



AMERICAN ACADEMY OF TEACHERS OF SINGING

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THE VOCAL MASTER CLASS

The master class—a format in which a teacher with significant credentials works in a public or quasi-public forum with specially selected students—has become an ever increasingly popular presentation of educational institutions and organizations. The American Academy of Teachers of Singing addresses the following recommendations to the sponsors of master classes, the teachers who conduct them, the students who participate in them, and the audiences who attend them.

The Purpose of Vocal Master Classes

The American Academy of Teachers of Singing believes that vocal master classes serve three purposes:

1. They give singers a unique opportunity to perform in public in a learning situation;
2. They give singers and teachers the chance to learn from a master teacher/performer;
3. They afford the musical public a greater understanding of the arts of singing and teaching.

Responsibilities of the Master Class Sponsor(s)

One of the first issues to be resolved by the sponsor(s) is the selection of the master teacher. Although selecting a master teacher who enjoys a certain amount of fame will ensure a large attendance of both singers and audience members, it should not be the only criterion. The interests and needs of the singers involved should be paramount in the sponsor's selection of a master teacher. For best results, the sponsoring organization should thoroughly research the expertise of the master teachers under consideration. A determination can then be made of how best to accommodate the kinds of singers it wants to present and to help, as well as the kind of audience that the organization would like to attract.

There are many kinds of subjects that will further the musical education of the student singers. They include:

1. Technical skills;
2. Mental skills, e.g. concentration, goal setting, maintaining confidence, etc.;
3. Coaching/performance skills;
4. Specific styles of repertoire: e.g. the French *mélodie*, the German *Lied*, etc.;
5. Combinations of two areas;
6. Physical control, e.g., the Alexander Technique, relaxation techniques, etc.;
7. Development of dramatic abilities.

Once the needs of the singers to be presented have been evaluated, the type of expertise that the master teacher must possess will become evident. The sponsor should discuss the singers' needs with the master teacher and come to an agreement about the issues on which the teacher will concentrate. Alternately, if a master teacher is selected on the basis of a particular specialty—such as interpretation of Mozart operatic roles—only students with secure technique and an interest in that repertory should be selected for the master class, which should then be advertised for its specificity.

A second important issue is determining the criteria for selecting singers who will participate. A variety of levels of accomplishment should be represented, unless the master teacher is unable to cope with such variety, or the topic precludes it. The singers should not be chosen solely for the level of their vocal endowment, nor for their ability to bring kudos to the sponsoring organization. Ideally, the singers who are selected should demonstrate not only a certain level of vocal and musical abilities but also, most importantly, a psychological stability that allows them to accept criticism and comments before an audience; that is, the chosen singers should be those who are best prepared to gain from the master teacher. In selecting the singers, the sponsor should make sure that the master class not be made a vehicle for certain celebrated teachers or, in an academic situation, for a certain studio, but rather be selected from a variety of studios.

The sponsor should confer with the master teacher regarding the physical set-up for the master class. For example, in a convention-ballroom venue a microphone will be necessary when the master teacher cannot position him/herself comfortably to address both singer and audience at the same time. Most master teachers will want a chair on stage so that they can recede into the background when the singers are first performing their selections, or when later repeating the performance. The sponsor should provide the master teacher with copies of music in advance and some background on the singers, such as voice type, age, school level, professional credits, roles performed or prepared, etc. The sponsor should counsel students regarding the length of the selections to be performed. Clearly, when the master teacher is given twenty minutes to work with a student, a multi-section seven-minute aria will leave little time for productive work on improvement. A good master teacher can work successfully under many conditions, but the more he/she knows about the students and the music being performed, the more specific and effective will be the results.

Responsibilities of the Master Teacher/Performer

The American Academy of Teachers of Singing believes that any master teacher of vocal arts should possess the following attributes:

1. vocal, musical, linguistic, and dramatic expertise;
2. the ability to dispense constructive information to various levels of singers and teachers and to the audience as well;
3. the capacity to keep an audience as well as the singers interested and informed;
4. a sense of humor;
5. a command of public speaking;
6. the ability to express him/herself efficiently and persuasively;

7. the patience to hear an entire piece before expressing criticism;
8. respect for the abilities and accomplishments of various levels of singers' development;
9. the ability to give advice appropriate to the level of each singer's development;
10. tact, courtesy, empathy, compassion;
11. the awareness to perceive the personality and psychological makeup of each singer;
12. the personal modesty to avoid self-serving and self-promoting talk at the expense of the singer;
13. the experience to recognize that singers will inevitably do better on the second performance of their selection—regardless of suggestions made—once nervousness subsides and better control of the performance has been achieved.
14. a sense of decorum, which would include not standing too close to a singer while teaching, not touching a singer without asking permission first.

The American Academy of Teachers of Singing considers the following qualities to be unacceptable in a master teacher/performer: rudeness, negativity, arrogance, abusiveness, and the use of vulgar language.

It is important that the master teacher in no way disparage the students' training. When a singer sings poorly, it will be almost impossible for the master teacher to ascertain whether the singer or the teacher is at fault. The master teacher should possess the expertise to discover some facet of the singer's work that can be ameliorated or changed for the better, and should have the capacity to give some kind of help to any singer who is disturbingly arrogant, shy or overly sensitive, as well as one who is dispirited.

Responsibilities of the Singer

Singers, when readying themselves for a master class performance, owe it to themselves and to the master teacher to make a thorough and accurate musical, technical, linguistic and dramatic preparation of their repertoire selections. In order to make sure that real learning can take place in this forum, singers should also prepare themselves psychologically for the more difficult task of being publicly criticized.

In return, singers have the right to expect from an appearance in a master class some real help and real information about the area of the master teacher's expertise, whatever that may be. Such an appearance cannot guarantee a career boost, nor a recommendation to a powerful person in the field. It is possible that the only result will have been the opportunity to perform in public and to learn therefrom.

Responsibilities of the Audience

The master teacher, assuming he/she has been properly informed by the sponsor, should be prepared to face an audience comprised of knowledgeable persons from the profession, other teachers, and ordinary music aficionados. The master teacher will improve the experience for the

audience if he/she can involve them in some way, providing it does not distract the singers from their task.

There are many reasons for audience members to attend a master class:

1. they expect to be entertained by the singing and by the master teacher;
2. they expect to be exposed to the inner workings of the singing profession and to learn thereby;
3. they expect to savor the experience of judging which of the singers is of exemplary ability and talent.

The master teacher and the singers have a right to expect from the audience: quiet and attention, courtesy, and a lack of overt partisanship for particular singers. In turn, the audience must be attentive to the master teacher so that the class will have a pleasant atmosphere. To that end, the master teacher would do well to have a sense of humor and enough showmanship to create an interesting and compelling atmosphere for the audience as well as the singers, to have sufficient verbal ability to explain clearly to the singers any new issues and to keep the audience interested.

Summary

Overall, spending twenty minutes to a half hour with a master teacher cannot be expected to change a singer's life or technique. It can open the singer's eyes to previously unrealized truths; it can make the singer aware of what must yet be done in his/her development. Yet, in rare cases when the circumstances are optimal, it can indeed be a life-altering experience.