



AMERICAN ACADEMY OF TEACHERS OF SINGING

FINDING THE PERFECT TEACHER

THE NATURE OF VOICE STUDY:

Successful teaching and learning requires an appropriate match between a student's needs and a teacher's expertise. On this largely depends the success of subsequent instruction. Styles of teaching tend to fall into recognizable categories:

- 1) Vocal development by means of a direct technical approach through specific vocalises and drills
- 2) Vocal development by means of encountering literature demands
- 3) Vocal development by means of musical coaching
- 4) Vocal development by means of linguistic accuracy
- 5) Vocal development by means of performance-presentation preparation

The particular expertise or skill of any given teacher must be considered. Some teachers concentrate more fully on one particular aspect of training, while others have wider-ranging aims. Some develop technique through the repertoire while some work through exercises and drills. Some function more as musical coaches than as developers of vocal technique and some have particular skills in languages or in presentation. The student must be realistic, honestly assess individual needs, and seek appropriate strengths in the teacher. The student's own level of accomplishment may determine the teaching approach best pursued. Appropriate instruction needs to match the style of vocalism the student wishes to follow.

In making a teacher choice it is important to observe the work of a number of teachers. Over a period of time, visit studios in which you have an interest in order to determine what tonal qualities all of the students, both new and advanced, have in common. Is progress being made from lesson to lesson? Do the long-term students sing more spontaneously, more comfortably, with more range and endurance, with better tonal quality than newer students do? Following lessons, ask students for their own reactions to the instruction they have received.

SOME FACTORS TO AVOID IN SELECTING A TEACHER:

- 1) Do not choose a teacher simply because of a single outstanding pupil about whose vocal history little is known. Some students, simply by some gift of nature, sing better without training than others do after expert guidance. One hearing or performance is not adequate to determine whether or not they sing well because of, or in spite of, the teacher.
- 2) Do not choose a teacher who accepts only singers who have no discernible technical problems. Good teaching takes place at all levels of accomplishment. The teaching of technique depends largely on an instructor's ability to diagnose problems and to solve them.
- 3) Do not choose a teacher solely because of reported professional contacts. Teachers do not serve as agents.
- 4) Do not change studios on the basis of flattery or promises made by another teacher. Unethical professional attitudes cannot produce healthy learning environments.
- 5) Do not select a teacher solely in response to pressures from fellow performers who may not be objective about their own current instruction.
- 6) Do not assume that lesson costs indicate the quality of the instruction.

WORKING WITH A TEACHER

First it is important to realize that no two teachers work in exactly the same way even if their objectives are the same. Each teacher has been conditioned by a different set of experiences.

Second, it is essential to realize that there is no standardized vocabulary for the evaluation or learning of singing. Although many words are used consistently by most singers and teachers, their meanings vary from one person to the next. Even the words that seem most clear in their meaning may signify different things to different teachers and singers. Students must undertake the task of finding out exactly what the new teacher means with almost every technical word used, as some may not mean what the former teacher intended with the same words. Students must feel free to ask for descriptions and definitions, and they must try to observe very carefully whatever illustrations are offered. Two teachers who use words quite differently may be equally effective in helping their students. In order to profit by understanding, students have the responsibility of determining the teacher's intent by attention and inquiry. Time, serious thought and careful observation will be required.

Whether the teacher confronts technical problems directly through special exercises or indirectly through repertoire selection and coaching is less important than the results obtained. Students should, however, be made aware of vocal problems. These must not be ignored. Although it is important that students understand what their problems are, it is equally important that the teacher's discussions of them be regarded as objective and analytical, not as personal attacks. A student who is constantly on the defensive, denying or attempting to explain away problems on the basis of temporary circumstances will usually make little progress and will always be looking for another teacher. The number of potential careers that are scuttled by misplaced pride is infinite.

Finally, there is much to be learned about singing. Different aspects of the singer's art may be learned from different teachers. Learn all you can from every teacher with whom you come in contact.