

## "Learning to Sing via Internet" - by Gilles Denizot

The Internet offers a considerable quantity of resources: articles, scores, sound and video files. Anyone may see the fantastic value of it. As always, the web provides the best and the worst. The specificity of vocal training (and the beauty of it) is that there must be a real contact between teacher and student. Fundamental issues like breath management and *passaggio* training can only be taught in the studio. It is impossible to diagnose a vocal issue in a thorough manner and to cure its cause at distance. A sound file may give indications, but nothing more. Students who wander on the net looking for *miracle remedies* definitely take considerable risks.

### Choosing a Voice Teacher

The most important task a voice student will bear is the choice of a competent vocal tutor. It is foolish to apply vocal advices received via Internet without having sung for the professor. You need at least a lesson (rather three) to have a precise idea of his/her technical knowledge, his/her human qualities, his/her vocabulary, his/her way of working. Not every Internet users are capable of giving relevant advices (this however does not prevent them by no means from doing so). Most of them have no professional experience whatsoever. The recommendations will thus be at best ineffective and at worst harmful.

### Working in Partnership with the Teacher

Some voice students look for answers via Internet to avoid the cost of a voice lesson. Others question their teacher's method by asking the approval of perfect strangers met on Internet forums. I have already spoken about the partnership which should exist between the student and the teacher. It is simply about the confidence in the capacities of the teacher and about being certain of the legitimacy of the work process. Without this partnership, no real progress is possible. When one chooses a professor, one should rely on him/her and let him/her be the guide. It is beforehand that it is necessary to enquire and be sure to make the good choice. Students often ask crucial and legitimate questions on Internet forums. Do their professors not answer them or in such an unclear way that students have to look elsewhere? Are those students trying to obtain more accommodating answers? Giving my opinion *behind the back* of the official professor is always uncomfortable. To consult a teacher via Internet or to follow in secret the instruction of a professor proves the distress of these students. You have the right to an excellent education, which answers *all* your questions. You have the right to a privileged contact with *your* professor. If you think that you are not getting the instruction you deserve, it is better to change teacher than to ask strangers for vocal recipes.

### Most Common Voice Topics on the Internet

Vocal category, vibrato, larynx activity and breath/support are some of the most common topics discussed on Internet forums. One must be clear: there is NO way to teach laryngeal activity, breath and support via the Internet.

#### a) Vocal Category

It is impossible to indicate someone's vocal category without having heard the singer. Yet it is one of the most frequent questions. One needs to hear the voice and observe how the singer produces the sound. Why should I tell a student to train his voice as a tenor when he describes his timbre as *light* and tells me that he *can easily reach the G above passaggio*? Perhaps his mouth opens horizontally on the ascending scale. A young man once sent me a sound file and assured me that he was perfectly mastering his *passaggio*. It was rather the opposite:

what he believed to be a high voice was really a pushed voice, more and more open, and a total loss of resonance and timbre. When I mentioned my doubts regarding his vocal situation, he sent me another file of the same quality. He also asked another teacher for a second opinion. The teacher's opinion was identical to mine. Internet users often point out that a specific aria gives them troubles implying that they belong to another vocal category. It is indeed possible that the repertoire is inappropriate, but it may also be a technical problem. The misunderstanding of the *passaggio* is in this respect significant.

### Case Study: Tenor *lirico spinto* singing baritone

A few years ago, a young singer was (rightly) asking himself questions about his repertoire. This thirty-year-old young man was to sing a concert with orchestra in Paris. His programme included Morales (*Carmen*), Figaro (*Le Nozze di Figaro*) and Publius (*La Clemenza di Tito*). This repertoire is respectively intended for a high baritone, a bass-baritone, and a bass, on no account the same vocal type. This singer described himself as a *light baritone or a big tenor who extends his high range bit by bit*. His professor also thought that he might be a tenor but not knowing how to train him, he preferred to train him as a baritone *until the voice would be ready!* This attitude is irresponsible and dangerous. One should train at once the student in his/her true vocal category. To allow precious years to pass without training proper muscles and reflexes is only slowing down the development of the singer. In certain cases, it can even definitively prevent him/her to have a career. Let me specify here that I speak only about the main vocal category (soprano, mezzo, alto, countertenor, tenor, baritone, and bass) and not about Fach categories (for example dramatic soprano, Heldentenor, or Verdi baritone). If your voice is that of a tenor, you should be trained as a tenor by your professor, not as a baritone under the excuse that the high range will come later (C.f. [The Beginner Singer](#)). You should also not be given baritone repertoire, but appropriate tenor study material.

Having read several messages of this young man and heard the different opinions of the forum's members, I exceptionally made a technical suggestion. By giving a mere hermetic statement, I made sure it would cause no vocal damage because there was no *directions* on how to use the suggestion. A brief private correspondence quickly began followed by a consultation session. Indeed, it is possible to discuss theory only during a short period, then it is necessary to move to actual singing.

Because I was supposed to train a baritone, I selected vocal exercises for medium voice and in a medium key. The medium and low range had absolutely no ring. We immediately abandoned the *bass* vocal category. While rising up in the scale, the voice began to naturally alter itself at the tenor break. It became obvious that the baritone vocal category had been chosen because of a) a false and hollow color produced largely by the tongue depressing the larynx and by an obstructed pharynx, b) because of the impossibility for the larynx to pivot and reach the tenor high range. Within minutes of appropriate vocalizing, a gorgeous tenorial sound came out of the young man's throat. Carefully, I shared with him what I believed his voice was. He then told me that he always thought he was a tenor. His relief was obvious, as if he could at last be himself. What had been wrongly categorized as a baritone (and trained as such for eight years!) was in reality a pure *lirico spinto* tenor. This fault in misdiagnosing the voice led the singer to experience vocal nodes and forced him to go through vocal surgery before we had met. It took us a year to recover his voice thanks to the switch in vocal category and appropriate tuition.

### b) Vibrato

I remember the message of a teenager who wanted to know where he could *buy* a vibrato for his voice! It is amazing to read all the vibrato recipes on the Internet. They are as good as saying that *vibrato will surely come later*. The absence of vibrato always causes a legitimate worry amongst voice students (especially amateurs, and quite particularly female singers). Any vibrato problem indicates without the slightest doubt a vocal dysfunction and should be considered a red light alarm at once. When the support muscles do not regulate breath pressure, vocal cords cannot freely oscillate. When the tongue is retracted and depresses the

larynx, vocal folds cannot properly function. When the singer accomplishes a balanced breath management then the vibrato naturally appears. However, all of this takes time and has to be trained. Without precise training, nothing happens. I once taught two singers who complained of a lack of vibrato. Their vocal folds oscillated during our first session. They were certainly encouraged, but it is really only after several months of patient work on breathing and support that they were able to consistently sing with a vibrato. The golden rule *the more one pushes breath through the larynx the less the voice rings* is highly difficult to apply.

### **Absence of Supervision**

The major problem as regards our subject is the absence of supervision. By definition, asking for vocal and technical advices on the Internet gives no real contact with a vocal tutor. There is no example and no possibility of control. Besides, the instruction is not adapted to the specific situation of the singer. Every student is a particular case which requests a personalized instruction. The specific characteristics of the singer may otherwise neither be revealed nor developed. Without supervision, the student deliberately exposes himself to vocal damage. You might understand an article on vocal technique, nevertheless you need a correct explanation by a professor. This includes seeing and hearing your teacher correctly apply this principle (often by touching the professor's muscles in action). The teacher's supervision is crucial.

### **Conclusion**

These examples show that it is impossible to learn to sing from a book, a CD and via Internet. The web provides additional information, which enriches our understanding of singing. But on no account does it replace the antique form of teaching. The human contact between a teacher and his/her student was, is and always will remain the only way of passing on this ancestral knowledge, whatever the evolution of the technologies.

Updated 09/2006

Gilles Denizot  
Articles

Copyright Gilles Denizot - All Rights Reserved