

DIDACTIC ASPECTS IN VOCAL ART

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Abstract

The European and universal research in the field of vocal art is centred on a multiple perspective approach both in what the pedagogy and the vocal singing are concerned. Therefore, there are canto congresses organized annually in different parts of the world, which confirm the truth that the functional education of the voice, based on the *bel canto* old school, is the only one consecrated over the years.

One of the main concerns of each student, future opera singer, ought to be the achievement of technical and interpretative skills specific to this field and fully develop them during his/her entire life. Natural talent and hard work represent the ideal formula for a true career in the lyrical theatres all over the world.

The part that the professor plays in the vocal education is of utmost importance. The experience of the great masters in the opera field transposed in singing methods books, is a real guide for the modern teacher of vocal art, but besides that the latter also ought to possess vast knowledge from other different domains as well as the sense to recognize the good parts in the student's voice and qualities and the things that should be corrected.

Keywords: *Vocal art, didactic, student, professor, artistic singing.*

There can be noticed a progressive and concerning decline in vocal art as well as in art in general. In order to avoid an even greater technical and stylistic degradation, several treaties have appeared in the last three decades which withdraw the attention on the necessity of the correct vocal education based on the *bel canto* old school, the one that stood the test of time.¹

All the professors who educate the voice in the *bel canto* style unanimously feel that without knowing the basic principles, the anatomic and physiologic elements of the phonic apparatus, the functional methods of voice education, the cultivation of a voice with multiple tonal qualities, with flexibility and technical complexity is not possible.

„Without a fundamental anticipated study of singing we shall have gridators², but never real singers. Their random high-pitched sounds, produced outside the art frame, will be cold despite the force or great-sounding, always lacking expressiveness or the pure dramatic accent, always monotonous and incapable of varying the form and content created by the composer's and librettist's imagination. The lack of artistic experience will

¹ Richard Miller, (*National Schools of Singing*, Scarecrow Press, 1977; *On the Art of Singing*, Oxford University Press, 1996 și *Solutions for Singers: Tools for Performers and Teachers*, Oxford University Press, 2004). James Stark, *Bel canto: a history of vocal pedagogy*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1999.

² Singer who yells, cries in stead of singing.

determine, as already mentioned, the voice damage and the premature disappearance from the artistic life”³

Some aspects of voice education may be controversial or interpreted in a different manner, the theories which lay at the basis of the phonic act not being unanimously accepted or vary from one school to another, or from one professor to another.

Despite these differences of opinions and of methods of education, the authors, researchers and modern professors managed to highlight the main principles, criteria and rules which lay and should lay at the basis of vocal education. Unfortunately they are seldom known or respected.

The vocal education ought to be made in an individual manner, without copying the professor or another singer. In order to do that the student should be familiar with the speciality literature, interpretative art (notions of technique, stylistics, interpretation) of the great singers in the history of music, so that the way artists sang during ages may be properly understood.

Many can *yell* on two octaves. But it is no trifle to sing on respiration (*sul fiato*), with appoggio, homogeneously and flexible, with a large range of colours, to pass easily from one tone to another on all intensities and on the entire width of voice. This is where the primordial role of the professor intervenes together with the student's intelligence and willingness to use his/her vocal skills at the highest intensity.

The knowledge of the basic pedagogical principles and the way the teacher and the student collaborate are extremely important in voice education.

The universal literature pays little attention to the teacher-student relationship. In my opinion this connection is of great importance, if not essential in training voices and assuring success.

In art as in nature in general, everything is in continuous and mutual connection. When music and text, composition and interpreting do not go hand in hand, divergency and misunderstanding take place.

A true artist should not perform neither for the public nor in front of it but for the work of art itself. The connection with the public, the aesthetic factor which creates emotions are this way much more powerful than when the artist performs for the listener or to prove his/her own skills.

The relationship between the student and the teacher is based, as the one between doctor and patient, on mutual trust, knowledge, professional devotion, experience, hard work, patience and desire to achieve the maximum level, the perfection if possible. Because the sense of sound is different for the teacher as it is for the student and it is particular from one ear to another, the vocal talent of a student can be wrongly assessed or recognized too late.

„The success lays in the professor's excellent choice[...]The idea that any teacher is right for a beginner is incorrect. It is by far extremely important that beginners be guided

³ Francesco Lamperti, Ghid teoretico-practico-elementar pentru studiul cântului, trad. Ioan Ardelean, București, Editura Muzicală, 2015, p. 17-18.

*by experienced teachers , because a failure in voice education is impossible to mend, this being possible only for other instruments. If he/she chooses a good teacher from the very beginning of the training from whom to learn the fundamental principles of singing, even if a poorly prepared one comes along, he/she will either continue to follow the first teacher's indications or will look for a new one."*⁴

I have never met in any singing treaty, book or article the idea of studying without a teacher, although there are in vocal art known to exist natural talents, extremely rare, who do not require the help of a teacher.

These persons who end up singing in front of an audience, on the radio or TV should not be mistaken for talents. The presence at an artistic manifestation, even a prestigious one, does not assure a career and does not certify the existence of an unusual talent. Even when these exceptions reach a certain level they still need guidance, correcting certain mistakes, participating to strategies of perfection.

It is hard to assume that somebody might think that a book can replace the direct guidance from the master's class. Singing cannot be learned by reading. One can take from the speciality treaties suggestions, advice from the great professors from past and present, the certainty that one is on the right path or not. Therefore a project of translating into the Romanian language the most important singing treaties from the XIX century, schools of Garcia and Lamperti, has been started. The first book has already been printed.

The professors speak mainly about the material rather than about the voice, about the physical qualities and anatomic functions of the vocal organ, including the resonant parts and body construction.

In the relationship with the teacher, the student has to be loyal, patient, has to learn from the criticism, to understand why the teacher wants this and not that. The self control and responsibility are the important elements of daily study inside and outside the teacher's classes.

Choosing a teacher, when possible, is not an easy job.

First one must not make the mistake of ranking a teacher by his/her vocal skills. The teacher need not sing correctly but he/she must know what to do to learn to sing correctly.

The student who passed from one teacher to another is usually confused and often gives up searching for somebody else. A natural talent with great will is not satisfied with less and keeps studying.

In Francesco Lamperti's opinion „ The student must pay special attention, even from the beginning, to the respiration rules that is to support and duration, to amplitude so as these to become his/her second nature. Doing so he/she must try nevertheless not to push too hard or use the voice more than he/she can sustain, avoiding this way the danger of tremolo voice, a fault produced almost always by forcing.[...] Another thing to be avoided by somebody who studies vocal technique is singing in *piano* unsustained, without respecting the respiration rules and thus tiring

⁴ Francesco Lamperti, *op.cit.*, p. 36.

the larynx followed by uncertain intonation and affected vocal support. *Piano* in singing has to be the son of *forte* and to be realised with the same vocal character, same support and same quantity of air, this way although sang in *pianissimo*, the voice is perceived as *forte*.⁵

Studying demands work and patience, *Natura non facit saltus, Chi va piano, va sano e va lontano*, these are only a few proverbs valid in the vocal art. There are countless examples. Even the best natural voice needs years of study and must avoid looking for fast results especially concerning the width and the intensity of the voice.

Adopting a certain pace in work, with patience and perseverance, is absolutely necessary. Walking is the right way to do it, not running. Sitting in one place doesn't help either.

On the other hand being too modest is not very useful, it is good to have selfconfidence. „ Do not be so modest, that is why you are not good enough” a great professor once said.

Selfeducation of the voice is as dangerous as leaving the entire responsibility on the teacher's shoulders.

„It is of utmost importance for the student, supervised by his/her master, to study the real character of his/her voice and not to mistake in establishing the extension of his own voice which can appear to be a tenor one at the beginning, when in fact it is a bariton or the other way around, to consider herself a soprano when she is a contralto.”⁶

If well guided and with the correct voice support, the student will know with what *tessitura*⁷ to sing, will be able to gracefully carry the tune, will mend the intonation faults, if they are not due to a physical problem, and will teach himself in the proper canto manner.

Still the most important qualities for the student remain the discipline and passion. The mental balance, the trust in what he /she has learned and what he/she can do, must give the student selfconfidence and courage in front of the public. Worries and fears will discourage and unmotivate him/her.

The student as well as the consecrated singer, must lead a balanced life, without abuse of any kind, without alcohol or smoking, with regular respiration exercises in open air, do gymnastics, have plenty of sleep and so on.

The role that the professor plays in educating the voice is indisputable. Even the most beautiful diamond will not shine unless polished before by the master . Talking about the role and obligations of the professor, I have no intention to utter immutable sentences. *Docendo discitur* (teaching is learning) Seneca said once. It is possible that the following phrases, gathered from the experience of the greatest masters of the field,

⁵ Francesco Lamperti, *op.cit.*, p. 36.

⁶ Francesco Lamperti, *op.cit.*, p. 29.

⁷ In fact the position, the height and width of a musical page and of voice. The problems of embroidering which some singers have exist not due to the number and position of the acute sounds but rather to the tessitura of the musical page. A tenor who easily masters Siegmund's (Die Walküre de Wagner) musical writing, may fail with the one from Walther (Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg) written with one tone higher . Dușescu, Mircea, Great voices, bizarre voices, București, editura Protel, 2002, p.203-204.

capture the attention of some younger teachers having the only purpose to inform and this way to avoid possible frequent mistakes.

The famous Swiss psychologist and physician Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961) treated each new patient as an individual entity. A voice professor cannot act otherwise. In order to do that he must possess immense knowledge from different domains as well as the sense to recognize what is good in the student's voice and skills and what needs to be corrected. Each student is a *terra incognita*, a new adventure.

The instrumentalists have at their service an already made instrument, a plastic artist has the brush, the colours, the canvass, while the most talented singer has only his vocal organ. This cannot be polished or mixed like an instrument made out of natural material, but treated as an organic material, made out of cartilage, muscles, membranes, bones, cavities. These anatomical elements have precise functions which must be well known and consciously cultivated and developed.

The most important task of the professor is the responsibility he has but not regarded as a burden. The desire to help is an ethical necessity, which every teacher ought to feel. The responsibility means ethimologically speaking having the sense of being responsible and this is undeniably linked to the dialogue science.

To each answer there must be a question. The professor need not know everything or wish to have answer for each question. He must be able of recognizing what he does not know and find a solution together with the student. The latter should not be left alone in his/her search for answers.

The teacher who does not show enough patience, even more than the student, will not be successful.

I placed responsibility in front of all the other teacher's qualities and tasks, the second being the musical sense. The musical talent surpasses the notion of vocal accuracy. It defines the power to alter and configurate the tune and the introduction of text. The sensibility for the text, for the spoken language is closely connected to the musical sense. The singer must understand what he/she sings about. Only the singers who possess the science of articulation, of declamation, a correct phrase, colourful rich tone and the sense of poetry are considered true artists, true musicians.

Some teachers ask their students to recite poems or to read a text to observe the sensibility for words, rhythm, changes in intonation, pauses (*sensibilitate agogică*), the power to render feelings. There are many great artists who have been actors before becoming singers.

The third quality a teacher should possess is what the specialists call the objective hearing, different from the absolute or perfect hearing. This one is to be differentiated from the subjective one, the individual aesthetic taste. To have objective hearing is to recognize the physical activities of the voice's functions: the position of the body and of the elements which support the spine, the position of the throat, jaws, tongue and so on, as well as the causal component and the sound quality. That is why the objective hearing is also known as functional or physiologic hearing. The teacher who has this quality *introduces* himself into the vocal organ, in the student's resonant

spaces, recognizes each intact function, each abnormal, unhelpful movement, locates the vibrations as well as the dangerous changes, sometimes fatal of the vocal organ.

Defining the notions of subjective and objective hearing is relative and that is why it has only a didactic value. „Beauty, aesthetics, can barely be defined. As a feeling cannot be completely described in a definition, nor can beauty.” This Eminescu’s axiom is also available for the function of the hearing organ.

The one who sings hears himself in a different manner than the one who listens and that is why it is impossible for a beginner student to correctly evaluate his own voice as long as he does not have the certainty (confirmed by the teacher)of perceiving the right vibrations of the soundwave at the internal ear level.

This phenomenon can be easily noticed at any student when he/she tries to hear his/her own voice and places the hands as a cone in front of the ears.

The information above is also available for the teacher especially the young ones. For that, even more if he is or has been a singer himself, it has to be clear that his hearing is simply subjective and that he has to *accept* a voice which is different than his.

On the other hand the older teacher tends to neglect the significant differences of young voices and the rules of developing the audio-vocal organ, of juvenile psycho-physiological characteristics, he hears different than years before and in general does not have the patience to educate a new voice. Compensating with long experience is not always sufficient. The teacher must adapt to the student and not the other way around.

The differences exist not only between the students and the teachers but also in their teaching methods, still, without trusting the teacher, without the conviction that what he has taught is effective, any collaboration must be stopped before it is too late. A teacher cannot be judged by his harshness but by his good intentions and results. Gianbatista Mancini thought that in order to correct the faults in vocal sound, the master can obtain by imitating and exaggerating the student’s mistake, a more correct and clean sound. (*Pensieri e riflessioni pratiche sopra il canto figurato*, Viena, 1774)

The power to receive, to accept the complex phenomena in voice education, the patience and the work capacity are different from one student to another. With some of them one can work simultaneously on several plans, with others one cannot. So it is for example often difficult to work at the same time the respiration, the activation of the vocal cords, the tone formation and the correct assignment of the resonant parts.

The teacher should take into consideration the student’s individual possibilities of concentrating and understanding the phenomena of the phonic act.

The great singing professors of all times have in common one point of view concerning the artistic, cultivated singing: it must not be done *artificially*. The art of singing has as a main purpose to reveal, to highlight what nature keeps hidden. Art is not oppressed nature but embellished nature.

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