

## "Teacher - Singer Partnership" - by Gilles Denizot

Numerous students of singing do not understand the process of vocal studies. They do not know how to respect and enhance the partnership between teacher and student yet they expect the teacher to fix almost everything in an hour. Renata Tebaldi said in 1991: "In one hour, one cannot accomplish miracles, and some people ask you to rebuild a voice".

No one is forced to study singing. Then "how can I take full benefit from my vocal studies" and "how can I give a better voice instruction"? The answer is "by improving and allowing a more respectful approach of the teacher-singer partnership"

### Investment of Time and of Energy in the Process

The building and training of a classical voice takes years. This process requires investment of time and energy on both sides. The student and the teacher both have to learn patience, identify the goal, and work towards it. Let me repeat the most important word: PATIENCE. Some students genuinely think they can achieve "stardom" or teach after only a few lessons. Other students want to sing in great international venues but will not consider traveling for lessons. They want to find the ideal teacher right around the corner. This is living in fantasy. Best results come from consistent study and quiet yet invariable determination. You will certainly experience various levels; even have the feeling that you are not improving. If you are certain of your teacher's competence and your personal investment as well as the reasonable goal you have decided upon you should not doubt to be achieving it. But it won't happen overnight. As Regina Resnik said in 1992: "I am very interested in the young singers that one pushes in the career in a atmosphere of total indifference, without the support nor the advices of the old Maestri... they do not possess the patience and the necessary discipline anymore, they believe to open up the paths of glory with 1 or 2 years of studies..."

I often see students wanting to change teachers as soon as they have failed at an audition or at a competition rather than also questioning their choice of repertoire, or amount of self-preparation. This is a childish attitude. A professional singer is able to quietly admit the existence of a problem, establish a plan of what needs to be addressed and work with his teacher and coach. I am amazed at the numbers of messages written on various Internet discussion groups by distressed students who ask the opinion of complete strangers. When they have a panel of answers (most times without having sung for their correspondents) they choose the easiest solution and think that they have been helped. This is irresponsible. The student lacks trust in the process and the teacher apparently is not committed enough in the student's problems. Obviously if such questions are being formulated on the Internet and not in the Voice Studio, it is because the "teacher-student partnership" is deficient. I simply cannot resist in quoting Antonietta Stella saying in 1999: "I can always tell some singers that they are on the wrong track... they will always find a sufficiently dishonest professor to accept them while letting them believe in a future". I know trust requires time, but there cannot be a solid construction when this elementary foundation is missing.

## Being Punctual and Ready to Sing

It might seem odd to mention that being punctual and ready to sing/teach is a basic condition. I know and fully understand that someone can be late once in a while and it is absolutely fine with me. What I am referring to are students who come late, always, and are not ready to sing. They have to arrive, apologize, hang their coat, find a tape, open the wrapping paper, install their recording device, prepare their scores and pencil, drink some water, take their breath because most of them have run instead of walking early enough etc. When we finally start vocalizing, it can very well be that half an hour is gone. Too bad. Teachers also have to respect the student's time and concentrate fully on the singer. I know teachers who answer phone calls while "teaching", or can't stop sharing their career memories over and over. I strongly disapprove these behaviors and I pity the students who are forced to deal with such "teachers".

## Preparing the Lesson

Being punctual and ready to sing/teach also signifies that one has prepared the lesson. When I am teaching I have carefully thought about each student prior the lesson. I am "ready for them" when I greet them. In fact I am looking forward to seeing them and to going deeper into the vocal process. I am convinced that certain students notice and appreciate this approach. Those are the ones who also prepare their lesson. Those are the students who progress rapidly and securely towards becoming responsible and independent singers.

## Defining Schedule and Priorities

Vocal process has to be somewhat planned ahead. You should not stick to a rigid program, but you should also know what you have achieved and what needs to be accomplished. By forecasting studies and teaching, students and teachers stay focused on the goal. They organize themselves in order to reach each new level and move forward. Before lessons or coaching sessions I always analyze the situation (based on listening to recent recordings) and decide upon what needs to be improved. I narrow the list to the most important aspects and I work on these. I also inform my teacher of what I would like to develop and train and if appropriate we work on my suggestions as well as his. Committed teachers prepare lessons. When the student meets his/her teacher, they really have defined their schedule and priorities.

## The Sense of Continuity

Defining schedule and priorities both in studying and teaching allows for "continuity in the process" to occur. When I tell a student "last week, we have addressed this specific technical point and now I think it would be appropriate to address that subject", I show them that we are in the middle of a highly structured process. A student has to understand and visualize the pyramid of vocal process. It is important to be able to look down and see what has been accomplished and also what needs to be explored above. This prevents the usual reaction of discouragement "I am 21, I have been singing for 2 years with 4 different teachers and I still don't understand why I cannot sing this aria". Maybe this aria is out of reach because you have not yet acquired the essential skills to sing it. You have a problem on this high note... have you trained your passaggio so that your vocal production is healthy and reliable? Do you feel the continuity of vocal studies when changing teachers so often ?

## Recording Work Sessions

A very important part of vocal studies and teaching is listening to one's sessions. I always record my sessions with

my teacher and coaches. I often record the lessons I give to my students. It is of the utmost importance that singers listen to their tapes and connect what they hear to what they have felt and done during the session. This is the only way to KNOW how you sound, and how to reproduce the healthy singing and avoid the unhealthy one. Concepts need to be established and it takes time. I once used a trick that helped me: I decided to listen to one tape a day, sing over my own voice and hear my teacher's comments. I pretended that I was indeed having a daily lesson with my teacher. And I kept intact what I had learned until I met with him again. This was a temporary trick, I don't need to use it anymore but what would I have done without the tapes ? The same story has happened to a young professional British soprano who studied with me for a week. She later told me that listening to her own tapes back home "really helped her stay on track" and I know it is true.

### Listening to the Lessons Before the Next One

When I work with my teacher, I record every lesson and listen to my tapes. On the next session, I know what has been achieved in previous lessons and I move further very quickly. Without the tapes I would not have been able to really match my sensations with the correct and healthy sound. We don't hear ourselves as others do and there is no other solution for a serious singer, whether professional or amateur, than to record the work sessions, listen to them and move further.

Being an active and committed teacher I am absolutely convinced that recording certain lessons and listening to them allows the adjustment of teaching tools. It is true that I spend a lot of time on planes and trains since I teach in Paris, London, Brussels and Geneva and sing as soloist in various places. When I travel from one city to another I usually listen to certain singers I have just taught. I take notes on their progress and write down what should be done next as well as repertoire suggestions. There is no wonder that when I meet with these students again I can quickly summarize and comment our previous session. I also choose the most adapted exercises for them based on a cold analysis of their voice on tape rather than on the excitement of the lesson.

### Daily Practice

There cannot be progress, at least a reasonable one, if there is no practice. The ideal situation would be daily practice, at least three twenty-minutes sessions. On a year-round basis there must be a daily technical routine of at least ten minutes. A serious singer will always find this minimal period of time to practice and work on the voice. You cannot expect to be able to use your voice if you don't train it. In order for proper and efficient muscular reactions to happen in singing, you literally need to discover and train the muscles. This does not happen while sleeping. If you do not practice then there is virtually no purpose attending voice lessons because nothing new will happen. Teachers cannot practice for students and they will merely be repeating what was previously said. In case your teacher is dedicated to offering the best teaching he will try to find new approaches, new ideas, but they will all inevitably fail to produce results. Amusing enough is the fact that lazy students often blame the teacher for the absence of results. This situation rapidly evolves towards sterility and it is best to quit singing altogether.

### Appropriate Study Material

Vocal study is also about looking for information to be researched in-between lessons such as vocal scores, articles, and recordings. The Internet for example is an invaluable source of knowledge. You can study facial postures of great singers on videos; print scores or read articles, listen to old recordings of famous singers. This is of great importance as it feeds the student with information. Discovering your own repertoire, studying a complete

operatic score rather than your single aria, reading poetry if possible in the original language will not give you a trained voice, but this is part of being an accomplished singer. I often have to explain the plot of the opera, or the meaning of the poetry, to students. Although I enjoy doing this it nevertheless shows a lack of involvement on the student's side. I remember an anecdote when working on Wagner with Sir Donald McIntyre. I was about the start the first lines but Sir Donald turned to me and asked me to first tell him what was happening at that point in the opera. As soon as I had begun, Sir Donald stopped me and said: "all right, I see that you clearly know what you are going to sing!" and we started working on the music. He later shared with me precious information on interpretation he knew from studying the original Wagner manuscripts kept at the Bayreuth Festspielhaus.

A great Master in Philosophy once wrote to a disciple: "After having granted your friendship, it is necessary to have confidence; it is before that one should judge. One reverses the natural order of duties, when one judges after having given friendship instead of giving friendship after making one's opinion. Reflect for a long time to know if you must choose someone for friend. But when your decision is taken, love your friend with all your heart: speak to your friend as freely as with yourself". Seneca was not wrong, and one could very well apply this advice to the teacher-singer relationship.

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Articles

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