons of what is perceived by some as appropriate period tone, both to its nature as evidenced by contemporary writings and to its relation to vocal health. Organizations of singing teachers might help to support the individual teacher with articles on the subject, which can be offered to students to demonstrate that the risks are perceived by the profession at large and are not simply the result of the individual teacher's personal viewpoint.

Finally, it behooves us as teachers to become better informed on the nature of Early Music and the expectations of its creators, first executants, and modern interpreters. Did early writers describe in unmistakable terms the sounds they admired and those they disliked? Did the ranges used preclude or promote the use of any particular type of tone? Was a distinction made between a soloist and an ensemble singer? Do we have any reliable information on the vocal longevity of the singers of the period? Did they go on singing *well* into their later years, as some of our recent and present singers do? The historical paper trail, recordings that reach toward "authenticity," and such local organizations as impinge on our consciousness and may represent the effort of respected and esteemed colleagues—all these are sources for expanded awareness and

reasoned response by members of our profession.

Certain it is that across the centuries the human larynx has not undergone any radical transformation. Enterprising modern singers, their mentors, and their collaborators have blown the accumulated dust off seven hundred years of superb vocal music and illuminated the more remote corners of a glorious and gratifying repertory. The health of the voice should always be paramount in our thoughts as well as our ears. Any theory or practice of questionable validity should be explained carefully and challenged. As we familiarize ourselves with the unknown, we must increasingly be aware of insistent demands for inappropriate vocalism. The assertion of questionable tonal preferences, rehearsal procedures, or performance practices which compromise a singer's vocal health and natural function are our mutual concern. ♪