

THE PRIVATE VOICE STUDIO

A paper by the **American Academy of Teachers of Singing**
(americanacademyofteachersofsinging.org)

July 2006

The dramatic increase in the number of private voice teaching studios through the early years of the twenty-first century reflects an ever increasing interest in the study of singing as well as the desire of teachers of singing to control their own pedagogical and economic destinies. While many private studio teachers share commonalities with their academically affiliated colleagues, the private studio reflects by far the greatest diversity of pedagogy, repertoire, age range of students, and styles of singing taught. At the same time, it comes under much less scrutiny. It is with this dynamic in mind that the **American Academy of Teachers of Singing** addresses the topic of *The Private Voice Studio*.

The private voice studio can be defined as an independent, self-contained voice teaching establishment that is accountable to no one except the students and teacher within that particular studio. All teachers of singing, of course, are expected to practice good voice pedagogy and professionalism. However, since private teachers in general are subject to no formal evaluation or peer review of their practices other than that of public opinion, the Academy wishes to provide some observations and guidelines to allow private teachers of singing to review systematically their pedagogical and business methods against well established norms.

First and foremost, the private voice studio enjoys considerable pedagogical freedom. The teacher can design and create the teaching environment, set hours, policy and fees, identify and target specific student singer populations, define behavioral and dress codes, personalize voice technique and repertoire choices, and establish evaluation and testing standards.

The private voice studio also offers the teacher potential economic freedom. Yet, for the teacher whose only source of income is the private studio, such freedom brings with it economic pressure. Any time away from the studio is at the expense of the teacher. There are no paid sick days, vacation days, or continuing education days as is often provided by academic institutions.

With these freedoms, however, comes an enormous responsibility to ensure that the students' needs are served. It is a daunting task to be well versed in all the elements of voice pedagogy. These elements include anatomy and physiology, historical and contemporary techniques, acoustics, psychology, biomechanics, styles of learning, languages and diction, age- and voice-appropriate repertoire, performance skills, practice habits, sight singing and ear training, music theory, keyboard or other instrumental skills, time management, and ethical conduct. The private teacher also bears an enormous ethical responsibility to the student including the setting of realistic goals and the honest appraisal of student potential.

To further compound the task, private voice studio teachers do not have readily available the resources and diversified faculty often found in academia. These teachers, if they wish, can remain isolated and have little or no contact with the greater voice teaching community. Such isolation can occur when teachers become so caught up in their own work that they literally have no time and energy for anything outside the studio. Other teachers may isolate themselves because they are afraid of negative peer review and input, while still others may feel that their pedagogy is so superior to that of their colleagues that no interaction is necessary.

The Academy believes such isolation does not serve the best interests of the teachers or their students. Private studio teachers are strongly encouraged to initiate contact with local voice teachers, singers, coaches, language specialists, accompanists, choral and choir directors, and instrumental music teachers so that collegial, professional relationships can be formed and a network of resources established. Regional, national, and international organizations such as the New York Singing Teachers Association (NYSTA), the National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS), and the International Congress of Voice Teachers (ICVT), offer even greater connectivity for both the teachers and their students through seminars, workshops, master classes, recitals, student auditions and competitions, and publications. It is worth noting that some organizations including NYSTA and the Music Teachers National Association (MTNA) offer programs leading to private teacher certification.

Participating in these and other organizations gives all teachers of singing, particularly those in the private studio, the opportunity to interact with colleagues, grow professionally, develop new skills, refresh previous learning, and exchange ideas and practices. Engaging in these opportunities may make the vast responsibilities of the private voice teacher more manageable.

Another issue of importance is the development of requirements and expectations for teachers and students. In academia, the voice faculty usually has departmental standards and requirements that establish what is expected of students and their teacher. In the private studio, however, the standards and requirements are established by both teacher and student. With regard to teachers, whom will the private teacher teach? Will the teacher be a generalist teaching all ages, all singing styles, and all levels of talent and skill, or will the teacher be a specialist teaching only certain ages, certain styles, or specific talent levels? Will technique and/or repertoire be taught? Will theory and diction be addressed? Will there be weekday and weekend hours, day and evening sessions three days a week or seven days a week?

With regard to student requirements and expectations, the private voice studio may present a much different scenario than that of academia; hence, the establishment of requirements and expectations is much different. In academia, students in a particular class are often on the same or similar career path. In addition, they have to meet certain standards to be accepted into a particular program and must maintain an established level of performance to remain in the program. Therefore, the institution, department, and teacher may establish requirements and expectations. In the private studio, however, many students are not engaged in an academic program pursuing a particular degree. They come into the studios with all levels of talents and myriad reasons for wanting to study. Consequently, student requirements, for the most part, are determined by the students themselves and their motivation for lessons. For example, are they purely

recreational singers studying for their own enjoyment? Are they interested in choral or community theater experiences? Are they career minded? Their individual goals, talents, and skills determine the course the teacher will set.

The choices are many and decisions are often difficult to make. The realities that inform the choices and subsequent decisions may be as different as the teachers themselves. For example, beginning teachers may not have as many options as veteran teachers. In order to establish their studios as well as their credentials, new teachers initially may need to teach a wider variety of ages and talent levels, and at very competitive rates.

Some teachers may choose to teach only exceptionally gifted students who perform in high profile and professional venues. Other teachers may enjoy working with those of lesser ability because they believe that singers seeking voice lessons, regardless of talent and skill, should be able to find a voice teacher willing to help them, in much the same way many professional golf or tennis instructors are available to give lessons to all who seek to improve their skills.

Whatever choices are made, the Academy strongly believes that all teachers, whether in the private studio, academia, or both, should teach only the voice techniques and styles of singing they know and understand. Since new singing styles are continually being introduced, teachers should study in detail any new style before attempting to teach it.

The Academy encourages both private teachers and academic teachers to communicate with each other and benefit from the sharing of their unique perspectives and knowledge. The entire voice teaching community will be healthier if all its component parts are active and working together to bring the best possible pedagogy to those wishing to learn the art of singing.

For further reference, the **American Academy of Teachers of Singing** (www.americanacademyofteachersofsinging.org) has published many papers that would especially serve the private singing teacher. Among them are “The Professional Criticism of Singing” (1991), “Qualifications for Teachers of Singing” (1997), “Finding the Perfect Teacher” (2002), “Leaving One Teacher for Another” (2002), “Ethics Revisited” (2002), and “Teaching Children to Sing” (2002).