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PROGRAM BUILDING FOR YOUNG SINGERS

[Since 1922, the year of its founding, the American Academy of Teachers of Singing has been actively writing and disseminating papers on all subjects pertaining to the teaching of singing. Inevitable changes in the profession itself and in musical life in general have since demanded that the Statements from the Academy be brought up to date. This Statement, changed to its present form in 1997, was originally published in 1948.]

The Academy offers the following recommendations for the purpose of assisting the serious young singer to present him- or herself satisfactorily, through the means of a well-planned program.

FUNDAMENTALS OF PROGRAM BUILDING

1. A program should be designed to give the maximum pleasure to the audience.
2. Variety is an important element of a good program.
3. Variety may be achieved by change of mood, rhythm, tempo, key, style, color, atmosphere, composer, language, and possibly dialect.
4. A group should maintain unity in its variety, within itself.
5. A vocal recital should not exceed an hour's actual singing time.
6. It is better to reserve possible encores until the end of the program. An occasional repetition of a number, when audience enthusiasm demands, is in good taste.
7. Modern operatic arias are, generally speaking, inappropriate in a song recital program.
8. Oratorio arias are acceptable, usually in the first group.

The experienced singer may vary his programs in countless ways, in accordance with his special taste and aptitudes. An inexhaustible supply of valuable material is available to the fastidious seeker.

The present alarming decline in the number of song recitals presented every year has made the issue of program-building more critical and has prompted a perceived need for accessibility in those programs. As a result, members of the average audience outside the major cultural centers can no longer be expected to welcome enthusiastically the presence of songs in a foreign language on a recital program. Generally speaking, only a small percentage of inexperienced singers have sufficient skill in foreign languages to produce an effective performance of this material. The Academy believes that there can be no communication without understanding and that singers should never sing in a language that they do not understand, for no one can share with the audience what he/she does not comprehend. A partial answer to this situation, the Academy believes, is for teachers to make a serious effort to find repertoire in English suitable for the young singer. Another solution that has been embraced in the name of accessibility is to give a short synopsis of the text of foreign language songs from the platform rather than to include them in the program.

A school situation presents a slightly different problem. Part of the responsibility of a trained vocal recitalist is to communicate the great song literature of the world. This requires serious and continuing language study. Language in vocal music has a unique function: it communicates meaning, but it also is an object of beauty in itself.

Translations of foreign texts into English serve the purpose of communicating meaning, but do not reveal the language as an object of beauty. The Academy recommends that the young singing student be given songs in a foreign language that he has studied for at least one year. If possible, songs in French, German, and Italian should be sung in the original language. Songs in languages less familiar to audiences, such as Russian or Scandinavian, may well be sung in translation, provided the translations have been made with care and skill. For the very young students or those who have no professional aspirations, it will be of great benefit to sing the great song literature in English translations of high quality. Groups of such music, which obey the rules regarding variety and at the same time "unity in variety," can be arranged in an attractive, pleasing manner.

OUTLINE FOR PROGRAM

The young aspiring singer, until he arrives at a place of matured discretion, might do well at first to follow this recital program format:

I

A group of songs of the early composers, such as Bach, Handel, Purcell, Haydn, or an entire group by early English composers.

II

A group of German Lieder by one composer or a number of composers, preferably of the Romantic school, such as Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, Strauss, Wolf, or a group of French songs by one modern style composer or by a variety of composers, such as Fauré, Duparc, Chausson, Debussy, and Ravel, or a combination of both. There is also excellent material to be found in the song literature of Russia, Scandinavia, Finland, Hungary, Italy, etc. Songs may also be selected on the basis of available, acceptable English translations.

III

A carefully chosen group of modern American and/or English songs, by composers of the present or recent past, of which there is a great variety.

IV

A group of traditional folk-songs, authentic in their origin and the arrangements of their accompaniment, or a second group of songs by American and/or English composers.

The type of program suggested above provides a maximum of enjoyment for the audience and also provides ample scope for the abilities of the singer without adding the burden of singing in a language foreign to both the singer and the audience.

Where the young singer is proficient in a foreign language, a variation in the suggested program might be made, and a group of songs in that language be included as a substitute for the group suggested.

The standard program usually includes three foreign language groups and one or more groups in English. The foreign language groups, when undertaken by inexperienced singers, should be chosen judiciously by the teacher.

SUPPLEMENTARY SUGGESTIONS

1. Attitude toward audience----

To give maximum pleasure and enjoyment, it is well to have in mind the type of audience for which the program is planned. A program should be within the grasp and understanding of the audience. While it should not be "over their heads," at the same time the practice of "singing down" to a level of average audience appreciation is unwise. The singer should demand something of the audience, but no more than they may be expected to supply.

2. Stage Deportment----

Every public appearance carries with it a definite responsibility in stage deportment. Simplicity and ease of manner are the prime objectives, for these will help to bring about the poise necessary for a successful performance.

- a. Remember, the singer is seen before he is heard. Walk to the place on the stage where you are to perform. Avoid extremes, such as running, dawdling, too long steps, short mincing steps, over-vivaciousness, laziness, etc. Go directly and naturally to the place on the stage where you are to perform. Do not stop to bow on the way; do not bow while walking. Reach your destination and then bow.
- b. A woman always precedes a man going on the stage or leaving it. There is no exception to this rule.
- c. When recalled to the stage for a bow after a performance, go nearly to the place you occupied on the stage when performing, then bow at least twice before leaving that place. It is insufficient to walk a few steps onto the stage, bow once, and leave.
- d. A thoroughly competent, experienced and sympathetic accompanist is absolutely necessary for the recitalist and should receive equal recognition.