

FOCUS on VOCAL TECHNIQUE and PERFORMANCE

Who Teaches the Teachers?

an address to the NYSTA Gala on being honored, April, 2006

by
Shirlee Emmons

An irresistible urge to ruminate about the many and varied influences upon one's professional life, in this case the teaching of singing, appears to be a marker of advanced age. In my case, looking back was caused by the completion of two new books, seven years in the making. For some reason, the inconvenience of their completion (both in the same month) prompted me to wax philosophical. Taking stock of those influences that have had significant impact upon my vocal persona and my teaching transformed them from a seemingly random, year-by-year gathering of information and skills into a matrix that—in the end—might be labeled a “method.” Voice teachers have not trained as have lawyers or doctors, for most of us spend the early years learning to be solo performers. Later, as voice teachers, we face a different chore: we must carve out an individual way of *transmitting* our mass of vocal, musical, linguistic, dramatic, and performing knowledge in such a way that each of our students can deal with that acquired knowledge most productively. To accomplish this, we draw from our many teachers, although our voice teachers are probably paramount in our memories.

An epithet most often applied to Elisabeth Schumann was “the voice of an angel.” And it was that. At twenty-one I was awarded a scholarship to Curtis Institute in Philadelphia as the only student accepted that year by the legendary Mme. Schumann. I fully appreciated this honor, and I adored her as a person. To hear her sing Schubert's “An die Musik” from the winding stairwell in Curtis was breathtaking. One felt a part of her utterly charming, musically entrancing Viennese world. Nevertheless, it soon became apparent that her insistence on an exercise she called “blasen,” meaning to blow powerfully with the lips tight together, was making me sing more constrictedly day by day. (Years later I recognized it as an early version of the lip trill.) Worse, I was becoming unable to sing musically, which disturbed me, Mme. Schumann, and Leo Rosenek, her accompanist and former conductor of the Vienna Philharmonic. When I spoke about the problem with him, he answered, “The truth is that Elisabeth never did actually *know* what she was doing as a singer. She just sang.” This was my first encounter with a “natural singer.” I left Philadelphia having learned two things: first, what a *prima donna assoluta* is like in stature, in musical persuasiveness, and in personal magnetism; second, a new understanding and command of German consonants, Mr. Rosenek's pet project. In constant drilling he insisted that they be precisely *on* the beat and that the final consonant—not the initial one—was most important.

William Herman, teacher of Jan Peerce and Roberta Peters among other celebrated

singers of the time, was my first New York teacher. He succeeded in making me into a soprano, after all other teachers had given up the attempt. He was tough, in the literal sense of the word. (We who were waiting often heard the sound of him slapping Ms. Peters' face when she missed the final high note of an aria, but she did debut at the Metropolitan Opera at the age of twenty.) His response to my singing on CBS radio was to tell me to be less academic. It was a new concept for me: that accuracy was not the only performance ideal. New standards were formed.

One memorable summer it was my good fortune to be a member of a drama class presided over by stage director and acting teacher Dr. Elemer Nagy, who had trained with Max Rinehart in Vienna at the very beginning of modern operatic acting. He managed to rid me of the "academic" pretensions derided by Mr. Herman. From Nagy I learned that my shyness on stage was really pride, fear of making a fool of myself. In those sixteen weekly hours he forced me to lose my pride, to be open on stage, to abandon a fear of embarrassment. His teaching was so beautifully structured that it is a permanent structure of my teaching and in my writing, notably a chapter titled "The Singing Actor" in *The Art of the Song Recital*.

From Charlotte Ellis, a ballet teacher for less-than-sylphlike singers, I acquired some physical grace and learned the requisite techniques of dying on stage, how to fall without broken bones, how to waltz while singing (a good thing, too, because I later had to do that with Lauritz Melchior, who treated the waltz much like "snap the whip").

Conductors and coaches inevitably transform and strengthen a singer's professional command in many ways. Literally every book I have written owes a not inconsiderable debt to the years I spent singing as a member, first, of Robert Shaw's Collegiate Chorale, then of the Chorale's "small choir," eventually of Shaw's original professional touring choir. Inestimably valuable practical experience as well as increased stamina came from the recordings, from the concerts on radio and in Carnegie Hall. We worked in high musical echelons. Under the baton of Toscanini we sang the Verdi *Requiem* (in rehearsal Toscanini taught us that Verdi, writing *pppp*, meant only "don't sing so loud"; in performance, overwhelmed to be facing the great conductor, I wept, but Robert pragmatically docked my pay for not singing the whole time). We sang Beethoven's Ninth under Koussevitsky ("come in when his hand passes the third button of his vest," advised Robert as we had difficulty comprehending the downbeat). Stravinsky led us in his *Symphony of Psalms* (when some less-than tactful singer asked him why he used music for our performance of the piece, since Leonard Bernstein did not, Stravinsky answered dourly, "I have written much music. I cannot remember it all."). Even walking with Robert was an adventure. He persisted in playing rhythmic games such as counting seven even beats from one sidewalk crack to another and five for the next, or walking with four beats but speaking three, changing to two against three for the next, and so on. How my rhythmic control improved under that regime. Shaw's greatest mastery lay in rhythm and tempo. He once shaved one lone minute off a twenty-eight-minute program, changing the tempo by a minuscule amount. One of his tricks was to supply the two silent sixteenth notes in a dotted eighth, so that the fourth sixteenth note would be accurate. Not only the musicianship of my students but a method for learning contemporary music resulted from Shaw's methods. Diction studies with Madeleine Marshall were shared with his singers. They have contributed to a chapter on vocal difficulties caused by consonants in my new choral book. I learned that it is easy to have good diction when one pays no attention to

musicianship and vocal control. The real trick is to have exemplary diction *without* interfering with vocal and musical issues.

It was my good fortune to meet John Wustman, celebrated pianist to great singers like Pavarotti, Schwarzkopf, Nilsson, Freni, and others--a splendid musician and pianist--when he first came to New York. We were friends and colleagues from then on, and John shared with me the professional advice given him by Pavarotti. (Among Pavarotti's words of wisdom are the following: 1. Voice teachers mistakenly try to imbue their young singers' repertoire with variety. Rather, they should first ascertain what the student's best foot forward is, then program pieces that display that quality in five different languages. Entry opera positions do not rely on variety, but on one clearly defined talent. 2. Make sure that an aria listed on the competition program can be sung before or after any other aria on the list. 3. When making a large skip up to a high range pitch, place the initial consonant of the high note on the bottom note of that skip, leaving only the vowel for the high note. One then lands there easily. Witness how, on *The 3 Tenors'* recording, Pavarotti's high B in the last *vincerò* of "Nessun dorma" is best of the three singers, because he leaves the [tʃ] on the bottom, whereas the other two put it on the upper B). Wustman's own guiding rule is that legato is the most important skill a singer can possess.

When I was on a Fulbright scholarship to Italy, my skills at the Italian language and musical styles improved dramatically as I studied first at the Università per stranieri in Perugia and then with coach Mario Cordone, a brilliant conductor whom Toscanini took directly from the conservatory to be his assistant. Maestro Cordone taught me the role of Tosca with such style that the conductor for my first performance of Tosca asked admiringly, "Who taught you this role?" It is most interesting to observe that American coaches rely on their memories for Italian pronunciation, whereas Italian coaches keep a dictionary close to their keyboards. Knowing that they have a regional accent, they take pains to look up any word whose pronunciation is in question, especially as to whether the [e]s and [o]s are open or closed, which are determined not by rules but by their original pronunciation in Latin. This taught me to look them up for myself.

As for the German language and style, for twenty years I relied on Walter Taussig, the primary German coach at the Metropolitan Opera. My lifetime friendship with Stanley Sonntag began as singer and accompanist and ended with our joint authorship of *The Art of the Song Recital*, published in 1979, still going strong in a Waveland Press edition. We talked endlessly and worked out our philosophy of recital-giving in twelve years of song recitals at Princeton University, where I was on the music faculty.

The opportunity to sing music of living composers is a priceless experience. Thanks to my work with Robert Shaw and John Wustman, my musical skills were recognized by the major contemporary music organizations of the 50s, such as The Alice Ditson Fund, The Composers' Alliance, and others. Singing only new music---such as the first American performance of Honegger's *Jeanne d'Arc*---honed my musicianship to the degree that Shaw even gave me a weekly salary bonus to be a trouble-shooter when needed.

Two composers on the faculty of Columbia University, Douglas Moore and Jack Beeson, changed my many-faceted operatic skills for the better. Mr. Moore had heard me sing one of his

previous works, *Giants in the Earth* (during which he relieved my anxieties about the final word “kill” he had placed only on a high B, by telling me that he and other contemporary composers had to learn to write codas as Mozart did, repeating the salient word on lower notes before putting it on a climactic high note in order that the singer need not worry about diction on that high note). Based on that performance, Mr. Moore asked me to sing the part of Augusta as he auditioned his new opera, *The Ballad of Baby Doe*. The difference between a soprano like me who has a good low range and a real mezzo was brought home while singing Augusta. This is the crucial difference between mezzos and sopranos. Mezzos must be able to cut through the orchestra in the middle range; in that area there is no making up for a lack of strength. I became friendly with Jack Beeson, whose music is quite difficult, during the production of his opera, *The Sweet Bye and Bye*. From that time on he knew me as a good musician. Ready to publish *The Art of the Song Recital*, I asked Jack to look over the chapter titled “New Music” for errors. His first question was this: “Why have you not included your method for learning new music? It is especially important because you—like many other singers—do not have perfect pitch. If you want to do a favor for contemporary composers, teaching singers how to learn this music easily, rapidly, and accurately would do it.” So I did.

Douglas Moore recommended me to Virgil Thomson, who was casting his opera *Mother of Us All*. Cast as the lead, Susan B. Anthony, I was privileged to listen to Mr. Thomson’s opinions, which were as interesting as his reviews for the *Herald-Tribune*. One comment in particular helped not only my singing but my teaching: dramatic sopranos and spintos like to have most of their notes in the lower octaves, sparing the higher notes, and returning. But lyric sopranos can happily hang out up in the top range forever. Lyric sopranos exult in those slow and deadly climbs to the high register, while heavy sopranos would do anything to avoid them. Many are the heavy voices, for example, who decline to sing Aida, only because of that fearful slow climb up to the high C in “O patria mia.”

Two musical adventures stretched my performing abilities: a State Department concert tour of Brazil and an American tour as a member of Lauritz Melchior’s company. As I was traveling to Brazil to do twenty-eight solo concerts, my plane made an emergency landing on the deserted north side of the Amazon River above the city of Belem. In the two days we remained there, the passengers kept themselves occupied by drilling me in my Portuguese until I was letter perfect. After we were rescued, I with a new linguistic skill, I met Brazilian composer Camargo Guarnieri and sang several of his beautiful songs on my concerts. On my return to New York, it became a yearly ritual for me to sing at Villa Lobos’s birthday party hosted by the head of the music division of the New York Public Library, who had helped me prepare the programs for Brazil. After one such evening Villa Lobos took John Wustman and me to his hotel suite, where we sight-read through compositions that he always carried with him in a footlocker. Among his stories and comments that evening were these: After he had won the Prix de Rome many times, he decided to test his prowess by sending a piece in under an assumed name. It was returned, marked to his satisfaction “too derivative of Villa Lobos.” Repeatedly that night he disdainfully characterized his songs with beautiful melodies as “operetta pieces.”

The year after Lauritz Melchior left the Metropolitan Opera he auditioned widely for two sopranos, a male quartet, and a duo-piano team for a long tour of Canada and the U. S. Given the

spot as the heavy soprano, I was privileged to sing several duets with this greatest of all heldentenors. Yet in all that time, he only once answered a question about vocal technique. “I always begin in the small position and then bloom.” (To this day, I advise my students, “If the world’s greatest heroic tenor found it necessary to begin in a ‘small position,’ shouldn’t you?”) Forty years later, while writing Melchior’s biography, I realized that he had worked very hard to learn the small, heady position seldom possessed by heldentenors. He studied with Victor Beigel, who had learned his craft under Jean de Reszke and consequently prized the ability to modulate the voice. He modestly took thirty lessons with Romano Romani, teacher of Rosa Ponselle and Beniamino Gigli, whose pianissimo was famous the world over.

Every university teaching position I held, beginning in 1964—Columbia, Princeton, Boston, and Rutgers Universities—boasted colleagues whose work and whose generous natures added to my knowledge. At Columbia, the composers Beeson and Moore; at Princeton, Milton Babbitt and Arthur Mendel; at Boston University, Robert Gartside, the French expert; at Rutgers, Valorie Goodall and I constantly compared our understanding of Berton Coffin’s work.

Being invited to join the American Academy of Teachers of Singing introduced me to illustrious members such as Bernard Taylor, Karl Gutekunst, Edwin McArthur, Louis Nicholas, Berton Coffin, William Gephart, Craig Timberlake, Richard Miller. The conversations around the dinner table at meetings were an education in the history and ethics of the profession.

My colleagues in NYSTA and NATS taught me so much that it would be beyond the scope of this article to note it all. My first NATS convention renewed my acquaintance with Berton Coffin, which eventually became a true friendship and mentorship. His celebrated chart, written in 1967, is in actuality a chart of the formants and how to maintain them in singing. This head start on the work of today’s voice scientists has helped me immensely to become a better teacher. As a master teacher together with the late Barbara Doscher, I was privileged to watch her teach. I brazenly stole and used several of her methods—using the consonant "th" before vowels on warm-up vocalises so as to bring the voice automatically forward was one helpful tool, as was her balance board, a 14-inch wooden square with two 2x2 boards nailed in the center of the top and the bottom. Doscher made her students stand, balancing themselves, on this contraption while singing, so as to keep the body fluid. I promised to give her credit each time I used her inventions, and I did.

Voice teachers and performing singers are always glued to the television set during the Olympics. We can see that, as Gertrude Stein might have said, performing is performing. When my husband fortuitously discovered Alma Thomas, a British performance psychologist, at an educators’ convention, he persuaded her to come to New York and meet me. Thus began a twelve-year partnership that culminated early-on in a book for Oxford about the mental skills of performance. At our first meeting I recounted the case histories of my two most difficult students. She astounded me by telling what she would do about their problems. She asked, “Who usually does this sort of thing for your students?” I answered, knowing already that it was the wrong answer, “Well, I do.” “Isn’t that just a bit amateurish?” she remarked. And it was. We teachers believe that we possess psychological skills simply because our students represent such a diverse group of personalities. But we are amateurs at it. So great is the quantity of knowledge

that she has given me, that it is impossible to conjecture its size. Even the new choral book, which will arrive in January, owes a great deal to Alma Thomas. She educated me and my coauthor about the psychology of leadership so necessary for a choral director.

The latest contributor to my teaching ability is Keith Underwood, a flutist who has spent the last twenty years studying the subject of breathing (which is remarkably similar between the flute and the voice). Happily, I discovered him at the *Classical Singer Magazine's* convention in May of this year. Suffice it to say that his simplification of breathing for voice and for woodwinds is a brilliant synthesis and distillation of the various ways to use the celebrated appoggio. It is so simple and results in such an immediate change for the better that I was compelled to rewrite the choral book during the last two weeks of the page proofs to include it. Although I hesitate to write a description rather than presenting it physically, let me say that Underwood has discovered that a forceful sucking of the air in the inhalation (as if trying to drink a too-thick milkshake through a too-small straw) is the most important element. Surely this is related to Ingo Titze's lecture on using five different sizes of straws to breathe.

The universal respect and affection that we voice teachers have for our own teachers and mentors is not just sentimentality; it is a common recognition that the knowledge demanded by a life in music and the art of singing is handed down from one teacher to another, generation by generation. Might it not be not only pleasurable but instructive for voice teachers (even those who are not of my advanced age) to stop for a moment, look back, and regard anew the learning paths that they have taken—so far? I heartily recommend the procedure.

© Shirlee Emmons