

"Becoming a Master Teacher" - by Gilles Denizot

I never thought I would become a voice teacher, even less that I would be chosen and trained to become one, and then create the OPERALAB network. This position arouses jealousy just like any successful artistic career. In such cases one should pursue one's goals quietly and not allow much attention to the opinions or criticism of others. My main concerns are my studies on the human voice and singing. My primary goal is to pass on to others a healthy (and proven) technique and work hard for the progress of the singers whom I teach. I have nevertheless noticed significant discrepancies among the large number of people who claim to teach voice. As a professional singer who has studied with various professors of several schools of singing or techniques (with unequal results), I think it is important to speak about the different approaches of voice teachers in Europe and in America.

Choosing to Teach, the First Step

Before teaching, one has to consciously choose to teach. There are instructors who have not "decided to devote" themselves to this profession. They came to teaching for various reasons, most frequently because of a failure as a singer (for various reasons) and because of the natural and vital need for money. This category is quite vast. I have personally studied with a teacher whose career (at the Paris Opera) had been terminated "too early" and who had to teach with no possibility left to go back on stage. This professor expressed constant rancor and longing of career. Such a situation cannot produce a high-level instructor because frustration prevents the teacher from being fully invested in the singer's progress. This person deeply wanted to sing instead of teach. She could not stop herself from trying to control "her" students. The saddest aspect of all this was that she indeed taught me a lot. Nevertheless, she was unable to truly rejoice in the progress of her students and even less for their professional achievements.

If every teacher chose to teach for the appropriate reasons without resentment, the students would be supported and encouraged much more. Singers would grow vocally and spiritually. Unfortunately, most singers have met at least one bitter and abusive teacher who wanted to "have the singers pay" (even unconsciously) for the failure of his/her own careers. As a professional singer, I think that an appropriate teacher is respectful of the human specificity of the singer. A vocal instructor should reinforce the qualities of the singer and bring out the best in the student. He should also strive to give the best teaching he could and accept his own limits for the well being of the singer. Finally, when the singer gradually becomes a talented artist, the educator should feel prouder and happier for the singer. In return it is most certain that this type of caring professors will meet students who are appreciative of the technique and teaching and who work hard to keep up with the level of their instructors.

Learning to teach

If one wants to become a voice instructor, one needs to decide in full conscience to be devoted to the study of singing, technique and voice, to continuously perfect one's knowledge, and to help singers whatever their level or aspirations. Teaching has to be learned; when the educator's goal is not to perfect his technical understanding and

his abilities to help the singer, the capacity to be a good vocal educator disappears. The problem is that the average teacher thinks that he/she is able to solve the problems of their singers when they are truly incapable of identifying the source of the problem and even less capable of offering a solution. I cannot count the singers who come to me (without telling their professor) in order to obtain at last a precise diagnosis of their situation or vocal fach. I hear the most incredible advice supposedly to remedy vocal difficulties. For instance, to a singer who was wondering about the lack of healthy vibrato in her voice: "It will come". Or to another singer whose jaw was so tight and locked it was preventing any high notes or legato: "Open your mouth as wide as possible in order to pronounce better and to relax the jaw" (this really creates a hyper-extended jaw plus a gag reflex at the tongue which places pressure directly on the vocal cords). An amateur singer, even more a professional one, does not need such remarks. Singers need a precise diagnosis and an immediate and effective solution. This requires that the teacher possess a real vocal understanding and masters his/her own technique and understanding of the voice. Few instructors are able to identify problems or correct vocal category. It is interesting to know that I receive more and more singers (amateurs as well as professionals) who are trained as counter-tenors or baritones, when they are truly genuine lyric tenors, capable of sustaining a high C sharp after only ten minutes of appropriate vocalization (it is true that some of the exercises I use are famous for training some of the greatest tenors we know, such as Jussi Bjoerling). This example proves that there is a manifest absence of educated ears and expertise, plus sometimes a deliberate will to hinder the singer so that the teacher does not have to recognize his own incompetence.

Becoming a Member of a Family of Master Teachers

I do not often mention that I was born in a family of artists, yet my great-great-grandfather, Henri Denizot, was a painter and had a tenor voice. His son, Charles Denizot, was the famous singer, Star of several renowned Opera Houses (Geneva, Nice, Bordeaux, Algiers etc.), "tenore robusto" singing Faust, Roméo, Cavaradossi, Des Grieux, Rodolfo, Pagliaccio, Vincent, Eléazar, Hoffmann, Almaviva, Turiddu, Alfredo, il Duca di Mantova, Don José etc., as well as Tristan, Siegmund, Lohengrin. He was also capable of "stepping in" for a sick colleague as the Evangelist in Bach Passions or to sing Handel's Messiah. He was also chorus master, conductor, voice teacher (he taught the famous bass Fernando Corena), stage director, and general manager of the Geneva Opera House. My grandfather, Charles Félix Denizot, first prize clarinetist at the Paris National Conservatoire, conductor and pianist, had also an impressive and natural baritone voice. In my family, we are accustomed to pass on to others the taste and pleasure but also the rigor of artistic professions (fine arts, music etc.) My grandfather was my first piano and violin teacher when I was three and then my first voice teacher. In fact, he passed on lineage of knowledge and practice of music in which our entire family was oriented.

But it is about another family that I want to speak. A family I am equally proud to become a member of: the family of the Master Teachers who have come before me. This is yet again another disparity among actual voice teachers. Although I have studied with notorious opera singers (Bacquier, McIntyre, Montarsolo for instance), I have also been trained by teachers who were the true heirs of identified and prestigious teaching dynasties of teachers and their teachings were of a totally different level. The principles directly come from the previous Masters and are passed on directly. The affiliation invigorates the teaching and stimulates the student. Let's mention some of the names that are at the basis of my teaching: for example the mezzo-soprano Marilyn Horne, student of William Vennard, himself a student of Alan Lindquest, himself a student of Caruso. Let's speak about Alan Lindquest, who had studied with Caruso, but also Joseph Hislop (teacher of Jussi Bjoerling), Mme Haldis Ingebjart (teacher of Kirsten Flagstad after the passing of Dr Bratt), and Maestro Romani (teacher of Gigli). Alan

Lindquest, who became one of the finest voice scientists and Master Teachers, has also coached Birgit Nilsson in 1938 in Sweden.

I have therefore begun to sing and to teach a technique that comes in direct line from Masters such as Garcia and Caruso. I have not only read in a book which scales Caruso was practicing. I have received them from my teacher, who had received them from Alan Lindquest, who had received them from Enrico Caruso in person in 1917. When a teacher offers a principle in such a way, he passes on not only the principle, but also the spirit that is contained within the principle and the history of the exercise. It is not a cold and dead concept, it is a vivid and animated teaching tool, and the results are evident.

I have once told an anecdote about the Italian-Swedish singing technique to a soprano I regularly work with. Dr. Gillis Bratt in Sweden has particularly perfected this technique. I have told this soprano that Dr. Bratt (who thought that singing had much to do with psychology) had considered necessary to study voice technique AND psychology. The young singer, who is quite fond of psychoanalysis, then learned that Dr. Bratt had studied singing with Manuel Garcia and psychology with Freud. On top of the fact that this thought process is quite rare or non-existent today, who can claim to have studied these two fields with such immense Masters ? Who can claim to be part of such a lineage ? I strive to teach and train the Italian principles of the "open throat" or "pharyngeal vowels", the exercises from Garcia. It is not because I have read a book on Italian technique or because I have heard about the exercise and have copied it (more or less inaccurately). Rather it is because I have inherited this exercise from the professor who came before me so that I could pass it on to others myself. Yes indeed, I am grateful to be in direct line with Garcia, Hislop, Bjoerling and Flagstad through Bratt; with Caruso, Gigli, and Nilsson through Lindquest etc. I have not taken this heritage without training; I have inherited it because I take seriously the intense study of this technique. I defend it. I apply it rigorously and with pride. I do this passionately because I try to modestly enrich it through my own experience. Singers are quite sensitive to this because they understand that I am not a teacher who suddenly began teaching with resentment and who teaches unidentified concepts. An ancestral philosophy, taught in a modern and compassionate manner, does not know a substitute. Being trained as a voice instructor by a Master Teacher cannot be compared to a failed professional singer who turns to teaching without real guidance.

Teaching an ancestral technique

My teaching benefits from the numerous concepts I have learned from various instructors and from working on stage with great singers. But my greatest asset is that I have acquired a complete method rather than a vague mixture of notions one abusively defines as vocal technique. Singing calls upon superior mental notions, and it is compulsory that exercises and technique be animated and stimulated at this level. It is obvious that passing on an exercise to a singer without supporting and nurturing him can only produce a limited result. In these circumstances, most of the trainers give up by saying, "the student is bad at singing, he has no voice, and he should do something else". It is rather the so-called teacher who should question himself, improve, or change professions. A true Master Teacher supports the singer and inspires the artist. My OPERALAB studios are growing with singers who find joy and personal satisfaction in their progress, whatever their respective level. This draws me to find clearer, simpler, more precise and effective answers to their questions. This forces me to study, progress, and refine my teaching, which I do with conviction. Based on the fact that teaching is a partnership, I share the successes and the failures of the singers I work with. I am also able to organize work sessions between these singers and carefully-selected valuable pedagogues. This way I am not isolated as a voice instructor,

tradition can be perpetuated, and an ever-growing number of singers are trained with the healthy principles of this School of singing. "Dozens or hundreds of voice teachers in the world" do not teach this technique (unfortunately) as I have read on the Internet. This technique effectively has its source in Sweden where instructors of the Italian School trained so many great singers in the years 1920-1930. I strive to gather the best of the vocal pedagogy and appropriate exercises in order to obtain a complete, healthy, high-leveled technique, which is adapted to our current conditions.

It is however understandable that some teachers, often isolated in their practice, regret not to be able to be part of this family of teachers or try to help themselves to the technique or also denigrate its proved results. The very strength of this method appears to the one who really studies it. This requires a personal investment. The actual habit of "everything, immediately" is of course a serious obstacle.

The Various Singing Techniques

Part of my training occurred as a permanent soloist of the Zürich Opera House. I have had the opportunity to observe quite a large number of singers, particularly of the German school of singing. At that time, I was struggling with the concept of "cover", a term and craft none had really been able to explain in precise and simple terms. Because of my international colleagues I had access to a large panel of opinions about singing. Each singer had a particular aspect of singing, with the respective flaws and qualities of the school of training. Some Germans used to over darken the sound (by swallowing their tongue, or heaving the muscles and the actions of the larynx instead of a genuine open throat). Some Italians, with brilliant and clear voices, open throat, comfortable in a specific repertoire that did not include much German music, most of the times none at all. The Bulgarians whose vocal power and sound were impressive while the French singers lacked a real identity. The Americans who were incredibly well prepared; in short, one could find anything in all these singers. Because of my repertoire, I needed to find (on top of a healthy and effective singing) a technique that would allow me to sing baroque music as well contemporary music, without forgetting the operas of Mozart, Verdi and Wagner, songs and opera arias. Some of the singers I was fortunate to sing with were particularly remarkable in their own specific repertoire (Cappuccilli in Verdi, Bartoli in Mozart et Rossini, Salminen in Wagner, Podles in Handel and Verdi, Gruberova in Donizetti and Strauss etc.). Each teacher I have studied with has brought me a slice of the technique. Each singer I have sung with and whom I have asked for advice has shown me a slice of the technique. I have ended up with an effective technique in German and French art songs without being able to sing brilliant high notes in the Italian repertoire. Then I have learned to produce high notes in the Italian repertoire but lost the sharpness of the Wagnerian voices and so on. It is only recently that I have been able to combine the open throat of the Italians, the ring and sharpness of the Wagnerian and Scandinavian voices, and the diction in French art songs without sacrificing the legato line. This training did not only allowed me to fully and precisely understand the meaning of the "cover". It also offered me the balance between "open throat", "healthy nasal resonance", "correct balance between high and low overtones"; in other words I now can choose my true repertoire instead of being stuck with a certain type of music. It is for instance the sad situation of numerous so-called "baroque" singers who could sing a much broader range of music if only they were not suffering from a "technique" which produces a flat tone, with an absence of natural resonance, wide-open mouth and closed throat.

In conclusion I must say that I have looked (for a long time) for a complete and effective technique, taught in a simple and loving manner. This is why I have decided to pursue my study of the best aspects of vocal pedagogy

and to teach these principles to a select number of singers. I also try to teach in a special way: compassion for the singer, complete partnership, and training of the singer as well as of the human being. My personal experience proved me that thanks to this training I have finally been able to sing in my true Heldentenor voice category and successfully sing roles that were out of reach. I have been able to do so only because my voice grew bigger and stronger with the daily practice of an ancestral method, which includes the Caruso Scales, the Garcia's Pharyngeal Vowels Exercises, Dr. Bratt's vocalizes (which allow the full control of the cord closure in any register and circumstance), the true and healthy nasal resonance (the resonance combined with the open throat allows literally the voice to cut through huge orchestras in the biggest theatres whatever the size of the voice). In essence, indispensable vocal balance. I have not been trained as a professional singer and vocal instructor by merely reading books, or auditing Master Classes. I have been fortunate to be trained by authentic pedagogues, and have consciously agreed to perpetuate this legacy in the same spirit.

To each singer I wish to find vocal balance and joy in singing.

To each teacher I wish to be educated and inspired by a legitimate Master Teacher.

Corrected and updated on 24/08/2003

Address all questions to **Gilles Denizot** at denizot@operalab.org Thank you !

Gilles Denizot
Articles

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